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Research Article

Child Development Workers (CDWs)' Challenges and Experiences on Supplementary Feeding Program (SFP) in the Child Development Centers (CDCs) of Vintar, Ilocos Norte

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ABSTRACT

Despite recognizing the importance of the SFP in addressing early childhood malnutrition, limited literature has been documented on the lived challenges and experiences of Child Development Workers (CDWs) especially in rural child development centers (CDCs). This paper aims to explore the challenges and experiences faced by CDWs when carrying out SFP within the CDCs of Vintar, Ilocos Norte. A qualitative-descriptive approach was used wherein 42 respondents comprising CDWs from five zones of the municipality were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide via focus group discussions (FGDs). The qualitative data obtained was then subjected to thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke. Results reveal that the challenges and experiences can be described under two major categories: (1) implementation challenges and (2) implementation experiences. The first category includes health management issues, resource issues, and operational issues while the second category highlights healthy experiences in terms of health and nutrition management, process and procedure in program delivery, and beneficial program outcomes. It is concluded that CDWs play a vital frontline role which involves not only food but also health supervision, cooperation and planning. Effective coordination between barangays and LGUs, proper guidance in the execution of procedures, flexible budget, and strong community participation are key to sustaining the program.

Keywords: *Child development workers, Health, nutrition, and safety for children, Supplementary feeding program*

Introduction

The period of early childhood development is considered to be critical since it is associated with cognitive, social, emotional, and physical

development. For proper development of the brain, it is crucial to ensure a stimulating environment, good nutrition, and social interactions with caregivers (Shrestha et al., 2022).

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Additionally, Mokone et al. (2023) also state that nutrition during this stage is important as it serves as a foundation for good health and well-being throughout life. It is essential to focus on such aspects as health, safety, and nutrition for providing high-quality early childhood education by allocating resources and establishing a healthy environment for young children (Tyilo, 2024).

In the Philippines, the government has created various feeding programs focusing on specific ages and vulnerable communities. In particular, there is the Supplementary Feeding Program (SFP), which is implemented by the Department of Social Welfare and Development, in coordination with the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Council for children aged three to five, who are currently enrolled in different child development centers (CDCs) (Mitchell, 2024). These centers serve as early learning places for preschoolers as well as spaces for implementing programs concerning their health and nutrition. These can be viewed as one of the best opportunities to address health and nutrition problems of young children as Republic Act No. 10410 (2013) provides health care and services in such centers. This program is included in standards for center-based early childhood programs aimed at improving children aged zero to four. Therefore, it becomes clear that the Child Development Workers (CDWs) working in such institutions are responsible for the program implementation.

The aim of the SFPs is to solve the issue of poor nutrition and health in children because of its significance and importance. This program aims at improving the health of preschoolers as well as referring any medical or nutrition-related issues of these kids to health units. Food supplements are used for providing children with hot snacks for at least five or seven days a week for 120 days. Also, management in SFP lies in parents and caregivers who work according to a prepared menu using indigenous foods. Such program brings positive results since it contributes to the improvement of children's nutrition and health-related knowledge, attitudes, and practices (DSWD, 2016). Nevertheless, certain difficulties are still encountered in implementing this feeding program to

deliver consistent and high-quality services for them (Ynion et al., 2025).

Despite the significant contribution of the program to solving the problem of poor health and nutrition in children, many challenges are encountered during the process of its implementation in local communities. Reports made at the national level indicate that SFP is currently unable to cover all children in need since according to the Second Congressional Commission on Education, 43% of the total number of children suffering from malnutrition aged two to four receive assistance. One of the reasons for that is the fact that the program is conducted only for preschoolers in centers. Therefore, it is evident that numerous children continue suffering from improper nutrition because they are not enrolled in preschool centers. These aspects indicate the necessity to consider some aspects of the program delivery from the perspective of CDWs (Carias, 2025).

Despite numerous pieces of research focused on studying the effects of supplementary feeding programs among preschoolers, there are few sources that can be helpful for analyzing the issues experienced by CDWs conducting programs in preschool centers located in rural areas. Investigation of problems faced by CDWs such as food allergies, parents' participation, involvement of the community, monitoring procedures, and sustainability after the program may help improve the implementation of the SFP locally. Therefore, the current paper deals with the problems and experiences of CDWs who work on the SFP in preschool centers in Vintar, Ilocos Norte.

Materials and Methods

This section presents the research design, participants and sampling technique, research instrument, data gathering and analysis procedure, and ethical considerations be needed in the study.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive research design to explore the challenges and experiences of Child Development Workers in the implementation of the SFP in CDCs of Vintar, Ilocos Norte. The design allowed for an in-depth description of their perspectives in

the implementation of the SFP for preschoolers based on their actual experiences.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The study involved all 42 Child Development Workers (CDWs) implementing the Supplemental Feeding Program (SFP) across the five zones of Vintar, Ilocos Norte, implementing the total enumeration sampling technique. This sampling technique was utilized to ensure full population representation of the study (Etikan 2017).

Research Instrument

The study employed a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide and was validated by three content experts in the field of early childhood education (ECE). The instrument was validated based from the criteria discussed by Oducado (2020).

The result of the validation process revealed that this is suited for its purpose. Hence, it is very much usable for the purpose of the undertakings. Likewise, the researcher incorporated recommendations and suggestions by the experts, which further enhanced the research instrument.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher adhered to a specific set of steps for collecting data relevant to the study. Following the proposal, the researcher obtained an approval from the MMSU-University Research Ethics Review Board (URERB) which ensures that the rights of the participants are protected and that all ethical guidelines are followed.

Once the necessary clearance was obtained, the researcher submitted a request letter to conduct the study addressed to the Municipal Mayor thru the Social Welfare and Development Officer of Vintar. After its approval, the informed consents were sought from the CDWs, and scheduled the sessions for the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in the five zones of Vintar, Ilocos Norte.

Five focus group discussion sessions were conducted to gather in-depth insights regarding their challenges and experiences. Each session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and utilized a semi-structured interview guide. The

discussions were conducted in Ilocano language, depending on the participants' preferred language, to ensure clear communication and encourage active participation. With the participants' consent, the sessions were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes for accurate data documentation and analysis.

Moreover, the respondents had the options to answer or not a specific question during its conduct. Likewise, the respondents may withdraw their participation at any time they if deemed necessary. The gathered responses were treated statistically, organized, and analyzed thematically. The data gathered were printed and securely kept in a storage cabinet. All the collected data were discarded, once the study was completed, in accordance with the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

Data Analysis Procedure

Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis were used to analyze the gathered data from the results of the conducted interviews with the CDWs in identifying the challenges and experiences in implementing the SFP in the CDCs of Vintar, Ilocos Norte.

The process include repeated reading of transcripts to gain familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated systematically to identify potential themes. The themes were identified, reviewed and defined. Finally, the writing of data analysis were integrated with the finalized themes to create a coherent narrative of findings. This provided a structured yet flexible approach for analyzing the qualitative data, which helped the researcher in generating meaningful insights (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Ethical Considerations

This study followed the ethical guidelines of the Mariano Marcos State University-University Research Ethics Review Board (MMSU-URERB) to ensure the protection and respect of all participants who were involved. After obtaining a URERB certificate, an informed consent were sought from the Child Development Workers (CDWs). Participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study and what it entails, any potential risks or benefits,

and their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences.

Participants checked the transcripts and initial results for accuracy. Data from different sources boosted consistency and to refrain from bias. All research choices, coding processes, and theme development were tracked for total transparency. Thematic saturation was observed indicating that sufficient information had been collected to support the findings of the study.

Confidentiality was strictly maintained through anonymization of responses and secure storage of data, accessible only to authorized individuals. The study was conducted respectfully and sensitively, considering cultural and community contexts, and efforts were made to minimize any discomfort. Transparency was upheld throughout the research process, ensuring that data were used responsibly and reported honestly.

By adhering to these ethical principles, the participants' rights and dignity were safeguarded while they generated valuable insights to the study.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the results and discussion of findings derived from the data collected from the CDWs in the CDCs of Vintar, Ilocos Norte.

Challenges of CDWs in SFP Implementation

The implementation of SFP posed challenges to CDWs in the CDCs of Vintar, Ilocos Norte. This affected their ability to enforce health restrictions, faced resource gaps and operational conflicts that strained their workload and resourcefulness. These challenges were summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Challenges of CDWs in SFP Implementation

Subthemes	Codes	Particulars
Health Management Constraints	Enforcement of nutritional restrictions amid peer dynamics	Junk foods are prohibited within the center, with confiscation enforced despite jealousy among other learners.
Resource and Support Gaps	Inadequate barangay collaboration and reliance on self-initiated post-program extensions	Barangay support is often unavailable, prompting CDWs to seek donors or implement independent strategies after 120 days.
Operational Conflicts	Scheduling discrepancies with ITed sessions	Infant-Toddler Early Development (ITEd) participants attend SFP beyond designated Fridays, encroaching on Monday-Thursday allocations.

Health Management Constraints. CDWs involved in the School Feeding Program (SFP) in Vintar, Ilocos Norte experienced health management constraints related to enforcing nutritional limitations against peer influence. As a result of prohibition on eating junk foods in preschools, such actions lead to envy on the part of other early learners, creating conflicts around promoting healthy food intake and regulating emotional responses to this behavior, which was reported by a respondent: "There were some times where learners bring junk foods inside the center. However, we will not allow them to eat it. The other learners will get jealous."

It was established that when young children have access to a variety of healthy foods in the home environment, they are less prone to obesity because such conditions promote the development of healthy dietary habits. On the contrary, homes where energy-dense foods are abundant, leading to obesity rates among children being higher compared to healthy environments (Dash et al., 2025). Although there is evidence that women who pay attention to their eating habits pass them on to their children (Zhang et al., 2023), there is also a problem of parental nutritional illiteracy, leaving parents unaware of what constitutes a healthy and nutritious diet (Jena et al., 2025).

As children are very susceptible to new behavioral patterns developed at preschool age, the early educator community, represented by CDWs, plays an important role in encouraging proper food habits by modeling such practices themselves (Esquivel et al., 2016). Early educators join preschoolers at the table for snacks, thereby serving as models for food consumption in the process of learning. Thus, CDWs are key figures in establishing a healthy nutrition environment and enforcing health policy in preschool classrooms (Landry et al., 2026).

Resource and Support Gaps. CDWs encountered many gaps concerning the availability of resources and support for implementing the SFP. These included weak partnership with barangays and dependency on funding or individual initiatives after the 120-day cycle, as barangays sometimes did not offer any help. Therefore, some CDWs turned to donors, whereas others tried to come up with alternative solutions when they lacked the assistance of the barangay. These gaps highlight the vulnerability of frontline implementers in rural settings, where LGU responsiveness directly impacts program continuity.

However, even with continuous SFP implementation in CDCs, there remain significant concerns related to escalating food costs and the need to provide preschoolers with nutrient-dense meals. As a result, a report suggest that an increasing number of at-risk children does not receive daily meals. For this reason, it is highly recommended to enhance cooperation among relevant agencies beyond the DSWD and increase the budget and efficacy to enable children to comply with the requirements of scientific nutritional standards (Angelo, 2025). Further, according to WHO (2019), participation is one of the basic elements facilitating health equity. Specifically, active participation of individuals in activities associated with health issues allows people to achieve desired results in terms of health improvements. Finally, the literature proves that the involvement of beneficiaries and other parties in community nutrition interventions leads to higher effectiveness and better health of the target population (Robert & Feijoo, 2022).

Moreover, the development of supplemental activities concerning collaboration with parents and other members of the community may be considered an important factor in motivating the implementation of supplementary feeding. Evidence from the realist review and from other studies on household food distribution also suggests that educating families about why some children may have a greater need for supplementary food may be necessary to overcome cultural norms related to the sharing of food (Kristjansson, 2016).

Operational Conflicts. The Infant-Toddler Early Development (ITEd) Programs include not only the Child Development Teacher (CDT) and the CDW, but also the parents and caregivers of 0 to 2.11 aged children. They cooperate together in order to ensure holistic development of the preschoolers. CDTs and CDWs act as the safe base for exploring and discovering through experiences done by the parent or caregiver, who knows their children best, in their effort to optimize their growth and development (Early Childhood Care and Development Council, 2024).

Since the SFP also includes the ITEd participants every Friday through Supervised Neighborhood Play (SNP) (DSWD, 2016), the CDWs experienced operational conflicts through scheduling discrepancies with ITEd sessions, where the participants attend beyond their designated schedule. They also participate with the preschoolers during snack time from Mondays to Thursdays, which were supposed to allocate young children ages 3 to 4.11 only, also known as the pre-kindergarten (pre-k) 1 and 2 level. One of the respondents shared the following comments: "Although we cannot prevent them from coming during Mondays to Thursdays, this becomes a problem for us. We should only cater the SFP for ITEd participants every Fridays but no, they will come during Mondays to Thursdays as well." Hence, the supply of the snacks might become difficult due to their limited supply which is meant for the pre-k 1 and pre-k 2 for 120 days and this can affect their equity.

Despite these setbacks, CDCs and SNP spaces become crucial venues to carry out feeding programs to make sure that the vulnerable

population receives adequate nutrition assistance that could improve health and development. Thus, the Second Congressional Commission on Education (2025) improved coordination efforts between the different nutrition agencies including the Department of Health, National Nutrition Council, and the DSWD.

Experiences of CDWs in SFP Implementation

The CDWs demonstrated effective health documentation practices that integrate seamlessly in implementing the SFP despite their experiences in the CDCs of Vintar, Ilocos Norte. The experiences were summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Experiences of CDWs in SFP Implementation

Subthemes	Codes	Particulars
Health and Nutrition Management	Allergy screening via parental consultations and documentation	Allergies to common foods like chicken and eggs are identified through parent interactions and documented in comprehensive records, including 98 individual folders
	Routine anthropometric and medical surveillance	Monthly Operation Timbang for height and weight, annual medical check-ups, and deworming are systematically conducted
Program Delivery Processes	Centralized commodity procurement	Commodities are supplied by regional offices, supplemented by Local Government Units (LGUs) for deficiencies
	Organized parental meal preparation	Parents are scheduled in groups to prepare daily mealsnacks adhering to guidelines
	Cyclical feedback for budget adjustments	Parental feedback on shortages is compiled and reported post-120 days for budget recalibration
Positive Program Outcomes	Enhanced child growth metrics	Program sustains and improves learners' height and weight
	Reduced parental financial burden	Alleviates parents' food expenditure concerns

Despite the challenges of CDWs, they had positive and meaningful shared structured experiences in the SFP implementation. These experiences enabled them to conduct proactive risk management and early malnutrition detection with precision, leverage community resources effectively, and boosted their morale and validation as CDWs. Based on interview responses, key themes emerged such as Health and Nutrition Management, Program Delivery Processes, and Positive Program Outcomes.

Health and Nutrition Management. It is notable that the practices of the participants reveal a proactive approach to health and nutrition management in the SFP. The system includes rigorous allergy screening performed via parents' consultation and record-keeping and regular anthropometric and medical surveillance of preschoolers. Most of the

informants agreed that "We don't have any difficulties because we have their records." The procedure included the use of 98 folders that helped keep track of allergic reactions to specific types of food like chicken and eggs. The information obtained from the interviews reveals that the practice helps reduce risks associated with early childcare because of the food allergies affecting 5-15% of young children and commonly occurring on the first food consumption experience (Santos et al., 2023).

The participants conduct Operation Timbang monthly to keep track of children's heights and weight measurements along with yearly medical check-ups and deworming. This set of practices reinforces the rights to health care and is supported by the fact that children's height and weight can be determinants of their physical development (Barnett et al., 2016). At the same time, conducting regular medical

check-ups and deworming are related to government strategies to ensure optimal child development through health practices. For example, according to the guidelines for WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) in Schools (WinS) implementation, the implementation of WASH in Schools can help prevent common illnesses, promote positive behavior, and facilitate learning processes (Department of Education, 2019). Thus, the practices adopted at SFP also ensure early detection of malnutrition and promote the aims of the Masustansyang Pagkain para sa Batang Pilipino Act. It requires augmentation of nutrition programs through health education at CDCs (Republic Act No. 11037, 2021).

Program Delivery Processes. These demonstrate efficient delivery procedures under the SFP involving centralized procurement of commodities from the regional offices supplemented by the LGUs to compensate for any shortage; well-organized participation of parents in group meal preparations according to the set nutritional standards; and the presence of a feedback loop through which shortages are reported after 120 days to adjust the budget.

As an illustration of such organized procurement procedure, the DSWD protocols include the process of transferring funds from the field offices to the LGUs for the procurement of rice, non-rice snacks, viands, and utensils (DSWD, 2016). Additionally, the involvement of the parents in preparing meals in groups also helps develop their understanding of nutritional standards and encourages them to cultivate healthier habits (Sirasa et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2024), which improves the health and wellbeing of preschoolers (Truman & Elliot, 2018). Thus, these mechanisms promote their consumption of nutritious foods and healthy habits (Ares et al., 2023).

Finally, CDCs in Vintar, Ilocos Norte, have also provided a good example of how a robust feedback loop can be used to ensure that there will be no problems in implementing the SFP again in the next cycle. In particular, shortages of ingredients reported by parents have been collected and reported to the LGUs to calculate the budget for the next cycle. One respondent indicated that "Feedback from parents includes

the lack of ingredients. We report these feedbacks to the regional and the LGUs after 120 days to recalculate the budget of ingredients for the next SFP cycle." The reason is that the parents and caregivers mostly prepare the meals for preschoolers. As such, using this type of approach helps adjust budgets and allocate additional funds. Therefore, in order to avoid such issues in the future, ingredients should be sourced locally (Maryam, 2022).

Positive Program Outcomes. Positive outcomes of the implementation of the SFP have been identified by CDWs, including better child growth measurements in terms of maintaining and improving children's height and weight growth, and decreased economic burden on parents in terms of food expenditures. Most of the respondents indicated: "It is a good one; it maintained and improved the height and weight of the preschoolers. It was beneficial to parents as well in relation to food expenses. Now parents no longer view it as an issue."

The implementation of the SFP contributed to positive changes in terms of improved child growth metrics, and sustained and improved height and weight growth provided by supplementary nutrition. Such improvements point to gains achieved by preschoolers in terms of better physical growth and other health indicators, such as an improvement in appetite, more active participation in school activities, higher quality of sleep, and general well-being (Ow et al., 2024). Likewise, the worries and additional costs for parents were alleviated because their preschoolers receive food at the centers they are enrolled in, which lessens their time to prepare and buy food during school days. Moreover, feeding programs also affected them, demonstrating remarkable improvements in their school attendance, concentration during class time, their academic performance and behaviour, and that they are in safer learning environment (Tamiru et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This results of the study shows how essential Child Development Workers (CDWs) are for implementing the Supplementary Feeding Program (SFP) in Vintar, Ilocos Norte. Besides providing food for the target population,

successful SFP implementation requires conducting health checks of preschoolers, documenting any existing allergies, working in coordination with parents, and handling available resources efficiently. It becomes clear how crucial CDWs are as participants who facilitate SFP activities and sustain child nutrition initiatives regardless of all operational challenges.

Better policies of the DSWD can enhance program efficiency and sustainability in strengthening policy support through clearer operational guidelines, adequate resource allocation, and continuous monitoring mechanisms

More importantly, this study points out the importance of investing capacity-building initiatives for CDWs as a form of support. Regular training, technical assistance, and professional development opportunities can equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to address emerging challenges, improve program management, and deliver quality services to beneficiaries. Enhancing parental engagement and community participation may further strengthen the sustainability and impact of feeding interventions.

Some areas for further research can include comparing the approaches to program implementation, assessing the long-term effects of feeding programs, and analyzing the impact of local governance on the effectiveness of nutrition programs for young children.

Finally, the implementation of feeding programs can be efficient only when there is proper collaboration between the state authorities and local communities who contribute to their successful functioning.

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