



Focus groups with secondary school students in The Netherlands

Introduction

RE-TASTY is a project that aims to help primarily secondary schools embrace the innovative idea of changing their school food system to a healthier and a more sustainable one, together with the young people. It has been funded through a Kickstarter grant, as well as through a Sustaining grant, by the IMPETUS Citizen Science Accelerator program (2024-2025). During the sustaining grant period, one of the goals was to collect insights and perspectives of secondary school students that could help in the problem framing and calibrate the direction of RE-TASTY in the future. This was done through the carrying out of focus groups (FGs).

We would like to in advance thank all the students that participate in these focus groups and for giving their own insights and perspectives about RE-TASTY and the topic of sustainable healthy school food.

Focus groups

During the period October-December 2025, five FGs with a total of 37 secondary school students were carried out in The Netherlands. Two of the FGs consisted of students from Eco-Schools and three of the FGs consisted of students from non Eco-Schools. The two FGs with students from Eco-Schools were carried out with the assistance of SME (Eco-School coordinators for The Netherlands).

Some details on the FGs are shown in the table below:

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| 2 FGs with students from 2 Eco schools | 19 students in total | 13 girls 6 boys | 12-16 years old |
| 3 FGs with student from 3 non-eco schools | 18 students in total | 11 girls 7 boys | 14-18 years old |



Questions – Topics of FGs

- 1) To explore on which topics in relation to food sustainability and health in schools adolescents have specific concerns /desires / hopes and find their researching deeply relevant
- 2) To explore their values and beliefs in relation to food sustainability
- 3) To explore which areas of food sustainability and health in schools the students would deeply like to change / monitor and in what ways that could be done.

Main results

In the table below, the main points that were derived from the FGs are listed. In some cases, student quotes are being used while in other cases a more descriptive summary of the discussion is being included.

| | How do they see the topic of healthy and sustainable food? | Interesting aspects to investigate | School related observations | Suggestions in relation to RE-TASTY | Why should we care about healthy and sustainable diets of students? |
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| School A | 'I do not mind sustainability that much', 'I do not know much about sustainability and where my food is coming from', 'it takes a lot of time to see whether a product is healthy, where it comes from'. (student quotes) | -Food contents (E-numbers) -Food myths (e.g., in relation to how food helps in health/skin, etc.) -What food does to your body (food and cancer) -Foods that involved unpaid/bad labor -Pricing: Compare (through data collection) school canteen with supermarket prices (unhealthiness is cheaper) | 'In school cafeterias, unhealthy food is way cheaper than healthy food. I think also unhealthy food is also made a little less sustainably.' (student quote) 'It makes sense that healthy foods are more expensive because healthy ingredients are more expensive. It is like | RE-TASTY could be implemented: -At the lower secondary school (years 1,2,3) (no exam concerns, no profiles) or -NLT (at the higher secondary school) | |



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| | <p>'We do not have a lot of money, so we often go for the cheaper option. And it is also sometimes tastier when it is unhealthy'. 'It is easier to choose the less healthy, less sustainable option'. (student quotes)</p> | <p>-See in the supermarkets what % of food is sustainably made and collect data around the Netherlands and see if there is any difference.</p> | <p>the government's fault, we cannot do much about that.' (student quote)</p> <p>Would be nice to have a class called 'Life lessons' (that includes cooking skills, health related skills, gardening, etc.)</p> | | |
| School B | <p>'Healthy food- nutritious, provides vitamins, good for your body, mental health and well-being.', 'When I hang out with friends, I do not think what is healthy and what is not, when I am with my parents, I am different.', 'My mum makes home-made food/healthy/not frozen. When I am with friends, I am not really conscious of</p> | <p>-What people eat without their full conscious -What is inside processed food/fast food</p> | <p>'Cafeteria offers unhealthy foods. It used to have healthy foods but they were not popular.', 'I noticed that everything that is really healthy is expensive for some reason.', 'Most students bring food from home and this is not the school's responsibility to make sure that we are eating good food from home.' (student quotes)</p> | | <p>'Because we want to be healthy, we want to grow up healthy.'</p> <p>'Why to care? Future generation ..can lead to health problems...'</p> <p>'We can make the students aware if you eat junk food what is going to happen but you cannot change their opinions on it.'</p> <p>(student quotes)</p> |



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| | what I am eating. Do not think about sustainability.' (student quotes) | | | | |
| School C | <p>Not aware of sustainable and healthy eating.</p> <p>Know little about the planet.</p> <p>During dinner, they give more attention to healthier lifestyle.</p> <p>Social media are not encouraging you to eat healthy.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Impact of meat on the planet (current situation) -More research on fruits and vegetables (we already know a lot about meat) -Labelling /marketing – food companies state only the positive things, they should also state the negatives. -Current situation of the use of antibiotics on animals | <p>Healthy is more expensive than unhealthy.</p> <p>Even if everything was for free, people would get the unhealthy stuff (with sugar).</p> <p>Fruit is less filling than bread.</p> <p>Bring bread from home (and some fruit, yoghurt) – food from home is often healthy.</p> <p>The school canteen is more expensive and so many students do not go to the canteen (go to nearby supermarket). At the supermarket, students look at the offers which are usually not the healthy foods.</p> | <p>Interesting to gather through surveys the opinions of the students in relation to the pricing (everyone says it is expensive) – collect data for policy changes</p> | |



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| | | | <p>The management wants to stimulate healthy eating but do not know how (it does not work). The school management cannot make the canteen lower the prices.</p> | | |
| School D | <p>Students are not directly concerned about healthy and/ or sustainable food. Most of the students indicated that they visit the local grocery store during school breaks. Most of the times they buy snacks from the bakery. Their reasoning concerned deliciousness and cheapness rather than health and sustainability. However, some of them stated that they are thinking about eating healthy to the extent that they opt to</p> | | <p>The cafeteria in school could and should be more healthy. The students of the Eco-Team are ensuring the placement of a greenhouse on the school terrain. They would like to grow, through school projects, their own crops which can be used in the cafeteria. They stated that their food should be locally produced, healthy and not too expensive. The greenhouse would be a solution to these ideas.</p> | | |



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| | maintain a varying diet. | | | | |
| School E | Students are thinking about the health benefits of food, however not necessarily sustainability issues. | Students are concerned with the labelling of foods presented in supermarkets, i.e. the Nutri-score (which is usually misinterpreted - many people think that a score of A automatically means 'healthy' whereas this is not the case). The students would be interested in ensuring good information on the labelling of foods in supermarkets. | Students indicated that they would rather buy 'snack vegetables' like carrots and cucumbers rather than chips, etc. during their breaks from school. However, it should be noted that the students were (officially) not allowed to leave the school premises. Furthermore, students bring their own lunch from home. Most of them are reliant on their parents in terms of sustainability, etc. Students bring their own food, being prepared by their parents or themselves prior to the school day. Most of the time, actively preparing your own food stimulates healthier decisions. | | |