

Opportunities for Interdisciplinary Research on School Catering

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ABSTRACT

In Hungary, about half of the 3–18 age group has regularly used school food service. This paper focuses on the operation and social embeddedness of school canteens and the at-home eating habits of the families involved. My conclusions are based on the findings of my interdisciplinary research group. Ethnographers from the RCH Institute of Ethnology and dietitians from the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition have been studying school food from 2018 to 2023. We selected a few model settlements: in addition to the capital, Budapest, three smaller towns, and two villages. Through questionnaires, interviews, and fieldwork observations, we investigated cooking, serving, meal courses, meal time, eating habits, preferences, as well as the nutritional knowledge of students, teachers, kitchen staff, and parents. Our goal, among other things, is to collect best practices and facilitate communication between participants. Some examples from our research highlight the special role of the centrally regulated school food in local food culture, and difficulties with social and historical roots can occasionally hamper school lunches in becoming a socially accepted model of a healthy diet. The school canteen works best at sites where cooking takes place within the school premises. There is a strong connection between the kitchen staff and the teachers, and they work together in the interest of the children. The value of food and its appreciation is demonstrated by how it is treated and how it is talked about. Communication about food in the canteen should be based on food preparation at home, where parents and children work together. The operation of canteens has become particularly problematic following the measures introduced during the coronavirus pandemic. A sustainable, enjoyable canteen can only be realized through the regular communication of schools and school kitchens, as well as children and their parents. Our findings are presented to our respondents, along with providing them with a comparison of different examples.

KEYWORDS

consumer opinions and experiences, ethnographic perspective, role of public catering in school life, lunchroom, communication, family eating habits

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The correlation between nutrition and health is scientifically proven. We know that diet-related diseases in adulthood often have their roots in poor childhood eating habits, and that they can be strongly influenced by the kindergarten and school environment, as well as by family patterns. It is therefore very important that educational institutions create the necessary conditions for a healthy lifestyle. Children's public catering can therefore play an important role in health preservation and the process of becoming a conscious consumer in the 21st century.

In Hungary, the importance of the canteen and its role in everyday life is illustrated by the fact that half of all children in public education eat there regularly. This ratio has not changed much in the last seventy years, and children's catering in kindergartens and schools is a significant part of food culture and even the economy. The current system of public catering was developed in the second half of the 20th century, within the framework of the welfare system of the socialist state. This service was available in all settlements, from nursery to secondary school — in addition to canteens at the workplace and in higher education, as well as hospital care. Until 1989, it was organized and run by the state; since then, it has been divided between local authorities, the state, and churches, according to educational institutions and their operators. The costs of children's catering are partly borne by the state, partly by parents and churches. Children from large families and families living in difficult financial circumstances have access to three meals a day free of charge: a mid-morning snack, a two-course hot lunch, and an afternoon snack. While all preschool-age children eat at the institution, the number of school-aged children that utilize canteens is decreasing, and even those prefer to pay for lunch only. In some cases, the school has its own kitchen, but it is more common for food to be delivered from kitchens run by larger companies. In addition, many schools have a cafeteria run by an external contractor. Residential children's institutions provide full board. Students who do not eat in the canteen bring a sandwich from home or have lunch at home after school.

Hungarian social sciences and humanities have so far shown little interest in the analysis of the functioning of the public catering system — with the exception of nutrition science¹ — although there are already several examples of successful interdisciplinary cooperation in Western and Northern Europe, in which ethnography, ethnographic approaches and research methods have played a central, sometimes leading, moderating role (MORGAN – SONNINO 2007, 2008; MATALAS et al. 2012; MIKKELSEN 2013; HART 2016).

The first study of food culture in Hungary with an ethnographic approach was conducted by Anikó Báti in 2012–2014 (BÁTI 2018). Through an ethnographic perspective, this study included consumer habits and preferences on the one hand, and family meals at home on the other, as topics of research on public catering. Through the example of a kindergarten and primary school in Budapest, the micro-study, using the ethnographic approach, sought to answer questions that have been left out of nutrition surveys due to their specific methods and objectives. For example, why soups produce a lot of waste, or why many people drop out of the system around the 5th

¹Since the 1970s, public health authorities and nutrition research institutes in Hungary have been conducting nationwide surveys on public catering, which have revealed an unfavorable picture of the quality of canteens in kindergartens and schools. The results of the very first surveys showed that the risk factors that lead to non-communicable chronic diseases are present in public catering. According to the school nutrition health environmental surveys carried out so far, in most cases canteens did not meet the guidelines for healthy eating, either in terms of the conditions under which meals were served or the quantity and quality of the food served. See for example: ORSZÁGOS ISKOLAI MENZA KÖRKÉP 2008; ORSZÁGOS HELYZETKÉP AZ ÓVODAI KÖZÉTKÉZTETÉSRŐL 2009, 2013.



grade. The source of these functional problems was identified at the time by nutrition experts (ORSZÁGOS ISKOLAI MENZA KÖRKÉP 2008, 2013, 2017) as the unclear legal background of public catering, followed by the frequent misinterpretation of the binding regulation² that entered into force on 1 September 2015, and on the other hand, the issue that was most often highlighted as an explanation but has not yet been studied in depth: changes in the everyday eating habits of families.

Anikó Báti's study with a new approach painted a complex picture and provided new possible answers to questions about the operation of canteens. After the results of the research were published, the operator of a school canteen, the Municipality of Budapest's XX. district, incorporated the recent experiences and recommendations into its planned canteen reform. As a result, both the school's management and the parents have become more aware of children's catering and engaged in dialogue about it. The novelty of the research has also caught the attention of the staff of the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition. The concrete results have laid the groundwork for the preparation of an inter-institutional, interdisciplinary tender.

THE CANTEEN – NEW PERSPECTIVES

Funded by the NKFIH National Research Development and Innovation Office (NRDI Fund) (128925 K-18, 2018-2022-2023), the project called *The Social embeddedness of children's public catering. Issues and opportunities* was launched in 2018 by the Institute of Ethnology of the Research Centre for the Humanities (BTK NTI), in cooperation with the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition (OGYÉI), under the leadership of Anikó Báti. The research team, made up of ethnographers and dietitians, was joined by an undergraduate student of ethnography. In this treatise, we summarize the research methods, approach, and potential for social utility of our joint work.

The aim of the project was to complement the existing dietetic approach to monitoring healthy eating with the ethnographic (social anthropological and foodways studies) approach to food. The approach related to the concept of *foodscape*³ has provided a good basis for this, which looks at the whole of school catering and children's entire daily nutrition from a specific perspective, in our case from the perspective of the consumers, the children and their parents. This broad-spectrum perspective has proved particularly useful to the interdisciplinary research team in mapping the world of canteens (organizational and operational forms, socio-cultural context), and also includes many other opportunities that have yet to be explored.

²37/2014 (IV.30.) EMMI decree. In 2014, a binding regulation was introduced for governing the operation of school meal services based on EU guidelines. The aim of the regulation was to reduce the level of nutritional risk factors in public catering. In European comparison, Hungary's regulation on public catering regulates the range of foods for consumption in a quite complex, mandatory, and autonomous way. As a result, kindergarten and school meals now include dishes that are most appropriate for the needs of the different age groups and ensure a healthy development. In conjunction with the regulation, a collection of recipes has been compiled, and further training for workers in public catering has also been launched.

³The “-scape” approach developed by Appadurai, which continues the idea of “landscape” (i.e., landscape as a specific viewpoint), has also opened up new avenues in the study of food culture. See, for example: JOHANSON et al. 2009. For a literature review of the issue, see: MIKKELSEN 2011.



Children's perspectives as a focus of inquiry are a fundamental element of research aimed at exploring learning processes in public catering. José Torralba and Barbara Guidalli's *foodscape*-based research suggests that children are not only passive recipients of practical and theoretical knowledge and norms related to nutrition but also shape them both individually and collectively. However, the framework varies from school to school and from community to community, so the eating habits and personal experiences of the students allow only cautious generalizations, as the students themselves are different, with different family backgrounds.⁴ In order to understand their eating habits, choices, values, and thus their day-to-day life in the canteen, it is essential to extend the study beyond the public catering sector to a wider context: to all foodscapes, "nutrition environments" they experience (TORRALBA – GUIDALLI 2014). Along this line of thought, research can be extended in several directions: beyond the institutional setting, we can focus on regional or national conditions, and at the micro level, we can focus on meals (including, for example, tables, plates, or dishes).

Following the entry into force of the Hungarian regulation on public catering,⁵ a research group (KISS et al. 2019) outlined the operational mechanisms, rules, and motivations that govern public catering in day-to-day life. The research has been extended to include the architects of the central regulations, public authorities, school kitchens, even teachers and parents. And the children who are the target group of canteens have been given special attention. The study has highlighted the prevailing approach that underpins both the regulation and the day-to-day practice of children's public catering. Which is the fact that the system operates based on top-down regulations, seeing children only as consumers and not as opinion-formers. In their view, this may have been one of the reasons for the difficulties in implementing the public catering regulation, stemming from an insufficient communication strategy.

In the social science literature on the practice of children's catering, there is also a paradigm shift: in addition to the development of healthy lifestyles and good eating habits, the environment, sustainability, the economy, equal opportunities, food as a communication channel, education, and, in this context, the relationship between the community and individuals, and eating together as a basis for community cohesion are all being incorporated as aspects of the current work (ARNAIZ 2009; CRAMER et al. 2011; RICE – RUD 2018; CHANSKY – TRACY 2020; SINGH LALLI 2020, 2023). Broader reviews on the topic are increasingly focusing on changes in family eating habits at home, linkages with meals away from home, and encouraging the active involvement of parents in the planning, menu compilation, and implementation of public catering, in a kind of "dinner lady" or assistant role (DIASIO – JULIEN 2019; PAGLIARINO 2021;

⁴(...) we think children's eating practices could be productively examined within a framework that encompasses the school and other foodscapes as well. More importantly, we think children's eating practices should be understood inter-contextually, or in a way that will allow us to explain and understand behavior in relation to how it emerges naturally. Our data strongly suggest that children's eating practices, preferences and behavior is modulated and shaped by factors that span more than one foodscape. This suggests that the impact of any intervention in or out of school will depend on building an understanding and designing approaches that span those foodscapes as well. (...) We, along with others, think that developing nutrition intervention and education strategies that promote healthy eating behaviors in young people requires an understanding of eating behavior and perceptions of food and factors that influence eating patterns and food choices" (TORRALBA – GUIDALLI 2014:21).

⁵37/2014 (IV. 30.) EMMI decree.



RYAN et al. 2022b; BONI 2023). The question has also been raised whether school meals can be a suitable way to shape children's healthy, sustainable diets (OOSTINDJER et al. 2017).

School meals, or more broadly cooking and nutrition, as a curriculum has entered the field of pedagogical, sociological, and ethnographic studies as a multifaceted way of promoting children's socialization and autonomy, opening up new avenues of research and applicability (WEAVER – HIGHTOWER 2011). From the child's point of view, communal school meals can be a "special time" with rules different than school rules (STONE – MURAKAMI 2021). It can have a similar role as holidays do in everyday life. Another reading suggests that the timing and duration of meals are strongly correlated with the formation of childhood eating habits and, as a consequence, with obesity, among other issues (BHATT 2014). Zofia Boni drew attention to the fact that the special attention children enjoy in their families (and on which the food industry and trade are building specific sectors), which is different from previous generations, is the basis for the emergence of a specific "children's food culture" today. This can be a form of resistance to adult rules, but it is also based on the foods prepared by adults, served at the family table, or packed in a lunch box. This perspective can also help us to understand children's choices, values, and behaviors related to nutrition.⁶

Ethnographers and dietitians in the canteen

Our project is a contemporary study. By building on the literature on the subject and the results and insights of ethnographic research on food culture, and by integrating the research aspects of nutrition science on eating habits, tradition, and innovation, we sought to promote the development and long-term implementation of public catering that was sustainable, based on local resources, and accepted by the community in the daily practices of the communities included in the study.⁷

The primary questions of the research were designed to investigate the course and duration of meals, use of space, use of facilities, social relationships, the day-to-day practices of learning, education, and socialization. Our aim was to understand children's current experiences and preferences regarding nutrition. In addition to school life, we also learned about cooking and

⁶BONI 2015, 2021, 2023. A similar trend to the Polish example presented by Boni can be observed in Cyprus, where fast food restaurants are the favorite choice for children, instead of the Mediterranean cuisine and home-cooked meals (MATALAS et al. 2012).

⁷The organizational and operational frameworks of the cooperation between the school and the kitchen has also changed a lot during the research period. The school that hosted the first micro-study has also played a key role in the current study. Including our prior experiences, we already have a 10-year perspective of the operation of that canteen. In the initial year, in 2012, we documented the conditions before the enforcement of the public catering regulation (37/2014/IV. 30./EMMI decree), when the state took back the schools from municipal governments, while the kitchens and lunchrooms remained in the hands of the municipalities. In 2015, the public catering regulation came into force, which rewrote canteen life and menus from the top down. The next chapter in the school's history began when the school changed operators, and its kitchen along with it, in 2021. All this has meant major changes (in rapid succession) in children's public catering on a scale not seen for decades. However, the changes were never applied to the entire system, always just to a single element. This highlighted example may also illustrate how lucky we were to have been able to carry out the research at the time, for we were able to capture so much during this time. On the other hand, it is clear that children's catering has been an ever-changing system in recent years, facing numerous challenges and external influences (e.g., lack of resources and staff). And that's not even mentioning the Covid period, the rise in food prices (from 2020/2022), the longer-term effects of which we were, of course, unable to track.



eating habits at home within the family, shopping preferences, and ideas about healthy eating. We also looked at issues that have not received sufficient attention in previous work on childhood obesity in Hungary, such as the role of food in school or family life, children's opinions, attitudes, and personal experiences. Our work has also revealed a lack of knowledge about young people's activities as consumers in relation to community life.

The social embeddedness of public catering in community, school, and family life was approached from the perspective of individuals, of children. The objective of the system — as set out in the relevant regulations — is to promote the development of health-conscious children eating a balanced diet. What does this look like in daily practice? Are these ambitions being realized?

To map the responses, we have built the framework of the research around two broad lines of thought. One is community life in the schools, with some of the important daily events taking place in the lunchroom. The premises are not just a physical environment: they can also become spaces for community building and education through the communal consumption of food. The equally important role of social life in the home, family meals, and the importance of parental patterns in shaping a child's eating habits perhaps need no explanation. Children eat in these environmental contexts: at school, at home, sometimes on the street, on the move. Their eating habits are shaped by the combination of these factors. It is therefore useful to try to get as complete a picture as possible in this respect.

Besides the community, our other perspective is that of the individual. How children's knowledge is expanded, how their autonomy is strengthened, how their skills develop, what kind of transformation their experiences go through in the course of hundreds of meals consumed within the context of public catering from preschool age. Is the message about healthy eating that the system wants to convey getting through? Does the system help them start life as informed adults, capable of making autonomous decisions, equipped with basic practical (cooking) skills?

Through expert sampling, one primary school in nine Hungarian settlements had been selected for analysis. In addition to the capital, we surveyed six state-run and three church-run children's catering facilities in county seats, smaller towns, one municipality, and one village (district XX and XXII of Budapest, Debrecen, Eger, Ózd, Pápa, Szarvas, Csömör, Rózsaszentmárton). The starting point was the results of a survey carried out by the Public Health Service (*Healthy Eating School program*). It was a positive experience that in the preparatory phase of the work, the school administrators and educational institutions we approached were eager to participate, seeing new opportunities in the cooperation. In the course of the work, the fact that the original work plan had to be modified on several occasions posed some difficulties. As an example, there were instances where the school had changed operators, and in two instances the company running the kitchen had changed.

In our research, we used the tools of both ethnography and dietetics, and applied both quantitative and qualitative research methods. After selecting the sites, we compiled the questionnaires, which were an important source of information for the research. In line with our objectives, we focused not only on school actors but also on families. We tried to map meals in school lunchrooms and beyond, in other areas of the school, using the open and closed questions of the questionnaire, in the same way we tried to map habits at home.

In each school, we involved two classes per grade from grades 3–8 (9–14 age group). Children who were canteen clients and those who were not received separate questionnaires,



as did their parents, whose social status was grouped into four broad categories by combining their income and education status. We were also interested in the opinions and knowledge of the kitchen staff, food service managers, and teachers. Before starting the questionnaire survey, all participants in all educational institutions were informed about the work. We asked them for their consent with the research and the publication of the results. In total, more than 3,000 respondents (1,896 students, 1,812 parents, 85 teachers, and 37 kitchen staff) provided written responses. The questionnaires were coded with numerical sequences before they were filled out. Upon receipt, they were all recoded to ensure complete anonymity. The coding system allowed us to juxtapose the data from the questionnaires filled out by the children and their parents during analysis.

The resulting database is a very significant record of contemporary Hungarian food culture, which is a good representation of the eating habits of families with school-age children. The data collected showed that in the selected settlements, the proportion of students eating in the canteen was higher than the national average (around 50%) (four-fifths of students), while, for example, only 30% of teachers used the canteen. 62.5% of students eat only lunch, and 37.5% eat three meals in the canteen. The proportion of those with specific dietary restrictions is 2%. 62% of parents pay full price, 30% receive a reduced rate, and 8% receive free meals as part of social assistance.⁸

Our numerical findings refer to the full sample, while due to the differences in the types of settlements and schools resulting from the expert sampling, some elements of the sample show individual characteristics for each institution. In this analysis, due to scope limitations, we cannot go into all the points and details at the level of the settlement, so we will only highlight a few components.

In addition to the questionnaire, another very important research method was the participant observation. In each location, we tried to get a glimpse of school life and the daily activities in the lunchroom during our fieldwork. We observed, photographed, and recorded the course and duration of meals, the interactions of children and adults, and unexpected situations. We organized semi-structured interviews with adults, and we asked the children in focus group discussions about their preferences or critical points of the canteen's operation, as revealed by their answers to the questionnaire. It was enlightening to reflect with them on what food means to them; what influences their food choices; why it is important to eat in the morning, or what effects energy drinks have on the body. They told us what foods they found delicious, and what suggestions they had for reforming the canteen. We tried to repeat these steps several times in order to document the changes.

There were research sites where the study has been able to look beyond school life and related age groups to other aspects of food culture. In addition to the selected groups, older people were also in our sight. Nutritional and socio-ethnographic research has been launched (and is currently ongoing) in two smaller settlements. Their long-term objective is to provide a glimpse of the social context of school catering. In one location, for example, the researchers contacted the local group of tradition bearers in order to explore in more detail the relationship between Slovak traditions — an important element of identity in the life of the community — and associated customs and foodways, and to understand the mechanisms of their functioning.

⁸On the role of public catering in the tackling of food poverty, see: [HUSZ – MAROZSÁN 2014](#); [VASTAGH – HUSZ 2016](#).



In another village, as part of the local health program, the dietitian and ethnographer were invited to lead discussions and give talks on healthy eating for different age groups.

This phase of the fieldwork (which was intense, multi-faceted, exciting, and required a lot of organization) touched the members of the research team. It really gave us a lot to get more involved in the subject. The closer relationship that developed with our respondents also led to strong emotional involvement: there were some particularly difficult moments. One kitchen worker, for example, tearfully shared with us the psychological toll of the changes in the workplace and the reorganization of the kitchen. Elsewhere, a half-orphaned child shared its grief and sorrow. Unfortunately, several of our informants died during the pandemic.

As I mentioned, the momentum of the work was not unbroken. We had to stop several times because of adverse external conditions. We had to react to these situations constantly, in line with the research plan and the work plan. There have also been personal changes, for example, due to office reorganizations affecting our workplaces (BTK NTI and OGYÉI). The pandemic situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic was unexpected and posed a very serious problem. From March 2020 to June 2022, there were periods, sometimes shorter, sometimes longer (a full school year), when we were unable to go to the schools due to pandemic and precautionary measures. This greatly hindered the work. The Covid period also influenced the periodization of the research. A significant part of the collected information records pre-2020 practices. And during the follow-up, we were able to document the temporary emergency measures during Covid, as well as the steps taken to return to normal patterns in the months after the pandemic. We had to keep these circumstances in mind when processing and analyzing the research findings.

LUNCHROOMS AT SCHOOL, KITCHENS AT HOME. LESSONS FROM OUR RESEARCH

From the perspective of the consumers, the children, the quality of the school canteen seemed to be one of the key issues at the research sites. Closely related issues are the course of the meal and communication about food. Another focus area of the research was the cooking and eating habits of families at home and their role in modeling. By analyzing the relationship between these two major topics, the issue of the social embeddedness and acceptance of public catering and its role in nutrition can be seen (BÁTI 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b; BÁTI et al. 2019; BÁTI – UMBRAI 2020; VÁRKONYI-NICKEL 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021; VÁRKONYI-NICKEL et al. 2019).

The lunchroom is key

What is the role of the lunchroom in school life? First of all, and it goes without saying, it provides a space for eating. On the other hand, a shared lunch also provides space for community building and socialization (HART 2016). This is partly contradicted by the fact that this is not the only place where children eat during the school day. Only canteen clients go to the lunchroom. And even they only go at specific times, once a day (if they only have lunch) or twice a day (if they also have their mid-morning snack there), in time slots tailored to the class schedule, and mostly as a class or together with their classmates. Grazing during breaks or consuming afternoon snacks takes place outside the lunchroom, typically in the classroom or hallway.



For most of the day (during classes), the lunchroom has no function for the students. But lunch time is a very “busy,” intensive period in the lunchroom. The location and layout of the room, the furniture, the lights, the smells and noises together determine the use of the space. Environmental psychology findings have shown that inadequately designed and furnished living spaces can be a source of stress, aggression, and behavioral disorders (Figs. 1–3). Therefore, in addition to classrooms, hallways and lunchrooms also have specific functions and additional roles within the school, as they are also the setting for the development of socialization and social relationships over many years.⁹

Based on the international literature on public catering and some preliminary studies, we had already assumed what the current project seems to have confirmed: the lunchroom as a place has a huge role in the success and acceptance of the canteen from the children’s point of view.¹⁰ The environmental impacts¹¹ — the layout and furnishings of the space, whether it is crowded or



Fig. 1. “If I push with my head, I might not drop the tray with the plates...” (Photo by Vira Réka Nickel, Eger, 2021)

⁹Environmental psychology is concerned with the impact of the use of space on human behavior. For more information, see, for example, SOMOGYI 2016; SOMOGYI et al. 2019; DÜLL et al. 2021.

¹⁰“The location and design of the canteen in educational spaces is of particular importance, as these are not only spaces for eating, but also place(s) for social and socialization processes in which children can learn, practice, and live forms of behavior in a communal setting. In our culture, mealtime is a strong community-building and active part of everyday life, and it is, or can be made to be, such a part of school life, too. In addition to its primary function, it enables group formation, mediates behavioral norms, and may encourage health-conscious behavior. Therefore, it carries a lot of added value beyond eating and could be assigned even more, so it might be worthwhile adding other social functions. It is very important to see that man and his environment are in constant contact and interaction with each other. Thus, as soon as we change the conscious or non-conscious features of a space, it has an impact on its users, eliciting observable changes in their behavior, which is particularly important in the case of an educational facility” (MÁTHÉ et al. 2016:28–29).

¹¹For more on this issue, see: MÁTHÉ et al. 2016.



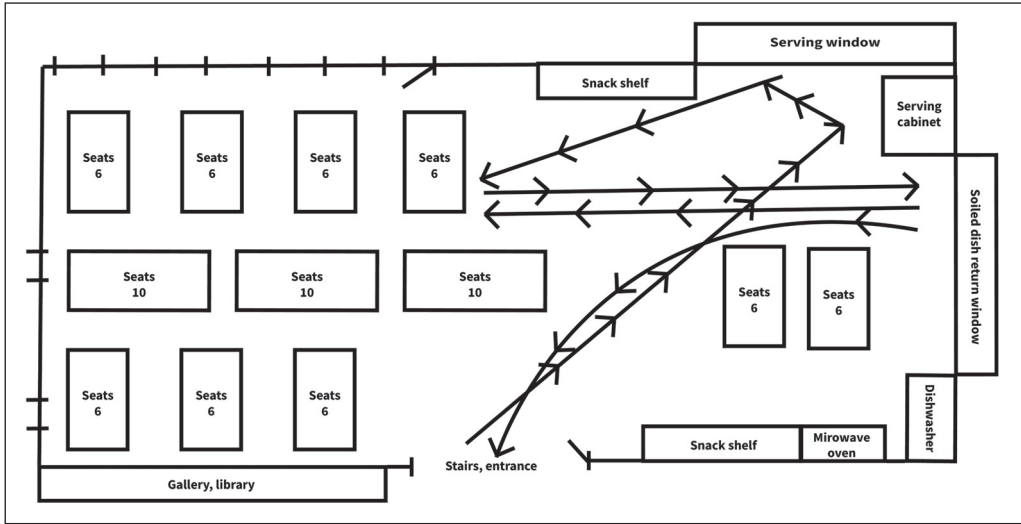


Fig. 2. Floor plan of a lunchroom, a child's path of movement during mealtime (Reconstruction by Anikó Báti, Szarvas, 2021)



Fig. 3. The chairs in the lunchroom, which have metal legs and are of inadequate size, are not comfortable (Photo by Vira Réka Nickel, Eger, 2022)



spacious, depending on capacity, whether it is family friendly, whether it is inviting for children and teenagers — may be even more important factors than the food itself. For example, food prepared by one of the kitchens was consumed better in a school that had a more pleasant, more organized lunchroom than in a neighboring institution where the lunchroom was crowded (BÁTI 2018).

83% of the children in the study who are not canteen clients (mostly upperclassmen) used to be. They could use the open-ended questions in the questionnaire to explain why they decided to quit the canteen. In their responses, they very often complained, for example, about the lunchrooms being crowded and noisy. A third of them considered the food that was offered there to be bad. However, most of them justified their quitting by saying that their friends did not eat in the canteen either. So it is not so much the food as it is the importance of community and eating together that their stance reflects. This is an important factor particularly in urban environments, where public catering has to contend with “competitors” such as fast food restaurants or supermarkets in the vicinity of schools. In the focus group discussion, upperclassmen explained that they would eat in the canteen if it had the same kind of comfort, same kind of furniture that provided space for smaller groups to retreat, as one of the fast food chains did. The “Meki” (McDonald’s) is therefore not necessarily attractive because of the hamburger, but because of the use of space that is different than at home or at school, which promotes socializing.

The design of the lunchrooms included in the study was adapted to spatial conditions. Usually it was one grade, two to three classes, that used the canteen at the same time, but there were instances when several classes from two schools would occupy the space. The seating arrangement served different purposes in different schools, and usually followed a framework set by the teachers. In some cases, an entire class could be seated around a long table, thus enhancing community cohesion. Elsewhere, the smaller tables of 4–6 people were more conducive to conversation. In one school, the kitchen staff set the long tables for the youngest children, while the older children set the tables themselves, along with their classmates. Some set out plates, others cutlery, and a third group brought in the soup bowls so that everyone could serve themselves what they needed. By all accounts, this solution proved to be the most fruitful. Based on the responses to the questionnaires, the students and their parents were the most satisfied with the catering service as a whole here, and this is also where the least amount of waste was produced.

A child’s autonomy in deciding with whom to eat was only exercised in half of the schools (and only among upperclassmen aged 10–14). Students who were not clients of the canteen were completely left out of the picture. In most schools, they were not allowed to bring their lunch from home into the lunchroom, they could not eat with their schoolmates in the canteen because the space was already very crowded. This was a serious source of conflict for the children. Some students chose not to eat their canteen lunch because of this, even though it was paid for, and over time they quit the system for good. In half of the schools included in the sample, the cafeteria is a place of prestige consumption, of autonomous student choice and decision making, which makes it a very important scene for adolescents and thus a kind of a competitor to the canteen.

A related experience is that the furniture in the lunchroom can also be a source of noise that children complain about. The sound of chairs with metal legs being moved about can fill the space, which must be shouted over during conversations: this creates an environment that is completely unsuitable for a relaxed meal.



Depending on the age group, the size of the furniture can also have a decisive influence on whether children like to eat in the lunchroom. While in kindergartens everywhere, the size of the furniture helps children become more independent (their feet touch the ground and they can comfortably reach the table), in schools, objects designed for adults can be uncomfortable and even dangerous for the little ones. It can be a source of frustration and conflict if they can't reach the soup bowl, if they have to kneel on the chair to serve themselves, or if they can only put their tray of plates on the return counter by holding it with both hands while having to push it higher than their body height. All of this has a big impact on how comfortable the children feel in the space, how well they can manage independently according to their abilities, while having to complete tasks in a hurry and on time.

COMMUNICATION ABOUT FOOD

The value of food is also reflected in the way we treat it, the way we communicate about it. In addition to the physical environment and the peer group, the work of teachers and kitchen staff is also key in the success of public catering (Figs. 4 and 5). This is reflected in our previous examples in the seating arrangement.

In many cases, the role of adults, seen from the children's point of view, could only be documented in the research by having them expound on their negative responses (such as "I didn't like eating there;" "The atmosphere was not good"). During fieldwork, we mostly encountered practices that were supportive of the children's needs, permissive, and in the case of the youngest ones, almost "mothering" (for example, helping them cut their meat or serve the soup). There were also instances of teachers having lunch with the children and modeling the correct use of cutlery for them. As a special, intensive time of education and socialization beyond the classroom, such situations also provided an opportunity for more informal conversations between teachers and students.

But there were also one or two extreme cases that were not to be followed. When, for example, the teacher added to the already loud noise in the lunchroom by shouting over it in an attempt to keep order. Elsewhere, however, it was striking that the youngest children moved about and ate in silence. Here, those who, despite the prohibition, tried to have a quiet conversation and were found out, had to stop eating. Standing behind their chairs, they watched as the others ate their lunch. In one case, the "troublemaker" even had to leave the lunchroom.

When children are conditioned to such rules, it is not surprising that they do not want to spend too much time in the canteen system. No wonder they quit at the first possible occasion. In the meantime, they protest by not eating the food at all, or by barely eating any of it. And parents may only find that their child comes home from school hungry. Even though it may not be the quality of the food that is the problem (Figs. 6 and 7).

Teachers should act as mediators between the kitchen, children, and parents. They could also set a personal example by suggesting that the dishes on the menu are healthy and nutritious. But 70% of the teachers surveyed do not eat lunch in the canteen. On the one hand, they no longer have time to do this because of supervising lunchtime. But an even more important reason is that they don't like the food. What message does it send to children that adults can eat their lunch they brought from home while they have to make do with the school menu for the day?





Fig. 4. Homey table setting and a way of serving that encourages students to become independent (Photo by Anikó Báti, Debrecen, 2021)

It is only the humanity and professional experience of the teachers and the pedagogical objectives and means of the school that determine how they support the autonomy of the students in the canteen. Do they involve them in setting the tables, prepare them for the dishes that are on their plate, allow them to turn eating into a meal thanks to a good atmosphere and their active participation? And this also includes, for example, whether they assist the children, in cooperation with kitchen staff, during the tooth-shedding period, when they can't bite into a whole apple. In such instances, do they encourage the cutting up of fruit, knowing that even the older ones prefer to eat fruit placed in a central spot in the school throughout the day if it is neatly cut up and served? Unfortunately, teacher training does not include this segment of school life. Teachers only learn these practices at school, partly following the example (good or bad) of their older colleagues.

The care of children who are not clients of the canteen is not the responsibility of the system. Teachers, on the other hand, know which students are not prepaid because their parents cannot afford it financially, and thus not being provided their five meals a day. The school and the canteen try to help them by offering an interim solution: they can eat fruit all day long, and they can also help themselves to the pastries and bread with salami left over from breakfast during breaks between classes.





Fig. 5. It is not easy to eat a vegetable stew (pottage) from a shallow plate, with a knife and fork (Photo by Vira Réka Nickel, Szarvas, 2021)



Fig. 6. Smiling sandwiches for an afternoon snack, an example of the creative way cheese and vegetables are served (Photo by Anikó Báti, Debrecen, 2021)





Fig. 7. The children did not like this lunch today, there is a lot of waste (Photo by Anikó Báti, Pápa, 2021)

Two thirds of the children consider the kitchen staff to be nice. This factor is not correlated with the quality of the food, according to the analyses, i.e., even in a canteen that is otherwise poorly rated, the kitchen staff may be nice. Kitchen staff are required to attend regular professional training, but it is their individual qualities that determine how understanding and helpful they might be to students. This is the main factor that determines whether the canteen achieves its goal: the children leaving well-fed and content.

Mutual respect for each other is based on proper communication and the personal relationship built on it. This is practically impossible in canteens where kitchen staff have to serve food so quickly — because of the short lunch time and the huge crowds — that they don't even have time to glance up at the children taking the plates from them. In such situations, the most they get from students is a mere "Thank you!". There is almost no chance that the kitchen staff would be able to encourage them to try a dish, for example, so that even minimal communication may arise between the staff and the students. The high turnover of kitchen staff is not conducive to building relationships either. Best practices are always based on long professional experience. Our sample includes a canteen worker who has worked there when the parents of the current students were there, so she calls many of the students by name and is familiar with their background, too. The children have been seeing her since they were in first grade, and have become accustomed to the rules of the lunchroom she runs. The few minutes of interaction a



day can include a greeting, a thank you, a kind word, an offer, an encouragement, a smile, or (if the plate is returned untouched) a question as to the problem with the meal. In kitchens that represent best practices, the success of lunchtime is demonstrated by the fact that even dishes that are mostly “disliked” are consumed more during meals with a family atmosphere.

In eight of the nine schools surveyed, the lunchroom is located within the premises of the school, and in one case it is within a five-minute walk. In five establishments, the lunchroom is connected to the serving kitchen, and the food is delivered there from the cooking kitchen. In four instances, the school, the lunchroom, and the kitchen are located within the same building. These conditions are also of great importance in terms of food and communication about it.

If cooking and eating take place within the same building, the transport phase is eliminated and there is no risk of quality deterioration, which in many cases can occur through no fault of the kitchen staff. (For example, if the pasta is overcooked in the thermo food container.) Spatial proximity also means a closer connection: feedback about the food can reach the kitchen directly. In these cases, community objectives can sometimes override strict health considerations, and the kitchen becomes more closely involved in school life. The menu can be adapted to school programs and holidays. While in most places the cooking or serving area is strictly off-limits to outsiders, children here can enter the kitchen and cook and bake with their teachers or an invited chef or pastry chef, and make Christmas gingerbread cookies together.

Where the serving staff has no interaction with the cooking staff, the only direct feedback is often provided by the driver delivering the food, or the “checkered notebook” that collects teachers’ comments on the meals. In the latter case, neither students nor parents have much information about who cooks for the canteen on a daily basis. This can be problematic even within a small settlement, if there are no meeting opportunities, organized tastings, discussions between parents, cooks, and operators, to exchange opinions.

One of the most important communication channels about the canteen is the menu card (Fig. 8). The regulation on public catering stipulates that the menu must be published, and that, in addition to the dishes, energy content and allergens must also be indicated. (However, for the most part, the latter two pieces of information are completely unnecessary for children.)

Our experience during the research was that all but one school had posted the menu: online on the school’s website, and on paper in the lunchroom. The online availability is mainly for parents. For them, information on the composition of food is also really important. However, in the children’s immediate environment, it is more useful to have a menu that is easy to read and understand, even through illustrations for the littlest ones, so that they know what dishes to expect that day. It is also a good idea not to place the menu at adult eye level in the lunchroom, where — in the worst case — the name of the dish will only fit in small print because of all the additional information. Children are typically not consulted when menus are planned. Students’ comments and issues with food are mainly reported to their parents or teachers, but these do not always reach the kitchen or the service provider directly. The menu card in its current form can only partially fulfill its role. 20% of children never look at the menu card before eating. While a third of them often check it out while waiting in line, 45% of students do not even order certain dishes just based on the menu card, or because they do not like the food itself (or its “canteen” version).

31% of parents never look at the menu card, 41% do so occasionally. Parents do not plan their meals at home based on this, nor based on their children’s meals throughout the day.





Fig. 8. On the menu card, it is hard to read the daily menu between the bell schedule, the class lunch timetable, and another document about allergies (Photo by Vira Réka Nickel, Eger, 2022)

At the same time, 88% check with their children afterwards about their school lunch. This feedback is important to them, but not always informative enough. One reason for this is that some children do not recognize dishes in the canteen. When asked “What was for lunch?”, “Some soup and seconds” is not a very meaningful response. However, parents judge the canteen’s performance based on these. 83% of them said that their child had come home hungry, i.e., the public catering system had failed to deliver on its promise that day. If a problem arises, parents, like students, are most likely to report it to the teachers, but they rarely use even this option. At parent-teacher conferences, public catering is hardly ever brought up. In the absence of other forums, they express their umbrage by withdrawing from the canteen system upon the child’s request. Of the schools included in the study, only one had a functioning canteen



committee, led by the food service manager, which included students and their parents and allowed them to voice their observations on a monthly basis. In this institution, this balanced communication, among other things, contributes greatly to the acceptance of public catering.

Variety is one of the parameters stipulated by the regulation¹² for the composition of the menu. The regulations specify what ingredients and in what quantities should be on children's plates for a period of ten meal days. It is up to the food service manager and the dietitian to decide what kinds of dishes this translates to. Feedback showed that children and parents would like to see more variety and diversity on the menu. It would be optimal to develop the menu for longer cycles according to the seasons. The menu could also be enhanced, for example, by incorporating children's favorite international dishes, with the recipes being adjusted as needed. We observed that where it was offered alongside gyros, the children also heartily consumed the fresh, raw vegetables they otherwise despised.

It seems to be a common experience that most of the waste comes from soups. However, if soups are not served every day, and instead the vitamins and fibers are offered in the form of a cup of fruit cream, for example, or if the much more popular cream soups (bisque) are added to the menu in addition to vegetable soups, in the eyes of consumers, the menu already seems more diverse. Both children and parents would consider it a favorable solution if they had several menus to choose from. A very promising example is that there are already schools where the canteen is self-service. Another opportunity to experience individual choice is when everyone can serve themselves from the non-optional menu, and only as much as they will actually consume. There will still be leftovers, but much less waste would be generated. (Our scope here does not allow for further discussion of the serious financial implications of leftover and waste management, the pointless wastefulness built into the system.¹³)

In the questionnaires, half of the children gave the canteen lunch a rating of 4 or 5 on a scale of 1–5, with 1 being the worst. 28% gave it a 3, while 20% were dissatisfied with the lunchtime meals in the canteen. Unlike their parents, students consider the time available for lunch to be sufficient. 60% of those who eat in the canteen say the atmosphere is good or very good; 19% say the atmosphere is not good at all. In response to the question whether they like eating in the canteen, 57% of students gave a positive answer or 4–5 points, with 23% having a mixed experience: sometimes yes, sometimes no. Only 20% are reluctant to use public catering. Based on the data, there is a correlation between the atmosphere and whether people like to eat there. Not surprisingly, children like canteens with a good atmosphere. The role of the school is absolutely crucial in this respect. It depends on the system they have set up, so the atmosphere in the canteen varies greatly from institution to institution. Regardless of the type of settlement, the canteens of church-run schools scored slightly better overall (3.79 points) in terms of popularity and acceptance than the ones in public schools (3.39 points). We also found that children in lower grades like to eat lunch in the canteen more than those in upper grades.

¹²37/2014 (IV.30.) EMMI decree.

¹³For details, see: [BATI 2018:127–128](#), with additional literature.



Overall, parents' perceptions of the canteen are more negative than children's, with lower scores in the questionnaires. This may also be linked to the fact that they receive very little meaningful, direct information on day-to-day practices.¹⁴ Most people see the public catering system based on their children's oral summaries and their own childhood experiences. Most of the time they do not have the opportunity to sample the food, but even where this might have been provided to parents, interest died down very quickly. According to the questionnaires, 17% of parents rated the canteen lunch as good, with the majority giving 3–5 points. 60% of them consider the dishes to be healthy, and in response to another question, a similar proportion consider the dishes to be diverse, although most of them are not familiar with the relevant provisions of the regulation on public catering. 35% believe that it is not easy to recognize the food on the plate. When asked about this in the interviews, the responding parents themselves were not necessarily open to the innovations introduced to promote healthy eating. For example, they themselves were not familiar with and did not like some of the ingredients and dishes that have been newly introduced into the canteen menu.

Parents perceive the time available for lunch as a very critical point: one third of the responses reflect a negative opinion. Based on the children's reactions and responses, they judge whether they are still hungry after the school lunch. 44% found that very often canteen food did not fill up their child.

However, the information recorded in the interviews can nuance this general picture. Sometimes, a child may get filled up with the snack they brought from home, and, not really having an appetite, will not eat enough of the lunch. But by the time they get home in the afternoon, they're hungry again. In this case, the problem is not the canteen, but rather the lack of conscious parental planning. Another source of problems may be if in family practice there is no difference between child and adult servings, which may mean that the age-appropriate serving of the school meal may be insufficient for a student with a larger appetite.

It is interesting to note that while the majority of parents gave rather positive scores (4–5 points) for each aspect (lunch, taste, duration, staff, etc.), their conclusion in response to the question "Overall, how satisfied are you with the school canteen?" was less positive. 68% of respondents were only moderately satisfied, giving only 3–4 points. Another 9% gave 2 points, and 5% gave only 1 point, indicating that they are very dissatisfied with the service. In their comments, they suggest the service provider increase the variety of the menu, the kitchen innovate with changes in kitchen technology or seasoning, and that the use of frozen products be proportionally reduced. Parents whose child is not in the canteen system but used to be (83%) said that the main factors behind their decision were primarily the poor taste of the food, the lack of menu options, and the short time available for eating. However, they had no means of sharing their experiences with the service provider.

¹⁴The articles in the media do not provide enough objective information, only occasionally is public catering a popular topic. For example: Telex's series on canteens has come to an end: "we've rounded up what's the problem with school canteens." <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/04/08/a-nagy-menzaserztal-vege-pontokba-szedtuk-mi-a-gond-az-iskolai-menzaval>, accessed April 8, 2022.



Family dining rooms, home cooking habits

We have also extended the focus of our research to family nutrition at home, which forms the basis of children's day-to-day care. This is the key element that can also be identified in the perception of school meals. This factor has already come up in the above analysis as part of the parents' opinions, but it is still worth reviewing some aspects (consumption preferences, eating habits, home cooking practices) in a little more detail — albeit not comprehensively, due to scope limitations. The relevant data gives us an idea of how parents saw their own habits and household functioning in 2019/2020, alongside canteen practices. (Due to the changes caused by the Covid period and subsequent food price increases, the time limitation is also a useful consideration for families.)

In many previous studies on children's public catering, the issue has been presented at the level of stereotypes. Food service managers, for example, have assumed that children do not like to eat in the canteen because their families do not cook much at home anymore. On the contrary, it seems that the canteen is actually perceived by children in the context of their habits and tastes at home. We hope that our research will provide a more nuanced picture of the eating habits of the families of today's school-aged children. The findings documented in the course of the study are in line with the changes and processes in food culture that were induced in the second half of the 20th century, from the 1970s onwards, by the proliferation of the two-earner family model, the disintegration of extended families, the expansion of urbanization and commercial supply, and last but not least, the affordable public catering system.¹⁵ So in some cases, the grandparents and parents of today's children may have had access to school and/or workplace catering, and they may (also) see today's practices through the filter of their personal memories.

In our survey on family meals at home, 62% of respondents said that on weekdays, dinner is usually the meal when families eat together at home. College-educated parents are more likely to have a family meal together every weekday, while it varies more for skilled workers whether they eat together as a family. One in five households serves a cooked meal, but three quarters of families do not serve a hot meal every night. Families from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have a hot dinner than the average. The majority (56%) have a mannerly home meal, setting the table nicely even on weekdays, especially college-educated parents. 78% of the families surveyed have an established seating arrangement, i.e., everyone has a set place around the table. These small details, from the use of cutlery to family conversations, contribute in a not insignificant way to children's socialization, to the acquisition and formation of proper eating habits (BÁTI 2018). The role and responsibility of parents is unquestionable in how children will behave at the table, how open they will be to new tastes, how they will treat food when they enter the kindergarten or school community.

56% of families cook several times a week, one third cooks every day. Families with the lowest incomes and/or lower education levels are more likely to cook on a daily basis (51.4%). In fact, only one in ten families do not cook at all on a weekday. They only get busy in the kitchen on weekends. They are typically the group with the highest education.

¹⁵For the changes in food culture, kitchen technology, and socio-economic processes in the 1960s and 1970s, see: BÁTI 2000, 2008, 2014, 2016, 2018; GYÁNI et al. 2004; KISBÁN 1975, 1995, 1997, 2010; KNÉZY 2007; LOSONCZI 1977; STEFLER et al. 2021; SZARVAS 1988, 1992; VALUCH 2021.



In 90% of the cases surveyed, the traditional family division of labor is still maintained, i.e., cooking is still considered more of a woman's job, but not exclusively: in one in five families, the father or grandparent also takes on some of the tasks alongside the mother. 15% of children are involved in household chores every day, including cooking, and 47% on weekends only. A third of them, on the other hand, do not participate in these activities at all.

Whether or not parents cook with their children is independent of their social status. In any case, it is clear that these occasions can play a very important role in terms of self-reliance and actual knowledge about food. Surprising even their teachers, the students proudly listed in the interviews what they help with at home and what they can prepare themselves. Learning to cook should be included in school education, but there was no institution in our sample that had a teaching kitchen.

For 75% of the families surveyed, weekend meals are more organized than weekday meals. But for 11%, there is no difference between meals on different days of the week. Weekend lunch is the most prominent occasion when 87.5% of families sit down together to eat, but dinner is also a shared meal for 71.6% of them. However, a shared family breakfast is only common in half of the cases.

Regardless of social background and occupation, a quarter of parents expect their children to carry on the family's eating habits later in life. 67%, however, are not so sure of this. There are some family habits that respondents would like to change to help their children become healthier adults: consuming more vegetables, salads, fruit, fish, and drinking water, fewer carbohydrates, and eliminating rushed breakfasts. Their perception of this issue is not correlated with their income, but it is correlated with their educational level. One in four families (mainly parents with higher education and higher income) places a high value on healthy eating. But when it comes to buying food, the most important factor is whether the family members like it. The composition and wholesomeness of the food is also important, but where it comes from, not so much. Surprisingly, the price of the product was at the bottom of the list of priorities in our sample.

Looking at the eating habits of the responding children and their parents, the general conclusion is that the practices of most of them only partially comply with the dietary recommendations for a healthy lifestyle. The majority of both children and adults eat four (36%) or three (31%) meals a day. Unfortunately, some children (4%) may also eat only two (!) times a day instead of the recommended five.

The responses of parents and children show that breakfast is not considered a family meal on weekdays. Even on the weekends, only for half of the respondents. Two-thirds of adults eat breakfast every day, but one in five only drink a fluid, such as coffee or tea, as their first meal. Children partly follow the family pattern. 56% of them eat breakfast every day, two-thirds at home, the rest at school (in the classroom or canteen). 34% (30% of lowerclassmen and 39% of upperclassmen) do not have time for it every day. But one in ten children goes to school hungry. For more than half of the students, following the family pattern, breakfast often consists of only drinking fluids: 6% every day, 50% several times a week only drink tea or cocoa, and there are even some that start the day with an energy drink. There is no difference between boys and girls in this respect. In addition to its physiological effects, skipping breakfast can have a negative impact on academic performance and behavior, and in the long term, also on healthy development. We found a higher proportion of children not eating breakfast (15%) in the group with



lower levels of education. This figure is twice as high as for parents with higher education. However, no such difference was found based on income level.

The place and role of the midday meal, lunch, is more stable than that of breakfast, for both parents and children. As shown above, canteen clients eat within the confines of the school. The majority (83%) of non-canteen clients (one fifth of respondents) eat a cooked, hot meal at home in the company of a family member (sibling, parent). 37% of responding parents eat lunch at home. Meals at home are mainly eaten in the kitchen or dining room, and for 15% in the living room. 6% of students eat in their room. This group may overlap with those eating alone at home (10%). 13% of non-canteen clients have to eat lunch at school, but not in the canteen, because of afternoon training or extracurricular programs. Many of them do not even have a cooked meal.

In the daily practice of adults and children alike, snacking often means grazing. Three-quarters of the children bring a mid-morning snack to school, mainly prepared by their parents. 10% buy it for themselves in the store. Mid-morning snacks are primarily sandwiches or pastries of some kind. Only in a third of the cases does snacking in the afternoon mean the consumption of raw, vitamin- and fiber-rich fruits, and even less often vegetables.¹⁶ Thus, the nutrition of most children and adults do not meet the recommendations, with only 49% of children and 41% of adults eating fruit and vegetables every day. Our data show similarities with the results of the National Nutrition and Dietary Status Survey¹⁷ that is based on wide sampling. Preferences are also evident in the canteen: most of the “don’t-like-it” dishes are vegetable-based.

Healthy eating is strongly correlated with social status as determined by income and education. Parental ideas about healthy eating and practices do not always overlap. Many people, regardless of where they live, are aware of the dietary recommendations, but only one in ten feels that their family is actually eating in accordance with them. For 41%, the intention is there, but the principles are not always possible to translate into day-to-day practice. Parents with lower incomes and lower levels of education often perceive their eating habits as being worse for long-term health. One third of the families in the sample have their own small garden. The cultivation of these, and the production of fruit and vegetables as part of health-conscious behavior, is more common among people with higher education levels in both urban and rural environments.

The almost unanimous opinion of parents is that shaping children’s eating habits is the responsibility of the family. This is in line with their view that the role of school is not particularly prominent in this respect, as well as their opinion that children will carry on the eating habits learned at home.¹⁸ A third of parents (those with higher education levels) think that school has a role to play in teaching healthy eating. In this context, the canteen can play a particularly exemplary role in the health-conscious development of children because, as we have seen, a large proportion of families do not eat properly.

¹⁶Eating at least 4 servings of fruit or vegetables a day is recommended. At least 1 of these servings should be fresh or raw. Potatoes do not count towards the 4 servings per day. 1 serving = 7–18 dkg (approx. one handful) of fresh, steamed or boiled, seasonal vegetable, salad, or fruit. For more details, see: www.okostanyer.hu, accessed May 1, 2023.

¹⁷Országos Táplálkozás és Tápláltsági Állapot Vizsgálatok [National Nutrition and Dietary Status Survey, (OTÁP)], <https://ogyei.gov.hu/otap>, accessed June 2, 2022.

¹⁸On the tensions between the values represented by school meals and family eating habits, see, for example: MAHER et al. 2020.



REPERCUSSIONS OF THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

In line with surges in Covid infections, schools and public catering as a whole were subject to stricter or less stringent central regulations from March 2020 to September 2022. As the disease spread, different practices emerged. Rural canteens were organized differently than urban ones, and the day-to-day operation of state- and church-run schools was not uniform either (JUHÁSZ – BATI 2021). The most stringent measure during the pandemic was closing all educational institutions for several weeks. However, the public catering service continued to operate throughout this period, providing three meals a day, hot cooked food and fresh fruit, to those in financial need.

In some places the food was distributed every day in plastic containers and delivered to homes. This solution resulted in high additional costs and a lot of plastic waste. In some places, one had to pick up the food at the commercial kitchen, which was dispensed into food containers brought from home. Because of parents' ignorance, sometimes the serving intended for children had to be increased because the consumer found it insufficient and complained about the amount of food. Instead of 2 dl of soup, which is the right amount for a small child, sometimes more than the adult portion (half a liter) was put in the food containers to support the families. The extra costs were financed by the operator of the kitchen.

During the months when schools were closed, most parents also worked in a new format, "home office," while also studying with their children in the context of "home school." This situation required a multifaceted reform of household management.¹⁹ The burgeoning practice of regular home cooking was dubbed "home canteen"²⁰ by social media at the time. Dietitians of the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition have launched an online advisory site²¹ to help parents implement a conscious, balanced diet during the pandemic, covering details such as shopping, planning out meals for several days, or daily fluid intake requirements. Many people have also learned to bake bread at home, following instructions from the internet, partly bringing back knowledge that has been out of everyday practice for more than fifty years. For them, homemade bread also symbolized family togetherness, love, and motherly care. In some cases, grandparents helped out by bringing cooked food to their children living in separate households. With limited shopping and food storage facilities at home, and the time-consuming nature of daily, regular cooking, many people realized how much help public catering provides on a daily basis in terms of providing for their families. Unlike before, at this point the overall perception of the canteen has changed in a positive direction.

"Home school" had a negative impact on students. Many of them experienced a significant deterioration of their physical condition: their performance at school also declined due to obesity or malnutrition. Children gained a clearer understanding of the importance of the daily rhythm of meals. They also pointed out afterwards that they drank more fluids during this

¹⁹The safety of the food supply and changing family eating habits in the home have triggered a new wave of research in both nutrition and social science, see, for example: ANTAL – PILLING 2020; NILES et al. 2021; HOLLIS – HANSEN 2022; RYAN B. et al. 2022a.

²⁰HÁZIMENZA, private Facebook group, https://www.facebook.com/groups/hazimenza/?locale=bs_BA, accessed February 10, 2022. 50 lunches from the pantry — downloadable ideas for "home canteen".

²¹Coronavirus, <https://merokanal.hu/koronavirus/>, accessed February 10, 2022.



period than they used to. (Which was often more due to the mothers' awareness, because they told them to drink, or because they had a drink ready for them next to the laptop.)

During the milder periods of the pandemic, children were allowed to return to kindergartens and schools, but until September 2022, some institutions would still close from time to time, as necessary. In schools, daily life has also changed in terms of social life and mealtimes. The main objective was to prevent the spread of the disease, everything else was subordinated to this. Wearing a face mask was mandatory. It was not possible to maintain a distance of 1.5 m in the classrooms, but efforts were made to limit the movement of children from different classes.

New practices have also been introduced in the use of the lunchroom. Wherever possible, not only class schedules but also lunch times were rearranged to avoid crowding and long queues. The children's autonomy also had to be limited: they were not allowed to take part in setting the table, for example. There was no time to chat during lunch as they had to finish quickly because the next class was coming. In some instances, children had their lunch temporarily in the classroom, with food delivered to them in individually wrapped plastic boxes. The new rules of lunchroom use, the wearing of masks, the shorter duration and more tense atmosphere of mealtimes were not positive developments for children. (This partly explains the large amount of waste generated in the canteen during this period.) Despite this, the number of children taking advantage of public catering has not decreased. On the contrary, it has been steadily increasing ever since, reflecting a positive turn in the perception of public catering, clearly driven by parents' financial considerations due to the low prices of the canteen.

The importance of public school meals in terms of children's development is illustrated with a poignant example. During the Covid pandemic, one of the children lost his mother. As a result of the tragedy, he did not want to eat. Or if he did, it was only by hand, without using cutlery. It took the attention and encouragement of classmates, the "motherly" love and patience of a teacher, and the family atmosphere of the school lunch for them to re-learn how to eat with a knife and fork, to re-adjust to day-to-day life.

The rise in food prices in Hungary started already in 2020, but it really reached its dramatic peak in 2022/2023, as a combined effect of Covid, adverse weather conditions, and inflation. The economic hardship has hit (and continues to hit) the bottom third of society particularly hard, exacerbated by the fact that even basic foodstuffs can sometimes become scarce. During the Covid pandemic, many people became aware of the importance of healthy eating for their family's well-being. However, this is increasingly costly to put into practice due to high food prices. This is why public catering is so important, as it is available at affordable prices or even free of charge. The canteen is a good example of health-conscious eating for both children and parents, because the rules require, for example, that fresh, seasonal fruit and vegetables be on the menu every day. It is also positive that the prices paid by consumers have (so far) not increased too much in public catering, as the operators of public kitchens are more likely to provide more financial support to cover the increased energy and raw material costs.

The examples we presented here demonstrate that the public catering system has adapted flexibly to changing circumstances and has met its challenges in difficult times. It has been able to act as a trusted helper for families, in the interests of consumers. Its role and importance have increased in the eyes of consumers. However, from the perspective of school social life, social relations, and pedagogical objectives, the practice of limiting meal times and space use — which emerged in an exceptional situation — cannot be sustained for long. Time spent in the lunchroom means much more than eating a plate of hot food. Food and eating are at once mediators



and communication channels that strengthen community cohesion. This is one of the reasons why it would be useful to actively involve children and parents in the public catering system.

Summary

The interdisciplinary research called “The social embeddedness of children’s public catering. Issues and opportunities” has introduced a novel approach in Hungary to the study of children’s school catering as a whole into the professional and wider dialogue on the subject. The “foodscape” approach to the school canteen (i.e., one that focuses not only on food, but also on lunchroom activities, meals as a whole, consumers, children and parents, as well as meals at home) provides a more nuanced picture of the eating habits and nutrition of children in the canteen and at home. The research proposed a perspective that has so far not been reflected in surveys of public catering. In doing so, it also sought to provide ways for a more thorough consideration and response to issues relating to the successful and sustainable operation of canteens.

One of the key findings of the study is that, despite its volatility and exposure to environmental challenges, the public catering system may play a key and increasingly important role in the life of local communities, particularly in bridging social inequalities.

The research has also shown that, although there is a need for it on the part of families, there are only traces of teaching materials and knowledge elements related to healthy lifestyles, including nutrition, in education and school life. In fact, it is not really about textbook knowledge. Rather, it is about the practice — more important than textbook knowledge — that is reflected in daily meals during the school years, the relationship with food, and communication about food.

The lunchroom is the setting for the canteen experience, but children also eat in other areas of the school, mostly in the classroom, and even in the vicinity of the school. Most of them take advantage of both forms during the day. It depends on the school, the teachers’ own practices, and serious, conscious parental groundwork whether there is an organized framework for eating in the classroom. Is it formally distinct (both in time and at the activity level) from the learning process? Can they wash their hands? Do they have access to drinking water? What foods do they bring to school? What happens to the leftovers, the waste from the mid-morning snack or boxed lunch? All of the issues raised here are important if our objective is to achieve health-conscious and sustainable nutrition. The equipment and furniture of the school lunchroom, the course of the meal, and the amount of time available are also essential conditions for success. Their inadequacy can also have a negative impact on children’s social life, socialization, and autonomy. (This also became quite evident during the Covid restrictions.) Children’s daily nutritional practices can in no way be interpreted independently of the school context that has just been outlined.

Alongside the needs of children, the role of the other members of the system cannot be neglected if the objective is to run a successful public catering service. It is the responsibility of the kitchen, the food service manager, the suppliers of raw materials, and the operator of the kitchen to provide children with food that meets age-appropriate needs and nutritional requirements. One of the things they need to do is consider consumer needs when designing the menu. An important indicator of the operation is the amount of waste generated. Documenting this and evaluating the results are also part of the operation of the canteen.



Communication channels that monitor consumer satisfaction must be established and maintained. Children are open to this and are happy to express their opinions in a playful way. We must go beyond the practice of previous decades: we must strengthen cooperation with parents, continuous dialogue, and the activities of canteen committees. Parent-teacher conferences focusing on public catering as well as healthy eating or knowledge sharing in other forums can offer a viable solution to parental disinterest that stems from lack of information.

The role of adults in children's immediate school environment in modeling, educating, and socializing is taken for granted by most. The same expectations, however, do not apply to processes in the lunchroom, nor to the activities of kitchen staff and teachers. Albeit, it would be very important for children to be surrounded by a supportive, helpful, and loving atmosphere even during meals outside their homes.

Our research has already had a direct impact on the schools involved in the study as well as public catering services. The children cooperated with us with great interest and enthusiasm. They were happy to express their opinion. Even the youngest ones demonstrated a wide range of theoretical and practical knowledge about nutrition. Thanks to our questions and fresh perspectives on the issues, food service managers and teachers have started to look at their canteen's daily practices differently. During the fieldwork, we also sought to share best practices. We have tried to provide expert advice, but also to help the institutions solve specific situations. (For example, one member of our group, who is a trained chef, supported a kitchen by volunteering to cook for an entire week. Meanwhile, they managed to introduce new recipes and processes as well.)

As an output of the research, recommendations were made in light of our results. We also wanted to strengthen communication between the parties involved in public catering by providing feedback of our findings. We shared our experiences not only with service providers but also with parents, in parent-teacher conferences. Most importantly, we stressed that central decisions and regulations cannot provide viable and valid solutions everywhere, so it is prudent to first evaluate the current situation of public catering at the local level and then develop the steps to be taken in the future.

In some places, we have been involved in the development of local municipal-level plans for public health; our insights and the results of our surveys have been incorporated into their program for the following year. Our collections have also resulted in a rich database of questionnaires, photos, and interviews about today's eating habits, which may be useful for further research. Another development related to our project is the launch of investigations into the history of public catering.²² The most significant success and recognition of our work so far is that the insights of the joint project of the Institute of Ethnology of the Research Centre for the Humanities and the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition [OGYÉI] are being incorporated into the proposal — prepared by OGYÉI — for the amendment of the regulation on public catering at the national level.

²²Our results have been summarized at an international conference, among others. The most significant of these was the Conference on School Meals (<https://www.hvl.no/en/research/conference/conference-on-school-meals/>, accessed February 10, 2023), held in Bergen, Norway, in June 2022. The meeting, with a focus on ethnographic perspectives, explored the canteen using social science and nutritional science methods, thus confirming the value and international relevance and validity of our research and perspectives. Several Scandinavian examples have also demonstrated that ethnography can be particularly useful for mediation within the public catering system.



The main characters of school catering are children. Their consumer approach, their “interpretation of the canteen” has nonetheless not been emphasized in previous research. The interdisciplinary study briefly summarized here is perhaps most innovative in this respect. With our project, the work has only just begun, and there are still many questions to be answered, which also hold further opportunities for ethnographic research on food culture. Their social benefit, however, makes the fresh results and new aspects of research tangible even in the present. It can spark a rethinking of the system at different organizational levels, inspiring all those involved in its regulation and operation — for a sustainable public catering service accepted by the community.

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