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School food provision in Germany - A first analysis of the role of organic produce

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Abstract

School meal provision in Germany is changing from a type of supplementary food provision towards full warm school meals. Reasons for this transition are longer school days, the expansion of the all-day school model, and an increasing interest in a healthy nutrition for children and young people. However, the organisation of school meal systems is patchy and confusing; there is an enormous range of services in various qualities. This paper describes the current situation and explores chances for sustainable school meal systems emerging out of this change. The focus is on the use of organic food in school meals.

1 Introduction

The school system in Germany is undergoing changes and, as a consequence, the demand for public school meal provision is increasing. The reasons include changes in the German school organization towards an all-day school system, longer school days as well as the rising awareness for children's health. The growing amount of children with allergies and weight problems in Germany similarly requires dealing with. Thus the offer for public school meals including a warm lunch has to be adapted in order to meet many different needs especially of the pupils. Organic school meals may contribute to a healthy, environmentally friendly nutrition and serve as a vehicle for food education at school.

1.1 Purpose

The aim of this study is to gain a first insight into the school food situation in Germany. Of special interest is the role of organic food in German school meal provision, as there is very little data available on this. We cannot give an overview over all German states here. For this reason we focus on the two federal states of Berlin – representing the East German legacy of warm school meals - and North Rhine-Westphalia, representing the situation in the western part of Germany.

2 Methods

This paper is based on a desk study analysing publications, official documents, newspapers, and websites informing about school food and complemented with information from interviews with experts in the federal states of Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia.

Furthermore data from two case studies for school food provision in North Rhine-Westphalia are presented, focused on secondary schools. These are publicly available portrayals which were generated during an organic information project focused at the school meal sector in the Federal Organic Programme. The two examples have representative character for the current situation in North Rhine-Westphalia and illustrate easy, successful adoption of organic produce in schools.

3 The current situation of public school meal systems in Germany

For decades school meal provision had only a low priority in the Federal Republic of Germany, whereas in the former German Democratic Republic pupils were served warm meals until 1990. In western Germany, the normal type of school lunch has been more like a supplementary food provision rather than provision of full warm meals. This was only different at all-day schools, but this type of school was a minor part of the school system until recently. Today school days are longer in Germany and since the children spend more time at school, a solution for a full warm meal provision is needed. At the moment German school meal provision is inadequately structured and insufficiently organised due to the fact that there is no compulsory regulation which includes all federal states. Each federal state government is responsible for school education and school meals within its own borders. This results in a broad variety of institutional, organizational and financial structures of school meal systems. Particularly in western Germany the development of full school meal provision is a completely new field. This is due to the fact that until now vending machines and school kiosks were the dominant form for on-grounds school food availability. With the expansion of the all-day-school model since 2003, the situation is changing and more and more professional caterers are involved in school meal provision.

To bring together both knowledge and experience in school meal provision and to create a central contact point, nearly all federal states opened coordination centres solely orientated to school meals and school food

provision. For example, these centres give advice to schools which intend to build own canteens or search for reliable caterers.

Organic food is included in this changing process but on a smaller scale than it might be. The drivers come firstly from organic-sympathetic bodies such as NGOs with a view to a greater diffusion of organic produce, secondly from parents concerned about the health of their children and thirdly from the political arena in support of both thrusts. Sometimes public authorities refer to the official guidelines of the German Society for Nutrition (DGE – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ernährung e.V.) which recommend a proportion of 10% organic food in school meal provision. The recommendation is the result of a dialogue process between the DGE, Consumer Groups and the consultancy Ökologischer Großküchenservice (ÖGS), as organic foodservice representative. Nationwide, the dominant forms of school food provision are by means of kiosks and vending machines. Parents Initiatives, often school caretakers (janitors) and increasingly teachers are the main stakeholders who care about the school food. Currently the schools and regional authorities are responsible for their individual concepts for school food and its provision. Often the aspect of organic food is considered less in the daily business.

3.1 School meal provision in North Rhine-Westphalia

A very diverse structured system is identifiable in North Rhine-Westphalia when considering school meal provision. No compulsory declarations concerning organic food are made by the government. However, the public authorities refer to the official guidelines of the German Society for Nutrition. Some case studies in North Rhine-Westphalia demonstrate good results but these examples are individual examples, mostly developed by teachers' or parents' initiatives.

The first case is the *Realschule im Kreuzviertel*. This school provides food for 70 pupils daily in a school kiosk in Münster. Food is served with a contingent of organic food of more than 20%. An important fact to consider is that the school kiosk is managed by pupils in a self-reliant way. This initiative was created by two teachers. The pupils care for the sale of food and this presents a good opportunity for several pupils to get involved in a small business venture project. The school works in cooperation with a regional bakery which delivers bread rolls daily. Furthermore, local apple juice in organic quality is served.

The second case is the *Annette-von-Droste-Hülshoff Gymnasium* in Dülmen. The school was established 10 years ago so in fact it is a very young one. In this case the school kiosk was created by a parent's initiative. Since the school is relatively new, the school kiosk does not have to deal with a great number of pupils. About 150 bread rolls and other snacks are sold daily. More or less four mothers care for the purchasing, processing and serving of the food. They are coordinated and supported by one teacher. If organic products are just barely more expensive than other qualities they choose to buy them. Otherwise non-organic food is bought. As in the previous case study, this school also receives its bread rolls from a local bakery. The share of organic food is around 6-10%, but the focus lies on fresh and healthy food. Sweets, only in organic quality, are sold but for a higher price to support healthy food habits. The experience here is that scholars buy less of more expensive items, or buy them less often (in this case sweets). The teacher responsible is very pleased about the feedback and considers his concept to sell more healthy food to the young persons substantiated.

3.2 School meal provision in the city state of Berlin

In comparison to North Rhine-Westphalia, the schools in Berlin are one step ahead in the organisation of school meals. There all-day schools provide a warm lunch for all pupils up to the 6th grade.

In Berlin the first major step to improve the school food system was carried out in 2003 with the development of the *Berlin Quality Criteria* (Berliner Qualitätskriterien). These criteria address purchasing and processing of school food as well as meal selection, transport and so on. They focus on primary schools. Especially the recommendation for the adoption of 10% organic food in the daily school food provision was innovative in Germany. Even if the criteria do not have any obligatory character, they provide a basis for all stakeholders. Meanwhile the Berlin Coordination Centre has accomplished that the quality of the food is one of the determinants in the call for tenders and not only the price of the offers.

All in all, the school food system for primary schools, all of which are all-day-schools, is well organized in the city state. The Berlin School Law from 2004 makes the offer of a full lunch in all primary schools mandatory. School meals are provided by professional caterers. Nevertheless, the secondary schools have no guidelines for a school food system. The public authorities are not involved in this topic and no funds are available for

this purpose. This is attributed to the federal state of Berlin spending all the money for the construction of a reliable meal provision for primary schools.

By now 11 of the 12 districts recommend demanding an organic food contingent of 10% from all catering firms. Some plan an increase up to a 20% share of organic food and one district is even planning a share of 30% organic food in the daily food provision in primary schools. For poorer districts in Berlin a 10% organic food contingent is still practicable, but an increase, which is always connected with an increase of the school food costs, is not feasible.

The well-organised and wide-spread offer of school food in the primary schools and the high participation provides an opportunity for more and also improved professionalism. This is especially so with the support of current policies which provide clear, practical guidance on integrating organic produce.

4 Discussion

In both North Rhine-Westphalia and Berlin two main constraints were identified which often obstruct a greater spread in the use of organic food in school meal provision. These are the price of the individual school meals and also the lack of willingness for the adoption of more organic school food by public authorities. Sustainable and/or organic school food is an emerging topic for all German stakeholders who are involved in the process of school catering, including teachers, school directors, parents and public authorities. Given that the situation in Germany is undergoing far-reaching changes and that these changes will take some time, it should be possible to spend more money for the school meals if the organic portion should increase. Even if the whole catering system for schools all around Germany is still in its infancy, there are many initiatives and projects underway where organic food finds its integration successfully.

5 Conclusion

Other European countries such as Italy and Finland have better established school meal provision systems at their disposal than Germany does with regard to the quantity of served warm school meals – which also requires a higher level of organisation and professionalism (Nielsen et al. 2009). Some, such as Italy, also have more developed systems for the incorporation of organic food than Germany does. Even so, the current situation in Germany is a chance with many opportunities for all stakeholders to create a well-organised school meal system in all federal states. It will be important for all stakeholders to focus on professional school food systems on the one hand, especially when addressing the price barrier, and to regard the aspect of organic food provision on the other hand, preferably in a linked process. In the short term any development will need to be largely bottom-up, if public authorities remain slow to adopt. The newly established coordination centres for school food in all federal states could and should play a key role in this process.

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