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Student Perceptions of Cafeteria Meals in an Oxford, Mississippi Third Grade Class: “Gooey”, “Gross”, and “Good”

By Kathryn James  Edited by Dr. Jody Holland

Abstract

This research focuses on student perceptions of school-provided lunch and cafeteria policy, particularly given the impact of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on school lunch programs. Student perceptions were studied through surveys administered to third grade students at Della Davidson Elementary in Oxford, Mississippi. These survey responses exhibit that while there is significant disagreement over whether or not cafeteria meals are “good,” there is agreement that cafeteria policy helps them eat more fruit and vegetables. Additionally, though they do not describe cafeteria policy as teaching them about nutrition and wellness, observed behaviors show excitement surrounding fresh fruit initiatives in the school, and nutrition assemblies. Broader incorporation of these strategies could help maximize student perceptions of school lunch and minimize waste.

I. Introduction and Purpose

In my role serving a third-grade class at Della Davidson Elementary School, which I have held since August 2015, I eat lunch with my students every day. Early on, I noticed that students reacted very differently to the meals served, and that the meals served were of a universally higher quality than those I remembered from my elementary school days. I had worked on the reauthorization of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act during the summer that I interned in Washington, D.C., but had never seen the policy implemented. I started asking the third graders their opinions of the meals casually, and took this opportunity to more formally record their thoughts and intentionally connect

II. The Organization and the Work

I serve with the same two homerooms of students (switch classes) every day, and see the cafeteria through their eyes. Della Davidson is 330-335 full-price students as their room for growth, as more of full-price students will allow them to better their

home to 686 students, of whom 48% are on free lunch and 5% are on reduced-price lunch. On an average day, the Della Davidson cafeteria serves lunch to approximately 680 students, with 330 students typically eating free. The cafeteria manager sees the average food offerings. Only a small number, 29 students, participate in reduced-price lunch (Mr. Westmoreland, cafeteria
manager, personal communication, April 25, 2016). The cafeteria received a Bronze Award from the United States Department of Agriculture, under the HealthierUS School Challenge, for its school lunch program in December of 2014, meaning that they are currently working on 30 action items across National School Lunch Program, Smart Snacks in Schools, and physical activity (FNS 2016) (FNS 2015). Nationwide, HUSSC schools are assessed on meal patterns and have recently increased emphasis on nutrition education. As a result of its awardee status, the Della Davidson cafeteria receives an additional six cents reimbursement per meal from the USDA (FNS 2015). Halfway through the 2015-2016 school year, the cafeteria manager left and had to be replaced. There was a clear variation in the quality and variety of the meals during this period. Cafeteria workers frequently transfer between Oxford School District schools: Bramlett Elementary, Oxford Elementary, Della Davidson Elementary, Oxford Intermediate, Oxford Middle School, and Oxford High (Jackie Leopard, Della Davidson teacher, personal communication, April 25, 2016). On the national level, as the debate over the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 showed, cafeterias participating in the NSLP are a large component of food product suppliers’ business, as billion-dollar suppliers from Schwan to ConAgra demonstrated in their lobbying against HHFKA passage (Confessore, 2014). For example, since these HHFKA reforms, NSLP cafeterias no longer aim only to feed children, but to educate them about healthful habits.

Additionally, there is a high level of community involvement in the nutrition and health programming of Oxford School District schools, with Good Food for Oxford Schools and RebelWell both participating in many initiatives for students: assemblies, classroom presentations, food distribution, activities, and more. For example, RebelWell (a collaborative effort of UM and BlueCross/BlueShield) sends graduate students to deliver whole fruit to each classroom for “Fresh Fruit Fridays,” when the graduate students speak to students about the fruit of the week and its health benefits. They also distribute cards with recipes that can be made using the fruit.

III. Methods

To conduct this study, I formalized my typical conversations with the students from asking about what they like and why they chose what they did to administering a single survey to each student in the classroom on a single day, regarding their school lunch experience. The survey can be found in Appendix A. The survey was developed after consulting other student perception surveys in the literature and aimed to understand both their receptivity to school lunches and what school lunches taught them about nutrition and balanced meals using a
simplified Likert scale (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2013). In addition, a photo of each students’ tray was also taken on the day of survey administration, to gauge what types of food were most consumed and most wasted.

IV. Findings

Of my 21 students, eight seat cafeteria lunch five days a week, while 11 eat lunch once every two weeks or once a week. Only four agreed that cafeteria food is healthy; 9 students disagreed with the statement “I think food in the cafeteria is healthy” (6 did not care). Ten students responded that they do not eat fruit every day, while 12 students responded that they do not eat vegetables every day. Regarding food waste concerns stemming from Offer Versus Serve provisions, six students agreed with the statement “the cafeteria makes me take fruit and vegetables, but I don’t eat them.” However, six students agreed that “the cafeteria makes me take fruit and vegetables, and I eat them, but I wouldn’t take them if they didn’t make me.” This finding supports the increased fruit and vegetable consumption found by Terry-McElrath et al., 2015, p. 53.

Focusing on the cafeteria’s performance teaching healthy eating habits, “the cafeteria teaches me about what food is and isn’t good for me,” only three students agreed, while ten disagreed. In addition, student responses on the acceptability of different products for fulfilling the fruit and vegetable requirements of the HHFKA were condemnatory: 11 students disagreed that a slushee is fruit and 15 disagreed that pizza is a vegetable, though both are compliant under regulation (Confessore, 2014).

Furthermore, when evaluating the pictures of my students’ trays, it becomes clear that regardless of whether the lunch was packed at home or served by the cafeteria, more students finished their fruits than their vegetables. Of the six students who chose black eyed peas as their vegetable, only one finished them; none of the seven students choosing corn and peppers finished this vegetable side, though they universally consumed a larger proportion than those choosing black eyed peas. Two students also took cucumber slices, and each ate roughly half the cup. The bananas, orange slices, peach slices, and apples chosen by students were universally finished or nearly finished by the 10 students who chose them; only one student did not finish the apple. Five students chose fruit juice instead of whole fruit. The four students who brought lunches from home widely consumed their fruit (only one student did not), but only one of the four brought vegetables.

V. Lessons and Recommendations

The levels of waste observed photographically- low fruit waste, medium to high vegetable waste, and
medium to low entree waste- align with the findings of Byker et al. (Byker et al., 204, p. 408-410). Overall, the meal options served- main dishes (chicken nuggets or pepperoni pizza) with vegetables (black eyed peas, corn, assorted crudites) and fruit (banana, Granny Smith apple, or peaches), salad bar, or sandwich box (with chips and yogurt)- align with HHFKA requirements for diverse offerings in Offer Versus Serve (Thiagarajah et al., 2015). However, the absence of individualized student tracking indicated that the Della Davidson cafeteria is not compliant with regulations regarding the subcomponents of weekly fruit and vegetable servings for students. Weekly requirements for diverse vegetable groups and limits on fruit juice consumption are not enforced. I’ve seen the same student choose juice to fulfill their fruit requirement every day of the week that I attend lunch with the students (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday). According to HHFKA regulations, students are only supposed to have no more than half of their fruit in juice a week, not twice daily cartons I’ve seen consumed (FNS 2013). While this does provide students with a more sugar-dense fruit consumption than HHFKA aims to provide, it does effectively provide the vitamins and fruit exposure that HHFKA values. After noting this area of noncompliance, however, I wondered how a cafeteria would possibly monitor a students’ weekly consumption of different vegetable types and level of fruit juice; the cafeteria can easily track how much of each menu category is served, but tracking individual consumption would require the daily logging of each students’ meal into a database and cafeteria workers to alter students’ lunches should they not be compliant at the end of the week. This would undermine the spirit of the current Offer Versus Serve program, which requires cafeterias to offer fully compliant meals but does not force students to take all options; it would also create additional personnel needs and food waste, as options students served themselves that were not compliant towards the end of the week would have to be wasted as they were replaced with compliant subgroups. The Della Davidson cafeteria performs strongly when providing generally nutritious meals, but fails regarding some of the specifics of HHFKA implementation. However, some of these failures, such as too much juice, promote the popularity of the program, and - in my eyes - are an acceptable compromise to promote generally nutritious habits with minor indulgences.

Moreover, significant dissonance from the body of research was found in students’ perceptions of whole grains. Thiagarajah et al. found that the most substantial student resistance was to whole grains, but my students expressed stronger dislike of vegetable products when asked “what is your least favorite meal item in the cafeteria?”
Whole grain noodle products were found to have the lowest levels of student acceptance in the research, but only one of my students listed noodles as their least favorite cafeteria food. Four listed salad or broccoli as their favorite. This variation from the research is potentially explained by the age of the students in question. As third graders, they never participated in a school lunch program that was not governed under HHFKA, so they only know fruit and vegetable-dense lunches with whole grain offerings, while the students surveyed by Byker et al. underwent the transition from pre-HHFKA to HHFKA-compliant meals (Byker et al., 2014, p. 407).

The photograph and survey findings coalesce around the primary need to better the consumption of vegetable offerings, with a secondary focus on fruit consumption. When examined in conjunction with community health and wellness initiatives like Fresh Fruit Fridays, which started in the last nine weeks and has been widely popular with the students, I recommend a similar program for vegetables. Students are excited for the visitors who come on Fridays and see fruit in class as a special treat. Additionally, Good Food for Oxford Schools presentations, which occur once every semester, are highly anticipated and are celebrated by students. The effect of both of these types of programs, which interrupt the typical school day, may be partly due to the excitement they bring, in addition to their informational value, but this does not diminish their ability to better the nutritional habits of students. Similar programs, sponsored by RebelWell or Good Food for Oxford School, focusing on vegetables would likely help decrease student waste of vegetables chosen under Offer Versus Serve.

Finally, recognizing the pivotal role of the local community is key when considering the implementation of similar initiatives nationally. Successful programming requires community investment through time, physical presence, and finances. The receptivity of Oxford third graders is likely attributable to popular programming that can be replicated in communities with sufficient critical levels of parent, business, and nonprofit activity and investment.

REFERENCES


Confessore, Nicholas. (2014, October 12). How school lunch became the


APPENDIX A

Figure 1. Student Questionnaire

Your Opinion on the Cafeteria

1. Where do you usually get your lunch?
   - My family makes it at home
   - From the cafeteria
   - My family buys it at a store or restaurant

2. I eat food from the cafeteria:
   - Every day
   - At least once a week (one or more days a week)
   - A couple of times a month
   - Never

3. I eat breakfast in the cafeteria.
   - Yes / No

4. I eat lunch in the cafeteria.
   - Yes / No

5. I like the food in the cafeteria.
   - Agree
   - Don’t Care
   - Disagree

6. I like the food in the cafeteria more than the food at home.
   - Agree
   - Don’t Care
   - Disagree

7. What are three words you would use to describe food in the cafeteria?
   1. ________________
   2. ________________
   3. ________________

8. What is your favorite meal in the cafeteria?
   1. Why do you like it?
   2. Why do you not like it?

9. What is your least favorite meal in the cafeteria?
   1. Why do you like it?

10. I think the food in the cafeteria is healthy.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

11. I think the food in the cafeteria is healthier than the food I eat at home.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

12. I think the food at home is healthier than the food in the cafeteria.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

13. I eat fruit every day in the cafeteria.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

14. I eat vegetables every day in the cafeteria.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

15. I eat fruit and vegetables every day in the cafeteria.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

16. The cafeteria makes me take fruit and vegetables, but I don’t eat them.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

17. The cafeteria makes me take fruit and vegetables, and I eat them, but I wouldn’t take them if they didn’t make me.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

18. I think a slushee is fun.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

19. I think pizza is a vegetable.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

20. I like the cafeteria food more than bringing a lunch from home.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

21. The cafeteria does a good job making food.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

22. I wish the cafeteria made more different kinds of foods (food from different countries, with different ingredients, etc.)
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

23. The cafeteria teaches me about what food is and isn’t good for me.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

24. I tell my family about the food I eat in the cafeteria.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree

25. I ask my family to make food using fruits and vegetables like the food I eat in the cafeteria.
    - Agree
    - Don’t Care
    - Disagree