

# Teachers' Interaction With Children in the School Meal Situation: The Example of Pedagogic Meals in Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** School meals are also a teaching occasion in which children learn about food and meals, which is referred to as “pedagogic meals” in Sweden. The aim of the present article was to study how the pedagogic meal is practiced in preschool and school settings, with focus on how teachers acted when interacting with the children.

**Design:** Observations, interviews, and focus group interviews.

**Setting:** School canteens.

**Participants:** Three schools.

**Phenomenon of Interest:** Teaching in the school meal situation.

**Analysis:** Social constructionism, new social studies of childhood.

**Results:** The teachers took on 3 different roles. The sociable teacher role entailed turning the school lunch into a social occasion, the educating teacher role involved educating the children, and the evasive teacher role was not associated with the definition of a pedagogic meal. The teacher roles, which ranged from adult-oriented to child-oriented, and which varied in the level of interaction with the children, were summarized in a framework named the Adult- to Child-oriented Teacher Role Framework for School Meals (ACTS).

**Conclusions and Implications:** To realize the potential of pedagogic meals, teachers must be educated and become aware of the effects of their behaviors. In this situation, the ACTS framework can constitute a useful tool.

**Key Words:** food services, schools, teaching, health education, school lunch (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2013;45:420-427.)

## INTRODUCTION

Public meals intended for children may be seen as a teaching occasion in which children learn about nutrition, food, and meals.<sup>1-4</sup> In Sweden, all children in compulsory school are served free school meals, based on the idea that this will raise and educate healthy children.<sup>1</sup> As the result of a government report, in which it was stated that children need to see adults in the meal situation, because children learn by imitating adults,<sup>5</sup> teachers started to eat with children. This is referred to as “pedagogic meals” in Sweden.<sup>6</sup> Pedagogic meals are thus seen as a teachable moment, an opportunity or an event that may be used as a learning occasion.

The National Food Administration (NFA) in Sweden publishes guidelines

for meals served at preschool and school (elementary school, middle school, and high school), including the pedagogic meal, although they are not mandatory. According to the guidelines for schools,<sup>4</sup> the aims of pedagogic meals are to give children and teachers a chance to interact and speak with each other while eating together, and to teach children about food and healthy eating. Teachers are seen as role models, and the NFA suggests that teachers speak positively about the school meal and teach children about the importance of eating lunch. Moreover, the guidelines state that the presence of adults results in a calmer meal environment. According to a national report,<sup>7</sup> a majority of the participating elementary schools stated that they had clear guidelines regarding what constitutes

a pedagogic meal: for instance, that teachers should have lunch at the same table as pupils.

In 1 of the few studies of the pedagogic meal, the interviewed preschool teachers expressed clearly what it means to practice a pedagogic meal: for example, helping and encouraging children to help themselves, and acting as a role model and encouraging children to try the foods served. Nevertheless, none of the preschool teachers recalled having had instruction regarding preschool meals.<sup>6</sup> In another study, focus group interviews with preschool children showed that children associate food and eating with rules and norms.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a British study showed that maintaining behavior, clearing up, and managing the throughput of children in the canteen were prioritized, rather than actively influencing feeding.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, an American study showed that rule-setting took up most of the interaction between children and adults in the meal situation. Although the caregivers held beliefs that should positively influence children's eating behaviors and food preferences, they

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did not act in accordance with these beliefs. The caregivers also had little knowledge of nutrition.<sup>3</sup>

Another Swedish study, by Norman,<sup>10</sup> studied the teaching of preschool children in the meal situation using videotaped observations. The researcher found 3 educational patterns. One involved numerous rules; children were told how to behave, depending on gender. Power was used when talking to children, meaning that there was a lack of dialog and the use of reprimands. Another educational pattern used dialogs, and there was playful teaching of children in the meal situation. The children helped with small tasks. The third educational pattern was founded on the understanding that children should not be educated during mealtime, because meals should be a pleasant time of fellowship. There was a lack of rules, few adults were present, and the staff seldom talked to the children, but the children talked to each other.

There is a scarcity of studies regarding use of the school lunch as a teaching occasion and how teachers interact with children in the meal situation. The studies that have been published have mainly looked at preschool. The present study focused on the oldest age group attending preschool and children attending school (grades 1 through either 5 or 6). The aim of the present article was to study how the pedagogic meal is practiced in preschool and school settings, with focus on how teachers acted when interacting with the children.

## METHODS

### Study Design

Data were collected through fieldwork at 3 schools in central Sweden that were participating in a larger research

project about Swedish school meals. A multiple approach was used, including a combination of data collection methods: namely, observations in the school cafeterias, interviews with the kitchen staff, and focus group interviews with children. In January and February, 2008, 2 pilot observations were carried out at 2 different schools in another town in Sweden. The fieldwork conducted for the actual study was carried out in April to June, 2008.

### Participants and Recruitment

The procedure of selecting schools, as well as more information about the schools and the data collection process have been presented elsewhere.<sup>11,12</sup> The schools were municipal schools teaching the last year of preschool (usually aged 6 years) through either grade 5 (usually aged 11 years) or grade 6 (usually aged 12 years). To strive for maximum variation, the schools included were heterogeneous in their characteristics, such as the number of pupils, the location of the schools, what meals were being served, and how the meals were prepared (Table).

Ethical rules from the Swedish Research Council were followed.<sup>13</sup> According to Swedish law, the study did not need institutional review board approval. The school superintendent in the municipality and the principals gave their permission to perform the study. The chief school dietitian in the municipality was also informed. The observations were overt<sup>14</sup>; the people in the setting were aware that researchers were present in the cafeteria and had been informed that they were studying how the school meal functions at their school. The kitchen staff was informed about the study and gave

consent before the interviews were conducted. The children were asked by their teachers about their willingness to participate in the focus groups, and were informed orally about the study by the moderator before the focus groups started. Informed and written parental consent was obtained for all children.

### Procedures

The main focus of the observations was how teachers acted when interacting with children in relation to the pedagogic meal. The educational environment (ie, whether the environment in the cafeteria was used to educate the children) was also analyzed. For instance, posters and other visual aids referring to food and nutrition were noted. Methods described by Patton<sup>14</sup> were used. An observation guide based on Patton was developed and used when observing and taking field notes, including the time and location of the event, the persons involved, how something occurred, and what happened during the event, as well as verbal and nonverbal interactions. The first author carried out the observations from the opening of the school cafeteria until it closed, for 5 consecutive days, Monday to Friday, at each school; this resulted in approximately 25 observation hours at the 3 schools. Because multiple investigators may build confidence in the findings,<sup>15</sup> an assistant was also present during the observations for as many days as possible, which was 2 days at each school. Both observers had previously participated in pilot observations at other schools and used the same observation guide and procedures. The observers participated in regular lunch activities, such as eating and talking to children and teachers while observing, or sat

**Table.** Characteristics of the 3 Schools That Participated in the Study

Characteristics	School 1	School 2	School 3
Pupils, n	205	285	160
Location	Densely populated area	Town	Countryside
Meals served	School lunch	School lunch	Breakfast (at a cost), school lunch
Meal preparation	Cooked at school	Mainly cooked at another school	Cooked at school
Meal service	Family-style (self-serve)	Family-style (self-serve)	Family-style (self-serve)
Other			Health profile

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