

School Meals

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People in the UK have recently been aroused by a young TV star chef, Jamie Oliver, to discover that our children are not only being offered high fat, high salt food at school, but are also ingesting the bits of animals that their parents would probably reject (albeit processed into shapes that disguise what they once were). This is scarcely surprising on a budget of around forty pence especially when considered with the general lack of facilities and skills.

What anybody expected for a budget of 40 pence, heaven knows.

In many schools there is no kitchen. Some have no space where children can sit and eat in a civilised manner. Lunch breaks of as little as 40 minutes scarcely provide time for a balanced meal.

Needless to say, they do things much better across the channel in France. The meal will cost several times as much (more than £2 per pupil), contain three separate courses including fruit and salad, and will have a space in the day of at least 90 minutes to allow proper digestion.

How did we get into this position?

Britain has a problem taking food, diet and nutrition seriously. We teach children in schools to appreciate the aesthetics of art and music, but eating is simply an indulgent pleasure. Any deficiency of sight or hearing constitutes a medical condition requiring specialist treatment, and probably exemption from military service. A deficiency in the senses of taste or smell would not give rise to a similar level of concern. Until recently our scientific understanding of the physics and biology of sight and hearing ran well ahead of our knowledge of the genes for olfactory receptors (now known to be densely located on chromosome 11).

School meals were introduced neither for educational purposes nor for humanitarian reasons. Their prime motive was to enable Britain to wage war successfully.

Recruitment at the time of the Boer War (1899) showed just how badly nourished were the nation's youth – some 85% of potential conscripts were not fit enough to be recruited.

Uptake of school meals was hugely increased during World War II to enable the mothers to work in the fields and factories in place of the men who had gone to fight.

With these origins, it is not surprising that the reasons for their existence today are rarely clearly enunciated, and not universally accepted. One result is that responsibility for their provision, and hence the budget, has moved back and forth.

In 1906 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were allowed but not compelled to provide free meals provided that the funds were raised locally. By 1914 central Government reimbursed 50% of the cost, and this subsidy was increased to 95% in 1941. By the end of the Second World War LEAs were allowed to continue meal provision even at weekends and during school holidays. However, in 1967 all the financial responsibility was returned to the LEAs.

In 1988 schools achieved the right to become "grant maintained" which involved receiving a block grant from the LEA to provide all services including school meals. Thus the headteacher (responsible to the school governors) now held the budget.

While the origins lay in physical fitness, it was not long before it was acknowledged that a hungry or malnourished child was less likely to benefit from educational opportunities.

In 1941 it was established that such a meal should contain 1000 kcal (approximately one third of the daily needs of an active teenager), 20-25 grams of animal protein, and 30 grams of fat. Moreover it was explicitly stated that "Good food must not be spoiled by bad cooking."

While the exact prescription changed over the next six decades, there was always an attempt to relate the contents to one third of the daily requirements of the growing child. As nutritional knowledge developed, insistence on occasional fish and fruit appeared.

Along with the school meal, there also appeared the provision of one third of a pint of milk, either free or at cost. During rationing from the 1940s to the early 1950s this was a major priority for milk producers and processors. It was the withdrawal, in 1968, of this entitlement to milk which first drew the attention of the electorate at large to Margaret Thatcher.

The costs of supplying the free or subsidised (the labour costs of production and delivery were never charged for) food moved from central government to local authorities to schools (and hence head teachers and governors).

While the former might be happy moving the bill from education to social subsidy and back again, the latter were more likely to regard their responsibilities as being limited to the provision of lessons.

In 1980 came the final straw with the cancellation of nutritional standards together with the insistence that the supply of the meals should be allocated to the commercial enterprise who submitted the lowest tender.

The ultimate consumer, the pupil, would in practice determine where the profit lay by exercising their freedom of choice about whether to eat chips, burgers and pizza or a fresh green salad with tuna or cheese.

This freedom of choice was often presented as if it were a fundamental human right, ignoring the fact that children under 16 often have rights denied to them (consumption of alcohol and tobacco, for example) when to exercise such a choice might do them physical harm. Choosing an inappropriate diet was not added to such a list. Vending machines in schools would rarely allow the choice of an apple or a banana to be made.

By 1991 the increasing costs of unhealthy lifestyle in adulthood – obesity (and hence diabetes), cardiovascular disease (from elevated fat and salt intake) encouraged the government to produce "Health of the Nation". This enunciated ten targets to be reached by 2005 including items such as lowering obesity, blood pressure, fat intake

etc. None of these has actually been achieved mainly because few steps were taken which might bring them about. In particular little was done about improving the diet of children at school.

Schools study "citizenship" but could this not include the concept of sitting down with colleagues for 40 minutes in the middle of the day and peacefully enjoying a pleasant meal?

It would have to be demonstrated to reduce truancy or exclusion levels before such an activity would assist a school in the national league tables, or in dealing with the enquiries of the government's school inspectors.

The national curriculum certainly includes diet and health, but much of this is presented in a theoretical way with little in the way of practical skills such as food preparation. Most schools would lack the physical facilities to allow this to happen.

When faced with the competing demands of well equipped science laboratories or kitchen facilities for pupils to experiment with cooking, school governors know which parents would demand.

The report of the School Meals Commission produced rapidly in late 2005 is still being chewed over.

The team not only contained academic nutritionists and school teachers, but also representatives from the catering trade.

The report contains an impressive list of 35 recommendations. Some are so obvious that it is impossible to imagine any resistance: "the nutrient standards proposed in the this Report should be applied to the provision of school lunches", "these standards should be applied to tuck shops and vending machines", "there should be easy access to free, fresh, chilled drinking water throughout the day", "all children should be taught practical cooking skills". Others such as: "schools should prioritise the refurbishment of kitchens", "schools and caterers should look to local farmers for their produce where possible" may be more challenging to achieve. The report also emphasises need to bring in change gradually, but to monitor progress at regular intervals.

It must be devoutly hoped that it will prove a catalyst for change even if we no longer wish to make our children fit only to become cannon fodder.

A list of further reading material on the subject is available from the author a.malcolm@iob.org
