



School Lunch and Student Food Insecurity: A Teacher's Observations and Reflections

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INTRODUCTION

While critical educators consider the ways in which students from low-income families, many of whom are of color, experience oppression and marginalization in and through schooling, seldom do they focus on the food students are offered at school. For formal educators, food in schools is ever present yet underexamined (Weaver-Hightower 2011). The percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-fee lunch is used by educators as a proxy indicator of the socioeconomic status of school communities. However, formal educators' considerations of school lunch typically end at citing statistics. Given the extent to which school lunches impact the lives, health, cultural identities, and well-being of our most vulnerable students, it is a significant oversight that we neglect to critically examine the food our students are being served in schools as part of the school curriculum.

Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011a) have argued that food has been ignored in education (as well as the humanities and social sciences)

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because it falls on the wrong side of the mind-body dualism split, being relegated to the body rather than the mind. Far from being an issue separate from education, Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011a) argue that “food practices are a means of social reproduction, oppression, and resistance” (p. 17), noting that “for educators, researchers, and policymakers, this requires viewing school food as one of the central facets of school reform” (p. 16).

While efforts to improve school lunches have occurred, these have mostly arisen from non-educators outside of schools. Interestingly, the history of school food provides more context on why this aspect of the curriculum has fallen outside the purview of formal educators. School meals began in the Progressive Era prior to World War I and, at that time, fell under the jurisdiction of charities, women’s groups, PTAs, and other non-educators (Levine 2008; Poppendieck 2010). This trend continues with concerns about school lunches being voiced primarily by celebrities, celebrity chefs, parents, activists, and non-formal educators (e.g. “Renegade Lunch Lady” Chef Ann Cooper, Alice Waters, Michelle Obama, FoodCorps). While this is important work (and we clearly need all hands on deck), we have argued (Stapleton et al. 2017) that formal educators working in schools on a daily basis bring needed perspectives to the issue. Teachers, in particular, have key placements within schools, and in relation to students, that can enable them to see and ask critical questions on food issues faced by their students.

It is no secret that the quality of school food is low. A singular word—“nasty”—has been uttered by countless people when asked to describe their school lunches (Poppendieck 2010). While the quality of school food in and of itself is an important issue to address for the sake of *all* kids in schools, in this chapter, we are turning special attention to students who are food insecure. By food insecure, we mean that they do not have consistent and reliable access to food in their lives outside of schools. Giving food-insecure students access to free/reduced-price lunches is an important, ethical act as it may be the only reliable access to food each day for youth in approximately 3 million US households (USDA Economic Research Service 2016). There have been strides under The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 to increase access to food in schools, through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which allows high-poverty schools to provide free meals to all with no need for family applications. While this is an important step, we demonstrate here why it is not enough.

In this chapter, we take a food justice approach: we consider access to high-quality, nutritious, tasty, and culturally sustaining food in schools as a right for all students. Our food justice perspective brings attention to social injustice along the lines of race and class to the food movement arena and is informed by scholars such as Alkon and Agyeman (2011). Following this, we bring terms from the food justice world such as food insecurity and food deserts into the school food arena. While we are very much in support of food movements that advocate for local, organic, and equitably sourced food for animals and people, in this chapter, we focus on three areas regarding school food: quality, nutrition, and cultural relevance. In our work, we share a veteran teacher's insights about food insecurity as experienced by her students. Based on her observations, we introduce the idea of *in-school food insecurity*, the situation in which students choose not to eat school food despite being food insecure *and* having universally free access to school food. We consider factors that can increase or decrease students' in-school food insecurity and suggest ways to account more accurately for whether or not students are facing in-school food insecurity.

SITUATING THE PROJECT AND THE AUTHORS

The ideas presented in this chapter stem from a participatory action research project with teachers which Sarah, an education researcher, led as part of her doctoral dissertation work (Stapleton 2015a). Sarah is a white woman who has lived all over the United States and internationally. She is a former middle/high school teacher and current teacher educator and seeks to engage teachers as collaborators in research. The goal of her dissertation project was to encourage teachers to focus (broadly) on food issues in schools within a low-income, urban school district in the Midwest and share their perspectives from their positions as teachers.

Person was one of four teachers who participated as partners in the project. She and Sarah met at a local food justice conference, where they discovered their shared passions around food justice for students. Person has spent 38 years working as a special education teacher in a low-income school district in a Midwestern city. She is an African American woman, who grew up in another urban center in the same state. Based on her extensive experience teaching in the same school district for decades, she is highly knowledgeable about the city, school district, local/regional politics, and local/regional demographics. That Person's own childhood

was marked by hunger shapes how she thinks about food security for her students and explains her attentiveness to it. Her history and experiences make her perspective particularly persuasive and authentic. She reflects:

The issue of food security in my urban center has caused me to do a lot of soul searching and thinking. As a child growing up in the '60s, I was very aware of no food, lack of food, being hungry, and not knowing what I could do about it. Now I'm well past childhood and I still have that sense of food insecurity and concern about a lack of food for urban kids.

Person's awareness of the importance of food security sparked her to question food insecurity at her school. To do this, she made observations of school lunches and students' eating patterns during the school day. She interviewed the school food coordinator about the systems and procedures for feeding students. She witnessed the meals being served, and whether students were eating. She also talked with students about their opinions on the food at various times of the lunch period. She also observed the vending machine sales each week, noting how much of what items were being purchased. Within the period in which Person was engaged in her study (the 2013–14 and 2014–15 school years) the district changed contracts, hiring a new food service provider. Interestingly, Person witnessed a noticeable change in food quality across the two years. Person's written account is shared in the following sections. Her words and observations are in italics so that her voice is distinguishable. After Person's observations are shared, Sarah discusses how Person's observations speak to literature on food and school food.

FOOD INSECURITY AT AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

I [Person] work at an alternative high school (AHS), where we specialize in working with at-risk students. I have worked with this population for over 15 years. My school is not in a traditional school with access to a kitchen, so the food is pre-packaged so that it can be heated in an industrial oven. The food is "bussed" in, and the students eat from elementary-like foam trays.

From our school improvement report, our documented free and reduced lunch rate is 97%. Everybody in our school gets to eat for free. And you would think that since everybody gets to eat free, they would come and eat. But they don't.

"Ms. Cole, I'm hungry."

"Why don't you get lunch?"

"I'm not eating that food."

"Oh, so you'd rather go to the vending machines?"

"Yes, because I'm not eating that food."

The at-risk students I work with do have access to food through the free breakfast and lunch program, but the food quality has been less than ideal. The food choices in my school over the last 15 years have been foods that lead directly to obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and a host of other destructive health issues. My students get 97% processed food, white flour-based breads, canned fruits, and sometimes apples, oranges, and bananas as fresh fruit. Access to quality food is extremely limited. To add insult to injury, we have one vending machine with snacks and one vending machine with pop.

AHS is located in a food desert. The closest grocery store is 2 and ¼ miles away from the school, and this is in a community where there are a lot of people. Where the school is, there are five apartment complexes on just one side of the road. So it's not easy to get fresh fruits and vegetables there. My students get hungry, and they want food. But they don't know how to easily get it, and there's not a place for them to easily get it.

My school does not have access to the food that the other high schools have, which means that the most marginalized students in the district have the least access to good food. If a food desert in an urban setting is a place with limited access to fresh food/quality food, then my school [itself] is a food desert.

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Person's observations are powerful for several reasons. First, Person identifies that within school districts there can be schools that have lesser quality food because of a lack of on-site kitchen facilities. Schools with lesser or no kitchen facilities have been of concern for years. In fact, Levine (2008) reports that it was this situation which ushered in the use of food service management corporations in 1969. Alarming, with the increasing rise of pre-packed foods, there are **new** schools being designed and built with no kitchen facilities, only "warming centers" for heating food prepared off-site (Kitchens without Cooks [n.d.](#)).

Person points to food security for students *within* the school day as a serious issue: food-insecure students—those who did not have reliable and/or adequate access to food at home—refusing to eat the food served

by the school because it was of such poor quality. She even notes that her school *itself* could be considered a food desert. Through this statement, she applies food justice language to school food. By doing so, she brings two distinct food practice communities into dialogue, to foster social justice within school food practices. That a school *itself* can be a food desert is an important and powerful assertion and one which educators and school food decision makers should take seriously.

While several books consider issues of school food access to low-income students and the quality of school food (e.g. Levine 2008; Poppendieck 2010; Robert and Weaver-Hightower 2011a, b), none make the direct observation that students with ready access to free food may not eat it because of low quality. Much of the focus of existing school food literature concerns the *access* of students from low-income families to free food, as eligibility for free/reduced-price lunch status presents countless problems (e.g. Poppendieck 2010). An additional concern that appears in literature is the stigma associated with accepting free/reduced-price meals in schools serving students from heterogeneous social-economic backgrounds (Poppendieck 2010). It has been argued that an answer to these problems is to provide free meals for all (Poppendieck 2010). Because all students in Person's district are automatically eligible for free meals, Person's observations demonstrate that the solution is not that simple.

THE SLIPPERINESS OF STUDENT HUNGER

You don't ask high-risk children, "Do you get enough to eat?" You don't ask that because you've got a fight. You don't ask them, "Do you have enough food at home?" No, you don't ask high-risk children that—especially a teenager or young to late adolescent. There's the wall of pride and the wall of shame. And the wall of pride is huge—you can't get through that. And the wall of shame? You are not getting through that. Unless there is a deep, penetrating relationship, kids are not going to discuss food security. They're not.

Some of their parents will note when the mobile food pantry is going to be in their neighborhood. Near the school, there is a church with a monthly food drop. When mobile food pantries are going to be in my area, we usually get a flyer sent to us, and we're to tell the kids. You've got to be careful how you say it, like I said, that pride and that shame. You just can't go up to a kid and say, 'Hey, the mobile food truck 'gonna be in the neighborhood. Tell your ma.' We cannot do that. We post the information and make a general announcement. We don't single out anybody.

My children (my students) do not seem to understand the social implications of food security. When I gave them surveys using the term "food security," every student asked me what it meant. (I had never heard of food security myself until I went to a local food justice conference.) They're disconnected from their lack of food, the causes, and what they can do themselves to solve the problem. This situation keeps them confined and perpetuates the continuation of food insecurity for them. It's cyclical.

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As someone who experienced hunger as a student but was forbidden by her mother to accept free food from her school, Person is aware of the nuances and challenges of understanding individual students' food security. Person's testimony points to how complicated it can be to try to get at food insecurity in schools and for individual students, even as someone who grew up in similar circumstances. Her awareness points to the importance of finding other measures (such as observing students at lunch) rather than asking students directly to investigate student hunger. Because her school has a 97% free and reduced-rate lunch, we can be fairly certain that nearly all students are in need of food, which makes this an ideal case study for this work.

Person also points to her students not being aware of the larger systemic food situation in which they are nested and trapped. This lack of awareness speaks to the need for educators to teach about food justice issues in their classrooms so that students have exposure to food justice language and concepts and might apply them to their lives.

THE IMPACT OF FOOD SERVICE MANAGEMENT CORPORATIONS

When we first started this project, the district was still working with the company [name redacted at publisher request]. [The food service company] treated delivering food to my school as if it were an elementary school, sending so little it seemed like food rationing. There was no variety, and there was a limited amount of food. Students complained about the terrible food. It was horrible.

The following year, when a new food company came in, they brought in more variety and more food. The daily standard food is a spicy chicken patty (which the children love), a regular chicken patty, and chicken nuggets. Even

though the kids still have spicy chicken patties, they can get two spicy chicken patties if they like. Last year they never served fish, but now during Lent, they serve fish once a week and the fish patties are of nice quality. The variety is exciting; there is corn on the cob, potato wedges made from real potatoes, and baked fried chicken once or twice a week. The baked fried chicken looks fried, but it's baked. They even have baked-fried drumsticks; you don't have to ask if it's chicken. ... [The former food service company] never served anything like that.

[The new company] has brought in more variety for the kids, more food for the kids, so more kids are now eating. I find that fascinating. I don't hear the kids complaining... They complained a lot [when the previous company was there], but now I'm not hearing complaints. So, to answer the question, "If you serve better food, will more kids eat?" I'm going to go with "yes," especially if the food is familiar to them. There has been a change in food security for our students. This new company provides a larger variety, and the kids notice it, like it, and they're eating. I'm excited about that.

[The new company] has provided food for the afternoon kids who go to school from 1–5 pm whereas last year, the afternoon students didn't have any food. Last year, to supplement the afternoon students, the teachers would bring in crackers and snack pretzels, and one of the teachers would request at least ten milks. Now, there is a whole hot box with food for at least 30 kids, and in the afternoon at 3:30 pm, there's a line... When they leave the school, if they got food at 3:30 pm, then they've got something in their belly, and they can wait until the next day.

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It was perhaps a serendipitous occurrence that Person's project timeline coincided with the changing of the food services contract in her district, allowing her to observe the impacts of this change on student food consumption. The dramatic and instantaneous shift in school lunch quality from one school year to the next is startling. It is important to note that this change also coincided with the enactment in 2014 of *The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act*, and could also (or otherwise) have been connected to changes in the language used in the district's request for food service proposals. While the exact causes of this change are beyond the scope of this research project, it is nonetheless fascinating to note that the changes did not result from a systemic overhaul of the district's food service system.

In looking at Person's narrative, there are some key phrases worth examining. That the initial food service company's meals appeared to Person as "food rationing" is one such phrase, connoting conditions of scarcity as in war or punishment. As part of this, Person has questioned the practice that her high school students—including groups with particularly high caloric needs like teenage boys and pregnant young women—have been served the same amount as the youngest elementary students in the district. I [Sarah] will add here my concern that *The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act* reduces portion sizes for youth. I recognize that this is an attempt to address obesity, but students—especially those in high school—are growing and have higher caloric needs than later in life. It is important to note that childhood obesity may be as connected (if not more) to the composition of foods (highly processed, high in sugar, fat) rather than the quantity alone. Moreover, childhood obesity is highly correlated with low income, not because children are eating too much per se, but because the foods that are most commonly available to their families (who disproportionately live in food deserts) are typically highly processed and nutrient poor. For these reasons, I advocate the unlimited availability of nutrient-dense food rather than limiting portion size as an ethical practice for food-insecure youth.

It seems important to call out food service companies for low-quality food as an unethical practice, particularly for its impact on food-insecure students. (That said, we were prohibited by the publisher from including the name of the company whose service was terrible.) Around this time, the initial food service company received substantial negative publicity in the state for its involvement with a prison food scandal. (It is unclear, however, how much this scandal impacted the district's decision to create a contract with another company.). Publicity about the company's low-quality food is continually emerging, such as a 2016 boycott staged by some Chicago Public School high school students and their teacher, Tim Meegan (Eng 2015, Nov 30; Perkins 2016, Feb 4). These students and their teacher specifically objected to the low-quality of their school food, calling out brown lettuce, gray broccoli, served-but-still-frozen food (Eng 2015, Nov 30; Perkins 2016, Feb 4). This company's food controversies are not limited to K-12 schools, but have also extended to colleges and prison scandals (e.g. Zoukis 2015, Dec 2).

Poppendieck (2010) recognizes that student participation (receiving of a school lunch) can change slightly by food service staff "branding" lunchrooms, bringing in new dishes, revamping their image, and so on. However, the significance of a local decision made, often haphazardly, by

a district school board for addressing (or not addressing) student food insecurity needs far more attention in the literature.

IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL RECOGNITION OF STUDENTS THROUGH FOOD

Food programs do not [but should] take into account the ethnicity of food, the diversity of food. On February 1, 2015, the new company served kids rib tips with real barbecue sauce, collard greens, cornbread muffins, and sautéed apples. When the company served these foods in our predominantly African American school, there wasn't anything left. When one child saw another's plate, they'd ask, "Where did you get that?" More and more kids who normally don't want to eat were eating. Some asked, "Are y'all doing this for black history month?"

* * *

In her historical exploration of school food, Levine (2008) points out that early on, with the advent of nutrition science, school lunches were a platform for "Americanizing" the diet of immigrant children living in the United States. In other words, not only were school lunches inattentive to the highly diverse backgrounds of American students early on, they were intentionally tone deaf to culturally responsive feeding. Moreover, dietary recommendations created and made official by the US Department of Agriculture, further institutionalized cultural imperialism through school lunches (Levine 2008) as they were based on a dominant-culture diet.

The importance of students having access to culturally appropriate foods cannot be underemphasized for the key role that food plays in shaping, expressing, and cultivating identity (e.g. Bell and Valentine 1997; Caplan 1997; Greene and Cramer 2011; Stapleton 2015b). Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011a, b) argue that school food is a window into identity and culture as "food establishes who we are in gendered, sexualized, raced, and ethnic senses, and who we are through food has social consequences" (p. 14). Food plays an important role in expressing who we are to others and in supporting group identities (Stapleton 2015b). Since schools are public spaces where students are encountered and interacting with others from many different food cul-

tures, school food plays a role in sustaining/not sustaining or validating/invalidating students' cultural foods.

HOW WE "CHECK" BOXES

I think the school food coordinator does a phenomenal job in addressing the issue of food security with our students. She has been working with me on this project. The district wasn't going to send us enough food because we accept children out of the district (because it's an alternative program, and we have all kinds of special programs). The district keeps careful records of all food distributed. But the food coordinator has her own system. When she makes a plate, she records a hashmark and counts all the sides for that plate, even if someone asks for just one item (so sides are left over, but they are counted as being used). If they send over 100 broccoli packages, for example, she may give out 60 broccoli packages, so 40 broccoli packages are left. But, instead of giving back the extras, she serves them to the afternoon students. Then she can tell the district, I went through 100 in a day, so I need 100 tomorrow, too. That's how she feeds the afternoon kids. I think she is being wise. She's demonstrating that there's not waste.

She's also creative in her food presentation and in getting food into the kids. When she serves nachos, she always puts a little extra something on them. She orders jalapeños and sour cream, and when she makes the nachos, the kids just love how she puts that together. She also insists that the kids get a vegetable.

[The new food service company] now prepackages their servings of fruit and vegetables. So, half an apple is a serving and they cut it already in their packaging. The lunch coordinator gives it to them and tells them they can throw it in their backpack. It's wonderful.

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There are a number of important points presented in Person's reflections here. First, while all the students in the district are provided free meals, students from outside the district (who may be just as food insecure) are not accommodated because of the way school districts are delineated and budgeted. In other words, food-insecure students served by special programs can get caught in between district accounting systems.

Second, Person's observations point to the importance of a single food service staff member for increasing food security. She illustrates that much—in this case beating accounting systems to acquire more food and making the food more enticing—depends on the initiative of individuals within the system. After Person articulated these thoughts, the food service director took a leave of absence due to family emergency. With her absence, Person saw the quality of food drop immediately. Even after receiving a replacement food service staff member, Person observed that the food amount and quality continued to decrease.

Person's selection of the preposition "getting food *into* kids" is an important choice. Given all the observations Person has shared, this occurrence should not be underestimated, as we argue that in-school food insecurity arises primarily because students are not ingesting food, even when it is freely accessible to them. This situation points to the inadequacy of the way current boxes are checked to "show" that kids are being fed in schools. Rather than simply checking boxes that kids were given food, we must attend to real measures that accurately portray what students are actually eating.

ASKING CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Food security is [a] very complex issue and even though there are grassroots efforts to try to remedy food security in general, I'm left with these questions: Who is in the grassroots? Where is the grassroots work being done, and to benefit whom?

By questioning *who* gets to make decisions around school food and *to what end* they are collecting data about who is given food (rather than about the rates at which food is consumed), Person has articulated important concerns about what it means to feed food-insecure students in schools. Her sentiment is echoed by Sandler (2011) who argues that we need to ask the following critical questions of school feeding: "Who feeds whom what, how, and for what purpose?" (p. 33). Both Person's and Sandler's (2011) questions encourage us to think more ethically in our approach to school feeding.

SOME ALTERNATIVES FOR MEASURING IN-SCHOOL FOOD SECURITY

Person has exposed the gaping problems in the way we account for feeding the youth in schools. Through her observations, we see that merely measuring when students are given food does not even come close to the type of accounting we need to accurately determine whether or not we are preventing in-school food insecurity among students.

If our aims are to ameliorate in-school food insecurity, perhaps we need to change the way we do our accounting. This suggests that we may need to “check” boxes based on whether or not the students are *actually eating food*.

Food Waste One idea is to measure the food waste being created each day as it will indicate how much food is consumed versus thrown away. If students are asked to sort their garbage, separating out the food, this can also help schools move toward environmentally sustainable practices like composting.

Student Satisfaction Another idea is to survey students regularly about whether or not they are eating and how they feel about the food. With a plethora of options to survey students using cell phone technologies, tablets, and so on, this could be an easy, stream-lined daily process.

Parent Satisfaction While parents are sometimes a little far removed from knowing exactly what their children are consuming each day, parents may still be an important source of information about how well a school food program is meeting the needs of its community. Parents are perhaps the most concerned members about the quality of food their children are receiving, so it is important to keep them in the loop.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As formal educators, we have cultivated an ability to ignore the significance and implications of food served in schools for our students. While we worry about the hidden curriculum in other aspects of the school day, we are blind when it comes to school food. The authors have argued that those interested in food justice in schools should partner with formal educators as insiders in school systems (Stapleton et al. 2017). More specifi-

cally, this chapter has argued that formal educators should focus explicitly on the role that food in schools plays in supporting (or not supporting) low-income, marginalized students. Person's observations reveal that feeding food-insecure kids in schools can be surprisingly precarious—both dependent on a district's contract agreements with food service management companies and on an individual staff member's prowess.

In reflecting on the tremendous and direct consequences that food service management corporations have on student food insecurity, ideally, we would extricate corporations from the US school lunch scene. However, if we can only take small steps, Person's observations suggest that it is possible for these corporations to do better (and worse), and that by increasing the quality of the food served, the problem of in-school food insecurity for students may be reduced. Despite strides made under the Obama administration to improve school food quality and access, with a new administration the political winds have changed, and the already-inadequate federal funding of free and reduced-fee lunches may be in jeopardy (Jalonick May 2017). Given this hostile political climate, there is even greater need for teachers to include school food in their purview and to look out particularly for students who are food insecure. As educators we must not be blind to our students' most basic and important need: food. Given the ways in which food is inextricably linked to identity (Stapleton 2015b), we must recognize the message that low-quality school food transmits to our kids about their worth and join the fight to improve it.

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