

School lunch from the teachers' perspective. A case study

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Summary

This case study examines why teachers rarely visit the school canteen. The meals available are varied, but there is no calm and no privacy. Teachers perceive the school canteen primarily as a provision (of care) for schoolchildren, which is associated with extra work.

Keywords: school canteen, noise level, acceptance, school development, workplace health promotion

Introduction

School canteen operators in Germany have an acceptance problem. Related studies tend to focus primarily on schoolchildren [1–4]. However, the teachers' perspective was investigated in an academic paper [5], because, educationally, they assume a key role [6] in the acceptance of canteen meals. To explore possible starting points for an increase in the acceptance of the school canteen among teachers, the study looked at an all-day secondary school (*Werkrealschule*¹) in the Rastatt area, to examine, among other things, why tea-

chers did not like to visit the school canteen. The size of the school is typical for this type of school; 15 female and 8 male teachers teach at this two-track school. Unlike in most cases, there is a school canteen. The meals on offer comply with the DGE (German Nutrition Society) quality standards for employee catering [7], as the caterer runs a staff canteen at the same time.

Methodology

This case study explored the attractions of school catering for teachers and was based on three coordinated approaches: a standardised written questionnaire (N = 14), structured interviews with teachers (N = 4, P1–P4) and an expert interview with the caterer. The study took place in July 2012. The standardised questionnaire contained closed questions on the frequency of canteen visits (♦ Table 1), satisfaction with the meals on offer and the atmosphere, what might be changed, etc. as well

as a few open questions on desired changes. A descriptive evaluation was performed using Excel spreadsheets. Of the 23 teachers at the school, 9 female and 5 male teachers returned a completed questionnaire. Of these 14, one female and three male teachers were willing to be interviewed. The interview questions addressed the contents of the written survey in depth. The structured interviews and expert interviews were transcribed and evaluated [8]. Starting points for the interpretation of the questionnaire were drawn from the evaluation of the interview questions.

Results and discussion

In summary, the study revealed that the atmosphere and, above all, the background noise were the main areas of criticism. The range and quality of meals were barely criticised. The attitudes towards the canteen are an interesting starting point for an increase in acceptance.

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¹ The *Werkrealschule* is a typical type of school in Baden-Württemberg for pupils working towards the *Realschulabschluss* (secondary school certificate).

	9 female teachers	5 male teachers	total (N = 14)
1–3 times/month	4	3	7
1–2 times/week	2	2	4
never	3	–	3

Tab. 1: Frequency of canteen visits (written survey)

The **questionnaire survey** revealed a low participation in school meals (♦ Table 1), in spite of satisfaction with the meals on offer (♦ Figure 1). Of the 14 participants, three never ate, seven ate 1–3 times per month and four ate 1–2 times per week in the school canteen. The majority (13 of 14 people) thought the range of meals was varied (they answered yes to the closed question of whether the meals were sufficiently varied). In response to another question, 9 of 14 people said that there was nothing missing in the meals on offer. The questionnaire also contained the start of a sentence for the participants to complete: “Occasionally I would like...” [Original question: „Ich wünsche mir öfters...”] The responses revealed that individuals wanted more vegetables, fish, fruit or meat and/or a higher serving temperature for the food. The food is actually not repeated that frequently. A review of the menu over a period of half a school year revealed a seven-week menu cycle on average; in comparison, the DGE quality standards for school catering prescribe at least a four-week menu cycle [9].

The closed question on what changes might be made produced the following ranking: noise level, food temperature, atmosphere, other, time, food choice (♦ Figure 1). An open question was also asked about feasible “specifics”, which was answered with keywords by eight people. The written suggestions mainly related to noise reduction, im-

proved atmosphere, exercise breaks, etc. Only one female teacher wanted a salad bar. The results of the questionnaire in this case study therefore essentially correspond to those in other studies carried out from the perspective of schoolchildren [2–4; see 6]. In the **structured interviews**, three men and one woman were questioned, all of whom had volunteered and had previously taken part in the survey questionnaire (♦ Table 2). The structured interviews strengthened the perception gained from the survey questionnaire in relation to the atmosphere, although, in comparison with the results of the survey questionnaire, all four interviewees frequently visited the canteen.

Noise was also the most frequently mentioned criticism during the interviews (P1–P4). P2 explained e.g.: “If I’m at school at lunchtime, then that is my break and it is already short enough. Even if it’s perhaps desirable for us to mix with the pupils – after five or six hours of lessons I simply need my rest. And particularly when eating.” [Original citation: “Wenn ich mittags Schule habe, dann ist das meine Pause und die ist kurz genug. Dann – auch wenn es vielleicht wünschenswert wäre, dass man sich unter die Schüler mischt – brauche ich aber nach fünf bis sechs Stunden Unterricht einfach einmal meine Ruhe. Und [das] insbesondere beim Essen.”] [5]. On this point the

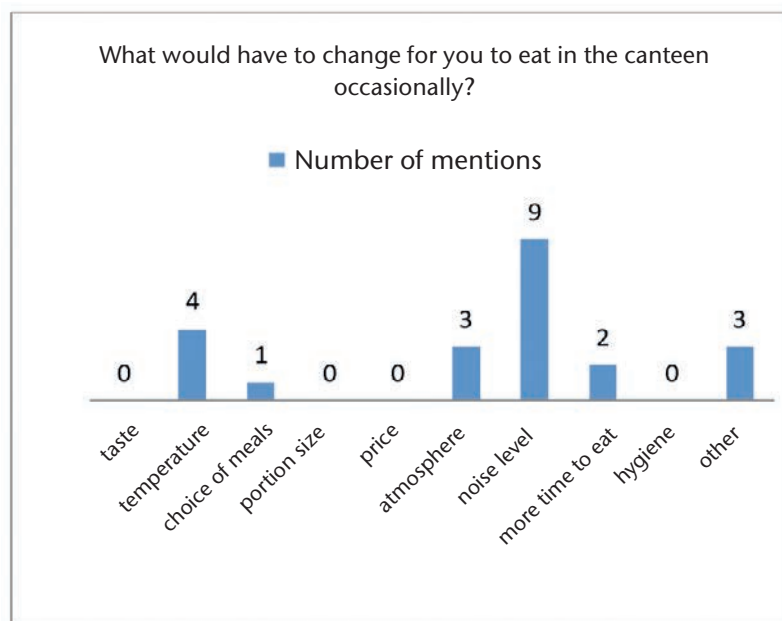


Fig. 1: Changes desired by teachers
N = 14, multiple answers possible

teachers' opinions do not differ from the schoolchildren's [1–2]. Suggestions for improvements in relation to noise reduction were e.g. more supervisory staff (P2). The noise-reducing effects as a result of more supervisors are scarcely feasible in terms of staff. Other suggestions on discipline, e.g. preventing (loud) table talk, encouraging quiet clearing up, etc., are rather unrealistic and tend to require technical and organisational solutions [see 6]. The high-quality food and the growing satisfaction of teachers with the food primarily indicate spatial and organisational reasons for their rare visits to the canteen. Here, there are parallels with studies carried out from the perspective of the schoolchildren [1–4]. In this case study, the teachers criticised the waiting times, although they thought the serving system (i.e. cafeteria line) was good and mainly felt the break time was sufficient. In contrast to other studies, the interviews in this case study revealed no or hardly any criticism of the choice, pre-order times, price-quantity ratio and the menu cycle, even though the participants were explicitly questioned on these issues. For example, P1 responded to the question on what she might say about the price-quality ratio: "I think it [the price-quality ratio] is right" [Original citation: "Ich finde es [das Preis-Leistungsverhältnis] stimmt"] [5]. The price issue – often discussed from the perspective of the schoolchildren – must be assessed differently from the perspective of the teachers, as, in this case study, they were prepared and were in a position to spend (more) money for more comfort and alternative

(adult-specific) meals (mushroom or fish dishes, salads), as shown by the restaurant visits made during the lunch break by the interviewees, among other things. P4 responded to the question on alternative catering options: "Yes, we go to a restaurant – once a week, [for] lunch." [Original citation: "Ja, wir gehen in ein Restaurant – einmal die Woche, [zum] Mittagstisch."] [5]. This impression was strengthened as it was repeatedly stressed that the price had to be assessed differently [5].

The **expert interview** in this case study showed that, from the caterer's perspective, the meal preferences expressed by the teachers were easily implemented. When asked about the teachers' desires, the caterer answered: "[...] we (can) always react quickly." [5]. "The [...] kitchen chef is in close contact with them [the contact people from the school]." [Original citation: "[...] man (kann) da immer schnell reagieren."] [5] "Schließlich steht der [...] Küchenchef mit denen [hier sind die Ansprechpartner aus der Schule gemeint] in regem Kontakt."] [5]. This produced starting points for an offer aimed at a specific target group: for example, the establishment of a quiet zone, the use of which would cost more with the same menu or would have an extended menu, including e.g. the desired fish options, etc. Modular menus (for everyone) and different pricing (in line with meals produced by school canteens for students, staff, and guests) should be discussed [4, 10]. Further requests e.g. in relation to the room layout, etc. are not within the caterer's sphere of responsibility. The teachers welcomed the school canteen principally for the good of

the student health and as supplementary "nutritional education". For example, P2 hoped that the establishment of a canteen would result in "educational and disciplinary improvements in the pupils' eating habits." [Original citation: "erziehungsdisziplinarische Verbesserungen beim Essverhalten der Schüler"] [5]. The positive effects on social interaction e.g. in class were also mentioned. P3 was in favour of "[...] classes eating together, which would increase the sense of community." [Original citation: "[...] die Klassen gemeinsam essen und dadurch dann das Gemeinschaftsgefühl gestärkt wird"] [5]. However, the positive influences were mostly linked to the assumption that more teaching staff (for supervision) would be in the canteen and act as role models. In the authors' opinion, this seems problematic, as teachers can quickly find themselves under pressure of expectation. Evidence suggests that they therefore reject the canteen. P1 hinted that he enjoys his food less when he is supervising² at the same time, although he said that the noise level did not disturb him. His case was individual, as others supervised without eating. P2 effectively said that he needed his break without pupils, even if it was desirable for him to spend it in the canteen. P3 explained in a whisper that she did not want to eat when others were looking at her. Even though the content of what was discussed in the interviews was absolutely positive, the tone and wording were ne-

² The supervising person can eat for free.

Interviewpartner	Person 1 (P1)	Person 2 (P2)	Person 3 (P3)	Person 4 (P4)
gender	male	male	female	male
canteen visits	1–2 x week	max. 1 x month	on all days with afternoon lessons	2 x week

Tab. 2: Frequency of canteen visits (structured interviews)

gative or disparaging. For example, the interviewees spoke about the caterer's current menu positively, but at the same time had a rather negative attitude to eating in canteens. P3 spoke generally positively about the canteen loudly and clearly for the record (she asked several times whether it would also be published), but then repeatedly added her own opinion in a whisper, e.g. "When I want fruit, I buy it myself. I don't trust the cooking... I don't know." [Original citation: "Also wenn ich Obst will, dann kaufe ich mir das immer selber. Ich traue dem Braten nicht.... Ich weiß nicht."] P2, who avoided eating in the canteen, also remarked: "I doubt whether it [current food] really tastes more varied, as individual canteens naturally still produce that universal flavour." [Original citation: „Ob das [aktuelle Essen] wirklich abwechslungsreicher schmeckt, wage ich zu bezweifeln, da natürlich die einzelnen Kantinen doch immer ihren durchgängigen Geschmack durchproduzieren.“] However, he stressed that he thought the food "[...] was as varied as possible [...]" [Original citation: "[...] im Rahmen des Möglichen abwechslungsreich [...]" sei.]

The results clearly demonstrate once more the importance of participative school development concepts in the establishment of school canteens. The concept of *Schuloecotrophologie* [4] or other concepts that provide for a catering committee (e.g. the Berlin Concept [Berliner Konzept], which provides for a food committee in calls for tenders for school catering; information at www.schulnetzungsstelle-berlin.de) offer assistance in this area.

Conclusion

The paper addressed the perspective of teachers as guests of the school canteen. In spite of a small sample size, the case study provided the first suggestions for a possible increase in

acceptance, which, however, cannot be generalised due to the study's structure and sample size. It was apparent that a high-quality varied menu was a good prerequisite for the acceptance of the canteen, but was insufficient in this case. Like schoolchildren [1–2], teachers also want more peace and privacy. Because of the significance for the acceptance of the canteen, this problem should also be discussed in the context of work time regulations. In terms of attitudes towards school catering, it is evident that teachers primarily thematise the nutritional care of the student health and the social effects (eating socialisation, class community), but often associate it with a workload, e.g. for supervisions. The health-promoting opportunities of school catering for the individual were barely addressed.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest according to the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

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