

## A Study of School Meals: How Cafeteria Culture Shapes the Eating Habits of Students

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**Abstract :** Lunchtime can play a pivotal role in shaping student eating habits. Studies have previously indicated that eating a healthy meal during the school day can improve students' well-being and academic performance, and potentially prevent childhood obesity. This study investigated the school lunch program in the United Kingdom in order to gain an understanding of the attitudes and beliefs surrounding school meals and the realities of student food patterns. Using a qualitative research methodology, this study was conducted in three primary and secondary school systems in London, United Kingdom. In depth interviews consisting of 14 headteachers, teachers, staff, and chefs and fieldwork observations of approximately 830 primary and secondary school students in the three schools' cafeterias provided the data. The results of interview responses and fieldwork observation yielded the following set of themes: (a) school meals are publicly portrayed as healthful and nutritious, yet students' eating habits do not align with this advertising, (b) the level of importance placed on school lunch varies widely among participants and generates inconsistent views concerning who is responsible (government, families, caterers, or schools) for students' eating habits, (c) role models (i.e. teachers and chefs) present varying levels of interaction with students and conflicting approaches when monitoring students' eating habits. The latter finding expanded upon Osowski, Göransson, and Fjellström's (2013) concept of teacher roles to formulate three education philosophies - the Removed Authority Role Model, the Accommodating Role Model, and the Social Educational Role Model - concluding that the Social Educational Role Model was the most effective at fostering an environment that encouraged healthy eating habits and positive behavior. For schools looking to cultivate strong relationships between students and teachers and facilitate healthier eating habits, these findings were used to construct three key recommendations: (1) elevate the lunch environment by encouraging proper dining etiquette, (2) get teachers eating at the table with students, and (3) shift the focus from monitoring behavior to a teacher-student dialogue centered on food awareness.

**Keywords :** food culture, eating habits, school meals, student behavior, education, food patterns, lunchtime

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