

Barriers and possibilities for using organic ingredients in school meal systems

By: Hannah Wirenfeldt Schmidt and Stine Rosenlund Hansen

Background

In Denmark, there is a growing focus on food and its importance for our health, as well as on food additives, which may be harmful to both humans and the environment. In our daily lives, we are exposed to more and more chemicals, and no one really knows which impact they have on our health. Some of these substances come directly or indirectly from our food. For instance, a diversity of pollutants, including pesticides, plastics, metals, radioactive substances and medicines can be found in meat. In addition, there may be many additives that are added to food to improve durability, appearance, taste and texture. Many of these substances are suspected to be carcinogenic or endocrine-disrupting in large or small doses, and can affect our health in many other ways.

This problem has motivated us to write the report “Barriers and possibilities for using organic ingredients in school meal systems”, since organic food does not contain these chemicals. The overall aim of writing the report was to examine ways of increasing the use of organic ingredients in school meal systems. We chose to focus on examining the cases, in which municipalities had chosen to outsource the school meal system to a private company. To this purpose, we selected two Danish cases, in which our work would take its starting point. These are Roskilde municipality which cooperates with the company “Frydenholm”, and Hoeje Taastrup municipality which cooperates with the company “123-skolemad”.

The report considers the following aspects:

1. The arguments that two Danish municipalities mention in relation to using, or choosing not to use, organic ingredients in school meal systems.
2. The reasons for school meal companies to use, or not to use, organic ingredients in their production as well as the challenges they meet in relation to organic food.

In relation to analyzing how the municipalities organize the school meal systems, we include issues such as the most common arguments used to legitimize their choice of meal system, objectives, involvement of users, most relevant decision makers etc.

In the case of school meal companies, the project includes an analysis of barriers such as economy, supply of organic ingredients, structural conditions, cooperation with municipalities etc.

Methods

School meal systems are enacted, and planned in a field of politicians and officials and therefore we found it necessary to make use of a tool (theoretically or empirically based) to gain understanding of this field. Among the things we were interested in, were aspects such as which conditions, decisions are made on, what kind of framework controls the decision makers, and how decisions are legitimised (e.g. “Are decisions based on rational arguments or is something else influencing decision makers?”).

To help us gain insight in this, we found the book: ”Rationalitet og magt – et case-baseret studie af planlægning, politik og modernitet”¹ (Rationality and power – a case-based study of planning, politics and modernity) by Bent Flyvbjerg, very inspirational.

Furthermore, we found inspiration in an article by Annika Agger: ”Kommunikativ planlægningsteori – nye idealer for borgernes rolle i planlægningen”² (Communicative Planning Theory – New ideals of the citizen’s role in planning). These two texts are used as a theoretical starting point for our interview guides and are also used as an analytical tool.

¹ Flyvbjerg 1991a

² Agger i Jensen et al 2007: Kapitel 2

Bent Flyvbjerg is strongly inspired by Michel Foucault, and his ideas of power, rationality and truth are not understood as solid concepts, but as concepts which are interdependent and constantly changing. "Power produces rationality and truth. Rationality and truth produces power"³ What is considered rational and true is not objective but is a product of struggles for power. Furthermore, power can be possessed via argumenting and acting (or at least making it seem like you act) in accordance with what is believed to be rational and true. Power is not concentrated in the municipality or amongst the politicians but is present in all relations and is constantly re-negotiated. This understanding of power, rationality and truth is important in understanding why some subjects are considered to be of great importance in the agenda of school meal systems, while others are not spoken of. It can also explain why some arguments are used and accepted more than others.

In his book, Bent Flyvbjerg examines how rationality and power affects each other in a field of planning, politics and modernity, using the Danish city Aalborg as a case. Bent Flyvbjerg argues that in our democratic society political decisions about planning should ideally be based on rationality-to-power relations, which requires that decisions are based on rational considerations and includes relevant scientific knowledge. He found that this is not always the case in reality.

In stead the reality is determined by men of power. This happens when they advocate their views based on manipulative documentation, which then creates the foundation of knowledge for decision-making. A strategy can also be to repeat a claim enough times for it to be finally perceived as reality.

Our report does not include a complete analysis of power relations in the two cases, as Flyvbjerg has made in his examination. But his discussion of the terms power, rationality and truth, which we have now referred superficially, has helped us gain insight in the less obvious conditions that can affect politicians in their choices of action.

³ Flyvbjerg 1991: 124

Empirical knowledge

Several interviews have been conducted with important actors related to the municipalities and school meal companies. We wished to perform interviews with actors representing each of the four involved parts (Municipality of Roskilde, Municipality of Hoeje-Taastrup, the company 1-2-3 Skolemad and Frydenholm A/S)

In the case of the municipalities we wanted to interview actors, who were close to the decision-making process when the school meal systems were first implemented, but also with actors, who possessed a more present knowledge about the municipalities' current work with the school meal systems.

In Hoeje-Taastrup we interviewed Mayor Michael Ziegler, since he has been very engaged in the school meal system. But because he did not possess a detailed knowledge of the decision making process, we also found it necessary to perform an interview with an actor who worked with the practical tasks during the start-up of the school meal system. This was to help us gain insight in the daily work, and in considerations and discussions, which had taken place before Michael Ziegler became the mayor. Therefore, we interviewed Nina Andersen, who was an important actor in the implementation and the daily running of the school meal system in Hoeje-Taastrup.

In Roskilde municipality we interviewed Kirsten Blicher Friis, because she was a central actor at the time when the school meal system was decided and implemented. We also performed an interview with Mads-Peter Klink Engelhardt, who is the project manager of the school meal system today.

To gain insight in the two companies' experiences with-, and considerations about organic food, we interviewed Jan Michelsen, who is the managing director of the company 1-2-3 Skolemad, and Karen Lindgaard, an employee in the company Frydenholm, who is responsible for the daily running of the school meal system.

Futhermore we made informal visits to a school canteen in Hoeje-Taastrup and spoke with the canteen employee about her work in the canteen and her perception of the students' attitudes towards organic food and their preferences of food in the school canteen.

The project is also based on knowledge from our earlier work with school meal systems, which included interviews with canteen employees as well as a focus group interview with students (approximately 13 years old).

Brief description of the cases

Roskilde

The municipality of Roskilde has approximately 81.000 inhabitants and 18 schools. As a part of the project "Det Gode Maaltid" (the decent meal) the municipality serves organic meals in day-care institutions and schools. The municipality have had a school meal system for many years, but started to serve healthy organic meals in 1997. The schools meals contain approximately 90 % organic ingredients. The former mayor was an important driver behind the organic school meal system and the project was therefore a political initiative. In the beginning the school meal system was handled by the municipality, but now it is outsourced to the company Frydenholm. By contract this company is obliged to deliver school meals which are organic and follow the national nutritional recommendations. This contract is valid until spring 2009.

Each school has a kitchen suitable for the preparation of food, and each school has an employee working in the canteen, with the responsibility of the daily running of the canteen. The municipality is responsible for the part of the school meal system that takes place in the school (establishment of kitchens, salary for canteen employees, structural conditions of the lunch break), the canteen employee on each school is responsible for some level of preparation of the food, setting of prices and marketing, while Frydenholm is responsible for everything outside of the school (planning of menus, logistics, calculation of nutritional value etc.).

Frydenholm

Frydenholm A/S is established with the objective of making organic food available for a larger number of people. The company is certified to prepare organic food, and it delivers meals and ingredients for public kitchens, institutions (day-care institutions, nursing

homes, schools etc) and private companies. In our report we have only focused on the company's school meal production.

The company consists of a grocery store, a production kitchen and meat slicing section. The school canteens can buy products from both the grocery store and the production kitchen (both raw ingredients and nearly prepared meals) and then finish the meals in their own kitchens.

Frydenholm A/S delivers ingredients or meals to all schools in Roskilde and a few schools in other municipalities on Sjaelland (Zealand).

Students/parents pay for each meal when it is bought in the school canteen. Pre-ordering is not possible.

Hoeje-Taastrup

The municipality of Hoeje-Taastrup has approximately 45.600 inhabitants and 12 schools. Seven of these have a school meal system and soon the meal system will be expanded to the last five. The school meals are delivered from the company 1-2-3 Skolemad, which has a three year lasting agreement with the municipality. There is no contract that binds the company to comply with certain standards, but there is an unwritten agreement that the meals have to be of a certain nutritional standard, and that it should be suitable for students with different religious and ideological convictions.

The school meals are not organic but 1-2-3 Skolemad has a few organic products on the menu, and in February and March 2008 they arranged a few weeks with a special focus on organic food, making posters and bookmarks for the students informing them about the benefits of organic food. This was combined with a larger amount of different organic products on the menu than usual.

Each school has a kitchen which is established by the municipality and it is suitable for light preparation (re-heating and slicing bread) and sale, but not for cooking. The municipality also pays for a canteen employee on each school. He or she has the responsibility of heating, cleaning and selling the food. The sixth-graders are involved in the school canteen. They help with heating the meals, cleaning the kitchen and selling meals. The company is responsible for delivering finished meals, setting the prices,

marketing, making guidelines for how to prepare the students for the work in the canteen and they also produce educational material for the teachers to use in their classes.

1-2-3 Skolemad

The company 1-2-3 Skolemad was founded in 2005. It delivers school meals to schools in various parts of Denmark (approximately 35 schools at present time, but the number is increasing). The food is produced de-centrally by different suppliers, but 1-2-3 Skolemad develops the recipes and menus and they are responsible for quality control of the finished products. The food is gathered twice a week in two central warehouses and is then packed and transported to the schools in accordance with what the canteens have ordered. In the canteens the food is chilled or frozen.

The students can order and pay directly in the canteen or they can pre-order at home, using the Internet.

Results

The purpose of our report was to provide some suggestions to ways, in which the use of organic food in school meals can be disseminated, and to how municipalities and school meal companies can work, separately and together, to increase the use of organic food in school meals.

Overall, it has become apparent that there are a number of barriers which must be overcome, in order for organic food to be promoted in school meals.

The most apparent problem for school meal companies is that there are only a few suppliers of organic full-and semi-manufactures, and that the ones, which exist, are considered to be unreliable suppliers, who lack the know-how required to supply a larger catering company. In recent years, more and more suppliers of organic products have emerged, but the selection of prepared products can still not live up to the companies' needs. This is especially a problem if the school meal concept does not include the preparation of food within the school canteen.

Additionally, many of the major suppliers will not supply organic products in small quantities. In cases where school meal companies are dependent on cooperation with other caterers, it may therefore be difficult to make demands in relation to shipments, as long as the company can only purchase small quantities of a given product. Another significant barrier is the fact that the organic products, particularly full-and semi-manufactures, are significantly more expensive than the equivalent conventional products.

The comparison of the two cases 1-2-3 Skolemad and Frydenholm, have demonstrated that the type of issues specifically associated with organic products emerge less, if the organic products are implemented in the start-up phase, instead of being introduced in an already well-established system.

One possible solution to these problems is to incorporate the organic products in the

school meal concept from the beginning, so that it forms the foundation stone for the construction of the company. In this way, it will be possible to organize menus while considering which ingredients are available in an organic variant, and in this way making sure to use more of the low-cost basic commodities. Another action that could be beneficial to the possibilities of increasing the share of organic products, is for more school meal companies to come together in a network that can both share know-how, and more importantly, can go together to buy organic products in amounts that will be of interest for wholesalers. This will increase the school meal companies' opportunity to influence the supply and prices of organic products.

The analysis of the decision-making processes in the two municipalities, Roskilde and Hoeje Taastrup, has shown that the municipal focus areas for school meals are dominated by national policies and discussions. In both municipalities, government subsidies have played an important role in placing organic food on the agenda. Therefore the themes, which are emphasized at a national level, are also regarded as important in local politics. With the change of government in 2001, a shift in the weighting of organic foods occurred, and today health and nutritional concerns dominate most of the national school meal debate. This is reflected in the local, municipal debate, and health and nutrition have proven to be issues, which take most of the focus, when we talk school meals. This means that there is less room to focus on areas other than health. The concepts of health and organic are far from being contradictory, but are often seen as two differing priorities, because organic is almost exclusively associated with environmental policies and not with health promotion. In the context of school meals, health is therefore often weighted highest.

If the share of organic products in school meals is to be increased, it is important that there is support for the use of organic ingredients at a national level. Furthermore, it is necessary to articulate the issue of organic food in the dominating health context, so that health and organic are not understood as two different areas of focus, but as two areas that provide a positive influence on each other.

The analysis has further shown that a relatively small number of actors have direct access

to the decision-making processes in the two municipalities. Users, NGOs and experts have not been directly involved in the decision-making process. This means that the possibility of choosing organic food is very much dependent on what position the parties involved have to this area, and also whether or not there is someone who argue the case for organic, and if so, what power he or she holds.

The Danish school meal model, which is based on voluntary purchase and user fees per meal, requires that school meals are organized on the users' premises. At the same time school meals are a “hot” topic, which is discussed quite a lot among politicians, parent associations etc. This means that the companies experience different demands from many different actors. Since the companies are often hired by the municipality to deliver school meals, they have to take the municipalities' wishes into serious consideration, but at the same time they depend on the students to buy their products. This places the companies in a grey-zone between being market driven and politically regulated. It can be difficult for them to make a profitable business that satisfies all involved actors, due to the fact that politicians and students often have contradictory needs.

As mentioned earlier politicians have a very heavy focus on the nutritional value of the food (this focus is supported by parents and researchers), which sometimes leads to the food being “so healthy” that the students find it boring and do not buy it.

This means that the objectives set by municipalities and companies for school meals, have difficult conditions, if they are not in harmony with the users' requests. In this manner, the users are important participants, and support or opposition from them is essential for the success of a school meal system. Therefore, it is a challenge that there is generally a small interest in organic foods from pupils and parents. If, on the other hand, they are motivated to take an interest in organic food, and begin to demand it, organic products will have a much better position to be widespread.

Consequently, an increased focus on organic foods in school meals should be combined with more education about the effects of food production and organic foods, with the purpose of creating awareness of the changes that a shift to organic ingredients in school meals often result in.

A solution to some of the mentioned problems would also be to implement mandatory, publicly subsidised school meals, as seen in other countries and in some private schools and day-care institutions in Denmark.

Another challenge to introducing organic ingredients in school meal systems is that the market for warm school meals is very small at present. The two companies 1-2-3 Skolemad and Frydenholm, which are analyzed in the report, actually dominate the market at Sjaelland (Zealand) and there are only a few other companies in the country, which deliver warm, fully- or semi-prepared meals. 1-2-3 Skolemad and Frydenholm have very different ways of organizing school meals, and there is also a big difference in how many resources the two different concepts require from the municipality and schools. For many municipalities this is of great importance when choosing a school meal concept. If the municipality wishes to use organic ingredients in the school meal system, it is required that the municipality either produces its own organic food, or that it cooperates with the company Frydenholm. Both solutions are very resource-intensive. A key barrier to using organic ingredients in school meals is therefore, that no less resource-demanding solutions exist.

Procurement of school meals is an area that is dominated by many actors and if the use of organic ingredients is to be increased, it is necessary that users, as well as municipalities and companies are actively involved.