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Published online: 13 Oct 2020.

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Between good intentions and practical constraints: Swedish teachers' perceptions of school lunch

L. Berggren[a], C. Olsson [iD][a], M. Rönnlund [iD][b] and M. Waling [iD][a]

[a]Department of Food, Nutrition and Culinary Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden; [b]Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

In Sweden, pupils eat tax-funded school lunches, often in the company of teachers. This article focuses on Swedish compulsory school grade (ages 7–15) teachers' (n = 823) perceptions of the school lunch in terms of intentions and daily practice. Analysis was based on written answers for an open-ended question that was part of a questionnaire focusing on teachers' attitudes towards school lunch as a pedagogical activity. It was found that participating teachers saw the potential of the school lunch, placing emphasis on the social interaction that takes place in the school restaurant and the possibility of meeting pupils in a more informal setting. However, a key outcome was teachers' depictions of the struggle between ideals and reality with the effect that teachers were not always provided with favourable conditions for school lunch inter-actions. It is important to address this in order to improve meal-time practices and the experience of school lunch.

Introduction

The school lunch is a social space, a time for eating and meeting. The meal takes place in a formal setting imbued with cultural and social values from the school staff, the school and wider society. During school lunch, pupils are often in the company of and supervised by adults. Worldwide, different school lunch systems and practices are used and the func-tion and purpose of the adult presence varies. In Sweden, and in other countries, the adult most often eating with pupils is a teacher, a role that also includes interacting with the pupils. Hence, in this context, teachers are important for the school lunch situation and key informants (Patton, 2014) who can help us understand what is happening – and why – in this specific setting. Furthermore, it has been stressed that teachers have a significant role that should be given more attention (Benn & Carlsson, 2014). The aim of the present study was to better understand how teachers in Sweden perceive the school lunch in terms of intentions and daily practices.

School lunch is a space that holds potential for teaching and learning, both in a formal and a more informal sense (see e.g. Andersen, Baarts, & Holm, 2017; Benn & Carlsson, 2014; Lalli, 2020a; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). School lunch has been highlighted as a

space for social learning, where pupils can learn how to be part of a group and an organised community, where they can practise social skills and learn how to behave and navigate the world outside of school (Earl & Lalli, 2020; Lalli, 2020a, 2020b). While the benefits of social learning have been recognised, it has also been noted that social learning is not always formalised nor recognised as part of teaching, and is at risk of being lost in the chaos of lunch time at school (Earl & Lalli, 2020). Andersen et al. (2017) has divided research on how teachers handle school meals into two positions: *the discipline position,* which focuses on the meal situation as an instrument for social control and discipline; and *the dialogue position,* framing the meals as a time to talk with the children. In a UK study of school meals, for example, Forero, Ellis, Metcalfe, and Brown (2009) found that teachers viewed the pupils' lunch time as free from adult monitoring. Andersen et al. (2017) concluded that although the dialogue position has been given attention recently, the general focus is on discipline, where most of the teachers' interactions with pupils deals with rule-setting and maintaining order. Similarly, Lalli (2020b) found that teachers associated social learning with rules and regulations and were more concerned with monitoring pupils than with interacting with them in the social space of school lunch. Indeed, the teacher role is complex and involves many different facets. For example, although subject teaching and classroom administration can conflict, their parameters are widely understood within the profession. However, research has indicated that teachers struggle to understand and/or enact their role as pedagogic mediators at mealtime and need more knowledge related to that (Albuquerque, Pontes, & Osório, 2013; Persson Osowski, Göranzon, & Fjellström, 2013; Sepp, Abrahamsson, & Fjellström, 2006). In Waling and Olsson (2017), it was shown that the majority of Swedish teachers participating in that study viewed school lunch as a part of the school's pedagogical work, as well as a resource when working towards goals stated in the curriculum regarding health and the environment; fewer, however, were sure of themselves when it came to fundamental values. A study conducted in Denmark showed that it was more common for teachers there to view school lunch as part of school health policy and practice, and less as part of education and learning (Benn & Carlsson, 2014). In the literature, teachers have been described as playing a key role in school lunch health-promoting activities (Mita, Gray, & Goodell, 2015). However, little is known about teachers' practices during lunch and the implementation of objectives stated in different regulations and policies (Moore, Murphy, & Moore, 2011). This is something that Mita et al. (2015) stressed as needing more attention. Exploring teachers' views on school lunch is important, especially since teachers' perspectives, and their presence, influence the approach and implementation of school lunch (Moore et al., 2011) and conditions for how the meal takes place (Benn & Carlsson, 2014; Pike, 2008) in terms of, for example, learning outcomes and the experiences of those involved.

School lunch in Sweden

Taking a specific context, in this case schools and school lunch in Sweden, into account is important since teachers' perceptions and how they ascribe and construct meaning is specific to particular times, contexts and places (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). School lunch, as with the rest of the school, is bounded by policies and regulations constituted by politicians, administrative authorities and local municipalities. Sweden is a country that

holds a long tradition of providing, by law, tax-funded school lunches (Swedish Education Act, 2010, p. 800). Legislation also requires that the school lunch should be nutritious. Furthermore, The Swedish Education Act requires every school to have an internal quality management system (IQM) to include all activities covered by the concept of education – and the National Agency for Education has, together with the National Agency for Education and National Food Agency (2015), indicated that school lunch is considered such an activity. The overall responsibility for school lunch (e.g. schedule, environment and the teacher's role), which is influenced by political and municipality decisions and resource allocations, rests with the school and the school principal. Different authorities, such as the National Agency for Education and the National Food Agency, provide policies (recommendations and guidelines) to support the school's work in meeting the legislated requirements of a nutritious school lunch, and also to guide and help school leaders, pedagogues and other school actors integrate a nutritious meal with curricular activities and plan, evaluate and monitor the school lunch accordingly (National Agency for Education and National Food Agency, 2015; National Food Agency [NFA], 2019). This integration of meals and curricular activities is one of the objectives described in policy documents, together with a recommendation that the meal should be tasty, safe, nutritious and pleasant. However, actual adherence to policies and guidelines regulating Swedish school lunches varies in practice. A study by Olsson and Waling (2016) showed that 50% of the participating school leaders did *not* include the school lunch in the IQM. Those who reported that school meals *were* included in the school's IQM were more likely to see school meals as a constituent part of their educational activities. Another study investigating teachers' attitudes towards the use of school lunch for educational purposes showed that it was unregulated at school level (Waling & Olsson, 2017).

For some teachers, eating with pupils is a requirement from school management; for others, the decision is made by the individual teacher and/or the staff. Research has shown that it is common for teachers in Sweden to eat with their pupils and get lunch fully or partially subsidised (Waling & Olsson, 2017). The National Food Agency, which provides policy documents about school meals, emphasises school lunch as a potential arena for the promotion of healthy eating, practising social interaction and also teaching about the environment and different cultures (NFA, 2019). In these policy documents it is emphasised that teachers have a central role in this work. In Sweden, meals that are seen as a learning occasion in school are often termed 'pedagogical meals' (NFA, 2019; Persson Osowski et al., 2013; Waling & Olsson, 2017). School lunch, as the 'pedagogical meal', is a well-established cultural phenomenon in Sweden. In 1987, the Swedish Government assigned the National Agency for Education the task of looking at the conditions for operating pedagogical meals, earlier referred to as the scheduled school lunch, in order to get a better understanding of how lunches could be incorporated into school learning activities. With pedagogical meals, teachers are, during scheduled work hours, supposed to act as role models for healthy eating, showing a positive attitude towards food and discussing the food-related topics included in the Swedish curriculum for compulsory school (National Agency for Education, 2019; NFA, 2019). The National Food Agency highlights one important aspect of this integration of mealtime and education, and that is the prospect of pupils learning by imitating their teachers. School lunch is also described as an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships

between teachers and pupils as well as between pupils (National Agency for Education and National Food Agency, 2015; NFA, 2019). Within teachers' general duties, school lunch also involves maintaining good order, although this is not specified in policy documents. A study conducted in Swedish preschools and schools showed that participating teachers took on different roles (the educational teacher, the evasive teacher and the sociable teacher) when eating and interacting with pupils during school lunch (Persson Osowski et al., 2013). These were often based on what the teachers considered to be the aim of the school lunch. The teacher role during school lunch is of interest in relation to the present paper, although with the specific focus of how teachers perceive the intentions and the daily operation of school lunch based on their first-hand experience. The study by Persson Osowski et al. (2013) was based on observations in school restaurants, focusing on teachers' interactions with pupils where the researcher in some cases interacted with the participants and asked questions if needed. Interviews were carried out, although with kitchen staff and pupils, and not with teachers.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

In this study, we focus on the school lunch as a social and pedagogic space. We therefore take interest in more than the food and the meal, and include social and pedagogical aspects of the event e.g. the setting, practices and relationships. With Lefebvre (1991), we understand social (and pedagogical) space as being continuously under production, not fixed. One way of understanding the production of a space such as school lunch is to analyse space as perceived, conceived and lived. Individuals' perceptions, acts, ideas and meanings interact with conceptualisations expressed in, for example, local and national policies and guidelines, and together they contribute to what space becomes (Lefebvre, 1991). The perceived, conceived and lived space interact with each other, causing both harmony and tensions. This study has a specific emphasis on the perceived space – how teachers perceive the school lunch as a social and pedagogical space with focus on the intentions and daily practice in that space. Our understanding is that teachers have agency and capacity to negotiate how they make sense of school lunch, e.g. through how they view, talk and act in relation to the event. This meaning making is influenced by local and wider school traditions, by teachers' personal experiences and values and, of high relevance for this specific study, by abstract representations such as policies and guidelines, i.e. the conceived space. The conceived space is especially of significance since the data consist of teachers' reactions to different policy intentions within the context of school lunch in Sweden. How teachers perceive school lunch is thus influenced by a number of individual, institutional and representational processes. Further, their perceptions – and meaning-making processes – have an impact on the daily practice.

Since there are policies promoting healthy eating as well as social and pedagogical activities during school lunch, the experience and perspective of those involved in its practice needs to be further studied. Exploring teacher perspectives can give valuable knowledge of how teachers view school lunch and how policy representations are produced and reproduced in their everyday lives with pupils. We hope to contribute to a deeper understanding that can influence, and if needed, improve meal-time practices and the experience of school lunch.

Method

This paper is based on data from a cross-sectional quantitative study performed in Swedish compulsory schools (Waling & Olsson, 2017) where the aim was to study teachers' attitudes towards the use of school lunch for educational purposes and the extent to which they saw themselves as role models in that situation. In total, 3629 teachers of grade 1–9 (ages 7–15) pupils completed a web-based questionnaire.

The questionnaire was made up of a total of 20 questions. In most of these, participating teachers were asked to show their level of agreement on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 was 'to a small extent' and 10 was 'to a large extent'. The questionnaire sought some background information about the teacher and the school, but the main focus was on questions about school lunch as a pedagogical activity. Teachers were asked if it were a requirement from their school management to eat with the pupils, if they got meals subsidised when they ate with pupils, and how often they ate with them. Two questions were directly related to goals stated in the Swedish compulsory school curriculum (National Agency for Education, 2019). The first asked if teachers thought that school meals could be used to reach goals related to health, lifestyle and fundamental values. The second asked to what degree the teacher identified as a role model in the school lunch situation. Following that question sequence, teachers were asked to state their position: did they think that the school lunch should be part of the educational activities at school, or should it be a break from them?

At the end of the questionnaire teachers had an opportunity to write comments about something or add information that they thought the questionnaire had not probed sufficiently. The question was formulated as follows: *'Here you can write if there is something you want to comment on or add information regarding any of the questions in the questionnaire.'* Comments provided for this open question were the dataset for the present paper. When the questionnaire was constructed the authors had no plan to analyse this question separately, but an initial review of teachers' comments and stories showed a broad range of answers and provided vivid depictions of their daily experiences of school lunch. This suggested a qualitative approach to investigating teachers' thoughts for a deeper understanding of how teachers perceived school lunch and the nature of everyday practice. In total, 823 teachers had answered this optional open question in the questionnaire. In the study by Waling and Olsson (2017), the participating teachers came from all grade levels and from different parts of the country. Although the teachers' geographical location and the grade level of teaching was not studied for the 823 participants in this specific study, it is likely that it is similar. The teachers' comments indicated this as many of them, for example, mentioned the grade they taught.

Teachers' answers to the open question were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was mainly inductive, focusing on themes strongly linked and close to the data. The main intention was to look for latent (interpretative) content within the data. The data included comments that were, in the main, directly related to questions on the questionnaire, and their answers. Many comments related to teachers' daily experiences of school lunch were emotionally charged, and full of opinions. In some comments, teachers provided an 'explanation' to augment a previously given questionnaire answer. Comment length varied from just a few sentences to longer narratives. Previous questions in the questionnaire have been discussed among the researchers

involved and taken into consideration throughout this study, but have not been used as a basis for the analysis: instead, they are viewed as stimulus material. We were interested in all dimensions revealed by the open question, including and beyond the attitudes shown towards school lunch as a pedagogical activity (Waling & Olsson, 2017). For that reason, data have been analysed as a whole, and independently of the questions in the questionnaire before the open question.

The analysis process followed six phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process has been slightly modified to fit the research question and data. First, as the original data came in digital form, there was no need for transcription. The data were read and re-read a number of times and initial ideas were noted and discussed within the research group. Second, the noted ideas and features of interest in the data were coded and data relevant to each code were assembled. Third, codes were brought together into potential themes. Fourth, a 'thematic map' of the analysis was conducted, checking the themes in relation to the data and the coded extracts. Fifth, themes were named and defined and the specifics of each theme were refined. Sixth, the findings were produced, analysing selected extracts and data in relation to the research question.

The study was conducted in accordance with national and international ethical guidelines (Swedish Research Council, 2017). Before the start of the questionnaire the teachers were informed in writing about the aim of the study and that it would not be possible for the researchers to link answers to specific teachers or schools. Information had also been given about contexts in which the results would be presented i.e. in scientific journals and popular science papers.

Results

In general, teachers perceived school lunch as a social space that had the potential of being an ideal time and place to strengthen relationships between pupils and teachers: an opportunity to socialise and have conversations. School lunch was often described as a pause from 'regular' pedagogical work but, at the same time, an opportunity for pupils to learn. By comparison with other school spaces and activities, school lunch was often portrayed as an informal setting and activity with complex contradictions. For example, it was emphasised by the teachers that school lunch should be considered and experienced as a break for the pupils and, in some ways, also for themselves, even though this did not necessarily have to exclude pedagogical intentions. These were often associated with practising social skills and informal learning through the conversations that take place during the meal. The analysis revealed how teachers face different challenges on a daily basis. The analysis resulted in two themes: (a) school lunch as a means for social interaction with pupils; and (b) the school lunch – a challenging activity. Both themes deal with and highlight intentions and daily practice.

School lunch as a means for social interaction with pupils

School lunch was generally perceived as a space for social interaction, something that was highly valued by the teachers and seen as both a means for teaching and learning – and as a means for bonding and socialising with pupils. The school restaurant was commonly

portrayed as a meeting place, an informal setting suitable for meeting the pupils and for strengthening relationships. The school restaurant was perceived as unique in the sense that the meal and the meal situation offered opportunities that were not as common in the more traditional school spaces, i.e. meeting the child as an adult and not necessarily as a teacher. It was felt that this kind of meeting could have positive effects on the relationship between teacher and pupil and that a good relationship with the pupil is important and essential if the teacher aimed to introduce more organised learning activities during or in relation to lunch. Also, the importance of meeting the pupil and sharing a meal in a relaxed way without any requirements of performance was underlined. Further, the importance of having adults present in the school restaurant to prevent bullying was emphasised. Some perceived school lunch as a break for the pupils where the teachers viewed themselves as adult meal company. This did not necessarily rule out viewing school lunch as a pedagogical activity. However, the pupils' need for recreation and peer interaction was underlined by teachers as one of the main reasons for not introducing too many pedagogical activities during lunch. Here is an example where one teacher described the importance of providing conditions for conversations based on the pupil's interest, which was described as something that could, in turn, give better potential in other learning contexts:

> Lunch is a great opportunity to talk about things around the pupil. Give the pupil the time to talk about an interest or an event that concerns him or her. Getting to know each other better, which also gives a better learning situation.

Within this child-centred approach, school lunch was seen to hold a compensatory purpose in relation to other school spaces (e.g. classrooms) and the home. For instance, teachers emphasised the positive effects of the conversations that took place around the meal: it was not something that all pupils got at home:

> In today's society, when all family members may not eat breakfast and dinner together at home, it is even more important to create such a natural situation in school when you talk, eat and socialize, which is very enriching for the social interaction. It is also important to include everyone so that all pupils feel that they are part of a community and here the staff have an important role, as with seating etc. If the pupils were in charge of seating, some pupils could be left out.

In the different depictions of school lunch, various social and physical learning opportunities were outlined. Social interaction was highlighted as the core of pedagogical meals along with the meaning of conversation, often with the food and the meal as the point of departure. Stages of the school lunch – standing in line, providing oneself with food and drinks, eating and sharing a meal, and taking care of the food waste – were noted as giving rise to opportunities for conversations about various topics e.g. sustainability, health and food culture, and considered as important parts of the pupils' learning. However, the main focus was on the pupils' social skills (rather than fact-based knowledge), focusing on appropriate behaviour e.g. table manners, good order and following set rules. Below is one example where a teacher argued that this should be the focal point during lunch, not subject education:

> [T]he educational activity is about getting pupils to understand how to behave during meals and, when appropriate, talk about the importance of eating healthy. That is, a part of "foster

pedagogy" as individuals but free from subject education. But if you think it's a part of teaching in different subjects like math, biology, sports, I think the meal should be free from these parts. The risk is otherwise that we get into assessment situations at the pupils' meals.

It was noted that foster pedagogy e.g. values and behaviour, which is part of the Swedish education system, is, and should be, the main purpose of school lunch. Others wrote that it often becomes a priority for discipline and fostering the pupils (the '*School lunch – a challenging activity*' section offers further discussion of this idea). It was also frequently written that it was a teacher's responsibility to teach pupils to become considerate individuals, aware of other people as well as, for example, the environment. According to the teachers, this 'teaching' was performed by teachers acting as role models and setting a good example, especially with regard to how to talk, eat and act in the school restaurant. The 'teaching', including the overall social interaction with the pupils, was said to vary, often depending on which grade the teacher taught.

School lunch – a challenging activity

The most prominent theme in this study concerned the relationship and the tensions between intentions and the teacher's daily reality. This was often crucial to the way that teachers perceived and made sense of the school lunch situation. Teachers' depictions of different obstacles for an ideal school lunch were omnipresent in the data and it was clear that they often found the school lunch challenging. Prevailing conditions were one underlying cause of the challenging situation. Teachers mentioned several factors such as time, the food served, payment and the overall working environment, as well as teachers' rights and needs as employees. There was a feeling of injustice and that they were not always being handed the right prerequisites to deal with the challenges, as well as that the prevailing conditions contributed to unreasonable expectations.

One major issue was combining working hours with the teacher's own lunch break. It was often written that if school lunch were considered pedagogical work, it should be counted as working time (i.e. paid hours) and that the food should be free of charge. This did not always seem to be the case for teachers participating in this study. It was seen as unfair that a teacher has to pay for lunch and work at the same time. One teacher explained that these were some of the reasons why he/she chose not to eat with the pupils:

I choose to eat my own meal after the school lunch because it is too stressful to observe and discipline 22 pupils and to eat at the same time, in a noisy and unpleasant environment. If the food was free of charge and hygienically managed, and if the eating environment was calmer, more adults would eat in the school restaurant.

Here is another example, where a teacher expressed a positive attitude towards eating with the pupils and including the school lunch as an educational activity:

If we are allowed to eat the food free of charge, at a reasonable lunchtime, i.e. not at 10.30 as we do now(!). If the room is furnished and big enough to result in a pleasant and quiet eating environment where we are not to be disturbed by sounds from the kitchen and screams. Right now, this is not how it is where I work, but I really feel that´s how it should be.

One of the more central issues revolved around time: the actual time that the lunch takes place, time to eat and chat with the pupils and still have time to do other teacher-

related activities. Many teachers mentioned having too little time, feeling time-pressured and stressed:

> To be able to eat in the school canteen, a longer lunch break for the teachers is required. With the increased teaching time and shorter lunch breaks, it is difficult for the teachers to have time to eat at all some days, and you don't always have the time to go to the school canteen.

The stress was also said to have an impact on teachers acting as role models, especially in terms of what they eat, how much and how long they took to eat. Indeed, one of the challenges mentioned involved the food and the meal. Some had a more child-oriented perspective, while others focused more on their own needs and preferences. The analysis revealed tensions between teachers' constructions of a 'good' meal and the school lunch that was served. Some reported that they do not always like the food served, which made it harder for them to act according to the policy intentions, e.g. setting an example by eating and acting 'properly'. Perceiving the food available as deficient made it problematic for use in pedagogical means. A 'good' meal was often discussed in terms of quality. The quality aspects mentioned concerned organic and environment-friendly food, nutritional standards, hygiene, origins and transportation, as well as where and how the food was cooked and served/presented. Others expressed positive feelings about the food served:

> We get versatile well composed meals that are really well flavored with the possibility to choose different kinds of food and with varied vegetables in different kinds of salads prepared in different ways. I am glad that we have school meals in Sweden! It is reflected in the classroom if the pupils have eaten and feel well! This applies also for the teachers!

However, negative descriptions of the food were more predominant. One teacher illustrated the tension between his or her own beliefs and the lack of control over the food served with the following comment:

> I stopped eating in the school restaurant about one year ago. I want to know the content of the food I eat, whether it's organic, etc. I want a much higher quality of food than is currently served … poor nutritional value, unimaginative, colorless, etc. (How about instant mash potato with fish cakes?) Frozen ready-made pancakes from Poland?? Yes. :(.

Another prominent feature of their comments was the overall environment in the school restaurant, and the noise level in particular. School restaurants were typically described as rather noisy and chatty places and it was commonly reported that neither the teachers, nor the pupils, could eat school lunch in peace and quiet. This was a cause of interactional difficulties. Pupils were seen as one of the causes of the noisy environment, together with the challenging logistics of school lunch i.e. the many people eating at once and the different noises in the school restaurant, such as the clatter of chairs, plates and so on – noises that encouraged louder talking in order to be heard. The noise level was stated as a reason why they did not always consider the school restaurant an ideal place for socialising, for pedagogical purposes or for teachers' own recreational needs. One school, for example, had introduced a radical solution to the problem:

> Our students, and we, are not allowed to talk at all during the meal; it is the only way to keep down the noise level.

Pupil behaviour was often mentioned and some argued that although they saw learning opportunities with school lunch, it often ended up with teachers having to reprimand pupils for their behaviour in the school restaurant. In these cases, teachers described themselves as more like a guard than a role model. Staff behaviour and treatment were also mentioned, and this included school meal personnel. They were seen as important for the overall meal environment, first and foremost when it came to relationships and being a role model in, for example, how to speak with and treat pupils.

Discussion

Teachers in this study saw many positive features of school lunch and wrote that they, on a daily basis, intended to make use of this potential. However, it was clear that the teachers perceived the daily practicalities of school lunch challenging, where issues such as time, costs, payments, the working and eating environment, and the food itself, were specifically highlighted. These were often seen as a hindrance to the ideal of school lunch, namely for building relationships, for pedagogical objectives, conversing and sharing a meal in a pleasant environment. It was clear that the challenges of daily practice contributed to their general perceptions of school lunch and were a reason why some teachers had their doubts and showed resistance to the policy's intentions and expectations.

One of the features seen as an obstacle to making school lunch pleasant and educative was the overall meal environment. Noise levels and issues related to time were particularly emphasised by teachers. This had an impact on overall wellbeing in the school restaurant, teachers' working conditions and the possibilities of practising the different meanings of school lunch. Noise levels were associated with the complex logistics of having many different classes and pupils in the school restaurant at the same time and created an obstacle for other social interactions. One school had introduced a solution where talking was not allowed at all during the lunch-time. This contradicts general views about school lunch as a meeting place for social interaction, something that the teachers noted was highly valued. This also contradicts the pupils' social agenda during school (Berggren et al., 2019; Bruselius-Jensen, 2014; Janhonen, Mäkelä, & Palojoki, 2016). It has also been noted that time and noise related issues negatively impact on pupils' experiences of school lunch (Berggren et al., 2019; Tørslev, Nørredam, & Vitus, 2017). Our interpretation of teachers' comments is that school lunch is, in many cases, a time-pressured experience. The main issue mentioned by teachers was the tension between working hours, lunch inclusion in the teacher's duties, and the need for a break. When work time was mentioned it was often highlighted in relation to payment and costs. As reported earlier, by Waling and Olsson (2017), some teachers in Sweden partially or fully pay for the lunch eaten together with the pupils, and it was clear that this caused frustration for many of them. The present study highlights how overall conditions, such as time and noise-related issues, affect the practical possibilities of successfully meeting policy aspirations for school lunches. Time constraints have previously been identified as a barrier, both in terms of lunch uptake and the experiences of those involved (Lalli, 2020a): structural factors and poorly designed restaurants were of significance.

This study gives valuable insights into the way that overall school conditions, for the teacher and for the everyday practice of the pedagogical meal, impact the way teachers perceive their role during lunch: what kind of role they take on and why. Teacher perceptions of their own role during school lunches varied from being a meal companion, a role model, a restaurant guest and/or a guard. Some of the roles and approaches that teachers took on were in accordance with the guidelines (NFA, 2019) e.g. being a role model, and where school lunch was viewed as a time to talk with the children, i.e. *the dialogue position* (Andersen et al., 2017). Others seemed to be related to the circumstances of the school meal situation e.g. maintaining order, which gives some explanation as to why *the discipline position* (Andersen et al., 2017) is, in some cases, central to the teacher's role during school lunch. Daily practice sometimes caused problematic situations for teachers who had to find a balance and make compromises between being a role model and a restaurant guest with personal principles and preferences. All three teacher roles observed by Persson Osowski et al. (2013) – namely, the sociable, evasive and the educating teacher – were more or less visible through teacher comments in this study. The present analysis gives some explanation as to why teachers take on, for example, a more evasive role. It has previously been noted that teachers have some ambivalence about how food and meals should be integrated into their daily work and that teachers may feel that the meal exceeds their pedagogical duties, in some cases refraining from talking to pupils during school lunch (Persson Osowski et al., 2013; Sepp et al., 2006). Likewise, these were noted in the present study and we are able to provide some clarifications of the reasons behind teacher perceptions and actions. Participating teachers indicated that being a role model was an aspiration and a natural part of the teacher's job. However, the overall conditions at school and the practical reality of working in that context sometimes conflicted with the teacher's basic pedagogical position. For example, conversations around the food and the meal were described as central for both the formal and informal purposes of school. On the other hand, tensions between the stated opportunities that the food and the meal offered and the teacher's own preferences, beliefs and eating habits were present. For example, the food available (which in some cases was perceived as unhealthy and of low quality by teachers) caused an inner conflict for the teacher's role during lunch. The present study suggests that teachers' perceptions of school lunch may be influenced by their concept of a 'proper meal'. This was also seen when studying children´s views on school lunch (Berggren et al., 2017). In our study, it was clear that not being able to choose what to eat and when could constitute a challenge for teachers, especially with regard to being an authentic role model. Although teachers' comments were not analysed by what grade they taught, their comments indicated that perceptions of school lunch and their own role in some cases varied between grades. Waling and Olsson (2017) showed that it was more common among teachers of younger grades to view school lunch as part of the educational activities at school. Similarly, it was seen in the study by Persson Osowski and colleagues that it was more common for teachers to act passively among older pupils (Persson Osowski et al., 2013). Building on the study by Osowski and the notion of pedagogical meals, Lalli (2020b) outlines the school lunch and the pedagogical meal as a formal type of teaching event. Indeed, the pedagogical meal could be seen as part of the pupils' formal education as it takes place in the context of school; it could also be argued that the policy documents concerning school lunch in Sweden advocates formal learning. However, as

with the results from this present study, there is a significant difference between policy intentions and what the school lunch and the pedagogical meal actually become in daily practice.

Although there were different views on *whether* and *how* school lunch was perceived as a pedagogical activity, we could see that, in general, there was consensus on how teachers made sense of and perceived the intentions and potential of school lunch. First, teachers in this study focused on the actual time and place of the meal, something that is emphasised in the policies (NFA, 2019): for example, conversing with the pupils and getting to know them better in an informal setting. Naturally, policy intentions were present in the teachers' comments, and had significance for how they perceived school lunch. However, the main result was, rather, their scepticism about achieving this in the existing conditions. Although it is likely that unfavourable conditions contributed to the way they perceived policy intentions, our interpretation is that the teachers were not *per se* opposed to them. Comments illustrated a lack of understanding among 'others' (policy makers, wider society, school principals) about what is possible to achieve during school lunch. Teachers' perceptions of school lunch could be seen as a construction and a compromise between policy intentions (i.e. the conceived space of school lunch) and the prevailing structural conditions. In research (see e.g. Benn & Carlsson, 2014; Daniel & Gustafsson, 2010) and in Swedish public discourse, it has been suggested that the pedagogical school meal could take away what little is left of 'free time' for the pupils at school. The present study demonstrates that other school actors, such as teachers, also need to be considered in this discussion. Debating the meanings of school lunch, and the role of the teachers, is also important at a societal level. Since pupils spend a significant amount of time at school and eat daily meals there over several years, school lunch is significant for pupil health and well-being. Moreover, it is a context where teachers play or can play a central role. Teachers are role models who can promote healthy eating and help pupils convert knowledge into everyday practice. Also, many teachers in Sweden eat a fully or partly subsidised school lunch (Waling & Olsson, 2017). It is important to address the challenges highlighted by teachers in the present study since the meal environment – temporal, social, physical factors – can restrict lunchtime staff from, for example, encouraging healthy eating (Moore, Murphy, Tapper, & Moore, 2010; Pike & Colquhoun, 2009). More generally, they influence social relations, the overall eating experience and undermine the implementation of well-intentioned policies.

Methodological considerations

It was clear that the questions in the questionnaire before the open-ended question used in this study had an effect on, and provoked, participant comments. Some of the meal intentions and potential stated by the teachers originated from previous questions and answers in the questionnaire (Waling & Olsson, 2017), while others were expanding their thoughts on the wider potential of school lunch. This examination of the 'further comments' data proved invaluable, since it revealed depictions of teacher experience outside the scope of the questionnaire (Waling & Olsson, 2017) and highlighted the circumstances of school lunch provision. Further, this study shows how an optional open-ended question in a quantitative questionnaire can contribute with rich qualitative data. Although some comments were short and fragmentary, the question

gave rise to comments from more than 800 teachers eager to express their opinions. Despite the rich data provided in these comments, in-depth interviews and observations would most likely have given us even deeper insights about teachers' perceptions of school lunch.

Concluding remarks

This study contributes with knowledge of how Swedish teachers perceive and make sense of the social and pedagogic space of school lunch in terms of policy intentions and the daily practice. It derives from the context of school lunch in Sweden, where the pedagogical meal is a well-established phenomenon and where the teacher has a central role. Results from this study indicate that there are underlying intentions and expectations on teachers that are not explicitly communicated in the policy documents. It is clear that some of the teachers' actions during school lunch were based on their own perceptions and the overall circumstances, rather than on explicit policy documents. This study visualises the conflict between ideal and reality: that teacher perceptions of school lunch intentions and expectations require conditions that do not always exist. Exploring teachers' perceptions of school lunch in the present study serves to increase awareness and understanding about the possibilities and obstacles facing teachers. This is something that decision makers (from school leaders to politicians) on a national, as well as on an international level, should address and learn from. It is clear that the logistics of school lunch, the meal environment and overall conditions for a pleasant school lunch need to be given more attention when making policies and planning school lunch (in particular scheduling, meal environment, costs and the teacher's role). This is important not only from the perspective of the teacher, but also for pupil wellbeing.

ORCID

C. Olsson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3731-6565
M. Rönnlund http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5308-7002
M. Waling http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9743-8567

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