



**SCHOOLS AND FOOD
EDUCATION IN THE
21ST CENTURY**

Lexi Earl



Schools and Food Education in the 21st Century

Schools and Food Education in the 21st Century leads the reader through the different food experiences that occur in primary schools over a school day. These food experiences are moulded and shaped by an amalgamation of discourses on obesity prevention, nutrition education, welfarism, and foodiness. The book focuses on school food policy, showing that while schools endeavour to enact policy in a variety of ways, it is taken up differently in different schools.

This unique book identifies the discourse of foodiness and argues that the classed nature of foodiness leads to certain food knowledges becoming marginalised, positioning some schools in tension with their local communities, resulting in a diversity of food experiences. Earl explores the ways in which media and policy work to shape everyday practices around food, and walks the reader through a school foodscape, beginning with breakfast, examining food learning in classrooms, kitchen preparation, lunchtime, and, finally, addressing other food education opportunities.

Asking critical questions about class and poverty often overlooked in the context of food education in England, this book will be of interest to researchers, academics, and students working on food issues related to teaching, food, policy, and schools in the fields of Education, Sociology, and Food Studies. It should also be of interest to policymakers, teachers, and parents.

Lexi Earl is a writer and baker, currently working as a Research Fellow in Education at the University of Nottingham.



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For my sister, Louisa.

Hopefully this explains why you can tell me about the intricacies of engine design at length and the first question I ask is what is for lunch?



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Credits

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Abbreviations

BMI	Body Mass Index
CT	Class Teacher
DHT	Deputy Head Teacher
DS	Dawn School
DT	Design and Technology
ECT	Environment Club Teacher
FB	Fort Basset School
FFLP	Food for Life Partnership
FG	Focus Group
FN	Field Note
FP	Framley Primary School
FSM	Free School Meals
HT	Head Teacher
JS	Jevington School
LA	Local Authority
LEA	Local Education Authority
MSC	Marine Stewardship Council
NHS	National Health Service
SAKG	Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Programme
SFP	School Food Plan
UFSM	Universal Free School Meals
UIFSM	Universal Infant Free School Meals
WHO	World Health Organisation

Preface

Imagine, for a moment, your ideal school. What does it look like? Are there playing fields? A swimming pool? A garden perhaps? Have you thought about good teachers? What about the curriculum? The classrooms? Have you thought about when and what you might eat during the day? Have you imagined where you might eat? Who the cooks are? Have you thought about food at all, in this ideal school?

If, like me, you are slightly obsessed with food and plan your dinner while eating breakfast, you might have included food in your ideal school. If you hadn't thought about meals and eating, don't worry. You are not alone. For a long time, food and eating in school were not the focus of government policy or of much concern for teachers. Historically, food was provided at lunchtimes in schools in England. It was free for those who qualified for free meals, and other children could buy something to eat if they chose to during the school day. From the 1980s until the early 2000s, what children were eating went unmonitored by government and the wider public was largely unconcerned with young people's food choices and habits.

Today, things are different. Policymakers, educators, and health professionals are very concerned about the state of children's health, and consequently, their food choices, because, after all, you are what you eat. Vast numbers of the population (we are told with regular frequency) are obese, and this is going to lead to future crises – of unhealthy fat people who will be a burden on our public services like the NHS. Our society is consistently told we need to make better food choices, eat more fruits and vegetables (up to ten a day!), and know where our food comes from. There has been policy change and advice from government to schools about how to create healthier young people – through better food offered at lunchtime and offering cooking classes, to growing vegetables and raising chickens on site. Schools have become a vehicle for combatting fatness and teaching young people about food and eating. Head teachers are now responsible not only for results and performance in Mathematics, English, and Science, but also children's health and wellbeing.

The progression of this link between food and children's lives can be seen in the public and media reactions to a blog called *NeverSeconds*.¹ *NeverSeconds*

is a food blog begun in 2012. It was written by a (then) nine-year-old girl called Martha Payne. Martha lived in Scotland and, as part of a writing project overseen by her father, began to take photographs of her school lunches and then to blog about them. The lunches were critiqued using a list of criteria that included a “food-o-meter” (giving a rank out of 10), portion size, which courses she had eaten, how healthy the food was, and whether any hair was found (Payne 2012a).

The blog quickly gained admirers and critics. Admirers praised Martha for capturing everyday meals served in schools whilst critics chastised her for not appreciating that she had food at all. This criticism prompted a charity drive for Mary’s Meals, an organisation that feeds school children in Malawi. The blog began to feature pictures of school lunches from around the world, as well as earning praise from Jamie Oliver.

Then, on June 14, 2012, Martha wrote that she had been taken out of class and forbidden by the local council to take further photographs due to a headline in the local paper that day. The council understood her blog to be an attack on the catering service, which led their staff to “fear for their jobs” (STV 2012, para.1). After the blog post was published (with some additional commentary from her father), a media storm erupted around free speech and school food, in both the national newspapers and online.

On Twitter, the hashtag #NeverSeconds appeared, and people swarmed not only to the blog but to the Mary’s Meals donations page. Two days prior to the announcement cancelling the blog, the donation page had funded 25.8% of a school kitchen in Malawi. On the morning of June 15 (the day after the announcement) the total had reached £45,889.46, enough money for more than one kitchen (Payne 2012b) and by June 28, the campaign had raised over £108,000 (Payne 2012c). *The Guardian* readers were encouraged to “tweet your mealtime snaps in solidarity with *NeverSeconds*” (Walker 2012). The council swiftly backtracked on their decision, issuing a statement on June 15, 2012 declaring that “there is no place for censorship in this Council” (Argyll and Bute Council 2012, para.1). Martha won Best Food Blog in the *Observer Food Monthly* awards in 2012. She subsequently starred in a BBC documentary, *Martha, Meals and Malawi*, which documented her trip to Malawi to see what was being done with the money she had raised (Hardie 2012), and she released a book.

The furore around Martha and her blog illustrates just how much has changed regarding children, food education, and eating in the 21st century. Martha’s blog provides just one example of how important the issue of school food, and food education more broadly, has become in England.

Food occupies a special place in our collective psyche because it is both embodied (Lupton 1996) and viscerally experienced (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008). It is therefore always personal, and there are many emotions attached to food experiences and who has what rights to food education (parents versus teachers, for example). Food educators are often motivated by

the idea of “doing good” (Guthman 2008a; Flowers and Swan 2012), but this does not make the practices of food education any less complex.

The focus of much food education is to encourage young people to eat more healthily and to eat more fruits and vegetables. This is done generally by teaching them how to cook, or grow their own food, and by providing healthy choices during lunchtime and at other break times during the school day. The focus is on teaching children and young people that food is something to be valued and that food is something to be known. Food has become part of a solution to a crisis of fatness. These various discourses on food, on nutrition, and on obesity dominate conversations about how best to go about educating young people about food.

This book will take you on a journey through the school day, exploring the changing foodscape and possibilities for food education in primary schools. The complexities of food education and the challenges in delivering it are explored, as are the ways policy and the media work to formulate particular environments in which schools can operate. Many aspects of the current debates around food and eating have been simplified in recent years. Eat well, and you will be healthy, we are told. Part of the purpose of this book is to reintroduce complexity to these discussions and to highlight the often contradictory world in which educators, schools, and children all operate. This book also highlights a much maligned aspect of school food experience, that of childhood hunger, and notes the growing place food poverty occupies in everyday school life. Hunger forms part of the challenge food educators face, but we know little about how schools cope with this phenomenon.

Before we begin though, a confession. A lot of this book will talk about foodies, about growing your own, or cooking, and it is important that you know at the outset that I am a foodie. I am personally deeply entwined in this book. In fact, the whole process of writing this was a considerable challenge because I am steeped so deeply in the world of food, and food media. I am a former pastry chef (and had to make cakes in a café to pay my rent while I was finishing the doctoral work on which much of this book is based). I write a food blog. I have an allotment. I set up a student community garden. I occasionally test recipes for cookbooks. I post a lot of food photographs on Instagram. Which is all to say that I come with a particular bias regarding the importance of food and the role food plays in our lives. Writing this book was a challenge because this book seeks to change the way we approach food education, by bringing attention to those practices that currently frame food education programmes, by highlighting the dominance of particular discourses, and the way these discourses shape what we can/not know about food, or teach about food, or accept as appropriate to eat at a particular moment. This will, I hope, challenge the way you think about how we approach food education, the expectations and responsibilities we put onto schools, and the way our food talk shapes the young people we teach and influence.

The purpose of this book is not to undermine the very valuable work going on around food education. Rather, it highlights the complex environment in

which schools, teachers, children, and cooks find themselves when it comes to learning and teaching food. Some of the schools in this book are doing a superb job integrating food into all aspects of the curriculum and the everyday life of school. Others are perhaps struggling, although not for lack of trying. The people portrayed in this book are part of an army up and down England who make a difference to what children eat, and what children know about food, on a daily basis. But their efforts are undermined because we are not looking at the wider, structural problems. We, as a society, have become so caught up in what food represents and tells us about ourselves, as individuals, that we have lost sight of the complexity of food practices – the cultures, families, traditions, homes, and communities in which they are embedded. We need to remember this complexity.

Note

- 1 *NeverSeconds*: www.neverseconds.blogspot.co.uk [Accessed March 20, 2015]

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