

Midday Eating While Learning: The School Cafeteria, Homeschooling, and the Open Campus High School

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Introduction

I grew up on institutional school lunches in the public schools of small town New England. Years later I still could not stomach eating coleslaw, which I now love, due to the insipidly sweet puddle in a plastic dish I remembered from school cafeterias in my youth. I remember those times where we sat at large tables after getting the same food from the kitchen ladies, usually a mystery meat or if we were lucky, Sloppy Joes, a cheap starch, and the ever-present canned fruit cocktail (or maybe green Jell-O). This did not vary from the time I entered school to when I graduated high school. There are many more options in today's schools even as this stereotypical practice of routine and uninspired dining persists.¹ Students now have salad bars and ethnic choices similar to a mall food court.

Yet, there are two kinds of midday eating I could not have imagined growing up in New England in the 1950s and 60s: Lunches at home during a homeschooling day and an open campus high school option, where students can go off campus to local restaurants. I begin with an historical discussion of what might be called simply lunch during learning, as instances in the past were not always in school, and were significantly different than what we today understand as school lunch. This brief history sets the context for the options of homeschool and open campus lunches compared to the mainstream cafeteria provided lunch or sack lunch brought from home. I compare them to my own routine school lunch and weigh what these different options can tell us about

the phenomenon of eating in the middle of a day of school as a cultural and possibly curricular practice.

For homeschooling, I describe how lunch occurs at home during a day of instruction and learning. I refer to first-hand accounts of parents who homeschool as well as a recent book on Christian homeschooling.² I will then reflect upon personal experience as a father of a daughter who attended an open campus high school next to a large state university. I discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the open campus model for the school lunch hour, focusing on safety, nutrition, and social cliques. I seek to have us understand more broadly the rich cultural phenomenon of eating midday during school, whether that be at one's kitchen table or in a McDonald's or college student sub shop. I end with consideration of conceptual issues raised by this three-part comparison.

Cafeteria School Lunch: Some Slop, A Sack, A Pit Stop, and More?

Eating during the midday at school has evolved from the time of the first public schools in the USA in the 19th century, but there is a history of a repast taken midday during instruction that predates the common school era. I restrict this history to my own country's European, and largely English settlement (without consideration of the practices of indigenous peoples) to aid in making the arguments later that are embedded in American social history, culture, and educational practice. In this long period, nearly 200 years from early English settlement in Virginia and Massachusetts to the Revolution, teaching and learning took place in a variety of settings such as the field schools and dame schools, which preceded the academies of the early republic. Food was not provided by the itinerant teacher of the field school, nor the "dame" in her home. Most of the time children went to their own homes at midday, a practice that persisted in the academies and even in the early common schools. In the English colonies of North America, the main meal was midday, and called dinner. Families ate together, and in the evening, supper was lighter fare, usually leftovers from dinner. As the common (public) school movement gained strength in the 19th century, school lunch became more institutionalized, but it was still a haphazard arrangement of some school provided food, some sack food brought from home, and some students going home to eat.

With the rapid population rise in urban centers, schools came to resemble the factories of the early industrial age. Efforts to provide meals for students were not uniform as they are today, but often the result of local social reformers:

The first major program had started in some Boston high schools in 1894, in large part due to Ellen Richards and Edward Atkinson. The New England Kitchen ran the program as a 'private enterprise' that paid for itself many times over. Although the lunches never became effective instruments for teaching the New Nutrition the founders had envisaged, by the early twentieth century they were praised for providing nutritionally sound meals and low prices to children who would not normally have them, and this became the main justification for similar lunch programs in other cities. (Levenstein 1988, p. 116)

A 1904 book titled *Poverty* by Robert Hunter influenced further reforms. Hunter convincingly linked poverty, hunger, and child welfare:

... but the poverty of any family is likely to be most serious at the very time when the children most need nurture, when they are most dependent, and when they are obtaining the only education which they are ever to receive. Guidance and supervision of the parents are impossible because they must work; the nurture is insufficient because there are too many hungry mouths to feed; learning is difficult because hungry stomachs and languid bodies and thin blood are not able to feed the brain. The lack of learning among so many poor children is certainly due, to an important extent, to this cause.³

School lunches became institutionalized in 1946 with the passage of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act.⁴ This measure was taken for several reasons as the social historian Harvey Levenstein states:

In 1943, with stocks of surplus foods dwindling and transportation snags bottling up many farm products, members of Congress from the farm bloc pushed through an appropriation of fifty million dollars for local school boards to purchase foods that were abundant locally. Meanwhile, the USDA continued to send them items it had purchased to help support prices, such as evaporated milk and canned prunes. In all, almost a third of the nation's schoolchildren—most of them rural—received some food aid. But commodities were bought not because they were needed for lunches but because farmers could not sell them at a good price. School districts were inundated with foods they did not want and could not store. Perishable foods rotted en route to schools or arrived unannounced at schools that could not refrigerate them. (2003, pp. 78-79)

Since the time of the act at least, the mere name school lunch connotes an institutional setting, usually a cafeteria with plain walls and Formica tables, in a public school. In the public elementary school my daughter attended for one year in Indiana, the gymnasium doubled as a cafeteria, the food was brought in from a kitchen at another school, and a sound detection device Michel Foucault would have appreciated warned kids of

unacceptable noise levels. Today, we continue the cultural mindset of the past 60 years. Public school buildings are constructed with tax dollars to provide a mandatory education for children who live in that area. Part of what is offered is an institutional meal at midday at a reduced cost, or at least the opportunity to eat a brown bag lunch brought from home.⁵ Lunch is but one function of a school, and is regulated with budgetary oversight and basic nutritional guidelines. The aim in such institutional settings is to provide a product with quality at the lowest cost to taxpayers, much as it is to provide a school bus and textbooks. Undue attention to lunches would be regarded as unbalanced, as they are an unremarkable aspect of the school resources provided at cost to students.

In such a setting, it is not surprising that little attention is paid to what could be taught with the lunch itself, such as could be lessons in economics, sustainability, and nutrition. From my own experience, I had no knowledge of where the items I ate came from, and there was never any discussion of the food in my 12 years of schooling prior to college. I have no salient memories of much of what I ate all those years, with the exception of the execrable coleslaw and green Jell-O.

Just as important to what was served for lunch are the social aspects of eating together at midday. For many children these are the first times they socialize with someone outside an immediate family context. What I did during lunch is less of a blurred memory. I recall the familiar sitting by clique and the banter more than the food. Once I got to high school, this was the only opportunity I had to chat during the school day, as we no longer had recess, and our time in class was tightly scheduled, as were the brief hallway walks to different parts of the building for classes. The new high school I attended for junior and senior years was not finished when I was a sophomore, so the three grades did a year of “double sessions” at the existing high school in the city, where juniors and seniors attended very early and got out by noon, and sophomores attended in the afternoon and early evenings. I ate lunch at home that year, missing out on the bonding experiences of the lunchroom, and perhaps some of the humiliation at being only a sophomore.

There are instances where midday fare in an educational setting takes on a heightened awareness of eating as a social and cultural practice. A quarter century ago, I helped found a center for teacher development in North Carolina.⁶ At The North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT) we constructed a curriculum of weeklong seminars on a myriad of topics. Hospitality for teachers was an expressed part of our work in providing a time and place for teacher renewal.⁷ As we considered how to welcome our students, namely the visiting teachers, we focused upon making them feel welcome and relaxed. In the early

pilot phase of the program, we relied on the local university's food service (which included dessert of orange Jell-O) but when we established our own facility, we saw that meals were times where teachers could experience not only new or tastefully prepared familiar cuisine, but take the opportunity to have extended conversations. We knew that few people, especially school teachers, chat in a relaxed manner during lunch. Teachers experience school lunch in a different way than do students. Many of these teachers had lunchroom duty or were otherwise occupied. Several teacher seminars focused upon meal preparation, and staff members with expertise in cooking served as presenters on food.

Homeschooling's Midday Meal

Given this context of eating at midday of instruction, it is obvious and evident that teaching and learning are not the same for those who homeschool or for those who are homeschooled. As noted in a book about conservative Christian homeschooling:

Homeschooling offers enormous flexibility in scheduling, curriculum, and teaching methods. This allows parents to treat learning as a much broader, more holistic endeavor than public schools, which are typically constrained by fixed standards, mandated texts, and unyielding demand of "curriculum coverage." (Kunzman, p. 53)

There are a number of reasons families choose to homeschool their children, and thus, intentionally include the midday meal in the instructional palette, or not. Robert Kunzman examines conservative Christian homeschoolers, and reasoning he cites is characteristic of their views:

A mother describes her initial discouragement when starting to homeschool her six-year-old: the challenges of choosing and planning curriculum, transitioning from caregiver to formal instructor, and continuing to manage the rest of family life felt daunting, even overwhelming. "Then God gave me light," she writes. "Homeschooling was not just about fulfilling the education laws of our state or equipping our daughter to read, write, and compute. Homeschooling was a spiritual battle for the soul of our little kindergartner." (Kunzman, p. 213)

Parents who homeschool see what they do as part of parenting and do not see a distinction between home and school. It is part of family life and thus regulations are an intrusion into that domain. There is no practical way to regulate the diet or broader lunch experience of a homeschooled child; these are hidden within the private sphere of family life.⁸

In reading Kunzman's detailed account of six conservative Christian homeschooling families, I detected little discussion or concern about eat-

ing. Lunch occurred regularly for all but one of these families, with no discussion of food preparation or eating as a site for teaching and learning, with the exception of treating grocery shopping as an opportunity to practice math and have some conversation about health (Kunzman, p. 53). In these households, women do most of the homeschooling (Kunzman, p. 29) and thus they would prepare or provide the lunches.⁹

Kunzman notes the amount of freedom that is possible in homeschool arrangements, and sometimes this freedom is abused. Some of the parents he interviewed did not keep a regular schedule. So a midday meal comparable to a school lunch might not occur. Kids could eat whenever they were hungry, if there was something provided, or they could fend for themselves.

While a fluid or haphazard schedule for eating was only mentioned in Kunzman's book, there are some homeschooling parents who indicate this could be the norm:

Have I ever told you how much I dislike lunch? I've decided that lunch is the homeschool mom's nemesis, the required interruption in an otherwise orderly and organized day. I've often said I wish we could skip lunch, but I have a few children who would object.¹⁰

Note here that eating is seen as an interruption of the mind/body split. The focus, as in traditional school settings, is on brain learning, with food an involuntary recharge much like one would recharge a cell phone battery.

In another example, a busy advice columnist with two sons affected by Asperger's syndrome chronicles how she juggles so much as she travels from one appointment to another that she forgets to give them lunch. Her day is packed not only with their activities but her own work. Her boys have a rushed pizza at 3 pm when she remembers that they missed lunch.¹¹

While the conservative Christian parents that Kunzman profiles are either unaware of the potential for school lunches to be a learning site, or do not focus upon that potential, these other homeschooling parents see lunches as just another chore. One wonders if their children might be better off at a school where they at least had an orderly day than with such parents.

I did find one account where a parent expressly saw lunch as part of the learning:

Noon-12:45 p.m., Lunch Today: I gave him Ak-mak crackers, sliced raw red bell pepper, a peanut-butter-and-pumpkin-butter sandwich on wheat, and a glass of unsweetened vanilla almond milk with Stevia, a dash of cinnamon, and pumpkin-pie spice. The saying "Change your food, change your mood" is so true.¹²

This parent shows at least the beginning of being “mindful” of food, with a nod toward the connection between food and emotions.

Opportunities abound in the home setting to make school lunches a time to learn not only nutrition and sustainability, but also how to prepare foods. Food could be harvested from a family garden, prepared, cooked, and eaten, all with attention paid to the continuum of provision and sustenance. It appears that for many parents this is a missed opportunity for such holistic, multifaceted learning.

Out on the Town: Lunch at the Open Campus High Schools

A relatively new development in midday school time meals allows students to go off campus. While a lunch is provided for students in the cafeteria, oftentimes students are allowed to go to local restaurants to eat lunch. Major considerations about this arrangement discussed in newspaper articles from around the nation wherever it is considered include safety and truancy. Other considerations should be nutrition and the formation of social cliques, something that can be corrosive especially in high school, and can be exacerbated by an open campus lunch arrangement. Surprisingly, little research until recently has focused on the effects of an open campus on academic performance. Shirlee Lichtman (2013) notes “an unconditional open campus policy has a negative effect on student test outcomes, while a conditional open campus policy has a positive effect on student test outcomes.”¹³ Going off campus for school lunch may be limited to those who could afford such. Free or reduced lunch students would not have that option. For many schools, it is a combination of factors that lead to allowing an open campus lunch model. The two most prominent are cost and freedom, and the interaction of these two factors leads to some ironies and unintended consequences.

If the high school is within walking distance of lunch options such as a McDonald’s or other fast-food joints such as Subway, or perhaps even inexpensive Asian noodle shops, school officials may trim expenses for a full service cafeteria. However, some form of school lunch within the school must be provided to students who do not want to go outside or who cannot afford to do so, and who do not bring a sack lunch. The addition of the open campus option allows students to exercise choice as consumers in a privatized setting where there are school lunches, homemade sack lunches, and restaurant dining in the community. Yet this open market consumption model is no more a thoughtful and intentional curricular opportunity than a school cafeteria model where students eat prepared food or bring sack lunches.

Obviously, midday eating becomes not lunch *in* school, but lunch *while in* school. Places where students eat are not tax supported public goods, but private businesses. Students mingle not with their classmates in an institutional setting, but as consumers who can be the blessing (for mealtime revenue) and curse (for being adolescents with little cash and perhaps uncouth behaviors) for the restaurant owner and other clientele. The opportunity for curricular exploration of a uniform school lunch is impossible even in a traditional cafeteria setting, as some students will bring homemade sack lunches. But with an open campus, the variations multiply even more to include sack lunches taken off campus, restaurant meals, or even eating at home with a parent or by themselves.

Discussion

I focus now upon aspects of the hidden curriculum¹⁴ of school lunch in these three instances in order to begin to discern what ways eating at midday possibly may be theorized and integrated into a curriculum. I believe a more robust curriculum would view school lunch as an opportunity for inquiry into health, the body, and aspects of the good life that are not afforded through other kinds of classroom discussion. School lunch, I suggest, is an understudied, hidden, or ignored aspect of the explicit curriculum. And I end with a brief sketch of the philosophical basis of a curriculum that would include the consideration of school lunch in all its manifestations.

My premise regarding the hidden curriculum of school lunch is that certain ways we have structured teaching and learning in the past and today influence how we look upon the meal of the midday. Furthermore, aspects of the hidden curriculum of schooling work toward how lunch is either a routine or important part of the day. In the school cafeteria paradigm, lunch is simply a part of the day that is not studied. It exists on the same plane as bathroom breaks or bus rides. Lunch is something that needs to be done midday, but is not part of the instruction or co-curricular activities.

In homeschooling, there is a greater opportunity to have lunch be a teaching moment. Yet even here, this is not taken advantage of in most circumstances. My research on midday eating for homeschoolers turned up mostly journalistic accounts of how busy moms make tasty sandwiches or fit instruction around the noon pit stop. I note that Robert Kunzman devotes little attention to school lunches for homeschoolers because it simply was not something expressly noted by the families he studied. For many parents teaching their children at home, lunch is a chore at best. For the students who go off campus, it is possible that they could be

alerted to concerns surrounding nutrition and sustainability that come up with eating out. Without adult intervention, this seems unlikely, and it is possible that many of these students have parents who are unaware of what their children are eating for lunch.

Food preparation and consumption should be an opportunity for learning. Otherwise it becomes just part of the décor or what we do when we need to fill our stomachs. How this might be accomplished in any of these settings remains a difficult question. There are opportunities to learn from smaller experiments where children are involved in the cultivation of gardens and the preparation of foods, such as The Edible Schoolyard discussed in Susan Laird's (2013) article in this issue. Cafeteria style school lunches in public schools remain part of the overall budget of that school, and thus are subject to budgetary pressures which may discourage innovation and connection to the broader curriculum. Even as cafeteria meals have become healthier, the opportunity to learn from them is limited. There are simply not many examples where lunch has been integrated in the curriculum. For homeschoolers, any conceptual understanding of the midday meal is limited by what the parent sees as important for instruction. The prepackaged curricula many homeschoolers use leave little room for such discussion. It may be useful to request that the many providers of these curricula consider a component on food preparation, nutrition, and cultural aspects of eating. In the case of open campus schools, there is little parental or adult supervision, and thus the opportunity for a curricular component to school lunch time is perhaps the most limited. Perhaps students could be encouraged to keep a food diary for classes they may take on nutrition or health.

A curriculum focusing upon school lunch should not be dependent upon these different instantiations of the midday meal. Two topics, nutrition and sustainability, could cut across cafeteria lunches, brown bags, parent provided homeschool meals, or open campus restaurant options. For some students, this might be the only structured opportunity to consider the food--where it comes from, how it is produced, and issues of nutrition and sustainability. This would go a long way toward making school lunch an intentional, rather than an incidental, part of the curriculum and the school day.

Notes

¹ When I was dean of my college, I regularly joined the superintendents of my large county in SE Washington at their monthly lunch meeting, held at the district office inside a local HS. We went to the school's small cafeteria before the kids descended, and picked up our salads or burgers wrapped in foil. Being a fan of the film "Napoleon Dynamite," I was happy on the days "tater tots" were served!

² Kunzman (2009).

³ Cited in: http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/aboutlunch/ProgramHistory_2.htm

⁴ The Declaration of Policy reads: "It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food, by assisting the state, through grants-in-aid and other means, in providing an adequate supply of foods and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation, and expansion of nonprofit school-lunch programs." <http://www.scribd.com/doc/49149203/national-school-lunch-act-1946>.

⁵ In 2012 in North Carolina, a child's sack lunch brought from home was inspected and deemed lacking in nutrition, and the child was forced to eat food provided by the cafeteria: http://www.carolinajournal.com/exclusives/display_exclusive.html?id=8762.

⁶ The establishment, philosophy, and early development of this center are discussed in Rud and Oldendorf (1992).

⁷ See my discussion of hospitality at NCCAT in Rud and Oldendorf.

⁸ Recent kidnapping of children and keeping them against their will, such as the case of Amanda Berry and two others in Cleveland, Ohio, illustrate the extreme of this practice. Regulation and oversight of private family life are weak or nonexistent, even in cases of abuse, unless there is some warranted concern about what is occurring behind closed doors and windows.

⁹ In an email with Kunzman on May 23, 2013, he confirms my appraisal of what I notice here in his book: "In reflecting on the various lunches (and other meals) I've sat through with homeschool families, I'm not sure I can discern a particular pattern or focus, at least in terms of formal academic connections. By virtue of my guest/observer status, family members often engaged me in conversation, since I kept pretty quiet and out of the way during the rest of the homeschool activities. I think it's fair to say that the main focus of those meals was social connection, either in terms of information exchange (i.e., what's the rest of the day's schedule) or just casual banter. Not surprisingly, these were all pretty simple/uncomplicated meals (at least at lunchtime), since the mom had kept quite busy during the day with schooling activities."

¹⁰ <http://thehappyhousewife.com/cooking/back-to-homeschool-lunch-ideas/>.

¹¹ <http://homeschooling.penelopetrunk.com/2011/11/11/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-homeschooler/>.

¹² <http://nymag.com/guides/everything/homeschool-schedule-2012-10/>.

¹³ While Lichtman's paper focuses upon open campus policies and their effects upon performance, and not the cultural aspects of eating I am examining, her important conclusion regarding an open campus concerns "the value that at least some students place on these dining choices and surroundings, and the freedom to leave campus to experience these, that is affecting school performance" in ways beyond the scope of my paper (S. Lichtman, personal communication, 5/28/13).

¹⁴ The term hidden curriculum connotes norms, values, and beliefs implicitly conveyed in lessons.

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