Abstract: The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required not only the reorientation of learning to remote form but also a change in the form of state-funded school lunches. One of the forms of school catering allowance was food packs, which obligated parents to prepare a warm lunch for the pupil from products included in food packs. As the responsibility for providing a warm lunch for the pupil was transferred to the parents, it was important to understand the parents’ experience. The survey was used to gather parents’ experiences of school catering allowance received during the pandemic using survey administration software—Google forms; 5166 respondents from different regions of Latvia took part in the survey. The school catering allowance in the form of food packs (83.7%) can be considered successful as over 70% of respondents rated it as positive, giving a rating of 7 (good) or above. Parents from Vidzeme and Latgale had the most positive experience with food packs. The parents appreciated the support they received, stating that it provided a certain sense of security during the crisis. Parental dissatisfaction was related to the composition of food packs, lack of local products and unacceptable products, such as canned meat and fish.

Keywords: school meals; catering allowance; food packs; parent; pandemic
meal for one pupil or by increasing the number of pupils receiving free lunches. In 2020, the state budget funding for the provision of free lunches for grades 1 to 4 amounted to EUR 6,357,594 [8].

During the pandemic, pupils’ learning was reoriented to a remote form, which also required changes in the provision of free lunches. One of the options was to provide families of pupils with food packs for preparing a warm lunch at home. Guidelines on the composition of food packs were set by the Ministry of Health [9], considering the nutritional and energy needs of pupils at lunch. Food packs prepared by municipalities/schools can be assessed in two ways; on the one hand, it provided assistance to families, but on the other hand, it obligated the family to prepare lunch for the pupil. Here, it is important to understand how families perceived this help, whether it was seen as providing great support, whether the current composition of food packs met the family’s expectations, whether it provided pupils with healthy, warm lunches, and so on. The aim of the study was to analyse the parents’ experience regarding the provision of free lunches for pupils during the pandemic when teaching was performed remotely.

Food packs were offered by the government of the Republic of Latvia/municipalities to assist pupils’ families during the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning. This research is unique because (1) it took place in the Republic of Latvia (a regional focus), (2) it took place during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, comparative studies with the experience of other countries could not be carried out.

2. Materials and Methods

An online questionnaire, using the survey administration software—Google forms, was sent to all Latvian schools that offer teaching from grades 1 to 4, with a request to send them to parents to fill them out. The questionnaire consisted of 45 questions in eight sections. Five questions were closed type, two questions were open type, four were line scale questions, and the rest were partially open questions. This article presents and analyzes the obtained results. The analyzed survey questions were divided into three groups: (1) school catering allowance received by the family for pupils; (2) composition of food packs, their use and parental opinion; (3) family characteristics.

The pilot study was conducted with 20 parents, approbating the questionnaire. The results of the pilot study showed that all the questions in the questionnaire were clear and understandable. None of the questions required further clarification.

A total of 5166 respondents participated in the survey, which took place from April to June 2021. Of the 5166 respondents, 4324 received food packs and were able to complete the survey.

All data from the questionnaire were downloaded from the survey administration software Google forms and saved in a Microsoft Excel 2013 file; data analysis was performed using various tools. The results were summarized by a number of respondents by region and total. The total survey results were also expressed as a percentage.

Research data was collected in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data [10] and Code of Professional Activity of the Latvian Association of Sociologists for Social and Market Research [11]. Participation in the survey was voluntary and by filling in the questionnaire, the respondents confirmed that they agreed to participate in the study.

3. Results

The characteristics of families participating in the study are given in Table 1, which showed that several generations live in one household in Latvia, as 70.7% of questionnaires indicated 10 family members; 88.9% of parents worked during the COVID-19 pandemic and in 72.4% of cases the mother was the one who prepared the lunch. In the study, a total of 6120 pupils received school catering allowance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of surveyed respondents covered the whole of Latvia, relatively evenly dis-
distributed by regions: Riga region—891 (17.2%), Kurzeme—497 (9.6%), Latgale—856 (16.6%), Vidzeme—694 (13.4%) and Zemgale—1051 (20.3%) taking the dispersion of the population into account. The capital of Latvia—Riga (1177 respondents—22.8%) was singled out because it has the highest number of inhabitants and schools. The obtained data allowed us to assess possible differences by region.

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

| Subsistence provider status | Riga (Capital of Latvia) | Riga Region | Kurzeme | Latgale | Vidzeme | Zemgale | Total |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| Number of Respondents       | 1177                     | 891         | 497     | 856     | 694     | 1051    | 5166  |
| 2                           | 15                       | 10          | 5       | 28      | 8       | 10      | 76    |
| 3                           | 39                       | 53          | 32      | 113     | 44      | 30      | 311   |
| 4                           | 86                       | 163         | 64      | 181     | 68      | 99      | 661   |
| 5                           | 34                       | 74          | 46      | 93      | 53      | 60      | 360   |
| 6                           | 4                        | 8           | 6       | 16      | 11      | 21      | 66    |
| 7                           | 1                        | 5           | 3       | 4       | 3       | 4       | 20    |
| 8                           | 1                        | 0           | 2       | 2       | 2       | 2       | 9     |
| 9                           | 0                        | 1           | 0       | 1       | 2       | 2       | 6     |
| 10                          | 996                      | 577         | 338     | 417     | 501     | 822     | 3651  |
| More than 10                | 1                        | 0           | 1       | 1       | 1       | 1       | 4     |
| Invalid answer              | 0                        | 0           | 0       | 0       | 1       | 1       | 2     |
| Working                     | 694                      | 527         | 348     | 617     | 482     | 723     | 3391  |
| Working in absentia         | 181                      | 135         | 27      | 46      | 54      | 81      | 524   |
| Working semi-remotely       | 204                      | 176         | 39      | 78      | 54      | 125     | 676   |
| Self-employed              | 0                        | 1           | 3       | 4       | 2       | 3       | 13    |
| Pension                     | 3                        | 0           | 4       | 4       | 5       | 3       | 19    |
| State benefit               | 8                        | 4           | 19      | 14      | 28      | 22      | 95    |
| Housewife                   | 2                        | 3           | 4       | 2       | 7       | 1       | 19    |
| Downtime allowance          | 37                       | 20          | 13      | 17      | 15      | 22      | 124   |
| Unemployed                  | 44                       | 22          | 38      | 73      | 45      | 71      | 293   |
| No answer                   | 4                        | 3           | 2       | 0       | 3       | 0       | 12    |
| A person preparing a lunch at home | 845                  | 618         | 368     | 645     | 498     | 767     | 3741  |
| Mother                      | 31                       | 20          | 3       | 12      | 12      | 25      | 103   |
| Father                      | 228                      | 197         | 93      | 150     | 133     | 182     | 983   |
| Mother and father           | 33                       | 32          | 22      | 24      | 35      | 46      | 192   |
| Mother or father or pupil   | 38                       | 23          | 11      | 25      | 15      | 31      | 143   |
| Adult 1                     | 2                        | 0           | 0       | 0       | 2       | 0       | 4     |
| Pupil                       | 2                        | 0           | 0       | 0       | 2       | 0       | 4     |
Ninety-four-point-five percent of all surveyed parents received a school catering allowance to provide lunch for a pupil during the pandemic (Table 2). In general, pupils received school catering allowance when they started remotely learning in March 2020 until June and from September 2020 until June 2021. The form of support in 83.7% of cases was food packs.

Table 2. Characteristics of the received school catering allowance by regions of Latvia.

| Questions                                | Riga (Capital of Latvia) | Riga Region | Kurzeme | Latgale | Vidzeme | Zemgale | Total |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| Number of Respondents                     | 1177                     | 891         | 497     | 856     | 694     | 1051    | 5166  |
| Received any school catering allowance    |                          |             |         |         |         |         |       |
| Yes                                       | 1153                     | 848         | 477     | 827     | 652     | 927     | 4884  |
|                                           |                          |             |         |         |         |         | (94.5%) |
| No                                        | 17                       | 30          | 18      | 28      | 37      | 111     | 41    |
|                                           |                          |             |         |         |         |         | (4.7%) |
| Refuse                                    | 7                        | 13          | 2       | 1       | 5       | 13      | 41    |
|                                           |                          |             |         |         |         |         | (<1.0%) |
| Type of school catering allowance         |                          |             |         |         |         |         |       |
| Food packs                                | 1103                     | 832         | 341     | 710     | 589     | 749     | 4324  |
|                                           |                          |             |         |         |         |         | (88.5%) |
| Meal                                      | 19                       | 3           | 47      | 4       | 12      | 14      | 99    |
|                                           |                          |             |         |         |         |         | (2.0%) |
| Coupons, cards, money                     | 25                       | 3           | 62      | 109     | 42      | 153     | 394   |
|                                           |                          |             |         |         |         |         | (8.1%) |
| In different ways                         | 5                        | 7           | 28      | 6       | 7       | 14      | 67    |
|                                           |                          |             |         |         |         |         | (1.4%) |
| Changes of school catering allowance      |                          |             |         |         |         |         |       |
| Yes, many times                           | 503                      | 301         | 233     | 338     | 245     | 387     | 2007  |
|                                           |                          |             |         |         |         |         | (41.1%) |
| No                                        | 650                      | 547         | 244     | 489     | 407     | 540     | 2877  |
|                                           |                          |             |         |         |         |         | (58.9%) |
School catering allowance changed in 38.9% of cases, thus altering the type and frequency of support; 4324 respondents, who had noted that food packs were received as school catering allowance during the pandemic, took part in the assessment of food packs (Table 3). The distribution of respondents by regions was as follows: Riga—1103 (25.5%), Riga region—832 (19.2%), Kurzeme—342 (7.9%), Latgale—709 (16.4%), Vidzeme—589 (13.6%) and Zemgale—749 (17.3%).

| Questions | Riga (Capital of Latvia) | Riga Region | Kurzeme | Latgale | Vidzeme | Zemgale | Total |
|-----------|--------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| Number of Respondents | 1103 | 832 | 342 | 709 | 589 | 749 | 4324 |
| Changes in composition of food packs | Different products each time | 154 | 67 | 54 | 42 | 135 | 98 | 550 (12.7%) |
| | Everything changed | 249 | 109 | 33 | 71 | 97 | 112 | 671 (15.5%) |
| | Certain products changed | 685 | 632 | 245 | 577 | 337 | 526 | 3002 (69.4%) |
| | No changes | 15 | 24 | 10 | 19 | 20 | 13 | 101 (2.3%) |
| The composition of food packs corresponded to a healthy diet | Yes | 564 | 367 | 186 | 417 | 365 | 346 | 2245 (51.9%) |
| | Partly | 464 | 406 | 137 | 255 | 195 | 352 | 1809 (41.8%) |
| | No | 61 | 46 | 15 | 36 | 25 | 44 | 227 (5.2%) |
| | I do not know | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 7 (<1.0%) |
| | Other answer | 11 | 11 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 36 (<1.0%) |
| Food packs included fruits and vegetables | Only fruit | 62 | 45 | 74 | 210 | 104 | 68 | 563 (13.0%) |
| | Only vegetables | 41 | 45 | 11 | 32 | 13 | 8 | 150 (3.5%) |
| | Both | 974 | 728 | 240 | 436 | 463 | 643 | 3484 (80.6%) |
| | No fruits and vegetables | 26 | 14 | 17 | 31 | 9 | 30 | 127 (2.9%) |
| Type of bread in food packs | Wheat bread | 162 | 227 | 107 | 232 | 288 | 331 | 1347 (31.2%) |
| | Rye bread | 120 | 101 | 68 | 206 | 167 | 267 | 929 (21.5%) |
| | Bread with seeds, etc. | 360 | 160 | 35 | 10 | 93 | 241 | 899 (20.8%) |
| | Cereal cakes | 112 | 174 | 1 | 0 | 7 | 3 | 297 (6.9%) |
| | No bread | 398 | 272 | 176 | 348 | 128 | 145 | 1467 (33.9%) |
| The source of protein in food packs | Canned meat | 1059 | 732 | 104 | 292 | 355 | 613 | 3155 (73.0%) |
| | Canned fish | 951 | 629 | 50 | 181 | 267 | 418 | 2496 (57.7%) |
| | Eggs | 881 | 446 | 255 | 629 | 429 | 576 | 3216 (74.4%) |
| | Legumes | 860 | 605 | 190 | 450 | 400 | 548 | 3053 (70.6%) |
| | Meat products (sausages) | 357 | 480 | 258 | 626 | 470 | 329 | 2520 (58.3%) |
| | Fresh meat | 0 | 0 | 3 | 18 | 7 | 0 | 28 (<1.0%) |
| | Milk | Included | 1090 | 819 | 286 | 628 | 513 | 601 | 3937 (91.0%) |
| | Oil | At least once | 631 | 447 | 198 | 563 | 449 | 589 | 2877 (66.5%) |
Fifty-one-point-nine percent of parents stated that the received food packs should be assessed as a healthy diet, 80.6% indicated that the food packs contained both fruits and vegetables, and 71% of respondents confirmed that the food products in the packs were included in the diet of the whole family; 74.4% of respondents evaluated the food packs positively.

Analyzing the respondents’ assessment of the compliance of the food pack with a healthy diet by regions, the largest percentage of parents confirmed it in Vidzeme—62.0%, followed by Latgale—58.8%, Kurzeme—54.4%, Riga—51.1%, Zemgale—46.2%, and the lowest percentage of respondents confirmed it in the Riga region—44.1%.

In the final stage of food pack evaluation, parents were asked to rate the composition of food packs in a line scale (10-point system), where 1 is very poor, 2—poor, 3—unsatisfactory, 4—almost satisfactory, 5—satisfactory, 6—almost good, 7—good, 8—very good, 9—excellent, 10—with distinction (Figure 1).

Overall, 76% of parents rated food packs with 7 (good) and above. The largest percentage of respondents, comprising one-quarter of all respondents (1108), rated food packs with 8 (very good). Analyzing by regions, the largest percentage of respondents...
who rated food packs with 7 and above was in Vidzeme—81.7%, followed by Latgale—79.4%, Riga—76.6%, Kurzeme—76.0%, Riga region—73.1%, and the lowest percentage of respondents was in Zemgale—71.3%. In total, the assessment was similar between regions. Food packs were given less than 4 points by 3% of respondents, who could not understand why food packs did not include local products.

The obtained data allow the conclusion to be made that parents assessed the school catering allowance (food packs) implemented in Latvia as successful, albeit with some exceptions.

4. Discussion

This study showed that the most popular school catering allowance during the pandemic in all regions of Latvia was food packs, as they were considered to be the simplest, safest and easiest way of providing support to families with pupils. The provision of food packs was an effective tool in reducing the deterioration of eating habits of pupils, as research shows that there are social disparities between families during the COVID-19 pandemic when the income of many families fell sharply [12]. Therefore, most parents appreciated this support, expressing their happiness with the received food products, but noting that the composition of food packs varied from school to school and that some food products should be replaced with other products. Some parents indicated that once voicing their dissatisfaction with the inclusion of certain food products in food packs, improvements were made in subsequent food packs.

Some parents misunderstood the use of food packs; the aim was to provide support for a pupil to receive a warm lunch, with the meal being composed in accordance with the recommendations of the Ministry of Health, including food products from different groups, such as grain and grain products (pasta, rice, bread, etc.), protein source products (eggs, legumes, canned meat and fish), fruit and vegetables, milk and milk products (UHT milk), potatoes, fats (oil or butter). The presence of these products in food packs was also confirmed by parents in the survey. Of course, it would be necessary to evaluate the composition of offered food packs and compare them with healthy diet recommendations, because, for example, in 31% of cases white bread was included in food packs. However, it raises the question of how this should be evaluated. From a nutritional point of view, it would be better to choose another type of bread, but if we take into account the fact that there was a crisis situation in the country, a result of which was that the state provided support, then it could be seen as acceptable.

The greatest dissatisfaction on the part of the parents was with the food products chosen to ensure the required protein content. The food packs included canned meat and fish, which some parents considered unacceptable because such food is not usually present in the family diet. Parental frustration could be seen as justified, but several aspects had to be taken into account when designing food packs, such as recommended quantities of certain food groups, price, storage conditions—at room temperature, etc. [3], which did not allow other food products to be included in food packs. Due to this situation, the contribution of parents was essential in preparing a healthy and delicious meal for a pupil from the food products in the food pack, as the influence of parents on children’s eating habits is strong [13]. In addition, parents can provide a nudge, for example, to help encourage the consumption of vegetables and fruits included in food packs, as giving a nudge has been shown to have a positive effect on a child’s dietary choices [14]; 80.6% of respondents confirmed that the food packs contained both fruits and vegetables, meaning that in this case, the responsibility for pupils consuming those lies with the parents. Statistics on the eating habits of Latvian pupils show the insufficient consumption of fruit and vegetables [15].

It is positive that in 91.0% of cases, milk was included in food packs, which is an important food product in the diet of pupils. However, some parents expressed their dissatisfaction that food packs were not intended for pupils with special dietary needs, for example, lactose intolerance, celiac diseases, etc. This reaffirms the importance of parental involvement.
Despite the goal being to provide pupils with a warm lunch, food packs were only used in 25.6% of cases, however, we believe that the inclusion of the contents of food packs in the diet of the whole family should also be assessed as a positive outcome because it could serve as a good example of how to make a balanced, healthy and delicious meal from simple food products, and due to the parents’ eating habits having a strong influence on a child’s eating choices, could also help promote healthy food consumption [16]. In addition, 74.4% of respondents rated the support as positive, indicating that they welcomed the food packs received, stating that they provided additional support in a difficult situation.

5. Conclusions

Given the crisis situation in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid state response to the consequences in the form of pupil lunch support, it can be considered that food packs provided sufficient support to families with pupils, who also appreciated it. Food packs created a sense of security for families, as there were parents who had lost their jobs.

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