



Research report

Learning through school meals?[☆]Jette Benn^{*}, Monica Carlsson

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a qualitative multiple case study aimed at evaluating the effects of free school meal interventions on pupils' learning, and on the learning environment in schools. The study was conducted at four schools, each offering free school meals for 20 weeks. At each school individual and focus group interviews were conducted with students in grades 5 to 7 and grades 8 to 9. Furthermore, students were observed during lunch breaks, and interviews were conducted with the class teacher, headmaster and/or the person responsible for school meals. The purpose of the article is to explore the learning potentials of school meals. The cross-case analysis focuses on the involved actors' perceptions of the school meal project and the meals, including places, times and contexts, and the pupils' concepts and competences in relation to food, meals and health, as well as their involvement in the school meal project. The analysis indicates that the pupils have developed knowledge and skills related to novel foods and dishes, and that school meals can contribute to pupils' learning, whether this learning is planned or not. However, if school meals are to be further developed as an arena for learning, greater consideration must be given to the interaction between pupil, school meal and teacher than in the school meal projects presented in this study, and the potentials for learning through school meals clarified and discussed in the schools. Studying the school meal projects raises a number of dilemmas, such as whether the lunch break should be a part of or a break from education, are school meals a common (school) or private (parent) responsibility, and questions about pupils' and teachers' roles and participation in school meals.

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Introduction

In various reports, Danish Health and Medicines Authority and the government have described the health problems of children and adolescents and identified the public school system as a possible arena or setting for health interventions. In the government's health package it is stated as a goal (no. 15) that a healthy lifestyle should be supported and promoted in all settings frequented by children and adolescents (Regeringen, 2009, p. 33); furthermore it is stated that these efforts can be related to education and to learning. This article is based on a qualitative Danish case study of free school meals. The research was carried out in 2009–2011, funded by the Ministry for Foods, Agriculture and Fishery, and was one of four research studies concerning free school meal projects (Benn, Carlsson, Hesselvig Mortensen, & Lindegaard Nordin, 2010). The EVIUS school meal projects can be seen as an example of one initiative to improve pupils' access to healthy food at school. An additional goal was to acquire a more qualified understanding of the school meal as part of learning and well-being. Schools that have not previously offered

school meals could apply to receive free meals for all pupils during a period of 20 weeks. Thirty-eight schools applied with 36 implementing the project. It was a requirement that local food suppliers should be used and that the meal should be related to education.

In Denmark, schoolchildren generally bring their own packed lunches from home. However, there is some historical precedence for providing free school meals. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, local authorities in urban areas saw it as their duty to feed needy, underprivileged children. Subsequently, school meals were regarded as a common social good for all children in those areas where they were offered. Since the 1970s, many newly built schools have incorporated tuck shops or canteens; however, these have mostly been sales outlets for a limited range of milk, bread, sandwiches and fruit. The period 1980–2000 saw several isolated school meal projects within the field of health education (Benn, 1996; Benn et al., 2010). These projects have varied in terms of objectives, with some schools using food production as a practical break in the school day, others to teach pupils how to run a tuck shop as a business, and others to develop pupils' understanding of cultural diversity and food culture. An ongoing project in a number of schools in Denmark has 'food literacy' and health as its goals (Benn et al., 2010).

The reasons for providing school meals have varied historically and geographically. For example, the English project Eat Well Do Well (Pike & Colquhoun, 2009) uses school meals as a means of elimi-

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nating health inequalities; in Italy, school meals help pupils to learn about local food culture within a broader perspective (Morgan & Sonnino, 2007); while in Finland (Raulio, Roos, & Prättälä, 2010; Tikkanen & Urho, 2009) and Sweden (Gullberg, 2006), school meals are seen as a general way of promoting healthy eating habits. In the latter case there is also focus on the 'pedagogical meal', meaning a meal which enables children and teachers to spend time together in the meal situation, but also to use the meal as both education and care, or edu-care (Persson Osowski, Göransson, & Fjellström, 2012, p. 15).

The article's primary purpose is to explore the learning potential of school meals. The cross-case analysis focuses on perceptions of the school meal project and the meals themselves among those involved, including the places, times and contexts of the meals, and the pupils' concepts and competences in relation to food, meals and health, as well as their involvement in the school meal project.

Following an outline of the article's primary objectives, we will now turn our attention to the methods used in the study. This will be followed by a review of the key theoretical concepts upon which the study is founded and a presentation and discussion of the findings. We conclude by drawing up a number of central dilemmas related to school meals and learning.

Method and material

The qualitative case study was planned to be carried out in four schools out of the 36 schools accepted for the free school meals purposively elected. Because of the delay of acceptance from the Ministry only 16 schools were still running the school meal project. All 16 applications for free school meals and the schools' information materials were reviewed. The final choices were grounded in geography, size of schools, and differences in food offer. The participating schools were chosen from different areas of Denmark and representing smaller and larger schools; the result was three public schools and one private school, one in a small island, two in medium sized cities, one in a larger city. All schools have both primary and lower secondary schools with classes from kindergarten class to grade 9 and two schools up to grade 10. One of the conditions for the schools to be chosen by the Ministry for Foods, Agriculture and Fishery for free school meals were acceptance of researchers to study the effects and implications of the school meals.

The research was carried out by two trained senior researchers and two juniors from the research program of health and environmental education, working together in pairs of senior and junior. The methods chosen for the study were focus group interviews by the pair and individual interviews following a semi-structured interview guide and performed by each researcher with pupils from grades 5 to 7, classified in Denmark as the medium level age 11–13, and grades 8–9, age 14–15, as example of the upper level. Furthermore individual interviews were carried out with the headmaster, the person responsible for school meals and the class

teacher. Both individual interviews and focus groups were scheduled 1 hour following a semi-structured interview guide. Pupils were selected by the teacher. Observations were carried out over 2 days and 3 hours in each school using observation guides, making field notes and taking photos, carried out both in the whole school setting and in the specific classes before and during the lunch break, and in the canteen or food delivery place. The pupils were asked to complete a food appraisal form to judge the food by sight, smell, texture, and taste in a scale from 1 to 6, and opportunities to make further comments.

The observation study is a minor ethnographic study in a given school context in the everyday life of pupils as "*studies of the living courses and (learning-) processes*" (Borgnakke, 2004, p. 229; Burgess & Morrison, 1998; Eisenhart, 2001). Observations or fieldwork were performed by one researcher in the different classroom settings. This work holds "*the strength that everyday action, the actors' doings, but also driving conflicts and their consequences is observed and documented as 'a real practice'*" (Borgnakke, 2004, p. 234). Interviews were conducted following semi-structured interview guidelines focusing on the school meal project's content and context, and on pupils' concepts, competencies and participation (Halkier, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). The guidelines were sent to the head of the school beforehand along with information letters for parents and teachers in order to have an informed acceptance for interviews. Furthermore, the pupils were asked by teachers for their acceptance of participation in the interviews. School applications to Danish Veterinary and Food Administration (part of the Ministry) and all other relevant materials (e.g. home pages, policies) have been used as background information.

The data generated in the case studies can be seen in Table 1.

The findings present the participants' perspectives on the school meal projects and their organization, identifying similarities and differences between informants and schools. These presentations are based on detailed case reports developed for each school in order to receive nuanced views of the experienced practice. These reports also form the basis for analyzing the participants' perspectives on the content and practical and social circumstances of the school meals, as well as perspectives on pupils' concepts, competencies and participation in relation to school meals. This analysis has been developed through an abductive process, that is, by alternating between observations, interviews and reflections from the specific cases and broader conceptual and theoretical sources of inspiration, as outlined below (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In the analysis we focus on describing the typical, the most meaningful, as well as the confronting and contrasting issues and variations between informants and schools.

Key concepts and theoretical basis

The study is inspired by research on school meals as learning arena for children's concepts of foods and meals, and research on children's competences and participation.

Table 1
Data collection, observation studies and interviews.

Surveys	School B	School F	School D	School C	Total
Observation studies	2 days – 2 classes 2 × 3 hours	2 days – 2 classes 2 × 3 hours	2 days – 2 classes 2 × 3 hours	2 days – 2 classes 2 × 3 hours	16
Interviews, single – pupils	2 pupils grade 6 2 pupils grade 9	2 pupils grade 6 2 pupils grade 9	2 pupils grade 5 2 pupils grade 8	2 pupils grade 6 2 pupils grade 9	16
Interviews, focus – pupils	6 pupils grade 6 7 pupils grade 9	6 pupils grade 6 6 pupils grade 9	6 pupils grade 5 6 pupils grade 8	6 pupils grade 6 6 pupils grade 9	8
Interviews class teachers	1 teacher grade 6 1 teacher grade 9	1 teacher grade 6 1 teacher grade 9	1 teacher grade 5 1 teacher grade 8	1 teacher grade 6 1 teacher grade 9	8
Interviews, headmaster/school meal responsible	1 headmaster 1 school meal responsible	1 school meal responsible (no headmaster, teachers lead)	1 headmaster 1 school meal responsible	1 headmaster	6

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