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# "The Hunger Games" Media Representation of the National School Lunch Program

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Running Head: NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

“The Hunger Games” Media Representation of the National School Lunch Program

by

Danielle Lee, BSW, LSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master’s thesis nor a dissertation.

### Abstract

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was designed to help ease the financial burden of eligible families and provide a hot and nutritious meal for students. This program offers assistance to families who otherwise may not be able to afford consistent nutritious meals for their children. There is a lack of research in the area of media representation of public welfare programs, including the National School Lunch Program. The purpose of this research was to examine how both national (*The New York Times*) and local (*Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press*) newspapers portrayed NSLP in the 1960's, 1980's, and 2000's. This study used the grounded theory data analysis method to facilitate a textual analysis. Findings indicated that in the 1960's there was support as well as acknowledgement that something needed to be done about hunger in America and NSLP created a sense of social justice and responsibility for many during this time. In the 1980's the predominant discourse centered on the costs of the NSLP program and ways to cut the budget, but there were voices in favor of expanding the program, too. Finally in the 2000s, while social responsibility started to emerge again as a theme, the discourse shifted to the nutrition of the program and how to efficiently feed those who need it. Interestingly, across all three decades, the influence of stigma for those using the NSLP was either evident in the prose of the discourse or in the experiences of children portrayed in the discourse. Future research should focus on how race plays a part in the portrayal of NSLP in the media, and the enduring influence of stigmatization of public assistance programs, even those that help children.

*Keywords:* National School Lunch Program, discourse analysis, barriers, access to the program, stigma, nutrition

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The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) has been a fixture in schools for almost 70 years, and was designed to help ease the financial burden of eligible families and provide a hot and nutritious meal for students. This program was established in 1946 as part of the National School Lunch Act. The program was expanded in 1966 as part of the Child Nutrition Act, which gave schools additional meal support and the ability to provide breakfast and snacks to students. The purpose of this program was to provide students, who otherwise may not have access, a hot and nutritional meal. With the assistance provided by the government, schools are able to offer healthy breakfast, lunch, and snacks for students.

The National School Lunch Program is one of the largest food and nutrition assistance programs in the United States (Ralston, Newman, Clauson, Guthrie, & Buzby, 2008). NSLP serves millions of children each day. In 2012 according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2013), “more than 31.6 million children each day got their lunch through the National School Lunch Program. Since the modern program began (1946) more than 24 billion lunches have been served” (p.3). The growth and reach of this program has increased exponentially over the years. At the end of the first year (1946) about 7.1 million children were participating in the free and reduced lunch program. In 1970 22 million children were participating and by the 90’s the program had grown to serve more than 24 million children daily (USDA, 2013). Since the 1970’s the child poverty rate has fluctuated in the United States. Between 1975 and 1993 the rate steadily rose, topping out at about 23% of all children. In 1993 there was a decline in the rate of child poverty with its lowest rate at about 16%. Since 1993 the rate of childhood poverty again increased. In 2011 about 22% of all children was living in poverty (Urban

Institute, 2013). This program continues to offer support to children and families as the need for meal support increases.

Since its inception the program has gone from serving seven million youth a year in 1946, to 31 million a day in 2012. According to the National Center for Education Statistics and table 204.10 (2013), “48,995,812 students were enrolled in K-12 public schools in the United States. Of that nearly 49 million students approximately 24,291,646 or 49.6 % of those students were eligible for either free or reduced school lunches” (p.1). To be eligible for a free lunch the household income of the child must be at or below 130% of the federal poverty level. To receive a reduced lunch the child’s household income must be between 130 and 180% of the federal poverty level (Ralston et. al., 2008). In other words, almost half of the school-aged children in this country were eligible for some form of meal assistance.

In Minnesota, in 2012, approximately 839,645 students were enrolled in K-12 education. Of those nearly 840,000 students 311,645 or 37.1 % were eligible for either free or reduced priced meals according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The National School Lunch Program is serving nearly half of all school-aged children in this country, and more than a third in Minnesota. The significance of this program to the children and families served is evident by the sheer number of eligible participants.

Over the past 10 years, more specifically in the last two years, there have been major cuts to social programs benefiting low-income families and children. In 2013 the federal government implemented cuts to several social programs due to the sequestration, or automatic cuts, to reduce the budget. Many of these cuts were directed at social programs. According to Lu 2013, “this fall, about 57,000 children will be denied a place

in Head Start and Early Head Start as fallout from sequestration. New estimates about the automatic budget cuts have slashed over \$400 million from the federal programs \$8 billion budget” (p.1). This is one of the biggest funding cuts to the program since its inception in 1965. In the same 2013 sequestration there were also major cuts to the federal childcare subsidy program. Roughly \$115 million was cut from this program increasing the amount that low-income families will pay for childcare (Hamm, 2014). The National School Lunch Program has largely been spared from cuts throughout the years. They have suffered reduction in reimbursements rates and the rise in school lunch programs, which decreased participation in the program in the 80’s (Ralston et. al., p.7). Cuts to social programs not only affect the individuals but the community as a whole.

Much research has been done on the benefits of lunch and academic success. According to Levin and Neuberger (2013), “access to free, healthy meals at school can reduce food insecurity for nearly 16 million children living in households that have trouble affording enough nutritious food” (p.5). By offering a family food support for one meal a day, their ability to care for their family increases tremendously. For many, this program may provide the only hot meal their children will have in a day. It is an assurance to parents with low incomes that their children will have enough to eat to be attentive and successful during the school day. There is a link between eating healthy and improving concentration and school performance. According to Kraus (as cited in Preidt, 2008), “When children consume a high-fat, high-sugar meal, their bodies will crash, and they will become very tired and lethargic -- which is not going to help them perform at their best level in school” (p.1). The National School Lunch Program is striving to create a healthy and successful learning opportunities for all children who accept meals.



Social workers are committed to the health and well being of our youth, especially within a school setting. The National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics exemplifies this when it discusses service to others. The principle states, “social workers’ primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems” (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008). Investing time and energy into the well being of our youth in need is paramount. Investing in the school lunch program is a step in the right direction of addressing the social problem of hunger. Access and availability of daily hot meals can help decrease the educational disparities that are present in this country. According Figlio and Winicki (as cited in Leos-Urbel, Schwartz, Weinsein, & Corcoran, 2013), “school districts that increased the calorie content of school lunches on test days demonstrated increased passing rates, although selection bias limits casual inference” (p. 91). Ensuring all children have the same advantages within the school setting highlights many social and economic inequalities present in our society. The ability to decrease these inequalities within the school lunch program relies on student enrollment and parents’ perception of the advantages and disadvantages of the program. Again the Code of Ethics speaks to fighting inequalities. It states “social workers challenge social injustice. Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (NASW Code of Ethics , 2008). Fighting to decrease educational disparities and offer a hot meal to a student who may not otherwise receive one is a relevant representation of this principle.

Minnesota utilizes many of the school nutrition programs that are available today. These programs include school breakfast and the community eligibility program. The school breakfast program in Minnesota served approximately 112,638 students in 2009-

2010 school year, who were also enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program. Students who are eligible for either free or reduced lunch automatically receive free breakfast. This program was designed to increase the availability of nutritious meals for low-income families. Having the option to eat breakfast at school may increase the likelihood that a child will eat breakfast (Public Health Law Center, 2014). The community eligibility program is a relatively new program that may greatly benefit schools and families. This program allows schools with greater than 40% participation in NSLP the ability to offer all students in their school free and reduced school lunch. This program allows schools to offer reduced meals to student who may not have signed up for the program or may have just missed the eligibility cut off. The Community Eligibility provision can begin implementation in Minnesota during the 2014-15 school year (Minnesota Department of Education, 2014). This has also reduced paperwork for the schools, and can reduce stigma as everyone in the school is receiving the same meal.

Researchers assert that the way social programs are portrayed in the media play a role in the extent to which they are supported and funded. The purpose of this research project is to gain an understanding of how the media portrayed the National School Lunch Program by examining its representation within major newspapers in the state of Minnesota, as well as nationally.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Legislative History of the National School Lunch Program**

The need for adequate nutrition for school aged children is a concept and conviction that has strengthened since its inception in 1946, when the National School Lunch Act was signed into law. This program was developed at a time when food

insecurity and malnutrition were of great concern. World War II played a significant role in the creation of the National School Lunch Program. Many U.S. Officials testified in front of Congress that the malnutrition among young soldiers was jeopardizing national security. They stated that the soldiers were not “nourished” enough to properly fight (Grimes, 2013). When speaking to congress, according to Grimes (2013), an official expressed the need for the National School Lunch Program “...As a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well being of our nation’s children, and to encourage domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food” (p.2). Soon after this testimony the National School Lunch Act was signed into law. This program not only helped national security it also benefited the farmers in many communities.

The Department of Agriculture then became authorized to purchase surplus farm commodities and distribute them to local school lunch programs. This provided a market for agricultural production, which aided farmers and provided a market for their goods. Without the ability to sell excess goods the price of farm goods may have gone down and there would have been too much production (Ralston et. al, 2008). NSLP was therefore developed in response to its times as a way to ensure that children received proper nutrition. However, it was also developed as a program to increase the market demand of our nation’s agricultural resources (Ralston et al., 2008). When the National School Lunch Act was first developed it was funded through a grant aid and not directly from the state or federal government. In 1962 states began to provide meal reimbursement, and schools with a high percentage of low-income students were granted increased funding. In 1966 the Child Nutrition Act was signed into law. This act combined school food service programs from other agencies and combined them into one under the United

States Department of Agriculture. This act also created funding to pilot a school-based breakfast program and provide increased funding to schools serving low-income students (Ralston et al., 2008).

By 1970 the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Consumer Service department became the administering agency for the program and it was now federally administered. In 1977 NSLP introduced provisions allowing schools with high percentages of low-income students to certify students for two years instead of one, increasing the likelihood that families would continue to utilize the program (Ralston et. al., 2008). At this time steps were also taken to create national eligibility criteria, guard against discrimination, and protect the privacy of participants. In 1980 the income limit for free lunches was raised from 125 to 130% of the poverty limit and the eligibility for reduced lunch was lowered from 195 to 185% of the poverty level with the signing of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. The Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act was signed in 1994 and now required school lunches to follow dietary guidelines. Much of the 2000's provided additional dietary revisions in hopes of providing nutritious meals to all children enrolled (Ralston et al., 2008). As stated previously, according to USDA (2013),

About 7.1 million children were participating in the National School Lunch Program by the end of its first year, 1946-47. By 1970, 22 million children were participating...in 1990 over 24 million children ate school lunch every day. In fiscal year 2012, more than 31.6 million children each day got their lunch through the National School Lunch Program. Since the modern program began more than 224 billion lunches have been served. (p.3)

The growth of this program has been tremendous and has helped feed millions of school children in the last 70 years. However, as the legislative history shows, it has not always been a smooth trajectory.

### **National School Lunch Program Eligibility**

NSLP, as stated in its name, is a national program. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2013), “The National School Lunch program operates in over 100,000 public and non-profit private schools and residential child care institutes. It provided nutritional balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 31 million children each school day in 2012” (p. 1). This program offers assistance to families who otherwise may not be able to afford consistent nutritious meals for their children. Around 16 million children in America live in households without consistent access to adequate food. That’s one out of five kids. When focusing on parents making meals at home for their children, roughly 85% of low-income families would like to make healthier meal choices at home, but only 50% are able to do so on a regular basis. When asked why this was many cited the perceived cost of healthy food as a barrier (Childhood Hunger in America, 2013). The disparity in the availability of nutritious and affordable foods is evident. In Minnesota this is also apparent. Food insecurity is a term often used to describe this disparity. According to the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) 2012, “food insecurity describes a situation in which families or individuals do not always have access to enough food to avoid hunger” (p.1). Minnesota’s food insecurity rate in 2012 was 11.2% however among children 18 and under it was 18.3% or 231,100 food insecure children (MISA, 2012). The school lunch program was designed to help take some of this burden off of families.

NSLP is a need-based program that maintains strict eligibility criteria. In order for families to qualify for free or reduced school lunches certain thresholds must be met. The USDA (2013) maintains that,

Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with income between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents. (p.2)

For families who may be over the eligibility guidelines there are emerging programs such as Community Eligibility, which enables the entire school to utilize free and reduced lunch rates if more than 40% of the enrolled population are eligible for the program (Levin & Neuberger, 2013). NSLP continues to evolve to benefit many eligible families and communities.

### **Attitudes about Public Assistance Programs That Affect Children**

In the United States federal social welfare programs for children have existed for more than three-quarters of a century. However, the meaning of “social welfare” may vary across the country. According to Stoesz, (1989) social welfare is “a society’s provision of social, economic, and health benefits to members who are unable to obtain such benefits by themselves” (p. 101). The social welfare system for children began in earnest in 1935 with the creation of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) Program. This program was developed as part of the Social Security Act and was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. ADC focused on the health of children and keeping them in their home with their family (Wiltse, 1964). According to Crowell (2001),

Historically, the establishment of Aid to Dependent Children program (ADC) was

established to fill the desperate need to support women who were caring for their children as a result of divorce, widowhood or desertion. These women were “deserving” since they were caught in circumstances deemed beyond their control. (p.157)

As the Social Security Act of 1935 was taking shape in Congress there was a push to ensure those who received assistance were “deserving”. Programs for those engaged in paid work, (mostly men), were considered worthy of state support in the form of social insurance. Programs developed for them included workers insurance, social security retirement benefits, and workmen’s compensation (Day, 2008). However, for those engaged in unpaid work (mostly women in the form of domestic labor), what had been locally controlled Mother’s Pensions were folded in into the Act and called Aid to Dependent Children. With this inclusion, southern politicians maintained that state and local governments should continue to establish their own eligibility criteria. Unlike the social insurance provisions crafted for men, women would have to continue to demonstrate need and meet eligibility criteria. Due to this stipulation a racial divide was created whereby southern county welfare boards would apply stringent eligibility rules forcing African American women to work at low-wage jobs (Quadagno, 1994, p. 119). To make matters worse, even though most African American women worked in the paid labor force, they did not benefit from the Social Security Act; Southern Democrats insisted that domestic and agricultural laborers not be included in the legislation as work worthy of the social insurance benefits.

In 1939 as the Social Security Act was implemented, there was a conscious effort to tighten eligibility criteria to limit the number of African-Americans who could benefit from services (Quadagno, 1994, p. 119). Quadagno (1994) stated,

During the 1940s and 1950s states created additional restrictions: seasonal employment policies cut ADC recipients off the welfare rolls during cotton-picking season: “man in the house” rules allowed social workers to make unannounced visits and eliminate from the rolls any woman found living with a man. (p.119-120)

This discrimination made it difficult for women of color to obtain assistance from the state and also increased the perception of those who received welfare as many were deemed unworthy, as they could not access it. Thirty years after ADC was signed into law, the landscape of America was beginning to change. Aid to Dependent Children was renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1962. Support for mothers in the form of cash assistance, allowed them to stay home with their children and not work. This shift in philosophy, due in part to the 1968 Supreme Court ruling that struck down the “man in the house” rules, increased the number of families on the rolls and began to include women of color and teenage mothers (Crowell, 2001). This program was soon to expand as demand for more services increased. The 1965 Daniel Moynihan report also contributed to discrimination towards African American woman. The report argues that high nonmarital birth rates in the African American community and an increase in female-headed households created a matriarchal society that undermined the role of black fathers (Acs, Braswell, Sorensen & Turner, 2013). This report gave



conservatives a platform to target African American mothers as a “problem” within their own community, and decrease available resources.

In 1981 as president Reagan took office, there was a shift in the way welfare was delivered. While campaigning for office in 1975 Reagan relayed a story about a woman abusing the welfare system to demonstrate the need for welfare reform. According to Gilliam (1999) Reagan stated,

She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 social security cards and is collecting veteran’s benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. (p.3)

The image that is portrayed in this description, that was later proven to be untrue, further ignited the push for welfare reform and continued stereotyping of African Americans on welfare. Reagan signed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) into law. This act cut public assistance benefits and combined social services programs into a block grant. The new eligibility guidelines drastically impacted working families on AFDC as childcare expenses were capped and work deductions limited. Nearly 408,000 families lost eligibility and another 299,000 had benefits reduced. Working poor families (the majority of whose members were children) were impacted greatly, many of whom fell into poverty (Stoesz & Karger, 1993). In 1990 a revised OBRA, under President George H.W. Bush, was released which gradually increased domestic expenditures by 22 billion over five years. Many programs which were defunded almost 10 years prior were again being adequately funded. This shift in welfare philosophy was a compromise with the democratic Congress that advocated for welfare assistance (Stoesz & Karger, 1993).

With welfare programs beginning to expand again and the number of individuals utilizing these services increasing, public support for welfare programs began to wane. According to Crowell (2001), “ A Gallup Poll in 1994 showed that 68% of the United States’ public believed that most welfare recipients were just taking advantage of the present system and 54% wanted welfare payments either curtailed or cut altogether” (p. 158). This shift in public attitude towards welfare and its participants has continued over time. Gilens, the author of *Why Americans Hate Welfare* offers research findings regarding America’s perception of welfare. When asked about individual responsibility versus using government aid, many Americans felt individuals should be responsible for their own self and well being (1999). Gilens (1999) more specifically states, “ the American public almost unanimously believe that people should take advantage of every opportunity to improve themselves rather than expect help from the government (96% of Americans agree with this sentiment in a phone survey in 1989)” (p. 34). The tolerance and support for the welfare program and those who utilize it, was declining rapidly.

With the public’s support for welfare decreasing, welfare reform was being sought by then president Bill Clinton. According to Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs (1995) who wrote during his presidency, “ An increasing majority of the public believes that the public assistance system does not work well. Welfare has come to connote dependence- and even fraud-and the welfare system is perceived to have greater negative than positive effects” (p.607). As attitudes towards welfare continued to decline Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) was signed into law in 1996. TANF marked a drastic shift in how welfare was delivered in the United States. Individuals were no longer able to stay on welfare indefinitely, regardless of the state of the economy.

A strict five-year time limit was placed on this program and recipients were required to prove that they were working or actively looking for a job (Lens, 2002). There were also states that chose to enact an even shorter time limit on benefits. There were 17 states that enacted policies that stated individuals would become ineligible for benefits after 24 months or two years. Michigan and Vermont had no time limits (Bloom, Farrell, Fink, & Adams-Ciardullo, n.d., p.34).

### **Contemporary Perspectives on Public Assistance Programs for Children**

Despite shifting how welfare was delivered, there were still many who felt the government was enabling those who were enrolled in the program to get something for nothing. The welfare of children and the work of parenting rarely come into the political conversation (Toft, 2010). Individuals receiving welfare are often judged on their ability to improve their own circumstances, primarily their ability to work. If recipients are seen as able to gain employment but choosing not to, they are often deemed as undeserving and welfare is not supported (Petersen, Sznycer, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2012). Perception is, “the way you think about or understand someone or something” (Perception, 2014, p.1). Perceptions of those who are on welfare continue to be a powerful influence on our social welfare system today.

Those who utilize public assistance continue to fight a negative perception as evident by statistics referenced above. This perception left unaddressed could negatively impact the welfare system. According to the findings of Rogers-Dillian (1995) who interviewed white and black women on welfare, “ though the stigma of welfare was not a deterrent to applying for assistance, respondents were very aware of the stereotypes of welfare recipients. They saw the public’s image of most welfare recipients as one of lazy,

baby-making women living off of other people's labor" (p. 445). Stigma is often mentioned when discussing the welfare system. Stigma is often characterized as, "a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group people have about something" (Stigma, 2014, p.1). The idea of stigma as a way to deter people from accessing available public assistance, to assist children and their families, is especially relevant within the welfare system both in the past and present day.

Stigma is not the only deterrent to the program. Many schools across the country are becoming more diverse everyday. One aspect of increased diversity may include undocumented immigrants. The National School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Programs are all available to students and families regardless of immigration status. These programs require no proof of citizenship only proof of income. This enables all families in need, access to services that can impact their children's well-being. Even with the ability to enroll in the NSLP, as well as other government programs, many undocumented immigrants hesitate to enroll due to fear of deportation and confusion over immigration laws (Broder & Blazer, 2011). The open eligibility and access to the program may also lead to the stigmatization of the program and its participants.

TANF and the National School Lunch Program are both examples of programs whose beneficiaries are largely children (and solely children for NLSP). When families were enrolled in TANF the children were able to receive food support and cash assistance. In 2012, children made up about three-quarters of TANF recipients. Children are the main beneficiaries of this program. In 1996 there were roughly 9 million children recipients of TANF. In 2013 this number was just over 2.8 million (Child Recipients of

Welfare, 2014). There are nearly a third, or 7 million less children benefiting from this program than in 1996. This is important to understand because how a program is presented can mean a lot for the kind of support and funding it gets. The discourse for AFDC recipients was so virulent; it has resulted in the dramatic reduction of children accessing TANF and a potential increase in child poverty. The National School Lunch Program was created to ensure 100% of students are able to receive at least one hot meal a day. Even with the focus on children, the stigma of the welfare system still persists. The notion of a child on the free and reduced lunch program may evoke a racial undertone regarding the work ethic of their parents. According to Gilens (1999), “respondents’ beliefs about blacks’ commitment to the work ethic is the strongest predictor of welfare attitudes” (p. 71). It is important to be aware of these attitudes in relation to how the program is portrayed.

One wonders if the pull to help children overrides the stigma attached to being poor. This stigma can also be found within the National School Lunch Program. As NSLP is a needs based program all those who qualify are already identified as being in need. According to Stein (2008),

Some high schools are finding that students would rather go hungry than be identified as recipients of free lunches. Indeed, across the city in the San Francisco public school system, only 37% of eligible high school students are participating because of the stigma of receiving subsidized lunch (p. 1982). This illustration demonstrates the power opinions of others can have on the ability for eligible citizens to access the resources they may need. Opinions often need a platform to be heard. One of the largest platforms is often through the media.

### **Media and Persuasion**

Information in today's society is available continuously whether it is on the Internet, in the paper, on TV, or on the phone. The Media is a powerful tool that can reach millions of people at a time. According to the American Press Institute (2014), "33 percent of Americans report following the news all throughout the day" (p.1). As news is available 24 hours a day there is unlimited access to an audience. The American Press institute (2014), also concludes that "Americans report that they trust the information they get from local TV news stations to a greater degree than any other source of news, with 52 percent who seek out local TV news saying that they trust the information very much or completely" (p.2). This statistic demonstrates that over half of the country puts their trust in what they see and hear on the news and they are particularly trustful of their local news.

The Gallup Poll in 2014 broke down the public's confidence in newspapers by party affiliation. This included liberals, moderates, and conservatives. Dugan (2014) reported that they found that 34% of liberals have confidence in newspaper reporting, 24% of moderates, and 15% of conservatives. The poll also stated that confidence in print media reporting is down by half since its all-time-high of 51% in 1979 (p.1). The media is how we receive the news and depending on persons' perceptions of the world they may view what they see and hear differently.

There has been much research conducted on how individuals process and retain information. According to Entman (1989), "information-processing research shows that people have cognitive structures called "schemas" which organize their thinking. A person's system of schemas stores substantive beliefs, attitudes, values, and preferences

along with rules for linking different ideas” (p. 349). When information is processed using this theory however, individuals may choose to absorb information based on interest rather than how it aligns with their values (Entman, 1989). If an individual or the public finds an idea or situation of interest to them, they may be willing to forgo their own values and beliefs to entertain their current curiosity. Entman finally wrote that, “Influence can be exerted through selection of information, but conclusions cannot be dictated. If the media (or anyone) can affect what people think about- the information they process- the media can affect their attitudes” (p. 349). The attitudes of the public can often shape how others are perceived. The perceptions can either lead to positive or negative outcomes. Social constructions as defined by Schneider and Ingram (1993) are,

... Stereotypes about particular groups of people that have been created by politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, religion, and the like. Positive constructions include images such as "deserving," "intelligent," "honest..." Negative constructions include images such as "undeserving," "stupid," "dishonest," and "selfish." There are a wide variety of evaluative dimensions, both positive and negative, that can be used to portray groups. (p. 3)

These constructions can often compete and may conflict when creating policy. For individuals who are poor and needing assistance the negative social construction may represent them as undeserving or not hard working and the positive may depict that their situation is not their fault (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Social construction as well as the attitudes of others can lead to unfair perceptions and judgments.

### **Political Discourse**

Language has been used throughout time to both build up as well as tear down thoughts and ideas. Discourse is, “the use of words to exchange thoughts and ideas” (Discourse, 2014, p.1). Through this “exchange” process there is the opportunity to influence what others receive as information. This is especially true politically. According to Dunmire (2012) political discourse analysis is “concerned with understanding the nature and function of political discourse and with critiquing the role discourse plays in producing, maintaining, abusing, and resisting power in contemporary society” (p. 736). The “power of words” can be found not only in politics but also in all areas of life.

Within the welfare system language may be the difference between support or opposition to funding. Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs (1995) state, The ambivalence toward providing income assistance explains why measures of public opinion on public assistance issues are affected strikingly by the connotations of words used to describe policies. Most notably, a plurality (and recently apparently a majority) of the public thinks that government spends too much on welfare, but support for government spending increases dramatically when the phrasing is changed to “assistance to the poor” or similar more specific phrases connoting especially deserving or sympathetic recipients such as “poor children”.... (p. 607)

The use of language can have a profound effect on attitudes and thought processes as evident by the passage above. The ability to garner support for or against a cause by the words that are chosen to represent it is significant. Hence, the way a program is presented



and discussed in the media, as well as how its recipients are constructed is important to understanding the support for such programs as the National School Lunch Program.

While research has focused on the effects of NSLP on childhood hunger and well being, how their success is portrayed in the media makes a difference in whether the policy is publicly supported and therefore, financially supported. There is limited research on how the media portrays the program in the newspaper. This is significant as the media is a powerful tool with a broad audience that can be used to influence policy. Discourse analysis plays an important role in understanding the significance of what is written. According to Phillips & Brown (as cited in Phillips & Hardy, 2002),

Texts are not meaningful individually; it is only through their interconnection with other texts, the different discourses on which they draw, and the nature of their production, dissemination, and consumption that they are made meaningful. Discourse analysis explores how texts are made meaningful through these processes and also how they contribute to the constitution of social reality by making meaning. (p. 4)

Discourse analysis provides us the opportunity to understand what the media is trying to convey. This literature review focused on the history of NSLP, the importance of society's perception of assistance programs, and how the media and politics can influence these perceptions.

There is an overall lack of research in the area of media perception and welfare programs, specifically the National School Lunch Program. There is evidence that location plays a role in how social issues are appraised. For example, states in the Northeast had the highest TANF-to-poverty ratios (per 100 families in poverty how many

access TANF) in 1994-95 and in 2009-10 while the southern states has the lowest. In both of these areas the rates have fallen over the past 20 years. In the North the ratio fell from 97 per 100 families accessing TANF to 44. In the South this fell from 64 to 18 (Trisi & Pavetti, 2012). Given this and based on information gained through this literature review the following research question was examined: How have both national (*The New York Times*) and local (*Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press*) newspapers portrayed the National School Lunch Program the 1960's, 1980's, and 2000's?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using textual analysis. According to Frey, Botan, and Kreps (1999), “textual analysis is the method communication researchers use to describe and interpret the characteristics of a recorded or visual message. The purpose of textual analysis is to describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in texts” (p. 1). This researcher systematically retrieved newspaper articles from local as well as national publications. *The Star Tribune*, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, and the *New York Times* were used to gather information. By using grounded theory data analysis method, information was gained regarding the media's portrayal of the National School Lunch Program over the past 60 years.

### **Sample**

The population looked at for this study included all articles published in the *Star Tribune*, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, and *New York Times*, spanning 60 years and focusing on the decades of the 1960s, 80s, and 2000s. The *Star Tribune* is a daily newspaper that is

based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It was founded in 1867 and is distributed across the upper Midwest. It is the largest newspaper in Minnesota and is owned by Star Tribune Company and Glen Taylor. The *Star Tribune* was largely thought to be a more liberal publication, however with new ownership in 2014, this may be changing. The *Pioneer Press* is also a daily newspaper that is based in St. Paul, Minnesota. It was founded in 1849 and is circulated in the eastern metro region of the Twin Cities and western Wisconsin. MediaNews Group owns this paper. *The Pioneer Press* currently does not endorse political candidates and attempts to stay neutral in their reporting. The *New York Times* is a national publication that is circulated across the United States and around the world. It is the largest metropolitan newspaper and the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest paper in the U.S. behind *The Wall Street Journal*. It was founded in 1851 and is owned by The New York Times Company. *The New York Times* is thought to be balanced politically, however leaning more towards the left.

As stated previously, articles written in the *Star Tribune*, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, and *New York Times* were selected from the past 60 years. This included staff articles and Op-Ed articles. In order to draw a sample, three decades were considered: 1960s, 1980s, and 2000s. These decades were chosen in part, because they represented eras of different types of policies for the poor: the 1960s were the era of the War on Poverty and a more liberal-leaning time (Day, 2008); the 1980s were considered the welfare state retrenchment period (Day, 2008); and the 2000s represent a time of early prosperity followed quickly by the Great Recession. It may be that the political and economic culture of the periods had an impact on how the School Lunch Program was portrayed. Within each decade among the three newspapers, this researcher searched and located all

articles regarding the National School Lunch Program written by each publication. This researcher was looking for five articles from each newspaper per decade. This would be a total of 45 articles, 15 from each decade. Articles were randomly sampled in an attempt to reach 45 articles. Based on the availability of articles within certain decades, 15 articles per decade and newspaper were unavailable.

The 1960's were a difficult decade to find articles on the School Lunch Program in general. *The New York Times* had articles archived on their website from the 60's. This researcher was able to systematically select every third article to be coded. However, when looking at the *Star Tribune* and *Pioneer Press* for articles from 1960, the researcher was unable to locate articles on-line, as they have not been cataloged. The Newspapers are available on Microfilm, however even in this format, they are not cataloged. Since local articles were not available to code more national articles needed to be selected. The researcher then sampled the articles that were skipped during the first search. In total seven articles from the *New York Times* published in the 1960s were found. Since there were so few articles available in the 60's all of them were used.

When looking for articles from the 80's the *New York Times* and *Star Tribune* were prolific sources. However, articles from the *Pioneer Press* did not become available on-line until 1988, and no relevant articles appeared when searched. This researcher found four articles from the *Star Tribune*. On-line articles for this newspaper were available from 1986 and beyond. Articles were selected systematically looking at every relevant article until the desired five articles were reached. Only four articles were found. Eleven articles from the *New York Times* were located. In total 15 articles from the *New York Times* and *Star Tribune* published in the 1980s were found.

When searching for articles from the 2000's all three newspapers were abundant sources. Six articles were used from the *New York Times*. These articles were systematically located looking at every other article for relevant information. The *Star Tribune* yielded five articles to be analyzed. These articles were systematically selected looking at every other article until reaching five. When relevant articles stopped the previously skipped articles were then looked at until five articles were reached. The *Pioneer Press* provided six articles from the 2000's. Every other article was selected for its relevance and then those that were previously skipped were selected. Seventeen articles from the *New York Times*, *Star Tribune*, and *Pioneer Press* from the 2000's were selected. More than five articles were at times selected to increase the sample size. In total 39 articles were coded and analyzed.

### **Data Analysis**

This study used the grounded theory data analysis method to facilitate a textual analysis. According to Walker and Myrick (2006), “ data research analysis in qualitative research manages words, languages, and the meanings these imply...Qualitative data analysis seeks to organize and reduce the data gathered into themes or essences, which, in turn, can be fed into descriptions, models, or theories” (p. 549). As previously stated, this researcher systematically selected articles as previously detailed. Once all articles were selected this researcher first open coded the articles. This provided a descriptive set of codes, sticking closely to the written word from the text, followed by a more analytic reading and coding of the text, looking for themes and patterns among the authors' words. Once themes were established this researcher used the themes to discuss the portrayal of the National School Lunch Program in the media. In order to ensure validity

and reliability of the study, the researcher read the articles multiple times to assure commonality of coding across texts.

A sensitizing code list was developed as a way for this researcher to predict what may be found when analyzing. There was the potential to find information on the vulnerability and innocence of children as justification for the NSLP, support for the program as a way for children to increase their education. There may have been support based on America's need to help the poor, for religious reasons or even to support those providing the goods. Support for children, especially children of color, was also used as justification for this program. Supporting immigrants could be used as justification or also as a deterrent of the program. Finally program stigma parents feel may be a deterrent of enrolling in the NSLP. Developing a list prior to beginning research helped ensure all possibilities are thought of and decreased the likelihood that something is missed.

### **Findings**

The researcher was able to effectively code 39 articles from three decades all related to the National School Lunch Program. These articles were from the *New York Times* (24 articles in total), *Star Tribune* (nine articles in total), and *Pioneer Press* (six articles in total). Each decade provided codes that were reflective of their political and historical context. There were also codes that carried through all three decades. Several major themes were identified within each decade. The themes were created when three or more instances of a code appeared within the article. There were also sub-themes that had at least two codes that were still relevant to the discussion of the National School Lunch Programs portrayal within the media.

**Food Discourse in the 1960's**

There were a total of seven articles found from the 1960s related to the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). These articles were all found in the *New York Times*. As stated, when NSLP was first developed it was not funded directly from the state and federal government. In 1962 meal reimbursements from the state began as well as increased funding for the program. In 1966 the Child Nutrition Act was signed into law. This act provided increased funding to schools serving low-income students and created funding to pilot a school-based breakfast program (Ralston et al., 2008). Several themes within the articles arose including lack of access to the program, social awareness and the attainability of ending hunger, stigma, and the innocence and vulnerability of children.

**Lack of Access to the Program.** Several articles had themes related to a lack of access of the NSLP. An article by Naughton (1969) read, “Dr. Mayer said in a news conference that the trouble with the school lunch program was that ‘it doesn’t reach two thirds of the kids’” (p. III). Within the same article Naughton (1969) wrote, “... the council prefers to call it ‘semi-national school lunch week,’ a reminder that some 32 million of the nation’s 51 million schoolchildren do not have access to lunch programs” (p. VI). The concern for the many children who were not able to access food, and benefit from this program was evident. In an article written by Loftus (1968) again for the *New York Times* reads, “The poor children who need a free school lunch the most has the least chance of getting one, according to an extensive study of the national school lunch program” (p. I). Loftus (1968) further stated, “The national school lunch program, which affluent Americans comfortably assume is available to all, has no room for the nine million needy school children...” (p. II). It was quite evident that reporters were

presenting that school children, or the “needy and poor,” as the articles often used to describe those eligible for the program, were not gaining access to the program. The news articles pointed out that although the majority of Americans likely assumed this program was reaching all needy children, this was not the case. Authors deemed this an important aspect of the school lunch program narrative, and attempted to make the public aware.

**Social Awareness and the Attainability of Ending Hunger.** During the 1960s there were also individuals who were bringing the issues of NSLP to the forefront. In the 60’s many schools in low-income areas did not have kitchens to cook or prepare food. Rosenthal (1969) wrote in the *New York Times*, “‘The major reason,’ Dr Mayer (special consultant to the president) said, ‘is that many of them go to old urban schools, which lack facilities to prepare and serve food.’ That he said is a problem that can be solved” (p. XL). Individuals within the federal government also began to take note that not only is the ability to utilize NSLP a concern, but the greater issue of hunger in America needs to be addressed, and is attainable. An article from the *New York Times* written in 1969, with no author, titled “Greater U.S. Aid Urged for the Hungry” writes,

‘I (John A. Schnittker, Under Secretary of Agriculture during the Johnson administration) expect that everyone will stand up and support a national policy to end hunger in America’ he said. ‘The test on this score is not support for the rhetoric that spells out a national policy, but providing the money to do the job.

This is an attainable objective, not an idealistic dream.’ (p. VII)

To continue to fight hunger in America, pilot school lunch programs were being considered to help families not only during the school year, but also in the summer in an



effort to end hunger among children. Finney (1968) addressed this in an article he wrote where Senator Philip A. Hart stated,

This is an opportunity to insure that a nutritional diet is available to hundreds of thousands of children-those too young for school or during the summer months when the school cafeteria is closed. The need of children to eat does not coincide with the school calendar (p. VII).

While it is evident that a number of persons within the federal government endorsed NSLP, congress did not back this endorsement with further funds or program expansions.

**Stigmatization within NSLP.** Given the general support for increased funding for NSLP from a number of members of the federal government, it may be surprising that the theme of stigma was very prevalent throughout the reporting on the program in the 1960s. This may be understood by considering that the civil rights movement was in full force at this time and this created public resentment among certain segments of society, namely wealthy southern whites and politicians, as it threatened their political and economic power (Quadagno, 1994). While there were many who were championing the progress and the benefits that NSLP offered for children, there were also individuals who believed this program was receiving too much funding.

In an article written by Finney (1968) for the *New York Times* discussing a new pilot lunch program aimed at feeding preschool children in poverty areas he stated, “In opposition, Senator Allen J. Ellender, Democrat of Louisiana, Chairman of Agriculture committee, objected to turning the school lunch program into a ‘welfare program’” (p. IIX). It seems as if Senator Ellender would be in favor of increasing funding to NSLP as this would typically benefit the agriculture community, however, it might simultaneously

bring economic support to low-income families, whom he and other Southern Democrats wanted to work in the low-wage workforce (Quadagno, 1994). Ellender's quote is an example of groups' sentiments who did not support an increase in public assistance and the Civil Rights movement in general. The social responsibility of taking care of others begins to unfold. The War on Poverty and the NSLP provided some awareness of the responsibility of caring for those less fortunate. This however was not an easy concept for some as evident in the quotes below that display counter feelings of personal responsibility. As discussed in the literature review, when asked about individual responsibility versus using government aid, many Americans felt individuals should be responsible for their own self and well being (Gilens 1999).

Due to the fear of turning NSLP into a "welfare program" increased funding was not readily available and many students suffered because of this. In an article published in 1968 again by the *New York Times*, with no author, titled "Free Lunch--For Some," reads, "... Many of those who are included in the National School Lunch Program are subjected to the humiliation of having to wait at the end of the line until the paying customers have been fed" (p. I). This quote captured the disregard and humiliation many poor children, and their families, felt during this time. Having to wait at the end of the line until your more affluent peers have eaten first encouraged the stigmatization of the poor. The stigma of poor children is confirmed in an article written in 1969 titled "Free Lunches Missing" by an unknown writer who states, "The National Education Association charges that needy children, entitled to free or reduced-price meals, are often discriminated against or humiliated" (p. II). The treatment of children whose families could not economically provide lunch meals was publically degrading. The stigma of

having to wait until others were done eating is powerful, and would likely act as a deterrent to using the program at all. This may have been one of the unstated goals of this process.

**The innocence and vulnerability of children.** In the media children, both now and then, rarely have a voice when it comes to policies or government decisions. As minors they are vulnerable regarding the decisions that have the greatest effect on them. This theme was not as prevalent throughout the articles, however a significant one to address. In an article published in the *New York Times* without an author in 1968 titled “Free Lunch-For Some” reads,

Millions of children, too poor to pay for their lunch in school, must watch daily as their more affluent classmates eat. Millions of others go hungry ‘only’ a few days a week while they wait for their turn to come again in an absurd and inhumane system of rotation that allows them only two or three free lunches a week. (p. I)

Being forced to rotate meals and go hungry several days throughout the week, while other classmates are being feed, demonstrates that the hunger children experienced was only important enough to address sometimes. This treatment leaves the “poor” children vulnerable, as they are not able to provide for themselves, and points out that the desire to help children was limited

The article “Free Lunches Missing” written in 1969 noting no author, accused some states of not using the funds allotted for the school lunch program for that purpose. The article reads, “ but some states disregard of the plight of the truly needy and the often callous misuse of emergency funds to pay for routine activities are at the heart of a scandalous situation” (p. I). The article then ends by saying, “...Children fail to learn

because they are hungry or suffer from malnutrition” (p. IV). Children were often the recipients of poorly and possibly unethically administered NSLP legislation at this time. They were powerless to the country’s many divided values that are evident in the intent of the law and its application.

In the 1960’s there was support as well as acknowledgement that something needed to be done about hunger in America. The National School Lunch Program created a sense of social justice and responsibility for many during this time. It however was not without opposition. There were those who felt NSLP was another welfare program and families needed to work harder to support their children. The media presented both perspectives and appeared to present the more sympathetic side of children needing access to this program.

### **Food Discourse in the 1980’s**

There were a total of 15 articles found addressing NSLP in the 1980’s. These articles were from the *New York Times* (11 articles) and the *Star Tribune* (4 articles). During the 1980s the National School Lunch Program was continuing to fight for its place within schools. During this time government officials were often discussing the need to fund the program and stricter eligibility criteria, thus creating less access to the program and barriers for families. The thoughts seemed to be shifting from “every child deserves a lunch” to only the “truly needy”.

In 1980, as discussed previously, the income limit for free lunches was raised from 125% to 130% of the poverty limit and the eligibility for reduced lunch was lowered from 195% to 185% of the poverty level. Although the income eligibility went up the overall number of people who received the benefit went down as those eligible for

reduced lunches decreased. President Regan signed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) into law enacting these changes. Working poor families were impacted greatly, many of whom fell into poverty (Stoesz & Karger, 1993). Alongside these policy changes, a shift in the discourse was evident. Barriers to the program, continued stigma and access to the program, and awareness and social responsibility were identified as themes.

**Barriers created to accessing NSLP.** The barriers to the program that were created in the 1980's were a significant theme within the discourse. The school lunch program before this time was open to whoever needed additional assistance with few restrictions. In the 1980's the idea of verifying income, as a way to reduce the amount of money spent on the program, was introduced. For some in the media, income verification was seen as a barrier for many families who utilized the program. In his article, Rule (1983) stated,

New York and four other cities have filed a class-action suit against the Department of Agriculture, seeking to block new Federal regulations that require them (schools) to verify the incomes of families with children applying for free or reduced-price school meals...in addition, the cities complain that the plan is costly and ineffective and invades the privacy of the poor (p. I, II).

The notion of "keeping the poor honest" did not sit well with many school officials. An article written in 1983, with no author, titled "An Expensive Way to Save on Lunch" reads,

Two years ago, however, an Agriculture Department impelled by suspicion of fraud and pressure to cut costs asked that parents list their social security numbers

on the applications. What, if anything, the department does with that information is still not clear but the results of its request are. School officials report that many parents are too frightened, illiterate or confused to answer properly and require countless explanatory phone calls and even home visits to get the forms filled out (p. II).

This article touches on a new worry within the discourse, and that is the burdensome and invasive process of determining eligibility for a family. Families' concern about supplying their income or social security number to the state is understandable, and may have created hesitation and resistance to signing up for this needed assistance. Susan Chira (1982) affirmed this in her article that highlighted the fear that some families felt in having to give more invasive information. She wrote, "...at the initial deadline for submitting the forms, 28 percent fewer parents had handed in forms than the previous year. Some parents said they feared government misuse of the information, while many illegal aliens were afraid of being detected" (p.2). Chira presented that parents' not knowing what this information was being used for, led to intimidation and resulted in some families not applying for NSLP in order to protect the safety of their family.

The media brought many other barriers to light during this time as well. An article titled "Eating Well; School Lunches Need Not Be Feared" written in 1989 with no author, highlighted some of these barriers. The general article had many bullet points of suggestions including,

Program applications should be easy to understand. If there are language barriers find volunteers to help families fill out the forms. Work to remove the stigma attached to the programs by making participation attractive to children at all

income levels...improve the quality of food and the way it is served. Finally anonymity of participants is essential (p. VI, VIII, X).

The portrayal of NSLP by the media shifted a bit during the 1980s. The media is no longer calling for increased funding of the program, but highlighting the hindrance of eligibility criteria and paperwork on a family. Some called for decreasing the barriers families have to the program in order to increase participation. The barriers that are discussed in these articles represent the media's portrayal of the oppression of the poor, through limiting their access to program.

**Continued stigma within NSLP.** As mentioned in the 1960's, the media's representation of the stigmatizing rhetoric continued regarding NSLP and its participants. As mentioned previously, cuts to the program were being heavily considered during this time. An article written by Pear (1981) discussed President Reagan's views on funding the program. The article states:

President Reagan and David A. Stockman, director of the Office of Management and Budget, have said that they would seek further cuts in the program, including elimination of Federal subsidies for meals served to children from middle and upper-income families who, in Mr. Stockman's words, 'can afford to pay for school lunches.' But at a hearing today, members of the House Committee on Education and Labor warned the administration that any further cuts in the program were politically unacceptable and would inevitably harm the nutrition of the neediest children as well as the more affluent ones. (p. II)

In the above statement, the media continues to perpetuate the notion that only the poor can benefit from a program as others can afford to feed their families and do not need the

help of the government. This singles out the poor unfairly rather than discussing how the program is beneficial for all children no matter the income level.

Honesty of the poor is a recurring topic in policy discussions, and can be stigmatizing. The “honesty” or deserving nature of the poor can be traced to the beginning of welfare in this country. Ensuring that those who receive the help of the government are “honest” and not taking advantage of the system is important to some. An article titled “An Expensive Way to Save Lunch” written in 1983 with no author, perpetuates just that. The article begins, “for most of its 37 years, all that America’s school lunch program asked of its participants was honesty” (p. 1). This statement says a lot. By writing “all the program asked of its participants” implies that those who utilize the program should be appreciative that this is the only thing they needed to participate in NSLP. It insinuates the poor have been given a “gift” from those who may be “better off”. Ending the sentence with the word honesty, allows those reading this article to believe that the poor, or those utilizing the program, are deceitful. This continues the stigma of the program and the thought that the poor cannot be trusted or are not “deserving” of assistance.

**Denied access to NSLP.** Under the Reagan administration many social service programs including NSLP had their budgets cut or threatened. The discourse around this centered on the children who were being priced out of the program. NSLP is not just for free lunches it also provides funding for reduced price meals. An article written by Pear (1982) says

In 1981, at the request of the Reagan Administration, Congress reduced Federal subsidies for school meals. Schools, in turn, raised their prices, and fewer children



bought lunch at school. The number of children in the program dropped 12 percent, to 23.6 million in 1981-82 from 26.8 million in 1980-81. (p. III)

The same article written by Pear (1982) goes on to state, “the savings were achieved through tightening of eligibility criteria, reduction of cash and commodity subsidies and the serving of fewer meals” (p. VI). Through these quotes those in charge are not feeling the value of the program and its participants.

Access to the program appeared to be moving towards fewer free lunches for students who qualified and more expensive lunched overall. In an article by Matzz (1981), regarding cutting funding to the program, he writes,

While seeking to cut \$1.575 billion from the \$3.918 billion child-nutrition budget in fiscal 1982, the Reagan Administration has listed school lunches for the “truly needy” as one of seven programs that will not be affected by the drive to reduce Federal spending. On the contrary, poor children will be affected, for millions who qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch under the nutrition program stand to be lopped from it. (p. I)

The families who may be just making it with the help of this program will be those most affected. In order for the program to work families need access to it. The discussion around this program centered more on the government’s measures for cost savings rather than the human aspect of families not being able to feed their children.

**Social awareness and responsibility.** As in the 1960’s there were many who felt the responsibility for feeding children does not end at home. This theme was prevalent throughout the 1980s, as well. An article written in 1988 titled “Education; U.S. School Breakfast Program Lifts Test Scores” looks at all the government funded school nutrition

programs. It read, "... people have found that when it can't be done at home, there is a role that the school should play in making sure these kids receive adequate nutrition" (p. V). This article stated that the responsibility of feeding and nurturing the nation's children does not fall solely on the family. It may also be that of society as a whole. In an article written by Chira (1982) she talked about the effort some schools are making to ensure all their students can afford lunch. She writes, "the city has held down school lunch prices despite the cuts in Federal reimbursement, by contributing its own subsidies. Schools have made an unusual effort to call and visit parents personally to persuade them to stay in the program" (p. III). The responsibility these schools have to their students is evident and conveyed through the texts.

Within the same article Chira (1982) writes, "'I don't think there has ever been such an outreach effort involving so many members of the community before,' said Kathy Goldman, director of the Community Food Resources Center, a food rights advocacy group" (p. XII). The effort made by those in the community to bring food to those who need it most is evident within this article. Finally in an article by Smith (1987) for the *Star Tribune* discussed Minnesota's ability to serve the community. The article reads, "Minnesota is one of seven states the group has chosen for special attention because of the large discrepancy between the number of students in the lunch and breakfast programs... In Minnesota, each school's principal determines whether it participates" (p. 08B). Being aware that there may be concern with the availability and facilitation of the school nutrition programs is important. The awareness that Minnesota may be lacking in this area could propel change and encourage others to change a principal's ability to decline a program that may greatly affect its student body. In the

1980's the discourse around NSLP centered on the cost of the program and ways to cut the budget. There were those in favor of limiting the program, or cutting the budget, and those who wanted the program to expand. The discourse at this time seemed to be focused on ensuring those who need the program most are able to participate.

### **NSLP in the Millennium (2000's)**

There were 19 articles total found regarding NSLP from 2000-2009. These articles were from the *New York Times* (6 articles), *Star Tribune* (5 articles), and the *Pioneer Press* (6 articles). With the turn of the century the way the NSLP was talked about changed again. While there were still continued discourse regarding stigma and social responsibility, nutrition was also brought to the forefront. Making nutritious meals for children is not always feasible at home. When focusing on parents making meals at home for their children, roughly 85% of low-income families would like to make healthier meal choices at home, but only 50% are able to do so on a regular basis. Many parents cited the perceived cost of healthy food as a barrier (No Kid Hungry, 2013). The major themes during this decade included social responsibility, nutrition for children, and stigma due to style of program administration.

**Social responsibility in the new millennium.** The idea of social responsibility in regards to feeding the nation's children was prevalent throughout this decade. In an article by Harter (2001) he reminds us of the original purpose of NSLP. He writes, "nothing is more important in our national life than the welfare of our children and proper nourishment comes first in attaining this welfare," President Harry S. Truman said on June 4, 1946, when he signed the act" (p. D2). This quote reminds the reader of the importance of this program. With over 50 years since the signing of NSLP, it is easy for

the public to forget the reason this program exists. The article then goes on to say, “Minnesota was one of the first states to establish a school lunch program, as evidenced by receipts for food to feed kids dating back to 1903 in Minneapolis” (p. D2). Finally the article concludes by stating, “Minnesota has a long history of attempting, or doing the best it could, in one way or another, to feed school children” (p. D2). These quotes highlight the author’s sense of responsibility Minnesota has shouldered to ensure that the children in this state had, at the very least, access to meals while at school. Highlighting this, as well as the original purpose of NSLP may shift the conversation around it.

The eligibility criteria for NSLP measures the overall support for the program and the degree to which citizens believe persons should have access to it. Continuing to look at the eligibility criteria of the program is socially responsible. As this bill was signed in 1946 the economic landscape has also changed. In an article written by Jones (2004), she writes, “school officials say that free lunches for families who now receive them at reduced prices would ease the pressure on those households that struggle to provide 40 cents a day for a school lunch” (p. 5A). The increased awareness of the struggles of some in the community, can give credence to the program and its usefulness to families. NSLP is also subject to the rising food prices just the same as the rest of the country. The increase in food prices however does not always correlate to the increase in federal subsidies. This is a problem for schools, as they cannot sustain the program if they cannot pay for it. In an article written by Jones (2008) she writes, “Smalley-Rader (student nutrition supervisor) worries that there’s a gap between families who qualify for the program and those that can easily handle the higher prices, leaving a group in the middle who will be affected greatly” (p. AA. 1). Bringing this concern to the public is important,

as those not linked to the program may not understand how cutting funding affects all families, not just those who qualify for the program. The discourse displays a shift in thinking from individual responsibility for self, to a greater responsibility of the community.

**The nutrition concern of NSLP.** The responsibility of feeding the nation's children healthy and nutritious food has trickled down to NSLP. This was a prevalent theme among the articles found in the 2000's. In an article written by Waters and Heron (2009) they write, "every public school child in America deserves a healthful and delicious lunch that is prepared with fresh ingredients" (p. XI). This is a significant shift in the way the program is discussed. This passage is inclusive of all children and does not single out those who may be utilizing NSLP. The idea that children deserve healthy food is the main objective. This "idea" however is easier said than done. In the same article by Water and Heron (2009) they write, "but food distributed by the National School Lunch Program contains some of the same ingredients found in fast food, and the resulting meals routinely fail to meet basic nutritional standards" (p. IV). The language within this article does not speak to "poor children" or parents who cannot care for their families. This article is informing the community as a whole that more needs to be done in terms of the nutrition children are receiving in school.

As the conversation about NSLP is changing, the amount of money that the program receives is not. In an article written by Severson (2009),

The first step toward healthier school food is to increase the free-lunch subsidy by at least 70 cents, said Senator Kristen Gillibrand, Democrat of New York. Others want more and say it should be spent largely on fresh fruits, vegetables and whole

grains. But some observers argue that even 70 cents is unrealistically high, given other pressures on the federal budget. (p. XV)

The enthusiasm to feed children healthy food has not been seen in previous decades.

When talking about nutritious food that may feed more than the “poor”, it appears there is more drive to see this accomplished. Within the St. Paul school district there was also a push to serve ethnic foods. Jones (2004) writes,

She (Rosemary Dederichs, interim director of Food Services in the Minneapolis School District) said the district would like to offer students more fresh fruits, vegetables, and ethnic foods, which isn’t possible with current funding. Ethnic foods are being tested in three elementary schools in the St. Paul School District, according to Jean Ronnei, nutrition services director in the district. (p. 5A)

With the testing of ethnic foods to be served under NSLP, it appears that more thought was being put into what types of food would benefit children the most. The schools are looking at the population of families they serve and trying to cater to what they like, which shows great respect and understanding. The cost of serving these foods, however, may impede this progress. With the push to create healthy food choices at school, it seems that the middle class discourse of healthy food is being applied to all children across economic status. This is an expanding discourse into not just enough food, but quality of food for children. The discourse surrounding healthier food choices at school is important because all classes of kids who are served food in the cafeteria would benefit from better quality food.

**Continued stigma associated NSLP.** Stigma of using the National School Lunch Program has been a continued theme throughout the program’s existence. Even

during this period of concern regarding improved quality of food for all students, there were still articles that created a feeling of stigma if receiving free lunch. This specific theme has carried through articles published in the 1960s, 1980s, and 2000s. The way the program is being discussed may be evolving, however the stigma surrounding it remains, although maybe in a more subtle way. In an article written by Jones (2008) the discussion of what increased usage of NSLP mean to “other” children. She writes,

According to Jeff Wolfer, supervisor of child nutrition in the district, more students using the National School Lunch Program also means that other students have to make up the difference in food costs because the district doesn’t control its federal reimbursement (p. AA. 1).

With limited knowledge of how the program works a reader may assume that this means other families who are not utilizing the program may have to spend more money to help the “poor students”. This implication increases the stigma that those on the program do not help themselves and rely on “other” (middle class) citizens to help them, much like the welfare program (Toft, 2010).

The portrayal in the media identifies many people who feel NSLP is not useful and should be ended. They feel that families should be able to provide without assistance. In a letter to the editor written to the *New York Times* in February 2009 titled, “Another test, this time for the school lunch”, Tanya Gray voiced such an opinion regarding ending the program. She wrote,

Those families that failed to send their child to school with lunch would be reported to the appropriate social services department, and a backup bagged lunch

would be made available. The National School Lunch Program has outlived its usefulness.... (p. III)

While this extreme view may be the minority, there were those who felt the program was unnecessary and judged low-income families for enrolling.

Another way that stigma is created is through peer judgment. It may also be difficult for children to want to eat their meals at school if they feel their peers will judge them. In an article written by Pogash (2008) this was discussed. The article reads, “‘Lunchtime is the best time to impress your peers,’ said Lewis Geist, a senior at Balboa and its student body president. Being seen with a subsidized meal, he said, ‘lowers your status.’” (p. IV). This passage is conveying the need to be seen as an equal. Maintaining your status is to not be seen needing subsidized food. The article continues stating,

Ann Cooper, director of nutrition services for the public schools in Berkley, California, said that attention to school cafeterias had traditionally focused on nutrition, but that the separation of students who pay and those who receive free meals was an important ‘social justice issue.’ (p. IX)

This passage identifies that today, what students eat and whether they bought it, is more important than the food itself. The article by Pogash (2008) continues, “he (Mr. Geist) said he was struck by the how many of his Hispanic and African-American friends who could benefit from the program avoid it. It ‘is meant to help them,’ Mr Geist said” (p. XXXIV). The article then ends with this statement,

Mr. Geist, the Balboa senior, said the problem boiled down to an issue of fitting in. ‘Kids who wear nice shoes and nice clothes,’ he said, ‘don’t want to be



associated with food that says ‘I’m not able to provide for myself.’” (p. XXXXII, XXXXIII)

For the children who utilize this program every day, the media’s portrayal of the stigma in using the program may be more influential than not eating that day. The perceived judgments of others may make it less likely youth will take advantage of the free lunch as it is more difficult socially to accept.

The National School Lunch Program has come a long way since the 1960’s discourse with children eating lunch in a rotating schedule as the program was not funded adequately. The 1980s brought divided discourse regarding expanding the program versus changing eligibility criteria and limiting the program. There was a renewed sense by some that the NSLP may play a role in the nation’s ability to feed those in need. Finally in the 2000s discourse shifted to the nutrition of the program and how to effectively feed those who need it. One thing that remained constant throughout the decades was the stigma attached to the program.

### **Discussion**

This research attempted to discern how both national (*The New York Times*) and local (*Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press*) newspapers portrayed the National School Lunch Program. The program was broken up into decades and articles were analyzed from 1960, 1980, and 2000. Within each decade there were themes unique to that time, as well as recurrent ideas across each time period. Many of these themes and ideas related back to what was presented within the literature review. There were major themes present throughout each decade including barriers to access NSLP, stigmatization of those utilizing the program, and social responsibility. There were also themes

presented through the media that were only seen in one decade, including the innocence and vulnerability of children and the nutritious side of NSLP.

### **Common Themes in the Media across the Decades**

As stated above there were many themes found through research that the media portrayed across decades. These themes included barriers to access NSLP, stigmatization of the program and those who utilize it, and social responsibility.

**Access to NSLP.** When the NSLP was first established it was created as a way to ensure the nation's children received proper nutrition. As mentioned in the literature many U.S. Officials testified in front of Congress that the malnutrition among young soldiers was jeopardizing national security. They stated that the soldiers were not "nourished" enough to properly fight (Grimes, 2013). According to Grimes (2013), an official expressed the need for the National School Lunch Program "...As a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well being of our nation's children, and to encourage domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food" (p.2). The rhetoric at the time was based on need.

Through research it became evident that the needs of the county were pushed to the forefront overshadowing the needs of individual families. The National School Lunch Program was being portrayed as a way to help those in need, but the reality was much different. This was seen in varying degrees across the 1960s, 1980s, and 2000s. An article written by Naughton (1969) describes how millions of children who may have benefited from the program were denied access due to various eligibility and funding reasons. The media ensured that this was known. It was also widely reported in the *New York Times* that the "needy and poor" were not receiving the benefits that were designed to nourish

them. It was found that many of the students who would benefit from the program the most were made to take turns eating or wait until more affluent children ate first. Schools were also accused of not using the money allotted to NSLP appropriately. The news articles again pointed out that the majority of Americans likely assumed this program was reaching all needy children, and that was simply not the case. Authors during this time continued to make the public aware of the programs shortfalls.

In the 1980's the media again focused on barriers created for families who wanted to utilize NSLP. Many were intimidated by the increased paperwork and invasiveness of the process. This process deterred families and in-turn they did not enroll in the program, saving the government money. The media again portrayed NSLP and those responsible for policy making as putting the needs of the government before those of its citizens. The concept of NSLP and those who it would benefit appeared to be lost within the cost of the program and the actual execution at the state level. There were many within the government who championed this program, however as mentioned previously, the funding to ensure NSLP was available to all who needed it was not there. Throughout the 30 years researched, the media's representation of accessing NSLP has proved difficult for many families. Having barriers to a program created to help those who need it most may be a way to limit the number of families who actually utilize the program, thus saving money. The media has portrayed this as a problem across decades.

**The continued stigma of NSLP.** The stigmatization of those in need has been a recurrent theme within our nations history. This is especially true in regards to welfare or government assistance programs. NSLP was not immune to this stigma, and within the literature it was debated. Does the pull to help children override the stigma attached to

being poor? As NSLP is a needs based program all those who qualify are already identified as being in need. Within the research stigma was a continued theme across the 1960s, 80s, and 2000s. It was reported that students were forced to wait for “paying” classmates to get their lunch before being allowed to eat, or continually having to prove that they are still “poor enough” for the program. There were continued articles depicting those enrolled in the program as the “needy poor” or insinuating that those utilizing the program were not honest. Within each decade this theme continued in the discourse.

The idea of “welfare”, or helping those in need, has always been a contentious topic, dating back to its conception. As the Social Security Act of 1935 was taking shape in Congress there was a push to ensure those who received assistance were “deserving” (Day, 2008). With this backdrop it is not surprising that there continues to be stigmatization surrounding the program and those who utilize it. The media certainly did not over look this aspect. Within the last decade the media has given a voice to children most affected by this stigma. Their concern centers on being labeled as “uncool” or not fitting in if it is known that they are enrolled in the program. Articles have talk about the stigma of the program at times overshadowing their desire to eat. This representation of the program is difficult as the construct of NSLP is completely opposite of what is occurring. The media’s focus on the stigmatization of NSLP is evident and at times unhelpful when attempting to dispel the stigma going back to the 1960s.

**The evidence of social responsibility of NSLP.** With the creation of NSLP, the government took on the responsibility of feeding the nations children. Throughout the history of the program, funding and continued support was constantly changing. There were many cuts to the program both overt and covert. There were also those who felt the

program was not of value. Within the discourse however there were many within the federal government and local communities taking society's responsibility of feeding children seriously. This responsibility was portrayed through the media in all three decades that were looked at. Within the literature this thinking was evident when NSLP introduced provisions allowing schools with high percentages of low-income students to certify students for 2 years instead of 1, increasing the likelihood that families would continue to utilize the program. At this time steps were also taken to create national eligibility criteria, guard against discrimination, and protect the privacy of participants. (Ralston et. al., 2008). The media represented this shift in thinking when talking about officials advocating for kitchens to be built in schools, addressing the greater issues of hunger, and creating pilot programs to increase the number of children able to access a nutritious meal. When researching, this idea was brought to life within the text. An article written in 1988 titled "Education; U.S. School Breakfast Program Lifts Test Scores" reads, "... people have found that when it can't be done at home, there is a role that the school should play in making sure these kids receive adequate nutrition" (p. V). Through research the idea of social responsibility within NSLP existed, however the degree to which the government embraced this responsibility varied from decade to decade with the climate of the culture.

### **Themes Evident in Only One Decade**

While there were several themes portrayed through the media across the 1960s, 80s, and 2000s, there were also relevant themes that were only seen in one time period. These themes include the innocence and vulnerability of children and the nutritious

interests of the program. While these themes may not have been present in all decades they bring a different perspective to the program as seen through the media.

**The innocence and vulnerability of children.** As stated before in the media children, both now and then, rarely have a voice when it comes to policies or government decisions. TANF and the National School Lunch Program are both examples of programs whose beneficiaries are largely children (and solely children for NLSLP). When families were enrolled in TANF the children were able to receive food support and cash assistance. In 2012, children made up about three-quarters of TANF recipients. Children are the main beneficiaries of this program. In 1996 there were roughly 9 million children recipients of TANF. In 2013 this number was just over 2.8 million (Child Recipients of Welfare, 2014). As with NSLP children are the ones who are affected by adult decisions.

In the 1960's this theme was portrayed within the media. During this time it was reported that there was not enough money coming into the schools to feed all the children enrolled in the program. The article "Free Lunches Missing" written in 1969 noting no author, accused some states of not using the funds allotted for the school lunch program for that purpose. The article reads, " But some states disregard of the plight of the truly needy and the often callous misuse of emergency funds to pay for routine activities are at the heart of a scandalous situation" (p. I). Because of the actions of adults many children during this time period did not eat while at school or were forced to rotate days with the other children enrolled in the program.

In 1962 states began to provide meal reimbursement and schools with a high percentage of low-income student were granted increased funding. In 1966 the Child Nutrition Act was signed into law. This act combined school food service programs from

other agencies under the United States Department of Agriculture (Ralston et al., 2008). The lack of oversight during this time may have increased the ease as to which schools could use money allotted for NSLP for other purposes. This could also be why this theme was not represented through the media after the 1960's. The media brought awareness to the lack of accountability or oversight school and government officials have during this time and how ultimately the children suffered the consequences.

**The nutrition concern of NSLP.** With the change of the century also came some changes to NSLP. In the 2000's the media began talking about the nutritious aspect of the program. This was a new theme brought up in the media in regards to NSLP. In the 1960's and 80's there was not much talk or concern about the nutrition content of the program. This began to change in the 90's. The Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act was signed in 1994 and required school lunches to follow dietary guidelines. Much of the 2000's provided additional dietary revisions in hopes of providing nutritious meals to all children enrolled (Ralston et al., 2008).

With the new revisions a healthier NSLP was promoted within the media. In an article written by Waters and Heron (2009) they write, "Every public school child in America deserves a healthful and delicious lunch that is prepared with fresh ingredients" (p. XI). The change in rhetoric highlights the commitment the government was making to the children of this country. This commitment however did not come with increased funding making it difficult to provide. This made the push to create healthier meals less powerful.

The media also brought to the forefront the issue of food values and quality of food. Not every family is able to afford fresh fruits and vegetables with every meal. The

media's focus on the new standards being enacted within NSLP were taking middle class values on food and applying this to all children and families. It is good for all kids to eat a healthier diet however this may not be possible for all families all the time. The increased awareness of the benefits of eating nutritious meals is a positive for the program and families however it also may be discouraging if they cannot provide that same nutrition at home. The media's portrayal of NSLP continues to evolve offering important information regarding the program and changing or affirming perceptions of the public.

### **Implications for Policy**

It is evident from research that there is much to do to make NSLP as effective as possible for those who utilize it. The eligibility and stigmatization of the program are hindrances to those who could benefit from it the most. This is currently being addressed in some capacity with the introduction of the Community Eligibility Program in 2014. This program allows schools with over 40% of free and reduced lunch participants to certify their entire school as eligible for free and reduced lunches. This provides students who otherwise would not qualify for free or reduced lunches to be able to participate. This may also decrease some of the stigma within the program, as there is no difference in what is being served or who is enrolled in the program. Continuing to find ways to improve its ability to engage families and provide nutritious food for all students is essential.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Social workers have an important presence within schools and communities. Many social workers are also responsible for enrolling families into NSLP. Being on the front lines of the program and managing the policies and eligibility guidelines, gives



them a unique perspective on how the program is working or what can be done to better the process. Social workers are great advocates for those they serve, as they are able to be their voice. It's important for continued vigilance around the stigmatization of those who have enrolled in the program as well as support for programs expanding or enhancing eligibility. Social workers also have the ability to connect with families to encourage and support those who are eligible. Social workers can dispel myths or untruths about the NSLP in an effort to enroll as many eligible students as possible. Social Workers can also continue to advocate for the program within their school. Ensuring there is continued support and staff members monitoring for stigma, may help change the perception of the program within the school and community.

### **Implications for Future Research**

When thinking about future research regarding NSLP there are several things food discourse analysts may consider. Gaining more insight in how, or if, race plays a part in how the program is portrayed in the media may be interesting. Looking in the biases of the media may also provide some insight. Looking at newspapers in more urban or rural settings may also give a clearer picture of how the program is discussed within the media. Looking into the power of stigma as a deterrent to the program is also a needed area of research. Stigma appeared within all three decades that were analyzed. How the media portrays stigma and the affect this may have on those who choose, or don't choose, to participate in the program is critical to the continued viability and success of the program.

Looking at how NSLP is discussed across regions may also be a needed area of research. The climate of support for government and needs based programs may be

different in the south versus the north, gaining increased knowledge of the representation across certain regions of the county. There may be more acceptance or encouragement of the National School Lunch Program depending on the area sampled, which may change how the program is characterized within the media.

Finally looking at NSLP and food discourse through the lens of political parties may inform us on where these parties stand regarding the program, and how this is portrayed in the media. Understanding where our elected officials stand on issues related to the program, welfare, and child nutrition, is important as they create the laws and policies. Looking at food discourse and the National School Lunch Program, there is much more research to be done to gain greater insight into the media's representation of the program.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

As the National School Lunch Program serves millions of kids a year and is a federally funded program, it is important to understand how the program is perceived. Strength of this study is looking at the program through the years, as well as its evolution. Furthermore, by considering the way the public discourse about the program is shaped, we can also see how justification for beneficial and punitive policy measures is influenced. Another strength is that this research attempted to get a sense of both the local Twin Cities' perception of the program and the national perception through the inclusion of the *New York Times*, which is widely read, across the country. Due to the time limits of this project it was not feasible to conduct an in-depth analysis of changes in attitudes evident in the text with particular policy decisions. This may have given a

different perspective or greater insight into the program and how legislation could change this.

Another limitation was the number of articles that could be analyzed. The researcher originally was looking to find 15 articles from each newspaper, which would include five articles from each decade. Due to the availability of articles from the 1960's that were on on-line archives, the researcher was only able to include articles from *the New York Times*. This was also a problem when looking for articles from the *Star Tribune* and *Pioneer Press* in the 1980s. Many of the news articles from the first half of the decade were only available on microfilm, which was not cataloged. Due to time constraints of this research, it was not feasible to sort through thousands of papers for articles relevant to the NSLP. This limited the local perspective of the program and how it may have been perceived in Minnesota.

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