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Moving Beyond Nutrients –
Nurturing Young People’s Social Health and
School Connectedness through Food

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Abstract

Social health is emerging as an important component of health in the 21st century. Food plays a central role in social health on a daily basis, and contributes to the overall quality of life. Despite being deeply intertwined with social life; food practices and social health are rarely researched in health promotion. Young people are often a focus in food studies, yet less often is their social health within this realm explored. A comprehensive settings-based health promotion approach, as a promising strategy for addressing future health challenges, embraces an ecological and holistic perspective by acknowledging the interconnectedness between people and their environments; with schools being key sites for promoting young people's health. This thesis integrates these perspectives and frames food practices as important for social health by investigating the ways in which food practices foster school connectedness in young people.

A critical ethnographic methodology was used to explore in depth everyday food practices within a school setting. One year of fieldwork was carried out in an all-girls secondary school in New Zealand, and included participant observation and interviews as key data collection techniques. This approach gave insight into the habitual, everyday food practices within the school, and allowed the observation and attendance of school food events throughout the year, thereby incorporating seasonal variability and celebratory customs. The participants included 16 to 18-year-old students and their teachers.

The thesis highlights that food practices play a vital role in social health, and are tacit but important vehicles for young people's social relationships. The findings show that food rituals enable young people to establish, maintain, and strengthen peer relationships in everyday interactions. The findings also suggest that food practices foster young people's school connectedness. Food practices in class- or school-bound structures contribute to school connectedness through enabling people to see their common humanity, creating an

informal environment, encouraging sharing, enabling inclusive participation, demonstrating sacrifice of time and effort, and allowing people to experience diversity. The results show how food practices can influence social health in a single setting, and suggest how the existing health-promoting schools framework can utilise food practices for social health gains. The findings support the value of a whole-school approach to health by highlighting the interconnectedness and synergies that may arise from a holistic approach in settings-based health promotion.

Overall this research suggests that focusing on social health aligns with health promotion goals and values, and indicates that deliberate health promotion activities related to food have the potential to contribute to social health dimensions. This thesis makes practical and theoretical advances in health promotion. Theoretically the thesis provides evidence for the benefits of viewing food practices through a social lens that extends how food is traditionally researched in health promotion, and proposes a way forward for holistic nutrition promotion. Social health, it is argued, forms a valid independent component of health alongside mental and physical health that is worthy of exploring in food studies. The research also contributes to health promotion practice by systematically exploring the potential for settings-based approaches and offering insight into food practices within a key setting for youth health promotion. This thesis provides an important contribution for understanding the mechanisms by which school food practices may contribute to school connectedness as a protective factor for young people's overall health and educational achievement.

Preface

“Food touches everything.

Food is the foundation of every economy.

It is a central pawn in political strategies of
states and households. Food marks social differences,
boundaries, bonds, and contradictions.

Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family,
and community relationships.”

(Counihan & Van Esterik, 1997, p. 1)

This thesis is about food and social relationships. It goes beyond thinking of food in terms of nutrients, and considers how food may be used to nurture our social health. My own experiences and interests inspired the topic of this thesis. The two key factors that brought me to this topic were my exposure to the relevant research during my undergraduate studies and my personal passion for sharing food with family and friends.

During my undergraduate studies in health sciences I developed an interest in young people, food, and schools. I became interested in the health-promoting schools concept as part of the healthy settings approach in health promotion, and gravitated towards nutrition interventions due to my personal interest in nutrition. One thing I noticed was a persistent negative tone in the literature, inevitably characterised by a strong voice arguing that young people did not comply with nutrition standards, or bewailing the quality of their diets. While I absolutely agree that a nutritious diet is pivotal, especially for a young person’s growing body, I felt dissatisfied with the negative energy surrounding young people and food practices. I felt like there must be a more positive aspect to the story about young people and food.

Another important aspect that contributed to my selection of this topic was my personal passion for cooking and sharing food. To me food is something beautiful: it is something to experiment with, something out of which to create wonderful dishes, and then to share them with the people I love and care for. Since my childhood I have always loved baking, and sharing the finished products with family, classmates, and teachers. I have always loved sitting with friends or family over a meal, sharing stories, and reminiscing over shared memories. Equally I have always found that food enables me to break barriers with people, establish new relationships, and help create a common point of interest. Reflecting on these little joys in my everyday life, I came to realise that precisely the same routines and rituals provide structure and security (or not) to many of our lives, and are used in relationships, in good and bad ways, all over the world.

My personal interest in food as something that enabled me to connect to people, interlinked with my knowledge of how important schools and social relationships are for young people, initiated my thinking on this topic. Because of my strong personal interest in this, I had to remind myself to remain critical of the subject, and not idealise the role food plays in “everybody’s” life. Equally, however, I was confident that food played at least some role in everyone’s life, and that I could use this knowledge to find evidence, or not, that food practices play a role in young people’s social relationships. Once I started reading about young people and research paradigms, I realised that there was an approach underpinning my ideas; a strengths-based positive youth development approach to the health of young people. This research paradigm, combined with my awareness of, and frustration with, the dominant negative voice in research about young people and food, set me on the journey of discovering whether a social food practice perspective may shed more positive light on young people’s food practices. This integration of my personal and academic interests into one endeavour represents to date the most fulfilling professional project I have accomplished.

Thesis Aim and Research Questions

The overarching aim of this thesis was to develop an understanding of how food impacts on social health, specifically through exploring how food practices may promote young people's social relationships and school connectedness in a secondary school setting.

The specific research questions were:

1. How do young people use food practices to establish, maintain, and strengthen their social relationships?
2. How may food practices promote school connectedness?
3. Are food practices a viable strategy for a whole-school approach to building school connectedness?

Thesis Structure

The thesis is presented in ten chapters. Five chapters are written as journal articles (Chapters 2, 4, 7, 8, and 9); the remaining five bind the thesis to a coherent story. The journal articles are written in the style of the journals to which they were submitted, but have been reformatted to conform with the style of this thesis, and the references from those chapters have been included in the full reference list. Introductions to these chapters link them to the overall thesis narrative.

The first five chapters frame the thesis. Chapter 1 presents an argument for researching social health in health promotion, and illustrates this through a discussion of the role food has for social health. Chapter 2, submitted to *Public Health Ethics* builds on the importance of social health from a nutrition promotion perspective, and argues that a biopsychosocial frame in nutrition promotion would add scope and value to current nutrition promotion endeavours that primarily investigate physical health. Chapter 3 introduces the approach to youth health promotion adopted in this thesis, highlighting the

importance of social relationships for young people's health. Chapter 4 presents a thematic synthesis of young people's social relationships and food practices, published in *Appetite*. In Chapter 5 an ecological, settings-based health-promoting schools approach for promoting school connectedness is introduced, and evidence is included that indicates the value of food for promoting school connectedness. Chapter 6 presents the methodology and methods used in the study.

Chapter 7, submitted and currently under review in *Health Promotion International*, is the first of three results papers, and explores the use of food rituals in young people's everyday school lives. Chapter 8, the second results paper, is in press for *Health Education*, and examines how shared lunches within the school, a phenomenon that emerged from the data, contributed to school connectedness. The third results paper, also in press for *Health Education*, uses an ecological health-promoting schools lens to identify how food practices may act as a strategy for promoting school connectedness, and develops a framework to guide future endeavours in this area. The final chapter, Chapter 10, draws the argument of the thesis together. It summarises key findings and contributions to the literature, reflects on the research methodology, discusses implications for health promotion practice, and suggests areas for future research. Finally the thesis reflects on its findings and how they contribute to a holistic approach to nutrition promotion.

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