



Beyond Nutrition: Teacher-Mediated Mealtime Practices for Developing Early Childhood Independence

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Abstract:

The Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program is primarily designed to improve children's nutritional well-being, yet its potential as a pedagogical context for developing early childhood independence remains insufficiently explored. This study aims to examine teacher strategies for fostering children's independence through MBG-related mealtime practices and identify conditions that support their effectiveness. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted using the PRISMA 2020 framework. Relevant literature published between 2021 and 2026 was identified from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Garuda using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data were analyzed through data condensation, data display, verification, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that teachers develop independence through structured routines, scaffolding, autonomy support, character habituation, and active participation during mealtimes. Effectiveness is further shaped by teacher competence, supportive environments, institutional resources, and family reinforcement. The study concludes that MBG can function beyond nutritional provision as an everyday pedagogical space for independence development. Its implication is that MBG implementation should integrate nutritional, pedagogical, and character-development objectives.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education constitutes a critical foundation for developing children's character, independence, and readiness to participate in social life. Independence should be fostered from an early age because children need opportunities to manage personal needs, make simple decisions, demonstrate responsibility, and participate actively in their learning environment. Recent studies indicate that school culture, habituation, and meaningful daily activities can contribute to the development of children's independence and confidence (Syarif, 2023; Jumaisah, 2022). Teacher practices are also important because autonomy-supportive interactions can encourage children's self-regulation and independent behavior (Montoya et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2023). Therefore, independence should be regarded as an integral component of early childhood education, with everyday activities serving as authentic opportunities for children to develop responsibility and autonomy.

Although independence is an important developmental goal, young children frequently remain dependent on adults when performing routine

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activities. Excessive assistance may reduce opportunities for children to make decisions, solve simple problems, and take responsibility for their own actions. Recent research emphasizes that teacher behavior plays a significant role in supporting children's self-regulation, particularly when teachers provide appropriate scaffolding, encouragement, and opportunities for autonomous action (Montoya et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2023). At the same time, unsupportive or overly controlling teacher practices may restrict children's opportunities to exercise agency and develop self-regulatory capacities (Searle, 2024). These conditions demonstrate the need for pedagogical strategies that balance adult guidance with children's opportunities for independent action. Consequently, routine activities should be deliberately transformed into developmentally appropriate learning experiences that gradually reduce children's dependence on adults.

This issue is particularly relevant to Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Program (Program Makan Bergizi Gratis or MBG), which was launched in 2025 and includes children at the early childhood education level. Although MBG primarily addresses children's nutritional needs, its implementation creates daily mealtime situations that can also support character development. Shared meals provide opportunities for children to wash their hands, manage eating utensils, serve or receive food, follow mealtime routines, interact with peers, and clean their eating areas. Research on early childhood mealtimes indicates that such routines can become important contexts for social learning, participation, autonomy, and responsibility when appropriately facilitated by educators (Willemsen et al., 2023; Searle, 2024). Thus, MBG provides a potentially valuable educational context in which nutritional provision and character development can be integrated through meaningful teacher-guided experiences.

Previous research has established that children's independence can be strengthened through habituation, school culture, contextual learning, and teacher support. School-based routines involving nutritious meals and other daily activities have been associated with opportunities for children to practice independent behavior, responsibility, and confidence (Syarif, 2023; Jumaisah, 2022). Research on teacher scaffolding further demonstrates that teachers can support children's self-regulation by providing instructional guidance, organizing learning experiences, and responding appropriately to children's developmental needs (Montoya et al., 2023). Similarly, recent research on autonomy-supportive teaching shows that teachers can promote children's self-regulation by offering choices, encouraging problem-solving, following children's interests, and adjusting assistance to their competence levels (Choi et al., 2023). These findings establish a strong conceptual basis for understanding mealtimes as potential spaces for developing independence.

However, existing studies remain fragmented across two major areas. Research on early childhood independence primarily examines school culture, teacher scaffolding, self-regulation, and routine activities, while studies of mealtimes frequently emphasize nutrition, eating behavior, social interaction, or classroom management (Willemsen et al., 2023; Searle, 2024). Although these studies demonstrate that mealtimes can provide opportunities for participation and autonomy, limited attention has been given to how teachers intentionally transform such activities into structured experiences for developing independence. Furthermore, the specific relationship between school meal programs and teacher-

led independence development remains insufficiently synthesized. This gap is increasingly important in the context of MBG because the program represents a large-scale national intervention whose educational potential extends beyond nutritional provision. A systematic synthesis is therefore needed to connect these previously separated research domains.

The novelty of this study lies in positioning the Free Nutritious Meals Program as not only a nutritional intervention but also a potential pedagogical context for developing independence in early childhood. Rather than focusing exclusively on nutritional outcomes, this study examines how mealtime routines can integrate habituation, autonomy, social interaction, teacher scaffolding, and responsibility. This perspective is supported by evidence showing that mealtimes can function as everyday sites of social learning and children's participation when educators create opportunities for agency and appropriate decision-making (Willemsen et al., 2023; Searle, 2024). In addition, research on teacher scaffolding demonstrates the importance of developmentally responsive support in strengthening children's self-regulation and autonomy (Montoya et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2023). Accordingly, a systematic synthesis is important for identifying transferable pedagogical strategies within MBG.

Based on this research gap, this study examines how teachers can utilize the Free Nutritious Meals Program to develop independence among young children, what pedagogical strategies are employed during mealtime activities, and what factors influence their effectiveness. The central argument is that shared mealtimes can become meaningful environments for developing independence when teachers intentionally provide opportunities for children to perform tasks, make simple choices, interact with peers, and assume responsibility while receiving developmentally appropriate scaffolding. This argument is consistent with recent evidence that autonomy-supportive and responsive teacher practices contribute to children's self-regulation and independent behavior (Montoya et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2023). Through a Systematic Literature Review, this study therefore seeks to synthesize existing evidence and develop a conceptual understanding of how MBG can support both nutritional wellbeing and independence-oriented learning.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical evidence concerning teachers' strategies for developing independence among young children through the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG). An SLR was selected because it provides a systematic and transparent procedure for identifying, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant evidence. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 framework, which provides updated guidance for transparent reporting of systematic reviews, including study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). Literature was searched through Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Garuda, covering publications from 2021 to 2026. Since this study was literature-based, there was no physical research site; the research setting consisted of academic databases containing publications relevant to early childhood education, independence, teacher strategies, and school meal programs.

Data were collected through systematic literature searching, screening, and extraction. The search strategy combined keywords related to early childhood,

independence, teacher strategies, scaffolding, and school meal programs using Boolean operators. Studies were included when they examined teachers' roles or strategies in developing children's independence, addressed shared meals or food-related interventions in early childhood settings, were published in Indonesian or English, provided full-text access, and were published between 2021 and 2026. Studies were excluded when they focused exclusively on nutritional outcomes without pedagogical dimensions, involved participants outside early childhood education, or consisted of editorials, opinions, books, and non-peer-reviewed publications. Extracted information included authors, publication year, research context, objectives, methodology, participants, teacher strategies, forms of independence, and major findings. The selection and reporting procedures were documented according to PRISMA 2020 recommendations (Page et al., 2021).

Data were analyzed through an interactive process involving data condensation, data display, verification, and conclusion drawing. During data condensation, relevant information from the selected studies was screened, summarized, categorized, and focused on teacher strategies, independence-related behaviors, mealtime activities, scaffolding, and factors influencing implementation. The condensed data were displayed through thematic matrices and narrative descriptions to identify recurring patterns, similarities, differences, and relationships across studies. Verification was conducted by comparing findings across the selected articles and returning to the original sources to ensure consistency between the extracted evidence and the resulting interpretation. Data trustworthiness was strengthened through explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, searches across multiple academic databases, cross-checking extracted information with the original articles, systematic documentation of the selection process, and maintenance of an audit trail. These procedures were aligned with the principles of transparent and reproducible systematic review reporting recommended by PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Teacher-Mediated Mealtime Practices for Children's Independence

The synthesis indicates that the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program can function beyond nutritional provision by creating a pedagogical space for developing children's independence. Across the reviewed studies, teachers transformed routine mealtime activities, including handwashing, queuing, receiving meals, praying, eating, managing utensils, and cleaning, into opportunities for self-care and responsibility. These practices allowed children to participate actively while gradually reducing dependence on adults. Mealtimes therefore emerged as repeated learning situations rather than merely eating periods. This finding is consistent with research showing that mealtimes in early childhood education provide contexts for learning through participation and interaction. The synthesis further demonstrates that the educational value of MBG depends on how intentionally teachers organize routines and connect them with developmental learning goals.

Teacher scaffolding emerged as the central mechanism connecting mealtime routines with children's independent action. Rather than immediately completing

tasks for children, teachers provided demonstrations, verbal prompts, encouragement, and assistance according to needs. As children became more competent, support was gradually reduced, allowing them to assume greater responsibility for everyday activities. This pattern reflects evidence that preschool teachers' scaffolding behaviors can strengthen self-regulation through instructional, organizational, and responsive support. Autonomy-supportive practices similarly encourage young learners to make choices, solve simple problems, and participate actively. The synthesis therefore identifies a progression from structured guidance toward autonomous participation. In the MBG context, teachers function as important mediators who convert routine food-related activities into repeated experiences of decision-making, responsibility, self-management, and social participation daily.

The first finding can be conceptualized as a pedagogical pathway: structured mealtime routines enable teacher scaffolding, which facilitates independent participation and strengthens self-regulation. The reviewed evidence suggests that independence is not produced by simply allowing children to act alone. Instead, children require predictable routines, clear expectations, modeling, and opportunities to practice. Teachers remain important because they determine carefully when to intervene or withdraw assistance. Such graduated support enables children to experience competence without removing necessary guidance. Accordingly, MBG represents more than a mechanism for delivering nutritious food; it can become an everyday learning environment where character formation is embedded within ordinary daily activities and routines within school life. The effectiveness of this pathway depends on deliberate pedagogical planning and responsive teacher practice in early education.

Ecological Conditions for Independence-Oriented Mealtime Practices

The second finding indicates that the effectiveness of independence-oriented mealtime practices depends on an ecological support system beyond teacher actions. The reviewed literature highlights teacher competence, classroom conditions, institutional resources, family reinforcement, and implementation as interconnected factors. Teachers require knowledge of child development to recognize differences in readiness and determine appropriate levels of assistance. Supportive environments are equally important because children need adequate time, clear routines, and safe spaces. These conditions determine whether mealtime activities can consistently function as learning experiences. The synthesis therefore shows that independence develops most effectively when pedagogical intentions are supported by organizational conditions and leadership support. Teacher strategies cannot operate optimally when structural constraints prevent educators from providing sustained attention, guidance, and opportunities for autonomous participation.

Family reinforcement emerged as another important condition shaping the continuity of independence development. Habits introduced during school mealtimes are more likely to become stable when families provide expectations and opportunities to practice responsibility at home. The reviewed evidence suggests that consistent messages between school and family can strengthen children's confidence and reduce dependence on adults across contexts. At the institutional

level, however, teachers may face competing responsibilities, including food distribution, supervision, classroom instruction, hygiene management, and documentation. These overlapping demands can reduce time for individualized scaffolding. Consequently, MBG implementation requires coordination among teachers and families. Such collaboration can create consistent routines and ensure that independence-oriented practices remain embedded consistently within educational settings rather than becoming isolated classroom activities.

The second finding can be represented as an ecological pathway: teacher competence, supportive environments, family reinforcement, and institutional capacity strengthen consistent habituation and sustained independence. This pattern extends understanding of MBG by demonstrating that children's independence cannot be attributed solely to teachers' strategies alone. Instead, it emerges through interactions among individual, relational, and organizational conditions. The synthesis also reveals an important implementation challenge: when teachers simultaneously manage food services, supervision, learning, and character development, the pedagogical potential of MBG may be weakened. Effective implementation therefore requires institutional arrangements that recognize teachers' multiple responsibilities and provide adequate resources. When these conditions are aligned, mealtimes can become more sustainable spaces for nutritional support, social learning, responsibility, and independent development and character formation.

Discussion

The findings indicate that teachers function as key mediators in transforming MBG mealtimes into opportunities for children's independence. This result is consistent with Montoya et al. (2023), who found that teacher scaffolding supports young children's self-regulation through instructional, organizational, and responsive behaviors. It also aligns with Zachariou and Bonneville-Roussy (2024), who reported a positive relationship between teacher autonomy support and children's self-regulation. However, this study extends existing literature by locating scaffolding within routine food-related activities rather than formal instructional tasks. Theoretically, the finding supports a social-constructivist view in which independence develops through guided participation. Practically, teachers should regulate assistance, gradually withdrawing support as children demonstrate greater competence during mealtime routines.

The study further demonstrates that structured routines can connect nutritional activities with children's autonomous participation. This finding corresponds with Willemsen et al. (2023), whose review identifies mealtimes as everyday settings for social learning, participation, and interaction in education. Similarly, Wiggins et al. (2024) illustrate how preschool meals can become spaces for interaction and shared activity. The present findings extend these studies by emphasizing routines such as handwashing, queuing, serving food, eating, and cleaning as repeated opportunities to practice responsibility. Unlike approaches that emphasize nutritional outcomes, this synthesis highlights the pedagogical value of repetition. Practically, MBG implementation should incorporate opportunities for children to participate, make appropriate choices, and complete tasks independently.

The findings also reveal that independence-oriented mealtime practices depend on ecological conditions involving teachers, families, classrooms, and institutional factors. This interpretation is consistent with Montoya et al. (2023), who showed that teacher scaffolding varies across learning experiences and includes instructional, organizational, and responsive dimensions. It also complements Willemsen et al. (2023), who identified practical challenges surrounding mealtime organization and teacher responsibilities. The study extends this literature by connecting contextual conditions with independence development within the MBG program. Theoretically, this suggests that children's independence should be understood as relational and context-dependent rather than solely individual. Practically, schools need adequate facilities, realistic schedules, teacher coordination, and family communication to sustain these routines.

Another important finding concerns the integration of character values into mealtime practices. The synthesis shows that prayer, gratitude, respect, sharing, discipline, and responsibility can accompany children's autonomy during MBG activities. This finding is consistent with Willemsen et al. (2023), who characterize mealtimes as socially organized learning environments, and Zachariou and Bonneville-Roussy (2024), who demonstrate the relevance of autonomy-supportive teacher behavior. The distinctive contribution of this study is the integration of nutritional, social, behavioral, and moral dimensions within one context. Theoretically, this broadens mealtime learning toward holistic character development and values. Practically, teachers can embed character education within authentic routines instead of treating independence and moral learning as separate educational practices.

Overall, the study contributes an integrative interpretation of MBG as a pedagogical context in which teacher scaffolding, structured routines, environmental support, and family reinforcement jointly facilitate children's independence. Previous research has examined teacher scaffolding, autonomy support, and mealtime practices as related areas (Montoya et al., 2023; Willemsen et al., 2023; Zachariou & Bonneville-Roussy, 2024). This synthesis connects these strands by proposing a pathway from guided participation to autonomous action within daily mealtimes. The contribution is practical and theoretical. Theoretically, it positions mealtimes as developmental learning spaces for children. Practically, MBG evaluation should include pedagogical indicators alongside nutritional outcomes, while teacher training and school-family collaboration should support opportunities to practice independence.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program has pedagogical potential beyond nutritional provision by creating everyday opportunities for developing young children's independence. The key lesson is that independence emerges when teachers intentionally transform mealtime routines into guided learning experiences through scaffolding, habituation, autonomy support, and character formation. Scientifically, this study contributes an integrative perspective linking teacher-mediated practices, mealtime routines, ecological support, and children's independence within early childhood education.

However, the study is limited by its reliance on previously published literature, variations in study quality, and the relatively recent implementation of MBG, which limits longitudinal evidence regarding sustained developmental outcomes. Future research should therefore conduct empirical and longitudinal studies across diverse early childhood settings to examine how MBG practices influence children's independence over time and to validate the proposed pedagogical pathway.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author confirms that there are no financial, professional, or personal interests that could have influenced the conduct, interpretation, or reporting of this study.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

AI-assisted tools were employed during the development of this manuscript to assist with language editing, improve the organization of ideas, and enhance the clarity of academic expression. All AI-assisted outputs were critically examined, edited, and verified by the author. The author retains full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, scholarly integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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