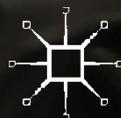


EDUCATIONAL  
DIMENSIONS  
OF  
SCHOOL  
LUNCH  
\*  
CRITICAL  
PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY  
SUZANNE RICE  
AND A. G. RUD



# Educational Dimensions of School Lunch

Suzanne Rice • A. G. Rud  
Editors

# Educational Dimensions of School Lunch

Critical Perspectives

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*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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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

*Suzanne Rice and A. G. Rud*

As of fall 2016, about 50.4 million students attended public elementary and secondary schools in the United States and an additional 5.2 million attended private schools (National Center for Educational Statistics 2015). Essentially every student eats lunch during the school days, and yet this multifaceted noontime phenomenon has received less attention in the education literature than practically any other school activity. Interestingly, the most widely cited books on school lunch in the United States are written by scholars outside the broad field of education (Levine 2008; Poppendieck 2010). The relative lack of educational scholarship on food more broadly and school lunch in particular is highlighted by two groundbreaking essays.

In her 2007 Presidential Address to the Philosophy of Education Society, Susan Laird draws attention to the fact that food, a most basic human need and the “object” around which, historically, most humans’ lives have been organized (and many lives are still organized today), is now rarely a topic of discussion or scholarly inquiry in education. This has not always been the case, Laird notes, recalling the works of Plato, Locke,

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Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, and Dewey among others, who discussed food and practices related to food in educational terms. At the very least, nearly all discussed some aspects of the relation between food and students' physical and mental well-being. Most went some distance beyond that to address such topics as the educational significance of various food-related practices, such as farming, cooking, and serving, and the role of food (and eating) in the formation of attitudes, tastes, desires, and habits. Laird adopts the term "foodways," which in her account covers "what, how, with whom, when, where, how much, by what labors and whose labors, from what markets and ecosystems, and even why and with what consequences people eat and drink (or do not eat and drink)" (Laird 2008, p. 1). Given their centrality in human experience, foodways, Laird argues, should again become foci of educational inquiry.

In an article published in *Educational Researcher* three years later, Weaver-Hightower addresses *school* food in particular (2011). When most adults reflect on their experiences with school food, images of compartmentalized trays, vending machines, or a cherished lunchbox may come to mind. Perhaps memory turns to especially pleasant or painful lunchroom interactions, special treats offered around the holidays, or the aroma of fish sticks on Fridays. While among the most common, such memories concern only a small fraction of the ways in which food is presented in schools. Weaver-Hightower points out that school food is related, centrally or peripherally, to practically *every* aspect of schooling, including (but not limited to) student health, achievement, and attainment; teaching, administration, and educational politics and policy; businesses that produce and supply food and the farm environments and animals upon which they depend. Further, he argues, school food teaches children about eating and food practices, provides a window into identity and culture, and reflects understandings of and commitments to social justice. Weaver-Hightower concludes his essay much like Laird, arguing that the pervasiveness and significance of school food and the many practices making school food possible should capture the attention of education scholars.

Directly or indirectly, each chapter in this book answers Laird's and Weaver-Hightower's calls for inquiry into food and school lunch. The essays collected here are diverse in terms of their particular interests, theoretical orientations, and value commitments. What unites this eclectic collection is its central purpose: to examine school lunch as an educational phenomenon. Education is a multifaceted process, connected with every dimension of the human experience. The authors contributing to this

volume are interested in how various aspects of school lunch affect the health, the intellectual, moral, and emotional development, and the overall well-being of those whose lives are affected—directly or indirectly—with this aspect of schooling. We are interested not only in the near-term educational effects of particular school lunch practices, but also in those that are long-lasting. Education, by its nature, tends to live on in each of us. Our preferences, choices, and conduct in the current moment embody traces of educational events that occurred earlier, sometimes much earlier, in our lives. To pick a familiar example, we may be unable to identify an “aha moment” when reading became second nature, but each time we encounter the written word, we are connected with educational events undergone long ago in elementary school where we learned to make sense of certain kinds of symbols. While education lives on in us as individuals, it also, in a way, stretches out beyond the individual; the effects of education are far reaching. We are accustomed to thinking about education in terms of its consequences for those most directly involved, especially students (and also sometimes parents, teachers, and administrators), but it is important to recognize that education has consequences for many other beings and entities—humans, animals, the environment, and the world as a whole.

What we eat and how we eat, and how we think about food and eating, are of course partly a result of our nature as a species, but to a very large extent, these are also a result of education. This education comes from many sources, one of which is the school. Learning *to eat* certain foods and learning *about* food and eating in school are learning that occurs in a particular social context. That social context leaves its mark on what is learned, and while much of that learning concerns food, it also concerns social relations between those who eat, the students, and beyond that, to all those who make school food possible and those who are indirectly affected by school food, which include, to some extent, pretty much everyone.

As the book’s title may suggest, the chapters’ authors take a critical stance toward the topics they examine, questioning and investigating often taken-for-granted assumptions that arise in relation to school lunch. Indeed, the basic premise of this book—that school lunch is an educationally significant phenomenon—developed out of a critical examination of the widespread assumption that school lunch is little more than an interruption to the actual work of schooling. But the critical orientation of the book does not manifest as mere rejection of existing ideas, policies, or

approaches. While the authors are critical of the different understandings and undertakings they address, they also offer alternatives to them. These alternatives range from radically rethinking established conceptions of education and ways of engaging with food to working within existing parameters of both while making curricular and/or pedagogical changes and other adjustments in the direction of progressive reform.

Susan Laird builds upon her previous work (2008) on the educational significance of food, elaborating the metaphor “education as healthy nourishment.” Central to Laird’s chapter is a discussion of the educational significance of Alice Waters Edible School Yard project in Berkeley, California. Waters, a former teacher, turned her attention to a public middle school in Berkeley and transformed it into a place where food production, preparation, service, consumption, and appreciation are all central educational activities. The currently dominant educational ideology, characterized by assessment, measurement, and control, has supplanted once canonical educational thought from Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, and Montessori. Waters’s example reminds us of strands in this earlier thought and reframes school lunch as central rather than peripheral to schooling and its educational project. Cautioning against trendy school gardening that occurs without critique of school authoritarianism, Laird looks to Waters where we as educators can “study and take seriously the deep-rooted wisdom in her imaginative rethinking of public-school lunch as an *educational* institution that can transform taken-for-granted school cultures with its own nourishment ethos, aesthetic, ecological values, aims, curricula, pedagogies, and problems.”

We have reprinted an essay by the late Matthew T. Lewis that seeks new avenues for theorizing school lunch (2013).<sup>1</sup> Lewis begins by exploring the school lunchroom as a site of disciplinary power. The modern lunchroom came into being in the Progressive Era but remains, in certain respects, much the same to this day. The room is nearly always square or rectangular and is designed so that bodies will move predictably through its space; it is designed and governed in such a way that disruptions to its order can be easily seen and corrected by teachers and administrators. By these and other means, the lunchroom, Lewis argues, is structured to produce obedient, docile bodies. Next Lewis explores the ontological status of food. School lunch is part of our contemporary foodscape, which is characterized above all by simulation. On Lewis’s account, within this foodscape the eater is a passive spectator of simulated “Frankenfood,” constrained in her ability to enact an effective revolt or to achieve

alimentary freedom. Finally, reflecting his belief in the possibility that our bodies can be reclaimed and liberated, Lewis outlines a form of practice he calls “alimentary freedom.” The Edible Schoolyard at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School (discussed by Susan Laird in this volume), is seen by Lewis as challenging the food policies he criticizes. Beyond efforts to involve students in the production and preparation of good food, Lewis believes that we need a new dietetic rooted in ethical habits of eating. Cultivating such an ethic will require fundamentally rethinking school lunch:

With respect to lunch, then, we need to eschew nutritional guidelines and circumscribed food choices, which position the eater as object of nutritive management, and reconceptualize lunch as an educative moment. Why not teach children, first and foremost, that foods are a source of pleasure and, secondly, a pleasure that must be managed? These two simple suggestions would have the effect of transmogrifying food from an instrument to a pleasure and shifting the locus of power from external authorities to the properly educated and empowered alimentary subject.

Carolyn Plum, Darren Powell, and Deana Leahy bring an international perspective to bear on school lunch, examining school lunch policies and practices in United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Certain of these policies and practices, they find, are animated by a desire to regulate consumption and to engender particular values, especially in respect to what constitutes healthy and unhealthy food choices. These diet-related values are embedded in an ideology the authors call “healthism,” according to which health and illness are largely results of individual choices. Under this ideology, the myriad social, political, and economic factors that shape food choices and influence health recede from view. Healthism normalizes the surveillance of students’ lunches and dictates that teachers monitor what students are eating. As teachers inspect and comment on students’ lunches, they not only pass judgment (Good choice! Or, too much fat!), but also teach, indirectly, what counts as healthy, acceptable food. In this way, the lunchbox is revealed as a transnational strategy for “promoting and legitimizing ideological and normative messages around health, consumption and responsibility while at the same time delegitimizing others.”

Paula Salvio explores relations between eating, emotional life, and democracy, and discusses how these relations have informed and continue

to inform US public school lunch programs. Salvio begins by providing a historical narrative of the genesis of the American school lunch program in the 1940s, highlighting the pivotal role played by anthropologist Margaret Mead. Faced with competing needs related to human nutrition, ethical and religious diversity, and resources, Mead argued on behalf of food that was bland and broadly inoffensive: “School lunchrooms and other cafeterias, Mead believed, should offer only ‘food that is fairly innocuous and has low emotional value’” (Levine 2008, p. 68). Whatever the benefits of school lunch menus informed by Mead, there were also costs. Most significantly, Salvio argues, bland, homogeneous school food failed to nurture sensitivity to or appreciation for culture-linked pleasures and perspectives.

Today, most students in the United States attending public schools, especially those in poor neighborhoods, are recipients of a school lunch legacy that includes “innocuous” food and that lacks connections with local communities that “might serve as vibrant sources of nourishment and gustatory pleasure.” In place of current school lunch practice, Salvio recommends an alternative that involves community members and caters to multiple tastes. She believes that such an alternative practice “holds the promise of promoting a form of citizenship that cares about particularized others -their traditions, pleasures and appetites.”

John J. Lupinacci and Alison Happel-Parkins discuss what can be learned from efforts to resist “food enclosures,” which they define as “socio-political and economic arrangements that limit access to the production, preparation, and consumption of local, healthy, and culturally relevant food.” In their chapter, such resistance is illustrated by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), a learning community of food activists and producers that engages in sustainable farming projects in the city. The DBCFSN works to ensure that all children in Detroit are able to attend schools that plant, tend, and harvest food as part of the school’s curriculum. The schools with which they have partnered have become sources of food and places where community members can learn to prepare and eat locally cultivated, culturally appropriate, healthy, and affordable food. This example highlights the educative potential of a “commons curriculum” that is grounded in relationships and things—such as the need for nutritious food—we share in common.

Suzanne Rice observes that most students (like the rest of us) rarely think about the food they eat beyond the food itself and are unaware of how the hamburger or chicken patty they enjoy at lunchtime is connected