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Management of a Shared-Meal Culture in the Free Nutritious Meal Program Based on Islamic Values to Strengthen Students' Empathy and Solidarity

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the management of a shared-meal culture within the Free Nutritious Meal Program *(Program Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG)* based on Islamic values and its contribution to strengthening students' empathy and solidarity. The study employed a qualitative method with an exploratory analytical approach. The research was conducted at SDN 1 Bodak, Central Lombok Regency, involving 20 fifth- and seventh-grade students selected purposively as informants. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with the principal, homeroom teachers, and students, as well as documentation. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, comprising data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings indicate that the management of the shared-meal culture was implemented in a structured and organized manner through scheduled activities, food inspection, meal distribution, collective prayer, shared meals, practices of sharing, and habituation of cleanliness and responsibility. These practices integrated Islamic values of religiosity, ta'awun (mutual assistance), ukhuwah (brotherhood), care, and togetherness into students' daily activities. The shared-meal culture also created a social interaction space that encouraged students to help one another, pay attention to their peers' conditions, share food, and develop closer interpersonal relationships. The findings suggest that the shared-meal culture within the MBG Program has the potential to serve as an Islamic educational management practice that integrates nutritional fulfillment with social character development, particularly the strengthening of students' empathy and solidarity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamentally concerned not only with students' academic achievement but also with the development of character, social attitudes, and moral values necessary for

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participation in community life [1]. Schools serve as both educational institutions and strategic social spaces in which students can develop positive social habits through activities that encourage interaction, cooperation, mutual respect, and concern for others. Within the context of Islamic education, these processes are closely associated with the cultivation of values such as *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), caring, sharing, and respect for others as integral components of students' moral development [2]. In Indonesia, the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program *Makan Bergizi Gratis* (MBG) has introduced a new context for fostering social culture within school environments. The program is not limited to providing meals or meeting students' nutritional needs; when systematically managed and integrated with educational values, it can also become part of the broader management of the educational ecosystem and contribute positively to students' development [3]. One important social character that can potentially be cultivated through shared-meal practices within the program is empathy.

Empathy is an essential social competence that should be cultivated through education, particularly amid the challenges of globalization, increasing individualism, and rapid technological development, which may diminish the quality of social interactions among students [4]. The ability to empathize enables individuals to understand the feelings, needs, and perspectives of others, thereby fostering positive and harmonious social relationships [5]. The development of social competencies, including empathy, plays a crucial role in supporting students' socialization processes and helping them adapt to the demands of community life [6]. Accordingly, education should promote learning practices that foster empathy, care, and social responsibility as integral dimensions of students' character development [7]. Rosepti [8] found that empathy-oriented learning can enhance students' social awareness, encourage appreciation of diversity, and foster more inclusive social relationships, including a stronger sense of solidarity among students.

Social solidarity is an important dimension of students' character development, reflected in their ability to foster togetherness, appreciate differences, and participate inclusively in social life [9]. Garton et al. [10] found that the free school meal program *Ka Ora, Ka Ako* in New Zealand created an inclusive environment and encouraged social interaction among students from diverse backgrounds. This finding is consistent with [11], who demonstrated that universal school meal programs can increase students' participation in school activities and contribute to a more inclusive learning environment. Similarly, Hernández-rangel and Páramo-bernal [12] explained that the school dining environment constitutes an important social space where students learn to interact, develop shared routines, and understand social and cultural values associated with food. These findings are further supported by Kristjansson et al. [13], who reported that school feeding programs can provide psychosocial benefits, including enhanced social connectedness, student well-being, and a stronger sense of belonging to the school community. Collectively, these studies indicate that shared-meal culture has considerable potential as a means of strengthening social solidarity, as it provides opportunities for students to interact, share experiences, develop mutual understanding, and build stronger social relationships.

Various studies have demonstrated that shared-meal practices within school meal programs have the potential to foster empathy through direct and sustained social

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interaction. Fernanda and Gómez [14] explain that shared meals at school function as a means of socialization through which students learn social norms, values, and practices through collective experiences. Neuman [15] further argues that shared-meal practices serve as a social mechanism that strengthens interpersonal interaction, facilitates social coordination, and promotes closer social relationships among participants. De Oliveira and Frutuoso [16] found that cooking and eating together can strengthen interpersonal relationships, enhance the quality of social interaction, and foster empathy among participants from diverse backgrounds. Similarly, Wallace et al. [17] demonstrated that food-sharing practices in educational settings can promote prosocial behavior, caring, and stronger social relationships among students. Meanwhile, Pramesthi et al. [18] found that the implementation of school meal programs in Indonesia encourages positive behaviors, including orderly queuing, responsibility, and appreciation of togetherness during mealtimes. Beltran et al. [19] further emphasized that shared-meal activities create social interdependence that contributes to strengthening interpersonal relationships and fostering a sense of belonging within groups, particularly through the development of empathy and solidarity among students.

Although previous studies have demonstrated the positive effects of shared-meal practices, the existing literature has predominantly focused on nutritional, health, and eating-related outcomes. In contrast, shared-meal culture as a medium for internalizing Islamic values, such as *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood), *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), care, and togetherness, remains relatively underexplored from the perspective of Islamic Educational Management in Indonesia, particularly given the recent implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in examining shared-meal culture within the MBG Program as an Islamic values-based educational management practice aimed at strengthening students' empathy and social solidarity. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the management of shared-meal culture within the MBG Program based on Islamic values and its contribution to strengthening students' empathy and social solidarity.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method with an exploratory analytical approach to examine the meanings, values, and social practices emerging from the management of shared-meal culture within the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) based on Islamic values, as well as its contribution to strengthening students' empathy and social solidarity [20]. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, interactions, and perceptions of students and other stakeholders involved in program implementation within the natural context of the school environment. The study was conducted at SDN 1 Bodak, Central Lombok Regency, one of the schools that regularly participates in the Free Nutritious Meal Program. The research site was purposively selected based on several considerations, including direct school management involvement in the program, the continuity of program implementation, students' active participation in shared-meal activities, and the researcher's accessibility to informants relevant to the research focus. The study involved 20 fifth- and seventh-grade

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students as informants, purposively selected based on their direct involvement in the implementation of shared-meal culture through the MBG Program. Data were collected through direct participant observation, in-depth interviews with key informants, including the principal, homeroom teachers, and students, as well as documentation. These techniques were employed to obtain comprehensive information regarding the management of shared-meal activities, students' social interactions, and the implementation of Islamic values in strengthening empathy and social solidarity among students. The data analysis process employed in this study is presented in Figure 1.

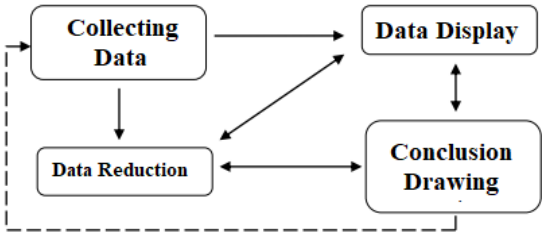


Figure 1. Data Analysis Procedure

Figure 1 illustrates that the research was conducted through a series of interconnected stages, beginning with problem identification and a literature review to establish the research focus. Data analysis was conducted interactively using the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of four stages [21]: data collection, data reduction or condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data collection stage, data were obtained through direct observations conducted at SDN 1 Bodak, Central Lombok Regency, in-depth interviews with key informants, including the principal, teachers, and fifth- and sixth-grade students, as well as relevant documentation. During the data reduction or condensation stage, observation, interview, and documentary data were selected, focused, coded, and categorized according to the research focus, namely the management of shared-meal culture, the internalization of Islamic values, empathy, and students' social solidarity. The data were subsequently presented narratively and thematically by identifying patterns of interaction, food-sharing practices, caring, cooperation, mutual respect, and togetherness that emerged during the implementation of the MBG Program. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn and verified through comparisons across data sources and collection methods to ensure the consistency and credibility of the findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Management of Shared-Meal Culture within the MBG Program

The findings from observations conducted at SDN 1 Bodak, Central Lombok Regency, indicate that the school is one of the educational institutions that regularly benefits from the Indonesian government's Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program. The implementation of the program at the school is not solely oriented toward meeting students' nutritional needs but is also managed as part of a social education practice through the development of a shared-meal culture. The observations revealed that students

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were encouraged to eat together with their classmates in an orderly and organized setting. Thus, mealtime functioned not merely as an activity of food consumption but also as a space for social interaction and the development of positive social habits. This management was reflected in the scheduling of mealtimes, teachers' active involvement in guiding students, and the habituation of students to avoid eating individually and instead share meals with their peers. This practice created opportunities for students to interact directly, share food, assist one another, maintain cleanliness, and foster a sense of togetherness throughout the meal. Furthermore, the findings from an interview with the principal revealed that:

> *"The Free Nutritious Meal Program is implemented according to a scheduled timetable at 9:00 a.m. The meals provided to students must undergo sterilization and be checked by teachers to ensure that they are safe for consumption. After the meals are distributed according to the number of students, teachers instruct the students to sit together, either in a circle or in an orderly arrangement with their peers, and begin by praying."*

The principal's statement indicates that the implementation of the MBG Program at SDN 1 Bodak is not solely oriented toward food distribution and meeting students' nutritional needs but is managed through a structured and educationally meaningful mechanism. The scheduling of mealtimes, safety inspection of food by teachers, distribution of meals according to the number of students, and arrangement of students to sit together in an orderly manner demonstrate the managerial functions of planning, organizing, and monitoring in program implementation. Meanwhile, the instruction to eat together in a circular arrangement and to begin the meal with a prayer demonstrates the integration of Islamic values into the practice of shared-meal culture. This practice transforms mealtime into a space for social habituation that encourages students to interact with one another, appreciate the presence of their peers, foster togetherness, and develop concern for others. Thus, the interview findings are consistent with [23], which indicated that the management of the MBG Program in schools has expanded beyond nutritional fulfillment to function as a medium for developing social culture and internalizing Islamic values that support the strengthening of students' empathy and social solidarity. The school's management model for implementing shared meals is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Management Model for Shared-Meal Activities

No	Management Model	Student Response
1	Scheduled Delivery of MBG Meals	Students continue their learning activities while waiting for the scheduled meal distribution.
2	Food Quality and Safety Inspection by Teachers	Teachers prepare and organize students before the meal activity begins.
3	Meal Distribution	Students are instructed to sit together in a circle in an orderly manner.
4	Collective Prayer	The teacher asks the class leader to lead the prayer before eating, which is followed by all students.
5	Shared Meals and Food Sharing	Students are instructed not to disturb one another while eating and are encouraged to share with their peers. They also share side dishes with one another, including food brought from home.
6	Cleanliness and Responsibility Habituation	Students are instructed to maintain cleanliness and arrange their eating areas properly, including organizing the meal containers according to the number distributed.

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Based on Table 1, the management of shared-meal activities within the MBG Program at SDN 1 Bodak was implemented through a structured sequence of stages, beginning with the receipt of meals according to the scheduled timetable, followed by food quality inspection by teachers, meal distribution, collective prayer, shared meals, and the habituation of cleanliness and responsibility. This sequence demonstrates that the school does not position the MBG Program merely as a mechanism for food distribution and consumption but manages it as a habituation-oriented educational activity with important social and Islamic value dimensions. The arrangement of students to sit in a circle and eat together creates opportunities for interpersonal interaction, while the practice of sharing side dishes, including sharing food brought from home, reflects the values of care, mutual assistance, and togetherness. The involvement of the class leader in leading the collective prayer also demonstrates the cultivation of religious values and social responsibility through everyday activities. Meanwhile, instructions to maintain order and cleanliness and to organize the eating area after the meal reflect the development of students' responsibility toward their shared environment. Therefore, the management stages demonstrate that the shared-meal culture within the MBG Program functions as a medium for habituating Islamic values, fostering social interaction, care, cooperation, and responsibility, which may contribute to strengthening students' empathy and social solidarity.

Shared-Meal Culture as a Space for the Internalization of Islamic Values

Based on observations of the shared-meal culture at SDN 1 Bodak, the implementation of shared-meal activities was found to extend beyond the fulfillment of students' nutritional needs and to function as a space for habituating Islamic values in everyday school life. Islamic values are not conveyed solely through formal classroom instruction but are also practiced through concrete activities within the school environment. [24] explains that the internalization of moral values through the MBG Program occurs through repeated and structured habituation.

Table 2. Habituation of Islamic Values through Shared-Meal Activities

No	Islamic Values	Habituation Practices
1	Praying before and after meals	Students are encouraged to pray before and after eating, led by the class leader.
2	Respect for food	Students are taught not to waste food, including refraining from throwing or mishandling it.
3	Observing proper mealtime etiquette	Students are encouraged to observe appropriate manners when eating and drinking, such as remaining seated and refraining from behaviors that may disturb their peers during mealtimes.
4	Avoiding excess	Students are taught to avoid excessive eating, greed, and taking food belonging to their peers.
5	Sharing with peers	Students are encouraged to share food with their classmates as an expression of care and mutual assistance.
6	Gratitude for food	Students are encouraged to express gratitude and recite a prayer after finishing their meals.
7	Maintaining cleanliness	After completing the shared meal, students are instructed by the teacher to maintain cleanliness and organize their eating areas properly.

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The moral values identified include discipline, religiosity, gratitude, responsibility, and social care. These values are reflected in students' behaviors, such as queuing orderly, reciting prayers before and after meals, finishing their meals, and sharing and assisting their peers. In addition, teachers' roles as facilitators, role models, and reinforcers of values are crucial in supporting the successful internalization of these values. The various forms of value habituation observed during shared-meal activities are presented in Table 2.

Based on Table 2, the shared-meal culture within the MBG Program at SDN 1 Bodak is not solely oriented toward fulfilling students' dietary and nutritional needs but is also utilized as a medium for habituating and internalizing Islamic values in everyday life. This habituation is reflected in prayers before and after meals as expressions of religiosity and gratitude, respect for food by avoiding waste, the observance of appropriate eating and drinking etiquette, and the cultivation of moderation as a form of self-control. Furthermore, the practice of sharing food with peers demonstrates the application of values of care, *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), directly providing students with opportunities to learn to recognize the needs of others and offer assistance. Meanwhile, the habituation of maintaining cleanliness and organizing eating areas after meals reflects a sense of responsibility toward oneself and the shared environment. Taken together, these practices demonstrate that Islamic values are internalized through concrete, repeated, and structured activities. Consequently, shared-meal activities function as a space for character education that connects religious values with students' social behavior, particularly in fostering care, empathy, togetherness, and social solidarity.

Strengthening Students' Empathy and Social Solidarity through Shared-Meal Culture

The findings from the observations indicate that the shared-meal culture within the MBG Program plays a significant role as a space for social interaction that supports the strengthening of empathy and social solidarity among students. The practice of sitting and eating together encourages students to interact directly, pay attention to their peers' conditions, and develop a sense of togetherness within a relatively equal social environment. The implementation of shared-meal activities at SDN 1 Bodak is illustrated in Figure 2.Content of Results and Discussion.



Figure 2. Shared-Meal Activities at SDN 1 Bodak

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As shown in Figure 2, the shared-meal activities within the MBG Program at SDN 1 Bodak were conducted in groups, with students sitting opposite one another and engaging in direct interaction while eating. This arrangement indicates that mealtime was not conducted as an individual activity but was managed as a social space that enabled students to communicate, pay attention to their peers, and share food and side dishes with one another. The interactions observed during the activity, including offering and accepting food from peers, demonstrate food-sharing practices as a concrete expression of social care. Moreover, the close seating arrangement and collective participation created a sense of togetherness that may strengthen students' sense of belonging to the group. These conditions demonstrate that the shared-meal culture within the MBG Program serves not only as a means of fulfilling students' nutritional needs but also as a space for social learning, where values of *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), care, and togetherness are enacted through direct experience, thereby supporting the development of empathy and social solidarity among students. Furthermore, interviews with the fifth- and sixth-grade homeroom teachers revealed that:

> *"Students' interactions are quite positive. They usually talk with their friends, remind one another, and provide assistance when someone experiences difficulties. The mealtime atmosphere also appears to be more familiar and friendly. For example, some students help their peers open food packages, take food, or clean their eating areas. Although not all students consistently demonstrate these behaviors, the habit of helping one another is beginning to develop."*

The interview findings indicate that shared-meal activities within the MBG Program function not only as a means of fulfilling students' nutritional needs but also as a social interaction space that supports the development of empathetic and solidaristic behaviors. Empathy is reflected in students' attentiveness to their peers' needs, such as helping them open food packages, assisting them in obtaining food, and providing support when they encounter difficulties. Meanwhile, social solidarity is demonstrated through practices of mutual assistance, reminding one another, and maintaining the cleanliness of shared eating spaces. These interactions suggest that the shared-meal environment can foster closer interpersonal relationships and encourage students to demonstrate greater concern for others. Although such behaviors have not yet been consistently demonstrated by all students, the emergence of mutual assistance indicates that shared-meal culture is beginning to function as a medium for cultivating care, togetherness, and social responsibility, which constitute important foundations for strengthening students' empathy and social solidarity.

The findings of this study indicate that the shared-meal culture implemented through the government's MBG Program has contributed to the habituation and internalization of Islamic values while creating a social interaction space that enables students to develop empathetic behaviors through attentiveness and responses to their peers' needs. The findings further demonstrate that empathy in the context of shared meals extends beyond the ability to recognize or understand a peer's condition and is increasingly manifested

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through concrete prosocial actions. These findings are consistent with [25], whose study of the free school meal program in Norway found that when students shifted from eating individually to sitting and eating together, there were improvements in social interaction, mealtime comfort, peer relationships, and social inclusion. Similarly, Mostafizur et al. [26] demonstrated that school lunch experiences are closely associated with peer interactions and students' emotions, with social interaction emerging as an important element in shaping positive mealtime experiences.

Within the context of Islamic education, these practices can also be understood as concrete manifestations of the internalization of *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), and care for others. Previous research conducted in Indonesia has similarly demonstrated that sharing and helping peers can constitute important forms of habituating Islamic values through shared-meal culture. With regard to social solidarity, Qomaruddin and Sa'diyah [21] identified an association between food-sharing practices during childhood and subsequent tendencies toward altruistic behavior. The researchers explained that food-sharing activities create social situations in which children learn principles of fairness, respect, self-control, and norms of sharing. The findings from SDN 1 Bodak demonstrate the positive contribution of shared-meal culture within the MBG Program to students' social development. Therefore, the management of shared-meal culture should be maintained consistently through teacher role modeling, educational mealtime rules, food-sharing activities, habituation of mutual assistance, and simple reflection after meals. Such practices can enhance the effectiveness of students' social experiences during the MBG Program and further support the development of empathy and social solidarity.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the management of shared-meal culture within the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program at SDN 1 Bodak, Central Lombok Regency, serves not only to fulfill students' nutritional needs but also as an integral component of social education and Islamic values-based character development. The implementation of scheduled and organized activities, teacher supervision, collective prayer, shared meals, food-sharing practices, and maintenance of cleanliness demonstrates the integration of religiosity, ta'awun (mutual assistance), ukhuwah (brotherhood), care, responsibility, and togetherness into students' daily activities. The shared-meal culture creates a social interaction space that enables students to pay attention to their peers' needs, assist one another, share food, offer reminders, and develop closer interpersonal relationships. These behaviors indicate the development of empathy and social solidarity among students, although such behaviors have not yet been demonstrated consistently by all students. Therefore, the shared-meal culture within the MBG Program has strategic potential as an Islamic educational management practice that connects the fulfillment of students' nutritional needs with the habituation of Islamic values and the strengthening of students' social character.

Future research is recommended to further investigate shared-meal culture within the MBG Program by involving more diverse informants and contexts, including not only students but also teachers, school principals, parents, MBG program administrators, and

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other relevant stakeholders. Such broader participation would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the management processes and internalization of Islamic values within the program. Future studies could also employ longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to examine the development of students' empathy and social solidarity more deeply and systematically over time.

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