

Educational Dimensions of School Lunch

Suzanne Rice • A. G. Rud
Editors

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Dedicated to the memory of Matthew T. Lewis

FOREWORD

It stuns me sometimes to think about how central school feeding has become in worldwide politics and civic discussion, both in and out of the educational sphere. I have marveled to see widespread, often viral attention in the United States to issues like “pink slime,” “pizza as a vegetable,” and “lunch shaming.” It seems nearly everyone is talking school lunch. A decade ago, when I began studying school food in earnest, there were a small but growing number of scholars—in educational research and in other fields like sociology (Poppendieck 2010) and history (Levine 2008)—and a growing number of teachers, administrators, school nutrition professionals, parents and concerned citizens who already took school food seriously. Yet that number has grown exponentially over the past two decades, spurred by exposés and documentaries like *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser 2001), *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (Pollan 2006), *Food, Inc.* (Kenner 2008), and Jamie Oliver’s television series on either side of the Atlantic (Gilbert and Walker 2005; Smith 2010), not to mention growing “crises” of obesity and diabetes, and high-profile politicians—US First Lady Michelle Obama perhaps most noticeably—pushing gardens and exercise and nutritional “nudges.” All these tens of thousands of intellectuals, activists, public servants, and citizens have been taking seriously the policies and practices of the lunchroom; the implications for students, the environment, and animals; and the legacy we are creating for our culture and society. Not just in the United States, either, but transnationally, for school food makes headlines in the United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Ghana, Australia, South Korea, Aotearoa New Zealand, and many more.

I first became acquainted specifically with the work of Suzanne Rice and A. G. Rud, editors of and contributors to this volume, in 2013, when reading a special issue of *The Journal of Thought* all about school lunch (Rice 2013). Just a couple of years before, I had published an essay titled “Why Educational Researchers Should Take School Food Seriously” (Weaver-Hightower 2011), and it was a delight to encounter these scholars who did in fact take school food seriously—as a critical part of education and society worthy of deep examination. Not only did they take it seriously, but they pushed on the boundaries of who the stakeholders of school food really are and, indeed, what the stakes are for getting school food right. It was immediately clear to me that the authors in that special issue would become important teachers for me about the politics and practices of school food.

That first introduction of mine to these important thinkers explains why I feel so honored to pen the foreword to their impressive collection you now hold, *Educational Dimensions of School Lunch: Critical Perspectives*. They and their contributors are scholars that continue to take seriously the need to research, rethink, and reform school food in multiple educational contexts. They have important new insights to share about the history, complexity, interconnectedness, and impact of a part of the school day that too many view as simple and inconsequential. This book arrives at a truly important time in our global history, when we face multiple and seemingly contradictory crises of hunger, unconscionable waste, and obesity. We face truly hard decisions about how to ethically, sustainably, and healthily feed the world. This book provides much-needed insights that push forward current discussions and policymaking.

This is a very philosophical volume. I don’t mean that in any pejorative sense that it lacks practicality or grounding in the empirical life of schools. Quite the opposite. Rather, I see within these pages a deep, abiding interest in uncovering the ontology of why we feed children; the epistemology of classrooms, lunchrooms, off-campus fast food joints, lunchboxes, and homeschooler kitchens; and the ethics and morality of the choices about what (or who) we eat, where, when, and how reflectively we do so. Perhaps most especially one feels within the volume a yearning for aesthetics and love to return to school meals, for food to appeal to our senses rather than simply stuff our guts, for our foodways and eating spaces to inspire learning and connection rather than just impose obedience and efficiency.

Given that several of the contributors are well regarded in philosophy of education, one should not be surprised by this book's philosophical leaning. Still, it is a philosophical volume in that the authors stake claims and explore them, challenging readers to clarify—or perhaps regret—their own positions. We readers consider along the way our relationships to other animals, to gender, to growing things, to justice for our fellow citizens, to our abilities and disabilities, to racial histories and the racialized present, to the parental role of teachers, to the larger environment and its man-made destructions, to the curriculum we allow to be taught in our name, and to what is real versus merely spectacle. All of this intersects with food, of course, because food stands as perhaps the most basic part of human existence.

Importantly, the contributors also help us reconnect to past philosophers of education, restoring our collective memory that food has long been part of our most cherished thinkers' ideas about culture and learning. Rud and Gleason remind us of John Dewey's and Paulo Freire's notions of food as central to just and acculturative education. Laird notes Dewey's food-related philosophies, too, as well as those of Montessori, Steiner, and proponents of the kindergarten movement. Salvio uncovers the theoretical tensions for Margaret Mead, the great anthropologist of sexual practices and education in the South Pacific, as she later worked to set up the US government's first national nutrition policies. Remembering these histories can hopefully lead modern educators to restore food to the center of educational thinking in teacher education, educational leadership training, and the foundations of education.

Educational Dimensions of School Lunch: Critical Perspectives, as the subtitle implies, also delves deeply into the social justice of food. The authors escort us to the school gardens of Berkeley, California; to the food deserts of Detroit, Michigan; to a private school lunchroom in Kansas and one in a Midwestern city public school; into lunchboxes in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and England; and to the school cafeterias that have become utterly surveilled “total institutions” (Goffman 1962). In these locales the authors take up the causes of the most vulnerable: the land, air, and water; animals; farm and slaughterhouse workers; the hungry and malnourished; those in food deserts; those from oppressed or marginalized cultures; those in developing nations; and, of course, the captive audience of students.

Naturally, the volume's contributors focus on the roles of school—the day-to-day phenomena of educating. That endlessly repeated process obviously installs the “what is” of food and foodways, which the contributors critique, ably showing readers *how* schools (wittingly or not) create technologies to keep students under control and unaware of how food is made. Crucially, though, the authors also imagine pedagogies and curricula of “what could be” within schools. Schools, each essay posits, are one way out of the mire of unhealthy, unjust, and unsustainable practices. This volume provides ample starting places for concerned professionals to become activists for better school food, better educational experiences for students, and a better society—for what Lupinacci and Happel-Parkins call “examples of curriculum and pedagogy that breathe life into the potential of diverse, socially-just, and sustainable communities.” It is an educative stance, seeking *mindful* rather than *mindless* eaters.

The volume's contributors also do not fall into the lazy trap of simply suggesting schools add one more thing to the curriculum. Rather, they recognize well the ever-increasing pressure on educators to be everything to everyone, to roll with the intensification of curriculum standards and ever-expanding testing regimes, and to solve all of society's ills. Instead, these thoughtful scholars envision a food education that takes advantage of interdisciplinary curriculum, seizing moments—like lunch—often viewed as non-educative to engage students, and involving community partners in work related to schools and their communities.

Many things from these pages might stay with readers; I know they will for me. Stapleton and Cole's conversation, based in Cole's struggles to help hungry kids in her school, rivets the reader with its depictions of the daily operation of inequality in an urban alternative school. We leave that chapter convinced that food deserts are as real *inside* schools as they are outside them. Plum, Powell, and Leahy's chapter recounts a similarly affecting story of Natia, a student who all around her are quick to hold up as the avatar of unhealthiness though they tragically overlook her poverty and hunger. It is a story hard to calm down after. I could point out similarly rich moments from every chapter.

Ultimately, as the authors you are about to encounter make clear, we fight so bitterly over school food because it is so multivalent, so layered with the deepest of meanings about what it is to be human, to take pleasure, to exercise self-restraint, to develop culture and identity, to be generous or stingy, to teach and learn, and to govern. *Educational Dimensions of School Lunch* maps this contested terrain wonderfully, casting light on

some of the darkest, unseen corners of the school lunchroom. Better still, the contributors lead us not to paralysis, but instead they argue vehemently—and correctly, to my mind—that explicit teaching about food holds the power to transform not only what appears on children’s noon-time trays but also the very future of our planet and our societies.

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Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower

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