Reviewer's report

Title: School food policy at Dutch primary schools: room for improvement? Cross-sectional findings from the INPACT-study

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Reviewer: Rachel Carey

Reviewer's report:

This study makes a useful contribution to the field. As the authors emphasise, relatively few studies have been published on food policy in schools, and those that have been published typically describe the North American context. This study of Dutch primary schools addresses a clear knowledge gap. However, a number of issues need to be addressed and the manuscript requires editing by a native English speaker to correct minor grammatical errors that appear throughout the document.

Major compulsory revisions:

1. The objective of the study should be made clearer both in the Background section of the document. The objective is stated in general terms as investigating schools and parents' views of school food policies, with the objective of identifying opportunities to improve policy. However, the presentation of results suggests that the aim was to identify how many schools have rules about the food and beverages that are bought to school (for morning break, lunch and birthday celebrations), the perceived compliance with the rules by parents and children and the perceived enforcement of the rules by schools. The aims of the study should be stated more clearly up front.

2. The Background section of the document should ground the study more strongly in the existing literature and international policy context. For example, statements in lines 47-51 are currently unreferenced, and should reference the international literature on the importance of schools as priority environments in obesity prevention. The authors rightly observe that few studies have been carried out of the effectiveness of school food policies. However, they cite only two studies in the literature review (references 18 and 19) and others should also be referenced (e.g. Moore and Tucker's 2008 study in UK primary schools). The authors should also describe the knowledge gap more clearly in summing up the literature, and indicate why this study is necessary and what it aims to contribute. For example, have any other studies been carried out in primary schools in the Netherlands or other areas of Europe?

3. In line 102 of the Methods section, the authors state that during the lunch break, children may go home for lunch, but in the following paragraph, they state that children are not allowed to leave the school premises during school time. It may be that children are allowed to go home for lunch, but not allowed to go cafes or shops, but this should be stated more clearly.
4. Some aspects of the results are unclear. Under the sub-section ‘School food rules’ within the results section, the authors state that “more than half of the principals (57.1%) reported that their school had food rules…”, but in the following section ‘Communication about school food rules’, it states that “most schools (89.1%) had a written food policy…”. It is unclear whether 89.1% of the 57.1% of schools had a written policy (in which case, what form did the food policy take in the other schools? Did they have ‘unwritten rules’? Or did 89.1% of all the schools have a food policy, in which case this contradicts the earlier figure stated of 57.1%. This needs clarifying.

5. The results section also states that 78.2% of parents reported that their child’s school had rules about the food and drinks that could be consumed during the morning break. This figure is confusing (and seems too high) given that the authors stated earlier that just 57.1% of principals said that their schools had food rules. This should be clarified.

6. The Conclusion section focuses on possible improvements to school food policy. However, all the improvements discussed are improvements that schools themselves should make. There is no discussion about the role of the state in encouraging (or mandating) school food policies or funding other school food programs, such as nutrition advisory programs, traffic light nutrition guidelines or kitchen garden programs. Discussion about the role of the state in school food policy is a key theme in the literature and state policies such as these are now commonplace in some countries, so the reader might reasonably expect some discussion of the possible role of the state in the Netherlands

Minor Essential Revisions

The document should be edited by a native English speaker to correct minor grammatical errors that occur throughout the manuscript e.g. in line 80, ‘research on the school food policy at primary schools’ should be ‘research on school food policies at primary schools’, the section heading ‘Analyses’ should be ‘Analysis’ and line 327 should state, ‘parents should take responsibility’ (not responsibilities). These errors are too numerous to note them all here. The following issues should also be addressed:

• The sub-section on the ‘School food environment of Dutch primary schools’ should be moved from the middle of the Methods section to the Background section. It is out of context in the Methods section and detracts from the details of the study design

• A statement should be included in the Methods section on the ethical approach to gaining consent for participation in the semi-structured interviews and surveys

• In the section on ‘Study design’ the distinction between the ‘organisational’ and ‘executive’ level in schools is unclear and probably unnecessary. It should be removed

• The sentence on line 75 does not make sense due to repetitive clauses. The words ‘provide food and beverages’ should be removed

• The authors note in the section on ‘Strengths and limitations’ that a limitation is that not all data were collected in the same year. It is also unclear whether data
from parents and teachers/principals were collected from the same schools so that they could be correlated i.e. if parents were interviewed from a school, were the principal and year 5 teacher also interviewed and the results compared? If not, this would also be a weakness of the study. If yes, this should be stated in the study design

• In the Discussion section, two studies are cited (references 22 and 23) about the nutritional value of birthday celebrations and the authors state that ‘in general, classroom celebrations consist of low-nutrient calorie-dense snacks’. Both studies cited are from the USA and this should be stated rather than using the phrase ‘in general’

Discretionary revisions

• The references to Dutch ‘school food rules’ in lines 77 and 94 would be clearer if the authors indicated what kind of food rules Dutch schools typically have (e.g. rules about what types of food and beverages should be bought to school for morning snack and lunch)

• The section on the ‘Parental questionnaire’ is long and some of the information would be better communicated in a table. The table could summarise the questions and answer categories, rather than listing them in the text

• The results section states that 78.2% of parents reported that their child’s school had rules about the food and drink that could be consumed during the morning break, but only 42.8% reported that their child’s school had rules about what could be consumed during the lunch break. The difference is surprising, but is perhaps due to factors specific to the Dutch context. This could be taken up in the Discussion section

• The authors state that a key aim of the study is to identify opportunities to improve school food policy. It is unclear whether they asked principals and teachers during semi-structured interviews about their opinions on how school food policies could be improved, but if questions were asked about this, it would be valuable if the results were included

• In the Discussion section, the sentence on line 327, “parents should also take responsibility for fostering healthy eating habits among their children and should fully support and comply with the school food policy” could be interpreted as patronising in its tone. This may be an issue of translation into English, and the authors might want to review this sentence

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests