

Introduction

Suzanne Rice
University of Kansas

When adults think back to their own experience of school lunch, they may recall the compartmentalized trays, the hair-netted servers, the special treats served on holidays, or the recurring question of who will sit with whom; everyone, surely, remembers the lunchroom smell, that unmistakable cocktail of sweaty bodies, institutional cooking, and chalk dust. Whatever the specifics of lunchroom memories, the fact that such memories exist when so much of what happens in school is beyond recall is itself interesting. *Something* important occurs during school lunch. Yet lunch has received less attention in the education literature than practically anything else connected with schooling (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). While much remains to be examined in relation to school lunch, this special issue illuminates several of the under-researched and under-theorized phenomena involving students' noon-time meal. It is my hope that the articles appearing in this special issue will interest and inform in their own right, and that, collectively, they will also serve as an invitation to others to inquire into school lunch.

The sheer number of students involved recommends school lunch as a topic for investigation. Across the United States each school day (in 2011) over 50 million students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelve ate lunch, nearly all in a school cafeteria (United States' Census Bureau, 2011, n.p.). In addition, while school lunch is a multi-faceted phenomenon, it is at root about one of the most basic of human needs: food. The food we eat literally builds and sustains our bodies and food is tightly woven into the cultural and other practices that help constitute our personal

and cultural identities. Growing, processing, preparing and/or serving food is the life-work of over half of the world's population.

In the popular media, lunch food is most often discussed in terms of its nutritional value, and this is an important concern, one too often overlooked until fairly recently. While several of the articles in this volume are concerned with nutrition in one regard or another, all the articles also discuss lunch in terms of its broader social significance. This is appropriate given that what gets counted as food is worthy of considerable analysis. From a biological standpoint, there are millions of things humans can safely and healthfully eat, but only a very small percentage of these are regarded as food. And what is regarded as food in one culture may be regarded quite differently in another (Montanari, 2006). In one context a dog is dinner; in another, the family pet (Herzog, 2010). Food (and the experience of eating) always exists in a social, cultural, and historical context, and understanding the significance of food—and certainly understanding the complex institutional practice of school lunch—requires inquiry into a great number of phenomena that may not immediately appear linked to food. Social relations between students as well as between schools and the larger community, policies connected with food service, the use of time during the noon meal, the relation between school lunch and animal welfare among various other ethical concerns, gender relations, and aesthetics are among the topics the authors included here address. The following brief introductions cannot do justice to the articles themselves, but will, perhaps, suggest the breadth of the topic at hand as well as provide the reader some guidance as to where to, well, dig in.¹

Dreary institutional or fatty fast-food may be the most common options available for children eating school lunch, but they are not the only ones. In “Bringing Educational Thought to Public School Lunch: Alice Waters and the Edible Schoolyard,” Susan Laird examines school lunch in the context of Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California. At the heart of this school is the Edible Schoolyard, an on-site, one-acre garden that provides organic produce for use in the school's kitchen as well as opportunities for hands-on learning in various academic disciplines. The garden is also central to the school's most recent curricular innovation, “eco-gastronomy,” which combines the study of food, aesthetics, and sustainability. The Edible Schoolyard is a brainchild of restaurateur and social activist Alice Waters, who, as Laird notes, was moved to transform Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, a once-decrepit institution she drove past daily on the way to her famous restaurant, Chez Panisse.

Laird's extensive reading of modern philosophical studies of food

and education informs and grounds her study of the Edible Schoolyard and Water's educational leadership there. One work of particular significance is Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots* (1943). In Laird's words, "Weil's moral theory of 'uprootedness' conceives hunger as a demoralized condition that starves both bodies and souls, for whom beauty is one vital food that cultivates 'roots,' because it addresses 'our thirst for good'" (Weil, 1952, p. 11). Also of special significance in Laird's analysis is Maria Montessori. As Laird mentions, Alice Waters studied at the International Montessori Institute in London and sees Montessori as a main influence in her own educational thought and practice. This influence is apparent in the Edible Schoolyard, where the overall environment and practical activities connected with gardening and food preparation and service carry much educational freight.

Against this philosophical background, Laird examines evidence of Martin Luther King Jr.'s transformed curriculum and culture, which is founded upon a new concept, "edible education." Such education is guided by five principles: (1) food is an academic subject, (2) school provides lunch for every child, (3) schools support farms, (4) children learn by doing, and (5) beauty is a language. As Laird observes, education at the school is organized around the ideas of "active learning" and "learning for understanding." Where lunch is concerned, this means that students are deeply involved in "selecting, producing, planning, preparing, serving, eating, and enjoying good food for their lunch—and cleaning up afterwards." In Laird's view, education at Martin Luther King Jr. exemplifies thoughtful, practical public coeducational childrearing, and she notes that, from the beginning, the Edible Schoolyard has involved students' parents and extended family members, as well as other community residents in its educational endeavors. Laird's essay concludes by suggesting future critical inquiry concerning Waters' possible contribution to a tradition of thought on coeducation that begins with Mary Wollstonecraft and continues to this day (Laird, 2008).

Like Laird, Matthew T. Lewis provides a philosophical analysis of school lunch. In "Postmodern Dietetic: Reclaiming the Body through the Practice of Alimentary Freedom," Lewis seeks new avenues for theorizing school lunch and in the process takes on three major, related tasks. First, informed principally by French philosopher Michele Foucault, he explores the school lunchroom as a site of disciplinary power. Lewis provides a brief history of the modern lunchroom, which came into being in the Progressive Era and remains, in certain key 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. The lunchroom 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. On Lewis's account, discipline and surveillance do not go uncontested. Resistances can be seen, he believes, in various self-induced pathologies of the flesh—obesity, anorexia, and bulimia—for example.

Second, in order help illuminate the effects of disciplinary power, Lewis provides an examination of school food. Here, grounded in the work of Marxist theorist Guy Debord, Lewis explores the ontological status of food, which he regards as an “epiphenomenon of our spectacularized foodscape.” 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.

Third, 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 such efforts to involve students in the production and preparation of good food, Lewis believes that we need a new dietetic. In sketching this dietetic, Lewis draws on the ancient Greeks, particularly Aristotle, in whose work he locates a “form of alimentation rooted in ethical habits of eating.”

In “Time to Eat: School Lunch and the Loss of Leisure in Education,” Kipton D. Smilie provides both historical and philosophical insights into the noontime school meal. At the center of his article is an argument on behalf of reconceptualizing the school lunchroom as a space outside the world of school work, outside instrumental ends and purposes: as a space for leisure. This argument is fueled by Smilie's examination of contemporary and historical school lunch practices, practices that he places within the broader context of schooling. He notes that with the erosion of a commitment to liberal education and an intensified emphasis on school-as-job-preparation, opportunities for leisure at school have shrunk to near non-existence. Nowhere is this loss of leisure more apparent, he notes, than in the school cafeteria at lunchtime. Feeling the pressure from No Child Left Behind and the Common Core State Standards, some schools, Smilie reports, have even sought to reallocate time within the day, with lunch getting less and instruction getting more. This is not an entirely new proposal; drawing on the history of education literature, Smilie recounts past efforts to make the inaptly named “lunch hour” productive in terms of student learning.

In contrast to those wanting to cram more instruction into the school day, Smilie laments the erosion of leisure in school (and elsewhere) and argues for its restoration, a process that might begin in the lunchroom, a space already set aside for the consumption of food. As Smilie reminds us, while we literally recreate ourselves physically through eating, we also recreate our sense of humanity when we “break bread” together.

To some, “leisure” conjures images of decadence, sloth, and mindlessness. But this is clearly not what Smilie recommends. Drawing on Aristotle, among others, he conceptualizes leisure as activity performed for its own sake rather than for some purpose beyond itself, and he notes that leisure activities—contemplation, playing with ideas, conversation, for example—often engage the mind quite deeply, albeit often enjoyably as well.

Jennifer Ng, Holly Morsbach Sweeney, and Melinda Mitchiner provide a largely empirical study of school lunch. Their article, “Let’s Sit Together: Exploring the Potential of Human Relations Education at Lunch,” is based on a study of lunchroom social relations in a single school. Under investigation is Bishop Seabury, a college preparatory school located in Lawrence, Kansas (a Midwestern city with a population of approximately 87,000). Bishop Seabury is a small, private school that enrolls nearly 180 students in grades 6-12 and has a staff of 28 teachers and administrators. Of special interest to Ng, Sweeney, and Mitchiner is the school’s approach to organizing seating arrangements at lunchtime. While Bishop Seabury has not adopted a formal program, the authors describe a lunchroom practice at the school as being very similar to “Mix It Up at Lunch,” an approach developed and recommended by an organization called “Teaching Tolerance.” This program is intended to foster interactions between diverse students in the hopes of overcoming stereotypes and promoting empathy, respect, and a shared sense of humanity, values endorsed by Bishop Seabury. Minimally, Mix It Up at Lunch entails randomly assigning students their lunchtime seatmates one day a week to ensure that, for at least that day, everyone has a chance to sit with someone they might not otherwise meet over a meal. Since the school opened in 1997, Bishop Seabury has exceeded this minimal expectation and has “mixed it up” three days a week; on those days students, along with an adult staff member, eat at randomly assigned, mixed-grade tables of eight. Seating assignments change every two weeks.

The research conducted by Ng, Sweeney, and Mitchiner included a month of observations followed by focus groups and interviews. Based on their research, the authors conclude that, at least at Bishop Seabury, Mix It Up at Lunch succeeds in helping to create a safe and welcoming environment for students of different ages and from different backgrounds

and that it serves the aim of inclusivity. The authors acknowledge that there may be features relatively particular to Bishop Seabury that make Mix It Up more effective there than it might be elsewhere. The school is quite small, private rather than public, and explicitly committed to economic, racial, and ethnic diversity. While the Mix It Up program and other human relations approaches to multiculturalism may work most easily and effectively in schools with characteristics similar to those found at Bishop Seabury, Ng, Sweeney, and Mitchiner conclude with a two-part challenge for all educators: to ask whether promoting interactions between different social groups in their school is worthwhile, and, if they decide that it is, to consider how this might be accomplished through school lunches or other activities.

For most, the term “school lunch” calls to mind an image of food actually consumed at school. But this noontime meal actually occurs in a range of venues. In “Midday Eating While Learning: The School Cafeteria, Homeschooling, and the Open Campus High School,” A. G. Rud examines typical lunch experiences occurring in these three different contexts. He concludes that, wherever students happen to be eating, their experience will likely not include an instructional or clearly educational component. Rud believes that, in contrast to current practices, lunch, whether provided at school, home, or commercial venues should be mined for its educative potential, and notes with approval the rare instances where this is the case, in particular The Edible Schoolyard at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, discussed by Susan Laird in this issue. Such educative potential is especially apparent, Rud says, in regard to three topics, economics, nutrition, and sustainability, which, he observes, are relevant whether students experience school provided cafeteria lunches, brown bags, parent provided homeschool meals, or open campus restaurant options. Where their food comes from, how it is produced, and what nutritional and other benefits it provides, are but a few of the more specific questions that might be taken up. Doing so, Rud concludes, would go a long way toward making school lunch an intentional, rather than incidental, part of the curriculum and the school day.

Two essays, both largely philosophical, discuss school lunch in relation to animal welfare. In “It IS about Chicken: Chick-fil-A, Posthumanist Intersectionality, and Gastro-aesthetic Pedagogy,” Bradley D. Rowe examines parallels between human and animal exploitation, which he regards in light of recent controversies involving the fast-food giant Chick-fil-A, a restaurant chain with outlets in schools. Chick-fil-A has been a focus of considerable scrutiny lately because of its stance against marriage equality for gay, lesbian, and transgendered couples and its “stealth” conservative curriculum, “Core Essentials.” Ignored in such

criticisms is how Chick-fil-A affects the chickens raised and killed to make its products.

Rowe's article begins by questioning "species" as a category of difference that interacts with other categories in constructing dominating ideologies and hierarchies. He challenges established hierarchical orderings of human and non-human animals in which the humans always come out on top, arguing that such orderings support systems of injustice. As an alternative, Rowe examines the theoretical framework of "posthumanist intersectionality," in which he sees the possibility for extending the category "all" to include the "millions upon millions of chickens that . . . [the Chick-fil-A] company breeds into this world only to mutilate and exploit to make a profit."

In the second part of his essay, Rowe examines the educative potential of what he calls "gastro-aesthetic pedagogy," which is an "embodied pedagogy of food that reduces the cognitive dissonance between the living body of the eater and the dead body of the eaten." Philosophically, gastro-aesthetic pedagogy draws largely on the work of Richard Shusterman, in particular the form of analysis, *somaesthetics*, which Shusterman defines as the "study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning" (1999, p. 302; italics original). The significance and power of gastro-aesthetic pedagogy in relation to Rowe's project is that it enables the learner to cultivate "somatic sensibility" and to actively choose which life-forms will enter into her body and become part of her being.

My own contribution to this volume, "Three Educational Problems: The Case of Eating Animals," was sparked by a question I encountered several years ago. In *Eating Animals*, Jonathan Safran Foer asks: "What did you do when you learned the truth about eating animals?" (2009, p. 252). While large and complex, one part of the truth to which Foer refers is that animals often experience great fear, pain, and, of course, death, prior to their transformation into food for human consumption; a second part of this truth is that in modern, industrialized societies humans do not need to eat the flesh of other animals.

Foer's book is geared toward a mature reader, one who already knows "the truth" in varying degrees or acquires it in the course of reading his book. I treat Foer's question as an educational problem, which I examine as if it had been modified to accommodate a larger audience, one including school-age children and youth. Such an examination leads quickly to a consideration of what might be done in response to those who do not know the truth about eating animals as well as to those whose relation to this truth is complicated in educationally significant ways. First are those who are *simply ignorant* and have no knowledge about the rela-

tion between the meat they consume and the animals from which it is derived. Second are those who are *willfully ignorant* about the meat they consume and the animals from which it is derived; they know, but turn away from the truth to which Foer refers and continue to eat animals. Third are those who “know the truth” and continue to eat meat, but are troubled in varying degrees by their consumption. It might be said that these meat eaters, who may describe their consumption as a “guilty pleasure” are *incontinent*, in the sense that they act in ways that go against their better judgment.

I argue that responding educationally to simple ignorance, willful ignorance, and incontinence as these relate to the “truth about eating animals” will likely require two broad components, one political, and one curricular and pedagogical. Needed, first, are policy reforms ensuring that if animal “products” remain in school lunchrooms they are much more carefully regulated and, further, that they are balanced with appealing, nutritious, and tasty vegetarian and vegan options. Needed, second, are curricular and pedagogical reforms that help students acquire information about the lives and deaths of animals used for food, enhance students’ capacity for sympathetic response to such animals (perhaps through arts and literature), and support students’ efforts to develop new dietary habits consistent with self-identified, ethical food choices.

Each of the seven articles included in this special issue provides important insights into, and raises interesting questions about, educational phenomena occurring in relation to school lunch. I wish to thank the contributors for their careful scholarship and for helping to illuminate aspects of schooling, and food, that have been largely overlooked. Many thanks, also, to outgoing *Journal of Thought* editor John F. Covalleskie who encouraged me to create this special issue as well as to Douglas R. Davis, the current editor, for his patience, careful attention, and good cheer.

Note

¹Susan Laird brought the larger topic of food to the attention of contemporary philosophers of education in her presidential address, “Food for Co-Educational Thought,” given at the 2007 meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society (Laird, 2008). She deserves credit for renewing interest in the educational significance of food, including food served to students at school.

References

- Herzog, H. (2010). *Some we love, some we hate, some we eat*. New York: Harper-Collins.
- Laird, S. (2008). Food for co-educational thought. Presidential essay in B. Stengel

- (Ed.), *Philosophy of education 2007* (pp. 1-14). Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society.
- Levine, S. (2008). *School lunch politics: The surprising history of America's favorite welfare program*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Montanari, M. (2006). *Food is culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shusterman, R. (1999). Somaesthetics: A disciplinary proposal. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57(3), 299-313.
- Simone, W. (1952). *The need for roots: Prelude to a declaration of duties towards mankind*. Author Wills, Trans. London, UK: Routledge.
- Weaver-Hightower, M. (2011). Why education researchers should take school food seriously. *Educational Researcher*, 40(1), 15-21.
- Zipperstein, R. (2013). School Food, Inc.: The contracting of America's national school lunch program and its nutritional consequences. *Cornell Policy Review*. Retrieved from <http://www.cornellpolicyreview.com/school-food-inc-the-contracting-of-americas-national-school-lunch-program-and-its-nutritional-consequences/>