

# FOOD ENTITLEMENT: WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO EAT

Jillian L.D. Burford Grinnel<sup>a</sup>,

<sup>a</sup>Gender Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

<sup>a</sup>Corresponding author: 6jb44@queensu.ca

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**Abstract:** Canada is one of the only industrialized countries that does not have a national school meal program. Even a number of developing countries like Brazil, Costa Rica and Indonesia, have school meal programs that are funded and regulated by their federal governments. The USA federal government has provided subsidized meal programs since 1946, conversely, the Canadian federal government makes no contribution to school meal programs. Why? During the 1940s and 1950s, Canada considered funding a national school meal program and rejected it. This political history of Canada's attempts to institute a national meal program has never been explored. I will consider why women, in particular single mothers, continue to struggle to raise families; as 51.6% of lone parent families headed by women live in poverty and to explore why Canada is one of the only industrialized countries that does not have a nationally funded or nationally regulated school meal program. I will explore the existing school meal programs that developed in the late 1980s as a response to perceptions of children arriving at school hungry. Poverty is strongly linked to poor health and poor school achievement.

**Keywords:** Canada, food security, gender and poverty, school meal programs.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to review the food insecurity issue in Canada and how this issue has influenced the development of school meal programs in Ontario and secondly, to address how alternative solutions for communities who are denied the space in which to define their needs in relation to hunger. It's estimated that only "10 to 15 percent of children have access to school meals..." [8], [12]. School nourishment programs can be viewed as a potential solution to the problem of food insecurity among children. The Canadian government has endorsed the definition of food security that was defined at the 1996 World Summit:

"Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet

their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." [1]

The problem of food security can be linked to Canadians' belief that children should not go to school hungry or be deprived of food based on their family's economic and social situation [17]. Food insecurity is an issue that requires diverse policy changes such as increasing real income rates, improving the affordability of healthy foods relative to 'unhealthy' foods, increasing the accessibility of affordable housing, and better monitoring systems. Food insecurity is not a localized issue, but rather spans across the nation with rates as high as 13% of families in Ontario suffering in a food insecure state [4]. Food insecurity is a problem that has increased in severity over the years, and concerned community members have come together to counteract the issue of food insecurity including the creation and maintenance of ad-hoc school meal programs.

## II. CANADA

The first school meal program in Canada was initiated in 1990 by an inner-city school teacher who wanted to alleviate hunger in her classroom [15]. Since then the programs have had continued success, with almost every region in the country currently operating a school meal program, existing programs could be breakfast, lunch, snack or a combination of these [14]. In their 2001 study, Rainville and Brink state that 10% of children of a sample size of 850,000 reported that they regularly accessed school meal programs between 1997 and 1998 [16]. A 2005 media release from the Ministry of Child and Youth Services claims that more than 253,000 students province-wide accessed school nourishment programs between 2004 and 2005 [13]. More recently, the October *Canadian Living* magazine headline read "Canada needs a national child nutrition program now" [9]. This article emphasizes the need to provide adequate nutritional programs for our school aged children to ensure that they are prepared to learn and grow each day. Many outcomes have reportedly been improved with school feeding. These outcomes can be divided into school performance and health

and nutritional variables. School performance variables include enrollment, attendance, dropout rate, repetition of grades, school attainment levels, cognitive function, and classroom behavior. Health and nutritional variables include improved dietary intakes and nutritional status and the establishment of good dietary practices.

Clearly the need for regulated school meal programs is there. Existing programs are to at least a small degree, meeting the demands of the community and often these programs become an integral component of a community's spirit. However, despite the amazing work of the volunteers, it is estimated that only 10 to 15 percent of children have access to school meals and these meals are not provided through federal government funding but rather a "patchwork of individual volunteer efforts, some provincial funding and corporate donations" [10]. On a personal note, when discussing the "snack box" with my daughters in grade five and six, they indicated to me that this was a "swap" meaning that if you didn't have anything to trade, there was no extra food. Clearly this is not the intent of these nutrition programs. The child who only has a sandwich, apple and drink clearly needs the additional food supplements to meet the necessary food group requirements however they are unable to access these resources. Canadian's ideas of food seem to be centred around the idea that the immediate family is responsible for providing food and, ultimately, access to food (or rather income in order to be able to provide food) is a conscious choice that an individual makes over the course of their life. I would argue against these ideas of the 'independent liberal individual', free to choose and live the dreams they have, guaranteed success. Despite what we teach our youth, life is not only about free choice. I have yet to hear any child clearly articulate that when they grow up they want to be homeless, unable to buy food, or clothing and live from shelter to shelter (or on the street) yet we have many Canadians and even 'Kingstonians' who regularly access food banks, meal programs and shelters. We do not hear children's dreams of living off social assistance. Instead, children dream of wealth, fame and fortune-the North American dream or careers as professionals confident they will be earning six figure incomes.

Sandra Harding describes in her text Sciences from Below the appropriation of scientific knowledge as a process of colonization. She identifies how this knowledge was and is still used to broaden the gap between rich and poor. It is this process of knowledge that ultimately, leads to the economic, social, and global environmental problems. The impending economic crash, will serve to re-iterate

that we live in a world where income gaps are widening, where the environment is suffering, and where economies are unstable. Despite this, some federal governments feel compelled to invest in their youth on a Federal level.

Harding argues that the supposed 'objectivity' of the sciences has for decades disguised its narrow-minded, 'Eurocentrism' which allowed "science" to provide an intellectual legitimacy to Western cultural projects. Harding focuses on the exclusion of 'peoples at the peripheries of modernity', namely women and the peoples of non-Western cultures. She calls for 'realistic reassessments of both Western and non-Western knowledge systems and the social worlds' they are embedded within calling for 'scientists' to engage with social justice projects and political policymaking. This does not mean a full out rejection of traditional philosophical concerns like, the role of ethics in science or destruction of foundations of scientific knowledge, but rather Harding emphasizes, that all of are in direct link with the authority of the sciences; rather her 'postcolonial' focus simply extends these sciences into the social and political.

Standpoint theory supports what Harding calls strong objectivity, or the notion that the perspectives of marginalized and/or oppressed individuals can help to create more objective accounts of the world or rather "it takes the standpoint theory of the oppressed and disempowered to reveal the objective natures and conditions of the dominant group" [5]. To simplify further, the predominant culture in which all groups exist is not experienced in the same way by all persons or groups. Those who belong to dominant groups, those groups with more social power are validated more than those in marginalized groups. These individuals in marginalized groups learn to be bicultural, or to "pass" in the dominant culture to survive, living a perspective that is not their own.

Harding's essential complaint is that science presents itself as "appropriat[ing] ... merely technical matters that are actually social and political ones", and as such wields a considerable yet invisible 'anti-democratic' influence over policy-making. This is particularly problematic given that authority of scientific knowledge and its power to affect "which groups will flourish and which will lead nasty and short lives" [5]. These 'flourishing' groups are generally "white, Northern, bourgeois men" yet the marginalized groups continue to suffer not only racial and ethnic discrimination, but also economic deprivation.

A 2004 public opinion survey led by the Canadian Association of Food Banks found that most Canadians believe that their government is at least

somewhat, if not wholly responsible for creating a solution to the hunger problem in Canada [7]. Despite this public opinion, a November 12, 2009 article from CanWest News, indicates a national increase of 18% in 2009 (from March 2008 to March 2009) of food bank users with Ontario having a 19.1% increase. This is the highest recorded annual increase since the organization Food Banks Canada began measuring need in 1997. The survey coined HungerCount<sup>1</sup> suggests food banks are struggling because demand for food bank supplies is increasing at a time when business and individual donations are declining. The survey also indicated that many of these users are employed. Twelve percent of national users were Aboriginal and eleven percent report living in a small town. Almost four in ten of the food bank users were children and youth under the age of eighteen; with one in ten (about 9%) being first time users according to the Food Banks Canada report.

In Ontario, 38% of food bank users are children. None of this information is race or class specific however, I would speculate that the majority of these individuals are not white and in remote northern locations, many find it challenging to access these resources. In Kingston specifically, the Partners in Mission Food has recently relocated to Hickson Avenue, meaning it is no longer on a bus route. As well, services are available only Fridays from 12noon until 3p which means not only do you need to take a Taxi (or arrange a ride) but if you have children, you also need to find someone to watch them if they are not at school and if they are at school, someone may need to be home to get them off the bus. In rural Lennox and Addington<sup>2</sup> food bank services are centrally located in the Town of Greater Napanee. For some, this means over an hour drive to access food, if you have a vehicle. According to the Ontario Association of Food Banks, almost 120,000 (119,435) people are forced to turn to food banks every month in the GTA.

- The number of people turning to food banks in the GTA has increased by over 20 per cent in the past year.
- 40 per cent of persons turning to food banks in the GTA are children.

<sup>1</sup> This is an annual survey conducted by the Canada food Banks organization. There are however some limitations which include accessibility to food banks for some Canadians. As well, some food banks do not provide information/statistics. Charitable groups (for example church groups or various women's institute groups) do not report their information through this survey.

<sup>2</sup> Lennox and Addington is the county directly next (West) to the City of Kingston. For example, the elementary and secondary school board includes both Kingston and Lennox & Addington counties

- One third of the people turning to food banks in the GTA are recent immigrants.
- Over 200,000 full-time jobs have been lost in Ontario this year—more jobs than any other province—leaving a record number of households no other option than to turn to their local food bank for support<sup>3</sup>.

More recently, at the UN Hunger Summit held in Rome on November 18<sup>th</sup> the UN's head of Food and Agriculture Organization called for urgent action in the need to set clear measurable targets and specific deadlines in order to eliminate hunger, which faces over a billion people worldwide. The summit was attended by approximately 60 heads of state and government however, aside from the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who chaired the opening session, no other G8 leader attended. Given that the UN's 2000 Millennium Summit generated the goal to "halve the number of hungry people by 2015" how can this lack of participation by G8 countries be read? The absence of "rich-country leaders sent a poor message" to all participants, clearly re-iterating Harding's concerns with intellectual legitimacy to projects of Western cultural and intellectual imperialism and the exclusion of 'peoples at the peripheries of modernity', namely women and the peoples of non-Western cultures, exposing the marginalization of their values and perceptions.

As pointed out at the Food security summit in Rome, by Jacques Diouf (director-general of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization) world hunger can be eliminated if "aid-giving countries hand over \$44 billion a year" which if provided and directed appropriately, could lead to sustainable agriculture for some countries leading to an improved internal economy. Considering that the world spends at least \$1.34 trillion a year on arms, and is able to mobilize trillions of dollar globally during times of crisis, a mere \$44 billion is a drop in the bucket. Perhaps if there was less war if everyone was fed and no one went without. Important to note, the summit also "endorsed a strategy shift to place emphasis on achieving self-sufficiency in food production in developing countries" and suggested that the UN's Committee for world hunger should increase its role in the co-ordination of aid spending. Interesting to note, a July meeting of G8 Leaders led to a \$20

<sup>3</sup> \* Source: HungerCount 2009. In March 2009, 99,002 Torontonians, 5,338 citizens of York region, 9,698 citizens of Peel region, and 5,397 citizens of Durham were forced to turn to food banks every month. In 2008, 98,883 citizens in the GTA turned to food banks.

billion pledge to agriculture over the next three years however it is unclear how this will be administered.

### III. EXISTING CANADIAN PROGRAMS

There are complications associated with the general operation of existing programs, as they rely on many different variables in order to operate. For example, the programs rely primarily on the commitment of a large informal labour force and charitable donations [2]. The programs often resemble an informal *ad hoc* charity model, relying on volunteer labour, insecure food and/or monetary donations, and up until 2006 informal program guidelines that result in the complex design and delivery of programs across the country [3]. In considering the abovementioned factors, it is not certain whether school nourishment programs are an appropriate social policy response to the larger food insecurity issue.

Author and policy analyst David Hay reports in his research paper entitled, *School-based feeding programs – a good choice for children?*, that there is not enough evidence to confidently state that school meal programs alleviate the broader social problems associated with food insecurity. These ‘problems’, he states, include, “alleviating hunger, enhancing nutrition, and contributing to the healthy development of Canadian children and families” [6]. Food can bring the social, political and scientific together. Education requires concentration, which requires adequate nutritional needs be met, not just for survival but in order to succeed.

Hay believes that school meal programs may have a place in addressing the food insecurity issue if they can be used in combination with other social and political strategies. Combined, these programs could form a best response to ‘feeding hungry children’. Hay’s critique also draws attention to the fact that school meal programs may have unintended consequences for users of the program, such as dependency and stigmatization for the child.

The question as to whether or not school meal programs can act as a solution to the problem of food insecurity in Canada is a multi-faceted issue that requires additional research. However along with the 2006 investment from the provincial government to expand school meal programs across the province, it would appear that Hay’s critiques, are not enough of a concern to halt the strides currently being taken by the government. These 2006 ‘strides’ to, “improve the health and success of Ontarian children and youth”, is took the form of an almost 100% increase in the amount of funds being invested in school nourishment programs across the province (MOCYS, 2005). Although school meal programs may not be the best solution to the food insecurity issue, it can be

a beginning. Drawbacks include the program being delivered solely within the timeframe of the academic school year leaving children without this dependable food source for summer months and the program ceases upon completion of high school. These meal programs as well are not uniform across the province but they are enough of a solution that the provincial government is willing to invest in them. The 2006 provincial *Guidelines* are introduced in the following paragraph.

The August 2006 release of the *Student Nutrition Program – Program Guidelines for Communities* from the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services provides school meal programs with a common strategy to follow during design and implementation of a school meal program [14]. These guidelines suggest service delivery models, outline the funding formula for the flow of money from the government to the programs, and provide accountability measures that are “vital” to the sustainability of the programs [14]. These guidelines were a welcome addition to the current operation of the programs. The guidelines provide provincially-determined guiding principles and “best practices” that remove some of the vagueness in the design of the programs. The guidelines were designed to improve the handling of the program structures by providing some format of monitoring and an evaluation criteria. Yet Canada is one of the only industrialized countries that does not have a federally funded meal program, why?

### IV. THE UNITED STATES

Since Canada is often seen in a similar light to its southern neighbour, the United States of America, a quick look at the USA will reveal how very different the two countries are when it comes to investing in its future citizens. From 1939-1942, US schools received free food to use for school meal programs. In 1946 the USA federal government recognized the necessity to make these programs permanent, which resulted in legislation being passed creating the National School Lunch Act. The aim of the Act was to improve the health and well-being of youth. There are two programs covered by the legislation; the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the National School Breakfast Program (NSBP). Both of these programs ensure children receive the necessary nutritional requirements in order to concentrate, to write and succeed in an academic setting, children need to be fed. The majority of overdeveloped nations have federal funding to support the nutritional needs of children while in school.

## V. FINLAND

Finland has strict regulations and strictly forbids packed lunches. In 1957, each pupil was entitled to a “sufficient meal” on every school day and in 1964 teachers were obliged to supervise the school lunch by participating in it. In 1967, the definition of “sufficient meal” was re-defined. A sufficient meal meant it provided approximately one third of a child’s daily food requirements. In 1981 new instructions about school catering was introduced eliminating all former regulations, which included instructions about the nutritional value of the meals, details with respect to special diets, the time and place of serving lunch, the school’s responsibility in the guiding and supervising of the school lunch program. Two years later, in 1983 all comprehensive school pupils and sixth form college students were entitled to a free, sufficient meal on each school day. In March 2008 the National Nutrition Council again set out new guidelines for school food in Finland. These guidelines were based on the 2005 recommendations for nutrition for the population.

## VI. FRANCE

Other countries focus on food as a communal experience including children in the growing, cultivating and preparing of food. The schools of France are strongly tied to agriculture, in fact the country has established set amounts that shopkeepers are to charge for what are deemed the staples or necessities of the French diet. These include a baguette, cheese and of course, wine, all products made within the country itself promoting sustainability alongside nutrition and economic stability. Meals are enjoyed in a group setting often with over an hour to allow for the meal to be fully enjoyed. School meals are taken together in a dining hall or cafeteria, as a “school community” with students, staff and teachers all sitting down together. Local products are used as often as possible and the emphasis is on enjoyment, community and nutrition.

In June 2001, the official information released by the Ministry of National Education and Minister for Research (France), was entitled ‘School restoration: composition of the meals in school restoration and safety of food. This document highlighted the importance of school children receiving essential nutrients through school meal programs that provided meals of high nutritional quality. The report also emphasized the need for pleasant dining environments and user-friendly facilities, approaching the dynamic of food, both preparation and consumption, as a communal event. The main finding of the report was that currently, school lunches were not always satisfactory, often too high in fat and

protein and low in dairy products, fruits and vegetables. The report further set out new, non-compulsory, nutrient and food-based guidelines to assist in the re-organising of school lunches into what the existing meal program entails.

## VII. ITALY

The food served in Italian schools as well focuses on procurement and sustainability. Meals are recognized as an integral part of both people’s right to education and the consumers’ right to health. In the mid-1980s, the Commission ‘What is Organic’ was established and the first national law to regulate the organic sector was introduced<sup>4</sup>. Soon after this, the municipality of Cesena designed the first organic school meal system. During the late 1980s, Italy began to promote the values of the Mediterranean diet. In 1986, the National Institute for Nutrition published the ‘Guidelines for a Healthy Italian Diet’, which explicitly promoted the Mediterranean food model in public sector catering. The link between local, organic food and public catering food policies peaked in 1999, when, in response to an increased public concern for healthy eating, the Italian Government issued Finance Law 488. This law guaranteed the promotion of regionally sourced, organic, good quality food products in institutions which operate public canteens, including schools. A whole school approach is also taken very seriously in Italy and under law the ‘Commissione Mensa’ (Canteen Commission) involves families in the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the school meal service. Each school must appoint its own ‘Commissione Mensa’ which includes any number of parents, appointed for a period of three years, who can visit the school in groups of two, unannounced, any time during term time. As a fundamental part of an education programme called ‘Cultura che Nutre’ (Culture that Feeds), Italian teachers reinforce the effort made in the school kitchen by linking it to material in the class room which covers a number of key areas: food, nutrition and life style (including cooking), as well as the importance of sustainability in Italian farming.

<sup>4</sup> I find the whole organic market challenging to achieve in fall, winter and spring. When living on a rigid, inadequate income (or debt) it is impossible to buy organic anything unless it is on sale. The summer months usually allow some landowners the opportunity to grow their own vegetables (and some fruits) but it is a circle because lack of economic stability does not allow for the purchasing of organic produce that is clearly the better alternative. Finally, cost wise, canned fruits and vegetables (although not as nutrient rich as fresh or organic) are sometimes the only option for those who are economically challenged. I also wish to acknowledge that food has monetary value placed on it. For example, the steak and lobster supper versus the NoName Mac & Cheese with hotdog wieners or the organic versus fresh versus canned.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Canadian food or the Canadian diet is quite the opposite, I would argue. Fast food, quick microwaveable TV dinners and take-out all encourage individualism and a sense of urgency to hurry up and eat so more productive activities can be accomplished. School lunch periods in the public school system allows students twenty minutes to get their lunch pail, get back to their desk (generally in their classroom), unpack their lunch, eat it and then clean up to go outside for recess. Kids bring ready-made, easy to eat, pre-packaged snacks (including Spidermans or other gooey fruit-like gummies). These foods are high in a variety of fats, lack adequate nutrients and some even contain huge amounts of preservatives in order to keep a long shelf life-but they are inexpensive, and something has to go into the lunch kit.

The federal governments of Finland, France and Italy view these federal programs as investments in children's health and the future of their citizens. In Canada however, this view is not federally articulated. School meal programs help children by encouraging healthier eating habits, by increasing their fruits, vegetables and milk intake as well these programs help reduce child obesity rates (which have almost tripled since 1985). Yet still nothing from the Canadian federal government. There is a possibility of future compatibilities of global sciences and cultures. Such a vision, can and must be a desire, a dream, and a vision long before it becomes a reality. This can be achieved through the integration of sciences into social and political agendas with the goal of sustainability both in agriculture and in the future health of all Canadian youth.

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