**Editorial introduction – Food, Youth and Education**

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Roland Barthes analyses food as ‘… an organic system, organically integrated into its specific type of civilization’ (2008, p.34). If so, what do our current preoccupations about food, its conceptualization, provision and education in the context of schooling say about contemporary civilization? The papers in this special issue draw on contexts from across the globe to focus on what is fast becoming a field of ideological battle in contemporary education – that of food, and education about food, in the lives of school-goers. As Hightower-Weaver and Robert (2011) tell us, school food is political and the papers drawn together here trace the outlines of these politics. Collectively, they deal with a range of perplexing questions: How should we understand the context within which programmes on healthy eating, food and education arise – at a time of an ‘obesity epidemic’ that sits directly alongside that of food bank growth, poverty, hunger and malnutrition? How much weight do we assign to nutritional value as a guide to school policies on food, and how much to children’s experiences and views of dining halls? How much should we value a controlled environment *versus* children’s rights/agency to shape this environment and its offerings? How should we deal with the boundaries that place food and healthy eating/living matters as either largely individually determined or as governed by social and environmental factors?

The special issue itself came into being with the observation that research on food education and provision in schools (through mid-day meals for instance) seemed firmly focused on the nutritional role of food to the exclusion of any social dynamics it might engender. Such an overwhelmingly instrumental approach seemed lop-sided with the wealth of anthropological and sociological research revealing food to be integral to a range of issues like identity, status, power, social relations and disadvantage. The set of papers gathered here act as a corrective to such instrumental perspectives, but, just as importantly, they steer us in different directions that engender a more complex and nuanced understanding of the functioning of food in the institutional and social lives of children and young people.

The six papers in this special edition fall largely into three categories of critique: of the discourse of food and policy initiatives; of the provision of school food; and critique of the ways in which schools ‘educate’ about food and health. Together they expose a lacuna in how this territory is conceptualized and perhaps, a certain poverty in acknowledging pupils’ agency and savviness about food, its social role and the relationships it allows across a diversity of spatial and social settings.

**Discourses of food and policy**

Lorayne Robertson and Joli Scheidler-Benns’s paper ‘Using a wider lens to shift the discourse on food in Canadian curriculum policies’ focuses on a range of Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum policy documents. The authors develop a policy analysis framework drawn from a review of literature revealing the divide between placing the emphasis for healthy eating on the individual (lifestyle focus) as opposed to the collective focus, taking into account ‘biology, physiology, psychology, context, society, culture, economy and policy’ effects. Their findings suggest that most Canadian HPE curriculum policies contain a neo-liberal inclination to place ‘the burden’ for improving health on individual students and their choices and focus much less on the social determinants of health. Their recommendations move the emphasis on to wider issues like the availability of food in the environment, origins of food, the policies and politics of labelling and food promotion – in short, they recommend a review of HPE policies to introduce a ‘critical literacy’ about food which also begins to acknowledge the knowledge students may already possess.

Victoria Elliott and Beth Hore take a similarly critical look at public texts relating to food and schooling produced or sponsored by members of the UK Coalition Government between 2010-2014. Their paper ‘“Right nutrition, right values”: the construction of food, youth and morality in the UK government 2010–2014’ takes its cue from pronouncements linking food practices and morality/values. They show how food exceeds its functional-nutritional role to signify moral choices and class identities in these authoritative texts. They also highlight how pupil choices regarding food are part of a network of pressures that supersede notions of ‘right’ ways of eating. Their central argument is that moves to ‘manipulate’ food in schools to change behaviour and outcomes are rarely innocent and may silence other considerations on wellbeing. Employing a Foucauldian discourse analysis framework to these public texts allows them to detect a range of discursive positions from manners and parenting to schooling and party policy, all of which supports a position of neo-liberal individualism or paternal liberalism, with both stances crowding out the space of the political left/socialist discourse.

**School lunch provisions**

Wendy Wills, Giada Danesi & Ariadne Kapetanaki’s paper focuses on the school lunch. ‘Lunchtime food and drink purchasing: Young people’s practices, preferences and power within and beyond the school gate’ draws on data from young pupils (13–15 years) located across a range of schools and locales in Scotland. By contrasting young people’s ‘eating experience’ within (school cafeterias) and outside school (retail outlets in the vicinity), they raise difficult questions about what the school food experience can or cannot offer pupils. While pupils are treated by retailers as ‘consumers’, with consumer rights, the school operates within the ‘student as citizen’ field, as a social-educational enterprise with its attendant rights as well as responsibilities. The paper reveals that there is room to improve the friendliness, promptness of service as well as the warmth of relationships within school cafeterias, where children’s rights and needs can be given greater priority rather than seen merely as a timetabled space for the provision of nutrition. Children’s pleasures, it seems, are mostly ignored, as are their rights and capabilities to participate in the organization of lunch times.

Caroline Hart’s paper continues this theme, looking at ‘The School Food Plan and the Social Context of Food in Schools’. She combines Social Quality Theory with the Capability Approach to look at food practices in primary schools in Sheffield, England. Her description of the variety of ways in which noise, smells, texture, space, room design, seating and place settings, navigation, social roles of helping and monitoring, parental involvement, ease of self-service, cost of lunch, time for lunch, staff support, friendship groups, etc. impact on the experience of the lunch hour is revealing. Hart provides a toolbox – the School Food Self-Evaluation Toolbox (SET) as one way of empowering children and their schools in enhancing their food experiences. By attending to ‘People, Preparation, Settings and Service’ the toolbox provides a way of enhancing pupil capability and school provision while bearing in mind, the uniqueness of each school’s communities, practices and settings.

It is clear from both papers that schools have room to improve and also, a clear role to play in the provision, availability and flexibility for pupils to have a greater say about their lunch times, whether in or out of school.

**Food & Health Education**

Deana Leahy and Jan Wright’s paper, ‘Governing food choices: Food, Young People and Choice in contemporary times’, points out that food has been a ‘staple’ of school policy for several generations, but that contemporary anxieties about the ‘obesity epidemic’ have given a new impetus and urgency to school food programmes and initiatives. Drawing on data from two Australian studies, the paper outlines the effect of a preoccupation with obesity, on schools and young people. Drawing on the concept of ‘biopedagogies’, the paper looks at how food is talked about and understood in classrooms. They conclude that these pedagogies are also lessons about moral judgments, acceptable bodies and ways of eating, and being responsible citizens. Rather than encourage students to deepen nutritional knowledge and develop decision-making skills, they require a more old-fashioned ‘obedience’ to social mores, particularly in the context of a ‘crisis’ of obesity. They request instead, a critical approach to food pedagogies that engages with the complexities of food, its varied meanings, aesthetics and power relations.

Amy Stambach’s paper, ‘Food, Aid and Education in East Africa: Repackaging the conversation’, moves us to three countries – Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya – that are sites of the UN World Food Programme (WFP). Presenting three vignettes with students in each of these countries, Stambach shows how students are already implicated in the social world of food and aware of it. Their interactions and resistances to instruction and pedagogy reveal that they also communicate through food, signalling their preferences, awareness of social norms and hierarchies, and suggest that they are savvy and astute, knowing when food is being used to ‘channel, control or socialize them and when it is being used to draw them into others’ worlds’. This offers room for the WFP to take a different stance towards education and its role in this part of the world. She sums up in this paper the thread present in all the other papers in this issue – that ‘pedagogic and policy frameworks focusing solely on food, fail to capture students’ own use of food to question and rethink the world around them’.

As Hightower-Weaver and Robert (2011, p. 3) note, ‘no one gets very upset *that* children eat at school. … Instead it is *where* food comes from, *when* and *what* children eat, *how much* it costs, and *why* things are the way they are that creates problems’. The papers in this collection reflect these concerns, showing how state, institutional and corporate discourses around food intersect. In this contested terrain, children and young people tend to be constructed as either potential consumer markets or as partial/deficit beings in need of monitoring and guidance. As this collection demonstrates, there may be greater benefits in engaging more closely with children and young people and recognizing their own knowledges and practices around the politics and role of food in their lives.

**References**

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