



# THE SEVERELY WASTED ELEMENTARY STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Janice S. Capuyan<sup>1</sup>, Elizabeth D. Dioso, EdD.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Master of Arts in Education Major in Educational Administration, Assumption College of Nabunturan, Philippines

<sup>2</sup>Doctor of Education, Professor, Assumption College of Nabunturan, Philippines

## ABSTRACT

Children who do not consume enough of the essential nutrients in their diets are severely wasted. These people might not be able to do well in school. In Proculo Fuentes Sr. Elementary School, there are five students identified as severely wasted for the past three consecutive school years. A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to explore the experiences, challenges, and the effects of malnutrition, and the recommendations that the five severely wasted elementary students. Using the In-depth Interview (IDI), the data were collected from students and it was revealed that malnutrition has affected the health of the participants which contributed to their low academic performance. They were already aware at a young age that their height and weight set apart from others. They still want to learn in school, despite everything. However, they found it challenging to study at school, particularly when it came to understanding lessons due to poor nutrition. They also recommended that their parents should cook nutritious food for their children and that the Joint School Feeding Program should be conducted. Therefore, the school, parents, and community need to work together to find a solution for the identified malnourished students.

**KEYWORDS:** Severely wasted elementary students, Malnutrition, In-depth interview (IDI), Qualitative-phenomenological, Proculo Fuentes Sr. Elementary School

## INTRODUCTION

Severely wasted children are those who do not get enough of the essential nutrients in their diets. They are those who may not be able to perform well in school (Nabarro et al. 2012). These are the kids who are malnourished. Ecker and Nene (2012) claim that malnutrition is a chronic condition that results from consuming too many or too few essential macro or micronutrients in comparison to a person's physiological and pathological needs. This condition is prevalent throughout the world's developing nations.

Studies from all over the world have demonstrated that young children who experience severe acute malnutrition have a poor cognitive function, poor academic achievement, and behavioral issues.

In Proculo Fuentes Sr. Elementary School, School Division of Davao De Oro where the researcher is currently teaching consistently implemented the school-based feeding program. The primary recipients of the program are the wasted and severely wasted pupils across elementary levels of basic education. Despite the continuous implementation of the School Feeding Program, the trend of severely wasted learners is increasing every school year. One of the root causes identified by the school is the lack of proper nutrition for these children.

Their parents could not also provide them with a proper diet due to the poverty situation. Most of these children have been observed that they have low performance academically.

Moreover, based on the school's data 18 pupils on average are wasted and 5 are severely wasted from the School Year 2017 - 2018 to School Year 2019 - 2020 on an average population of 245. I observed that these 5 severely wasted pupils are consistently on the list for consecutive three school years and do not perform well more specifically in their academics. Anent to it, I would like to validate my observation in terms of their experiences, challenges, effects of malnutrition and their recommendations to lessen the negative effects of malnutrition.

**Realities of Malnutrition.** A vital component of health and development is nutrition. Stronger immune systems, safer pregnancies and deliveries, a decreased risk of non-communicable illnesses (including diabetes and cardiovascular disease), and longer life spans are all associated with better nutrition. Kids that are healthy learn better. People who are well nourished are more productive and can open doors to progressively end the cycles of hunger and poverty (WHO, 2023). However, malnutrition, in every form, presents significant threats to human health. Today the world faces a double burden of malnutrition that includes both undernutrition



and overweight, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Malnutrition is one of the worst problems in the world. Let us explore the real score of this health issue to be Enlightened to cope and help mitigate its impact. According to the World Health Organization (2020), malnutrition occurs when the body lacks the vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients necessary to sustain healthy tissues and organ function. It affects persons who are either underfed or overfed. In the United States, dietary imbalances cause more malnutrition than nutritional deficiencies. Undernutrition occurs when not enough essential nutrients are consumed or when they are excreted more rapidly than they can be replaced. Globally in 2020, 149 million children under 5 were estimated to be stunted (too short for age), 45 million were estimated to be wasted (too thin for height), and 38.9 million were overweight or obese. Around 45% of deaths among children under 5 years of age are linked to undernutrition.

Based on the definitions provided by the World Health Organization (2010), as cited by Ghosh (2020) undernutrition can be one of two types: protein-energy malnutrition or micronutrient deficiency. Protein-energy malnutrition manifests early during the ages of 6 months–2 years, resulting from irregular or no breastfeeding, introduction to low-protein food, and different types of infections (FAO, 2004). It is measured by indicators such as wasting, stunting, being underweight, or obesity.

Children of all ages can suffer from malnutrition, but young children are the most susceptible. According to the World Health Organization, malnutrition poses the single greatest risk to public health worldwide. Malnutrition is thought to be the primary factor in the deaths of 3.1 million children worldwide each year and is the cause of long-term harm for millions more. Children who are malnourished are more susceptible to serious illnesses. Chronic malnutrition or stunting, which occurs when children are under weight for their age due to inadequate nutrition, care, or living condition, can have a devastating and long-lasting effect on a child's physical and mental development.

**Effects of Malnutrition on Children.** Every country in the world is affected by one or more forms of malnutrition. Combating malnutrition in all its forms is one of the greatest global health challenges. Women, infants, children, and adolescents are at particular risk of malnutrition. Optimizing nutrition early in life—including the 1000 days from conception to a child's second birthday—ensures the best possible start in life, with long-term benefits. Poverty amplifies the risk of and risks from, malnutrition. Poor people are more likely to be affected by different forms of malnutrition. Also, malnutrition increases healthcare costs, reduces productivity, and slows economic growth, which can perpetuate a cycle of poverty and ill health (WHO, 2021).

**Interventions for Malnourished Children.** UNICEF (2016) reported that across South Asia, government statistics indicate that less than five percent of severely wasted children are receiving appropriate care and treatment. This unacceptable situation stems from several reasons. First, there is a perception that the treatment of severe wasting is only relevant in an emergency or humanitarian contexts, while prevention is only applicable in stable or development settings. This is not true – every country in South Asia needs systems in place to both prevent and treat severe wasting in both crisis and stable settings. Second, families often do not realise that their severely wasted children need urgent medical assistance, and do not seek treatment until very late when the condition is more difficult to treat – if at all. Third, there is a belief among some medical professionals that children with severe wasting need to be treated in a hospital or health facility. In the past, hospital admission was the only option available. However, we now know that children can be safely treated in their homes and communities provided they have no medical complications.

## OBJECTIVES

This research aims to explore the experiences, challenges, effects, and the recommendations of the five severely wasted students at Proculo Fuentes Sr. Elementary School.

## METHOD

This study employed the qualitative phenomenological research design that was used in exploring the experience, challenges, effects and the recommendations of the five severely wasted students at Proculo Fuentes Sr. Elementary School. Qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems (Tenny et al., 2022). Phenomenology (Giorgi, 2012) is a qualitative research tool for describing how people respond to a particular phenomenon. Phenomenological research tries to put aside prejudices and preconceived notions about human perceptions, emotions, and reactions to a situation. It enables the researchers to look into the experiences, understandings, and emotions of others who have observed or lived through the phenomenon or circumstance of interest (McMillan & Schumacher 2010). The researcher used the in-depth interview (IDI) in gathering data from the five participants who were selected purposively. The sample size of the participants satisfied the requirement in the qualitative study using phenomenology (Creswell, 2007).

This study was conducted in Proculo Fuentes Sr. Elementary School. It is in Fuentes, Pantukan, Davao De Oro. Pantukan is a coastal municipality in the province of Davao de Oro. The municipality has a land area of 533.11 square kilometers or 205.83 square miles which constitutes 11.69% of Davao de Oro's total area. Its population as determined by the 2020 Census was 90,786. This municipality is politically subdivided into 13 barangays with a density of 170 inhabitants per square kilometer or 440 inhabitants per square mile. The municipality is primarily dependent on mining but agriculture thrives in



communities within its boundary. While small-scale mining operates in the town, a large mining operator has been granted a permit to explore gold in the area. Gold deposits in Barangay Kingking alone are estimated to be at 10.3 million ounces with copper deposits of 5.4 billion pounds. Nationwide Development Corporation (Nadecor) holds the Mineral Production Sharing Agreement (MPSA) for the Kingking mine site.

The researcher preferred to conduct the study in Proculo Fuentes Elementary School, Pantukan Davao de Oro. The data were collected from the identified severely wasted pupils and their parents. Proper orientation was given to each of the participants and made sure that personal views were set aside to avoid biases, assumptions, and expectations which would affect the results of the study. The selection of the participants was based on the school records that they have severely wasted pupils for three consecutive years. This was done to source comprehensive information that pertains to the concerns of the study.

Moreover, the researcher structured an interview guide with open-ended questions utilized during the interview. The research questions stipulated in the interview guide were validated by a group of experts identified by the dean of the graduate school. The said interview guide was utilized for the actual in-depth interviews. But before conducting the interview, a letter of permission was served first to the school principal to ask for his consent and to inform him about the research endeavor.

Before the data were analyzed, it was transcribed in a verbatim fashion for more comprehensible and organized output. To determine answers to the research questions, data interpretation followed.

A set of steps were followed in conducting the study. The researcher sought permission from the Division Superintendent of Davao de Oro through a letter conveying the reasons to conduct the study. Upon the approval of the superintendent, another letter was prepared for the principal of Proculo Fuentes Sr. Elementary School to allow her to conduct the study at the same time the parents of the five severely wasted students were also informed that their children were the participants of this study.

The data were collected through IDI which was the only method of gathering data from the participants to provide a more profound understanding of specific viewpoints. The said interview utilized the interview guide prepared by the researcher. A free-flowing discussion with the participants as well as a non-threatening environment was assured during the interview. The identified participants were informed personally ahead of time about the discussion so they would not be taken by surprise. Upon the conduct of the interview, it was ensured that health protocols were applied to maintain safety for both the researcher and the participants. After the data collection,

transcribing, analyzing through thematic analysis, coding, and interpreting the findings were done.

During the data collection period, the analysis also began. The newly collected data were reviewed, synthesized, and recorded to keep absolute, careful, and detailed records useful to the study. After gathering a sufficient amount of data through the conduct of IDI, thematic analysis is used to analyze further the results and to check the disparities and similarities of all responses gathered. This is the time wherein responses are categorized and organized into themes.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Addressing the trustworthiness of a study is always been one of the major concerns that most researchers are confronted with. There are a lot of questions that arise about the credibility of qualitative research which is always compared to quantitative research. To address this issue, the researcher employed significant viewpoints about the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by highlighting the following criteria by Shenton (2004) which were credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility.** It involved establishing that the results of the research are believable from the perspectives of the participants (Burton, 2013). Hence, several useful data-gathering procedures and analyses were undertaken to ensure credible results. For generating rich information needed for the study, IDI was done by utilizing an interview guide containing open-ended questions. Responses of the participants underwent a thematic analyst's expertise to generate themes that served as the foundation and core ideas of the findings.

**Transferability.** Through illuminating key issues and seeking a greater understanding of the phenomenon being studied, useful information on the experiences of the severely wasted pupils was generated from the study. Other researchers used this study as the baseline for the investigation and exploration of relevant ideas about the challenges they encountered.

**Dependability.** Data gathered were coded in detail to ensure the dependability of the study. Through the help of an audio device which was supplemented by archival notes, everything was carefully done. Coding and transcribing responses were done in Bisaya or Filipino languages and were transcribed into English to make them comprehensible for the readers.

**Confirmability.** To be able to achieve confirmability, results from the study were substantiated by others specifically the parents of the severely wasted pupils, and not by my predisposition. To avoid biased results, the researcher's engagement in the processes was done. With this, confirmability is promoted and emphasized ensuring that the responses were coming from the direct experiences of the participants.



### Ethical Considerations

It was always emphasized that to achieve factual and desirable results in every study, ethical considerations were greatly considered. According to Gilbert (2008), whatever research undertaking was to be employed, the study must always have to be guided by the following ethical principles: informed consent, respect for privacy and confidentiality, and no harm and deception to research participants. To avoid ethical complications in the research process, the researcher made use of the informed consent form. Consent to administer the research was asked from the school head.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The structured themes and the emerging therein were made as bases for broadening the discussion of the findings in this study. As each theme was linked to related literature and studies, a substantial discussion was made to find their alignment with the theme.

**Experiences of the Severely Wasted Pupils** The structured themes generated in this aspect are, (a) Considering Themselves Malnourished At An Early Age; (b) Having Difficulty Learning; (c) Having Desire To Learn In School, and (d) Having A Family With Low-income Status. Based on those themes, the experiences of the severely wasted pupils are coated with challenges and effects on their health and studies. It is a sad reality that at an early age they realized that they belonged to the severely wasted pupils. According to the World Health Organization (2011), malnutrition can occur in children of all ages, but young children are the most vulnerable. The first structured theme is supported by the following emerging themes: (a) Started Early being Severely Wasted; (b) Do Not Eat Healthy Foods, and (c) Body and Height Are Different From Other Learners. One of the reasons for their being severely wasted is that they do not eat healthy foods. Malnutrition occurs when the body lacks the vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients necessary to sustain healthy tissues and organ function. It affects persons who are either underfed or overfed (John Hopkins Medicine, n.d.).

Another experience that the severely wasted pupils realized is that they observed that their bodies and height are different from other pupils. According to Briet et al. (2003), the consequences of prolonged malnutrition are sequentially altered cellular metabolism, impaired function, and finally, loss of body tissues. Thus, the findings show that malnourished children are aware of the type of food they eat at a young age, which they feel is one of the contributing elements to their severely depleted physical looks. This awareness of the youngster must be handled quickly since it may have an impact on their education and personality.

The second structure theme emerged from the following sub-themes: (a) Having difficulty learning (b) Missing classes due to health reasons, and (c) Able to know how to read. The

participants' experiences of having difficulty learning could be attributed to having not eaten healthy food and due to the effects of being severely wasted at an early age as gleaned from the data in the first structured themes. Because of such circumstances, missing classes is another effect on their studies. Chinyoka (2014) as cited by Shabbir et al. (2019) found that malnutrition affects academic performance. The results of the study demonstrate that undernourished and hungry children are less capable to attend school and if attend they face problems in concentrating and learning, and also have no interest to take part in physical activities like sports events. However, despite the challenges faced by these pupils, they still have the opportunity to be able to know how to read. Clearly, the results show that hunger has a negative impact on students' academic performance.

To further revealed their experiences, let us explore the third structure theme of their experiences as severely wasted pupils which is the description of the informants learn in school. This is derived from the following emerging themes: (a) Listen to Teachers; (b) Finding Learning Easy; (c) Find Ways Know How To Read. These emerging themes show the positive side of being severely wasted pupils in terms of their experience in school as they study. These experiences could be affected by external factors. The severely wasted pupils still see the beauty of studying due to the help of their teachers, and parents, as they are also motivated by the fire of passion deep in their hearts to finish their studies amidst their situation. On the other hand, despite the difficulties that hungry children face, it is clear that they remain hopeful about their academics.

Lastly, economic status at home is one of the structured themes under the experiences of the severely wasted pupils which come from the following emerging themes: (a) Parents with unstable income; (b) Father or mother Being Sole breadwinner; (c) Financially hard-up after the parents' separation. These experiences are ultimately the reason why they became severely wasted. It was also revealed in the emerging themes that they have parents with an unstable income, the father being the sole breadwinner, financially hard-up after the parents' separation, and the mother sole breadwinner. Poverty amplifies the risk of and risks from, malnutrition. Poor people are more likely to be affected by different forms of malnutrition. Also, malnutrition increases healthcare costs, reduces productivity, and slows economic growth, which can perpetuate a cycle of poverty and ill health (WHO, 2021). According to Acheron and Acheron (2019) students are suffering from malnutrition, and its prevalence was high. The income of families was not sufficient to support the education of their children since other basic needs would be primarily their priority.

### Challenges encountered by the Severely Wasted in Learning at home and in school

Three themes were generated related to this area which are challenges encountered in learning at home, academic





challenges encountered, and problems related to health. Because of being severely wasted, they found it hard to learn even at home.

The first theme under this section focuses on the challenges encountered in learning at home. This theme emerged from the following sub-themes: (a) Nobody to guide learning; (b) Uninterested to learn at home; and (c) Many modules to answer. One of the reasons for having such experiences is that their parents could no longer guide them in the lessons because they are busy looking for livelihood. When no one could guide them at school especially when they have to answer many modules lead to a poor interest in learning at home. These experiences added to the clouded situation of the severely wasted pupils as they are trapped in their nutritional status

Aside from the challenges they experience in learning at home they also faced other challenges in their pursuit of academic achievement in school which is reflected in the second theme, the academic challenges encountered. This theme is also the product of combining the following emerging themes: (a) Problems with comprehension; (b) Experiencing difficulty in class; (c) Problems with Math subject. Another challenge that they faced as severely wasted pupils is that they are slow to learn in class.

Lastly, problems related to health status is another theme under the participants' experiences encountered in learning at home and in school. This theme comes from the following emerging themes: (a) Eating only a small amount of food, and (b) No vitamin intake. These severely wasted pupils have faced the challenge of not being provided with proper nutrition by their parents. One of the reasons could be due to poverty. Poverty is the number one cause of malnutrition in developing countries. Often, families living in poverty lack access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Many communities do not have full-service grocery stores that regularly stock fresh produce. Even if they do, fresh fruits and vegetables can be expensive. When fresh fruits and vegetables are out of reach for children, they can fill up on less expensive, less healthy foods (Global Childhood Report, 2018).

**Effects of poor nutrition on the performance of severely wasted pupils.** There is only one theme generated in this part which is the effect of poor nutrition. This is derived from the following emerging themes: Affecting Learning and Comprehension, Uninterested listening in Class, and Missing Some Classes. Generally, the direct effect of being severely wasted is having difficulty in learning as a by-product of poor comprehension. Chinyoka (2014) as cited by Shabbir et al. (2019) found that malnutrition affects academic performance. The results of the study demonstrate that undernourished and hungry children are less capable to attend school and if attend they face problems concentrating and learning, also have no interest to take part in physical activities like sports events. According to NesaPriya and Premraj (2017) children who are severely malnourished experience slow intellectual

development. Undernutrition also harms academic performance (Asmare et al. (2018). Therefore, poor nutrition has negative impact on the studies of the pupils.

### Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, the following implications for practice are offered.

**On Experiences of the Severely Wasted Pupils.** After being enlightened by the severely wasted pupils' dramatic experience, it is realized that malnutrition poses challenging effects on children's health and leads to poor academic performance. Hence, the school, parents, and the community should work hand in hand to provide a remedy for the identified malnourished children in school.

**On Challenges encountered by the Severely Wasted in Learning.** Difficulty in learning is the number challenge of severely wasted children. After providing them with a remedy for proper nutrition intake, academic remediation should also be done by the teachers with the support of their families.

**On Effects of poor nutrition on the performance of severely wasted pupils.** It is the primary role of the teachers to augment and bridge the learning gaps of the pupils. In the case of severely wasted learners, it is quite challenging for the teachers since their performance is affected by their poor nutrition. However, the teachers must be very patient and passionate in uplifting the morale of these learners. They must help them.

**On Recommendations to lessen the negative impact of poor nutrition on the severely wasted pupils.** Those recommendations are coming from the mind and hearts of the severely wasted pupils themselves. They are expressing a genuine call for help. Therefore, their recommendations should be provided by the school, their respective family, and any right individuals concerned. They must also be replicated in other schools with a similar case.

### CONCLUSION

The case of the five severely wasted pupils in Proculo Fuentes Sr. Elementary School shed light that their lived experiences are very challenging. At an early age, they have to realize that they are different from others in terms of height and body weight. Despite that, they still have the desire to learn in school. However, they found it hard to learn in school especially in lesson comprehension as affected by poor nutrition. Thus, they should be provided with good nutrition by their family and supported by the school in terms of the feeding program.

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