



Pupils' perception of their school meals

Results from focus group interviews in secondary schools.

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Abstract

Adolescent students do not participate in school catering to the extent that would be desirable from a social and health policy perspective in the context of all-day schooling [1–4]. To know more about the background and derive opportunities for improvement, students in schools with comparatively high satisfaction with school meals were surveyed in qualitative focus group interviews. We describe the characteristics and conditions of successful school catering from the students' point of view, the needs of secondary school students with regard to their lunchtime meals, and what expectations they have of the school catering system and of those responsible for catering. We also describe pupils' expectations of themselves and their fellow students.

Keywords: school catering, focus group interview, expectations, needs, pupils' perspective, school canteen, communal catering

Introduction

What characterizes school catering that is judged to be "successful" by various stakeholders as well as by the students? This was the central question of the staff of the networking offices for school catering (*Vernetzungsstellen Schulverpflegung [VNS]*) in the five northern German states of Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein. In a four-year INFORM project, they identified and systematized the conditions for success from the perspective of different stakeholder groups and the people who receive the meals. Special attention was paid to determine the original view of students on school meals, which has rarely been captured in previous publications on the topic [5, 6]. To this end, focus group interviews with students were conducted and analyzed. The research guiding questions were: What characterizes successful school catering from the students' point of view? What do students expect from their school meals? Which general conditions and quality features of school meals lead to a successful offer from their point of view? How do they see their own role? This article summarizes the results of this qualitative study and shows how differentiated the students' view of school catering is, how they comment on it and, not least, it shows their motivation to participate in school catering.

Citation

Braun B, Schafmeister M, Jonas A, Senkler H, Betke N, Neuthard C, Stehr-Murmann S: Pupils' perception of their school meals. Results from focus group interviews in secondary schools. *Ernährungs Umschau* 2022; 69(8): 118–24.
The English version of this article is available online:
DOI: 10.4455./eu.2022.023

Peer reviewed

Manuscript (original) submitted: 19. November 2021
Revision accepted: 12. April 2022

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Methodology

Schools were selected for the study, in the case there was reason to believe that there was a high level of satisfaction with the design of the catering service among school catering stakeholders and students. In order to determine the conditions for the success of school catering at the respective schools, guided focus group interviews were conducted and evaluated with the help of qualitative content analysis. This explorative approach was chosen with the intention of not only confirming conditions for successful school catering already known or assumed in the literature and consult-



ing practice, but to be open to possibly previously unknown aspects that arise from the perspective of the interviewees [7].

Focus group interviews with students in secondary schools were conducted and evaluated in 2019 and 2020. The plan was to visit at least one school in each of the provinces represented in the project for this purpose and to conduct a focus group interview with a group of students from secondary level 1 and 2 at each of these schools. Accordingly, it was necessary to select schools with secondary levels 1 and 2. When approving the surveys at the schools, the project staff encountered very different conditions. In particular, data protection was a very big hurdle. Since the approval process in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania turned out to be very lengthy, it was not possible to recruit any schools in this federal state in the time available.

The decisive selection criterion for the schools was to be that the students perceive the catering offer as successful or that there is a high acceptance of the catering offer among the students. It proved to be comparatively difficult to find valid indicators for a correspondingly positive assessment on the part of the students. In Schleswig-Holstein, a survey of parents on the satisfaction of their children, which had been conducted shortly before throughout the state, was used by the state parents' association.

The type of catering did not play a role in the selection of schools. Mixed cuisine, cook & chill, and cook & freeze were represented in the sample.

Recruitment of focus group participants was handled by school staff in each case. The project team requested to put together one group each of students from secondary level 1 and 2. There was no precise specification of age and grade level. An equal distribution of genders was considered desirable, but was not a necessary condition. It proved difficult to recruit sufficient secondary school 2 students to participate regularly in school meals for the study. The reasons for this could not be clearly established. Therefore, mixed groups of secondary 1 and 2 students were also assembled.

A total of ten focus group interviews were conducted at seven schools in four states (♦ Table 1). The groups consisted of four to nine students. They were predominantly mixed-gender; one secondary school 1 group happened to be all-male. All focus group interviews were conducted by an external moderator. At each appointment, two to three project staff members were present to perform organizational and technical tasks and to document non-auditory impressions during the interviews. The moderator was chosen for her professional experience in the school field and her expertise in systemic interviewing techniques. She was informed about the procedure and objectives of the project and was also involved in the final coordination of the interview guide.

The interview guide was based on the research questions. They were derived from interviews with school administrators and food providers,

from the literature on the topic of the students' perspective, from conversations with actors in school catering, and on the basis of expert discussions with employees of the networking offices for school catering. The focus group interviews were recorded with audio recorders and transcribed by a transcription agency. Based on the interview guide, a coding system and a coding guide were created in an inductive-deductive procedure. Using these and the data analysis software MAX-QDA, the focus group interviews were coded by the project staff. The interviews were evaluated according to the content structuring qualitative content analysis described by Kuckartz [8].

Results and interpretation

A central result of the interviews with the pupils is that, from their point of view, the school food service represents a gastronomic service. In this context, the students see themselves as "guests" and the responsible actors as "hosts". From the students' perspective, not all actors and their tasks and responsibilities in the quite complex systems of school catering are known. Nevertheless, the students have an idea that there are people who determine the framework conditions of school catering, plan processes within the framework of school catering and carry them out. Students and parents can also be counted among the actors, e. g. if they are employed in the cafeteria. Gastronomic services include not only the food offered but also the framework conditions in which the catering takes place and include the design of hospitality on the part of the host. Beyond their guest role, respondents also see themselves as contributors to quality development. The special situation of school catering with the monopoly-like position of the food providers is very clearly recognized and, according to the students, requires special attention from the actors towards the wishes and needs of the catering guests. They see themselves as responsible and express their willingness to contribute to quality development through feedback and constructive cooperation.

	Bremen	Hamburg	Lower Saxony	Schleswig-Holstein
schools	3	1	1	2
focus groups secondary level 1	3	1	2	1
focus groups secondary level 2		1		
focus groups secondary level 1 + 2				2
total	3	2	2	3

Tab. 1: Number of schools and focus groups by province and school level



When describing and sharing their own school catering in the focus groups, the students described and reflected on their needs and expectations of the food and the general conditions of the lunch break. The expressions could be predominantly categorized under four themes: Expectations of the hosts, their own role, the food offered, and recreation during the lunch break. In the following, the most important aspects are substantiated and interpreted on the basis of selected quotes from the students.

What is expected from the host

The students would like to know the hosts and appreciate personal contact with them. In this respect, the serving staff come first; they are mostly known by name to the students interviewed. The students appreciate it when the employees deal with them in a fair, polite and friendly manner.

Furthermore, they expect host staff to accommodate individual student requests within reason, e.g., portion sizes and individual choices (see below). The students assume that sufficient personnel resources of the serving staff are helpful to approach them in a relaxed and friendly manner and to be able to implement their wishes during the serving of food:

*"I wanted to pick up on the point about personnel. That you really don't cut corners, (...) [You] notice that when there are three of them, it's much more relaxed" (F9, 422).*¹ [„Ich wollte noch mal das mit dem Personal aufgreifen. Dass man halt da wirklich nicht spart, (...) [Das] merkt man dann halt schon, wenn da drei sind, dann ist es viel entspannter“ (F9, 422)]

It is also very important to deal with problems in a solution-oriented manner, e.g., when a chip card is forgotten.

The students would like to be actively involved by the hosts in the planning of the food offer and would like to have the "right to suggest things [food] that can then be enforced" (F2, 565). [„Anrecht darauf [haben] Sachen [Speisen] vorzuschlagen, die dann durchgesetzt werden können“ (F2, 565)]

In addition, they consider it important to "get an opinion from the quieter students and the majority of the student body and really see, is it working the way it is? Does something need to be changed?" (F5, 218). [„sich mal auch von den ruhigeren Schülern und der Mehrheit der Schülerschaft eine Meinung einzuholen und mal wirklich zu gucken, funktioniert das so, wie es ist. Muss etwas geändert werden?“ (F5, 218)]

Students want their feedback to be taken into account and for this to be made transparent by "posting suggestions for improvement online and also seeing that they then Networking offices for school catering, 'Okay, our next topic to deal with is this and this'" (F10, 538). „man Verbesserungsvorschläge dazu online stellt und auch sieht, dass die dann rückmelden: 'Okay, unser nächstes Thema, womit wir uns beschäftigen, ist das und das'" (F10, 538)]

One concern of the students is that the hosts take advantage of their "monopoly position" (F10, 559). [„Monopolstellung“ (F10, 559)] "And that you just make them [the students] feel like you're paying attention to what they want. And not like, yeah we're just going over your heads. We want to make our money now, done" (F4, 393). [„Und dass man einfach denen [den SchülerInnen] das Gefühl gibt, dass man darauf achtet was sie wollen. Und nicht so, ja wir übergehen euch einfach. Wir wollen jetzt unser Geld machen, fertig“ (F4, 393)]

"Since they are the only providers at our school, they can actually do everything with the prices. Because many students still buy something

anyway" (F9, 256). [„Da die halt die einzigen Anbieter an unserer Schule sind, können die gefühlt ja eigentlich ja alles mit den Preisen machen. Weil viele Schüler sich trotzdem noch etwas kaufen“ (F9, 256)]

Students distinguish the role of the host and the task of educational supervision in the cafeteria and see the difficulties that arise when educational supervision is not guaranteed.

"And sometimes there is simply no supervision there, which then sends the students [who do not want to eat there] out, so to speak. (...) The cafeteria staff sort of takes care of sending these students out. The cafeteria staff is quite annoyed or irritated by this, I think" (F10, 377). [„Und manchmal ist auch einfach keine Aufsicht da, die die Schüler [die dort nicht essen wollen] dann quasi rausschickt. (...) Die Mensa-Mitarbeiterinnen kümmern sich quasi darum, diese Schüler rauszuschicken. Das Mensapersonal ist ziemlich angenervt oder auch gereizt dadurch, glaube ich“ (F10, 377)]

Students reflecting their own role

The students interviewed are aware that certain rules and forms of behavior apply in the cafeteria. The focus group participants are clearly opposed to the manners of fellow students, which they themselves find inappropriate: "I've also seen a lot of students being really, really cheeky to the staff. (...) But they just don't have to be like that" (F9, 132). [„Ich habe das auch schon echt oft mitbekommen, dass ganz viele Schüler zu dem Personal echt, echt frech waren. (...) Aber die müssen halt – nicht – so – sein“ (F9, 132)]

"I also had that once, such a situation. Where a boy really showed her, so according to the motto, you are the staff. And that was really shocking" (F9, 128). [„Das hatte ich auch mal, so eine Situation. Wo ein Junge wirklich ihr gezeigt hat, so nach dem Motto, du bist das Personal. Und das war echt schon schockierend“ (F9, 128)]

However, according to one student, knowledge of the applicable rules is crucial for the students' well-being in the cafeteria: "Yes, I think that is also very important that the students feel comfortable there and know what they are allowed to do and what not" (F9, 496). [„Ja, das ist glaube ich auch sehr wichtig, dass sich die Schüler da quasi wohlfühlen und wissen, was sie machen dürfen quasi und was nicht“ (F9, 496)]

There still seems to be a need for information about this topic, because the interviewees

¹ Abbreviations refer to the numbering of the units in MAX-QDA. F=Focus group.



within a focus group apparently received different information about some rules in the cafeteria or there are different opinions. E.g., during the interviews there are discussions about the applicable look-up rules at lunch.

Students differentiate between their actual and desired roles in the cafeteria in their comments. Some refer to themselves and the teachers eating in the cafeteria as guests: *"In my eyes, the teachers are guests there just like we are"* (F8, 264). [„In meinen Augen sind die Lehrer da genauso Gäste wie wir da auch“ (F8, 264)]. Or they would like to be able to feel as such: *"So that you could say the students are guests"* (F4, 393). [„Sodass man sagen könnte, die Schüler sind Gäste“ (F4, 393)] In addition, the students express their basic interest and willingness to actively participate in the quality development of the cafeteria offerings, *"So that in every school there is the possibility to change something about the cafeteria and everyone there works constructively on it"* (F5, 282). [„So dass in jeder Schule die Möglichkeit besteht, etwas zu verändern an der Mensa und von allen Seiten dort konstruktiv dran mitgearbeitet wird“ (F5, 282)]. They report that this involvement increases with age. As a causal factor for this, one student suspects that with increasing age, the ability to judge one's own school meals develops and thus the need to exert influence increases. *"And the fact that you get more involved when you get older is, I think, because then you see the mistakes. (...) And then I would also be more committed to making it OTHER. (...) Which you don't tend to do when you're little"* (F4, 378). [„Und dass man sich mehr engagiert, wenn man älter wird, liegt, glaube ich, daran, dass man dann die Fehler sieht. (...) Und dann würde ich mich auch eher dafür engagieren, dass es ANDERS wird. (...) Was man als Kleiner eher nicht macht“ (F4, 378)]. A high school student reports that younger pupils are not yet self-confident enough to approach the serving staff on their own initiative. She therefore suggests other feedback possibilities: *"I think, in order to simply give feedback anonymously, (...) that perhaps some middle or lower school pupils simply do not dare to somehow discuss this with the canteen people now or so"* (F5, 217). [„Ich glaube, um einfach auch anonym Feedback zu geben, (...) dass vielleicht manche Mittel- oder Unterstufenschüler sich einfach nicht trauen, irgendwie das jetzt mit den Kantinenleuten zu besprechen oder so“ (F5, 217)]. This statement also illustrates another obstacle for the interviewed middle school students: they do not feel sufficiently informed about the possibilities to participate in quality development: *"There is supposed to be (...) a MENSA-AG. That has also been emphasized a lot. (...) Should always be on Wednesdays during some break or something. (...) We don't know anything for sure about that. (...) Therefore, it is a bit difficult to get in touch with them or so"* (F4, 317). [„Es soll angeblich ja (...) eine MENSA-AG geben. Das wurde auch schon groß betont. (...) Sollte immer mittwochs in irgendeiner Pause sein oder so. (...) Davon weiß man halt auch nichts Genaues. (...) Von daher ist es doch ein bisschen schwer, sich mit denen in Verbindung zu setzen oder so“ (F4, 317)]

The food on offer

The students surveyed expressed very specific needs and wishes regarding the quality of the food itself. The focus is on the enjoyment value of the food. They recognize when expected sensory qualities are not fulfilled and suspect that deviations are due to improper preparation: *"But I think you can already expect, for example, that the potatoes are well done"* (F7, 173). [„Aber ich finde man kann schon erwarten, dass zum Beispiel die Kartoffeln durch sind“ (F7, 173)]

Many students appreciate it when their food is fresh or cooked on site: *"I think it is not a matter of course that the food is made fresh there. And I think that's very important"* (F8, 357). [„Ich finde, es ist keine Selbstverständlichkeit, dass das Essen da frisch gemacht wird. Und ich finde das sehr wichtig“ (F8, 357)]. *"I think that if it is prepared directly, then it is a lot of work, and you also need several kitchen staff. But then it also tastes a bit better, and then I think you have more reasons to come here"* (F6, 286). „Ich glaube, wenn das jetzt direkt zubereitet wird, dann ist das zwar viel Arbeit, und da braucht man auch mehrere Küchenfrauen oder Küchenmänner. Aber dann schmeckt es auch ein bisschen besser, und dann hat man glaube ich mehr Gründe, herzukommen“ (F6, 286).

Students appreciate *"that you know where the food comes from, that it is sustainably designed"* (F10, 644). [„dass man weiß, woher das Essen kommt, dass es nachhaltig gestaltet ist“ (F10, 644)]. *"That's what I would like to see (...), that it says (...) where does it come from, so that you can just be sure that I can eat it and that it's not from bad farming conditions"* (F10, 585-588). [„Das würde ich mir halt auch wünschen (...), dass da steht, (...) woher kommt das, damit man einfach sicher sein kann, das kann ich essen und das ist nicht aus schlechten Handlungsbedingungen“ (F10, 585-588)]. *"And it also makes you feel better somehow. When you know okay, I'm eating organic right now"* (F3, 388). [„Und man fühlt sich dann auch irgendwie besser. Wenn man weiß okay, ich esse jetzt gerade Bio“ (F3, 388)]. *"And I would find something like that great, if you had that (...). A kiosk that pays a little attention to nutrition, but (...) with less paper and plastic"* (F8, 323). [„Und sowas fände ich toll, wenn man das (...) hätte. Einen Kiosk, der ein bisschen auf Ernährung achtet, aber (...) mit weniger Papier und Plastik“ (F8, 323)]

In addition to animal welfare, organic production, health and reduction of packaging waste, the interviewed students see the avoidance of food waste as a sustainability aspect in community catering: *"Well, you have to throw things in the garbage, that's so. But that not somehow (...) a whole lunch for 20 people just ends up in the garbage, so. I think that is also important"* (F10, 619). [„Also, man muss Sachen in den Müll schmeißen, das ist so. Aber dass nicht irgendwie (...) ein ganzes Mittagessen für 20 Leute da einfach im Müll landet, so. Das finde ich auch noch wichtig“ (F10, 619)] The avoidance of leftover plates is one of the reasons why the students are in favor of individualizable portions: *"I also think that the different portion sizes are a very good idea. Because I eat very little. And since I often don't want anything left over, that's good (...)"* (F9, 470).



[„Das mit den verschiedenen Portionsgrößen finde ich auch eine sehr gute Idee. Weil ich esse wenig. Und da oft dann nichts übrigbleiben soll, ist das halt jetzt gut (...)“ (F9, 470)]

Another aspect is the greater need of some students: "That the food is also sufficient for older students and that one may also take appropriate portions additionally" (F4, 407). [„Dass das Essen auch für ältere Schüler reicht und dass man sich auch angemessene Portionen nachnehmen darf“ (F4, 407)]. When plates are served, they expect an appropriate proportioning of the menu components: "But then it feels like everything is kind of swimming in sauce. So then you have half the plate full of sauce and then you have (...) anything in there" (F9, 457). [„Aber dann schwimmt gefühlt alles irgendwie in Sauce. Also dann hast du den halben Teller voller Sauce und dann hast du da (...) irgendetwas drin“ (F9, 457)]. Further, the students appreciate when there are choices and tasting options between and within the menu lines or components: "There is a salad bar every day. And that's pretty cool. Because there are always lots of different things where you can put together your own bowl of salad" (F4, 208). [„Es gibt jeden Tag eine Salatbar. Und das ist schon ziemlich cool. Weil da gibt es immer ganz viele verschiedene Sachen, wo man sich dann so eine Schüssel Salat frei zusammenstellen kann“ (F4, 208)]. "You can also, for example, combine the meals, so if one has potatoes and the other has bread, then you can ask, 'Can I have a loaf of that?'" (F8, 199). [„Man kann auch zum Beispiel die Essen kombinieren, also wenn es bei dem einen Kartoffeln gibt und bei dem anderen Brot, dann kann man fragen: "Kann ich da ein Brot von haben?" (F8, 199)]. The suggestion to offer leftovers from the previous day is also expressed.

It is important for the students to have a varied menu, ideally with a choice of different dishes: "For me it is important that there is something suitable for everyone to eat. I think it's very good that we have three different dishes. And (...) that there is for example one with meat, one without meat and so on. I find that very important" (F9, 502). [„Also für mich ist es wichtig, dass es für jeden etwas Passendes gibt zum Essen. Ich finde es sehr gut, dass wir drei verschiedene Gerichte haben. Und (...) dass es zum Beispiel eins mit Fleisch gibt, eins ohne Fleisch und so. Das finde ich sehr wichtig“ (F9, 502)]. "Ultimately, this quality and also the variety ensures that nevertheless RELATIVELY many of the upper school eat here. And that, I think, also distinguishes the cafeteria" (F5, 262). [„Letztendlich sorgt diese Qualität und auch die Abwechslung dafür, dass trotzdem RELATIV viele der Oberstufe hier essen. Und das zeichnet, denke ich mal, die Mensa auch aus“ (F5, 262)].

The health value of the food is addressed by the students themselves: "Well, I think it is important that it tastes good, but also that it is healthy" (F10, 635). [„Also ich finde, es ist wichtig, dass es gut schmeckt, aber auch, dass es gesund ist“ (F10, 635)]. "And now I prioritized balanced nutrition above all. That when I eat, I pay attention to what is there that day? Because I try to eat a balanced and healthy diet" (F5, 41). [„Und jetzt habe ich vor allem priorisiert die ausgewogene Ernährung. Dass ich, wenn ich esse, darauf achte, was gibt es an dem Tag? Weil ich versuche, mich ausgewogen und gesund zu ernähren“ (F5, 41)].

Recreation during the lunch break

The students interviewed would like to have a break that allows them to relax. For middle school students, meeting friends contributes significantly to this. When asked about the reason for eating in the cafeteria, these students often mention meeting and eating together with friends first. They explain this as follows: "Because it is simply relaxing

to eat with friends, I would say. You can talk and exchange stories with each other" (F10, 182). [„Weil es einfach entspannend ist, mit Freunden zu essen, sage ich jetzt mal. Man kann sich unterhalten und tauscht sich aus untereinander“ (F10, 182)]. "So whenever we go out to eat, we just sit at a huge, so mostly in the last room at a big table. And there sit then so, I guess, 17 boys of us. And it's just, I think, quite a nice group atmosphere when we're all sitting there at such a long table" (F10, 194). [„Also immer, wenn wir essen gehen, dann sitzen wir halt an einem riesigen, also meistens im letzten Raum an einem großen Tisch. Und da sitzen dann so, schätze ich, 17 Jungs von uns. Und ist halt, finde ich, eine ganz schöne Gruppenatmosphäre, wenn wir da alle an so einem langen Tisch sitzen“ (F10, 194)]. "I usually eat in the cafeteria because I meet my friends there and spend time with them" (F8, 30). [„Ich esse meistens in der Mensa, da ich mich da mit meinen Freunden verabrede und da Zeit mit denen verbringe“ (F8, 30)].

Eating together with friends during the lunch break is rated so highly by the students that it can even positively influence the enjoyment value of the food: "And I think then the food would also taste a bit better, because then you don't necessarily pay so much attention to the quality, but can also just talk with your friends" (F7, 120). [„Und ich glaube dann würde das Essen auch ein bisschen besser schmecken, weil du ja dann nicht so unbedingt auf die Qualität achtest, sondern auch einfach dich mit deinen Freunden unterhalten kannst“ (F7, 120)]. In contrast, an interviewed female student in the upper school estimates the "friend aspect" for classmates of her age as not (anymore) a priority: "Of course it is very nice to sit together with your friends at lunch (...). But I would say that is not specifically the reason why I eat" (F5, 125). [„Klar ist es sehr schön, beim Mittagessen mit seinen Freunden zusammensitzen (...). Aber ich würde sagen, das ist nicht konkret der Grund, warum ich esse“ (F5, 125)].

For a restful lunch break, students expect "that the time is well timed, that you can eat in peace and then still have time to RECOVER. To be able to spend some time with your friends. Then, I think, everything is much more fun and tastes better" (F3, 437). [„dass die Zeit gut getaktet ist, dass man in Ruhe essen kann und dann noch Zeit hat sich zu ERHOLEN. Mit seinen Freunden ein bisschen Zeit verbringen kann. Dann, finde ich, macht das auch alles viel mehr Spaß und schmeckt auch besser“ (F3, 437)]. This also includes "being able to sit down a bit separately so that you can have a bit of peace and quiet during the break and eat in a relaxed way" (F8, 302). [„dass man sich halt auch ein bisschen separat setzen kann,



damit man ein bisschen Ruhe in der Pause bekommt und entspannt essen kann“ (F8, 302)]

They would like to sit together with their friends and advocate *"that you are then not always so hemmed in by the teachers. Because you have topics of conversation among each other, and then you want to talk about them, and then a teacher sits down. And then you can't talk about it, because then they eavesdrop or talk in between. And that's just extremely annoying"* (F6, 495). [„dass man dann nicht immer so eingengt ist von den Lehrern. Weil man hat untereinander so Gesprächsthemen, und dann willst du arüber reden, und dann setzt sich da ein Lehrer hin. Und dann kannst du darüber nicht reden, weil dann lauschen die oder reden dazwischen. Und das nervt halt schon extrem“ (F6, 495)]. The students appreciate a friendly, inviting ambience and a pleasant room climate: *"And now the new [refectory] is more spacious and also furnished quite nicely. And that then also gives a bit of a feel-good factor"* (F9, 91). [„Und jetzt die neue [Mensa] ist ja geräumiger und auch einigermaßen schön eingerichtet. Und das gibt dann auch so ein bisschen Wohlfühlfaktor“ (F9, 91)]. *"If I were to build a new cafeteria, I would make sure that there is enough room for ventilation and that there is a draught"* (F8, 291). [„Wenn ich eine neue Mensa bauen würde, würde ich darauf achten, dass man genug Möglichkeit zum Lüften hat und dass da Durchzug entsteht“ (F8, 291).] Furthermore, they perceive noise and spatial confinement negatively: *"What is the reason for us not to eat on short days is the noise, the crowding during the second break. I think that when planning a cafeteria, it is VERY important to have enough space to eat in peace. I think nobody likes to eat stressed"* (F5, 267). [„Was für uns ja an kurzen Tagen der Grund ist, nicht zu essen, ist die Lautstärke, das Gedrängel in der zweiten Pause. Ich denke, dass es bei der Planung einer Mensa SEHR wichtig ist, dass man genug Platz hat, um in Ruhe zu essen. Ich denke, niemand isst gerne gestresst“ (F5, 267)].

Discussion

The results presented show that the secondary school students interviewed observe and assess their catering offer in a very differentiated manner. They would like to be in an appreciative environment in which they are taken seriously as guests with their wishes and expectations and in turn can also behave as guests. In return, they declare their willingness to participate in quality development. In doing so, they show themselves to be quite self-reflective and willing to compromise. The central framework conditions and quality features are discussed in more detail below.

Social encounters

When asked about their reasons for attending lunch, very many of the young people participating in the focus group interviews cited "meeting friends" as the first and most important reason, because the company of friends makes a crucial contribution to their relaxation during the lunch break. These self-selected social encounters, which may also involve teachers, are especially important to middle school students. They can even compensate for other aspects of school meals that are not satisfactory to students (see below).

Compensation possibilities and willingness to compromise

Despite incomplete knowledge of the framework, students realize that not all of their needs can be taken into account and all expectations can be met at the same time. Thus, they are willing to make concessions in favor of more urgent needs. The opportunity to meet friends seems to be the least dispensable, at least for students at secondary level 1.

Underage students are generally not allowed to leave school grounds to use alternative food providers, such as kiosks or snack bars. This restriction, as perceived by the students, can be compensated for at least in part: *"For example, the acceptance of food offerings increases when adolescents have a say in the composition of their meal in terms of quantity and individual components"* [9, p. 437]. In the focus groups, too, the students surveyed praised choices between menu lines and the free combinability of different food components, especially buffet systems for salad, fruit, vegetables, pasta and sauces.

Role of pedagogy

Young people attach great importance to their lunch break being free time and reject, for example, "institutional supervision" during lunch [10]. Secondary schools meet this need when their cafeteria concept largely dispenses with "regulation by supervision/educators" [11]. In this respect, this approach coincides with the ideas of the students interviewed. However, complaints from some students about inappropriate behavior and manners of fellow students show that some students may not have the "self-control competence" [11] apparently assumed by the pedagogical side, which is necessary to behave according to their guest role. There seems to be a gap here that cannot be closed by returning to more regimentation without losing the young people as guests of the refectory [10]. Instead, educational leaders should take on the task of empowering all students to behave appropriately as dining hall guests.

Structure of hospitality

Students are very specific in their comments when the food service environment does not meet their well-being needs. This concerns structures which the host is responsible for, such as the suitability of the break time for eating a meal, the room climate (light, temperature, and volume), and the spatial design of the cafeteria. In the comment "there is nothing more annoying than when you end up with no place to sit" (F10, 594) „es ist nichts nerviger als wenn man dann am Ende keinen



Platz hat“ (F10, 594), it becomes clear how low the claim of the quoted student is with regard to the hospitality that can be expected in a school with successful school catering.

Sustainability

The students addressed the topic of sustainability in food and catering on their own initiative and away from the interview guide in detail (see above). The current attention for this topic offers a great opportunity to inspire young people for health-promoting and sustainable school catering.

Conclusion

The young people interviewed in the focus groups formulate needs that relate both to the specific food offered and to the given framework conditions. They want basic food quality, variety, choice, and consideration of sustainability issues. It is important to them to have time and space for self-selected social encounters and they would like a hospitable setting for this.

The statements show that even in schools with "successful" school catering, the needs of the students are not fully met or do not have to be met. The desire of the interviewed students to be seen and appreciated as guests plays a central role.

Students are unaware of the structures behind their school food and most of the players. Nevertheless, they are aware that there are responsible parties who are responsible for designing the catering offer in terms of hospitality.

The findings from the focus group interviews allow the conclusion that school catering can only succeed if all actors responsible for school catering accept their social and health responsibility and perceive themselves as hosts. Depending on the area of responsibility, the actors have different tasks. The actors with pedagogical responsibility should see their task in enabling the students to behave as guests. The actors who are responsible for the framework conditions and the gastronomic service have the task of creating a dining situation that offers hospitality. The participating network offices for school catering, which have been supporting schools in the quality development of their school catering for over 10 years, continue to see a need for action to initiate or strengthen processes of participation development in schools and to demand and promote transparency and communication. The results of the focus group interviews with the students, along with other findings from the four-year research project, are being incorporated into an advisory guide for all school catering network offices.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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