



The “meal dictatorship” or: What should children (be allowed to) eat in day care centers and primary schools?

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Abstract

The article refers to a selected excerpt of a discourse on the exclusive offer of a meat- and fish-free lunch at day care centers and elementary schools in the city of Freiburg in autumn 2022. In the run-up to the corresponding decision of the municipal council, a lively media discussion arose. The analysis shows several strands of discourse and points to different values. These include the value of pleasure (hedonism) and the value of children's autonomy. In this article, these values are discussed against a (nutritional) educational and political background.

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is repeatedly criticized, for example by pupils or from a nutritional science perspective [5, 6]. The DGE quality standards for day care centers and schools provide for both a meat/fish menu and a lacto-ovo-vegetarian menu. According to the EsKiMo II study of children and young people on eating habits, 1.4% of children (6–10 years) and 5% of young people (11–17 years) eat a vegetarian diet [7].

Plausible health, ecological, social and animal ethical arguments for a more sustainable diet can be formulated for a lacto-ovo-vegetarian diet (in the following we will only refer to “vegetarian” for the sake of widespread abbreviation), whereby the term “more sustainable diet” is used in this article in the sense of the Scientific Advisory Board on Agricultural Policy, Food and Consumer Health Protection (*Wissenschaftlicher Beirat für Agrarpolitik, Ernährung und gesundheitlichen Verbraucherschutz*, WBAE) at the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (*Bundesministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft*, BMEL) [4]. Particularly – but not only – in the area of “animal welfare”, it becomes clear that a more sustainable diet always includes ethical or moral aspects or values and can therefore imply value conflicts between the various areas [4].

From the point of view of nutritional psychology and nutritional education, an appealing eating atmosphere is very important in addition to the choice of food [2, 3]. In order to support a certain food choice, nudging of nutritionally favorable foods can also be carried out [8] or various nutritional education approaches can be used, such as the targeted use of the role model effect of adults during mealtimes [9, 10]. However, a large number of local stakeholders are involved in both day care center catering and school catering: children, parents, educational staff, school management, caterers and serving staff, school authorities and others [11]. As a result, and due to the possible conflicts of objectives and values mentioned above, reaching a consensus on the offer, the price and the framework conditions is challenging.

Initial situation and research questions

Meals at day care centers and all-day schools are the responsibility of the providers of the respective institutions and the preparation and delivery is often outsourced to caterers. Local authorities, as school providers, subsidize the meals financially, so that parents or guardians do not have to pay for the entire meal, but a more or less high personal contribution [1]. At day care centers, participation in lunch is usually provided for all-day children; at elementary school, participation is voluntary, with different registration and cancellation procedures being used in the municipalities. The German Nutrition Society (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ernährung*, DGE) has developed quality standards for the quality of the food, but compliance with these standards is voluntary for the providers [2, 3]. That the DGE standards are adhered to and that the adolescents take part in the lunch offered is in the interest of a nutritionally beneficial diet for children and adolescents [4]. The quality of lunch at day care centers and schools



In the following, an excerpt from such a demanding consensus-building process will be examined. It relates to the plan of the city of Freiburg/Brsg. to offer exclusively vegetarian lunches at municipal day care centers and elementary schools in 2022. In view of the aspects already mentioned above, it was to some extent to be expected that this plan would meet with opposition. This article focuses on the analysis of a selected section of the relevant discourse.

The analysis follows two questions:

1. Which strands of discourse can be identified in the selected media regarding the conflict in question in the selected period?
2. Which value conflicts can be identified?

The aim of the discourse analysis is to generate knowledge in order to be able to shape future public communications on day care and school catering in such a way that they are in line with a more sustainable diet and a constructive approach to conflicts.

Methodical approach

The present discourse analysis follows an approach described by Rosenthal (2015) as text-based interpretative discourse analysis [12]. Rosenthal (2015), in turn, develops her approach in line with other approaches, in particular a knowledge-sociological approach [13] and the critical discourse analysis [14]. In the sense of these approaches, the selected discourse can be described as an "interdiscourse", which – in contrast to specialized discourses or everyday discourses – is neither conducted in scientific nor in biographical contexts [12, 14]. For this article, a synchronous¹ section is made through the discourse that developed from the publication of the draft resolution for the Freiburg Municipal Council (14.09.2022) [1] to the resolution of the municipal council (18.10.2022) [15]. In addition, the analysis for this article focuses exclusively on the excerpt that took place in the *Badische Zeitung*, a newspaper for the southern Baden region in Germany that appears both in print and online. Despite this very limited discourse excerpt and the limited "discourse level" (*Badische Zeitung*) [14], several discourse strands, i.e. "thematically uniform discourse sequences" [14] and other aspects can be identified that make it possible to answer the two research questions. The qualitative content analysis method according to Mayring [16] was used to identify the discourse sequences. In a first step, the content-related aspects addressed in the draft resolution are used as categories for a deductive analysis; in a second step, categories are added inductively for those statements in the discourse that have not yet been captured by the deductive analysis.

Context of discourse

The selected discourse took place in the city of Freiburg/Brsg. The strongest parliamentary group in Freiburg's municipal council at the time was the Green Party. On January 21, 2022, the Green

parliamentary group had already published the paper "Strategy for a climate-friendly diet", which called for exclusively vegetarian meals to be offered at all municipal day care centers and schools [17]. In June/July 2022, the Freiburg parents' council conducted a survey on the current school lunches and asked for an assessment of them and suggestions for improvement; the Green Party's strategy paper on vegetarian meals was not included. The results of the survey were published on September 18, 2022 [18]. As early as August 2022, the *Badische Zeitung* reported that a resolution proposal from the Office for Municipal Day Care Facilities and the Office for Schools and Education was planned for the Freiburg City Council; this motion aimed to only offer vegetarian meals at municipal day care centers and elementary schools in the future. This was quoted from a conversation with the city hall spokesperson and the representative of the parents' council [19]. The motion was then published on September 14, 2022 [1]. On October 15, 2022, the general parents' council published a statement on the draft resolution, in which it also reported the results of its own previous survey [20], which, however, had already been carried out *before* the draft resolution on vegetarian meals was published and therefore did not relate to it. No further statement was made by the city. The extent to which further discussions were held between representatives of the municipal offices and other stakeholders in the background cannot be assessed.

Results

Opening of the discourse

The resolution proposal, which provided the impetus for the selected discourse, was published on September 14, 2022 by the respective heads of the Office for Municipal Day Care Facilities and the Office for Schools and Education and was addressed to the Freiburg City Council [1]. It contains 6 proposals. The motions listed under numbers 1–4 refer to a gradual increase in the parents' own financial

¹ By "synchronous" it is meant that the analysis makes a "synchronous" cut through the discourse at a very specific point in time and that it does not examine the discourse "diachronically" over a longer period of time.



contributions to meals in day care centers and schools. The motion with number 5 addresses the fact that from the new school year onwards, only vegetarian meals should be offered at municipal day care centers and elementary schools [1]. In addition, the proportion of organic food should be increased by 10% to 30%. Motion 6 aims to introduce a new ordering and billing procedure for day care centers and elementary schools.

A draft resolution was published as an informative background to the proposed resolution. The increases in the personal contributions and, in a first section, the "adjustment of the meal offering" are explained in detail [1]. Firstly, the current range of meals and prices are described and it is pointed out that the intention is to offer meals that largely comply with the DGE standard. It is then argued that the new offer will make administration easier and cheaper; the caterers could also achieve savings in this way. This economic argument is followed by another that can be classified as pragmatic, in the broadest sense as pedagogical: "Since the intersection of different eating habits is a vegetarian offer, the menu line should be vegetarian in the future" [1]. No further explanation is given here as to what is meant by "intersection". If only one meal is offered, social aspects of eating could also be strengthened in the course of "family-table-setting", according to the further explanations. "Family-table-setting" is not explained. (It is a euphemism for one adult sitting at the table with a group of 10–15 children). This is followed by another economic argument for the vegetarian offer: high-quality meat is very expensive. The increase in the proportion of organic products is then described in more detail without further justification. At the next point, it is announced that the caterers will be trained with regard to vegetarian meals in order to improve the nutritional quality and make the offer more child-friendly. Finally, there is an explanation of EU public procurement law when choosing a caterer. In the second section, "nutritional education", three lines state that the change-over should be accompanied by nutritional education. An annex is attached for this purpose. The third section, "further developments", deals with the planned simplified billing system; unlike in the past, it should be possible to register and deregister children from meals at shorter notice. However, the exact procedure has not yet been determined.

Strands of discourse

Following the draft resolution, various strands of discourse can be identified for the ensuing discourse, which are outlined in ♦ Figure 1 [14]. In ♦ Figure 1, only those strands of discourse that *critically* comment on the resolution are listed.

In view of the qualitative research approach and the synchronous analysis of a limited section of the discourse, it is not possible to compare arguments quantitatively. The analysis reveals various substantive differentiations that include economic (1-1; 3-3-4; 4-1), social (1-1; 3-4-1; 3-4-4), nutritional policy (3-2), nutritional education/psychological (3-1; 3-4), nutritional physiological (3-5; 3-6; 3-4-3) and ecological (3-4-2) perspectives. The other strands of discourse address pragmatic aspects, such as the feasibility of the proposal (3-1-1; 3-7), and they point out contradictions in the argumentation of the draft resolution: on the one hand, the city wants to save money, but on the other hand,

it wants to increase the proportion of organic food, which could lead to higher costs (4-1). In addition to the strands of discourse that involve rejection of the proposals, there are also strands of discourse that signal *approval*. They refer to the climate-friendliness of a vegetarian diet as well as the beneficial health and animal ethical consequences.

Values

Some of the arguments are based on ethical and moral aspects and values. These include the value of (social) justice (1-1; 3-4-4). The keywords "mealtime dictatorship" and "social re-education" are based on the value of the child's autonomy or self-determination: It should be able to make its own eating decisions without being inappropriately dominated by other people [21].

The reference to the value of pleasure (hedonism) [22] is made by stating that "experience shows" that children do not like to eat vegetarian meals, especially vegetables (3-4). The "rabbit food" is justified by the fact that caterers would not prepare vegetarian meals in a tasty way. This presumed rejection of vegetarian food by the children then has various negative effects from the point of view of those involved, such as the fact that more food is thrown away in the canteen (3-4-2). This can involve ecological, economic or even moral values with regard to food.

The health of children (3-5; 3-6) mentioned in the discourse can also be interpreted as a value that may conflict with the economic arguments of the draft resolution.

The contributions *in favor* of the draft resolution express values that concern health and want to preserve life on the planet, even beyond human life [22].

Discussion

In terms of the two research questions, the analysis can reveal different strands of discourse and different values or conflicts of value. Discourse strand 3 is particularly differentiated with regard to the arguments (♦ Figure 1).

Among other things, strand 3 assumes that the children would not like the vegetarian food (3-4). The statements in the draft resolution that vegetarian food offers an "intersection" that could be interpreted as a compromise in taste between vegan and omnivorous food are

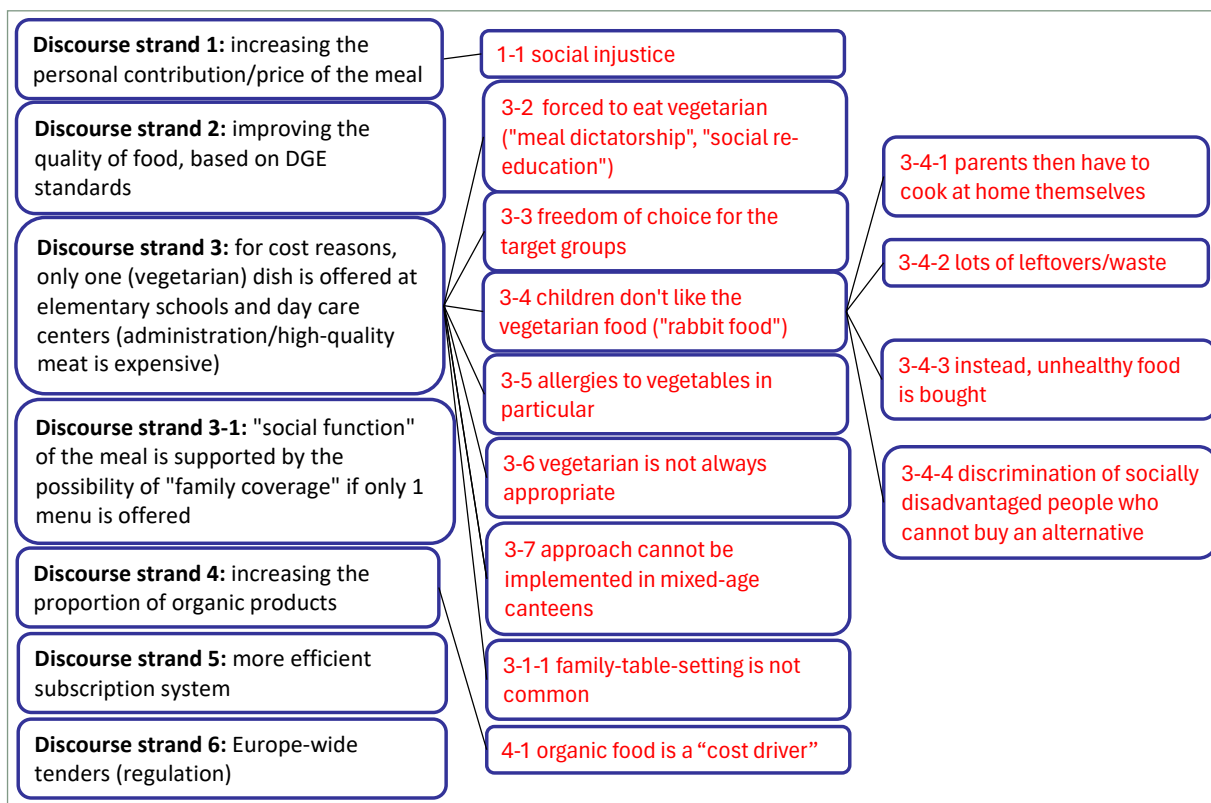


Fig. 1: Synchronous discourse analysis: overview of discourse strands for the draft resolution of September 14, 2022 for the Freiburg Municipal Council on the provision of meals at municipal day care centers and elementary schools (own presentation)
red: negative contributions in the analyzed discourse

thus rejected. The critical argument is based on personal experience. As already mentioned, according to the EsKiMo study, around 1.4% of children eat a vegetarian diet [7]. However, this does not imply that all other children would reject a vegetarian meal. Although children of nursery school age increasingly show certain neophobias or are considered "picky eaters", these behaviors can also relate to meat and fish dishes [23]. Eating habits and preferences are already partly developed in children of primary school age. However, openness to unfamiliar experiences with food can be supported in non-family contexts because peers or adult companions can exert a favorable influence here [23]. Nudging can presumably also increase acceptance [8]. In addition, caterers can be trained to improve the enjoyment value and child-friendly appearance of the food, as intended according to the draft resolution [15]. The fact that food should taste good is undisputed from a nutritional, pedagogical and psychological point of view [24]. However, even when there are two alternatives on offer, some children may (initially) reject both options or parts of them [25]. Discussion strands 3-2 and 3-3 deal with the fact

that the children in Freiburg's day care centers and elementary schools would no longer have any freedom of choice once the proposals have been implemented. Strand 3-2 assumes that children should have the choice between vegetarian and omnivorous meals. In strand 3-3, it is postulated that children would in principle have the right to choose between at least two meals. Both strands are *not* concerned with the nutritional psychological argument of nudging children to make a nutritionally more favorable choice by offering them several meals [8]. Rather, the autonomy of the eating child is postulated, whereby autonomy can refer to the two variants mentioned below:

1. The first variant of autonomy (3-2) demands the child's right to meat/fish at lunch. The discussion here uses formulations that otherwise originate from political discourse. A "dictatorship", i.e. tyranny, would be exercised if the children were only offered a vegetarian meal at lunchtime: They want to re-educate the children to become vegetarians because this is politically desirable. The political framing of this accusation presumably refers to the "Strategy for a climate-friendly diet" presented by the Green parliamentary group in January 2022, which has already been mentioned above. People who hold a different political opinion to the Greens could now interpret the proposal by the two heads of office as a covert push by the Green parliamentary group.
2. The second variant of autonomy (3-3) points out that children should be able to choose between two meals as a matter of principle. Proponents of this variant refer to family meals or



meals at home, which would also give children a choice; they also agree with the idea of two vegetarian meals at day care centers and elementary schools. According to various studies, adults in private households actually attach importance to eating together harmoniously and often take the individual wishes of the children into consideration when offering meals [26, 27]. The familiar saying from conservative mealtimes, "You eat what's on the table", has often given way to co-construction when choosing food [28]. This goes so far that adults prepare several meals or at least components in order to maintain a harmonious eating atmosphere [29]. However, when these *domestic* demands are transferred to meals *outside the home* in public educational institutions, as is done in the discourse and in some cases also in the surveys and statements of the Freiburg parents' council, the providers reach their limits. Such contradictions between the needs of the children and the needs of other people as well as the given framework conditions can be interpreted as an expression of a fundamental pedagogical tension between self-determination and heteronomy. However, this does not only take place during meals, but is typical for educational situations [30]. Even though, it seems to come to a head during the act of eating: If the child is not allowed to decide autonomously what to eat, it is prescribed "the self-regulated intake of food, the incorporation of the food into one's own body by one's own hand" [30]. While it is possible to react to this fundamental tension when eating with children at home by offering food and taking educational measures, the options for reacting are generally more limited when eating outside the home. In this case, the nutritional and educational skills of the staff are required.

In this context, it should be discussed to what extent the meals provided at public educational institutions differ *fundamentally* from those provided at home: As is well known, children in day care centres and elementary schools do not sit at the dining table at home as part of a small family during lunchtime, but rather eat a meal with many other children that is subsidized and responsible for by the respective provider. Apart from the economic and, in terms of social justice, questionable disadvantages of a higher meal price, there is broad scientific consensus on the nutritional and physiological benefits of offering vegetarian meals [2, 3]. A nutritional deficiency of the children due to a vegetarian lunch can be ruled out if the children are given a balanced diet at their other meals [31]. The vegetarian lunchtime meal can be interpreted as an act of care and acceptance of responsibility on the part of the provider with a view to accustoming the children to a more sustainable diet [4]. In addition to the health of the individual child, this is particularly about ecological and animal ethical concerns. The analyzed discourse indicates that it is not always clear to those involved that meals in public educational institutions are not a private matter [32].

In this way, day care center and school meals can easily become a pawn in polemical political discussions. In the context of the "Freiburg Meals Controversy", municipal nutrition communication has not fully succeeded in convincingly explaining the different motives for switching to a vegetarian menu to the public. The media reticence of the representatives of the municipal offices suggests that the city was rather anxious not to interfere in the

public discussion. The opportunity to strategically shape communication even before the proposed resolution was announced may have been perceived in the background, but hardly in the media. In particular, the values of "enjoyment" and "autonomy of the child" were not taken up in the run-up to the decision.

Even if the limitations of the discourse analysis carried out must be pointed out here, which only examined a very short section of the discourse and did not include other regional and national media and social networks, the analysis presented makes it clear what content can play a role in the discourse surrounding food at day care centers and schools: In addition to the content and values associated with a more sustainable diet, it is also about *educational* and *political* values of food [32].

A comparison with similar earlier discourses shows how delicate it can be from a political point of view to influence personal eating habits from the public side. In retrospect, parallels become clear with the very lively discussion surrounding the proposal by *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* in 2013 to introduce a weekly "vegetarian day" in public canteens for adults [33]. Among other things, this was perceived as an encroachment on personal freedom [34]. The fact that dietary habits are still seen as a "private matter" by some citizens [35] and that it can be difficult to reach a consensus on state regulations is reflected in the decision taken by the *Bundestag* in May 2023 to set up a citizens' assembly on the topic of "Nutrition in transition: between private matters and state tasks". This citizens' council is to develop recommendations for action on selected nutrition issues and present them to the *Bundestag*.

If the city of Freiburg had wanted to avoid a media dispute about the meals on offer at day care centers and elementary schools in 2022, this would probably have required more extensive communication and cooperation in advance, for example with the parents' council. The possibility of being able to choose between different individual components in a vegetarian meal offer could have been presented as a compromise. It would also have been conceivable to implement communication and marketing strategies [34] that make it clear that day care centers and schools also have an educational mandate for lunchtime meals that promotes sustainable nutrition and consumption sufficiency. However, the question of whether a greater consensus could have been achieved in this way cannot be answered in retrospect.



On October 18, 2022, Freiburg City Council decided in line with the proposal that only vegetarian meals should be served at municipal day care centers and elementary schools in future. The caterers were to be trained for this and the children were to be given additional feedback opportunities. In addition to the motion in the narrower sense, the municipal council also passed the resolution that children should be given the opportunity to choose between different vegetarian meal components [15].

Disclosures on Conflicts of Interest and the use of AI

The author declares no conflict of interest. No AI applications were used in the preparation of the manuscript.

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