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## *Learning at Noon Critical Teacher Education and Lunch as Curriculum*

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### **Abstract**

*In the context of the unrelenting neoliberal reality of schooling, teacher education focuses largely on the formal, structured spaces in which children learn: predominantly the classroom. Yet, critical educators also recognize that children learn in informal spaces at school, including at lunch. This essay examines how school lunch can be used to teach about humans' relationships with other humans, animals, and the environment through innovative school, community, and university-based programs. In conclusion, this essay suggests that critical teacher educators should understand the pedagogical importance of school lunch in students' lives, and begin to incorporate it into preservice teacher education programs.*



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As a field, teacher education, including critical teacher education, focuses largely on the formal, structured spaces in which children learn, predominantly the classroom. This emphasis is reasonable, given the unrelenting neoliberal reality of contemporary schooling and the concomitant focus on standards, testing, and high-stakes accountability (Crawford-Garrett, Sánchez & Meyer, 2018; Crawford-Garrett, Sánchez & Tyson, 2017; Hursh, 2015; Sleeter, 2008). These attacks on public education have sparked considerable dissent and resistance from educators who are committed to developing “critically conscious citizens capable of engaging productively within our democracy” (Crawford-Garrett, Sánchez & Meyer, 2018, p. 56). In addition to continuing practices of resistance and dissent (e.g., O’Brien and Robb, 2017), teacher educators should also look to new spaces and possibilities for expanding students’ capacities for critical engagement with the world around them. One of the most significant, though often-overlooked, areas for the development of critical perspectives among preservice teachers and K-12 students is the daily practice of school lunch.

As educators, we recognize that students learn throughout the school day, not solely in classrooms and through formal curriculum (Harper, 2011). Students also learn about the world, their place in it, and their relationships with others on the playground, in school bathrooms, on sports fields, at recess, on the bus or walk to school, in the band room, and on the stage during a theatrical production, among other places (Bekerman, Burbules & Keller, 2006; Hyndman, Benson, & Telford, 2016). Similarly, school lunch is a rich and varied site of learning. As Weaver-Hightower (2011) argues, school food teaches children about their identity, culture, the varying significance and value of food, and their relationship to animals and the earth. Food is also intimately connected to concerns about social justice, from the reality of food deserts and movements for food justice, to issues of the corporatization of food, animal welfare and rights, GMOs, and organic, sustainable, and local agriculture and foodways (Bekoff and Pierce, 2017; Nestle, 2002, 2015; Obach, 2017; Robert & Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Roselle & Connery, 2016; Venture & Bailkey, 2017). Additionally, the actual practice of eating lunch with other children provides opportunities for children to learn about human relationships. The school cafeteria, at least in elementary schools, is one of the last remaining spaces in our society that is (often) free of technology, where children sit together and talk without electronic devices (Turkle, 2015).

Much of the research on school lunch has been dominated by nutritionists focused on the promotion of public health (Nestle, 2002; 2015) and political scientists, historians, and others (e.g., Geist, 2016; Levine, 2008) who have been concerned with the politics of school lunch and its connection to large-scale agribusiness and the food industry. While that research and scholarship are extremely useful for analyzing structural forces, educational research which understands school lunch as a pedagogical space is now emerging as an important area of both research and educational practice (DeLeon, 2010, 2011; Laird, 2013, 2018; Ng, Sweeney & Mitchner, 2013; Rice & Rud, 2018; Rowe, 2011; Rowe & Rochas, 2015; Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Wright-Maley, 2011). As Weaver-Hightower (2011) suggests, this shift is significant because educators and educational researchers bring a particular lens to questions of school food, including school lunch. This perspective situates food at school as a site of learning that can be understood as part of the curriculum, and can also be a potent site for social change. Rice and Rud’s (2018) edited collection on school lunch provides a critical lens on school lunch practices, as they write,

The basic premise of this book—that school lunch is an educationally significant phenomenon—developed out of a critical examination of the widespread

assumption that school lunch is little more than an interruption to the actual work of schooling (p.3).

I extend this important earlier research and scholarship through situating this essay within the field of critical teacher education. I assert that critical educators should consider the pedagogical importance of school lunch and that discussion and analysis of food, lunch, and related social and cultural contexts should be included in the teacher education curriculum in the United States. Though of course these issues are of concern well beyond the field of teacher education, I focus attention here to open conversations and critical dialogue in applied contexts, not solely at the level of theory.

In the balance of this essay, I first discuss how school lunch can be understood as part of the curriculum of schools, drawing on the literature in curriculum studies that extends the concept of curriculum beyond the formal spaces of classrooms, and situate this discussion within critical teacher education scholarship. I then discuss the historical and current context of school lunch, with a focus on the United States.<sup>1</sup> In the following sections, I move into an overview of recent scholarship and research on school lunch from multiple subfields within education and related areas, and weave in examples of emergent educational practices that are beginning to model how to engage with lunch as a pedagogical space. In the final section, I make beginning suggestions as to how critical teacher educators specifically might incorporate some of these ideas into preservice curriculum. Because school lunch is an experience that all students share every day, I suggest that it is an appropriate site to use to help future teachers prepare to ask difficult, critical questions about educational practices and schools, and how they can be altered to strengthen commitments to social justice (Rubin, 2018).

### **Understanding Lunch as Curriculum: The Role of Critical Teacher Education**

In broad strokes, the field of teacher education, including critical teacher education, has been primarily focused on the central primary space of learning—the classroom—and related curriculum and policy concerns. For example, as teacher education has gone through yet another round of “reforms” critical teacher educators have critiqued, challenged, and resisted new regimes governed by edTPA and CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) standards (Foley, 2012; O’Brien and Robb, 2017). Critical teacher educators have also been focused on the ways that concepts such as “social justice” in teacher education have become stripped of their transformative potential, instead used as ways to reproduce the existing social order (Dunn, 2016; Dominguez, 2019).

In addition to continuing to critique and resist neoliberal regimes of testing, standards, and accountability, it is equally important that critical teacher educators explore new ways of engaging students in the world around them through paying attention to the minutiae that makes up the “daily grind” of school (Jackson, 1968). Combined, these events are also a part of a broadened definition of curriculum that recognizes the educational significance of activities that occur outside of (or alongside) the formal curriculum, an intellectual tradition that has a rich history in critical

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<sup>1</sup> This article concentrates on lunch in the context of the United States; however, it is important to note that practices differ around the world. For discussion of school food situated in global context, see Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011).

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education (Apple, 2004; Dolby, 2015; Dewey, 1902; Giroux & Purpel, 1983; Jackson, 1992). For example, in the context of formal schooling, there is educational research that investigates what students learn on the playground (Hyndman, Benson, & Telford, 2016), in afterschool programs (Bekerman, Burbules, and Keller, 2006) and in extracurricular activities (Berk, 1992).

In the past decade, school lunch has emerged as a critical site of engagement, research, and critique. Rice and Rud (2018) argue that, “Essentially every student eats lunch during the school days, and yet this multifaceted noontime phenomenon has received less attention in the educational literature than practically any other school activity” (p. 1). Rowe and Rochas (2015) similarly reflect,

School lunch is one of the least critiqued aspects of compulsory schooling. As a result, there may be a tendency to think of school lunch as part of the hidden curriculum.<sup>2</sup> Granted, for most schools, eating is not part of the written curriculum... But that does not change the fact that food in schools is hardly hidden: on the contrary, food is everywhere in plain sight, smell, and even sound. (p. 483).

The observations from Rice and Rud (2018) and Rowe and Rochas (2015) echo those of Weaver-Hightower (2011) who comments, “Although food is ever present, its role in the life of schools has been little studied by educational researchers” (p. 15).

While explicit focus on school lunch as part of the curriculum is a relatively recent development, historically, school lunch has been at the center of progressive social reform efforts. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of this history to provide a framework for situating more current research and practice.

### **The Historical Context of School Lunch in the United States<sup>3</sup>**

Beginning in the late 1800s, liberal social reformers focused attention on the nutritional needs of the immigrant families who were arriving from around the world and crowding into U.S. cities. Social reformers, joined by scientists in the emergent field of nutrition science, tried to convince these new Americans that a modernized, scientific diet would contribute to higher standards of living and the overall strength of democracy (Levine, 2008). Charitable efforts to provide families and children with nutritious food blossomed in this period, as lack of adequate nutrition was widespread throughout the United States. For example, it is estimated that approximately 1/3 of all young men called for military service during World War I were deemed unfit to serve because they were underweight, had rickets, or rotting teeth (Levine, 2008).

Ellen Swallow Richards established the first large-scale school lunch program in the United States in the Boston public schools in 1890s. Richards, the founder of the “women’s laboratory” at MIT, was accepted as a “special student” after being denied admission at multiple graduate

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<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the concept of the hidden curriculum, see Apple (2004) and Giroux and Purpel (1983).

<sup>3</sup> While beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that the history of school food in the United States, and throughout the world, is of course situated in the context of colonialism, racism, and anti-immigrant movements, policies, and practices. The Indigenous Food Sovereignty movement is an important example of research and scholarship in this area. For example, see the forthcoming joint issue on Indigenous Food Sovereignty in North America, co-published by the *Journal of American Indian Education* and the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*. See also Ma Rhea (2018) for overview of literature in the Australian context.

programs because of her gender. When Richards' research study on sanitation in Boston schools revealed appalling practices, Richards convinced the Boston School Committee to allow her to run a scientifically based, nutritious, low-cost lunch program to serve 5000 students per day. Her plan was to not only feed children who were underweight and/or nutritionally deficient, but to use the free, school-provided food as a way to teach children and their parents (particularly mothers, at this time), about the benefits of nutritious foods.

Richards' initiative provided important precedent for school lunch programs across the United States, and ultimately led to the establishment of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in 1946 (Rutledge, 2015). The NSLP was designed to provide nutritious, low-cost food for school children, while simultaneously creating price supports for U.S. agriculture. Initially administered by states, the program produced a patchwork of regulations, policies, and procedures, often not reaching needy children (Levine, 2008). In 1966, the federal Child Nutrition Act created and enforced national income-based guidelines for free and subsidized lunches.

The NSLP remains a contested and politicized program. Through the 1960s and 1970s racial discrimination in the program was rife, and numerous lawsuits and political actions provided evidence of the lack of equity in the distribution of resources and lunch at state and local levels. Under the Nixon administration, funding was increased as part of a political goal of ending hunger. In 1969, new and controversial regulations allowed for school districts to contract with private companies to provide lunch. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration attempted to reduce federal funding for the program, and to reclassify the way that some food was labeled, most infamously, reclassifying ketchup as a vegetable and cakes and cookies as bread (Levine, 2008). The 2010 Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, enacted under the Obama administration, set new nutrition standards which minimized fat, sugar, and salt, limited portion size, and required more whole grains, vegetables, and fruits. Seven years later, the Trump administration curtailed many of the new regulations, delayed implementation of others, and provided states with more flexible options for compliance.

Given this political context, research on school lunch often focuses on public health and nutrition: there is a substantial body of literature on school lunch, nutrition, and childhood obesity from both the perspective of an individual child's health, and the larger, structural concerns of the persistent linkages between the government and agribusiness (Cooper, 2011; Levine, 2008). For example, debates over "pouring rights" in schools drew attention to the widespread availability of soda in schools nationwide, which in some cases led to reform of these practices (Nestle, 2015). Michelle Obama's 2010 *Let's Move! Initiative* recognized that children learn lifelong eating habits at lunch. A component of the *Let's Move Initiative*, Chefs Move to Schools, encouraged professional chefs to become involved in local school lunch programs: training staff; overseeing meal preparation; cooking, and serving; educating children about nutrition and exposing them to new foods; teaching children to cook; establishing culinary classes in schools; and promoting peer led education about food. Research in this area reflected the priorities of reduction of obesity and healthy eating (e.g., Cohen et al., 2012; Just, Wansink, & Hanks, 2014).

However, over the past twenty years, and with increasing intensity in the past decade, research and scholarship in multiple subfields of education has started to more explicitly examine school lunch as a site of curriculum. Simultaneously, educational organizations have partnered with schools on new initiatives that use lunch as a multi-faceted space that engages students in learning about themselves, their communities, animals that are used for food, and the environment. In the next section, I examine these two emergent trajectories in research and practice surrounding

school lunch, focusing on humans' relationship with other humans, and humans' relationships with animals and the environment. As my objective in this article is to provide an overview of the field of practice and research, not all of the examples discussed are necessarily critical in their perspective/orientation. However, all provide new avenues for opening conversations about human relationships with other humans, animals, and the planet, and thus inherently contain the potential to move in critical directions (Dolby, 2012).

### **New Directions in School Lunch: Examples from Research and Practice**

Similar to recess and other free times at school, lunch is not structured through lessons or other activities: it is a rare time during the day when the only required activity (and generally, even that is not enforced) is to eat. In addition to learning how to talk and listen to others, lunch is a window into students' lives outside of school: whether they pack a homemade lunch of peanut butter (or sunflower butter, if peanut butter is not allowed) and jelly, a thermos of curry, or stand in line for a free or reduced lunch. Alice Waters (2008), the well-known chef, comments that, "life is given meaning and beauty by the daily ritual of the table—a ritual that can express tradition, character, sustainability, and diversity" (p. 53). While Waters was referencing the family meal, her reflections can be extrapolated to the ritual of lunch at school: that it both expresses and creates much about our culture and our relationships with others (Smilie, 2013; Waters, 2008).

School lunch, and the cafeteria, can also be places of tension, teasing, and bullying. Harwood and Copfer (2015) identify the content of school lunches brought from home as a source of teasing in elementary school, as children encounter unfamiliar food from different cultures. Laird (2018) reflects on her experience of lunchroom duty as a high school teacher early in her career, noting that teachers were required to "stand and pace back and forth "and watch for students who were "...throwing food and or fists at one another, or cat calls or whistles at girls, or cruel-joke names at gay and lesbian students, students of color, and students with disabilities" (p. 2). As Laird recalls, many students and teachers avoided the lunchroom as a "space too toxic for them" (p. 3). Popular culture reinforces this image of the school cafeteria as a highly charged locale where unpopular children are isolated and bullied, and those at the top of the social pecking order are glorified and celebrated: a dynamic depicted in the 2004 film, *Mean Girls* (Michael & Waters, 2004) and discussed in Eckert's (1989) ethnography of social categories ("jocks" and "burnouts") in a suburban high school.

In response to these troubling dynamics, Teaching Tolerance (a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center) initiated *Mix It Up at Lunch Day* in 2002. Founded in 1991, Teaching Tolerance's mission is concerned with "reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children (Teaching Tolerance, 2018, n.p.). As they explain, the program evolved from listening to students, "Students consistently identify the cafeteria as a place in their school where divisions are clearly—and harshly—drawn (Teaching Tolerance, 2018, n.p.). The program also draws on Tatum-Smith's (1997) research that examines the racial self-segregation that occurs in tens of thousands of school lunchrooms across the nation every day. While Tatum-Smith asserts that this self-segregation is a natural and positive response for minority students in a majority environment, she also argues that schools should be intentional about breaking down these racial barriers, which is the objective of *Mix it Up at Lunch Day*. *Mix It Up at Lunch Day* has become Teaching Tolerance's best known program: in 2017 over 1,000,000 U.S. students participated.

*Mix It Up at Lunch Day* simply asks students to sit in a different seat in the cafeteria as a way of increasing interactions among students from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds. As Teaching Tolerance explains, “Mix It Up at Lunch Day is an international campaign that encourages students to identify, question and cross social boundaries” (Teaching Tolerance, 2018, n.p.). Teaching Tolerance also provides dozens of classroom and school-based exercises and activities that can be used before, during, and after the *Mix it Up* lunch to help students understand what to expect, how to interact, how to talk with schoolmates of varying ages and grade levels, and how to extend those new relationships to the playground, the classroom, and other formal and informal spaces in schools. For example, a lesson for early elementary grade students explores the variety of foods that students of different cultural backgrounds bring for lunch, with specific lesson objectives tied to cultural tolerance and respect. As Harwood and Copfer (2015) discuss, this is a critical area of emphasis as lack of familiarity with the appearance and smells of different types of food can contribute to teasing and bullying behaviors at lunch, which of course can extend well beyond the lunchroom.

Teaching Tolerance also provides lessons in empathy and listening classroom use before the *Mix It Up at Lunch Day* so that students have skills and experiences to draw on when faced with a new and perhaps difficult personal interaction at lunch. This scaffolding of empathy-building experiences before the actual lunch is important, as research on student experiences at two elementary schools indicates that positive outcomes for students are most likely if the activity is implemented with forethought and adequate preparation for students (Kindzierski, Leavitt-Noble, Dutt-Doner, Marable, & Wallace, 2013). For example, Kinderzierski et al. (2013) found that students who had been prepared for the activity were more likely to enjoy the experience as opposed to students who were not prepared beforehand.

While *Mix It Up at Lunch Day* is now international, there are local initiatives that use school lunch as a space for strengthening human relationships. For example, Ng, Sweeney, and Mitchiner (2013) describe a lunch-focused human relations program at an independent, college preparatory school in the Midwest where students sit at pre-assigned tables with a staff or faculty member four days out of the week. The seating is mixed-age and the groups change every two weeks, allowing students to talk and form relationships with a wide variety of other students over the course of a year. Ng (2018) further develops this research and reflects on the value of “slow” lunch for the development of human relationships. Briggs (2005) describes a program in a California school which invited senior citizens to serve as “table hosts” in support of a new plan to serve food family style during school lunch. Senior citizens helped the children with the basics of passing and serving food and appropriate mealtime behavior, contributed to a calmer atmosphere in the cafeteria, and helped to encourage intergenerational and community relationships. While these programs are not necessarily grounded in a critical orientation to schooling, they do focus on fostering empathy and understanding for other people, which can provide the necessary scaffolding to explore more topics and dynamics from a critical perspective (Dolby, 2012).

Other school-based projects use lunch to teach about human relationships with the environment and animals. One of the first individuals to recognize the potential of school lunch as a pedagogical opportunity for students to learn about food’s journey from farm to plate was chef Alice Waters, who founded *The Edible Schoolyard Project* in 1995 in collaboration with a public middle school in Berkeley, California. Waters recognized that school gardens could teach children (and teachers, parents, and community members) about how to grow, eat, and appreciate healthy

foods. In the midst of well-documented and ongoing concerns about food insecurity, food justice, and food deserts in poor, urban communities, Waters' program provided a model for the nation and raised critical questions about the pedagogy of food. Over the past twenty years, the project has grown to a network of more than 5000 schools and community organizations.

Interest in school gardens and "farm to school" programs (including the National Farm to School Network) has also increased because of an explosion of obesity and obesity-related health problems among children and teenagers in the 1990s and a belief that a highly processed, sugar, salt, and fat-laden diet was behind this growing public health concern (Nestle, 2002; 2015). School gardens have also been used to provide resources for academic learning across the curriculum, and opportunities to enhance students,' schools,' and communities' environmental and health awareness (Williams & Dixon, 2013). Ralston (2012) underscores the potential of using school gardens to prepare students for what he terms "gardening activism," or understanding (and then using) school gardens as sites to teach students about collective action, community development, food security, and the politics of land use (p. 1).

In 2004, the *School Lunch Initiative* was founded as a collaboration among The Berkeley Unified School District, the Center for Ecoliteracy Education, and the *Edible Schoolyard Project*. Its objective was to make explicit the teaching and learning aspects of the *Edible Schoolyard Project* and to expand beyond the school garden to rethink and reshape school lunch. While school gardens can provide food to supplement what students are eating in school on a daily basis, school lunch is engrained in the daily life of students and teachers. The *School Lunch Initiative* believes that to change eating habits and patterns, students have to see healthy, sustainable food on their plate at lunch every day, despite limits of the growing season and the realistic limits of school gardens.

Mounting environmental concerns have led to the creation of curriculum focused on sustainability, particularly within the context of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). For example, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Uganda, and other countries all incorporate sustainability to varying extents into school curricula, as worldwide concern about the sustainability of school lunch practices increases (Oostindjer et al., 2017). There is also educational research on how food practices need to be situated within the historical realities of imperialism and racism within the larger field of critical food studies (Lloro-Bidert, 2018; Ma Rhea, 2018). For example, Ma Rhea (2018) connects attitudes about food in Australia to indigenous philosophies about the sentience of the planet and relationships to the land, through what is known as the Gaian hypothesis, scholarship that is also related to the field of ecojustice education (Bowers, 2002, 2011; Kahn, 2010; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2015). Much of this scholarship is based on critical education philosophies (e.g., Kahn, 2010; Kahn & Hume, 2009; Lupinacci, Happel-Parkins, & Lupinacci, 2018), and is also easily applied in educational contexts within and outside of the classroom, because we are surrounded by the tools for teaching (the earth and food) at all times. Thus, school lunch is at the nexus of what Kahn and Hume (2009) refer to as a "total liberation pedagogy," which, as they write, "attempts to work *intersectionally across and in opposition to all oppressions* (including those of nonhuman animals) and for *ecological sustainability*" (pp. 181-182, emphasis is the authors').<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> While published a decade ago, Kahn and Hume's (2009) article is an extremely useful overview of educational practices that support ecological sustainability from an intersectional perspective, including fields such as humane education, which are rarely discussed or written about in educational scholarship. While beyond the



School lunch, as Kahn and Hume (2009), Rice and Rud (2018), Rowe (2011) and other scholars suggest can also be used to teach about humans' relationships to animals. Recently, critical educational scholars have raised probing questions about the food consumed during school lunch, amid growing public awareness of animal welfare in the agricultural livestock sector (Bekoff and Pierce, 2017; Faruqi, 2015; King, 2017). Much of this scholarship focuses on what students often do not know about the processes (and the life) behind the chicken nugget on the school lunch tray (Rice, 2017; 2018). For example, Rowe and Rocha (2015) discuss the intentional ignorance inherent in the practices of school lunch: that the brutal processes of industrial slaughter are deliberately hidden as the school and the lunchroom becomes the "training grounds for docile bodies and technocratically controlled human and non-human bodies" (p. 493). Rice (2018), also concerned about practices of the industrial animal industry, suggests that school lunch can be used as an opportunity for students to examine "connections and relations" between humans and animals (p. 127). DeLeon (2011) links the attitudes developed towards eating animals at school lunch to the broader issues of how animals are used throughout the educational lifecycle, from preschool through graduate education (Hart, Wood, & Hart, 2008; Holley, 2009; Pedersen, 2010).

In response to this growing awareness and concern for animal welfare, there are multiple schools in the United States and throughout the world that serve a vegan and/ or vegetarian lunches (Erbrant, 2015). For example, Santa Barbara, California public schools recently began offering vegan options: currently, 50% of the meals served in their school district are vegan (Forster, 2018). Four cities in Brazil are in the process of transitioning all of their school-based food to completely vegan by 2019, affecting 23 million meals per year (Humane Society International, 2018).

### **Critical Teacher Education and School Lunch: Exploring Possibilities**

As Weaver-Hightower (2011) reflects, "Food is truly ubiquitous in schools" (p. 15). In addition to school lunch, food is woven through the school day in before and after school programs, in vending machines, through school fundraisers, in concession stands at sporting events, birthday and holiday parties, and many other sites. Thus, there are myriad ways in which food can be engaged as curriculum in schools. School lunch is a reasonable place to begin, as it happens every day and involves every child (and adult) in the school in some manner: it is a shared experience that everyone in the school can immediately understand (Rubin, 2018). Some, though not all, of the examples I discuss below are grounded in critical education philosophies. However, as this is a developing field of inquiry, I hope to provide a broad landscape of examples to draw on for thinking through how to begin to incorporate school lunch into teacher education, and gesture towards general ideas that would need to greatly expanded on to be used in practice.

Teacher education programs generally do not usually include discussion and analysis of school lunch as part of the curriculum. However, there are some pre-service courses (required and/or elective) that teach about food more generally. For example, in a course called "Indigenous and Traditional Education in a Globalized World," Ma Rhea (2018) uses students' experiences with food (past and present) to examine their own place in the world, and Indigenous/Settler relationships more broadly. In the U.S. context, Lloro-Bidert (2018) reflects on a critical food studies service-learning course she teaches, in which students learned about the working conditions

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scope of this article, interested readers should also see the websites of the Institute for Humane Education (<https://humaneeducation.org/>) and the Association of Professional Humane Educators (<https://www.aphe.org/>) for additional information.

for farm labors and the lives (and sentience, emotion, and cognition) of animals who are raised and slaughtered for food. While these are examples of innovative, stand-alone courses, there are also many opportunities to integrate a curriculum about school lunch into existing teacher education courses. For courses that include field experiences, the lunchroom can be used as a reflective site of learning, where teacher education students can observe K-12 student interactions with each other, and the food that students are (or are not) eating. There are many possibilities for preservice teachers to both learn about and take action on what they see in schools: including organizing opportunities for K-12 students to try new foods (one local charter school in my town had a “Taste It Tuesday” program for this purpose), learning about food insecurity, food deserts, food justice, and school-based programs, such as the *Mix It Up At Lunch* program discussed above. Following Ma Rhea (2018) teacher education students can also use critical perspectives to reflect on their own experiences of school lunch, and how what they learned through those experiences influenced their own relationship to food and to other people.

Teacher education courses without field-based experiences can still look at school lunch for curricular inspiration. Both preservice teacher and K-12 students can use school lunch as a way to learn about where their food comes from, its nutritional value, its effects on animals and the environment, and concerns about food security and insecurity in the school itself and the local community. Simply tracing the sources of a typical school lunch, one either provided by the cafeteria or commercially produced (e.g., a *Lunchable*), opens conversations that involve nutrition, economics, environmental science, politics, culture, animal welfare, income inequality, gender and race, among many other topics. Visits to farmers markets, food banks, local (and school) community gardens, locally-sourced restaurants and coffee shops, food co-ops, and small scale and organic farms provide opportunities to engage curriculum in language and literacy, social studies, science, and math education. School lunch can also be used as a starting point for broader conversations about food, identity, and culture, as Rud and Gleason (2018) suggest, “What kind of intergenerational, historical knowledge could be tapped into if students engage with their families and other community elders about their own knowledge of food in and outside of school” (p. 181)? Such inquiries and projects could be incorporated into teacher education courses in multicultural and social justice education, in addition to history, geography, social studies, literacy and language, and environmental education.

Finally, teacher educators can look to other courses on related themes, such as food and sustainability, as models for ways to incorporate units on school lunch in preservice courses. In the United States, Arizona State University requires a class, “Sustainability Science for Educators” and in Australia there are continuing initiatives to mandate similar courses in universities (Evans, Ferreira, Davis, & Stevenson, 2016; Foley, Archambault, Hale, & Dong, 2017). Courses that focus more specifically on food and sustainability are emerging in higher education, for example, in a “Sociology of Food” course at Florida Gulf Coast University (De Welde, 2015). Additionally, there are efforts underway on some college campuses, including at the University of California Santa Cruz and the University of New Hampshire, to rethink campus food systems to make them more sustainable and humane (Clugston & Caledor, 2007).

### **Conclusion: Towards a Different Lunch**

As I write this, the Amazon burns and the planet edges ever-closer to a climate catastrophe. As most of us know, the fires in the Amazon are a result of what we eat every day including what our children eat in school. Deforestation to clear land for cattle grazing, and to produce soy to feed that cattle, has already had devastating consequences. As critical educators and teacher educators,

we must begin to engage with school food and what our schools teach children through these practices. This does not mean that the lunchroom becomes just another classroom with a formal curriculum. Yet, as Rud and Gleason (2018) write, ...”school lunch is such an important part of the school day that it is essentially an informal yet explicit curriculum teaching students about food, the ethics of consumption, community, and the environment” (p. 174).

On the same day that the Amazon burned, Greta Thunberg sailed into New York Harbor on a solar-powered, zero-carbon emissions yacht, after two weeks spent crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Thunberg’s “School Strike for the Climate” began in Sweden in 2018 and quickly attracted world attention. When Thunberg became aware of the climate crisis at age eight, one of her first steps was to convince her family to adopt a vegan diet. Her actions and her leadership remind us that focusing attention on school lunch is one of the most vital steps we can take as critical teacher educators to hold on to hope.

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