

Bloomsbury Food Library – Introducing Food Studies

An Introduction to food policy in schools across Europe

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Introduction:

Schools are considered key for both feeding children and influencing future food, health, and lifestyle behaviours, that track into adulthood. Children across Europe spend on average 190 days each year in school, consuming more than a third of their meals there, making schools a significant public spending cost, and a powerful setting where food norms are created. But school food environments are not always conducive to healthy eating, nor are the food messages children receive consistent or coherent. Therefore, school food policy has a unique and crucial role in ensuring schools become healthy, protective spaces that promote child health, and equip children with the skills and knowledge to be healthy.

Despite its long scholarly history, school food policy lacks formal definition and consensus as to what it includes. Wider food policy is defined as the strategies, legislation, laws, directives, guidelines, regulations, programmes, or voluntary initiatives that influence the food that is produced, consumed, and disposed. For this article, this applies to schools. Development and implementation of policies about food in school involve a complicated system of institutions, organisations, infrastructure, procedures, and people. Mandatory or voluntary policies can be delivered across levels of governance from high level international agencies such as the World Health Organisation, national, regional, or local governments, or by a school. The policy mix across governance levels is unique to each country, region, and school reflective of their food cultures and issues, as school communities adapt food practices, cultures and rules to the children and families they serve.

This article summarises European school food policy, highlighting interdisciplinary studies from across anthropology, policy studies, history, sustainability, social justice and more. It defines school food policy, then examines the core topics of school meals and food education, concluding with resources to support further studies.

Overview:

School food policy has a long history in health and obesity policymaking as schools were identified as far back as the 1900's as vital sites of educating children about healthy living. Although, historically considered beyond traditional food systems governance, school food policy is increasingly acknowledged as a key tool to address food, health, and climate change issues concurrently, alongside wider social issues including food security, culture, and community. The study of school food policy spans sociology, public health and nutrition, history, economics, education, and anthropology, with many increasingly taking a trans-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary perspective, reflective of food's natural interdisciplinary nature and the sheer complexity of food in school.

Much of the literature focuses on the school meals in America, but Europe equally presents a rich collection of studies of school food policy, with scholarship predominantly focused on school meals and food education. The World Health Organisation's (WHO) Health Promoting Framework (2006) provides a broad conception of food policy in schools, albeit from a health, rather than comprehensive food perspective. Taking a systems approach, it identifies community, curriculums, school environment and health and nutrition services as vital pillars. In practice, this includes traditional food-based policies (school meal provision, food or nutrient standards, lunch box and snacking policies and vending machines), education policies such as curriculums, extracurricular activities, allergy policies, and increasingly school sustainability and climate change education.

The volume of texts concerned with comprehensive school food policy topics is limited. Instead, specific areas of school food policy are included within wider disciplinary texts. *Food Policy in the UK* (Caraher et al., 2023) provides a narrative analysis of UK public sector food initiatives, including school meals, whilst *Eating out in Europe* (Jacobs, 2003) includes an historical, anthropological analysis of school lunch in France.

Most scholarship takes a disciplinary approach to school food policy largely focused on school meals (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008; Rutledge, 2016). But there is an emerging body of comprehensive, interdisciplinary work. *Food Futures in Education and Society* (Lalli et al., 2023) includes an historical analysis of Irish curriculum, nutrition and sustainability education, the pedagogical opportunities, and social benefits of school meals and more. Meanwhile, emerging foundational work by Bryant et al., (2022) analyses the UK school food system to identify the factors affecting primary school children's food choices and the facilitation of a comprehensive approach to school food policy implementation.

School meals, as a distinct and core aspect of school food policy, became of interest in the early nineteenth century as compulsory schooling spread across Europe. The unintended consequence of this highlighted the extent of child hunger and malnutrition that prevented children living in

crippling poverty from fully participating in their education. This led to the birth of school meal policy in France, Italy, and England, that eventually spread across Europe. Initially carried out by charities and the Church, school meals quickly became a national policy priority when it became clear that a localised, piecemeal approach could not deliver the national public health improvements required.

Health remains a central theme within school meal policy literature, but it has also been studied more broadly, such as examining the impact of meals on poverty, educational engagement or attainment, or wider topics such as the economic return on government investment, procurement practices, decarbonising school meals or interventions. The critical examination of schools revolutionising their meals in Europe and beyond by Morgan and Sonnino (2008) reflects this breadth. By taking a sustainable food systems lens to examine the benefits of school meal reform, the collection spans procurement, food growing, community connections and nutrition guidelines. Meanwhile, Murcott (2019) applies a sociological lens to institutional food, including school meals, and highlights how school meals frequently emerge as solutions to multiple social problems. Examining why school meals are frequently inadequate, it reveals the food system, local and regional food cultures, and the need to consider social structures over individualistic approaches to diet improvement, to impact school meal quality. Ruge et al., (2023) alternatively conducts an exploration of school food policy and practice through the lens of equity and social justice. Driven by a concern that neoliberal mechanisms for school meals prioritise efficiency over an educational school meal, they take the perspective that a school lunch should be delicious, nutritious, and sustainable whilst promoting commensality. The collection examines the impact of school meals on children of Ireland, Polish food culture and the future of school feeding in Norway and includes some examination of curriculum.

Food education is another key element of school food policy, albeit less studied than meals. School food education policy in this article refers to both curriculum guidance from national and regional governments, plus wider school curriculum activities.

Historically, within *Feeding the Nation: Nutrition and Health in Britain Before World War One*, Akiyama (2008) describes how the National Training School of Cookery was established in 1873. Designed as welfare policy to ensure diet and nutrition became a bigger priority, it provided teachers to train girls in cookery and domestic skills at primary schools. This gendered policy approach to food education curriculums continued to address concerns about the social and economic impact of World War 2 (Tull, 2018).

Reflecting shifting societal issues, of European curriculum reform emphasised healthy eating, whilst some countries restructured curriculums into professional, technological courses for food industry careers, or maintained domestically orientated curriculums. In practice, curriculums vary from mandatory comprehensive food skills and knowledge grounded in sustainable diets in Norway, to English health-oriented curriculums (Smith et al., 2022). Despite a long history of food education policy across Europe, debates about its place in the curriculum and the purpose or content of food education, continue. A unique discussion of UK school food policy by Earl (2018) highlights the middle-class discourse of “foodiness” in food education that risks marginalising other food knowledge, potentially causing tension between schools and communities.

Contemporary scholarship is evolving to combine all these approaches under the comprehensive perspective of Food Literacy (Vidgen and Gallegos, 2014) featuring a wide range of skills and knowledge needed to be healthy. Food literacy frameworks expand food education from typical cooking and nutrition to include culture, equity, social justice, and sustainability to inform research, curriculum development and pedagogy. A Sicilian food democracy education initiative connecting children to small local family farms (Counihan, 2018) reflects such as a comprehensive approach. Designed to both educate children and support small scale farmers, the scheme prioritised experiential learning connecting to economics, sustainability, history, health, and farming, bringing the classroom onto the farm and back into lunchtime.

Conclusion:

Given most people go to school, school food policy in Europe represents a rich field of study, inclusive of school meals, food education and elements such as allergy or lunchbox policies. Yet despite a long history in policymaking, scholarship remains underdeveloped, although of interest to multiple research disciplines. Historically developed as welfare policy, contemporary school food policy is evolving to become reflective of food’s interdisciplinary nature, and contemporary societal issues.

The focus of research on school meals provides ample opportunity to expand and deepen understanding of how comprehensive school food policy can support children in the twenty first century. There is a deficit of research about food education policy, especially longitudinal, comparative and policy studies, which are needed to shed light on best practice across Europe. This undeveloped field ultimately makes evidence-based policymaking challenging, presenting an underexplored opportunity to improve outcomes for children.

Points for Consideration:

1. How can school food policy around the world rise to meet the global health, environmental and societal challenges of the twenty-first century?
2. How can education settings balance the tension between addressing school food policy improvements, and their core educational aims?
3. What role does gender have in the history of school food policy and how does that influence policymaking today?
4. What does the history of school food policy in different countries tell us about the social and cultural priorities of governments and wider society?

Recommended Reading:

Key works from the Bloomsbury Food Library platform:

Akiyama, Y. *Feeding the Nation: Nutrition and Health in Britain Before World War One*. London: I.B.Tauris, 2008. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780755696888>

Counihan, C. *Italian Food Activism in Urban Sardinia: Place, Taste, and Community*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474262316>

Jacobs, M. and Scholliers, P. (Ed.). *Eating Out in Europe: Picnics, Gourmet Dining and Snacks since the Late Eighteenth Century*. Oxford: Berg, 2003. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350044838>

Murcott, A. *Introducing the Sociology of Food & Eating*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350022058>

Ruge, D., Torres, I., and Powel, D. (Ed.). *School Food, Equity and Social Justice: Critical Reflections and Perspectives*. Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2022. DOI: <https://www.bloomsburyfoodlibrary.com/encyclopedia?docid=b-9781003112587>

Key works from other sources

Bryant, M., Burton, W., O’Kane, N., Woodside, J. V., Ahern, S., Garnett, P., et al. Understanding school food systems to support the development and implementation of food-based policies and interventions. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 20(1), 1–13, 2023.

Caraher, M., Furey, S., and Wells, R. *Food policy in the United Kingdom: An introduction* Routledge, 2023.

Earl, L. *Schools and food education in the 21st century*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018. DOI:10.4324/9781315228679

Lalli, G. S., Turner, A., and Rutland, M. *Food futures in education and society* Routledge, 2023.

Morgan, K., and Sonnino, R. *The school food revolution: Public food and the challenge of sustainable development* Routledge, 2013.

Rutledge, J. G. *Feeding the future: School lunch programs as global social policy* Rutgers University Press, 2016.

Smith, K., Wells, R., & Hawkes, C. *How primary school curriculums in 11 countries around the world deliver food education and address food literacy: A policy analysis*. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 19(4), 2022. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph19042019

Tull, A. *Food and cooking skills education: Why teach people how to cook?* Routledge, 2018.

World Health Organization Food and Nutrition Policy for Schools: A Tool for the Development of School Nutrition Programmes in the European Region: <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/107797> (November 2024).