

# **One size fits all? – Differences in school food cultures identified in iPOPYP research**

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## **Abstract**

The goal of this presentation is to explore integration of organic food into schools from the perspective of school food cultures. First, the concept of school food culture is defined. The presentation is based on data and findings from the ongoing iPOPYP- “innovative Public Organic food Procurement for Youth” project, which focuses on how increased consumption of organic food may be achieved through procuring organic food in public food service for young people. Researchers in the iPOPYP project have collected available information on organic school meals and have also visited school canteens. Differences and similarities in school food cultures in Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland and Norway) and Italy are discussed. School food cultures reflect local food culture and different school meals systems. School meals can be included in educational services, schools can offer commercial food services or children can bring their lunch from home. Finland and Italy recognize school meals as a part of people’s right to education and serve warm lunch meals, whereas children in Denmark and Norway usually bring their lunch from home and there is a tradition with bread meals for lunch. This presentation shows that school meals and school food cultures are different in iPOPYP countries and illustrates that it is not possible to give one recommendation that fits all for how to integrate organic food into schools.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 School food culture**

Food is an important marker of cultural identity; people mark their difference from others through shared patterns of food consumption (Counihan & van Esterik 1997). Eating patterns are influenced by individual factors, social context and food availability. The ecological model, which is a framework to examine the relations and interactions between people and their environment, identifies three dimensions: individuals and their behaviour, physical and social environment. Studies in nutrition using ecological models of health behaviour have used the concept of school food environment to describe the physical factors that are associated with dietary behaviours of pupils (Cullen et al. 2007, Kubik et al. 2003). The school food environment has in these studies usually been operationalised as availability of vending machines and á la carte lunch programs.

In anthropology, Tylor (1871) introduced the concept of culture: “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Culture has subsequently been given various definitions and has been used in different contexts. In the context of school, school culture can be defined as shared beliefs and priorities driving the thinking and

actions of people within a school community. School food culture and school climate have been used in school improvement literature ([www.schoolculture.com/ideas.html](http://www.schoolculture.com/ideas.html)). School food culture has also been used recently by some organizations who arrange actions aiming at transforming school lunches to be healthy, sustainable and environmentally friendly, for example, the Food for Life Partnership network in England (<http://www.foodforlife.org.uk/>) and the Center for Ecoliteracy in the US (<http://www.ecoliteracy.org/>). For example, the Food for Life Partnership provides a whole school approach to healthy and sustainable eating with six steps to transform school food culture: school meals, food growing (school garden), cooking, farm links, school cooks, pupil power and parent power.

School food culture is here defined as shared beliefs and priorities driving the thinking and actions related to food at school. School food culture thus reflects both shared patterns of food consumption, national/local food culture and priorities in schools and education.

## **1.2 The iPOPY project**

The aim of the iPOPY project (2007-2010) is to study how increased consumption of organic food may be achieved by implementation of relevant strategies and instruments linked to food serving outlets for young people in some European countries (Denmark, Finland, Italy and Norway). Supply chain management, procedures for certification of serving outlets, stakeholders' perceptions and participation as well as the potential of organic food in relation to health and obesity risks are analysed. Because schools are central arenas for public food procurement for children and adolescents the project focuses on organic food served in schools. In addition to schools/municipalities in Denmark, Finland, Italy and Norway, a Finnish congregation and a Norwegian music festival are used as cases for public serving outlets for young people. More information about the project can be found at the iPOPY website <http://www.ipopy.coreportal.org/>. (Løes & Nölting, 2009)

## **2. Methods**

As part of the iPOPY project participating researchers have collected information (including publications, papers, reports and statistics) on organic school food in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Italy and based on this information national reports describing school meals systems have been published (Bocchi et al. 2003, Hansen et al. 2008, Løes et al. 2008, Mikkola 2008). Researchers have also visited a few school canteens in these countries and made observations, collected written material (including menus) and performed some short interviews with contractors and kitchen personnel.

## **3. Results and discussion**

The school meal systems varies in the iPOPY countries. In Denmark and Norway pupils in general bring their own packed lunches to school and some schools provide milk and fruit subscriptions (Hansen et al. 2008, Løes et

al. 2008). Some schools in both countries, especially Denmark, have started to provide, sell and serve lunches to the children. These commercial services have mainly provided sandwich type of dishes, bread and not cooked meals. In Finland pupils get a free warm lunch based on school food dietary guidelines. The pupils serve themselves a plate with a main dish including fresh vegetables, select bread and a beverage (milk or water) and carry their food to the table on a tray (Mikkola 2008). In Italy pupils get served warm lunch at school and the meal is paid by the parents (Bocchi et al. 2003, Morgan and Sonnino 2008). Italian pupils sit at tables and get served first the first course (a plate with pasta) followed by the second course, another plate with the main dish (a “protein” component and vegetables), and fruit as dessert.

The differences between the countries are illustrated in Figure 1. Finland and Italy recognize school meals as a part of people’s right to education and serve warm lunch meals, whereas children in Denmark and Norway usually bring their own lunches from home and there is a tradition with bread meals for lunch.

	<b>Warm lunch</b>	<b>Bread lunch</b>
<b>Educational service</b>	Finland, Italy	
<b>Domestic service</b>		Denmark, Norway
<b>Commercial service or public kitchen</b>		Denmark (a few schools)

Figure 1: School meal structure and service type in iPOPY countries

Additional differences in national school food cultures between iPOPY countries will be explored in the final presentation.

## 4. Conclusion

This presentation shows that school meals and school food cultures are different in iPOPY countries and illustrates that it is not possible to give one recommendation that fits all for how to integrate organic food into schools and increase consumption of organic food, which was one objective of the iPOPY project. By using the concept of school food culture we study how school meal systems are influenced by shared beliefs and priorities that drive the thinking and actions related to both food and education. School food culture adds focus on relations and interactions between people and their physical and social environment, and how these play a role in how school meal systems are structured and organized. School food culture can be used in characterizing differences in school food systems.

## 5. References

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