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Consider the lunch lady: Examining assumptions to create a paradigm shift within school lunch

Abstract

Changing the school food system requires that we critically examine our existing assumptions about how this system works. Currently, school food mirrors our larger food system as it is both highly processed and highly consolidated (Gaddis, 2019). Further, school food reflects larger societal assumptions around issues of social welfare and racial equity as a system that leaves many undernourished and wanting (Levine, 2008). Engaging critically with these assumptions is an essential step to dissecting the paradigms that shape our systems. Ultimately, dismantling these paradigms is what creates deep change (Meadows, 1999). To challenge my own assumptions around how school food works, I sought out the perspectives of the cafeteria staff who work within this system daily. Synthesizing these perspectives with the extant literature revealed the many contradictions and inconsistencies of school lunch. Examining these inconsistencies led me to broader incongruencies in how we approach both the issues and the solutions within school food. My deliverable for this project is a creative nonfiction essay. This method allowed me to weave academic literature with narrative storytelling. In so doing, I endeavor to invite interested audiences into a critical dialogue on our approaches to school food and systems issues.

Background and justification

School food scholars suggest that school lunch can either be a mirror, reflecting back our larger food system, or it can be a window, showing us the food system we would like to create. For much of its history, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) has been a mirror of our larger food system – that is, processed, consolidated, and built on cheap and gendered labor (Gaddis, 2019). Further, the school food system reflects back our larger assumptions concerning social welfare and racial equity and is significantly shaped by our politics (Levine, 2008). The last three decades have seen numerous attempts to reform the US school food system at various scales, mirroring the centering of food in sustainable development (Morgan & Sonnino, 2020). These reforms include farm-to-school programming, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, and more recently, Universal School Meals legislation. The NSLP and the various reforms are all part of an experiment in how to “address hunger and malnourishment, promote nutritional health, and satisfy children’s appetites while keeping costs low and maintaining political support” (p. 4, Ruis, 2017). Each attempt at reform seeks to bring us closer to that ideal food system. However, our ideals don’t always match up with the realities of the lunchroom, from nutrition to funding to organization (Levine, 2008). Even the seemingly simple goal of providing locally sourced school meals becomes incredibly complex (Morgan & Sonnino, 2020). Wading into these complexities and nuances is essential to better understanding how to approach reforming the school food system.

To further my understanding of the complexities of school lunch, cafeteria workers offered a key perspective. As Besky and Brown (2015) argue, labor is at the heart of many of our food system issues, yet largely unexplored. Looking to those who work within the food system allows us to not only better understand how that system functions, but also how to change it (Jayaraman, 2013). In her book *The Labor of Lunch*, Jennifer Gaddis (2019) makes a compelling case for considering the lunch lady as we seek to reform school food. Gaddis demonstrates that cafeteria workers (especially women) played a significant role in creating and maintaining school lunch since its inception. Further, as the ones working within the school food system on a daily basis, cafeteria workers are poised as potential agents of change. Centering their voices and experiences was crucial not only to my understanding of the system, but also to examining my assumptions of this system.

In this project I set out to examine and critique some of the assumptions that surround school food systems with the larger goal of inspiring further discussion around reshaping our school food paradigms. Engaging in critical dialogue around our assumptions allows us to further examine the paradigms that create and enable those assumptions so that we might create lasting change within our systems (Meadows, 1999). In questioning my assumptions, I also hoped to reject binary thinking, or include “the middle” grey area that holds a plurality of truths (Max-Neef, 2005). Finally, in engaging my own assumptions and expectations in critical dialogue, I hoped to engage in food democracy. Food democracy, as a form of deep democracy, encourages us to move beyond “vote with your fork” campaigns and enter into meaningful participation and discussion around our food system (Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2015). By capturing this critical dialogue with my own paradigms in a creative non-fiction essay, I hope to invite and encourage others to engage in this type of thinking.

Employing the creative non-fiction genre was essential to the goals of this project. Specifically, this genre allowed me to invite audiences outside of academia into this discussion, responding to my goal of creating a deliverable for a wide range of readers. This type of narrative storytelling can provide a non-threatening entry point to academic fields like food systems. Creative nonfiction in particular has developed as a means by which those outside academic institutions access knowledge and ideas.

A major strength of creative nonfiction is its ability to engage and invite in a plurality of readers in a time of distrust for academia. Scholar Richard Hofstadter wrote in 1962 of the US public’s extreme dislike of intellect. The patterns he observed then are ever more prevalent and disturbing in our current political and social climate. I argue that creative nonfiction is a promising method for breaking down some of the barriers that lead to distrust. The more readers we invite into our work, the more we will “widen the area of shared concerns” (Dewey, 1916). Further, I echo John Dewey’s (1916) argument that change, especially change to improve society, requires that we think critically about how we perform education and knowledge sharing. Otherwise, we risk simply perpetuating customs. We are aware that much of academic writing remains inaccessible to many. Scholarship that seeks to inspire change would do well then to employ other modes of communicating those ideas. Creative nonfiction provides such a

mode as it encourages the melding of both creative storytelling and research. As such, this genre can invite and engage an audience beyond academics.

This format also allowed me to develop and explore professionally relevant skills. Moving forward, I intend to pursue work in communications outside of academia. This project provided an excellent opportunity to explore different writing styles outside of the traditional research paper. Additionally, the observation and interview process gave me relevant experience in the field.

Project Process

This project began with developing my understanding of the field of school food. Through spring and fall 2022, I reviewed relevant literature, casting a wide net from scholarly books and articles to government reports and popular media. This review provided me with broad background knowledge in the existing approaches and analyses within the field. Importantly, this also gave me the necessary historical contextualization of school food in the US.

I supplemented this literature review with informational interviews with various stakeholders and practitioners involved in school food in Vermont and Massachusetts in Spring 2022. With each interview, I gained a new perspective on the realities of school food as well as potential areas for exploration. I also hoped to find an organization to collaborate with on this topic. Sam Icklan, a UVM Food Systems alumnus and project coordinator at Project Bread, highlighted the lack of transparency around cafeteria wages and broad gaps in public understanding of how school food programs work. Betsy Rosenbluth, project director of Vermont FEED, described the state-level activities of Farm-to-School and other sourcing programs available to school cafeterias. Notably, she was not aware of any efforts to engage directly with cafeteria workers around issues of pay or school food reform. I also spoke with Teddy Waszazak, Universal School Meals Campaign Manager, who explained the Universal School Meals bill in detail and described to me the technical support that Hunger Free offers to schools and parents. Finally, I interviewed Jason Williams of Geniune Foods at Bellows Free Academy Fairfax who described the details of his work as cafeteria manager at the K-12 school. Additionally, I spoke with the faculty member running the school farm, the high school principal, and the financial manager to gain greater perspective on the school food system. What stood out to me from these interviews was that even among those involved in school food campaigns, I observed the gaps in knowledge that Sam Icklan described. Ultimately, I did not find anyone to collaborate with on the issues facing school cafeteria workers. However, these interviews provided critical background on current reform efforts and issues around school food in Vermont.

During this time, I also explored possible methods and deliverable formats to complete the project. In Spring 2022, I took a Mixed Methods class with Bernice Garnett. Inspired by this course, I pursued a mixed-methods exploratory study that would combine a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews of cafeteria workers in two different supervisory unions. I proposed writing both a research paper and a non-academic article. I eventually abandoned this approach

due to both time and interest. As I explored the background and issues of school food, the most pressing issue seemed to be the breakdown in understanding between those working directly in the school food system and those of us working around it. I felt compelled to speak to an audience outside of academia – one which might have an interest in the topic or work in related education and policy fields. I was far more interested in producing the non-academic article than the research paper. I spoke with Melissa Pasanen, UVM Food Systems alumnus and writer at Seven Days, about how I might approach this from a journalistic perspective. However, I realized that the intent of this project was less to report on what was happening in cafeterias, and more to explore how cafeteria work interacts with our assumptions of both food and labor. This led me to consider taking a creative nonfiction approach. In Spring 2022 I took a course on creative food writing with Amy Trubek. Revisiting the work we did in this course, I was inspired to take a similar approach in my project. That is, I would base my article in both literature and field experience and rather than produce journalistic reporting, I would use ethnographic-style storytelling to create a narrative synthesis of lessons from the literature and my experience in the field.

Having solidified my approach, the next phase in this project was the interview and observation process. In spring 2023 I conducted interviews and observations with cafeteria staff at BFA Fairfax, Vermont. While I initially intended to include multiple school cafeterias in this project, I found that focusing on one school as a case study allowed me to dig deeply into the interesting nuances and contradictions that I was observing. This process included one formal interview with the cafeteria director and two separate observations which included informal interviews with cafeteria staff. I took notes during interviews and observations. After each observation, I reorganized my notes into themes and removed identifiable information of participants in accordance with my IRB protocol.

The final phase of this project was the writing process, completed in spring 2023. During this phase I met with Amy Trubek for a weekly writing practicum. Through this practicum I worked through the drafting process of the creative nonfiction essay. I submitted each draft to Amy Trubek for feedback which we then discussed at separate meetings. This phase was both the most difficult and the most rewarding. It was only through writing these drafts that I was able to arrive at my broader conclusions. The writing process facilitated these larger conclusions by allowing me to synthesize the academic literature with my own field observations. This process was also informed by my work at the Graduate Writing Center. Specifically, I worked to incorporate writer-responsible writing into this essay. This approach recognizes that in the US context, the writer holds responsibility for facilitating the reader's understanding of material (University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center [UVM GWC]). Additionally, while I was not writing an academic research article, I grounded my writing in the idea of signal moves. Signal moves are the key questions that any piece of writing seeks to answer: why does this matter? What has already been said? And what new information or approach can you contribute? (UVM GWC). These approaches provided bounds and structure to the more creative format of this essay.

Conclusions

This project went through several transformations from start to finish. This final version satisfies not only an academic and research interest, but also a professional aspiration. The final piece centers both cafeteria worker's voices and experiences as well as a systems perspective to school food. Additionally, through this project I explored a style of writing that is of professional interest to me, providing me the experience of communicating food systems issues to a readership outside of academia.

Through this project I also discovered that sharing food systems issues with non-academic audiences can be facilitated by ethnography. The tools of ethnography, namely, participant observation and self-reflection, allowed me to communicate complex food systems concepts in a unique and engaging way. By intentionally placing myself within the narrative, exploring the points of tension within my own assumptions, I hoped to engage readers who might not be accustomed to thinking about food systems. Further, grounding my writing in a lived experience and situating myself within it helped me create a nonthreatening tone and connect with the audience. This type of writing is not only accessible to a broader audience but also inviting. These tools will continue to serve me as I explore careers in writing and communication.

Next steps will include preparing my final essay to submit for publication at relevant outlets. Regardless of the future of this specific project, I intend to continue to apply the lessons I learned through writing it. Namely, an appreciation for complexity and an acceptance that there might not be a clear-cut solution to systems problems. More than straightforward solutions, we need critical thinking and questioning as we strive for resilient futures.

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