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## **A kitchen at the heart of a school – an investigation into school meals in the Republic of Ireland**

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Free school meals provide support to vulnerable families in the Republic of Ireland. Funding is allocated as part of an anti-poverty strategy. An investigation was carried out to discover if the school meal could be used to provide nutritious scratch-cooked food as well as providing opportunities for increased socialisation and pedagogy. Food affects students in a myriad of ways and schools are in a unique position to guide what and how young people eat. This article draws on data from an ethnographic study in an inner city Dublin school. The school recently had a scratch-cooking canteen embedded within it. Using a case study methodology, this paper investigates whether this type of canteen can lead to the school becoming a more food literate entity by building a scaffolding that can facilitate a greater knowledge of food throughout the school, increased interest in tasting new foods and spaces for socialisation over a meal.

**Keywords:** school meals; school canteens; children's food provision; Irish school food; food literacy; scratch-cooking

### **Introduction**

An inner city Dublin secondary school canteen uses government school-meals funding to cook daily meals from scratch using wholefoods, locally sourced where possible. In the Republic of Ireland (ROI), this is unusual. This deviation from the norm reveals insights into more standardised practices, where schools use the allocated money to order pre-packaged food from external businesses. These pre-packed lunches are delivered to the school each day and can contain ultra-processed components (Monteiro et al. 2019). Three companies supply 890 schools out of 1548 who receive funding (Carty 2020), with many smaller companies also supplying schools throughout the country (Carambola 2020; Glanmore 2021a; Fresh Today 2021). Schools are in a unique position to influence enjoyable and nutritious food choices for young people in ROI. As food preferences, formed early in life, tend to continue into adulthood (Nicklaus et al. 2004; Murimi et al. 2018), increasing the availability and/or accessibility of healthier products in school canteen settings has proven to be effective in stimulating healthier food choices. The provision of

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nutritious school meals, free of charge or at a reasonable price, can be considered an important way of increasing health equality (Juniusdottir et al. 2018).

The reality of diet-related ill-health of Irish children is stark (Bel-Serrat et al. 2017; Browne et al. 2017; Department of Health 2016). School meals provide support for families from lower socioeconomic groups in Irish society. Inequalities in health are closely linked with wider social determinants (Healthy Ireland and Department of Health 2013) and this inequality can be further compounded by feeding children, who avail of school meals, ultra-processed food. Six out of ten people in ROI are either overweight (37%) or obese (23%) and it is estimated that 145,000 people are either malnourished or at risk of malnutrition at any given time (HSE 2019). Relationships to food within the wider community, as well as within the microcosm of schools, are complex.

One of the facets of food literacy according to Vidgen is that it provides ‘the scaffold that empowers individuals, households, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change, and support dietary resilience over time’ (2016, 63). Using a kitchen as a pedagogical tool can allow for the transmission of food knowledge and can provide dietary resilience through increased consumption of freshly prepared food and increased willingness to try new foods. What students eat and their experiences with school meals teaches them a lot about food, health, community, culture, and life (Trent et al. 2019, 9). This research contributes to the growing conversation about the important role school meals can play in the lives of children (Dimbleby and Vincent 2013; Educational Disadvantage Center 2020; Kenney et al. 2020; Oostindjer et al. 2017) and focuses on the relevance of engaging young people’s participation in decision-making.

Having a scratch-cooking canteen in a school means fresh food is cooked each day for the students and staff. Scratch-cooking can be defined as ‘food service that prioritizes the preparation of meals or snacks on a daily basis at or near the site of consumption with ingredients in their most basic form’ (Trent et al. 2019). The principal of the school, which forms the basis of this case study, considers the embedded kitchen and the serving of hot food to be a fundamental part of the school day. This article sets out the case for scratch-cooking within or near schools by firstly looking at school food models in Japan and France. An overview of school meals funding in ROI is provided before turning the focus to the ethnographic study of a school located in inner city Dublin, which shall be referred to as the D8 school.

### ***School food models in Japan and France***

In Japan, school lunches are part of education not a break from it. Children come to understand at an early age that what you put into your body matters. Parents are asked to contribute towards the cost of the ingredients, but local governments pay the staff to cook (Ministry of Education [Japan] 2011). Schools either have a kitchen within them or rely on centralised kitchens which are based in communities and deliver freshly prepared food to a number of schools in underpopulated areas. The children have the communal duty of serving and tidying up after the shared meal. Food education classes are conducted in conjunction with mealtimes and focus on the deliciousness of the food and its provenance (Harlan 2013, url). Murayama et al. (2017) confirmed an association between household income and the amount of foods and nutrients consumed by Japanese school children and stated that school lunches play a role in reducing disparities in children’s diets.

There is an acknowledgement in France that social eating situations, which encourage interactions during meals, are crucial for the development of children's eating behaviours (Marty, Chambaron, and Monnery-Patris 2018, 267). Similar to Japan, there is a focus on pleasure and taste in the provision of school meals. Children sit down to a four-course lunch each day in the school setting. The school menus follow guidelines set by the French Ministry of National Education. There is a set structure, but foods are varied, in that no meal is served twice in a month. Flavours are not simplified, children eat bitter, strong and challenging foods (Barclay 2015). The meal break is at least 30 minutes long, excluding waiting for the meal (European Commission 2016). In France, parents are asked to pay for the meals if they can afford to do so. The creation of meals varies from one local authority to the other, but in most cases, the meals are prepared within the educational institution, however, in some instances meals are prepared in a central kitchen and delivered to schools (2016, 4) where they are served to the students (not pre-packaged).

### ***Irish school meals provision***

In 2013, an Irish Primary Principals' Network survey found that over 20% of primary principals observed an increase in children coming to school hungry (Educational Disadvantage Center 2020). Callaghan (2010) indicated that 20.9% of school children reported going to school or to bed hungry because there was not enough food at home. Free school meals provide support to such children (Oostindjer et al. 2017; Caraher, Crawley, and Lloyd 2009). The Hunger Prevention in Schools Strategy Group (HPSSG) calls for two distinct spaces to be created within Irish schools; one for cooking and the other for eating.

A dual system may need to be put in place at least initially, where some schools with kitchens would have the food cooked and prepared on the school premises, whereas other schools would receive food externally cooked and transported to the schools ... State commitment to an infrastructure dimension to this strategy, to build kitchens in schools and provide adequate staffing levels, would clearly be required. (Educational Disadvantage Center 2020, url)

In 2020, a total of €57million of government money was allocated for school meals in ROI (increased to €67million due to COVID-19). An application for funding is made by a school to the Irish Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) or their local authority in advance of each school year. The school has to prove a need and meals are provided in areas with low socioeconomic resources. A statutory Urban School Meals Scheme (USMS) for primary schools is operated by local authorities and part-financed by the DEASP whereas a non-statutory School Meals Local Projects Scheme provides funding directly from the DEASP to both primary and secondary schools (DEASP 2019).

The history of school meals in ROI began with the establishment of the USMS in 1914. Its main focus was on combating food poverty and it was modelled on the British Education (Provision of Meals) Act, 1906 (Seanad Éireann debate vol 49) which allocated the job of provision to local authorities. A poor turf yield in 1924 and again in 1925, compounded by a below average-potato crop, adversely effected rural Irish regions and led to emergency measures, which provided food to schools in the worst hit areas. A hot meal was provided in the national schools of Counties

Donegal, Galway, and Kerry, plus parts of Mayo and Waterford. These emergency measures were discontinued in 1926 but the scheme lay the foundation for the School Meals (Gaeltacht) Act, 1930. Gaeltacht areas are where the Irish language is spoken by the majority of the population, these are most often very rural, with children having long distances to travel to school ‘and the hardships thereby suffered, particularly in the wintertime, were such as to render them unfit to profit to the fullest extent by the education given’ (Carney 1985, 14). The scheme was introduced for all children attending national schools in designated areas of the Gaeltacht (The Irish Times 1997). It, like the urban predecessor was run by local authorities and schools had the option to avail of it.

In Dublin, some larger schools established specific dining areas with ‘the most modern apparatus provided for the preparation and cooking of the food’ (Carney 1985, 19). The food served through both schemes varied from Irish stew and soup, cocoa, currant buns, bread, butter, margarine and jam. School managers and teachers both urban and rural were said to ‘bear repeated testimony to the beneficial effects of the midday meal in stimulating renewed alertness and mental activity’ (Carney 1985, 12) and the existence of the service was also believed to have secured ‘a more regular attendance on the part of the poorer children, who under ordinary circumstances are responsible for the bulk of the absences marked in the school’ (Carney 1985, 12).

These schemes remained virtually unaltered in law for decades as successive government ministers declined to take responsibility. When the newly established Department of Social Welfare took over the direction of the school meals service in 1947, the rate of participation in the urban scheme increased. Yet in the late 1950s, when the subject of school meals was discussed in Dáil Éireann (the central house of the Irish government), attitudes had changed. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Social Welfare announced:

I do not subscribe to the welfare state at all and the more we can avoid it, the better. People stand on their own feet in this country. They supply their children with meals and take pride in supplying them with substantial meals. Subject to the approval of the Minister, while I am in this position, there will not be any extension of the scheme to other parts of Ireland. (Seanad Éireann debate vol 164, url)

It was suggested in successive decades that a light lunch should be served not a ‘substantial meal’ as had been named in the original documentation. What was being provided dwindled to just milk in some areas and milk and either a bun or sandwich in others. By the time Jim Walsh from the Combat Poverty agency was calling for a changed approach to school meals in 1995, the service simply provided a snack which was intended to restore a child’s energy. According to Walsh

There’s no real logic to it being funded by the Department of Social Welfare and the local authorities - it should be financed by the Department of Education and the health boards ... The scheme should be linked to a nutritional education and health awareness programme for low-income parents. (The Irish Times 1997, url)

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) framework was put into place in 2005 and this led to the expansion of school meals funding to all schools within this category and others who could prove a need. The notion of providing a full lunch re-emerged. At present there is no one size fits all; some schools receive

breakfast, others lunch support and some afterschool snacks, or a combination of all three. The funding is for food items only; not staff provision or equipment. This lends itself to the purchase of pre-packed food, divesting the responsibility for feeding children to privately run food companies and inhibits food being freshly prepared within schools. The allocated stipend is €0.70 per student for breakfast and €1.20 per student for lunch. This allocation also favours larger-scale production of food. Of the 3305 primary schools in ROI, 692 are included in the DEIS programme as well as 198 out of 730 post-primary schools (DES 2020). In total 1548 schools' avail of the school meals funding in one form or another. Presently, school principals vie on the open market for food provision (DEASP 2019). Their already overloaded itinerary often results in them choosing the easiest option; large-scale producers who have websites and logistics in place to fulfil the obligation. Company websites allow primary school parents to order online and the company then delivers an individual lunch to each child. In secondary schools, the allocated amount of lunches are delivered daily to the school but not itemised for each student. These lunches may meet basic nutritional standards, but the food tends to be processed in large volume, provenance of ingredients is not usually noted, and an amount of each lunch is often ultra-processed (Glanmore 2021b).

Traditionally, the majority of ROI's secondary school students bring home-made lunches with them each morning (Browne et al. 2017). Browne et al. (2019) conducted an in-depth exploration of school food and students' food choices using peer researchers. The study revealed that teachers and principals acknowledged that schools were changing and that there was increasing demands on schools to provide canteens with snacks and lunches (Browne et al. 2019, 4). The students' involved in Browne et al.'s study felt that the solution to improving eating behaviours among peers 'would be to provide healthier school food environments' (Browne et al. 2019, 6). 'There is still a wide range of ... junk food sold in post-primary through tuck shops and vending machines, and also hot snacks which are high in fat and salt' (ETBI 2019, 5), which is at odds with Healthy Eating Guidelines. Research has shown that the wide availability of low nutrient, energy dense foods in schools and the retail outlets close to them can have a negative impact on food choice (Oostindjer et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2013; Browne et al. 2017, 2019).

### **Materials and methods**

A D8 school was allocated philanthropic funding to make improvements. The staff held a vote with the student body to ask how the funding should be spent, 'creating a place to congregate at lunchtime was the most popular option' [PI1]. The school liaised with a local architect and built a canteen as well as a new Home Economics room. Initially two catering companies tried to run the canteen but failed to provide a scratch-cooking kitchen, instead using frozen, pre-packed foods. The principal then approached a local café to take over the canteen space because, 'I loved the atmosphere, the staff are fantastic, the quality of the food was second to none, and I thought, God, this would be a really interesting connection' [PI1].

Influenced by ethnographic methods in anthropology, a holistic approach was taken to a single, action-based, case study within a girl's secondary school. The essence of a case study is to make enquiries into a real-life context, as opposed to the contrived contexts of experiment or survey (Yin 2018). Ethnography is not

simply a mixture of participant observation and interviewing, instead Pink (2001), following on from Crotty (1998), defines it as a methodology in itself: a process of creating and representing knowledge about society, culture and individuals that is based on an ethnographer's own experience. 'It does not claim to produce an objective or "truthful" account of reality but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge is produced' (Pink 2001, 18). An emic approach enabled a nuanced exploration of the area of investigation and was underpinned by a triangulation of qualitative methods (Mac Con Iomaire, Affi, and Healy 2021). The use of triangulation (Creswell 2014) provided a rounded and therefore more accurate picture of the food system within the school. Participant observation, interviews, student focus groups and parent group interviews were conducted over a two-year period (see Table 1). In the first-year, weekly observation visits consisted of note taking and image generation, which form an observational diary. Visits focused on verbal and non-verbal reactions to the food being served, the socialisation within the canteen including both student to student interaction and student to canteen staff interactions, as well as noting consumption behaviour. At each visit, an interview was conducted with one of the two canteen staff. After a change in canteen staff, in year two, longer monthly interviews and visits were agreed upon with the new chef.

The data were subjected to qualitative inductive thematic analysis which involved a process of data familiarisation, coding and gradual data reduction as coded comments were brought together under higher order themes. Codes were subjected to a process of continual comparison, and the data were refined through several stages using procedures outlined in the literature (Braun and Clarke 2006). The themes were explored in relation to the school becoming a more food literate environment.

The findings in the case study are specific to the school at hand rather than to the population at large. A wider study would be needed to prove generalisability of the findings. However, research in the field lends support to the case study findings (National Nutrition Council of Finland 2017; Morgan and Sonnino 2007; Persson Osowski, Göranson, and Fjellström 2012; O'Neill et al. 2020; Irish Heart Foundation 2015).

## Results

The D8 school has approximately 170 students attending, mainly from the surrounding, inner city area. Many of the student's parents went to the school and there is also a mix of families who have moved to ROI more recently. When the local café began operating the canteen, unlike previous caterers, they vowed to cook from scratch, on-site each day. Students and parents paid a subsidy to cover these costs as allocated government funding can only be spent on food items. According to the principal, previous to having a canteen in the school:

Students used to go home for lunch, and that brought its own challenges. You know maybe kids not coming back after lunch, a bad day being kept home, litter sometimes on the street, or kids eating all sorts of really bad food that would cause them to be, you know, a little bit unsettled and maybe more challenging in the afternoon. [PI1]



Table 1. Data collection details.

| Research subject   | Date                         | Code     |
|--|------------------------------|----------|
| Ethical approval for this research project was granted by Technological University Dublin ethics committee.  |                              |          |
| Consent forms were signed by all of the participating staff and parents. Parental/guardian consent forms were signed. Students signed an assent form before each focus group which was explained to them in detail. Interactions with students were conducted under the guidance of a member of the teaching body. |                              |          |
| Principal Interview 1  | 13.11.18                     | PI1      |
| Principal Interview 2  | 27.05.19                     | PI2      |
| Principal Interview 3  | 28.02.20                     | PI3      |
| Principal Interview 4  | Cancelled due to<br>COVID-19 |          |
| Two chefs were employed to run the canteen   |                              |          |
| Canteen Staff Interview 1  | Both chefs                   | 19.10.18 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 2  | Chef A                       | 26.10.18 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 3  | Chef B                       | 07.11.18 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 4  | Chef A                       | 16.11.18 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 5  | Chef B                       | 30.11.18 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 6  | Chef A                       | 07.12.18 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 7  | Both chefs                   | 21.12.18 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 8  | Chef A                       | 11.01.19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 9  | Chef B                       | 25.01.19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 10   | Chef A                       | 31.01.19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 11   | Chef B                       | 15.02.19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 12   | Chef B                       | 01.03.19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 13   | Chef A                       | 15.03.19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 14   | Chef A                       | 22.03.19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 15   | Chef B                       | 01.04.19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 16   | Both chefs                   | 12.04.19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 17   | Both chefs                   | 17.05.19 |

*(Continued)*

Table 1. Continued.

| Research subject  |   | Date                      | Code |
|---|---|---------------------------|------|
| Canteen Staff Interview 18  | Chef B  | 31.05.19                  | SI18 |
| Change of canteen staff. One chef was employed to run the canteen. Longer interviews conducted on a monthly basis |   |                           |      |
| Canteen Staff Interview 19  | Chef C  | 17.11.19                  | SI19 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 20  | Chef C  | 20.12.19                  | SI20 |
| Canteen Staff Interview 21  | Chef C  | 24.01.20                  | SI21 |
| TY Students Focus Group 1   | 8 students selected by the Principal                  | 27.05.19                  | TY1  |
| TY Students Focus Group 2   |   | Cancelled due to COVID-19 |      |
| 1st Year Students Focus Group1  | 8 students selected by the Principal                  | 27.05.19                  | 1Y1  |
| 1st Year Students Focus Group 2   | 8 students selected by a member of the teaching staff | 09.03.20                  | 1Y2  |
| Parents Group Interview   | 4 parents present                                     | 15.02.19                  | PGI1 |
| Parents Group Interview 2   |   | Cancelled due to COVID-19 |      |

Following the introduction of the scratch-cooking canteen, students stayed on the school grounds during lunch time, with the exception that 6th years were allowed to leave on a Friday. A quote from a student points to fact that students previously relied on food from the local shop and chipper, an Irish fast-food outlet.

Yea everyone goes to Centra. I'd say he lost loads of money when (the school) stopped letting us out. Everyone used to go down there. He kept asking us, like when are you allowed back out. The chipper used to open early cause of all of us going around at one, but now that is closed because we all got kept in. [TY1]

Commensality has a positive relationship with healthy eating (Vidgen 2016) and the canteen not only provides nutritious meals, but is a space for socialisation, students sit together at long tables chatting and mingling. Students voted that the canteen be a mobile phone-free zone so that the focus was on eating and talking among themselves. Food provision in this way can be seen as part of a wider approach towards societal capabilities allowing young people to gain critical skills around food, which they can use throughout their lives (Earl and Lalli 2020).

School meals can offer an opportunity to teach about food, taste and socialisation (Andersen, Baarts, and Holm 2017). Along with cooking wholefoods on site, the canteen staff developed food education workshops using the kitchen space as a pedagogical tool. The staff also set up a table where wholefood produce was displayed and they wrote additional details about the ingredients on the menu

boards such as free range chicken, or halal meat. There was a desire to educate and improve students' life experiences, the chefs' aim was to transmit their knowledge of food to the students, but further to this it was observed that there was a desire to instil an enjoyment in and enthusiasm for the food. Earl (2018) refers to the ambition to educate about food as being situated within the discourse of 'foodiness' which is often motivated by the desire to 'do good to others' (154). 'Foodiness' can be described as a passion for food but it is also aligned with a shunning of processed or factory produced food and an inclination for 'farm to fork' ideals. At times there was a discord between what the students wanted, and what the chefs cooked, there was a sense that the chefs' 'foodiness' came to the fore, with one chef acknowledging that they were in their own food bubble [SI7] and another declaring 'Oh my god, all we are asked to do is recreate stuff out of packets' [SI1]. The Principal also noted some challenges as they were trying to change palates, 'you are trying to change mindsets' [PI3]. There is a desire to encourage the students to 'regulate their bodies through food choice, and produce themselves as healthy' (Earl 2018, 17).

As well as articulating an ambition to educate, the canteen staff were committed to creating a canteen that the students were happy with, but it also had to be financially viable. Tenacity helped them through the first year when the economics of the venture were difficult, and some students voiced discontent. Approximately 25% of the students were using the canteen at this stage and this number worried the staff. A student canteen committee was formed, and the staff asked questions of themselves and adapted the menu many times, while still sticking to the scratch-cooking model. They, along with the students, lobbied to have the morning break extended by five minutes so that students had more time to come to the canteen. After student consultation, comprehensive menus (Figure 1) were provided at the beginning of each month, rather than just being displayed on a chalk board each morning. This was welcomed by one of the parents in a group interview, eliciting nods of agreement from others in the room. It was stated that it helped the parents to organise dinners at home, which did not clash. The staff discussed the fact that students were bringing in 'pot noodles' and asking for boiling water, a practice that the school soon banned. During conversations with the students, they requested more familiar foods, such as spice bags and chicken fillet rolls. The staff created a chicken wrap as a compromise and suggested it was 'popular so far'. With a slight air of frustration, they acknowledged that students often make suggestions without much basis or then change their mind on the next visit [SI1]. The takings in the canteen did increase throughout the year and dipped back down at the end of the school year when tours, sports days and plays were being hosted.

It was noted that the younger classes within the school used the canteen more than the older years. When a focus group was conducted with 1st year students [1Y1] there was generally positive feedback with one participant stating: 'Most canteens have chicken fillet rolls and like, these have healthy things. It doesn't taste healthy, it's good healthy food' (student a). There were repeated calls from the students for foods that were 'more familiar' to them; 'they should use proper ham, like Denny ham' (student a). Provide 'like stuff you eat at home – like ketchup' (student b). 'They have ketchup' (student c). 'They don't, it's like tomato puree' (student b). In this instance, the canteen staff were attempting to comply by providing tomato ketchup, but they made a version with fresh tomatoes.

## CANTEEN MENU

|                      |      |                            |      |                      |      |
|----------------------|------|----------------------------|------|----------------------|------|
| <b>breakfast</b>     |      | <b>little break</b>        |      | <b>lunch</b>         |      |
| toast + butter + jam | 0.60 | scone + butter + jam       | 1.50 | soup of the day      | 1.90 |
| + peanut butter      | 0.20 | choc chip cookie           | 1.50 | + bread              | 0.60 |
| eggs + toast         | 2.00 | chocolate flapjack         | 1.50 | cheese + ham toastie | 3.50 |
| porridge             | 2.00 | good sausage roll          | 1.50 | salad bar            | 4.00 |
|                      |      | cheese roll                | 1.50 | daily special        | 4.50 |
|                      |      |                            |      |                      |      |
| <b>drinks</b>        |      | use your card to get 60c   |      | <b>snacks</b>        |      |
| fresh fruit juice    | 1.50 | off at breakfast or little |      | fruit                | 0.60 |
| bottled water        | 1.00 | break and 1.90 off at      |      | yoghurt pot          | 1.20 |
| tea or herbal tea    | 1.00 | lunch time every day       |      | popcorn              | 1.00 |
| coffee               | 1.50 | 1.00 minimum at            |      | snack pack           | 1.50 |
| glass of milk        | 1.00 | lunchtime every day        |      | fruit pot            | 1.50 |

  

### MARCH DAILY SPECIALS

| MONDAY                 | TUESDAY                  | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY                   | FRIDAY             |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| chicken<br>curry       | pasta &<br>meatballs     | half day  | chicken<br>& chips         | chinese<br>noodles |
| spaghetti<br>bolognese | chicken<br>broccoli bake | half day  | sausages / fish<br>& chips | roast dinner       |
| chicken<br>meatballs   | pasta &<br>meatballs     | half day  | chicken<br>& chips         | chinese<br>noodles |
| spaghetti<br>bolognese | chicken<br>broccoli bake | half day  | sausages / fish<br>& chips | roast dinner       |

• all goodies baked fresh each day •  
 • EVERYTHING is now available for takeaway! •  
 • all our meat is Irish and free range, and all our chicken and beef is halal •

Figure 1. An example of a monthly menu.

The disparity between what the students requested and what the canteen staff produced shows again the desire to educate rather than simply alleviating hunger or ensuring concentration in class.

When TY students were asked if they had any advice for the canteen staff, one student suggested that ‘lower prices would have way more people. You could get a drink, a packet of crisps and a roll for what they are charging up there. So, what are you going to go for at the end of the day?’ (student c) [TY1]. This infers that students are purchasing food on the way to school and this was noted during observation. During the thematic analysis, the issue of cost most frequently appeared with both the principal repeatedly expressing regret that due to government stipulations the food had to be subsidised. Parents noted that they could not always afford lunch, and cost was addressed by the students themselves.

In the second year, the chefs changed, and a new approach was taken. While food was still created with nutrition in mind, it was not as forcefully displayed as ‘good’, the desire to educate seemed less prevalent in the chef’s rhetoric.

Who am I to tell them what they can have, if they say they like something who am I to say ours is better, I battle with that, am I saying ours is superior, our stuff is superior, our knowledge is superior than theirs and I do not want to do that to them ... they have their own opinion, their own minds, they should be encouraged to express it rather than me going 'no' and doing a finger wagging. [SI19]

The first time a student came to the chef with 'pot noodles', she offered them a sausage roll or soup (both free of charge), but once they were refused, she gave the student the hot water even though it was against the regulations. 'I don't want them sitting there with nothing in their stomach, I don't know the situation they are going home to, have they had breakfast? I didn't know, I am just going to have to do it'. After it was highlighted by the principal that it should not be repeated, the chef sat down with the students to explain why the school had made this decision – 'they had not understood the bigger picture. Once we explained that to them ... they said, "ok that makes sense, grand"' [SI20]. The issue did not persist. The students were treated as active and equal citizens in the conversation, and it showed in how the students interacted with the canteen space. 'I love the rapport that we are building up with them. I can feel the enthusiasm, not sure if it is the space or the food but I can feel it. They are coming up and having the bants' with you across the glass and the cash register' [SI20].

During the second year, the student engagement with the canteen was higher, particularly by the early years' students. The canteen initiative began to support itself financially. The principal, when interviewed in February 2020, felt that the canteen had increased awareness of, and interest in food among the student body, noting 'a curiosity about not just what is on the menu but how it is made and how it got there, I can see it very clearly' [PI3]. She mentioned the interaction between pupils and canteen staff saying the students 'are not just coming up and buying, they are stopping, they are chatting, they are asking questions about the food' [PI2]. A parent in the group interview commented that her child was trying a wider variety of foods – 'she never used to eat different foods, saying just make me the same, but since this (the canteen) started, she is trying new foods' [Parent 2 – PGI1]. Parent 1 added that 'they were going out having a chicken fillet roll every day, now they are having something different (in the canteen) every day' [Parent 1 – PGI1]. This particular parent was pleased with the student's willingness to try new foods and increased dietary resilience since the canteen had been in place.

This scratch-cooking formula also has far reaching benefits by way of its procurement policies. The canteen fridge is stocked with local produce where possible with an aim to support smaller food producers in the region and creating employment. The light-filled room became a space of socialisation where students, for their time there, switch off from their mobile-devices and eat, talk and enquire about the food being served. The smell of cooking permeates the school each day, cooking workshops and multicultural food days were held, and herbs were planted in window boxes, which will eventually be transplanted into a proposed edible garden. It is in marked contrast to the time before the canteen when either pre-packed lunches purchased through school meals funds or the students went to the local shops. By working with the students to give them autonomy over the canteen space, but also in taking time to explain the importance of nutrition, it created a more equitable relationship. The canteen was an expression of both the chefs' desires to feed 'well'

and the students desire to create a space they had ownership over but also where they enjoyed the food on offer.

## **Discussion**

Food literacy can be described as a collection of interrelated knowledge, skills and behaviours required to plan, manage, select, prepare and eat food to meet the needs for a healthy food intake (Perry et al. 2017; Truman, Lane, and Elliott 2017). The comprehensive nature of the term and its dependency on context makes food literacy difficult to measure quantitatively, an ethnographic study allowed for a nuanced and in-depth look at food practices within the school, over time. By positioning the school to become a food literate entity it moves the responsibility away from the individual, when the focus of responsibility is solely on the individual to be ‘better’ the fear is that larger societal problems are overlooked (Flowers and Swan 2015). Having a school that is food literate, one that plans, manages, selects and prepares food to meet needs, enables students and teachers to implement healthier, pleasurable eating practices more easily. Providing fresh food to children and young people each day can have advantages,

well-cooked, well-presented meals, made from good quality ingredients to accepted nutritional standards, by school caterers who are confident in their skills and valued by the school community, are inestimable. The benefits of good school meals go beyond high quality catering. They also produce social, educational and economic advantages. (School Meals Review Panel, cited in Cross and MacDonald 2009, 39)

Having that ability to prepare food within a school and providing a place where students can socialise without the interruption of a mobile phone led to increased consumption of a variety of foods for some and there was a reduction in pre-packaged food being brought into the school. The principal told of reduced behavioural instances after lunchtime, better class attendance and also a greater awareness in the student body of food and how it is made.

Looking closely at food in Irish schools, the DEASP fund the school meals programme, the Department of Children advocate for the children within the schools, the Department of Agriculture fund food tasting initiatives, the Department of Health work with healthy eating policies and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) work with strategy, utility of school buildings and curriculum development. With so many actors strategic thinking in regard to how food is addressed within schools is inhibited. The sudden closure of Irish schools during the COVID-19 pandemic threw a harsh light on the number of Irish families who rely on the support that school meals provide. There was a scramble to reallocate the food into children’s homes and the DES stepped in to aid DEASP. An extra €10million in funding was provided to continue support throughout the summer months. With a national focus on the importance of school meals it is a good time to visit the system anew. Browne et al. (2017) demonstrate that the school food environment is a modifiable factor that can be addressed through state and local policies. One way to do this is by drawing up a coherent national plan, in conjunction with students and across government, to demonstrate how school meals can best be implemented in the ROI, similar to *The School Food Plan* created in Britain (Dimbleby and Vincent 2013).

Research conducted by the Irish Heart Foundation (2015) found that 95% of schools surveyed said they would be interested in a national catering standard. Schools in the ROI presently receive guidance on healthy eating policies through public sector organisations such as the Health Service Executive (2019) and Educational Training Boards Ireland (ETBI 2019), however, only 59% of the schools were found to have implemented the healthy eating policies (ETBI 2019, 5).

In the Browne et al. study, 'students were clear that their schools had a responsibility for student welfare, which local food retailers did not' (2019, 6). Schools that become more food literate can provide a scaffolding for students on which to build a better relationship with food. The provision of scratch-cooked food in schools can make nutritious choices the easier option and enable the schools to develop a greater understanding among the students of the importance of nutritious food. As demonstrated, school meals in Japan and France take on a scratch-cooking model, similarly in Italy school lunches are cooked and served each day and are also used to teach children about Italian food culture (Morgan and Sonnino 2007). In Finland, freshly prepared school meals are seen as a way to promote pleasure in food (National Nutrition Council of Finland 2017). In Sweden, the 'pedagogical meal' encourages children and teachers to eat together and to use the meal for educational purposes (Persson Osowski, Göranson, and Fjellström 2012).

Serving school meals in packaging may deter students from eating it due to the texture of the meal but also due to other children's perceptions of the meal (O'Neill et al. 2020). The same study concluded that scratch-cooked meals had less stigma and were better perceived by both students and their parents which lead to increased consumption. Caraher and Lang (1999) highlight attached meanings of love and familial cohesion to a home-cooked dinner served at the table, which translates to a greater 'value' being placed on foods prepared from 'scratch' or 'base' ingredients. Providing the 'two distinct spaces within Irish schools; one for cooking and one as a space for eating', as called for by the HPSSG, would help to replicate the commensality a shared meal provides. As noted, school meals monies cannot be used to pay staff or for equipment, therefore the majority of school meals funding is spent on pre-packaged food. The D8 school case study highlighted that it is possible to situate a scratch-cooking kitchen within a school, although in this incidence students/parents/guardians were asked to financially supplement the meals, as funding was not adequate. The case study is limited in its scope, being focused on just one school. Nevertheless, the case study highlighted that it was possible to bring about change and provides an insight into the potential role of school meals in improving the food literacy of a school. The venture also demonstrated that when the student voice was equitably included in planning, it aided the creation of a canteen that is both serving nutritious food and one in which the students enjoy eating.

Implementing a scratch-cooking model in ROI would entail a significant increase in funding, but the benefits of this model, such as creating local employment and food procurement from within communities, may help alleviate some of the additional cost. Procurement models, which differ from a for-profit, market-driven approach, are worthy of consideration in relation to the school meals budget as they can add value to local markets. For example the EU Public Procurement Directive advocates for good practices in Socially Responsible Public Procurement and also for Buying for Social Impact (Caimi, Daniele, and Martignetti 2019). A not-for-profit model could ensure that children get the best value from the funds allocated, where meals

are provided ‘at a charge no more than the cost of the food’ (Earl 2018, 31). For example, Food for Thought in Merseyside, UK, calls itself a not-for-profit healthy school meals provider (Manzoori-Stamford 2011). The company is owned and managed by its seventeen partner schools with any surplus created being re-invested into the schools.

## **Conclusion**

School meals provide much needed support for Irish families in vulnerable positions. The free meals are allocated to schools in areas with low socioeconomic resources, with the scheme funded by the DEASP as part of their anti-poverty strategy. The current model for providing free school meals could be improved to provide more nutritious and enjoyable food for the children who receive the meal each school day. When schools have only a tentative link to the food being eaten by its students, such as those where pre-packed lunches are dropped at the door, it is more difficult to provide the same food literate environment as those with an embedded school-kitchen. In most cases, for-profit companies provide the packaged lunches and logistical solutions for school staff. The nature of the funding, which does not allow any monies to be spent on staff or equipment compounds this model.

Scratch-cooking may initially be a costlier option, but benefits can offset this; pedagogical opportunities (Earl and Lalli 2020; Andersen, Baarts, and Holm 2017), increased consumption (O’Neill et al. 2020), reduction of ultra-processed foods, a better chance for socialisation over the meal (Caraher and Lang 1999) and local employment. The D8 school canteen initiative demonstrates that in this instance, with student involvement and a supportive staff, an embedded scratch-cooking kitchen at the heart of the school was used as a scaffold to make the school a more food literate entity. Every new school build should be required to include a kitchen, as it does a sports hall and retrofitting should be done first on a needs basis then extended nationwide. For real change, that is not tokenistic in nature, a cross-government body is needed to address the issues that arise in this text, particularly if the aim were for scratch-cooking to become an unremarkable part of the school day as it is in Japan or France. Working with the students and school staff to shape and create a canteen that suits their school is advisable. No child should go hungry and having an anti-poverty strategy that includes school meals is to be lauded. However, a box-ticking approach that focuses on hunger prevention alone, without future planning, misses valuable opportunities to address nutrition, health and wellbeing. Furthermore, this article argues for a different approach; one where the opportunity is taken to use the school meal as a place for fostering enjoyment in food, for socialisation and to build links to food education.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## **Notes on contributor**

Michelle Darmody is a doctoral researcher in TU Dublin and food journalist for *The Irish Examiner*. An interest in food led Michelle to establish a busy bakery and café in 2006, both



of which were unique for their time in Dublin, making everything from scratch on site and procuring ingredients from small local producers. Michelle taught baking and cooking classes in local schools. This educational initiative was expanded with the aid of the Taste Council of Ireland. Schools nationwide were visited and workshops were developed, where cheesemakers, bakers and food growers were cajoled into teaching children about food. However, even with the backing of both Slow Food and Eurotoques, the methods employed were not sustainable. A need for a more far reaching and systemic approach to food education within schools in Ireland was noted, and this need forms the core of her doctoral study.

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