What Would Be the Best School Meal If You Were to Decide? Pupils' Perceptions on What Constitutes a Good School Meal

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Abstract. Much attention is given to school meals as a way to prevent childhood obesity. This article is concerned with a perspective that is often lost in the present debate, namely the perspective of pupils on what constitutes a good meal. The article draws on the findings of an action research process in a Danish public school and presents the perspectives of a group of eighth-grade pupils, with the aim of voicing their opinions and positioning them as co-constructors of school meals. Inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre and literature on the sociology of childhood and meals, the article demonstrates how pupils' perspectives on what constitutes a good school meal are concerned with much more than food and are only associated weakly with healthy nutrition. Pupils perceive school meals as a means of being social and as a break from the order of school life. They are concerned with the construction of meal spaces and with the sensuous experience of eating. Subsequently, it is argued that there are both epistemological and ethical arguments for including pupils' perspectives in research on school meals. Furthermore, including pupils' preferences in the planning of school meals might eventually build school meals in which pupils enjoy to participate and are therefore more likely to be health promoting.

Introduction

School meals are high on the agenda in several Western countries. This interest is primarily fostered by the increase in the prevalence of obese and overweight children. Healthy school meals and increased physical activity during school hours have been widely identified as focal in the effort to fight growing obesity rates (WHO, 2009). Subsequently, numerous initiatives have been launched to promote healthy school meals (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008; de Silva-Sanigorski et al., 2011). The fact that this recent attention on school meals is driven by a political desire to reduce obesity strongly affects discourses defining school meals. Karresbæk (2012) demonstrates

how meals, despite their often informal role, are a prominent part of the general socialization taking place in school, and Burke (2006) even describes how school meals become a central part of 'surviving' school life. Through a historical perspective on school meals, Burke (2006) furthermore underlines how, affected by scarcity or abundance, discourses on 'the good school meal' change and, thus, so do the socializing dynamics of the school meal. James et al. (2009) state that the contemporary focus on health-related food issues has made risk a prominent feature in young people's relations to food.

In Denmark, the effort to introduce provision of healthy school meals has been predominantly a top-down reform argued according to a narrow biomedical and instrumental perception of meals as nutrition to prevent obesity and promote learning readiness. Subsequently, this change has been mostly structural, defined by municipalities and, to some extent, teachers. Generally, pupils have not been consulted or involved and only few changes have been made to school spaces and structure. However, findings show that only few Danish pupils are using the new meal provision. A study of meal schemes in the municipality of Copenhagen has shown that as few as 7% of the pupils took advantage of the new meal options (Høyrup and Nielsen, 2010). This indicates that efforts to promote healthy eating through the introduction of the provision of school meals have not had the desired effect. A study of pupils' perceptions of different types of school meal systems indicates that if pupils are more involved in the daily production of the food as well as the organization of the meal, they become more inclined to eat the healthy food options (Bruselius-Jensen, 2007). This indicates a need to pay attention to pupils' preferences when planning school meals.

However, meal studies are rarely concerned with the perspectives of the users. By far the majority of food studies comprises studies on nutritional aspects, with research on dietary habits, the effects of different diets, and how to promote healthy diets. Nevertheless, there is a rich tradition in social science studies on human relations to food that stresses that the function of food is far more than nourishment. In anthropological studies, with Douglas (2002) being the most prominent scholar, studies of food and meal culture are a central point for gaining insight into foreign cultures. Sociologists have illustrated how taste is socially produced (Gronow, 1997) and strongly tied to social class (Bourdieu, 2010). As one grows up, eating practices are shaped in interaction with others (Lupton, 1996). James et al. (2009) state that even though much is written about the sociology of eating, not much scientific work deals with children's relation to food and much of this literature focuses only on historical aspects. Furthermore, the focus is predominantly on family meals, even though in contemporary society a large proportion of meals are eaten in public settings. James et al. (2009) stress the absence of research on young people's own experiences with food and eating. A few studies are concerned with both school meals and the pupil's perspective. For example, Valentine (2000) studied differences in pupils' agency over food choices at home and at school, Pike (2008) has drawn on the writings of Foucault to examine how the notion of governmentality and power of space played out in the school meal dining hall, and Dryden et al. (2009) interviewed children about the significance of meal boxes.

The lack of research in food studies considering the perspective of young people becomes even more conspicuous by the fact that, both in research and in politics, young people are increasingly constructed as capable individuals who actively participate in shaping their own life and surroundings. James et al. (1998) challenged

the view on children from developmental psychology and stated that children are not only 'becomings' needing to be shaped by adults to become functioning human beings; they are 'beings' who actively participate and shape their surroundings. A change in policy was implemented in an update of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) by the addition of a clause stating children's right to be consulted on matters that concern their everyday lives. Two decades later, the discussion on how best to explore, determine, represent, and reproduce young people's perspectives and voices in research methodologies is still central to youth research (Fielding, 2001; Clark, 2010). According to Warming (2007), arguments for participatory methodologies are twofold: ethical, in that young people have the right to be heard; and epistemological, in that young people's perspectives represent new knowledge that strengthens the theoretical insights and authenticity of youth research.

Recognizing the notion of young people as competent actors and co-producers of their everyday lives, as well as the contingent and political nature of contemporary discourses of the good school meal as healthy nutrition, this article argues the importance of giving a voice to pupils on what constitutes a good meal experience from their perspective. Based on the findings from an action research project, this article presents the perspectives of a group of pupils on what constitutes a good school meal. The general implications of introducing pupils' perspectives into the future planning of school meal schemes are discussed subsequently.

Methodology

Background

This study is part of a larger project on how the provision of school meals and especially dining environments should be developed to appeal to pupils (Bruselius-Jensen, 2011). The Danish Innovation Fund partly financed this project with the general aim of developing more sustainable meal systems in Danish primary schools. The project was based on two schools and involved second, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. The study approach was participatory research and aimed to address the following questions: What would be the best school meal if you were to decide? What would you eat, with whom, where, and how? This article will only present findings from work with a group of eighth-grade pupils from one of the schools. The group consisted of a total of 20 pupils, seven girls and 13 boys, aged between 13 and 15, all of ethnic backgrounds other than Danish, namely, Middle Eastern, Balkan, and Asian.

The public school under study is situated in the city of Copenhagen in a socio-economically deprived area. A total of 98% of the pupils attending the school have an ethnic background other than Danish and most live with poor and low-educated parents. The new dining hall and meal provision represented a way to mend the somewhat frayed image of the school. At the time of the study, the school was in the initial stages of restructuring its meal services. The school wished to engage the perspectives of the pupils in the restructuring process and engage the researcher to support that process.

Danish school lunches are traditionally based on packed lunches brought from home and eaten in the classroom. However, during the time of the study, many Danish municipalities introduced some kind of meal provision with the aim of promot-

ing healthier food intake. In the school in question, introduction to meal provision implied a radical change in the whole school setting. The school had been granted money to establish both a dining hall and a production kitchen, with requirements for pupils to participate in meal preparation. When the new scheme was established, pupils participated in preparing food as part of home economics lessons. The lunch hour was prolonged, since pupils had to eat in two shifts due to limited seating in the new dining room. Teachers were obliged to eat lunch with the pupils instead of in the staff room. Finally, the new dining room formed a less formal space in the school setting where teachers and pupils could meet, with different rules and structures than those comprised in and by the classroom setting. Prior to the new meal setup, the school had an external meal provider selling lunches, either on the Web or from a booth at the school.

Action Research and Pupil Participation

The study was designed as an action research process that involved pupils in both defining their preferences in the new meal set-up and, preferably, to implement their ideas. Action research seeks to combine the development of scientific insights with social change processes in close interaction with lay people (Kemnis and McTaggert, 2000) and aims to produce knowledge that applies to real-life problems. Action research provides opportunities for lay people to bring forth their perspectives and knowledge and to act as genuine participants in matters that affect their everyday lives. Thereby, action research seeks to empower the people involved (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006). The overall aim of the methods applied has been to enable pupils to form and express their perspectives on what constitutes a good school meal experience. It was repeatedly communicated to the pupils that the aim was for them to voice their ideas and preferences. The researcher was positioned as a helper rather than a regulator and controller. Subsequently, the working atmosphere was, when successful, playful and imaginative.

Contemporary childhood research has been especially sensitive about developing methods that allow pupils to express themselves. This has led to the introduction of using, for example, drawings, photographs and acting as methodological approaches (Thomson, 2008). However, recent work highlights the importance of allowing pupils to shape the working methods in participatory research processes (Percy-Smith, 2007; Warming, 2007), thus making it feasible to adjust to the interests and modes of expression of the pupils. Based on those assumptions, the methods aimed to be inclusive towards the pupils' way of expressing themselves and their way of participating. Following the aim of action research (Heron, 1971) to conduct research *with* and not *on* pupils, the applied methods were developed in dialogue with the pupils.

Project Design

The action research with the eighth-grade pupils was developed throughout a year. We met and worked together on 15 occasions during the year, sometimes for just a few hours and sometimes working together the whole day. Pupils were made aware of the fact that the teachers wanted the pupils to be part of the development of the new school meals.

The process evolved in four phases. The first phase consisted of a workshop aimed at supporting the pupils in generating a vision of their future school meal procurement and dining environment. The workshop was based on the methodology of the 'future creating workshop' (Jungk and Müllert, 1990; Nielsen et al., 1999). First, pupils collectively voiced their criticism of the present school meals, reflecting on the following questions: What are you most unsatisfied with regarding the present state of your school meals? What would you eat, with whom, where, and how? Second, mirroring criticisms, pupils defined their visions of good school meals, reflecting on the following questions: If anything were possible, what would be the best school meal if you were to decide? What would you eat, with whom, where, and how? The pupils expressed themselves through cues and all the cues were written on the blackboard. Through a collective process, the visions were categorized into themes and the pupils chose which theme they wanted to develop. Last, the thematic groups made a drawing of how their vision could be materialized. The data from this phase consisted of the written cues and the drawings by the thematic groups.

The second phase consisted of locally based experiments aiming to build experience and adjust the pupils' visions accordingly. During the group talks, a set of actions was decided upon by each group in response to the question of what they could do to carry out their visions. In the second phase, these actions were carried out as social experiments in the school setting. Data from this phase consisted of interviews with each of the thematic groups about their experiments, as well as notes taken during the process.

As a third phase, two visits to schools with meal schemes, a Danish school and a Swedish school,1 were arranged. The aim was to widen the horizon of the pupils as to how school meals could be organized. The pupils worked in the groups defined during the first phase. A structure based on observations of sensuous experiences was defined for the pupils to use to systemize their experiences. The groups had the following tasks: to observe smells, documented by taking notes; to observe sound, documented by sound recordings; to observe tastes, documented by taking notes; and to observe visual appearance, documented by photographs. These impressions were presented and discussed during two class-based meetings used to further develop the visions of good school meals. The focus questions were as follows: What did we like and what was not good in the two school meals schemes? And can our ideas be strengthened by our new perspectives? Data from this phase consisted of primary data produced by the pupils during the field visits, as well as the class discussions, with data in the form of written cues.

The fourth phase aimed to implement elements of the visions in the new school meal system and to evaluate the school meal scheme. When the meal set-up had been implemented for two months, three observations were made during lunch hours, with one month in between. Observations were based on sound recordings, written notes, and pupils' photographs of meals.

Data Analysis

The action research process and the data produced were analysed to produce more generalized insights into young people's meal preferences and the possibilities and constraints associated with introducing pupils' preferences as a strong input in the development of school meal services. While action research has a strong focus on empowering local participants, as research methodology, it also has special episte-

mological qualities. Kurt Lewin (1946) coined the term *action research* and stated that, to gain knowledge about social organizations, one must try to change them. Kemnis and McTaggert (2000) extend this tradition to youth research, claiming that youth perspectives represent new knowledge to which adults could not otherwise gain access. Grover (2004) argues that participatory methods produce more 'authentic' knowledge about young people's subjective realities. Subsequently, the participating pupils local and specific perspectives on school meals simultaneously represent and mirror overriding social dynamics, in this case discourses of good meals and young people's responses to these within the school context. Following the terms of Gustavsen (2003), the study contains both local and praxis-based knowledge as well as generalized and theoretical knowledge.

To capture both local knowledge and the generalized perspective, the process was written both as a narrative of the process and the pupils' perspectives and as a theory-informed general social science approach on pupil's perspectives on school meals (Bruselius-Jensen, 2011). Fine et al. (2000) points out that qualitative research must avoid 'othering' in the form of writing scientific texts in ways that do not represent the authentic voices of young people. Therefore, both practice-based and theory-informed readings are presented in the findings.

The narrative is based on primary data from the pupils (e.g. cues from workshops, interviews, drawings, photographs, postcards) and notes from the researcher's diary. The narrative was written in an ongoing dialogue with the pupils.

Four months after the process ended, the researcher carried out a theory-informed reading of the narrative. First, the data were systematized according to the concurrence of the perspectives. Second, these first themes were studied in relation to sociological theory to extrapolate more general perspectives from locally embedded children's perspectives. Due to the strong notion of space in the perceptions and visions defined by the pupils, the analytical lines were primarily influenced by the works of the French philosopher, sociologist, and urban theorist Henri Lefebvre (1991, 2002) and his triad of the social production of space, as well as his focus on everyday life. Furthermore, literature on the sociology of childhood was applied in the analysis. An analytical framework was used to define the central themes and to discuss how these themes inform more generally about pupils' participation and about school meals as societal structure and discourse.

Study Ethics

Prior to the project, the parents of the pupils granted their informed consent. Based on the consideration of not doing harm, participation in the project was voluntary for the pupils. Even though the project took place in the school setting, where participation is obligatory, the researcher deemed it crucial for the democratic values of the project to give pupils the option to not participate in project activities. Two pupils chose not to participate in the second phase of the project and thus spent their time in the school library instead. They rejoined the project in the third phase. As noted above, allowing the pupils to affect the themes and working methods and recognizing their opinions were a central concern. Furthermore, all the data (photographs, drawings, workshop notes) were uploaded onto a shared class web page and pupils were urged to express if they did not want parts of the data to be used in the analysis. Furthermore, pupils were the first interpreters of all the visual material and all the scientific analysis was presented for the pupils and its validity discussed.

Findings

Producing Visions of Good School Meals

The criticisms expressed on the existing school lunches during the first phase of the initial workshop focused on the bad taste and smell, the prices and availability of the food sold by the existing external food service, and on the school environment. Additionally, some cues referred to ethnicity, such as the Danish climate, the poor quality of the vegetables, and general ethnic minorities' discrimination at the school. Visions of a good school meal 'if anything were possible' produced a wide range of cues in a playful atmosphere. The cues generally related to food items and dishes; material objects such as TV screens, music centres, and couches; and social organization, such as 'pupils decide the rules', 'free access to the dining hall', and 'a set-up like in high school'. Four thematic groups were formed based on the visionary cues.

The first thematic group was formed based on written cues about gaining more influence on the school space and opposing the interference of teachers. This vision was defined by a group of boys who named themselves the Security Group. It dealt with having access and the keys to the different rooms in the school, hence the group's name. The pupils wanted their own key and envisioned themselves as the ones in charge during school breaks. The vision was related to the whole school environment, since the school had a policy of locking all the doors and making the pupils wait outside. The pupils stated, 'We are fed up with spending so much time waiting for the teachers to unlock the doors'.

The second thematic group focused on developing a space at school for girls to eat their lunch. All the girls in the class formed a group to work with this vision and named themselves the Girls Group. Their work was based on written cues about clean toilets, vending machines, and a girls club. The girls wanted to eat by themselves, with no boys. They said, 'We want a place where we can talk about boys'.

The third thematic group was formed based on written cues about food and eating. The main cue of the theme was 'free food' and the theme was generally about having access to preferred dishes. The group was interested in both the price of food and good food as such. A group of boys chose to work with this theme and called themselves the Grosh Group. *Grosh* refers to an Albanian dish that the boys especially liked and that is surrounded with some degree of mysticism, since the recipes are passed on through generations.

A fourth vision was defined, but no group chose to work with it. The theme was based on cues about the design of a good school cafeteria, such as flat screen TV's, computers, music, and leather sofas. The theme also concerned the organization of the meal. The pupils preferred to eat only with the older pupils and were very inspired by the meal environments presented in American TV series. Most of these issues were incorporated into the work of the other groups.

In the second phase, all the groups decided on an action they wanted try to test their visions. During a period of two months, the groups developed their ideas and conducted small practical experiments during school hours. The Girls Group had lunches in a separate location to see how girls-only lunches worked. The Security Group experimented with having their own key to the classroom. Both the girl's lunches and the key management were short-lived experiments. The teachers were not in favour of the girls separating themselves from the boys and the boys did not manage the key very well and had too many quarrels with the other pupils. The Grosh Group managed to serve *grosh* for the whole school, and generally the group

was often engaged in activities in the kitchen during the project period. In this period, the visions did not change much, despite the new experiences and difficulties associated with making changes to the school setting. Finally, the class held a school party, initiated by the teachers, for which they decorated, cooked, served, and ate good food, listened to music during the meal, and participated in a range of other activities, all intended to implement their meal preferences.

In the third phase, two school visits were undertaken that were greatly enjoyed by the pupils and made them clearer and more realistic in the kinds of meals they wanted. In concluding the visits, the pupils each wrote a postcard stating the best features of the two meal schemes and ideas for their own cafeteria. One pupil wrote:

> 'I liked the buffet and that the food was richly seasoned and salted. It is important to have good teamwork in the cafeteria and I prefer to eat without noise. People need to be quiet!' (eighth-grade girl, age 14).

Another pupil wrote:

> 'I like the cafeteria to be clean. I think the system for dishes worked very well [in the school we visited]. I would like our school to smell of good food, so that you're attracted by the smell and you get the feeling that this is a good cafeteria. I want nice soft seating' (eighth-grade boy, age 13).

These quotes demonstrate that the visits helped the pupils become more aware of the importance of good food, most underlined by the importance of the smell of good food. The pupils also acquired new insight into what school meals could be like. This meant that the focus on American high-school meal systems,2 as well as the focus on material objects, diminished.

During the process, the perspectives of the pupils were communicated to the group responsible for the new cafeteria. This group was keen on incorporating the visions of the pupils. However, mostly these did not fit well with the plans for the meal scheme. It was especially difficult to influence the material structure of the dining hall. Even though the material design was central to the pupils' visions, their only mark on the dining hall design was the installation of two sofas and a high table with bar stools. However, during the observations of the new school meal, it was apparent that the pupils were able to make their own spaces for meals. They started the meals by greeting each other loudly, gathering in groups in their regular places and marking their spots with jackets. The girls would sometimes gather in the Girls Group, but now they also seemed to like to sit with boys. Their wish for a buffet was granted, with a buffet every Friday. However, the food still did not seem to have much focus. Social meetings while having lunch and being out of the classroom in a less predefined space seemed to take place even on days the pupils did not like the food. Even though the pupils' influence on the actual meal scheme may seem minimal, they expressed a general feeling that it was 'their' dining hall. Furthermore, before the new meal set-up only 5–10% of the pupils took advantage of the meal provision offered. During the first year with the new set-up, 90% of the pupils in the school participated in lunch, despite the fact that they had to pay a monthly fee to participate. Participation was equally divided among age groups.

Three Central Themes

The theory-informed reading of the data produced condensed themes of a more generalized character. Three themes appeared most prominently in the perspectives

of the pupils: the social meal, the spatial meal, and the sensuous meal. These themes are presented in the following sections.

The Social School Meal

> 'Really, the most important thing about having school meals is to have a good time with friends and not having a grown-up buzzing you around' (eighth-grade boy, age 14).

The most prominent theme that emerged from the fieldwork was the importance of social meetings during the meal. This theme was omnipresent and remained relatively unchanged and unchallenged throughout the project.

The data material contains many examples of the importance of social meetings. All of the four visions had central elements related to social meetings. Obviously, the vision of the Girls Group basically concerned the possible social meeting of girls while having meals. Social meetings were also present in the Grosh Group, since the social act of serving a good meal for others to enjoy was a central drive for the boys in this group. In the vision of a good cafeteria space, being seated together in groups as well as standing together in line waiting for food were defined as being social. Another example is the pupils' desire to meet another class and have a meal with them during their field visits instead of merrily observing the meals. Finally, the importance of social meetings during meals was clearly demonstrated during observations of the established meal scheme in the fourth phase of the project.

The observations demonstrate how the pupils seemed to 're-meet' each other when entering the dining hall. Even though they had just been in class together, they still carried out a regular greeting: they shook hands, smiled, and hugged each other and gathered in groups and found common seating for lunch. This practice was maintained during all three observations, despite the decreasing novelty of the cafeteria. This indicates that social relationships during meals differ from the ones in class. During the fieldwork, the pupils expressed that social meetings were much more distinct in the new dining room compared to previously having lunch in the classroom. This, according to the pupils, greatly improved the lunches in the new dining room.

Observations also demonstrated that the Girls Group was the group that best succeeded at implementing their vision within the new meal scheme by making the 'girls lunch' an everyday reality within the confines of the new school meal scheme. The girls simply reserved a table, which the teachers let them do, and it soon became an unspoken rule that this was the girls table. Therefore, the girls managed to establish something that resembled their vision of a girls lunch, even though it had to be within the shared space of the dining hall. However, some days the girls would choose to sit with boys.

On the one hand, while pupils emphasized the importance of the social meeting, they did not just wish to be social. The interest of the girls group displayed a drive to have a social meeting in a purely female group, thereby distancing themselves from the boys. The girls longed to be alone to discuss 'girls matters'. They also found the younger pupils too noisy and longed to have more space of their own. In school, the pupils are forced to be together in large groups, within classes and within the entire school population. The pupils in the study expressed a wish to choose with whom to share their meals. They wished for the lunch break to be defined more like leisure time, by allowing them to choose more freely who to be with during lunch hours.

While the girls had a strong priority to dine in a strictly female group, they still had an interest in the other groups. While dining in their girls group, they would talk about the other girls and especially about the boys and sometimes the groups would make comments to each other across the cafeteria. The boys did not show the same interest in being separated from the girls. On the contrary, they were very interested in being with them. This became especially evident during our visit to the Swedish school. At our first appearance at the school, the Swedish girls clapped and cheered as we walked through the school entrance. Subsequently, during lunch, the boys took dozens of photographs of the Swedish girls and one particularly courageous boy managed to get the phone numbers of some particularly attractive girls. So, obviously, the lunch also facilitates meetings across social groups.

Meetings across groups also took place between pupils and teachers. During the fieldwork, the pupils stated that the relations with the adults were strained. While the younger pupils appreciated the presence of popular adults, the older pupils sought to have meals without the presence of adults or, more precisely, meals without adult rules and restrictions, and that would make pupils feel welcome. However, on several occasions, I observed the pupils having pleasant informal chats with the teachers during lunch in the new meal scheme.

The social importance of meals is far from a new theme in social studies about meals. Anthropologists, philosophers, and sociologists have often described meals as a central activity in the organization of daily life, as well as in the formation and demonstration of cultural values. Holm (2005) notes how shared meals mark a recognition of the family as a unit. This could indicate that the social meetings of the school meal signify a similar formation of a unit of pupils.

In their drawings, photographs, and practices, the pupils continuously demonstrated that meals are social and that the meal's perceived quality is closely related to the feasibility of establishing social meetings. However, the theme was also multidimensional. The pupils involved in this study were just becoming teenagers, so the social meeting was also about gender and reshaping identity. Furthermore, the social theme involved self-identification with certain groups and not others. From the pupils' perspectives, informal meetings with friends during meals are a crucial part of what constitutes a good meal experience at school. A good meal was associated with an informal space at school where pupils can meet, without being pupils, simply because they like one another.

The Spatial School Meal

> 'Sitting on a sofa is like being home. So having a good meal also means sitting on a sofa' (eighth-grade girl, age 13, during the Future Creating Workshop).

A strong theme concerning the importance of the meal space and school space as such was also present in the pupils' perspectives. Pupils criticized how the school space felt restrictive and controlling and a large proportion of their visions involved restructuring school spaces to accommodate their interests. Three out of the four visions of good school meals centred on issues concerned with access to and dominance of school space. In the visions of both the Security Group and the Girls Group, the material dimensions of the school spaces were crucial. Pupils envisioned a cafeteria with widescreen TVs, computers, music, and, most importantly, leather sofas

and focused on the organization of the meal. They preferred to eat solely with the older pupils and were very inspired by the meal environments presented in American TV series and films about high-school life.

The focus on the spatiality of the school meal developed throughout the project. As indicated in the findings, the theme was mostly mentioned as a criticism in the initial phases. The pupils would criticize how the school space and schedule worked to structure life at school. According to Lefebvre (1991), space is socially produced but simultaneously also produces social life. The criticism of the pupils presented the school space as having been produced by adult agendas and as structuring the lives of pupils. Following this perspective, Wyness (2006, p. 234) writes, 'Thus while schools are quintessentially children's places, there is little sense of children owning these places or having any control over how they are organised, run or structured.' In light of this critique, the time spent in school meal spaces was mostly associated with regulation and control, which the pupils opposed. The work and visions of the Security Group are a strong example.

In a research project about school architecture, Gitz-Johansen et al. (2001) note how predefined all the rooms in a school seem to be and how difficult it is for the pupils to affect the codex of usage for the rooms. Along the same lines, referring to the research of Devine, Gallagher (2006, p. 173) writes: 'She solicited pupils' views on the way in which the school controlled their time and space, and found (not surprisingly) that many children resented their powerlessness and resented the lack of consultation in the process of planning classroom layouts, timetabling and rule making.'

However, during the course of the project, the pupils became more aware of what a good school meal could potentially be and they related this closely with how the school space was structured. The school meal space became associated with a space within school that was not structured or predefined by teachers' agendas. In this school meal vision, the space would also potentially provide a break from formal school life and the formal role of being a pupil. It would allow the pupils to engage in matters of interest, such as playing, meeting up with friends, relaxing (in comfortable furniture), having informal meetings with teachers, and being taken care of in terms of being provided good food.

The Sensuous School Meal

> 'I noticed that the smell of food makes you hungry. I never thought of how important the sensation of smell is when we eat. It is sort of an invitation' (eighth-grade boy, age 14, during a field visit to a neighbouring school).

During the progression of the project, a third theme with a focus on the meal's sensuous dimensions emerged. This was the only theme closely related to food and eating. In the initial phase, food and eating did not capture the attention expected in a project about school meals. In the workshops, food items were mostly mentioned as provocative negations of public dietary advice and listings of unhealthy food items. However, this focus on unhealthy food slowly disappeared as the ideas and perspectives took shape.

Then, for a while, the focus changed to meal environments and school life. At times, it seemed that food was not present in the visions at all. Following that assumption, the pupils could be assumed to have no interest in food, as long as the

social and material conditions were inviting. However, a new interest in food and eating slowly started to emerge. Instead of merrily resisting dietary advice, the pupils began to define a vision of meals at school as a rich, sensuous experience, a meal with inviting smells and tastes, a meal leading to good bodily sensations: an aesthetic meal. Karresbæk (2012) demonstrates how the value of food is often defined in dichotomies of good–bad and healthy–unhealthy in contemporary school meal situations. Subsequently, with the sensuous experience of eating, pupils' perspectives seemed to exceed the binary categories, adding new value to eating.

When defining this vision of the good school meal, the pupils would mainly define themselves as the ones being cared for through the meal, very much like the role they have at home, having the parents take care of them. Most pupils found it to be the role of adults to ensure that the pupils were served good meals. However, there were ambiguities in the theme, since the Grosh Group envisioned themselves as the ones preparing lovely meals and serving them to all the pupils. Thereby, they positioned themselves in what the other pupils expected to be an adult role. However, in all cases, food and eating were associated with pleasure, not with nutrition.

Discussion, Conclusions and Limitations

Both the process and the theory-informed readings of the findings demonstrate the pupils' perceptions of what constitutes a good school meal as holistic and everyday based or, as Lefebvre (2002) would express it, a *lived* perspective. The pupils' perspectives represents that of those who practice school meals in everyday life and is therefore of epistemological value as an everyday perspective and local knowledge. The findings clearly demonstrate that school meals constitute an important time and space at school. Meals indicate opportunities to be within the school community in a less structured manner. Social, spatial, and sensuous dimensions are central values in meals, which has already been richly demonstrated in social science meal research (James et al., 2009). This article's contribution to the literature shows the way in which the pupils expressed the importance of these notions in their visions and actions during the school meal. In this research, pupils' perspectives point to a need for a spatial school meal that can accommodate their interest in social and sensuous experiences. The pupils' perspective includes a great deal more than food and the way it affects the body. School meals are presented as a potential break from the official school day and the role of being a pupil, a fact that is not often expressed in either research or politics. Therefore, the findings underline the value of including pupils' perspectives in the planning of meal set-ups.

Warming (2007) introduces two arguments for youth participation in research and development: an *ethical* argument, in that young people have the right to be heard; and an *epistemological* argument, in that young people's perspectives represent new knowledge that strengthens the theoretical insights and authenticity of youth research.

The findings clearly demonstrate that the perspectives of pupils represent valuable epistemological knowledge. The perspectives of pupils of what constitutes a good school meal differ strongly from the political agenda on promoting healthy food intake. With their practice-related approach, the pupils bring forth the value of the social meeting, the spaces where we eat, and the sensuous experience of dining, core values that are often neglected in the top-down planning of institutional meals.

According to Borg et al. (2012), research should allow room for multiple voices and realities because of the open and contingent character of the social world.

Simultaneously, pupils' perspectives claim influence on their everyday school life and thereby emphasize the ethical importance of taking their preferences into account when planning school meals. The visions of a social, spatial, and sensuous meal not only inform about pupils' meal perceptions, but also demonstrate that pupils miss these features and lack the possibility to incorporate these factors in school meals. As demonstrated by Burke (2006), Pike (2008) and Karresbæk (2012), school meals are arenas for controlling the social meal situation and the discipline and regulation of eating habits. Subsequently, the pupils in this study responded towards school meals as a regulating practice. The distinction between children's services and children's spaces (Moss, 2006) presents a framework for interpreting these findings. According to Moss (2006, p. 186), children's services refer to 'primarily technical and disciplinary undertakings, concerned with regulation, surveillance and normalisation, and instrumental in rationality and purpose', while children's places refer to spaces 'for children's own agendas, although not precluding adult agendas, where children are understood as fellow citizens with rights, participating members of social groups'. This distinction is illustrative of the position of the pupils versus the top-down planning of health-promoting schools, and thus in conceptualizing school meals as a service to promote children's healthy food intake as opposed to an event in which children participate on a daily basis and that they shape through their presence.

Even though pupils' preferences for good school meals do not articulate nutrition and health as important functions of eating, this does not suggest that pupils' participation in developing school meals is incompatible with eating healthily. As mentioned, the introduction of the provision of school food in Denmark has not been as successful as expected. However, in this study, the new meal set-up was very successful, with 90% of the pupils participating. In this case, pupils' preferences for meals were compatible with teachers' requests for healthy meals and led to a popular meal set-up. Likewise, promoting healthy food intake is not merely an issue of feeding healthy food to the pupils. Jensen's (1997) notion of health promotion as the development of action competence stresses that long-term healthy lifestyles are built by engaging young people in defining visions for a healthy life and taking action to change health determinants. Subsequently, engaging pupils in the development of school meals may be much more effective in promoting healthy diets than just providing healthy food.

The general value of the findings in this study can be questioned due to the limited study group, as can their representativity due to the fact that the pupils were from ethnic minority groups. Karresbæk (2012) demonstrates that teachers, in an act of cultural integration, may pay special attention to educating minority pupils on food issues and meal culture. This could explain the strong opinions of the pupils in this study. However, as mentioned in the methodology, parallel studies were conducted in classes with pupils representing the Danish middle-class and ethnic majority and their findings are remarkably close to those presented in this study (Bruselius-Jensen, 2011). Furthermore, it was not a strategic choice to study a school with pupils predominantly from socially deprived families, nearly all of which had different ethnic backgrounds. The school, however, presented a very good case study of pupils' perceptions of good school meals through an action research approach, since the pu-

pils were invited to take part in developing the school meals. This is seldom the case and made it possible to work with pupils during school hours for longer periods.

Notes

1. We have chosen a Swedish school because they provide free school meals, which are therefore organized very differently from typical Danish school meals.
2. Danish youth often watch TV series and movies that take place in an American high-school setting. At the time of the study, the musical film *High School Musical,* was very popular, and many of the scenes are set during school lunches. Danish schools generally do not have meal provision and cafeterias, therefore the pupils used the American films as inspiration.

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