PUBLIC HEALTH PAST AND PRESENT

From poor law society to the welfare state: school meals in Norway 1890s–1950s

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This article examines the main trends in the history of publicly organised school meals in Norway, while casting comparative glances at Britain. First, it argues that the status of school meals today is strongly influenced by three intertwined strains of past tradition: poor relief, universal welfare and the ideal of full-time and nutritionally competent housewives. Second, tradition is also visible in the extent to which publicly organised meals are seen as solutions to problems – in the past to hunger or malnourishment, today to obesity and malnourishment – and not simply as a meal. Third, the creation of civil and health conscious citizens has, to varying degrees, been a part of the school meals programme, as the school itself has had, and continues to have, such an agenda.

Thus, it is hoped a new school meal would create citizens who take care of their own health, or, in a favoured expression of the day, develop health citizenship as their forebears developed political citizenship. It is also suggested that this meal would improve school attendance, concentration and attainment. Furthermore, in several African countries, for example, school meals are encouraged in order to solve a variety of problems concerning gender, education and health.⁶

With obesity and health citizenship in mind, the school meal has assumed a totally different *raison d'être* from its original intention, but the shift is perhaps not as dramatic as it may seem. When the school meal was established in the late 19th and early 20th century, the main issue was to provide children with sufficient food, but from the 1920s and in particular the 1930s it was, as today, not least about receiving the correct type of food. In fact, in a recent and wide-ranging article on poverty, science and school meals, James Vernon has argued that in Britain not only receiving enough of the correct food, but also eating the food “in the right way; becoming healthy and civil citizens” became embedded in the idea of school meals at quite an early stage.⁷ When the 1944 Education Act was passed in Britain, he claims that the school meal was extended to all children “to encourage particular mentalities of self-government, the internalisation of the lessons of a healthy diet, and the civility of society”, and, furthermore, that the meal was less an outcome of social democracy and welfare than “partly constitutive of them”.⁸

Vernon's interpretation raises the question of how important it was historically to instil civility and the new knowledge of nutrition compared with other aspects and in other national contexts. In Norway, it was first and foremost the vision of a universal welfare state that gave support to programmes to provide a free school meal. The meal's justification was firmly rooted in the problems of under-nourishment and later malnutrition among poor children, but to prevent its receipt from carrying the stigma of poverty, the meal should be offered to all pupils. In general, however, providing and choosing food was held to be a family matter; thus, the organised school meal was abolished as the welfare state eliminated mass poverty. Was civility, then, not an issue at all in Norway, and was food about quantity without any regard for quality?

This article mainly deals with conditions in the larger cities. Bergen in Western Norway is the chief example, but we will cast some comparative

Publicly provided school meals in primary schools were initially aimed at feeding the poor to enhance effective learning.^{1,2} This original purpose has influenced later developments in the area and the effect of past traditions can be clearly seen today when the school meal is back on the political agenda in several European states. Two features in particular are worth highlighting. First, in some countries the school meal retained its emphasis of feeding to still hunger even when hunger was no longer the major problem. A current issue in Britain, that school canteens serve food lacking in taste as well as quality, reflects this tradition. In 2002/3 only one in every two school-children in Scotland, primary and secondary, chose to eat such meals; whether or not this is the result of the meals' poor quality is unclear.³ Second, in other countries the meal's historical association with poverty came to serve as an argument to abolish the organised meal system as society became more affluent. Today the issue in Norway is that the absence of an organised school meal means that many children go without proper food during the school day. Many Norwegian school children bring packed lunches from home but do not eat them. Subsidised milk is available at nearly all primary schools, but only 57% of children participate in the school milk scheme; milk is evidently not children's favourite drink.⁴

In both Britain and Norway, a major concern is that school meals or the lack of such is producing schoolchild obesity, and new policies have been launched to turn the tide. Campaigners for an organised and healthy school meal emphasise that it would reduce the intake of sweets and fats while at the same time teaching healthy eating habits.⁵

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glances, especially at Oslo. Publicly provided school meals in these two cities have been investigated in detail: the political battles over the meals, their aims and organisation, and the famous “Oslo breakfast”, whose introduction and formulation relied heavily upon nutritional science.^{9–13}

In Norway, as everywhere in Europe, organised school meals were initially an urban phenomenon, but in the early 20th century some countries, among them England and Wales, adopted national legislation.¹³ No such formal regulation took place in Norway; school meals were always a voluntary municipal responsibility. Thus, there were many differences between larger and smaller towns and between urban and rural districts; some rural communities prescribed what food children were to bring to school, but few institutionalised a publicly funded meal. This diversity long characterised the general Norwegian approach to welfare: the central government was hesitant to assume responsibility and from the 1880s to the late 1930s welfare provisions were built up by social reformers in the larger cities, while reform in rural municipalities was slow for both ideological and economic reasons.¹⁴

1890S–1920/30S: FEEDING THE POOR

In the European context there were three important reasons for the introduction of the school meal: poverty and hunger made it difficult for children to learn anything at school; compulsory schooling put responsibility for the children in the hands of the authorities; and the wish to promote of the quality of the new generation and the nation's strength and power. Nevertheless, the school meal provoked controversy. In countries such as England, the Netherlands and Sweden, debate about the inclusion criteria and the effect of school meals on individual children and on societal responsibilities was intense.^{15–17} In Norway, a recurring topic of debate was the criteria for allocation: should school meals be offered to all children, or only to the poor? Social democratic and socialist parties in Europe demanded that all school children should be served a free meal at school; in their view it should not be necessary to be designated poor in order to reap the benefits of a good meal. Putting the school meal under the aegis of the poor law administration would inevitably stamp its recipients with the unacceptable shame and social stigma of poverty.

At the same time there appears to have been a constant and, in a European perspective, universal conservative fear that serving the poorest children food at school would make their parents less responsible and undermine their will to provide for their offspring.¹ Behind this fear was the conviction that the feeding of children was the family's responsibility. In Norway this debate was part of a wider discourse on the reasons for poverty and on the distribution of poor relief, but in the larger cities a consensus emerged that compulsory education made the government responsible for the children's well-being when at school.² Thus, in the 1890s the city councils of Bergen and Oslo voted to introduce a system of school-administered meals for needy pupils, who were to be given a free hot meal 3–4 days a week during the autumn and winter months. The number of pupils benefiting from these meals varied between the cities, different parts of the city and over time. In Bergen, the mean number was approximately 20% of all pupils, but during the First World War participation was much higher.

1920S/30S–1950S: SCIENTIFIC FEEDING, UNIVERSAL WELFARE AND AGRICULTURAL INTERESTS

Vernon points specifically to the techno-politics of the school meal (the canteens, the arrangement of tables) and to education, encouragement and supervision as techniques applied to refine children's habits.¹⁸ These techniques also

came to have a place in Norwegian schools. The director of the school medical services in Oslo (1919–1931), Carl Schiøtz, was a particularly emphatic advocate of the school meal as a pedagogical ritual.¹⁹ However, the main educational issue in Norway in this period was neither inculcating table manners nor, as Vernon suggests in the case of Britain, accustoming the children to a hot meal, but teaching schoolchildren to eat according to the latest nutritional knowledge. In Norway the hot meal came under early attack from medical experts. In his 1909 book on school hygiene, Professor Axel Holst raised some critical questions regarding its nutritional suitability.²⁰ He noted the lack of vegetables and argued that many of the children had difficulties eating the heavy and fat-laden school meal.

Schiøtz's critique of the prevailing hot school meal was more systematic. After having generally advocated reform for some time, he published an article in the *Journal for Hygiene* in 1927 that presented a completely revised program for school meals.²¹ On the basis of the latest scientific knowledge in nutrition, in particular vitamins, Schiøtz concluded that the hot meal was inappropriate for and even detrimental to the well-being, health and development of schoolchildren. Instead, he insisted, a breakfast consisting of crisp bread, margarine, cheese or sausage, an apple, a raw carrot or an orange, and milk would better serve their nutritional needs. In the early 1930s, Schiøtz's model was tested in Oslo and Bergen. The experiments confirmed his arguments: pupils given the special breakfast gained more weight than those who had received the customary hot meal.²² On the basis of these results, school meals in these two cities shifted from a hot meal to breakfast.

The “Oslo breakfast” placed school feeding in Norway under the dominance of the precepts of nutritional science. The goal of providing as much food as possible for the lowest possible price was superseded by the aim of giving school children the right food in scientifically calculated amounts that contained sufficient quantities of necessary vitamins and minerals. It might be suggested that Schiøtz's strong and personal interests in nutrition as science, combined with a firm and general political conviction that science was the only road to a modern and rational society, was of utmost importance in this “scientification” of the school meal.²³ The shift was all the more remarkable because it led to substantially increased costs. As in many European countries, the introduction of a minimum diet standard in relation to establishing levels of poor relief was discussed in Norway in the mid 1930s, and a heated debate over the relationships between income, nutrition and health took place, but minimum food standards were usually not an issue in the feeding of school children.

The main medical argument for providing food to everybody was that everyone should be taught the latest nutritional knowledge; thus, medical science and universal welfare principles pointed in the same direction. In 1935 the newly elected social democratic city authorities in Oslo implemented Schiøtz's model breakfast as a universal measure, free for all who wanted to participate. Actual participation varied between schools and city districts. In Bergen, where the social democrats were not as influential as in Oslo, a universal system of school breakfasts was never implemented. Although the city's school medical service annually argued in favour of universality, the school breakfast remained restricted to those who met the criteria of economic need.

Outside Oslo, debates grew more intense on the importance of ensuring that food was given to those who actually needed it. Vernon has argued that in Britain “the debate over the ethics of feeding hungry children” quickly “became technologized around the discussion of its nutritional mechanisms”.²⁴ But neither in Britain nor in Norway were the criteria to decide precisely who needed (and therefore deserved) a free meal

Figure 1 Image from a Bergen school (courtesy of Bergen City Archive).

absolutely clear, and in both countries needs tended to be related to parents' income rather than to the child's nutritional status. In fact, it would seem that the aim of supplying food to those who for health reasons needed it most was eventually abandoned.^{24–26}

With the introduction of the "Oslo breakfast", the school meal in Norway became a way to teach children good manners as well as how to choose the right food, but, as the debate over hot meal versus breakfast indicates, good food was more important than good manners. For example, milk was included by Schiøtz for its nutritional value but also to serve as a lesson in choosing the correct food: many Norwegian children at the time regularly drank coffee and had to be taught to drink milk instead.²⁷ However, the continuously strong focus on milk in school may also be seen as a by-product of the negotiations between the Labour Party and the Agrarian Party that paved the way for the Labour government in 1935: namely, an agreement to increase the prices of farm products, among them milk.²⁸ In 1937 officials argued that "a larger consumption of nutrients will put idle hands at work" and that the prevailing spirit of cooperation between workers and farmers gave hope for improving the diet of broad population groups.^{29–30} This combination of interests was not an exclusively Norwegian phenomenon; the relationship between nutrition and agricultural policy was an important issue throughout Europe in the 1930s.³¹ In the Netherlands the government organised a milk-in-school program to get rid of surplus milk, and Peter J Atkins has concluded that the provision of school milk in interwar England and Wales owed far less to nutritional precepts than to "a combination of economic and political factors".³²

In the early 1950s the number of school meals delivered peaked in Bergen and elsewhere; at that time about half of Norwegian pupils took part in some sort of breakfast system (fig 1).³³ The physical wants of children were a major issue behind the policy: food was served to feed hungry children and, while doing so, to teach them what to eat and how to eat. However, when social need was no longer seen as pressing, support for the policy collapsed as such meals weighed rather heavily on public budgets. The development of the post-war welfare state eliminated the spectre of children starving at home, or at least it established public welfare policies aimed at doing so. In addition, and most importantly, the 1950s were the heyday of the full-time housewife, who was presumed to be an expert in domestic sciences, including food and nutrition. Elisabeth Haavet has put it this way: "the homes should, in this period, be the arena for nutritional education" and "a variety of educational measures were directed towards the housewives".³⁴ Thus, while the hot meal was retained in England and in fact

even expanded in scope, according to Vernon in order to teach children civility, in Norway publicly provided school meals stopped entirely. The contrasting developments demonstrate that the school meal in Norway was prompted and sustained by socio-economic need and not the promotion of civility. In Norway the school as a totality was the main arena for instilling civility, not the canteen and the dining table. It was the family who was responsible, if economic conditions allowed, for feeding children. Thus, the politicians in the post-war period obviously trusted the country's full-time housewives to provide school children with the recommended packed lunch à la the "Oslo breakfast". The housewives heeded the call, and parents have continued to do so, even if many children tend to bring the lunches back home uneaten.

CONCLUSION: HEALTHY AND CIVIL CITIZENS AND THE PLIGHT OF MOTHERS

The encouragement of particular mentalities of self-government and the creation of healthy and civil citizens are inherent aspects of the compulsory school system as it was developed in the late 19th century. In accordance with prevailing political ideas, poor children were in particular need of societal support and guidance into the democratic era of the 20th century, but the discourse on supporting the poor developed into a discourse on universal welfare provision. Furthermore, universal principles found support in the medical discourse on scientific nutrition. In Norway the Labour Party's dominant position in some of the larger municipalities, and indeed its achievement of national power in 1935, combined with its strong belief in science as a political tool, paved the way for a universal approach to school feeding. In the interwar years Norwegian children were not fed primarily to encourage particular mentalities of self-government. They were fed because numerous reports stated that they suffered from under- or malnourishment. Science was extremely important in this argument, but nevertheless, the school meal must be firmly placed within the context of social democratic striving for universal welfare solutions and the rejection of shaming, or stigmatising, because of poverty. When the school meal became history in the 1950s, in the very heyday of the welfare state, the argument was that there was no longer a material or an educational need for such assistance.

This does not mean that the Norwegian school-meal program did not have a socialising intention. When Schiøtz attacked the hot school meal in the mid-1920s, he wanted a scientifically based meal, and an important part of such a meal would be to teach everybody, via the children, about healthy food. The abolition of the school meal in Norway, however, points to the strong ideological connotations of "the meal" as well as to the position of women in this phase of the welfare state; to prepare the meals was among the first duties of welfare state mothers, and they were trusted to do so according to the scientific recommendations they were provided with. For a long time this policy seemed to work; today, however, the packed lunch bag competes poorly with other, less healthy, options. Nonetheless, a prominent argument against the re-establishment of a public school-meal system in Norway today continues to be the familiar one that parents are responsible both for feeding their children and teaching them good habits.³⁵

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What is already known

- Organised school meals in Norway have been investigated as regards social policy, nutrition, education and economic policy.
- Few studies have discussed the different rationales for the school meal in different countries.

What this paper adds

- School meals were originally intended to feed hungry children and teach them correct nutrition, but today it is hoped they can be used to tackle obesity and improve learning.
- The relative historical importance of poverty, nutrition, lessons in correct nutrition and civility has varied between countries and over time.
- The importance of mothers as nutritional experts and of families as providers under different welfare regimes must be considered.

Policy implications

- The article favours an enhanced awareness of the social, cultural and political mechanisms that have historically been involved in such a “simple” thing as the feeding of school children.
- It begs for further investigations into the results of previous school meal policies: which problems have the meal actually solved, and under which conditions?

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