

13.2 Case Study—Co-Creating School Meals Services

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Introduction

All children in Italy receive free, compulsory schooling and have all the rights to school and community education services, including school meals, according to constitutionally founded basic educational principles. The decentralised education model operated by the State assigns overall responsibility for preschool, primary and secondary education to the Ministry of Public Instruction (instructional guidelines, learning goals, exit exams, school curriculum and organisation) and the administrative and operational side to the local authorities (school year scheduling, school closures/openings, building maintenance, etc.). The latter are responsible also for the complementary services that enable the right to education, such as school transportation, special needs and school meals. In the eyes of Italian law, the right to education marches in lockstep with the children's right to health.

To operate a school meals service, the municipal authorities must set up an SMJC (School Meals Joint Committee) composed of the CEd (Councillor for Education), pupil-parent representatives, teachers and a council expert. Tasked with basic advisory duties, the SMJC can, however, assume greater responsibilities.

Mapping the experience of the School Meals Joint Committee set up in Abbiategrasso, a town in the Metropolitan City of Milan, Lombardy, northern Italy, identifies three interconnected drivers of co-production in a basic school and community education service:

- the significant influence of the citizens in shaping the process;
- the opening of direct communication channels to connect the key stakeholders (the parents of primary and secondary school-goers, the teachers, the town council and the school meals provider), including online access to meeting minutes, monitoring reports and the SMJC's recommendations;
- the diffusion of sustainability best practices.

The Abbiategrasso case informs how the SMJC successfully addressed essential co-production issues, such as accountability, equity and the relationship between the lay persons and the professional staff.

Background

The school meals service is mandated by the Italian State to the town councils. Around 80% of these hire external companies to deliver five meals per week to 53.4% of Italy's school-goers, with preschool accounting for 64.4%, primary 26.7% and lower secondary just 6.1% (Ministero della Salute, 2014).

The SMJC established in 2000 by the mid-size municipality of Abbiatograsso (pop. 32,000) brings together the users of three public schools and the external school meals provider to 'co-create' meals for around 2000 pre-, primary and lower secondary school day students aged between 3 and 13.

Headed by the CE_d, the SMJC started out as a nine-member 'technical table' for the purpose of formal consultation with the stakeholders (parents, teachers, local authorities, school meals provider), but has since branched out in two additional directions: quality control, both independently and jointly with the council, and recommendatory, e.g., menu, service delivery, external provider contractual specifications.

The case study demonstrates that the organisation and the effectiveness of the school meals service have both benefited significantly from the readiness of the SMJC to develop its consultative role into a fully pro-active endeavour.

Under its guidance, new initiatives were launched, such as the 'zero-kilometre' organic food chain, for which it also helped to define the contractual specifications; the fight against food wastage; the reduction of waste; and the adoption of 'pupil-sized' tableware. The SMJC assisted in the definition of the special quality monitoring system procedures that involve the parent-representatives of all three school types in an average of three inspections per month, the results of which are posted on the Abbiatograsso council's website. It also gave the council the reach it needed to better identify and respond to the special needs and/or food ethics of pupils.

Hence, the SMJC has become a major enabling force in the school meals monitoring operations, allowing the council to take on education-related challenges that were previously beyond its limited capabilities.

Experiences

The Abbiatograsso school meals experience is a typical case of the co-creation and co-production of a complementary school and community education service. As a co-creator, the SMJC works closely with the council's technical and managerial staff to define the content, methods and contractual specifications of the school meals service, while the parents and the catering experts jointly define a healthy, balanced, tasty and appealing menu. As a co-producer, the SMJC acts both independently and in conjunction with the council staff to inspect the school meals provider's kitchen premises and equipment; the school cafeterias; the organisation of service and staff; the foodstuffs; and the quality/quantity of the portions.

The involvement of the SMJC members in the diverse stages of the decision-making process has created a new institutional arena in which the actors play a central role in shaping the school meals service.

Rated positive by all the key stakeholders, the Abbiategrasso initiative casts light on three interrelated and well-recognised co-production issues: accountability, equity and the relationship between the lay persons and the professional staff, otherwise known as the institutionalisation factors of success.

First, the dual accountability of the CED to the parents and to the town council and his/her attendance of the SMJC open citizen meetings are clear indicators of the council's sharp focus on education policies.

Second, the SMJC acts as guarantor, working alongside the council and the provider to create menus that take account of the school-goers' ethnic, cultural and health needs. Taking meals at school is an inherently educational ritual that offers several advantages in that it teaches even the smallest kids to eat properly and promotes socialisation and inclusion among peers.

Third, the SMJC case study has shown that bringing on board the citizens generates valuable inputs that go a long way to optimising the efficacy of the public service mission. The parents and teachers all acknowledge that the ongoing interactions afforded by the online and offline communication channels set up since the SMJC's inception have led to an overall improvement in the quality of the school meals service. Based on the knowledge that 'we're all in it together', the lay persons (parents and teachers) and the professionals (council technicians, service provider experts) have built a relationship of trust conducive to the transparent addressing of issues that concern both the town council and the service provider.

Given that about 70% of Italian schools deliver a school meals service and that only 52% have a pro-active SMJC, the Abbiategrasso case evidences several meaningful points of interest on the practice of co-production in service design and implementation.

Reference

Ministero della Salute. (2014). *Indagine conoscitiva sulla ristorazione scolastica in Italia*. Relazione 2014. Roma: Ministero della Salute.