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A content and thematic analysis of Welsh school food menu design and healthiness compared to present government guidelines

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All four United Kingdom (UK) nations have School Food Standards (SFS) which schools and local authorities must adhere to. Since the Welsh SFS were updated in 2013⁽¹⁾, the UK government has updated its healthy eating guidelines according to advice from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN)⁽²⁾. The Welsh government is committed to revising their SFS to reflect the most up-to-date scientific evidence for nutrients and food. This study aimed to quantitatively and qualitatively content analyse (CA) school food provision (i.e., menus and/or price lists) pan-Wales to determine the extent to which it meets the latest healthy eating government recommendations for school-aged children. Secondly, menu design was thematically analysed (TA) to ascertain the language used and design elements⁽³⁾.

Menus and/or price lists were collected cross-sectionally for the autumn 2023 term and 79% of the total population was sampled (n = 82/104). Welsh language documentation was translated into English via an online translation website prior to CA. The study protocol received approval from the Cardiff Metropolitan University School of Sport and Health Sciences ethics committee. The researchers developed an assessment tool inclusive of healthiness criteria based on SACN guidelines as well as the Welsh SFS and used this tool to CA and TA all 82 menus.

Local authority organised primary school food provision was most likely to meet the predetermined healthiness criteria. Most secondary schools lacked fruit-based desserts (64%), red meat (95%) and milk (55%). Moreover, occasionally secondaries exceeded the allotted frequency for processed meat (11%), potatoes cooked in oil (22%) and high in fat, salt and sugar mid-morning snacks (18%). Instances were found where the healthiness criteria, identical to the current Welsh SFS, were not fulfilled. Regarding the TA of menu and/or price lists, four key themes were identified: (i) language, (ii) signalling, (iii) imagery and (iv) design. 12% menus featured the Welsh language. Descriptive language was apparent for cooking methods ('freshly filled,' 'oven-baked') or to popularise dishes ('veggie-daws,' 'meatball wrapstar'). An array of keys and icons were employed to signal non-meat items or nutritionally balanced dishes. Logos, photos and illustrations were evident across most menus, yet the imagery could be seemingly unrelated to the school food provision. In particular, primary school menus were bright and colour was utilised to emphasise different weeks of the menu cycle. Issues around clarity were observed on secondary school price lists which could be overly long and include complex pricing structures.

This study has established the current school food and drink provision pan-Wales and provides policymakers with a baseline from which the SFS may be updated and include a formal monitoring process. Improvement in the amount and clarity of information on menus could also be considered at this stage.

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