



The barriers and enablers to providing healthy food in New Zealand secondary school canteens

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Establishing healthy lifelong eating habits in young people is important for short and long-term health⁽¹⁾. Schools are ideal setting to improve diet. However, research shows that many school food environments are unhealthy⁽²⁾. In New Zealand (NZ), the canteen is a popular food provision, particularly in secondary schools. This research aimed to explore the barriers and enablers to providing healthy food and beverages in NZ secondary school canteens. In 2022, 6 secondary schools were purposively selected to participate in semi-structured interviews about foods and beverages sold in schools' canteens and the factors that influenced this. In total, 11 stakeholders representing six schools and one staff member of an external catering company completed interviews. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach⁽³⁾. Four themes were developed. Theme 1 *Action-oriented school policies that are based on healthy eating principles can facilitate healthier canteens* highlighted the use and characteristics of policies. The subtheme highlighted that *Mandatory policies are more enforceable*. Theme 2 *Multiple component opt-in programs or interventions facilitate a healthier school food provision* shows that opt-in government interventions (e.g. Ka Ora, Ka Ako, the NZ free school lunch initiative) with funding, monitoring, and incentives can improve food provision. The subtheme *Health-enhancing changes in the school environment has flow-on effect to canteens* showed that these changes can affect the entire school food environment. Theme 3 *Healthy canteens get lost in the "pecking order" of what's important* highlights that while schools and key stakeholders may believe healthy eating is important, other factors related to well-being and education were more important to prioritise within the school's limited resources. Theme 4 *People's values, attitudes and beliefs may help and hinder the healthiness of canteens* and explores the role champions have in influencing the healthiness of the canteen. Champions were those with a positive, proactive attitude, value healthy eating and are capable. Subtheme 1 *Meet student preferences while providing healthy food* was a common barrier many champions worked hard to overcome. The final subtheme identified how *A collaborative approach within schools and their communities can overcome barriers to healthy canteens*. Government mandates and interventions can positively impact the canteen and other food provisions. This research supports a recommendation for schools to create and implement school policies around food encompassing a whole-school approach.

Keywords: canteen; food environment; School Food and Nutrition Policy; qualitative research

Ethics Declaration

Yes

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