



Teacher Strategies for Fostering Early Childhood Independence Through the Free Nutritious Meal Program

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Abstract :

This study aimed to synthesize empirical evidence regarding teachers' strategies for fostering young children's independence through the implementation of Indonesia's School Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG). A qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Relevant studies published between 2021 and 2026 were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, Google Scholar, and nationally accredited journals. Data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings identified four major pedagogical strategies: structured routines and habituation, family-style dining, integration of character education through mealtime etiquette, and creative approaches to children's eating challenges. Their effectiveness was influenced by teachers' pedagogical competence, supportive learning environments, adequate facilities, and school-family collaboration. The review concludes that MBG functions not only as a nutrition program but also as a pedagogical platform for promoting children's independence and character development. These findings contribute to early childhood pedagogy by integrating nutrition and character education while providing evidence-based recommendations for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers to optimize the educational value of the MBG program.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is widely recognized as the foundation for developing lifelong competencies, as it shapes children's cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral capacities during their most formative years (Boll et al., 2025). Beyond academic readiness, contemporary education emphasizes the importance of cultivating independence because self-regulated children are more capable of making decisions, solving everyday problems, and participating responsibly in social environments (Kharroubi & ElMediouni, 2024; Yuliani & Hanif, 2026). Independence in early childhood encompasses the ability to

perform daily activities autonomously, regulate behavior, assume responsibility, and gradually reduce dependence on adults through guided experiences (Diani & Pranoto, 2025; Etokabeka, 2025). International educational perspectives consistently emphasize that these competencies are not acquired naturally but require systematic educational support embedded in children's daily routines (Hayashi et al., 2022). Consequently, teachers play a decisive role in designing meaningful learning experiences that transform ordinary classroom activities into opportunities for character formation. Strengthening children's independence has therefore become an educational priority because it supports lifelong learning, resilience, and active participation in increasingly complex societies (Hoang et al., 2024).

Despite this recognition, many early childhood education settings continue to encounter difficulties in fostering children's independence consistently within everyday learning activities (Turienzo & Manzano-Soto, 2024). In many classrooms, children remain highly dependent on teachers or caregivers to complete simple routines such as organizing learning materials, eating independently, cleaning up after activities, or making basic decisions (Boll et al., 2025; Kharroubi & ElMediouni, 2024; Yuliani & Hanif, 2026). These conditions are frequently influenced by overprotective parenting, teacher-centered classroom management, limited opportunities for autonomous practice, and instructional approaches that prioritize task completion rather than character development (Ryan et al., 2026). Previous educational reports indicate that independence is often taught through isolated moral instruction instead of being integrated into authentic daily experiences where children actively practice responsible behavior (Chuang et al., 2025; Rahkola et al., 2026). Consequently, opportunities to develop self-confidence, responsibility, and self-regulation remain underutilized, suggesting the need for contextual pedagogical strategies that transform routine school activities into meaningful learning experiences supporting children's independence.

One contemporary educational phenomenon that offers such opportunities is Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (Program Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG), officially implemented beginning in 2025 as part of the national strategy to improve children's nutrition and human resource quality toward Indonesia Emas 2045 (Malaka et al., 2025; Putawara et al., 2025). While the program primarily aims to address nutritional needs, classroom implementation has revealed broader educational potential (Herwawan et al., 2026). During meal routines, teachers encourage children to queue orderly, wash their hands independently, collect meal boxes, pray before eating, manage eating utensils responsibly, and clean their learning environment after meals (Hari et al., 2026; Humaeroh et al., 2025). These recurring activities provide authentic situations in which children repeatedly practice independence, discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and self-management. Rather than functioning solely as a nutritional intervention, the MBG program has therefore emerged as a pedagogical context where teachers naturally integrate character education into children's everyday experiences through structured guidance and habitual practice (Sianturi, 2025).

Existing literature has predominantly examined the MBG program from nutritional, public health, educational policy, and program implementation

perspectives (Christian et al., 2026). Previous studies largely evaluate the effectiveness of the program in improving children's nutritional status, concentration, learning readiness, food security, and educational participation (Khoirunnisa & Ramadhan, 2025; Lee et al., 2026). Although these findings demonstrate the importance of school meal programs for supporting children's physical development, they provide limited explanation regarding the pedagogical processes occurring during meal implementation. In particular, current scholarship rarely investigates how teachers intentionally transform meal routines into structured opportunities for cultivating children's independence. Consequently, the educational value of MBG has been interpreted primarily through health outcomes rather than through teachers' instructional strategies that promote character formation within authentic classroom contexts (Buaton et al., 2025; Mas'amah et al., 2026).

Broader research concerning early childhood education has consistently demonstrated that children's independence develops through teacher scaffolding, experiential learning, classroom routines, and social interaction (Khaerunnisa et al., 2022; Venard et al., 2023). Studies grounded in constructivist perspectives emphasize that teachers facilitate autonomy by gradually transferring responsibility from adults to children through modeling, guided participation, positive reinforcement, and repeated practice. Nevertheless, these investigations generally examine independence development within conventional classroom activities such as play-based learning, project-based learning, or daily instructional routines (Julian & Pranata, 2025; Sujianto et al., 2026). Very limited attention has been directed toward school meal programs as pedagogical environments capable of fostering independence. Therefore, previous studies remain fragmented because they discuss either nutrition programs or character education separately, without synthesizing how teachers strategically integrate both dimensions within the implementation of MBG. This unresolved gap highlights the need for a comprehensive synthesis of existing evidence.

To address this limitation, the present study positions the Free Nutritious Meal Program not merely as a government nutrition initiative but as a pedagogical ecosystem that enables teachers to cultivate children's independence through authentic daily experiences. Unlike previous studies focusing on nutritional outcomes or policy implementation, this research systematically synthesizes evidence regarding teachers' strategies in facilitating independent behavior during meal activities. The novelty of this study lies in integrating school nutrition, early childhood pedagogy, teacher strategies, and character education into a unified conceptual framework. By examining how teachers employ scaffolding, habituation, modeling, environmental organization, and positive reinforcement throughout meal routines, this review extends current understanding of how everyday school practices contribute to children's holistic development beyond nutritional improvement alone.

Based on these considerations, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to identify, analyze, and synthesize empirical evidence concerning teachers' strategies for fostering early childhood independence through the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Specifically, the review addresses three questions: (1) What pedagogical roles do teachers perform

during MBG implementation? (2) What instructional strategies are used to cultivate children's independence through meal activities? (3) What contextual factors facilitate or constrain the effectiveness of these strategies? This study argues that the educational significance of MBG extends beyond improving children's nutritional status because the program provides authentic opportunities for developing independence through teacher-guided daily routines. Accordingly, the findings are expected to contribute theoretically to early childhood pedagogy and character education while offering evidence-based recommendations for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers seeking to maximize the educational value of the MBG program.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to comprehensively identify, evaluate, synthesize, and interpret empirical evidence concerning teachers' strategies for fostering early childhood independence through the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). The SLR approach was selected because it enables researchers to systematically integrate findings from multiple studies, identify consistent patterns, reveal conceptual relationships, and generate evidence-based conclusions that cannot be obtained from individual studies alone. Furthermore, SLR provides a rigorous and transparent procedure for minimizing selection bias while producing comprehensive knowledge regarding a particular educational phenomenon. To ensure methodological transparency, consistency, and reproducibility, this review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines proposed by Page et al. (2021), encompassing the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.

The review was conducted using literature obtained from internationally recognized academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Google Scholar, and nationally accredited journals indexed in Garuda/SINTA. These databases were purposively selected because they provide high-quality peer-reviewed publications in education, early childhood education, pedagogy, and school nutrition. The literature search focused on studies published between 2021 and 2026, considering that the MBG program is a recent educational policy and contemporary publications are more likely to capture current pedagogical practices. Consequently, selecting these databases and publication years ensured that the synthesized evidence was relevant, credible, and reflected the latest developments concerning teacher strategies and early childhood independence.

Data were collected in systematic, empirical studies that addressed teacher strategies, pedagogical practices, or educational interventions related to child independence in school lunch programs or comparable early childhood education contexts. To synthesize evidence explaining how teachers utilize daily meal routines as opportunities for developing independence. Literature was retrieved from the selected international and national academic databases. The search was conducted from January to March 2026, covering publications issued between 2021 and 2026. The reviewed studies involved early childhood teachers, preschool children, school leaders, or educational practitioners relevant to the

research focus. Literature searches employed Boolean operators combining keywords such as ("early childhood" OR "preschool" OR "PAUD") AND ("independence" OR "autonomy" OR "self-reliance") AND ("teacher strategy" OR "teacher role" OR "scaffolding") AND ("free nutritious meal" OR "school meal program" OR "MBG"). Retrieved records were exported into Mendeley for duplicate removal before undergoing title screening, abstract screening, and full-text eligibility assessment based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), adapted for a systematic literature review (Sudibya & Prasojo, 2025). Analysis involved data condensation, where relevant findings were extracted, coded, summarized, and categorized according to the research questions; data display, where evidence was organized into synthesis matrices to compare study characteristics, participants, teacher strategies, and findings; and conclusion drawing and verification, through iterative comparison and interpretation until coherent themes emerged. Trustworthiness was ensured through adherence to the PRISMA 2020 protocol, transparent documentation of the review process, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, source triangulation across peer-reviewed studies, a comprehensive audit trail of analytical decisions, and repeated cross-checking of extracted data with original publications to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and overall methodological rigor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Characteristics of the Analyzed Studies

The characteristics of the analyzed studies refer to the general profile of the research included in this systematic literature review. These characteristics encompass the research approach, study design, publication year, research setting, participants, and research focus (Steil et al., 2022; Sudibya & Prasojo, 2025). Examining these characteristics provides a comprehensive overview of the methodological trends and research contexts concerning teachers' strategies for fostering independence among young children through shared mealtime programs. This analysis also establishes the contextual foundation for interpreting the synthesized evidence presented in subsequent findings.

The synthesis revealed that the majority of the selected studies employed qualitative approaches, particularly descriptive qualitative research and case study designs (Simon-Tillaux et al., 2022; Vediya et al., 2025). These methodological approaches were considered appropriate because they enabled researchers to explore teachers' pedagogical practices and children's learning experiences during shared mealtime activities in depth. Several studies utilized classroom observations, interviews with teachers, and document analysis to capture authentic educational practices, resulting in rich descriptions of how teachers facilitate children's independence through daily mealtime routines (Lockett, 2025; Osorio & Azad, 2025).

Furthermore, the analyzed studies were conducted across diverse early childhood education institutions throughout Indonesia, including both urban and rural settings. This geographical diversity reflects the implementation of

shared mealtime activities within varying social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Bojcic et al., 2024; Trujillo & Fontana, 2026). Despite these contextual differences, the studies consistently emphasized the teacher's central role in integrating nutritional objectives with character education by encouraging children to eat independently, practice responsibility, and develop self-help skills during mealtime.

Overall, the analyzed literature demonstrates that research on teachers' strategies for fostering children's independence through shared mealtime programs is predominantly qualitative and process-oriented. The diversity of research contexts enriches the body of evidence while consistently highlighting teachers as the primary agents responsible for transforming mealtime activities into meaningful opportunities for character development.

Several consistent patterns emerged from the synthesized studies. First, qualitative research dominates this field, reflecting researchers' emphasis on understanding educational processes rather than measuring outcomes quantitatively. Second, although the studies were conducted in different educational settings with diverse socio-cultural characteristics, they reported similar pedagogical objectives and implementation strategies. Third, teachers were consistently identified as the key facilitators who integrated nutritional goals with the development of children's independence through structured and guided shared mealtime activities.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Analyzed Studies

Aspect	Synthesized Findings	Indicator
Research approach	Predominantly qualitative	Exploration of teaching and learning processes
Research design	Descriptive qualitative and case study	In-depth investigation of teachers' practices
Research setting	Early childhood education institutions in urban and rural areas	Diverse implementation contexts
Publication period	2023–2026	Research development following the introduction of the School Meal Program
Research focus	Teachers' strategies for fostering children's independence	Teachers' pedagogical role during shared mealtime

Table 1 demonstrates that research on teachers' strategies for fostering children's independence through shared mealtime programs is largely dominated by qualitative inquiry. The prevalence of descriptive qualitative and case study designs indicates that scholars have primarily sought to understand the pedagogical processes, teacher-child interactions, and contextual factors underlying the implementation of shared mealtime activities rather than to quantify learning outcomes. Such methodological preferences reflect the complex and socially situated nature of character development in early childhood education.

Moreover, the diversity of research settings illustrates that shared mealtime programs have been implemented across various educational and socio-cultural contexts in Indonesia. Although institutional characteristics, available resources, and community backgrounds differ, the reviewed studies

consistently identify teachers as the central pedagogical agents responsible for transforming mealtime into a meaningful learning experience. This recurring finding suggests that the effectiveness of shared mealtime programs depends not only on nutritional provision but also on teachers' intentional instructional strategies that promote children's autonomy, responsibility, and self-regulation.

Teachers' Role in Facilitating Children's Independence

Teachers' role in facilitating children's independence refers to the pedagogical responsibilities performed by teachers to encourage young children's ability to complete daily tasks autonomously during shared mealtime activities (Marconi et al., 2022). Within the context of the School Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG), this role extends beyond ensuring children's nutritional intake to intentionally designing learning experiences that cultivate self-help skills, responsibility, self-regulation, and positive social behaviors (Malaka et al., 2025). Across the reviewed literature, teachers are consistently portrayed as facilitators, role models, and motivators who transform routine mealtime into an educational opportunity for character development.

The synthesis indicates that teachers predominantly function as facilitators by providing structured guidance while gradually encouraging children to perform mealtime routines independently. Rather than completing tasks for children, teachers scaffold learning by demonstrating appropriate eating behaviors, offering verbal prompts, and reducing assistance as children become more competent (Anggereni et al., 2023; Cerino, 2023). This facilitative approach enables children to practice essential self-care skills, including preparing eating utensils, serving food appropriately, cleaning up after meals, and following classroom routines independently.

The reviewed studies further demonstrate that teachers assume the role of behavioral models by consistently exhibiting appropriate table manners, hygiene practices, and respectful social interactions during shared meals (Etchebehere et al., 2024; Fadlillah et al., 2025; Usoltsev et al., 2025). Children learn not only through direct instruction but also by observing teachers' behaviors, attitudes, and interpersonal communication. In addition, positive reinforcement including praise, encouragement, and constructive feedback is frequently reported as an effective strategy for strengthening children's confidence and intrinsic motivation to complete mealtime tasks without excessive adult assistance (Marconi et al., 2022). Consequently, mealtime becomes an authentic context in which cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral aspects of independence develop simultaneously.

Overall, the synthesized evidence demonstrates that teachers' contributions to the MBG program extend well beyond nutritional supervision. Teachers intentionally integrate educational objectives into daily mealtime routines by creating supportive learning environments, modeling desirable behaviors, and encouraging children to assume increasing responsibility for their own actions. Through these pedagogical practices, shared mealtime functions as an effective medium for cultivating independence alongside healthy eating habits.

Several recurring patterns emerge across the analyzed studies. First, teachers consistently adopt a facilitative rather than directive approach,

emphasizing guidance instead of direct intervention. Second, modeling desirable behaviors is identified as a fundamental instructional strategy that enables children to internalize independence through observation and imitation. Third, positive reinforcement appears across nearly all studies as an essential mechanism for maintaining children's motivation and confidence. Finally, the literature consistently suggests that successful implementation of the MBG program depends not only on food provision but also on teachers' pedagogical competence in integrating nutritional objectives with character education, thereby positioning shared mealtime as both a health initiative and a meaningful educational practice.

Table 2. Synthesized Roles of Teachers in Facilitating Children's Independence

Teachers' Role	Synthesized Evidence	Indicator
Facilitator	Teachers provide scaffolding and gradually reduce assistance during mealtime activities.	Guided independent practice, task completion
Role model	Teachers demonstrate appropriate eating behaviors, hygiene, and social etiquette.	Modeling, observational learning
Motivator	Teachers use praise, encouragement, and positive reinforcement to strengthen children's confidence.	Positive reinforcement, self-confidence
Character educator	Teachers integrate independence, responsibility, discipline, and respect into mealtime routines.	Character development
Learning manager	Teachers organize mealtime as a structured learning experience rather than merely a feeding activity.	Pedagogical management

Table 2 illustrates that teachers' responsibilities within shared mealtime programs encompass multiple interconnected pedagogical roles. Rather than acting solely as supervisors of children's nutritional intake, teachers simultaneously facilitate learning, model appropriate behaviors, motivate children through positive reinforcement, and embed character education within everyday classroom routines. These complementary roles create a learning environment in which independence develops through repeated practice, observation, and supportive interaction.

Teachers' Strategies for Fostering Children's Independence

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that teachers employ multiple complementary strategies to foster children's independence during the implementation of the School Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) (Malaka et al., 2025). Shared mealtime is conceptualized not merely as a nutritional intervention but as an authentic pedagogical context where children gradually develop autonomy, responsibility, self-regulation, and positive social behaviors through meaningful teacher guidance (Brandisauskiene et al., 2022, 2023). Four major strategies emerged across the synthesized studies. First, teachers establish structured routines and habit formation by encouraging children to wash their hands, queue orderly, collect meal boxes, pray, eat independently, dispose of waste properly, and clean eating utensils after meals. Repeated engagement in these predictable routines enables children to internalize self-care behaviors and

progressively perform daily activities with decreasing adult assistance and confidence (Cerino, 2023).

The second strategy identified in the reviewed studies is the implementation of family-style dining, where children actively participate in serving food, pouring drinks, selecting appropriate portions, and cleaning the dining environment after meals. This approach positions children as active participants rather than passive recipients, encouraging independent decision-making, responsibility, cooperation, and self-confidence. A third strategy involves integrating character education into mealtime routines by encouraging children to pray before and after eating, demonstrate polite table manners, appreciate available food, avoid waste, and express gratitude. These practices extend the educational value of the MBG program beyond nutritional improvement by simultaneously cultivating discipline, respect, self-control, responsibility, and positive moral values through everyday eating experiences within meaningful classroom contexts together (Razza & Brann, 2025; Zahra et al., 2024).

The final strategy emphasizes creative pedagogical approaches for addressing children's eating challenges through storytelling, picture books, interactive discussions, playful food presentation, and repeated positive exposure to unfamiliar foods. Rather than compelling children to eat, teachers create enjoyable and emotionally supportive learning experiences that encourage independent food choices and gradually strengthen healthy eating habits. Overall, the synthesized evidence indicates several recurring patterns. Structured routines provide the strongest foundation for independence, while child-centered participation encourages autonomy and confidence. Character education is naturally embedded within mealtime activities instead of being taught separately, and teachers consistently demonstrate adaptive instructional practices responsive to children's diverse developmental needs. Collectively, these complementary strategies transform shared mealtime into an effective environment for holistic independence development.

Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Teachers' Strategies

The fourth theme identified through the systematic literature review concerns the factors influencing the effectiveness of teachers' strategies in fostering children's independence during the implementation of the School Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) (Hari et al., 2026; Simpson et al., 2022). Operationally, this theme refers to the internal and external conditions that facilitate or constrain teachers' ability to implement pedagogical strategies consistently and effectively. Across the reviewed studies, effectiveness was influenced not only by teachers' pedagogical competence, emotional capacity, and understanding of child development but also by contextual factors such as school facilities, time allocation, institutional support, parental involvement, and collaboration among educational stakeholders (Polymeropoulou & Lazaridou, 2022; Sarfraz et al., 2022). These factors collectively determine whether mealtime activities can function as meaningful opportunities for developing children's independence rather than merely fulfilling nutritional objectives (Iqbal et al., 2022).

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that teachers'

pedagogical and emotional competencies constitute the most influential internal factors affecting the successful implementation of independence-building strategies. Teachers who possess strong knowledge of early childhood development are better able to design age-appropriate learning experiences, provide effective scaffolding, and gradually reduce assistance according to children's developmental readiness (Mohebbi et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2025). Emotional qualities such as patience, empathy, consistency, and responsiveness further strengthen teachers' capacity to guide children through repetitive daily routines without creating dependence or frustration. Several studies also indicate that reflective teachers are more capable of modifying instructional approaches when children encounter difficulties, thereby creating supportive learning environments that encourage gradual independence.

External conditions also play a significant role in determining the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies. The reviewed studies emphasize that adequate learning facilities, sufficient time allocation for shared mealtime, supportive school leadership, and collaborative partnerships with parents substantially enhance children's opportunities to practice independent behaviors consistently (Roka et al., 2024; Zahra et al., 2024). Parental involvement is particularly important because independence developed during school mealtime routines becomes more sustainable when similar expectations and habits are reinforced at home. Nevertheless, several studies identify practical challenges, including limited instructional time, increased teacher workload, and the additional responsibilities associated with implementing the MBG program. These constraints may reduce teachers' opportunities to provide individualized guidance and continuous supervision, thereby limiting the overall effectiveness of independence-oriented instructional practices.

Discussion

The present systematic literature review demonstrates that teachers occupy a pivotal role in fostering young children's independence through the School Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG). Across the reviewed studies, teachers functioned as facilitators, role models, motivators, and character educators who transformed mealtime into meaningful learning experiences rather than merely nutritional interventions (Mohebbi et al., 2022; Simpson et al., 2022). These findings align with Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes that autonomy develops through guided participation and scaffolding provided by knowledgeable adults (Lei & Bakar, 2025). Likewise, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory positions teachers as influential actors within children's microsystem whose daily interactions shape developmental outcomes (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). Unlike previous studies emphasizing nutritional benefits, this review highlights teachers' pedagogical contributions as equally essential (Etchebehere et al., 2024; Fadlillah et al., 2025). The findings broaden the conceptualization of school meal programs by integrating nutritional and character education perspectives.

The findings further reveal that structured routines and family-style dining constitute effective instructional strategies for developing children's independence during shared mealtime (Burakgazi, 2024; Lei & Bakar, 2025). This conclusion supports previous studies showing that repeated participation in

structured routines enables children to internalize independent behaviors through meaningful repetition. Likewise, Bandura's Social Learning Theory explains that children acquire behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement from significant adults (Bandura, 2024; Rayes & Albelaihi, 2023; Vijayalakshmi & Rajakumari, 2025). Teachers who consistently model hygiene, table manners, and responsible eating create authentic learning opportunities that encourage imitation. Family-style dining further promotes autonomy by involving children in serving food, selecting portions, pouring drinks, and cleaning dining areas. Compared with teacher-directed feeding practices, participatory mealtime develops broader outcomes, including confidence, cooperation, self-regulation, and social responsibility.

Another important finding concerns the integration of character education into mealtime activities, indicating that MBG extends beyond improving children's nutritional status. The reviewed studies demonstrate that teachers intentionally embed moral and spiritual values by encouraging children to pray before and after meals, appreciate food, avoid waste, demonstrate respectful table manners, and practice gratitude (Herwawan et al., 2026; Marconi et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with holistic education perspectives emphasizing the simultaneous development of cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains through authentic learning experiences. However, this review extends previous discussions by showing that character education is naturally embedded within everyday routines rather than delivered as a separate curriculum (Etokabeka, 2025; Sarfraz et al., 2022). Consequently, shared mealtime becomes an authentic pedagogical context that strengthens responsibility, empathy, discipline, ethical awareness, and independent behavior simultaneously.

Despite consistently positive findings regarding teachers' instructional strategies, the reviewed literature also identifies contextual factors influencing successful implementation. Previous studies reported that teachers' pedagogical competence, classroom management skills, and understanding of child development substantially determine the effectiveness of independence-building strategies (Herwawan et al., 2026). The present synthesis confirms these conclusions while demonstrating that successful implementation also depends on institutional support, adequate facilities, and effective collaboration between schools and families. Parents' reinforcement of independent behaviors at home strengthens habits developed during school mealtime routines. Conversely, inadequate logistical support and increasing administrative responsibilities may reduce meaningful teacher-child interactions during MBG implementation (Hari et al., 2026; Malaka et al., 2025). These findings reinforce ecological perspectives emphasizing coordinated support across children's learning environments.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review concludes that the School Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) extends beyond its nutritional function by serving as an effective pedagogical medium for fostering young children's independence and character development through teachers' intentional instructional practices. The most significant finding is that structured routines, family-style dining, character integration, and creative pedagogical

approaches collectively form a holistic framework that transforms shared mealtime into an authentic learning experience promoting autonomy, responsibility, social competence, and moral values. This study contributes theoretically by synthesizing fragmented evidence into a comprehensive conceptual understanding of teachers' strategies within the MBG context, thereby enriching the literature on early childhood education, character education, and school meal programs. Nevertheless, this review is limited by its reliance on published studies, which may not fully capture contextual variations across educational settings. Future research should employ longitudinal qualitative and mixed-methods designs to examine the long-term impact of these strategies and compare their implementation across diverse socio-cultural contexts to generate evidence-based best practices for policy and educational improvement.

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