

*School Food Politics: The Complex Ecology of Hunger and Feeding in Schools around the World*

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*School Food Politics* unravels the sociopolitical context that surrounds the logistics of feeding children all over the world. The lunch trays in front of millions of American children represent a vast ecology with various stakeholders from the micro- to macro-level. This edited volume explores the complexity of school food politics using international examples and then portrays a series of social movements surrounding school lunch reform. Editors Sarah A. Robert and Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower introduce the concept of food politics by highlighting the role of state authority. Food is political because it is subject to governmental regulations, which in turn, influences the allocation of food within the boundaries of a particular nation-state. Public school is a government institution, so it is easy to apply the concept of food politics to school food. In the United States (US) and abroad, the school determines “*where* food comes from, *when* and *what* children eat” as well as “*how much* it costs” (p. 3). Throughout the essays, the salient framework for investigating school food politics is policy ecology. According to Weaver-Hightower and Robert, policy ecology borrows from the notion of natural ecosystems to emphasize the complex interactions of actors, relationships, environments and structures, and processes (p. 7).

Section One, “From Pap to Sloppy Joes to Nada: Inside International School Food Politics,” is comprised of the first five chapters, which together provide empirical evidence of school food politics within five disparate ecologies. In Chapter 1, Sandler discusses the ongoing discourse regarding school food in US public schools while outlining key historical events, which have shaped and are currently shaping the contemporary discourse. To illustrate, Sandler discusses the integral role of the Black Panthers (and the struggle of the US government to undermine them) in instigating an expansion of the National School Lunch Program to include breakfast for the neediest children (p.33-35). In the following chapter, Chapter 2, Weaver-Hightower employs a cross-national analysis of three Western nations (i.e., England, US, and Australia) and work-dependent advocates of school lunch reform. The three case studies demonstrate the need for school lunch reformist groups to adapt varying strategies because of unique political ecologies. Although Weaver-Hightower’s three case studies underline the differences in these three nations’ school food political ecologies, it also stresses some very important similarities such as money or funding often being the root of the school food reform issue. In Chapter 3, Phillips and Roberts explore food sovereignty in Tanzania. They outline an international shift away from “food security” and to “food sovereignty” as an approach for economically developing nations (p. 72-75). Using the concept of food sovereignty, Phillips and Roberts discuss school cultivation (i.e., school farming and gardening) in Tanzania. Similar to preceding chapters, this chapter emphasizes the complexity of political ecologies by tracing historical and sociopolitical changes in Tanzania and how key events have shaped perspectives and policies for school cultivation.

Chapter 4 also contextualizes the difficulties with understanding school food policy; Robert and Kovalskys consider the problematic nature of first *defining a problem*. The earlier chapters from Section One illustrated the obstacles and intricacies when trying to address school food policy; however, these chapters assume that most actors and stakeholders agree that there is a problem with school food and reform should take place. Chapter 4 exemplifies that this

assumption does not always hold true and that defining the problem with school food may be contentious in itself. Robert and Kovalskys examine school food policy in Argentina, and reveal the multi-dimensional nutritional concerns for many developing nations. “Hunger can be associated with the nutritional needs of students, but it also can be associated with socio-cultural, political-economic, and psychosocial context” (p.113). Whereas past definitions of hunger—especially relating to school food—has relied on an undernourishment (or lack of calories), another particularly salient definition of hunger has come into view: malnourishment (or a lack of nutrients). Many Argentinian children have difficulty acquiring enough calories and many others suffer from obesity, which is not indicative of undernourishment, yet their health may be suffering from too many low-quality calories. Because of the two simultaneous nutritional issues occurring in Argentina, there are differing efforts to address school food, which only highlight one side. The authors argue that efforts should strive to tackle a multi-definitional concept of hunger, which rely on nutrient-rich school food (p.113-114).

Kang’s essay exploring school lunch programs in South Korea rounds out Section One. In Chapter 5, Kang outlines the public discourse surrounding free for all and organic school lunch movement by analyzing newspaper articles. These analyses demonstrate the potential influence of political elections have on school food politics. All five chapters from Section One emphasize the complexity of school food political ecologies and the difficulties of understanding and analyzing these unique political ecologies. From defining the problem to understanding the socio-historical and political context of school food within a particular region to identifying the contemporary actors and stakeholders including those advocating for reform, these chapters overwhelming reveal how school food is indeed political. The following section, Section Two, continues with these themes; however, there is an emphasis placed on reform, activism, and actors at a more local level.

Section Two, “Reforming School Food: Parents, Activists, Teachers, and Youth,” is comprised of the last five chapters. These chapters as a whole explore school food reform on a smaller scale, while situating the analyses in the broader political ecology context. Introducing Section Two, Chapter 6 is a call for change in public policy. Nestle succinctly summarizes the current US school food policies and the implications of such policies such as increasing rates of obesity and type-II (adult-onset) diabetes among young children (p.143-144). In Chapter 7, Lalonde explores food preparation as a “critical pedagogy intervention” (p.148). Lalonde traces her experiences as an instructor of an after-school program cooking class for low-income teens of color. One of Lalonde’s goals for the class was to understand and combat the role of media. This chapter highlights the potential for intervention through food preparation and the discussion and learning that occurs when individuals prepare their own food. Chapter 8 reviews a “farm-to-school program” in Burlington, Vermont. Davis and colleagues share their experiences with the implementation and continuing success of the Burlington School Food Project. In Chapter 9, DeLeon draws from numerous theorists to examine the meaning of disciplinary space and meat consumption. Finally, Chapter 10 reiterates the challenges associated with school lunch reform. Robert and Weaver-Hightower offer suggestions for future research and strategies for change with the hope of “healthier horizons” for all children.

*School Food Politics* offers a collection of essays exploring various school food political ecologies. Several themes emerge including childhood health/obesity, sociopolitical context, and advocacy and reform—which highlights the broad audience and applications of this edited

volume. Within the classroom is where *School Food Politics* will shine. Instructors will have plenty of conceptual and empirical examples to draw from as well as an appendix full of resources (i.e., websites and curriculum and lesson plans). Section One provides an exceptional foundation for understanding school food politics through a political ecology lens, while Section Two provides examples of school lunch reform from the reformist's perspective. Although *School Food Politics* addresses the complexity of food politics in a succinct and synthesized manner, there are opportunities for instructors to supplement the content. Section Two only provides US examples of reform from the advocate's perspective. Additionally, the perspective of the children within these complicated school food political ecologies is neglected. Nevertheless, *School Food Politics* is a timely and salient collection of essays, which encourages the reader to become involved and think about the politics of school food.