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THE DREAM OF A PERFECT LUNCH:
HELENELUND SCHOOL CANTEEN IN 1968
AND 2012

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Everyone that has attended compulsory school in Sweden has spent a lot of time in the school canteen and most of them have opinions about the food served there. Although school meals and the rituals surrounding them have been a part of schooling since the early 1900s, it has not received much attention in educational research. This paper explores how various strategies to get children to eat school meals are visualised in photographs from a school canteen taken in 1968 and 2012, respectively.

The School Canteen

“I hid the disgusting, hairy bacon rinds in my pocket,” remembers an elder colleague when I told her about my project to examine the history of our school canteen. It was strictly forbidden to throw away food, another colleague adds. Since the beginning of the 20th century, school lunch has been served in Sweden. At first there was a small charge for it, though children from poverty-stricken homes often received it for free. During the 1940s, the government introduced free school lunch for all children. At that time there was a great interest in investing in the health and well-being of the upcoming generation. On the other hand, it was a very authoritarian system that often created a lifelong malaise among school children. During the 1960s, Sweden underwent tremendous modernisation, which brought on rapidly increasing economic growth. Hence this new modern society demanded a higher educational level of the entire population. In 1962, the nine-year comprehensive school was introduced, which also had an affect on school meals.
I compare a series of photos from 1968 taken at Helenelund School with photographs that I have taken in the school canteen in 2012. The main purpose is to illustrate how ideas about organisation of space, control and food are made visible in a source material that consists of photographs. To analyse the pictures I applied four different perspectives: 1) the organisation of space, 2) hygiene, 3) conduct and expectations of pupils and staff and 4) how the food was cooked and presented. The theoretical framework of the study resembles the one outlined by Catherine Burke in her paper “Contested Desirers: The Edible Landscape of School”. She suggests that consistencies and significant change of the edible landscape becomes visible by studying the relationship between architecture and the culture of a school. Burke uses the concepts authoritarian model and delivery model to describe how adults look upon children in the school canteen. In the present study, I have also added the professional model to the discussion, since I needed a concept explaining the Swedish system shown in the photographs from the 1960s.

Helenelund School was built in 1927 as one of three new schools in the municipality of Sollentuna, situated just north of Stockholm. At the time the government encouraged working class families to leave the overcrowded and unhealthy city by handing out small patches of land in the surrounding areas of Stockholm. The school added new buildings as the municipality became more densely populated. In 1965, the school received its present-day look when a new building was erected to house the secondary school together with a new school canteen. The canteen is located in a separate building; very functional with large windows on the top floor to let the fumes escape. The school had been serving hot school lunches since 1943, initially for a small fee but from 1946 free of charge. Until 1937, the children ate their lunch in a corridor, but by 1937 the school had a small dining room. In 2002, the buildings were refurbished. Then the dining room was moved to another smaller building, where it remains today.

141 Burke (2005), 571–587.
142 "Glimtar ur Helenelundskolans historia: Häfte sammanställt till skolans 70-årsjubileum 2007".
The Value of the Visual

In 1968, the National Board of Education produced a series of photos with an accompanying guide, an audio-visual tape entitled “Eating at School” and addressed to staff at the school canteens. The aim was to highlight the importance of school lunches by offering practical advice to staff on how to organise the canteen. The guide was produced at Helnelund in its new, modern dining room. The analysis of the photographs is based on thirty-nine images from the audiovisual tape found in a digital archive and ten photos that I took in the canteen in 2012. Four of the photographs from 1968 and two of the photographs of 2012 school canteen are included in this chapter.

Ian Grosvenor discusses the difficulties of using photos as historical sources. For instance, photographs often lack a sufficient context. However in this case, the purpose and context of the photographs from 1968 is very clear and moreover comprise a didactic tool. In a way, these pictures can be seen as fiction. They represent an idea of the “perfect lunch”. Bearing that in mind, I consider the photos to be an important historical source revealing the ideals promoted by the National School board at that time. The board probably chose to use photographs in their production, because they say so much more than mere text.

The organisation of space, for example, is difficult to express in words alone. It is also difficult to capture the relationship between pupils and staff without images. Canteen staff always smiles when serving food, but display a disapproving expression when a pupil is about to throw food away (Figure 4 and 5). In this case, the pictures provide information that would otherwise have been lost. A comparative study between now and then thus requires that I use photographs from today as a source as well.

144 Grosvenor (1999), 86–90.
Ethical Considerations

The pictures from 1968 are filed in the municipal archives and they have been published on the Internet. Pupils and staff from Helenelund pose in the pictures. The municipal archivist has approved the use of the pictures but the identity of the photographer is unknown. I took the present-day photos during a few days in October 2012. I received permission to take pictures from the school principal and the dining room’s private contractor ISS, provided that no pupils are identifiable. Adults in the photos have given me permission to use and publish the photos. I have also photographed a child in close-up with permission from both parent and child. These photographs will be added to the Sollentuna municipal archives.

Analysis of the Photographs

It is important to note that the photographs do not represent the reality of Swedish school canteens in the 1960s. This was the National Board’s ideal, which municipalities should strive to meet. The pictures show how the premises should be disposed, how hygiene issues should be handled and what the relationship between staff and pupils should be like. In addition, they also offered advice on suitable dishes. The pictures are clearly arranged. Both staff and pupils are posed in the photographs. The audio-visual tape has a very clear pedagogical approach. Photographs showing desirable behaviour alternate with images displaying the opposite. Staff posing in everyday outfits from home is contrasted with photos of staff dressed in crisp, clean uniforms. My analysis is based on the four different themes mentioned above, namely the organisation of space, hygiene, conduct and expectations and finally the food itself.

Organization of Space

In numerous instances, the images from 1968 highlight the importance of school meals being served in a spacious dining room. The children were able to queue up without crowding among outerwear. Next to the school canteen, there is a large space with a row of sinks and hooks for outdoor clothing. The actual dining room consisted of one large room with large windows and rows of tables.

![Figure 1. A spacious cloakroom equipped with washbasins was important in 1968. Photo from the audiovisual tape: “Att äta i skolan”, SÖ-förlaget, Skolöverstyrelsen (1968).](image)

In 2012, the hall is much smaller, only 20 square meters, with two sinks. The children serve themselves. This system has minimised the length of queues and thus the need for corridors in which to line up. The actual dining room is organised into three smaller rooms. It is still dominated by rows of tables but there are also a few round ones. It is nicer to sit at a round table and while they are very popular among pupils, they take up more space in the dining room. The images from 2012 tell us that it is important the premises are no larger than required.
Figure 2. Today the cloakroom is much smaller and there are only two sinks for 800 pupils. Photo: Cecilia Johansson (2012).

Figure 3. Edwin serves himself black pudding. Photo: Cecilia Johansson (2012).
Hygiene

The photos from 1968 show the onus on hygiene at the time. Sinks and clothes hangers have already been mentioned, but there are also several pictures of how the staff wash their hands and dress appropriately. The women who worked in school canteens in the sixties were often housewives possibly working outside the home for the first time. For this reason, it was important for the board of education to emphasise that this was a profession different from cooking for the family. Today there are only two sinks left in the cloakroom and nobody checks that the children wash their hands. Although sometimes are supervised by a teacher when they serve themselves lunch, there are many opportunities for pupils to mess around with the food. One manifestation of this is the pupils’ habit of never taking the top plate in the pile of plates. You never know what has been on that plate. If all the children decided to wash their hands in the two sinks, chaos would result. The value of proper hygiene is no longer taught either by teachers or canteen staff.

Conduct and Expectations for Pupils and Staff

Figure 4. Proper staff conduct: The staff of 1968 was required to offer the pupils the portion size that they wanted.
Photo from the audiovisual tape: “Att äta i skolan”, SÖ-förlaget, Skolöverstyrelsen (1968).
Several photos from 1968 show that the school board wants to create a friendly and respectful relationship between canteen staff and pupils. Pupils should listen attentively, but the staff should also pay attention to the pupils’ wishes. They were expected to serve lunch and clean up but also to help pupils and make sure that they learned the rituals of mealtimes. In the photos that show undesirable behaviour, staff displays a disapproving expression or ignores the pupil when asked for something. This shows that the board wanted to replace the authoritarian model that previously ruled in Swedish canteens. However it was still important to teach children how to behave. For instance, they were expected not to waste food.

Figure 5. A meal hostess prevents food waste. She points out the inappropriateness of throwing away food and tells the pupil to finish his portion.

Photo from the audiovisual tape: “Att äta i skolan”, SÖ-förlaget, Skolöverstyrelsen (1968).

Today’s staff are employees of ISS, a private catering firm. The municipality renegotiates canteen services on a regular basis and the supplier is often replaced. ISS has no educational mission at all. Instead, teachers are expected to keep the canteen tidy and ensure that pupils follow the rules of the dining room.

146 Burke (2005), 571–572.
The Food

Several of the photographs from 1968 show industrial-scale cooking taking place in a well-organised and perfectly spotless kitchen. But there is nothing in the pictures that suggests the possibility of choosing from different dishes, nor a variety of beverages. Milk was the only option. The photographs from 1968 show five recommended dishes. All served with milk, crisp bread and fruit. The dishes consist of traditional Swedish fare that the children would be familiar with from home, like meat or fish with potatoes and steamed vegetables.

The dishes presented in the photos suggest that food was important to the National School Board. It should be nutritious and fulfil the needs of growing children, but should also be tasty.

Today parents want food to be organic and homemade, not industrially produced. The kitchen is not as clean and shiny as it once was. Milk is still served, but you can choose water instead. Salads of all kinds are now an important part of the lunch buffet. There is also more attention to pupils’ individual choices. Vegetarian and pork-free meals are served every day.
Children have a say in what dishes are served through their food council. Yet most of the dishes are still based on traditional, everyday menus. The municipality still checks the quality of food through its contract with the caterer.

**Discussion**

Society’s fundamental mission as far as school meals are concerned has remained the same for 100 years. School children are served a nutritious meal during the day to give them the necessary energy and facilitate learning. But this mission has always been hampered by demands to save money and tight schedules. In the first half of the 20th century, getting the children to eat food they found disgusting was resolved with an authoritarian model that simply forced them to eat their lunch.147 Meals were eaten wherever there was room, usually in the corridor or in the classroom. In the 1960s, canteens were modernised along with the rest of the school system. The school board produced an audio-visual tape to highlight the importance of organising school meals. However, the photographs from 1968 show that there was still concern about correct modes of mealtime behaviour. Canteen staff became part of the pedagogical activity at school. In contrast with the authoritarian model, pupils were encouraged, not forced, to do the right thing. In 1968, lunchrooms were to be purpose built with plenty of pleasant, open space. The food would be cooked in a professional manner and was not only nutritious but tasty, too. The National School Board wanted to improve food quality and the environment in which it was served in order to avoid the kind of conflict caused by the authoritarian model. Efficient organisation, agreement rather than force, and functional premises characterised the *professional model*.

Today, a private company runs the canteen like a restaurant. It has become much more important to use space efficiently. There is no room for queuing and staff no longer interacts with the children to correct their behaviour. The dining room is designed to reduce noise and catering services are regulated and controlled by the municipality. The children have a voice

147 Burke (2005), 574.
now, seen as consumers or customers with purchasing power. But this also means that they have to take responsibility for what they eat and how they behave, just like an adult in the same situation. Values, hygiene and conduct are less important. Eight-year-old Edwin handles the edible landscape more or less all by himself (Figure 3). The *professional model of 1968* has been replaced by something that resembles a *model of delivery*, as Burke discusses, where school children are more like customers at a restaurant and therefore in control of their eating and behaviour.

This state of affairs has actually greatly reduced lunch-related conflict. Terrified children no longer hide bacon rinds and other disgusting food in their pockets. At the same time, other questions about how we see children in our society are raised. Perhaps childhood as a social construction is about to disappear. According to Ellen Key, the twentieth century belonged to the child. Perhaps the twenty-first will belong to the consumer, regardless of age. This is already a fact when it comes to other aspects of education in Sweden.

In this light, it would be interesting to continue studying the school canteen today from the perspective of the children. What would their perfect school lunch look like?

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have compared photographs of the Helenelund school canteen in 1968 with photos taken in 2012. The analysis is based on four different perspectives: organisation of space, hygiene, conduct of pupils and staff, and food. The analysis shows that in the 1960s, the National Board wanted to abandon an older, *authoritarian model* for a modern, *professional* one. Canteen staff, often consisting of former housewives, would behave in a correct but friendly manner toward pupils. Good hygiene, nutritious food and sound organisation were key. The dining room was another arena for the school’s pedagogical efforts. A private catering company runs the school canteen today and the photographs reveal that its staff is only

148 Burke (2005), 587.
responsible for the food, not the pupils’ behaviour. The latter are treated like customers in a restaurant. They can choose between two dishes and they serve themselves. Responsibility for their behaviour lays now entirely with the teachers. The professional model has been replaced by the delivery model. While this has reduced conflict, the children are left to their own devices and must take responsibility for eating enough to get them through the school day.