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What's on (or off) the menu in school?

Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point an autobiographical account of food and schooling. It then questions the ramifications of recent policy imperatives and socio-political discourse that intervene in children's food choices at school. The paper moves on to question the social, ethical and personal implications of the 'war on obesity' and how its contradictory aims both warn of the dangers of obesity as well as promoting the notion of children and young people having a 'healthy body image'. The way in which this schizophrenic 'war on obesity' is waged at a political level is examined as well as the way in which the 'war' is fought within schools at the micro level. I deploy a post-Foucauldian understanding of governmentality and, specifically, utilise the concept of 'biopedagogy' to examine the work that is being done in the name of obesity prevention education in schools. The paper concludes by illustrating the urgent need for further work in this area and argues that this can be evidenced by the disjuncture between the way in which food is framed within schools and the media trends for 'gluttony promotion' reflected in shows like *Masterchef Australia*.

Biographical note:

Deana Leahy is a lecturer at Southern Cross University, Australia. Her research interests include historical and socio-cultural analyses of policy/curriculum and pedagogy within health education, education and health promotion more broadly. Her work is largely informed by Foucauldian-inspired writings around governmentality.

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Introduction

Food is, without question, a significant part of schooling and is interwoven through the school day in numerous ways. Reflecting back on my school days, food is vividly folded through my experiences and memories. There were various playful pranks in home economics classes (and of course the wrath of the teacher). But also, too, at the end of it all there was the eating. There was play lunch with me, and others, sitting under the peppercorn tree savouring our morning snacks. The spicy smell of the peppercorns would waft up, as I crushed them under my feet, adding to the sensory mix. And then there was the joy of lunch times. Of waiting impatiently in line at the canteen, filled with apprehension (would all of the sausage rolls be gone by the time I got my turn?) and excitement (what else might be on the menu today?). The line was full of kids straining from the back, trying to get a glimpse of what might be. If not in line at the canteen, we would be sitting down for lunch, comparing (ever hopeful of swapping) sandwiches. Peering into other's lunch boxes, asking to see what they had, and hoping they liked what they saw in yours. Then Friday would arrive. You thought it never would, and you could put in your order from the Fish and Chip shop. And if you were lucky, you got to be the lunch order monitor on that day. Walking back to class with the warm box of lunch orders, the smells of course following you into the classroom as all eyes turned to you with the treasure in your hands. To be sure there are many more memories and stories to tell. The memories tend to be fond, though I am certain this is not the case for all. But in thinking about my memories of food and schooling I cannot help but wonder how young people who are currently at school might remember and talk about their school food related experiences. Admittedly things have changed since I was in school, and I am not making a call here to bring back the 'good ol' days'. Rather my interest here relates more to what is happening in and around schools now in relation to food. In particular I am interested in how current school practices might shape not only memories, but also how children and young people both relate to food, and are shaped by school food experiences.

The concern arises out of, what I would suggest, is the unprecedented attention being paid to food within the context of school. Schools are, more than ever, being called upon to 'intervene' in both children's lives and those of their families in relation to food choices. The concerns around schools and food are varied, but a cursory glance across the media, policy documents, school programs and curriculum indicates that the panic around the impact of the 'obesity epidemic' has led to an intensification of initiatives at the school level. It must be noted that this trend is at play not only in Australia, but in New Zealand (see Burrows & Wright, 2007), the United Kingdom (see Evans, Evans & Rich, 2003; Rich, 2010), the US (see Vander Schee, 2009a) and Canada (see Rail, 2009). The flurry of activity in schools has significant implications for those targeted by such initiatives. There are new, and often alarming, stories starting to emerge that speak to a very different experience around food given the current climate of obesity prevention.

Anecdotally there are a multitude of stories circulating that tell us that the 'call to arms' in the war on obesity has been rather successful in rallying the troops. There have been reports of 'classes' that are running competitions based upon the reality television series *The Biggest Loser*. Some schools have banned birthday cakes, and

others have banned particular kinds of sandwiches, drinks and snacks. In addition to this, canteen menus have been dramatically modified to ensure that healthy choices are only available (fish and chip Fridays may soon be a relic of the past if not already). In some schools teachers have commented that they no longer feel comfortable eating their lunch in the staffroom for fear of scrutiny from others (especially if they are the Physical Education teacher and/or feel that they are overweight or prone to being viewed as being overweight). There has even been talk of teachers leaving the school ground to eat (joining the smokers perhaps). The majority of stories reveal that the 'war on obesity' is having a significant impact in schools by shaping and reshaping the regulation of food and food choices. The storylines here are worrying and point to a need for greater consideration of the issues at hand, and the solutions that have been, and are being, called upon.

There are of course ardent supporters of the 'war on obesity' and those who revel in this moment. But as with all wars, there is collateral damage and we are only just beginning to get glimpses of what this looks like. Recent research has revealed that the consequences of schools 'tackling' the body, weight and food in the ways that they are can be extremely detrimental to how young people understand themselves, especially if they are eating disordered (Rich & Evans, 2005). Research also reveals that teachers find themselves feeling torn as they negotiate the tensions between trying to teach for a positive body image whilst simultaneously being required to teach about the perils of obesity. The two imperatives do not sit comfortably with each other and are difficult to reconcile (see Cliff & Wright 2010). This 'clash' of imperatives is not surprising as it has been identified before (see Leahy & Harrison, 2004) but what is interesting to hear about are the difficulties encountered as teachers try to negotiate the tricky terrain. In addition to this, we also know that teachers are acutely aware of the impact that obesity prevention has had, and is having on their professional and private lives. For example teachers report feeling the 'weight' of increased bodily surveillance and the assumed requirement that they themselves engage in certain practices that show their commitment to the cause (Vander Schee, 2010). They are substantial 'additions' to the life of a teacher, welcome or not. What would be of interest here too, would be to find out student perspectives about how they feel about what is being done to them and how they might be negotiating the imperatives being forced upon them. In relation to how parents might be experiencing the war on obesity, Pike's (2010) analysis shows that there are indeed conscientious objectors, who resent having schools and/or teachers interfering with their children's food choices. In this case, parents were responding to the phenomena of 'Jamie Oliverism' in their school, and felt left out of the decision-making about the initiatives being forced upon them and their families. In many ways the research discussed here echoes the sentiments expressed in the anecdotal stories that I have referred to earlier on in the paper. This is, however, only part of the tale. The remainder of the paper adds to the story by discussing both the reasons behind the mobilisation of schools in this 'war' and some of the consequences for thinking, and teaching, about food in schools within the contemporary moment.

In order to achieve this, I draw from various research moments that I have documented over the past several years, as well as insights afforded by others in the

fields of education, health promotion, nutrition and public health. My work, over time, has been concerned with interrogating the moral and political imperatives associated with formal health education curriculum in schools, as well as how such imperatives are enacted in pedagogy. To do this I have analysed policy and curriculum documents, drawn from classroom observations, school meeting observations, and interviews with teachers and key government personnel (see for example Leahy & Harrison 2004; Leahy 2009). Much of the analytical scaffolding that informs my work, as well as other critiques in the associated fields of education, health promotion, public health, nutrition have drawn largely on the work of Foucault and the concepts of governmentality and biopower (Lupton 1995; Coveney 2000; Evans, Davies & Wright 2004; Harwood 2009; Wright 2009). The concept of governmentality as outlined in Foucault's lectures (Foucault 1991), as well as post-Foucauldian writings on governmentality (Dean 1999; Rose 2000) allow us to consider how it is, that in the contemporary moment, we find ourselves in the midst of an obesity epidemic, and then contemplate the means by which this epidemic is to be brought into relief. Following Foucault (1991: 100),

> Government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, and so on; and the means the government uses to attain these ends are themselves all, in some sense, immanent to the population; it is the populations itself on which government will act either directly, through large scale campaigns, or indirectly, through techniques that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people, the stimulation of birth rates, the directing of the population into certain regions or activities, and so on.

Given the concerns of government outlined here by Foucault, it becomes evident that the obesity epidemic falls well within the realms of governing population. The looming health crisis, and the economic costs associated with the increase in both childhood and adult population obesity rates, marks the problem as one to be considered urgently for ongoing government action (Catford & Caterson 2003). The very act of problematising obesity has come about as a result of intellectual machines that 'render reality [obesity] thinkable in such a way as to make it calculable and governable' (Inda 2005: 7). The creation of a governmental problem relies on particular truths and rationalities being created and put into play in an attempt to scope out the nature of the problem and where and how action is to be levied. This is what Inda (2005) refers to as the 'reasons of government' or what other governmentality scholars refer to as political rationalities (Dean 1999). It follows then that schools become one of the key sites in enacting the pragmatics of government or what are referred to as the technics or technologies of government (Inda 2005). As Miller and Rose (1990: 8) suggest this is the 'how' of governmentality. It relates to the ways that government works through 'authorities of various sorts [in this case education] have sought to shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others in order to achieve the objectives they consider desirable.' The usefulness of the governmentality thesis is invaluable as one seeks to think about and address questions related to the why and how of schools work in response to the obesity epidemic. I will discuss this in the following section but before

I do I want to highlight two things. First, Foucault's work has been significant in informing my analytics but I have also found myself moving into the realm of the interdisciplinary to widen the palette of possibilities for thinking about the complex ways in which schools are connected into the governmental assemblage and do 'health' work. Second, critiquing the obesity epidemic and the resultant interventions comes at a cost. Asking 'critical' questions tends to provoke a certain level consternation from others in the field. People who have questioned the way in which schools have responded to the 'war on obesity', and who err on the side of caution, have been labelled 'foolish and irresponsible'. We apparently have little regard for children and their future lives. I find this to be rather a harsh accusation, given that at the heart of our work is grave concern, related to both the intended and unintended effects of the pedagogies that are being espoused. So, regardless of the accusations, it is important to continue to interrogate, disrupt and challenge current practices around food and school.

Why food and why schools?

As previously stated, given that obesity has been defined as a rather large problem in need of solving, it is little wonder that schools have been called upon to intervene in the epidemic. But also too, in order to begin to think about the how and why of food in schools in the present, it is necessary to consider the past. Food has not appeared on the schooling agenda as a result of the 'war on obesity'. It has long been part of the work of schools (see, for example, Brodribb 1901). This is largely because schools are key to the governmental architecture and functioning of a nation, and so too is food. If schools are central apparatuses that are charged with the task of enacting the hopes of government (Popkewitz 2009) it is no wonder that food has been, and still is, part of the matrix of schooling. This has had, and continues to have, significant implications for how food is thought and talked and taught about. Given the connection to governmental agendas over time (Coveney 2000) food has largely been fused with both health and broader citizenship imperatives. For example (govern) mentalities about gendered citizenship, economies of family and the regulation of domestic spaces saw the issue of food become interwoven through the Home Economics curriculum (Stage & Vincent 1997). The form that food imperatives have taken over time, though, has been shaped by the broader social, political and economic forces circulating (see Lupton 1995; Coveney 2000).

Within the present moment 'the war on obesity' dominates the ways in which food and schooling can be thought about. This is not to say that other ways of thinking about and doing food at the school level do not exist. There have been some very interesting and promising initiatives around the development of kitchen gardens for example, and there are a multitude of reasons as to why a 'kitchen garden' is a grand idea. Kitchen gardens can provide for a generative pedagogical space that permits teachers to plan for, and conduct, authentic learning experiences. The lessons could (and do) range from plant biology, sustainability, food production and environmental impact, and cooking lessons with 'school' grown produce to name but a few. However the obesity epidemic is never far from view. This can be evidenced, for

example, in the (then) Shadow Minister for Health policy promises before the 2007 Federal election. Amongst other monetary policy promises for obesity prevention she stated that:

> 12.8 million will be provided to establish the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program in 190 primary schools across Australia. The program will tackle the rising trend of childhood obesity by giving children hands-on experience in healthy eating: teaching them how to grow, harvest and cook produce, as part of the school curriculum (Roxon 2007: 494).

There are of course similar garden initiatives to Stephanie Alexander's that have received government backing and/or endorsement because they can be harnessed in the fight against obesity (see for example Gannon 2010). I am not at this stage able to discuss research findings that shed light on the ways in which such imperatives play out in the kitchen garden, I am not sure there are any. It might well be that people are using the obesity epidemic as a means to get funding to get their program up and running, and then use it for other means (for example educating about sustainability and food production). But my point really is, that in the name of health, obesity prevention is dominating thinking around school programs and teaching. Even when it might seem that an initiative does not have to be about 'obesity prevention' it can still find itself mobilised in the fight against obesity. Given the potency of health imperatives, in this case obesity prevention, the rest of the paper will consider how this shapes the ways in which food is dealt with in schools in the contemporary context.

As I have suggested above, the role of schools and the relationship to food as a result of contemporary governmental assemblages (Rose 2000) ostensibly means that certain kinds of 'education about food' are produced. The fact that we are in the midst of an obesity epidemic coupled with the notion that schools are considered key settings for health promotion (Fleming & Parker 2007) and thus expected to cultivate a particular kind of healthy citizen (Tinning & McCuaig 2006), it is little wonder that food has become a site of intense action. What does this 'action' look and feel like? More significantly what kinds of things has the 'war on obesity' made permissible? The insights gleaned from the stories in the introduction to this paper, combined with what the research is telling us, provides us with a starting place to consider such questions. To add to this though, I am now going to discuss some examples of pedagogical devices that have been deployed in schools in the name of obesity prevention.

School based food biopedagogies

One of the ways in which we can understand the governmental work that is being done in the name of obesity education in schools is to conceptualise the various pedagogies being developed and delivered as 'biopedagogies'. This concept was developed by Wright and Harwood (2009) as an extension of Foucault's notion of biopower. The intent here was to develop an analytical device that facilitated an exploration of the multifarious pedagogical techniques that targeted the body and the intersection to and with the obesity epidemic. As Wright (2009: 1) states 'the notion of biopedagogies is drawn from Foucault's (1984) concept of biopower and the

governance and regulation of individuals and populations through practices associated with the body'. Simply, the concept allows for thinking around the how and why of pedagogies that explicitly direct their sights on the body (the bios). In a sense it is the how of government. How pedagogies target the body in an attempt to interpolate the subject via a range of risk knowledges into transforming themselves via the variety of technologies of the self on offer. Within the present moment a multitude of biopedagogies have emerged in schools to fight the war on obesity. Some of the biopedagogies have been specifically assembled together for the purpose of obesity prevention. Many though are hybridized versions, where past approaches and strategies morph as they are moulded into a device that suits the present occasion. A good example of this is the strategy of encouraging students to practice the art of 'Just saying NO to pies'. Previous thinking about why children and young people use drugs (peer group pressure) has found its way into understandings related to why children eat pies. Given the dominant understanding attached to pie eating here, the skills children require are 'pie refusal skills'. A good dose of assertiveness training will help build those skills. There is much to be said here about 'pie pushers' and 'saying no to pies', but that is for another day. Regardless of how biopedagogical devices are assembled, their intention is directed towards cultivating certain dispositions and not others. By analysing the various biopedagogical assemblages we can begin to understand some of the finer nuances of how these body pedagogies work and why there is cause for concern.

In order to analyse food related and directed biopedagogical devices, one must know where to look to find them. An obvious place to start is in the Health and Physical Education (HPE) classroom. This curriculum area is specifically charged with teaching about nutrition and physical activity in ways that are explicitly attached to the governmental imperative of producing healthy young people (Leahy & Harrison 2004). But the HPE classroom is not the only place in schools. The space of the canteen has been dramatically altered as a result of the epidemic. Certain items have been taken off the menu, as calls to limit access to particular kinds of food and drink get louder. The kinds of foods that 'experts' are suggesting be removed are fast food, packaged snacks and confectionary. These are to be replaced by fruit and water (see Bell & Swinburn 2004). Although one might not conceive of the change in menu as a biopedagogy, it actually is. Canteens are part of the school governmental assemblage that seeks to shape children and young people's food choices. In a sense the space pedagogicalizes those who inhabit it around which foods are okay and which are not, and essentially what one can consume. In addition to canteens, there are other spaces that have been transformed as a result of a focus on monitoring and improving dietary choices (the link to obesity prevention here should be obvious). Classrooms for example are now often the place where children have to consume their snacks (only certain ones though) and lunch. This act can be accompanied by a lesson in nutrition or two, as any moment can be a pedagogic one. In many ways some might argue that it is indeed an authentic approach to teaching about a topic. What better way to learn about food and nutrition than when eating? But as you will see the lessons learnt in the aforementioned spaces are not that straightforward.

Biopedagogical moments

In the ensuing section I discuss two biopedagogical devices that connect to the school governmental assemblage that cluster around, and interweave obesity prevention imperatives, either directly or indirectly. These biopedagogical devices have been drawn from a range of research moments over I have collated over time. The devices have been removed from the 'whole' for analytical purposes.

As previously mentioned the HPE classroom provides a formal teaching and learning space to address the issue of obesity with students. The moment that I describe below is but one iteration of myriad of strategies that could be called upon to encourage young people to reflect on the food they have consumed. The excerpt is taken from a year ten nutrition class in a secondary college in metropolitan Melbourne. It is an all girls class. The teacher is introducing the lesson.

> *Mrs. Murray*: Okay today we are going to be looking at nutrition, and I want you to write everything down that you ate yesterday and today already.
>
> *Class*: [General groan.]
>
> *Mrs. Murray*: Now once you've done that I want you to go through and make a note of the following things. I'll put them on the board and go over them in a minute. Start writing down what you ate, and be honest with yourself. Be sure to note quantity.
>
> *Class*: [Another groan.]
>
> *Mrs. Murray*: Can I have you attention for a moment please? Now this is for when you have finished noting down what you have eaten. I want you to go to your text and look up each of these on the board [points to board] and find out what they do for you or to you and make some notes. Um, I want you to focus on the following [writes on the board as she is talking]. What is the RDI? Are you eating the RDI? What will happen to you if you don't eat the RDI? [stops writing] So girls, basically the consequences of not eating properly, eating the things you should be eating. So, what are the risks to your health? So whether it be related to cancer, CVD [asks a question] who knows what CVD is? [No one answers] Mmm well, it's in the book. So you might want to organise it under some goals for yourself like this in your books, like this [complies the following list on the board]:
>
> <u>Goals</u>
>
> Reduce fat intake
>
> Problems which may occur if this goal is ignored:
>
> My personal goal:
>
> I will lower my fat intake by…
>
> [Turning back to the class] So if you can do that for the others here [pointing to the list]. You can see why you might need to change your eating habits, if you can see what the risks are to you, yeah? (Field notes, year 10 HPE class)

In terms of analysing the above, there are numerous lines one might follow. In previous work I have talked about how the significant role expert risk knowledges play in enacting the project of governmentality. Such knowledges powerfully shape

the possibilities of what can and can't be said in this moment (see Leahy & Harrison 2004). But for the purposes of my discussion here I want to consider the ways in which food is actually talked about and thought about. In this classroom, food gets reduced to an input, something that is simply made up of nutrients. Nutrients are then counted up and compared to what we are told are our recommended dietary intakes (RDI's). Once this is done, recommendations need to be made if there is work to be done to ensure RDI's are being met. This inevitably turns into some goal setting activity where students are asked to set goals to improve their RDI's. The task as I have said is a common one, and a troubling one. The very fact that girls are asked to analyse their diets by recalling what they ate over two days and formulate goals to make changes to their diets based on that data is fraught within itself. Inciting young girls to survey their diets closely is indeed a precarious act (see Rich & Evans, 2005). But the other issue here is the decontextualised, scientific, rationalist ways in which students are asked to understand and relate to food in their lives. It seems to me to be devoid of the rich meaning that food plays in our lives. In reading through this special issue, it is clear that the food is much more than a set of nutrition principles. It shapes (and is shaped by) culture, history, memories, and interactions. It evokes in us pleasure, desire, joy and contentment amongst others. It also has the power to evoke disgust, guilt and trepidation. But given the kinds of imperatives that are at play in the present moment, activities like the one described above will keep being utilised as key biopedagogical devices.

Moving away from the provision of formal lessons about food, I now turn to discuss the rule that exists in some schools that insists that children remain in the classroom to eat their lunches. Once again there are a myriad of reasons as to why this rule may have been introduced. But given that it has, it seems to be considered to be an opportune time to do some biopedagogical work around food. I attended a 'health and wellbeing' professional development day as part of a research project. During one of the sessions, one of the presenters outlined what she loosely referred to as 'Let's see what we have in our lunchbox'. The strategy was introduced as being necessary given the current obesity crisis, and that teachers could utilise it a number of ways. The presenter went on to outline the steps involved in carrying out this strategy. It required that teachers look into children's lunch boxes and make comments about individual lunch boxes if they were deemed to have made good healthy choices. For example if a student had a banana in their lunch box this could be mentioned out loud and praised. Teachers could also use this moment to ask questions about whether children thought bananas were healthy as well as why that was the case. Basically 'good' lunch boxes were to receive praise. But what of the 'bad' lunchboxes? To deal with such occurrences a teacher could simply remain silent as they gazed into the 'bad' lunchbox or they could utter a disapproving sound. This strategy apparently is a popular one (see Burrows & Wright 2007). And it is a strategy that I have discussed before in light of the significance of affect in biopedagogical moments (Leahy 2009). It is a strategy that can produce (and actually relies on) the production of anxiety, guilt or shame around food. In many ways we are adding to the complex emotional layers that may already permeate our children's feelings around food. And if they were not there already, this kind of activity might just change that. Once again there is a great deal more to say here about who packs lunches, the thinking that goes into packing a

lunch and what else a child may or may not have eaten, or be going to eat that day. I am certain though that encouraging a guilt, anxiety or shame response in children around food is not all that 'healthy'. Yet in the name of obesity prevention such practises are deemed to be permissible.

Conclusion

This paper began by posing questions about the kinds of experiences, understandings and memories of school and food that children and young people currently in education might be left with. Related to this were concerns about the limited ways in which food is being talked about, thought about and taught about within our current school system. I argued that the 'war on obesity' is powerfully shaping the way in which schools are currently able to teach about food within both formal and informal curriculum areas. Currently discourse and practices around food in schools is influenced by their location within a broader governmental assemblage that seeks to enact health imperatives. This undoubtedly imbues practice and has resulted in food being talked about in scientific, rationalistic and largely decontextualised ways. In addition to this we have witnessed an increasing level of surveillance around food consumption in school whether it be in the canteen or classroom. What is interesting though is the disjuncture that emerges as one considers the role that food plays in our lives. What is interesting, however, is that at the same time that 'the war on obesity' is being conducted in our schools (and throughout wider society), we are simultaneously being enticed by a cacophony of cooking shows, magazines, advertising, social networking sites, iPhone applications and community projects like the farmer's market or slow food towns, to prepare, savour, appreciate and above all to indulge in the pleasures of food. If one could tease food away from the explicit obesity prevention imperatives one wonders what other possibilities could be opened up in relation to teaching about food in schools. Given this disjuncture, and also given some of the 'problematics of government' that have been detailed in this paper, there is clearly a need for greater exploration and research into the effects of governmental imperatives around obesity in schools.

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