



The role of teachers during school lunch at lower secondary level in Germany (ISCED-97-Level 2 / Sekundarstufe 1)

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Abstract

School lunches are an opportunity for nutrition education and food culture education. Staff have an important role to play here. Findings from various studies indicate problems with the (nutritional) pedagogical behavior and actions of the staff. This article presents stakeholder interpretations of the actions of teachers in terms of nutrition education during school lunch at lower secondary level on the basis of an exploratory study in which qualitative interviews were conducted with persons belonging to different stakeholder groups in the school catering setting (school management, teachers, pupils, school authority staff). Taking a (nutritional) pedagogy and professional teaching theory perspective, this article argues for the strengthening of the provision of pedagogically competent guidance during school meals—with the support of teachers if necessary—in order to make use of (nutritional) pedagogical opportunities.

Keywords: school meals, nutrition education, whole-day school, teachers, qualitative research

Baseline situation and research question

With whole-day schools becoming more common across Germany thanks to the initiative of the German Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs [1], there is now an increased need for lunch to be provided to pupils who are in school all day. Various measures have improved the quality of the meals provided, with the standards of the German Nutrition Society being used as the guiding principles behind the improvements [2–4]. It has also become clear that lunch at school represents an opportunity to further the nutritional education of adolescents. The main aims of this approach are to promote a *diet that is adapted to individual needs* and to build a *food culture* around meals [2].

Here, school lunch is primarily considered an opportunity to implement nutrition education measures that take an informal pedagogical approach [5]. Though the approach is informal, people (stakeholders) are still required to implement it. Non-school staff are particularly important for implementation. These staff may be paid by the authority responsible for the school (city, local authority or private school authority). Their roles may include preparation and distribution of the meals as well as monitoring during meals. Alternatively, the school authority may outsource these roles to commercial providers, such as caterers. Furthermore, the Principal has a key role to play since they are responsible for monitoring the school as a whole and are also responsible for all internal school affairs. Staff involved in social education are also involved in school lunch, as are the pupils, of course. Teachers are involved in school lunch to varying degrees. The explorative research project “PEERS” (**P**ädagogische **VER**pflegungskonzepte an **S**chulen [in English: Pedagogical Catering Concepts in Schools])

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targets the aforementioned stakeholder groups and their roles in nutrition education during school lunches. This project addresses the question:

What are the interpretations of the roles of different groups or stakeholders with regard to nutrition education in the context of meals at educational institutions?

This article focuses on a selection of interpretations of the role of the teacher during school lunch, which is to say that the article asks: what role interpretations are associated with the actions of teachers in the setting of school lunches at lower secondary level (Sekundarstufe 1) with regard to nutrition education?

Definitions

In this project, the term *pedagogical* is understood in the sense that Luhmann [6] has developed for the term education; he defines “education” via a “formal and quasi-tautological definition” as “*all communication (...) that takes place with the intention of educating*” [6]. In the context of this project, this understanding also refers to nutrition education-related interpretations. These are therefore interpretations relating to the intention to pedagogically promote a diet based on individual needs (“dietary education”) as well as interpretations relating to the intention to promote a food culture (“food culture education”) [7]. The term “*interpretations*” serves as a generic term for attributions, expectations, interpretations or other mental constructs regarding the actions of teachers that are expressed in the statements of the interviewees or can be reconstructed from them.

A *meal* (and therefore also the school lunch) therefore at the very least comprises social and cultural components in addition to nutritional and physiological ones [8–11]. In English-speaking countries, from a sociological point of view, the term “*commensality*” is used in this context: “*Consuming food and drinks together may no doubt activate and tighten internal solidarity; but it happens because commensality first allows the limits of the group to be redrawn, its internal hierarchies to be restored and if necessary to be redefined*” ([12] p. 24). According to Grignon [12] it is also necessary to distinguish between “*institutional commensality*” and “*domestic commensality*”, with the defining characteristic of “*institutional commensality*” being that it reflects the specific classifications and hierarchies of the institution where it takes place. Consequently, because they are institutional meals that take place under public responsibility, school lunches are fundamentally different from meals in the home [13].

(Nutritional) pedagogical aspects of school meals

The expectations associated with school lunches include (nutritional) pedagogical expectations. According to the quality standard of the German Nutrition Society [2], school lunches can contribute to “*health education and consumer education, as well as the transmission of values*” (p. 25). Educational publications on whole-day schools [14, 15] also discuss (nutritional) pedagogical

intentions and measures during school lunch. These also play a role in countries with a long tradition of providing meals for a whole day at school, such as the concept of the “*pedagogic meal*” in Sweden [16] or the understanding of school meals as a “*multidisciplinary learning complex*” in Finland, which is even anchored in the Finnish framework curriculum [17]. Referring to the numerous (nutritional) pedagogical and school culture-related demands placed on the school lunch, Schütz [18] talks about an “*overwhelming of the setting*” with regard to the German lower secondary level ([18] pp. 170, 173).

Such overwhelm (particularly among staff) could be one of the reasons for the unfavorable results found in both national and international studies according to the researchers involved in those studies. Rose and Seehaus [19] distinguish between two “*main normative approaches*” to eating in whole-day schools in the federal state of Hesse in primary and secondary education: supervised meals for younger pupils and cafeteria meals for the older pupils. Supervised meals in particular were characterized by “*rigorous adult interventions and sanctions*” (p. 49), while older pupils were largely left to their own devices. The researchers point out that the majority of the supervising staff are “*volunteers, low-paid semi-professionals or those who supervise the afternoon leisure activities*” ([19], p. 49, footnote 5). Rose [20] also takes a critical view of way in which (social) educational institutions link preventative health and nutrition measures together with disciplinary measures without proper reflection on the consequences. Staff did not recognize the educational potential of meals.

International studies also indicate that rigid disciplinary and health-related interactions sometimes take place between adult staff and pupils, especially during school lunch in primary schools [21, 22]. Another issue that research has addressed is the (inadequate) pedagogical qualification of the supervising staff [21, 23]. Therefore, from the perspective of nutrition education and food culture education, the extent to which the school lunch is supervised and the question of who is responsible for supervision and guidance during the meal are questions of considerable interest, as are the skills, resources, powers, etc. these persons are equipped with.

Method

The study that is the subject of this article was conducted as part of the PEERS project (Oct. 2018–Dec. 2019). There are also some master's theses based on this project but these master's theses investigate separate questions and their results have not been taken into account in this article.

The schools participating in the project were recruited with the help of the Vernetzungsstelle Kita- und Schulverpflegung Baden-Württemberg in Trägerschaft der DGE Baden-Württemberg e. V. (networking body for daycare and school catering in Baden-Württemberg, part of DGE Baden-Württemberg), which allowed access to the BAWIS-KIT database. The BAWIS-KIT database contains the contact details of schools, which have been provided by the schools of their own accord. These contact details are allowed to be passed on. The researchers wrote to 10 different schools in Baden-Württemberg whose contact details were correct and whose current projects indicated that they had relevant nutritional pedagogical perspectives. In addition, an advertisement was published in the newsletter of the aforementioned networking body (this newsletter goes out to around 300 schools) to raise awareness of the PEERS project and invite schools to take part. This article focuses on the results of two comparative case studies at two whole-day secondary schools in Baden-Württemberg. Two schools of different types (one a "Gemeinschaftsschule"¹ and one a Gymnasium [a school that allows access to higher education]), from two different contexts (one a more rural school and one an urban school) were selected to ensure the heterogeneity of the two case studies [24]. The question: "What role interpretations are associated with the actions of teachers in the setting of school lunches at lower secondary level (Sekundarstufe 1) with regard to nutrition education?" was answered with the help of four guide-

line-based interviews of stakeholders from the groups directly involved in school lunch (school management, teachers, school authorities, pupils). The researchers assume that this approach has achieved representation in the qualitative research sense for the context of lower secondary school in Baden-Württemberg.

In contrast to statistical representativeness, representation in the qualitative research sense implies that the theoretical construct that has been developed for the most part fully reflects the relevant dimensions and aspects of the research question [25, 26]. Representation is particularly evident when the evaluation of new data does not produce any new results and thus it becomes apparent that there are redundancies in the data [26]. In this project, data was collected from adults through individual interviews, whereas pupils were interviewed in groups. In the student interview quoted below, five students were interviewed. A cafeteria supervisor was interviewed as a representative of the school authority. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were recorded with audio or video. Parents were not involved. The guideline for the semi-structured interviews contained a consistent set of questions to be used in all interviews. This was supplemented with selected questions relating to the specific stakeholders being interviewed. The guideline was developed based on the underlying theory and in accordance with the current state of research. The recordings were transcribed and codified using MAXQDA. Qualitative analysis of the content was then performed using Mayring's method [27]. For this purpose, a detailed coding guide was generated in a deductive manner based on the interview guide. Inter-coder reliability was then checked. In the course of the coding process, individual codes had to be added in an inductive manner. For the present article, the codes were then combined into superordinate categories (■■■ "Results") in relation to the research question. Another check was then performed to ensure that all

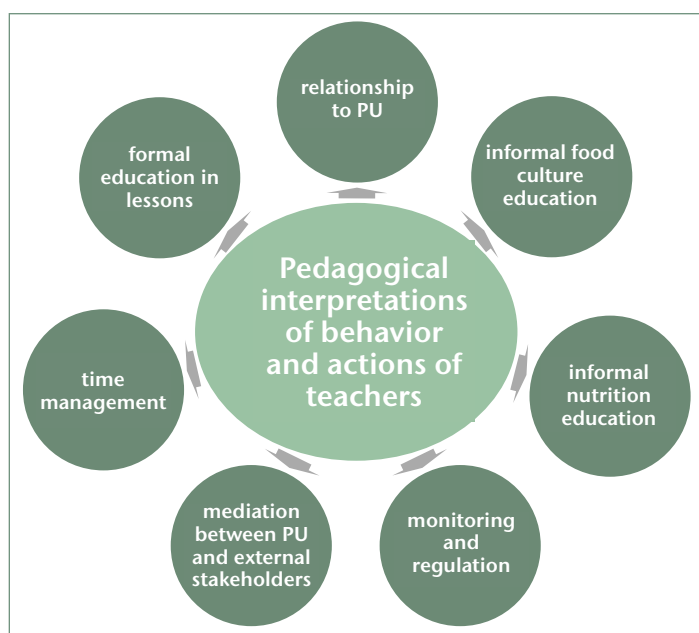


Fig. 1: Stakeholder interpretations of the actions of teachers in terms of nutrition education during school lunch at lower secondary level

PU = pupils

¹ A "Gemeinschaftsschule" is a school that offers tuition at different levels, allowing pupils to graduate with Hauptschule (lower level) or Realschule (intermediate level) school leaving qualifications. If there is a sufficient number of students, upper level tuition is also offered, allowing pupils to graduate with the Abitur (school leaving qualification required for university).



Transcription rule	Meaning
(.)	Short stop, short pause up to one second
(3)	number of seconds a pause lasted
<u>No</u>	emphasis
N::o	elongation, the frequency of : corresponds to the length of the elongation
(...)	omission from the quotation

Table 1: Excerpt from the transcription rules [26]

individual interpretations or codes were fully taken into account in these categories.

Results

The people who were interviewed associated various nutrition education-related interpretations with the actions of teachers during school lunch at lower secondary level. From these, seven superordinate categories were deduced (♦ Figure 1).

Teachers as relationship builders

Teachers, school management staff and cafeteria monitors all feel that teachers and pupils eating together during the lunch break provides opportunities for establishing relationships outside of formal lessons. During lunch, it is possible to talk about topics that have nothing to do with lessons (TCH25, SM10)². This context allows teachers and pupils to approach each other simply as “people” (CS29). In the view of the lower secondary pupils, teachers eating together with pupils “*actually comes over quite well*” (PU4, 37). The pupils therefore said they did not want separate eating areas for teachers and pupils.

Teachers as conveyors of food culture

The adult stakeholders who were interviewed saw teachers as informal conveyors of food culture during school lunch—playing a role in showing how to eat certain dishes, for example (TCH49). Teachers are also seen as setting an example (CS21, 29; TCH29). They can prompt pupils to reflect on the biographical and psychological aspects of food (CS29). In this context, the teacher takes account of differences in pupils’ family upbringing and socialization. “*That is um a difficult question, mhm because um (.) you yourself have a certain attitude (.) towards eating, um or how a meal should go, but you can’t project that onto the children because there are 27 different people sitting there who just have a completely different attitude towards eating (...)*” (TCH59; for the meaning of the transcription symbols see ♦ Table 1). As a consequence, this teacher takes a very tolerant approach to the pupils.

Teachers as healthy eating educators

During lunch, teachers are able to observe what dishes the pupils eat. Since lunch is only one meal in the day, only partial observation of eating habits is possible this way—nevertheless, teachers must choose whether to ignore certain nutrition-related choices made by pupils or whether they should intervene as part of nutrition education. It appears that teachers tend to act with caution

here, as stated by the cafeteria supervisor: “(3) (...) *what I have observed is (2) that the teachers are for example ve:ry (2) tentative (...)* what are you having for lunch then? (2) *So why are you eating that? Why do you like that? Do you eat that at home too? Consider the question: Could that be perceived as que:stioni:ng? (2)*” (CS29).

As was touched upon in the section on food culture education, teachers take care not to interfere in the pupils’ private lives.

Teachers as persons responsible for supervision and compliance with rules

Lunch supervision is the responsibility of the school and the adult stakeholders consider the teacher as a supervisor who ensures a conflict-free atmosphere during lunch and who calms the pupils’ “*urge to get moving*” during the break (TCH27; CS12; SM6, 8). The teacher sees it as an advantage if the supervisor knows the pupils and vice versa (TCH65, 69).

Teachers as mediators between pupils and non-school staff

The time allocated for lunch is usually very limited and the adolescent pupils are often very hungry (TCH67). For this reason, if there are delays at lunch that are attributable to the staff dispensing the food (in the present these were employees of the school authority), this can lead to conflicts. The teacher is then obliged to “*appease*” the pupils and act as a “*mediator*” between them and non-school cafeteria staff (TCH67) by ensuring pupils act with patience and courtesy.

² The abbreviations refer to the numbering of the units in MAXQDA. Abbreviations translated into English: TCH=teacher, CS=cafeteria supervisor, PU=pupil, SM=school management team member (original German abbreviations that were actually used: LK=Lehrkraft, MB=Mensabeauftragte/r; S=SchülerIn, SL=Schulleitung)



Teachers as timekeepers during lunch

Under this definition, the term “pedagogical” applies in the broadest sense to the interpretations of how teachers are involved in time management during the lunch break. Class groups are often escorted from class to the cafeteria by teachers (TCH25; SM8, 10). This is done partly for monitoring purposes, but the main aim is to ensure that lunch runs smoothly and that the break is used optimally, given the limited amount of time allocated.

Teaching staff as educators in the cafeteria context

The real task of a teacher as a professional expert is teaching lessons, so it is questionable whether activities during lunch can be considered their responsibility (TCH45; CS12, 13; SM8, 16). It is also unclear to what extent it is even reasonable to expect teachers to supervise the lunch break. From the point of view of one interviewee, the fact that lunch offers an opportunity to combine formal teaching and informal education shows that it is reasonable for teachers to take on this role (CS29, 31, 36) and that it and core teaching tasks are not mutually exclusive (CS31).

Discussion

The interviews for the present study took place in Baden-Württemberg and focused on lower secondary level (Sekundarstufe 1). In North Rhine-Westphalia [28], Lower Saxony [29] and (under certain circumstances) in Bavaria [30] (these are the German federal states with the most whole-day schools [31]), teacher working hours can be used for supervision of school lunch, although only about 50% of the time is counted as part of the individual’s teaching load. In Baden-Württemberg, according to the applicable regulations governing schools, teachers are not allowed to be involved in the supervision of school lunch [32, 33]. School management teams are therefore faced with the challenge of developing legally correct workarounds if they nevertheless consider such supervision important. Other German federal states handle the calculation of teachers’ working hours during lunch within the framework outlined above in very different ways, so there appears to be a very large scope for interpretation of the legal wording [34].

In any case, the interviews show that even in Baden-Württemberg, the actions of teachers in this context at lower secondary level are associated with many pedagogical interpretations. In the sense of *commensality*, school lunches can lead to a strengthening of communication between teachers and students and to the deepening of relationships [35]. However, as institutional meals (*institutional commensality*), school lunches also reflect existing social relationships, classifications and hierarchies. Teachers are therefore expected to take on a professional role during the lunch break, for example by being responsible for disciplinary supervision. Pupils accept this role and non-school staff benefit from it. Therefore, although lunch takes place outside of formal lesson time, the teacher cannot completely set aside expectations of professional behavior in the school setting and eat as a “private person”, even though strictly speaking, this is what should happen under Baden-Württemberg school regulations.

In professional teaching theory, one of the professional development tasks of teachers is to learn to distinguish between the “antinomies” of “role” and “person” in the course of their professional career [36]. Therefore, in professional teaching theory, it is assumed that there are fundamental structural contradictions inherent in the exercise of the teaching profession which fundamentally cannot be resolved. Rather, they require teachers to find appropriate solutions for individual situations and persons. On the one hand, teachers are thus expected to take adolescents seriously in their role as pupils and accept pupils’ role-based boundaries and partial autonomy [37]. On the other hand, they are expected to see the learner as a “whole person”, i.e. as a developing individual sometimes in need of special support, with a mix of strengths and weaknesses [36]. Likewise, a teacher is expected to be able to deal with and correctly handle the antinomy between their own role as a teacher and the distance from learners inherent in this on the one hand, and the creation of proximity and “approaching learners on a personal level” [37] on the other. Even during school lunch, the teacher is still subject to these antinomies inherent in their profession. The described tentativeness with which teachers in this study approached food culture education and dietary education reflects the fact that the teachers involved took into account the fact that nutrition and eating are part of the pupils’ sphere at home or outside of school and are at least partly outside the boundaries of the pupil role. The role of teachers or adults during institutional school lunches differs from the role of adults during home meals, such as family meals, where such specific institutional role boundaries do not exist.

The problematic research findings cited at the beginning of this paper suggest that the outlined antinomies of roles and actions that are present during school lunch may pose a challenge for staff involved in school lunches who do not have pedagogical training. This may be attributable to such staff equating school meals with the “civic model” of family meals [19, 23]. This *doing family* approach [22] could lead to a lack of awareness of one’s own role and to a lack of respect for the boundaries of the pupil’s role during school meals [38, 39]. That is not to say that teachers are necessarily the “better” (nutrition) educators, but rather that they usually become used to dealing with the antinomies outlined above as part of their professionalization process, so it is expected



that they are more likely to be able to avoid overreaching in their behavior and actions [37].

From the point of view of the stakeholders, underlying the pedagogical interpretations linked with the actions of the teachers during lunch in the interviews, there is an assumption that a relationship exists between the adults taking the actions and the adolescents. It is certainly also possible for relationships with non-school staff to be established as a basis for nutritional education-related actions, provided that these staff are continuously working at the schools in question and also have the skills and time to develop appropriate (nutritional) pedagogical intentions and to act on these intentions while taking into account the antinomies of action outlined here.

For teachers who have lunch at the cafeteria of whole-day schools and who do not have official pedagogical responsibilities in this context but nevertheless take on (or are obliged to take on) such responsibilities, the boundaries between everyday and professional activities become blurred [40].

From the perspective of professional teaching theory, a critical view should be taken of this, since such ambiguity in the school lunch context ultimately devalues the professional work of teachers by equating it with everyday actions. At the same time, the fact that professionals are not seen as necessary for the school lunch context (unintentionally) devalues nutrition education and food culture education. If teachers were performing a variety of tasks during lunchtime as part of their professional activities in lower secondary school, it would follow that these activities should be covered by school regulations and would be counted as working hours accordingly. As already outlined, this is handled in very different ways in the different German federal states.

Limitations

The empirical qualitative findings in this article refer to lower secondary level (ISCED-97-Level 2 / Sekundarstufe 1) in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. In primary level schools, stakeholders would presumably have additional nutrition education-related interpretations regarding the actions of teachers, e.g. an expectation that they will help children prepare food. Furthermore, each school is a specific organization or system of its own, and each has developed its own solutions for school meals. Therefore, the small number of case studies used in the present study means there is a risk that not all possible interpretations regarding the actions of teachers have been recorded, although the evaluation of further data did not yield any new findings. Since there are many very different types of schools in Germany and different federal states have different legal situations, often with large scope for interpretation of laws, the present article cannot claim to be representative of the whole of Germany.

Conclusions

The fact that (nutritional) pedagogical aspects (in particular antinomies of action) need to be handled professionally in the context of institutional meals with pupils at lower secondary level means that the staff involved need to have skills that enable them to act appropriately and to make use of the pedagogical potential of the shared meal. It would also be helpful to develop school-specific concepts or mission statements for eating together, or refine them where they already exist. Using their professional skills, teachers could take on a constructive role in this development work and/or during the school meal. In light of the fact that there has been little empirical research on pedagogical interventions during school meals and in light of the limitations of this study as set out above, further research on this topic is desirable.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.



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