

A Comparative Study of Healthy Sustainable School Food

Nielsen, T.¹, & Kristensen, N.H.¹

Abstract

The focus for this presentation is two of the most important challenges in contemporary society today, namely, healthy school food and development of sustainable food production.

The historical background of school food in different European countries shows a considerable variation in terms of actors, background, and values. The school meal systems are organized in very different ways in the four countries, especially between Denmark and Norway, on the one hand, without a national school meal system, and Italy and Finland, both with national school meal systems, on the other. This evidently has a significant bearing on what kind of subjects regarding school meal systems are primarily discussed in the four countries. In Denmark and Norway, much of the discussion is about whether there should be an obligatory school meal system in the respective countries, and, if so, how should it be organized. In Finland and Italy, the discussion is mainly about the quality of the food served in the existing school meal systems.

Often the initiatives to change the school food in a qualitative direction originate with the government, and in other countries the changes occur in spite of the government's actions, for example, at the initiative of individual school leaders, parents, or other groups. We have found considerable variation in the kind of role the different actors play in different countries. Due to the different political choices at the national and municipal level, the schools play different roles in the different countries. Often, private companies are involved in the production and distribution of school food. In Italy, we also found examples on co-ownership between private and public institutions.

In Italy, the most important actors in promoting the use of organic ingredients in the school meals seem to be found on the political level, since organic ingredients are mentioned in laws. There are few examples of municipalities/counties in the other three countries that make an effort to promote the use of organic ingredients. In Denmark and Norway, there are municipal projects with the objective of making the participating cities or municipalities more environmentally friendly. The use of organic ingredients in public procurement can be part of such projects. In Finland, "a large number of municipalities organize organic or local organic meal days or weeks, whereby the whole meal or nearly all the ingredients are organic or local organic."

As can be seen, the discussion about school meals in Finland and Italy concerns environmental and sustainability issues (discussing organic and domestic products), whereas in Denmark and Norway "there is not much focus in the public debate to combine these issues." This is also the case in the political debate, at least in Denmark, apart from the few municipalities participating in the "Dogme 2000" project and the municipality of Roskilde. Here the health issue is taking up most of the debate.

The barriers mentioned for implementing organic ingredients in the school meal systems are—apart from the barriers originating from the fact that these ingredients are more expensive and more difficult to purchase—different in the respective countries. Barriers mentioned are quality, local conventional versus imported organic food, lack of food security from distributors, etc.

¹ DTU Management, Technical University of Denmark, Section for Innovation and Sustainability