Schooling Food in Contemporary Times: Taking Stock

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Abstract Over the past decade we have witnessed a proliferation and intensification of food pedagogies across a range of sites. This article begins by considering two pedagogical scenes that attempt to address food. They were enacted within educational settings in Australia; one a Year 8 (13 years of age) health education classroom, the other a professional learning seminar. Each were heavily imbued with the obesity prevention imperatives that have come to characterise social, political and educational discourse around food in contemporary times. Using these scenes as a springboard, we move to consider the place where we initially envisioned food might intersect with environmental education. We imagined that it would be a space with significant potential for approaching teaching and learning about food in new ways. Deploying menu as metaphor, the authors explore the possibilities for this new terrain and argue that bringing a Foucauldian inspired 'ethics of discomfort' to the table might help us take stock of contemporary approaches and their effects. Given the dominance of crisis-driven responses that tend to characterise school food education, we conclude by suggesting that we need to interrupt the dominant discourses that circulate around food and try to engage with some new possibilities for teaching and learning about food.

Apéritif

Apéritif is a French word derived from the Latin verb 'aperire', which means 'to open'. It is used to whet the appetite and prepare the taste buds for what lies ahead. The following fieldwork excerpts intend to do just that.

Scene One: 'Just say no to pies'

The setting: School health education classroom.
The target: Year 8 students.

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The theme: Nutrition.
The topic: Developing assertiveness skills (refusal skills).
The background: In the previous lesson students did a dietary analysis of pies. They discussed good food and bad food choices. Conclusion was made that pies were a bad food choice.
The lesson: Just say no to pies.

The lesson begins with a reminder about the key ideas that were covered in the previous lesson. The teacher uses questions to prompt the students to remember a discussion where the class reached the decision that pies are a bad food choice.[1] In order to follow this up the teacher announces that today's class is to be directed towards helping students develop the necessary life skills they need to make good food choices. Students are put into pairs and asked to work out between them who would be person 1 and who would be person 2. Person 1 was then asked to pick something up (a pen or pencil case or a book). Both students are then asked to imagine that the object selected was a pie. Person 1 is charged with the task of convincing person 2 to take the pie. Person 2 is then required to practise saying 'no' to the pie. The activity commences. Students across the room begin in earnest to either force their pie onto their partner or refuse the pie on offer. After a short period of time, the teacher stops the activity and asks if anyone accepted the pie. To her horror most hands are raised, accompanied by smiling (some smirking) faces. She asks: 'What? You all took the pie? Really? Why?' Without waiting for a response she announces that the activity must be repeated. This time though, person 2 must practise using non-verbal communication to help reinforce their response. The teacher then demonstrates what she means by lifting her hand into a stop sign and saying 'No, thank you, I do not want the pie'. She asks all the students to copy her as a test run before putting it into action. She then asks the students to practise that again in their pairs. They do. Some earnestly, some quizzically, some giggly and some with looks of disinterest and possibly disdain (adapted from Leahy & Pike, 2015).

Scene Two: The Lunchbox Police

The setting: Professional development seminar.
The target/s: Teachers and student lunchboxes.
The theme: Nutrition.
The topic: Lunchboxes.
The background: The seminar was part of a broader suite of seminars assembled together by a professional association aimed at building capacity of teachers to work in health related areas in schools.
The lesson: How to police lunchboxes.

To introduce the session, the presenter outlines a range of strategies that could be used by teachers to fight the 'war on obesity'. One of the key strategies that was prioritised for discussion was lunchbox surveillance. Teachers were told that at lunch time they should check lunchboxes as students sat down to eat. Teachers were encouraged to reinforce 'good choices' by highlighting them when they are noticed. For example, if a student had a banana in their lunchbox, the teacher could (and should) turn this into a pedagogical moment by praising the contents and deliver nutrient knowledge about the particular item. Other tactics could be used too. For example, they were instructed that if they walked past a 'bad' lunchbox they had a range of options. They could either give that lunchbox the silent treatment, or they could express a 'tsk tsk' to let it be known that the student's lunchbox was not acceptable (adapted from Pike & Leahy, 2012).

Amuse-bouche

Amuse-bouche literally means to amuse the mouth. The small, bite-sized hors d'oeuvre that accompany the aperitif are intended to stimulate the appetite for tasty, interesting food. For our purposes here, they are a necessary accompaniment as we begin to outline our raison d'etre for 'Putting food on the table'.

The pedagogical scenes outlined above are part of a larger constellation of food pedagogies that have emerged in contemporary times, largely in response to the 'obesity epidemic'. And while the scenes might be unique, different versions with similar ambitions have been well documented and problematised in Australia (Leahy, 2009; Welch, McMahon, & Wright, 2012), New Zealand (Burrows & Wright, 2007; Powell & Gard, 2014), Canada (Beausoleil, 2009; McPhail, 2013), the United States (Vander Schee & Gard, 2014), and the United Kingdom (Pike, 2015, Rich, 2010). Such scenes, and their intended and unintended effects, have troubled us as authors for some time because of their reliance upon, and the reproduction of, individualising and moralising discourses. They also rely on a very limited understanding of food and its function and place in our lives. It can be argued that this is largely due to the way in which the nutrition sciences are over-privileged in much of the social and political discourse around food. Perhaps the pedagogical scenes above, then, can be explained by what Scrinis (2008) refers to as health reductionism. Health reductionism, according to Scrinis, operates powerfully in many contemporary food pedagogies to subjugate or silence other ways of thinking, learning about and engaging with food. We would add that neoliberalism is also a potent ingredient in the mix and helps us to understand the ways many food pedagogies operate at the level of 'individual behaviour change', rather than seeking to educate people about, and address, the politics, economics and social aspects of food. When mixed together, this recipe has on every occasion left us with something of a bad taste in our mouths (Leahy & Gray, 2014). Given this, we, along with others, have been on the lookout for other educational spaces that might allow different pedagogies to emerge.

Environmental education, we thought, could be one such space. We had noticed that gardens as places for learning were gaining in popularity (e.g., see Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009). We had also been exposed to some insightful and inspiring scholarship by critical scholars that added to the attraction of the field (see, e.g., Gough, in press; Gough & Whitehouse, 2003; Preston, 2013). In beginning our quest, however, it did not take for us long to bump up against some of the usual moralising and reductionist discourses and practices. For example, although Stephanie Alexander's Kitchen Garden Foundation, which encourages primary school children to take an active interest in the growing and cooking of fresh food, has deliberately tried to avoid mentioning being overweight and obesity in its online resources and objectives, even though it is funded under the banner of government obesity prevention (Welch et al., 2012). On scanning the Foundation's Facebook page recently, the reader was asked in a post 'Did you know that 1 in 4 children are overweight or obese'? So, even where organisations actively try to avoid obesity imperatives, they find themselves mobilising them at times. This reveals just how difficult it is to avoid deferring back to obesity and using it as a rationale for talking or teaching about food in contemporary times. It also seemed that the field of environmental education was prone to similar kinds of body fascism that have been part of the various health education assemblages we were trying to escape (Russell, Cameron, Socha, & McNinch, 2013). Specifically, Russell et al.'s (2013) article discusses how obesity prevention discourses have joined forces with climate change prevention discourses to fuel weight-based oppression. The title to their article says it all: 'Fatties cause global warming'.

From our initial observations of some of the happenings under the guise of the environmental education field, it appeared that the pedagogical forces and the resulting effects created by the 'obesity epidemic' were omnipresent. In fact, they seemed to be getting an extra push, if anything. Obesity and climate change accompanied by neoliberalism were providing the optimal conditions for the emergence of a smorgasbord of new and/or repurposed food pedagogies. For example, different versions of food and lunchbox surveillance have evolved in recent times. Later in this article, Amy Cutter-Mackenzie provides an example of how school policy means that letters are sent home to parents telling them what food they can and can't send to school for their children. O'Flynn (this issue) discusses how her son is sent home from preschool with cake because it is a prohibited substance (despite it being homemade with love). In Australia, *Nude food* (Nutrition Australia, 2014) and *Lunchbox Blitz* (n.d.) campaigns have been launched to 'attack lunch boxes', in an attempt to help the environment, improve nutrition and curb obesity; the latter presented as an 'epidemic' (and indeed an axiom) by the *Lunchbox Blitz* website. While such campaigns, resources and pedagogies are largely directed towards 'doing good' (Flowers & Swan, 2012) on closer analysis we find ourselves yet again on some familiar and troubling ground.

It just so happened that at this particular juncture, Deana had a conversation with Professor Amy Cutter Mackenzie, and through talking about gardens and environmental education over a cup of tea, it was decided that it would be timely to 'put food on the table' in the form of a special issue. Given the level of discomfort we had been experiencing as we encountered different scenes and versions of food pedagogy, we found Harwood and Rasmussen's (2004) use of Foucault's 'ethics of discomfort' useful as a way to approach how we might develop a call for papers. Harwood and Rasmussen (2004) suggest that education is often characterised by a pleasant certitude and that we should be interested in corrupting this, so that we become more 'vigilant for those shadows that can cast an illusion of new ideas upon the ground of the familiar' (p. 307). We wanted to put food on the table to entice scholars and practitioners to engage with food with an ethics of discomfort. We wanted to encourage some provocative encounters with food that would take us outside of the familiar orbits that obesity prevention seems to lock us into, and offer us ways of thinking, working, teaching, learning and eating that help us carefully rethink and broaden our current pedagogical palate.

Entrée

Entrée is a French word that usually denotes the dish that is served before the main course. For our purposes, the entrée provides us with an opportunity to begin to talk about what lies ahead in this special issue. The entrée consists of Amy and Chris's table conversations about the papers on offer and their various provocations.

June 1, 2015
Kaiala Chris,
The special issue 'Putting Food on the Table' is now drawing to a close. The issue brings together an eclectic assortment of research that is both familiar and unfamiliar to environmental education research. The contributions with a focus on school gardens could be considered the familiar, expected and somewhat comfortable research. In fact, it was such familiarities that formed the impetus of this special issue, which, like most good things occurred over a cup of tea (between myself and Dr Deana Leahy — the lead guest editor of this issue). Of particular interest though is the unfamiliar and uncomfortable research in this special issue. For me, this is epitomised by Stovell's contribution entitled 'A New Discourse on the Kitchen: Feminism and Environmental Education'.

Stovell initially highlights the sexual division of labour associated with 'putting food on the table', historically recollecting women's work in the kitchen as a second-class act. Stovell calls for a revaluing of this traditional work, referring to it as a 'feminist act'. From a personal narrative perspective, what is so interesting about this for me is that from my late teens up until about 6 years ago (the same age as my eldest child), I saw cooking as an un-feminist act, which Greer (2000) characterises as a common feeling of 'resentment' among women. Representations of women's resentment towards cooking has been symbolised through an abandonment of cooking to changed social and physical dynamics of cooking. In Western (minority) countries the open plan kitchen is now commonplace in many households, where cooking has the potential to be seen as a whole-family activity rather than strictly women's work. Motherhood, in my experience, has somewhat transformed the kitchen as a family place, where we indulge in the love of growing, cooking and eating food together. Is it though a feminist act? I am not sure.

Best wishes,

Amy.

June 3, 2015

Kia ora Amy,

Great to hear that the special issue is nearing completion! A lot of hard work has gone into the articles within it, and I think they make a very thoughtful contribution to environmental education research. Their diversity shows that food touches many areas of thought and practice related to environment and sustainability, and even though food is something that is important to us all, your point about unfamiliar and uncomfortable research helps us to see it in new ways. What I like about this series of articles is the attention to theorising about food and food practices that permeates them. As you note, Stovall focuses on the 'feminising' of cooking, which leads me to think about cultural changes in food preparation and sharing. I agree that the act of growing, cooking and eating food together is an important aspect of a sustainable approach to living, and Ritchie (this issue) offers us an excellent example of this theoretical position from her work in early childhood education with Māori students in New Zealand. She contrasts the compassion and generosity shown through these collective food-oriented acts with the neoliberalist focus on individualism that seems to permeate many of our societies today. This latter focus has been argued to lead to competition around food rather than collaboration (Williams & Brown, 2012). This can promote unhealthy food habits, as has been commented on by several authors in this special issue (namely Harris and Barter, Davilla and Dyball, O'Flynn and Piatti-Farnell). How do these authors' contributions further our thinking in environmental education?

Ngā mihi,

Chris.

4 June 2015

Hi Chris,

The alignment of neoliberalism and the omnipresent food crises is undeniable. In 1992, Orr identified three crises, namely: a food crisis, an energy crisis, and a biodiversity crisis. In Orr's (1992) view, these problems together constitute a planetary crisis requiring fundamental changes in the way human beings relate to each other and to the environment. I wonder how far have we come since 1992 (now some 23 years later)? There are still some 805 million people (13.5% of the world population) chronically undernourished. In 1992 that figure was 18.7% (1,014.5 million people), representing a 5.2% reduction. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) the

problem is not food availability, but rather that 'many people in the world still do not have sufficient income to purchase (or land to grow) enough food' (Hunger Notes, 2015). The reasons though for insufficient income and indeed hunger are complex, yet typically mitigated by poverty, destructive economic systems, war and conflict, world population, food and agricultural policy and climate change. At the same time, obesity statistics are skyrocketing in minority countries. A disturbing reality is that while people are dying from too little food, others are dying from too much food. In that sense, I think that the contributions in this issue from Harris and Barter, Davila and Dyball, O'Flynn, and Piatti-Farnell further environmental education research by situating 'food' not only squarely on the table, but they collectively confront the socioecological and sociocultural parametres of food.

On the other hand, in this issue, Green and Duhn, Ritchie, Lebo and Eames, and Clifton and Futter-Puati return us to the materiality, potentiality and agentic nature of food and education. They remind us that food is quite simply part of our culture, and what separates human animals, other animals and food is 'culture' (Weaver-Hightower, 2011).

A further issue that has occurred to me concerns the socio-technological considerations of putting food on table. Along with Piatti-Farnell's contribution in this regard, such socio-technological phenomena come to mind as I now see some 40 million people engaging in Farmville (per month — 8 million users daily). Farmville is a global virtual environment where a pseudo garden can be ploughed, sown, grown and harvested in less than 24 hours. As an academic, I often hear university students comment (in passing) that these programs are convenient as they can do them any time of the day, as well as 'be creative and focus on me time', as they refer to it. This everyday existence is consistent with a fast food culture where meaning making is centred on consumption, possibly feeding what Hillcoat and Rensburg (1998) described as the 'the empty self'. Back to you …

Cheers,

Amy.

June 5, 2015

Gidday Amy,

I agree that we do seem to have slipped into a consumption mentality indelibly linked to convenience and speed, which can be a long way from the communal sharing around food that we were discussing earlier. The impact of technology is interesting and brings to mind an experience that I had at the last Australian Association for Environmental Education conference in Hobart, where I was shown around a school garden by an iPad-wielding student who enthusiastically used QR codes on garden signs to bring up interesting information about the plants that her class was growing in the garden. Here was technology enabling, and perhaps enhancing, an educational experience, empowering a young person with skills and knowledge around the action of gardening. I contrast that with the ostensibly technology-free and 'real' examples of permaculture-enhanced learning that Nelson and I worked on (Lebo and Eames, this issue) and the relational-materialist exploration of children's interactions with gardens (Green and Duhn, this issue). The replacement of these actual experiences with what Kahn, Severson and Ruckert (2009) have labelled *technological nature* led these authors to question whether such a diminished human experience of nature could affect our ability to flourish.

It is intriguing to think about the role of educators in putting food on the table. As Clifton and Futter-Puati argue in this issue, teachers are being expected to provide the food education that may once have been provided at home, and in Ritchie's early

childhood example in this issue, bringing the topic of food into the classroom can provide a rich means for connecting with the community beyond the school. How do you see educators' roles in providing food education today?
Cheers
Chris

June 5, 2015
Hey Chris,
Ideally I would like to think that food education is a whole-society responsibility, but in reality the responsibility appears to be shifting from the home to early childhood education and school settings. By way of example, just today I received the following note from my daughter's school:

> *Nutrition and School Lunches*
>
> *Dear parents / carers,*
>
> *We would like to take this opportunity to remind families about our school Nutrition Policy.*
>
> *We encourage families and students to aspire to our nutrition vision, which is to empower students and families to choose quality, wholesome, natural foods that will nourish the healthy development of the body and mind. The aim of this vision is to encourage families and students to choose to eat for success rather than ban foods.*
>
> *We also seek to minimise the impact food choices have on our planet by encouraging foods that are local, seasonal and that use minimal packaging.*
>
> *Specifically we ask our families to:*
> - *Provide lunches that are nutritious, wholesome and free of artificial chemicals / additives (see list below), made up of fresh fruit, salads, vegetables, grains, nuts, eggs, meats, dairy, pasta or any other healthy, fresh, whole foods.*
> - *Empower students to make good choices about their own food by involving them in making their own healthy lunches.*
> - *Choose foods that avoid or reduce packaging and have a positive impact on our environment.*
>
> ***Nasties that should not go into your child's lunch container!***
> *There are some well researched foods that we know have an adverse effect on children's health or simply add no nutritional value to a lunch tin. We seek cooperation from parents / carers to remove / restrict these foods from school lunch containers:*
>
> ***Food Additives***
> ***Colours***
> *102, 104, 107, 110, 122–129, 132–133, 142, 143, 151, 155*
>
> ***Preservatives***
> - *Most of the 200's (Sorbates, benzoates, sulphites, nitrates)*
> - *Antioxidants 310–312, 319–321*

Flavour Enhancers
- *All the 600 Numbers and HVP*

Foods holding little nutritional value
- *Lollies*
- *Sweet treats, i.e., biscuits, cakes, ice creams, ice blocks*
- *Foods containing chocolate*
- *Sugary spreads, i.e., Nutella, jams, golden syrups, peanut butters containing sugar, etc.*
- *Chips*
- *Drinks (other than water)*
- *Foods with a high sugar or high fructose corn syrup content*

Supporting information
For those who would like a little more information, the links below will provide you with interesting information on children's health;
- http://www.fedup.com.au/factsheets/support-factsheets/schools-eating-for-success

- http://www.spcottawa.on.ca/ofsc/food_additives.html
- www.drlibby.com
- *A School Lunch flyer is also available from the school office, filled with great food ideas.*

Thank you for your support.

This level of information exceeds the basics of food education to a genuine attempt to inform parents about nutritious chemical free lunches. The extent to which early childhood centres and schools approach food education varies markedly. Such variations are akin to Hart's (1997) ladder of participation, ranging from manipulation, decoration, tokenism, adult-initiated to child-initiated decisions as it concerns participation in food education. Green and Duhn (this issue) gesture to child-initiated food pedagogies in schools opening spaces for 'agency as transformation'. Food as transformative is certainly hopeful and I would like to think we are on the cusp of a food revolution (as Jamie Oliver puts it). In fact, I would like to think we are on the cusp of an education revolution. We can only hope ...
Talk later,
Amy.

June 6, 2015
Greetings Amy
Now that is an interesting letter to get from a school! It does indicate a school taking responsibility for food education, with an espoused aim to empower students and their families! As Jensen and Schnack (1997) might argue, this can build their action competence towards food choices if those choices are intentional and informed. Such action competence can be a step in the transformative learning that we need to engage the type of action (Birdsall, 2010; Rathzel & Uzzell, 2009) that could contribute to the education revolution you are looking for.

The role of communities in education also comes into focus here. I like to think that all schools would engage holistically with their parents and wider communities in the way your daughter's school seems to be. This viewing of a school or early childhood centre as part of a sustainable community is a strong element in Ritchie's article in

this issue. It echoes the positioning of curriculum in New Zealand as something that should be co-constructed between educators and their communities to acknowledge the position of education as a process of *ako* (reciprocal teaching and learning).

As the authors in the special issue have done, bringing food to the table invites us to consider the ways in which we think about education and, in particular, environmental education. How food has embodied the privileging of certain voices, how it can be a vehicle for considering the nexus with health, how it can lead us to explore new theories and pedagogies, and how it can help create the sort of transdisciplinary and transformative thinking that can lead a revolution.

I have enjoyed co-editing this special issue with Deana, Emily and you, so thanks for inviting me to be a part of it. I think the authors' articles raise many useful points for our readers to consider. I am very much looking forward to the main course.
Regards
Chris

Endnote

[1] It must be noted that the class were not unanimous in the decision that pies were bad. There had been a robust discussion around different kinds of pies and that not all pies were bad, if any. There was little room for disagreements, however, before the verdict was handed down.

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Author Biographies

Deana Leahy is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia. Her research interests are framed by her concerns about the political and moral work that is 'done' under the guise of improving the health of children and young people in educational settings. Her research draws from Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian inspired writings on governmentality to consider the various mentalities that are assembled together in policy and curriculum and how they are translated into key pedagogical spaces. Deana has published a in a range of national and international scholarly journals as well as several book chapters in edited collections. She is the lead author of a co-authored book entitled *School Health Education in Changing Times: Curriculum, Pedagogies and Partnerships*. The book will be published by Routledge in 2015.

Emily Gray is currently a Lecturer in Education Studies at RMIT's School of Education in Melbourne, Australia. Her publications include refereed journal articles, book chapters, and a co-edited collection entitled *Queer Teachers, Identity and Performativity,* published by Palgrave in 2014. Her theoretical interests are interdisciplinary and she draws from the fields of sociology, cultural studies and education primarily to consider questions of social justice and inclusion. She is particularly interested in interrogating how attempts to teach social justice issues are both enabled and constrained within different pedagogical settings. More recently, her work has turned to consider the role of affect in learning and teaching within a range of institutional settings and contexts and to the complexities affect (re) produces in relation to social justice. Emily's work also explores popular culture, public pedagogies and audience studies; in particular, the ways in which gender and sexual identities are explored within online fandom and fanfiction. She considers how popular culture is deployed as a pedagogical tool and with the effects that this produces. Some of this work is located within the Gothic and with how Gothic tropes are used within contemporary popular culture to examine the construction of monstrous Others that exist at the margins of the social world.

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