Head teacher perspectives on school lunch: At variance with national policy

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Abstract
Objective: Previous research indicates that head teachers in Sweden frequently fail to see school lunch as part of the educational activities of a school. This study contributes to an understanding of how head teachers in Sweden perceive and experience current national policy intentions related to school lunch.
Design: Qualitative inquiry.
Setting: Ten municipal state schools in Sweden.
Method: Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 head teachers responsible for the compulsory education of 6- to 15-year-olds in state schools. Data from digitally recorded and transcribed interviews were thematically analysed.
Results: Head teachers primarily saw school lunch as a means to ensure pupils were fed and energised. Their focus tended to be on what followed after school lunch in the form of academic performance and mood, rather than the stated intentions of national school meal policy. Head teachers stressed the value of a free and nutritious school lunch for social equality, and the importance of good collaboration with food service managers and school meal personnel, despite the difficulty of achieving this.
Conclusion: This paper highlights a gap between head teachers’ perspectives with respect to school lunch and official intentions stated in Swedish national school meals policy. The meanings head teachers saw as connected to school lunch were those of social equality and ensuring pupils were fed, rather than the wider potential envisioned by the authorities. This paper identifies factors that affect the possibility of realising national policy intentions for school lunch in Sweden.

Keywords
Head teachers, school lunch, school meal policy, school meal providers, school meals

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Introduction

School lunch is an important part of the school day which, if it is a nutritious, attractive and pleasant experience, provides excellent opportunities for health promotion (Andersen et al., 2014; Day et al., 2015; Storcksdieck Genannt Bonsmann et al., 2014). Beyond nutrition, however, there are also important social, physical and pedagogical aspects to the meal (Berggren, 2021). A key player in this context is the head teacher of an individual school (Adams et al., 2023; Earl, 2018; Lalli, 2019). In Sweden, the head teacher has overall responsibility for the social, physical and pedagogical environment – including school lunch – and those involved in it. Head teachers have a major contribution to make to the successful implementation of change in schools (Holthe et al., 2011a) and, by extension, to the conditions in which school lunch takes place (Torres and Benn, 2017). Dimbleby and Vincent (2013) have identified three kinds of head teacher actions that can contribute to pleasant school lunches: integrating lunch with other activities in the school; providing support to the school meal service; and focusing on those aspects of food and meals that are most important to young people. Moreover, by understanding school meals as part of the pedagogical curriculum, it is possible to facilitate learning about shared values in a country (O’Rourke, 2021). School lunch can, therefore, be thought of as much more than food on a plate: it has wider benefits.

Research on school lunch from the perspective of the head teacher is rare. In a study conducted in Ecuador, head teachers reported that the meal’s learning potential depended on the food content and the schedule of the meal (Torres and Benn, 2017). In Denmark, head teachers discussing school meals in relation to learning saw new possibilities but stressed how responsibility for school meals should rest primarily with parents (Benn and Carlsson, 2014). A US study showed that, while many head teachers believed it was important to have a nutrition policy, far fewer reported having one in their own school (French et al., 2002). There is research to suggest that head teachers consider pupil health less important than academic achievement (Nollen et al., 2007). Furthermore, a study in Norway showed that school staff, including head teachers, experienced barriers to implementing national guidelines for healthy school meals (Holthe et al., 2011b). Often the main challenge was one of resources, but tensions could also arise between their regular work at school and the implementation of meal guidelines, which could be seen as time-consuming. Previous research has shown that lack of funding and priority, as well as pupils’ preferences for unhealthy eating, make it difficult for head teachers to provide healthy school meals (Cho and Nadow, 2004).

Worldwide, there are differences in the systems of school meal provision – in terms of financing, responsibility, purpose and provision. The study reported on in this paper took place in Sweden where school lunch serves as a symbol of national welfare and is a well-established cultural phenomenon (Persson Osowski and Fjellström, 2019). There is a long tradition of providing tax-funded school lunches and legislation that requires that school lunch in Sweden is provided free of charge and nutritious (Swedish Education Act, 2010). In addition, school lunch is viewed as an integral part of the school’s pedagogical work by the Swedish National Agency for Education, and head teachers are by law responsible for including school lunch in the school’s internal quality management (IQM) system to ensure that it meets national requirements.

To support schools in this work, authorities such as the National Agency for Education and the Swedish Food Agency (SFA, 2021) have developed regulations and guidelines in which school lunch is framed as a social and pedagogical activity and where it is stressed that a proper school lunch should be tasty, safe, nutritious, sustainable, pleasant and an integral part of the school day. The last two features are the responsibility of the head teacher. In addition, in Sweden, it is usual for teachers to sit together with pupils at school lunch (Waling and Olsson, 2017), contributing to
what is commonly called the ‘pedagogic meal’ (Persson Osowski et al., 2013). Lunch is understood as a teachable moment when pupils can learn about food and healthy eating by teachers talking positively about food and being role models. Pedagogical meals can also be seen as part of the interdisciplinary work within schools, with pupils’ school lunch participation acting to support teaching and learning in the classroom.

Even though the majority of Swedish municipalities have developed school meal policies (Grausne and Quetel, 2018), and there are guidelines from national authorities, the delivery of these policies and guidelines is left largely to each individual school. Responsibility for the provision of school lunch in Sweden is often divided between the head teacher at the school and a local food service manager at the municipal level or, for independent schools, the businesses that own them (Grausne and Quetel, 2018). The school’s operator (the municipality or the independent school owner) is responsible for ensuring that the school lunch provided meets nutritional requirements, and the food service unit is usually accountable for the planning, preparing and serving of meals. Head teacher responsibility concerns physical and social aspects such as furnishings, sound levels, rules, the placement of pupils, scheduling when pupils will eat and deciding how long the mealtime will take. As the school’s pedagogic leader, they are also responsible for if, and how, the ‘pedagogical meal’ is implemented as part of school lunch.

A recent study has shown that only half of 216 participating schools in Sweden met the requirement of including school lunch as part of the IQM (Olsson and Waling, 2016). This limited involvement was also reflected in the extent to which head teachers had knowledge of, and implemented, the school lunch objectives as stated in the SFA (2021) guidelines. Exploring head teachers’ perceptions and experiences of school lunch can provide insight into the interplay between adherence to school lunch policies and actual practices at the school level, and the question of why ‘school lunch does not have a special place in Swedish school’s quality management’ (Olsson and Waling, 2016)? The aim of this study was to contribute to an understanding of the way that head teachers in Sweden perceive and experience the national policy intentions of school lunch, and the conditions necessary to realise these intentions.

**Methods**

A qualitative approach was used as we aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of relevant issues (Patton, 2002). Individual digital-recorded interviews were conducted by the first author with 10 head teachers in municipality schools between December 2019 and April 2020.

**Recruitment**

It was originally intended that head teachers would be recruited by e-mail messages sent to a random selection of municipality schools (for pupils aged 6–15 years old) of 3 main types listed in the classification of Swedish municipalities, ranging from smaller urban areas to larger cities (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2017). The intent was to elicit the perspectives of head teachers in both smaller and larger municipalities.

In the e-mail, head teachers received details about research aims and objectives, and the study itself, as well as the fact that a researcher would contact them by telephone shortly afterwards to provide more information about the study (e.g. inclusion criteria and ethical aspects). In the event, however, it proved difficult to recruit head teachers at random in this way and the recruitment procedure was modified to utilise a convenience sample, with most head teachers coming from large cities and nearby municipalities. None of those who agreed to participate subsequently dropped out.
Data collection

Individual digitally recorded audio interviews were conducted using Skype to enable nationwide data collection. A semi-structured interview guide was developed comprising background questions about the head teacher and the school (how long he or she had worked there, number of pupils at the school etc.) followed by questions relating to the aims of the study. The interview guide allowed for follow-up questions based on the participant’s initial responses. In light of the data collected, some questions in the interview guide were amended early in the study. Interviews lasted around 30–45 minutes.

Analysis

Informed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) work, a thematic analysis was conducted on the data. Following transcription, interviews were read and re-read several times, and initial ideas were noted. Next, ideas and features of interest within the data were coded, and data relevant to each code were assembled. Codes were then brought together to create potential themes that were checked in relation to the data and the coded extracts. Towards the end of the analysis, themes were named, and the specific characteristics of each theme were refined, with selected extracts and data being analysed in relation to the research questions. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines in the Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 2013). All participants were informed in writing and orally about the purpose of the study and the research procedure, the fact that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. In this paper, the results are illustrated by data extracts in which individual head teachers are referred to by a letter (A–J).

Results

A total of 10 head teachers agreed to participate in the study. Collectively, they had a range of responsibilities from the early to later stages of compulsory education. Most worked in large cities or municipalities close to large cities.

Head teachers were happy to discuss school lunch arrangements in their school but had difficulty talking about their plans and intentions and those of the authorities. According to head teachers, school lunch was seen as valuable and important but was not necessarily incorporated into the educational work of the school nor the IQM, as required by Government policy. The analysis enabled us to develop two themes: (a) the school lunch – a means of getting all pupils fed and energised and (b) the importance of a well-functioning collaboration between food service and school.

The school lunch – a means of getting pupils fed and energised

Head teachers saw the school lunch primarily as a means for arranging for pupils to be fed and energised for the rest of the school day. The emphasis was on pupils’ academic performance, mood and stamina. Thus, head teachers placed the stress on what happened after school lunch (especially if pupils did not eat lunch), rather than focusing their attention on what goes on during lunch as stated in the national school meal policy. Many head teachers seemed to take a child-centred approach to school lunch. For example, the fact that it was free of charge and nutritious was highly valued in terms of its contribution to social equality.
The equalising and compensatory purpose of school lunch, that is the fact that the school provided a good meal for all pupils regardless of their socio-economic background, was positively evaluated by participants and seen as of value to their schools. The following example from a head teacher illustrated how pupils’ circumstances at home could affect the school lunch situation.

‘A big win is, we have pupils whose home situation is not that good. School lunch is part of our compensatory mission as well. It is the same for everyone, everyone can take part in it. For example, we have noticed that more school food is consumed on Fridays and on Mondays because then the pupil eats before the weekend and [then again] after the weekend since they may not have eaten sufficient food at home. We also have children where the parents work a lot and where it is not at all certain that they get a cooked meal even if you come from a well-off home’ (Head teacher A).

Unlike their commitment to school lunch as a social equaliser, when asked about school lunch as part of the school’s pedagogical work, it became clear that this was not something that head teachers had reflected on to the same extent. Turning school lunch into a learning situation was seen as valuable for younger pupils. However, for ‘older’ pupils, having their own time for recreation and social interaction with peers was viewed as more important than any pedagogical activities during lunch.

In general, head teachers saw teachers as key actors during lunch break. The teacher’s role during ‘pedagogical meals’ not only encompassed being a guard, maintaining order and taking action when necessary but also involved conversing and sharing a pleasant meal with pupils, especially young ones.

‘If you eat with the children, you somehow have an obligation to be available and present, but I think that [until now] it has been a matter of maintaining order and helping and supporting the younger pupils. The pedagogical lunch has been more of a guard and supervisory responsibility than a pedagogical [one] in some way. With younger children and multilingual pupils, then it becomes a little more educational because you have conversations and are helpful and are more active with the pupils’.

Besides maintaining order and talking to the pupils, the pedagogical meal was mainly thought of in terms of cost, politics, priorities and logistics by head teachers. For example, the pedagogical meal was seen as something that need not take place when there were financial constraints. In Sweden generally, and for participating head teachers, school lunch most often took place in a designated room or school restaurant. However, in one of the schools in the study, students had their school lunch in the classroom, which was said by the head teacher to provide a pleasant environment, suitable for conversations during lunchtime. However, doing this was also said to create more work for the teachers in terms of maintaining order and helping the children.

Several head teachers stressed the importance of letting pupils express their views about school lunch and systematically provided opportunities for pupils to share their thoughts and opinions. However, this did not necessarily mean that pupils’ perspectives were taken into consideration, nor did it lead to change. Some of the issues that head teachers said that the pupils raised were not considered part of their responsibilities, especially in reference to the food available. The social and physical aspects of school lunch were said not to be as systematically reviewed as the food and the meal itself. School lunch in general did not figure schools’ IQMs. Head teacher F said,

‘Honestly, school lunch is not included at all in the systematic quality report. This is something that I do not include in the systematic quality work. I have read other head teachers reports and they have not included it either, school lunch is not mentioned at all. The focus is mostly on knowledge, teaching and
learning, and they do not think about this pedagogical moment of school lunch. School lunch is not a pedagogically planned activity’ (Head teacher F).

As with school lunches’ absence from the IQM, it was also clear that national school meal policy documents were rarely part of most head teachers’ engagement with school lunch. Few participating head teachers acknowledged their existence. The few guidelines that were mentioned involved legislation concerning a nutritious school lunch, something that the food service unit was considered responsible for. When asked about school meal policy documents describing school lunch as a pedagogical activity, it was clear that this was not something that head teachers had reflected on.

The importance of a well-functioning collaboration between food service and school

Another prominent theme from the interviews concerned the effects of school lunch organisation at the management and school levels. The food service manager and the school meal personnel were most often mentioned and said to be crucial to the overall success of school lunch. While there were some positive recollections, in general, participating head teachers had negative experiences of this collaboration.

In relation to the daily practice of school lunch, it was clear that head teachers thought their room for manoeuvre was constrained by a lack of collaboration and communication between different management levels and personnel. One frequently raised issue was the fact that the head teacher was not responsible for the school meal personnel, and this restricted what could be done. Constraints were mainly at the management level where different approaches and perspectives were said to make joint-planning difficult:

‘It would be good to create better forms and [a] culture for collaboration between schools and [the] food service . . . School lunch is not a jointly planned activity. Maybe we are too far apart from each other, we should really use each other as resources’ (Head teacher E).

Questions of responsibility and how head teachers experienced the opportunity to influence school lunch were often raised. Some head teachers had more limited opportunities to influence school lunch than others. This was often because of the division between units, as well as a lack of collaboration and understanding of each other’s everyday operations. Head teachers argued that they and the school staff had better insight into school activities and could understand pupils better than school meal personnel. Head teachers referred to the presentation and taste of served food. Tensions were identified between the nutritious food provided and the food the pupils liked. Many head teachers reported that pupil preferences were not always met and students were not always listened to. Some said they had a better knowledge of what pupils preferred in terms of meals than the school meal personnel. However, they did not always have the mandate to influence change, for example when trying to introduce a system to provide pupils with their favourite dishes.

Responsibility for including reference to school lunch in the quality management system was also discussed, in line with school meal policy documents. It appeared that head teachers had either not reflected on this issue at all or did not consider themselves responsible. Instead, quality management was generally considered to be a food service unit responsibility. Likewise, in meetings where head teachers from within the municipality got together, school lunch was seldom discussed and, if it was, then it was mainly about costs. School lunch issues were seen as the responsibility of the food service unit:
‘The school lunch is on the agenda if she (the food service manager) chooses to participate, but we (the head teachers) do not discuss school lunch issues otherwise, it is her responsibility’ (Head teacher F).

The organisational aspects of school lunch warrant some consideration. First, even though head teachers were not responsible for school meal personnel or the preparation and provision of food, these issues seemed to generate a lot of work for them. As with the importance of a good relationship with the food service manager, personnel in the school kitchen were seen as key players in school lunch provision and were often mentioned, for example in relation to the presentation of the food and the treatment of pupils. Head teachers also described how school meal personnel did not always have the same knowledge and understanding as teachers when it came to individual pupils’ situations and could therefore sometimes talk to pupils in an unsatisfactory way. This was particularly the case when it came to foreign-born pupils and pupils with a neurodivergent diagnosis.

A second challenge concerned the logistics of school lunch in terms of time management, space and the overall meal environment. Head teachers saw themselves as having limited room to manoeuvre on these issues. The main challenge was one of time management in relation to the size of the school restaurant, the number of pupils and the amount of time pupils should have for lunch. Together, these factors could have a negative impact on the meal environment. For school lunches to run well, there needed to be good collaboration with the food service, as well as with the municipality.

Discussion

In this study, head teachers’ major preoccupation about school lunch was the possibility that pupils might not eat enough, impacting their academic performance after lunch. This took priority over concern for the more eclectic purposes of school lunch that are emphasised in policy documents, for example their pedagogical and social benefits.

Throughout the study, head teachers were the first to accept that they had not reflected more widely on the school lunches provided in their schools, especially their pedagogical dimensions. They maintained that they did not have adequate knowledge of and competence in these issues, suggesting they may not have appreciated national policies and the wider intentions articulated in those. In general, school lunch was not seen as a teaching or a learning opportunity by head teachers, at least not in a formal sense. For them, the purpose of school lunch was to feed the pupil, something often stressed in relation to social equality, and enhance performance in school. This aligns with the traditional Swedish school lunch ideology and its goal of fostering healthy citizenship and promoting social equality (Persson Osowski and Fjellström, 2019), rather than the wider potential envisioned by the authorities. Pedagogic meals were primarily associated with simply being present in the school restaurant, and pedagogical activities were mainly seen as valuable to younger pupils. Similar results have been found when exploring school lunch from the perspective of schoolteachers (Berggren et al., 2021; Persson Osowski et al., 2013; Waling and Olsson, 2017).

Beyond the above, the way in which school lunch was organised seemed to create challenges in attaining the wider goals intended by the authorities. Managing the logistics of school lunch was described as a daily challenge by head teachers in this study, specifically in terms of time management and the meal environment. Another challenge regarded the management of the division of labour between the different parties involved. There were clear signs of ‘us and them’ distinctions being drawn between schools and the food service, with a lack of communication and different approaches, agendas and overall conditions. This had an impact on what head teachers believed was possible to achieve during school lunch. Head teachers wished for a deeper consensus and shared understanding between the units. In some cases, they did not think they had the mandate to
influence the situation; in other cases, the responsibility was seen as being something for others – such as teachers and/or school meal personnel – to sort out.

In Sweden, collaboration difficulties such as those documented above have been reported in other studies (Eriksson, 2014; Holmberg, 2019; Prim and Broberg, 2014). In a national report, school meal personnel highlighted the importance of collaboration between all personnel involved in school meal provision, with head teachers having a crucial role to play in this respect (Prim and Broberg, 2014). In another national report, food service managers saw it as crucial for the head teacher to be interested in, and have knowledge of, food and meals (Holmberg, 2019). This was not always perceived by the food service managers as being the case. Food service managers in Holmberg’s report also said they wished to be more involved in food education as part of their work but found this difficult due to the fact that relevant guidelines rarely reached school management, only school meal personnel. Previous research has highlighted how school meal personnel can sometimes be perceived as subordinate to other professionals in the school such as teachers (Earl, 2018; Pike, 2010; Pike and Kelly, 2014). If such power imbalances are not recognised and school meal personnel’s intentions and ideas are not taken into account, constructive collaboration may be hard to achieve.

In this study, head teachers saw school meal personnel (both managers and school meal personnel) as key to the success of the school lunch situation but constrained by organisational factors such as divided responsibilities, time management and lack of control over the overall meal environment. While head teachers and school meal personnel may share perceptions of the main factors hindering a well-functioning school lunch and are keen for greater collaboration, the current division of responsibilities for school lunch may risk the loss of this larger perspective (Olsson and Waling, 2016). Findings from several studies confirm that positive and successful school lunches require team effort, in which different professionals collaborate and work together (Grausne and Quetel, 2018; SFA, 2021). As suggested by Olsson and Waling (2016) and the SFA (2021), among others, a holistic approach to school lunch, and collaborative working towards common goals, requires well-communicated expectations and roles, as well as an understanding of each other’s skills and conditions of employment. Difficulties in collaborating, together with a lack of knowledge of the national meal policy, may offer some insight into why head teachers’ perspectives on school lunch are at variance with national policy and why school lunch is not accorded its proper place in Swedish schools’ quality management.

**Limitations**

Although the small number of participants in this study may be seen as a limitation, this study has led to the generation of new knowledge in a previously under-explored area of research. The themes developed here were clear irrespective of whether the head teacher had a more positive or negative experience of the school lunch situation in the school in which they worked.

With respect to the generalisability of the findings, it is possible that those who chose to participate in the study were in some ways untypical – for example by being more interested in school lunch and having especially strong opinions about daily practice in their school – which limits the generalisability of the findings. The fact that interviews were conducted by means of Skype may also have affected what was said, due to lack of visual cues to assist the interviews. On the contrary, telephone interviews often tend to be shorter and more flexible than personal interviews, which may have attracted head teachers who often have a strained work situation. For the researcher, telephone interviews are less time-consuming, more flexible and cheaper, although they carry the risk of a more limited connection between the researcher and participant.
A more holistic account would have been developed had other professionals and personnel within the municipality been involved in the study. Exploring what different parties perceive to be the purpose of the school lunch, and to what extent the school environment is able to provide this, would aid future understanding.

**Conclusion**

This paper highlights a major gap between head teachers’ intentions with respect to school lunch and the aims and ambitions stated in the national school meal policy in Sweden. The meanings head teachers attribute to school lunch relate primarily to social equality and the importance of having children properly fed, rather than the wider potential of school lunch emphasised by the national school meal policy. A key factor hindering schools from reaching national and local intentions with respect to school lunch was limited knowledge about national school meal policies themselves – on the part of head teachers but also among other key players. Head teachers further described the fragmented organisation of school lunch as an obstacle to implementation and the achievement of a co-planned whole-school approach. We believe that a clearer recognition of school lunch as part of the pedagogic curriculum could bridge the gap between current policy and head teacher understandings and improve organisational collaboration between schools and school meal organisations.

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**Note**

1. The IQM is a collective process in schools comprising the obligation to plan, perform, follow up and document systematic improvement work with the aim of meeting the national goals stated in the Swedish curriculum for compulsory school (National Agency for Education, 2022).

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