

Children and School Meals: The New Party to Negotiations for Sustainability

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1 Introduction

School meals, served free for young people at primary and secondary education in Finland and Sweden, imply the welfare state's effort at being responsible for the wellbeing of young people. This aim is very concretely expressed by the provision of statutory school meals which satisfy about one third of daily nutritional needs, offer a broad food cultural selection of meals with different ingredients and are meant to introduce children to table manners (Finnish National Board of Education, 2008; Lintukangas et al., 2008; Valtion ravitsemusneuvottelukunta, 2008). This 'proper meal' (Murcott, 1982) additionally reflects strongly the scientific view on nutrition (Valtion ravitsemusneuvottelukunta, 2008), and thereby connects with European historical challenges to enhance the poor nutrition status of children from families of limited means (Ahonen, 2003; Morgan and Sonnino, 2008; Spigarolo et al., 2010). The welfare state thus enters the sphere of responsibility of the family for their children (Rothstein, 1996), as it eases parental care by removing the cost and effort of meal provision from the family to the public actor. This school meal system thus not only aims to offer collateral support for learning but to promote healthy eating as a condition for public health.

Currently, the focus of school catering aims to expand from the individual health to environmental health and even wider to sustainability (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008). This view has been evident in public caterers' efforts across Finland (Mikkola, 2009a) as well as in individual rector's work for joining programs such as the Green Flag, entailing occasionally the provision of organic food as a proxy to sustainability (Mikkola, 2009b). These interests also draw on Union and national level policy support (ICLEI, 2008; Ministry of Environment, 2009) whereby the school meal becomes "a prism" of sustainability interests (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008), promoted by public actors (Mikkola, 2009; Morgan and Sonnino, 2008; Spigarolo et al., 2010). It is highly relevant to explore the impacts of these policies on children through activities such as public catering; 'does it deliver' the expected benefits in terms of increasing sustainability orientations by the children? This paper probes into children's responses to school meals, with emphasis on the potential to learn healthy and sustainable eating practices.

2 Theoretical background

Young people are understood as competent actors and (future) consumers, "fellow humans", and cultural beings. Therefore, their discourses can be studied like the ones of adults on the condition that their subordinate position is taken into account (Christensen, 2004; Christensen and Prout, 2002). Children's relation to eating is framed by the notion of foodscape, catching the multiplicity of connotations by the eater about the food to be eaten or on display (Mikkelsen, 2011). The paper makes visible children's voices as subjects within their foodscapes; these subjects' particular feature is that their subjectivity develops within the tension of everyday practices, other subjects – including their peers and adults – and the cultural ideals as they are expressed in children's discursive environments (Hall, 2004; Harré and Gillet, 1994). Recently, environmental education and education for sustainable development are emphasising children as responsible young consumers, 'conducting their conduct' while they engage individually in their everyday consumption opportunities (Larsson et al., 2010). Furthermore, the paper adds a critical edge into the discourse of children's responsabilization as it views adults and their practices through the same lens of responsible speech and action, expected to show rather more than less coherence and consistence (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999).

3 Method

The data consist of five focus groups with 27 young people between ages of nine and 14 years and their discussions about school meals. Additionally, children's eating at schools was observed. The focus groups were conducted in three schools in Helsinki region in 2008 and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. At one school, organic food was

served as part of the school meal, and other two schools served conventional meals. However, two schools had the status of a Green Flag school, entailing adoption of particular environmental practices and the third school had made preparations for joining the program. Therefore, these schools can be seen to represent efforts for environmental education and education for sustainable development through changes of material practices, comparable with those in higher education (Friedmann, 2007). Discourse analysis (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999) is used to make intelligible the children's food talk as they account for their (school)food consumption in relation to food served at school, the persons in charge, the production animals and 'nature' – and finally themselves as subjects to discursive developments.

4 Results

Children's voices can be interpreted as four broad discourses about school meals. These centre around young people's sensory perceptions, regulated behavior, other regarding behavior (negotiations with caterers, other people and even animals as well as nature) and finally themselves as (ir)responsible eaters. The sensory and emotional approach to school meals yielded strong expressions of likings and dislikes. Young people also knew the rules about proper consumption. Children also negotiated, albeit to limited extent, about their eating with caterers and argued for sustainable food preferences entailing animal welfare and environmental considerations. Finally, they set themselves within these discourses aligning more or less with the responsible eating practices within their reach.

Loving or hating the food was a clear and pronounced account by the children, who freely changed very contradictory thoughts about the foods they enjoyed. These claims were expressed notably in the first person, underlining the importance and personal significance of the sensory experience, and strengthening the claim for having the kind of food one enjoyed and as a reason to refuse eating food one did not like. The list of dishes the children did like was long and contained a range of different ingredients, including vegetables and vegetarian foods. 'Favorites' such as macaroni casserole, chili con carne, meat soup, spaghetti, lasagna, carrot meat soup, sausages, tuna sauce, jalopeño, tomatoes, maize, soy sausages, fish fingers, spinach crepes, meat balls, and vegetable balls were mentioned.

"I like ice cream and yoghurt"

"I don't care about youghurt"

"I don't like the school's porridge"

"I like the school'd porridge"

"I think the sauce with minced meat is terrible"

"I think that sauce with minced meat is quite good"

The texture and temperature of food were also important for children, who commented the reasons for not wanting to eat particular kinds of foods. The comments revealed a kind of a sophisticated, analytical approach for processes of service which show how demanding these children can be. They resisted drinking warm milk, claiming that:

"Warm milk is foul"

This claim was further specified by the statement that if the milk has been heated in a micro wave oven it was good but if it was kept in the room temperature it was not appealing. Furthermore, if the milk was frozen, it turned watery 'milk ice' and was not acceptable. The fish fingers, fried in the oven, were crispy and tasty but the fingers in the lower layers were soft and watery, simply to be thrown away as waste. Porridges and sauces with lumps were disliked. If the rice was hard and cold, or the food contained pieces of animal fat it was not satisfying. If the chicken was 'soft' in the mouth it felt unpleasant. The potatoes were occasionally perceived watery and cold, and with a brown inside, and mashed potatoes contained too much water. Additionally, peeled potatoes were better than the ones with peels because peels were 'bad'. Particularly the cooked potatoes had to be fresh because the 'rubber potatoe' was a legend among the children:

"...her big brother was there in the dining hall so he threw the potato against the wall and it bounced back on his plate."

The identifiable ingredients were important for the children as unknown raw materials made them suspicious:

"...surprise beefs, so it was not indicated in the menu what they contained, so they looked ok but when everybody tasted those almost all of them were vomiting in the toilets...the teachers did not know, the kitchen did not know, nobody knew what was really in them."

The children also remembered their previous food problems such as allergies which had created a 'bodily' dislike for some ordinary products such as milk.

Regulated eating was natural for children, who were well aware of the rules regarding eating at school. Buffet service at school meant that children themselves portioned the dishes on their plates. However, the children knew that they were not expected to choose onto their plates only the dishes they liked, such as meat balls or sausages, but to follow the 'plate model' organizing the proportions of main course, energy side dishes such as potatoes, pasta and rice as well as vegetables and salad on their plates in the recommended constellation. Particularly younger children referred to plate model, also in terms of dishes such as green salads.

"And vegetables, vegetables, they are important, and I almost always eat them. Not necessarily always, but often at least, it's good to eat half a plate of those and then potatoes and meat there, quite healthy."

The children also were aware of the rule that all the food taken on the plate was to be eaten instead of being put into the waste bin. Here the teachers were recognized as attendants of table manners and avoidance of food waste, conveying also to economical use of resources.

"...this one guy, he thought it was a sort of a sauce and filled his plate with that [ketchup] and then he had to eat it all...our teacher, so you never can throw food away...the value of ingredients of the school meal is 60 cents."

"If you like it, if you think I'll really like it but when you taste it, darn it this is bad, then you quickly take it away so then you're not allowed to throw such a large volume [on your plate] away."

The children were familiar with some rules regarding the volume of food allowed to be taken on the plate such as meat balls and organic crisp bread, which were both among highly popular food items. Sometimes there was uncertainty about how many tortillas one was allowed to take, but these things sorted out: the figure was four instead of just one. As the food served was 'proper' only, it was a kind of breach by the school to offer something else than healthy meals; however, these events were festive and marked an important occasion of the academic year.

"In general you can take about five meat balls...and the crisp bread you can have two bits...in the summer, you get ice cream and a lollipop when you leave the school."

However, the rules are made to be breached. The children reported that they eventually disobeyed these rules in secret, because the food was so good. They fetched more of the good food on their plates than they were supposed to. The plausible excuse was that they were still hungry.

Other regarding behavior was evident by children as they explained their connotations of food, also reaching beyond the dining hall into the supply chain. They obviously connected the education about the food chain with its energy source, the sun, and considered further the feed of the cows, dairies as milk suppliers and slaughterhouses as "quite brutal" sources of meat to be eaten.

Organic food was appreciated as it was seen to represent nature, healthy for humans without additives, sweeteners, pesticides and fertilizers. The connotations of organic food ranged widely across the foodscape from vague statements about climate change to eutrophication, animal wellbeing and outdoors grazing options.

"For instance organic milk it is so that the cows can be a bit more freely in the nature and during winter, and their feed is without pesticides for instance in the hay."

An intriguing connotation was the wild food, as children remembered how they could pick leaves of a particular plant and eat them, as they were lovely tart. The surroundings were there in their memories; the road, the big stone, close to the summer cottage. These memories were eagerly agreed with others, unlike the likings of various dishes.

"Every now and then I eat those clovers those clovers."

"And [the plant] is so good...I always pick them when I'm in the summer cottage, there is the big stone...close to the school, there is a big road, so there you can find them."

The organic food was presented as a conscious choice, which was a bit more expensive but tasted better than conventional food and was healthier. However, the taste aspect was often disagreed with by children who had tasted organic food. The price of organic food created a heated debate about how to use money and for what kind of purposes it should be allocated. However, here a compromise was sometimes obtained, while at other occasions the discussants stuck in their views:

"It would be nice [to have organic food in school] but then there wouldn't be so much money for other things here at school because it [organic food] is a bit more expensive...we could organize for instance some organic food weeks..."

“Organic food would be unnecessary at school”

“It would be good.”

“But one would need to pay oneself sick of taxes”

“It’s not our money!”

“But it’s our parents money, then they can’t buy us anything. Real nice when we wouldn’t get candies anymore”

“Well, there you die immediately if you don’t get candy.”

In similar vein the children disputed about animal wellbeing, one child arguing in general for the better life of the hens producing free range or organic eggs, in contradiction to caged hens. This argument of the animal welfare could not move the resisting point of view of importance of economical food items, because the shared sentient nature between humans and animals was not regarded as a common ground strong enough for ‘willingness to pay’.

Growing to a responsible eater was a development making visible the moral considerations to which a child was committing him/herself. This personal responsabilization showed the evaluating “I” as watching the doings and sayings of the active “I” whereby one’s eating behavior became negotiated and guided through this internal dialog. Intriguingly, the children often showed disapproval to unhealthy personal habits, including eating, and behavior not in alignment with regard for others. The examples were smoking and eating just ready-made meals, fast food and pizzas. While the focus group was being conducted at the school, the internal radio informed children about an evening festivity where candies and popcorn would be served. The children were quick to comment that these offerings would be “unhealthy”. This evident split between these enticing and sometimes disapproved food behaviors and healthy but not similarly tasty school meal consumption was soothed as an acceptance of everyday school meals through moderated approach:

“Well, actually the school food is quite good.”

“One mustn’t be choosy.”

The children realized that even though the food was not that tasty, for their own sake they had to eat some of it. They emphasized their struggles rhetorically with eating the salad which was obviously seen as a mandatory part of the meal by the teachers. Here they saw themselves as subjects who were about to learn how to eat also the dishes they were not particularly fond of:

“Yes, it [the salad] must be taken...I always take a nanometer long bar of something bad.”

“Have to [eat], at least a little.”

The dinner ladies were seen as persons worth of considering when eating at school:

“Except that when there has been food you don’t really like, the you think that I never want to eat this again and then some give feedback to the dinner ladies and some say that darn it was bad or write something on the piece of paper. And in general if there should be bad food so it’s worth to go and thank for it because otherwise they’ve done all the food unnecessarily, if you take too much.”

The children were able to imagine how the organic ingredients would benefit their own health and therefore, their likings could be given a little push to ease the consumption of this particular meal:

“...if I wouldn’t like those organic foods, then I think that I don’t want to eat that, I’ll take it away. Then, when doing that, so then I, when this organic food is again on the menu, so then I think, that well, inspite of [not liking] this is quite healthy, that hey, that anyway, it doesn’t pay to throw this away.”

However, not all the children showed tendencies to try to master their internal dialogue, but a few children openly contested the adult views about moderate eating and alignment with the plate model. This kind of eating could consume boldly, in the first person, 50 meat balls, as also two teachers did when competing in a ‘duel’ about the number of eaten meat balls. Although the upright confession might be crafted, it expresses the interest to contest the ‘healthy and sustainable’ moderation tendency embodied in school meals and to defend opposite tendencies available for children in the buffet service. Furthermore, this kind of consumption seemed to centre around the eater and leave others such as fellow humans, production animals and the ‘nature’ beyond consideration.

5 Discussion

Children of this study had extensive experience about and shared competent understanding regarding food chains they were connected with by the public catering at their school. This confirms the recognition of interest and competence by children in matters regarding food chains (Bergström et al., 2010). Furthermore, the children's talk can be interpreted to express their status as fellow humans (Christensen 2004) and as respected and relevant participants in discussions, rather than ones only sensitive to and aligning with adult power (Spyros, 2011). This also seems to reflect the Nordic discussion of 'competent children', who respond to adults in the way they are treated (Larsson et al., 2010). This understanding of children's status as competent young citizens underlines the importance of their formative years and the potential impact of education for sustainability also in terms of their experiential reflections. Thus, the impact of school may still have a practical and experiential role in educating future citizens into more sustainable consumption, unlike the emphasis on critical thinking only (Bridges, 2008).

Sensory experiences of the children highlighted the significance of the "I" pole as the centre of experience about the world. This pole seems to exert an inevitable and strong influence on acceptance or rejection of food, which sets itself into a position of being able to demand particular kinds of foods from those on duty. The taste of food was obviously important and referred in the school context to various dishes and to less healthy but popular snacks and candies (Johansson et al., 2009). It is important to understand that children do enjoy also very ordinary and inexpensive dishes such as porridges, vegetarian food and soups (Johansson et al., 2009). Both ordinary dishes such fish fingers and meat balls were favorites, as well as more international ones like lasagna and tortillas. As learning to consume and enjoy a range of food cultural items is the aim of national school food recommendations, ensuring balanced nutrition (Ravitsemusneuvottelukunta, 2008) it seems that school meal service supports this intention for individual health and wellbeing. The role of school catering may gain emphasis due to convenience food and fast food consumption at home and with friends (Johansson et al., 2009). Furthermore, as "food hates" seem to fade over the life course (Uprichard et al., 2013), the base for learning individually to enjoy a range of dishes and to relate this with nutrition may be more significant than generally thought. Finally, it seems possible that the school meals as healthy 'proper meals' offer a kind of background for learning a range of tastes against which 'fat, salt and sugar' may be perceived as less inviting or at least there is a known alternative for this kind of consumption. A Norwegian child complained about high sugar content in crepes (Johansson et al., 2009). This finding does not, however, suggest that the American type of food with high content of 'fat, salt and sugar' would not be without its allure as it seems to spread out globally (Kessler, 2009), and is a treat during family leisure and festivities (Johansson et al., 2009), but that school meals as enjoyable 'taste anchors' may counterbalance this tendency with negative health consequences (WHO, 2003). Rather than presenting full orthodoxy in terms of healthy food, suspicious in itself (Andersen, 2011), the school also served candies to celebrate particular annual festive seasons.

Intriguingly, not only taste but temperature of food and its mouth feel were important for children, and were perceived important aspects of enjoyment of food. Particularly too warm or cold foods, watery, lumpy or 'loose' dishes were disliked because they did not represent their nutritive materiality in an expected way. Knowing the ingredients was important for children; many of them seemed to echo food cultural aversions and perceived a danger in getting 'contaminated' by something unfit or hazardous material. Therefore, foods with unknown contents were regarded as 'suspicious'. Furthermore, children could connect the preparation techniques to their dislikes; however, providing food with proper temperatures or crispy surfaces often may also mean more energy consumption. However, food waste and plate waste in catering could be diminished if the expectations of the children would be better met.

Regulations about consumption were 'carved' into children's minds and served as 'introducing discipline' for masses in their own little way. While the rules called for breaching, as well as valid grounding for this as an everyday instance for structural changes à la Giddens, they also seemed to offer a clear message about equal positions between children. In schools where children bring their own food with them to school, the quality and quantity of meals can be compared by the children and indicate others the child's family status (Andersen et al., 2010). This possibility is stripped away by the 'democratic' meal, seen as a socially desirable situation at many schools (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008). The practice may also be seen to educate about individuals' equal human value in terms of needs while educational achievements may vary among the children.

Regard for others seemed to wield a range of aspects although it also presented a contested field in particular in terms of animal welfare and cost issues. Nature and naturalness were something very appealing to children who connected the organic food with their experiences of consuming 'wild food', picked by them. Organic food reminded them about agrochemicals used in the 'ordinary' food, whereby food system simultaneously acquired a scientific coloring, evident in discussing agri-environmental problems such as eutrophication and climate change. However, both of these and particularly the latter were very vaguely referred to without more accurate understanding. Farmers

were mentioned shortly and global transports were hardly recalled, reflecting the school meals as a given reality organized by the 'system'. To increase the awareness of origin of food and its carbon footprints the idea of communicating supply chain information on the site of eating has been initiated; the effort aims at ambitious learning by children about complex food system structures (Mikkola, 2013). Organic production and animal welfare elicited moral approval for the production system in general; strong disputes came to fore when talking about buying organic food to school. The costs were seen to hit the parents in the form of increased taxes and were in contradiction with some children's consumption interests. Moreover, animal welfare did not gain unanimous support although the cruelty to animals was shortly reflected. This moral dilemma of eating animals (Eder, 19xx; Lappalainen, 2013) was overcome by stating that the animals will have a good life [before they are killed] and they are not reared just in order to be eaten by humans; thus, animals represented a sentient being which was regarded as being able to enjoy its life. The school catering scene imported the dinner ladies as care takers of children, who also experienced their work as valuable and not to be done 'in vain'. This conscious awareness of the value of the performing work may be seen to represent a democratic ideal of 'flat' organizations, and to be at the core of the welfare state (Rothstein, 1996). His "street level bureaucrat" seems to wield influence on children unlike the children buying their food from the supermarkets and fast food outlets (Andersen et al., 2010).

Internal dialogue was seen to be developed by children as they reasoned about their eating behavior. This reflective approach often put the children in relation with themselves, what was good and healthy for them. Next, the approach put them into relation with actors close by such as the dinner ladies and the ones in remote places, such as animals within the supply chains. Finally even the 'nature' was introduced as a basis for the food system, both as a site experiencing 'goodness' of nature as well as a scientifically constructed entity. These accounts about nature open up the possibility for multiple aspects to be negotiated in terms of food consumption, which seems to be relationally controlled. However, a continuum seemed to develop, the one end of which was represented by consumers willing to actively modify their consumption by negotiating about it within a relationally controlled foodscape. The other end of this continuum showed consumers who ate what they wanted without second thoughts (Mikkola and Morley, 2013). The internal dialogue seems to support the growth of the responsible consumer, controlling the consuming essence of human eating.

6 Conclusions

School meals appear as a scene for children to learn experientially about several aspects of sustainable food consumption, as they show their connotations regarding their schoolfoodsapes. Among these connotative aspects were the sensory background for learning about different ingredients' and raw materials' taste and texture, eating as a regulated and democratic practice, regard for nature, production animals and dinner ladies as well development of internal dialogue to support one's relations within one's foodscape. The children seemed to move on the continuum from the relationally controlled sustainable consumption to the 'pure' consumer position without regard for others. Furthermore, the children also showed traces of *akrasia*, being trapped between things they wanted to consume while knowing this consumption was not good for them (Harré and Gillet, 1996). This relationally controlled discourse, often yielding the agent who grew to practice responsible eating behavior, seemed to be the positive impact of school meals as a platform for sustainability connotations. The skilled eater may be seen as positive future consumer resulting from the policies for education for sustainable development. However, children's voices are hardly heard when they have a say about the sensory quality so important for their enjoyment of food. Furthermore, they do regard other actors within the supply chain as worthy of consideration and as requiring an ethical response on their part. Listening seriously to children's experiences and evaluations about school meals could show the young people the appreciation they deserve as collaborators for more sustainable public catering.

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