

# 'I don't do it for the money, I do it for the kids': Examining school foodservice staff and student interactions using the lens of school connectedness

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## Funding information

The research described in this article was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Amy Rosenthal contributed to this publication in her personal capacity. The views and opinions expressed are her own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA or the United States Government.

## Abstract

This study investigated social interactions between students and school foodservice staff in six US school districts. Qualitative data was analysed from 23 in-depth interviews with school foodservice managers and 17 focus groups in five high schools, seven middle schools and five elementary schools. Applying the lens of school connectedness, findings highlight the various forms of care experienced by students and staff. However, structural constraints limit opportunities for staff and students to interact and demonstrate care, suggesting potential opportunities for interventions to enhance the role of the cafeteria in contributing to students' social-emotional well-being.

## KEYWORDS

cafeteria, care, food and diet, policy and practice, school connectedness

## INTRODUCTION

In this study, we examine the social relationships among foodservice staff and students in K-12 public schools in six US states. Applying a lens of school connectedness, we identify the cafeteria as an important component of the school environment and the foodservice staff as adults with the potential to impact students' social-emotional well-being.

Although interactions with school foodservice staff are a key part of students' experience of lunch period, there has been little formal study of or attention to the social-emotional environment of the cafeteria. Researchers and civil society focus on the foods available in the cafeteria, who has access to them, and how much students consume or waste (see, for example, Byker Shanks et al., 2017; Peckham et al., 2019). Others in the school community, such as teachers and administrators, may overlook the 'non-instructional time' of the lunch period.

When emotions and relationships are examined within the school setting, it is often in the context of teachers and students (Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Wentzel, 1997). These studies show connections between students' emotional experiences at school and educational outcomes. Evidence also suggests that establishing safe and consistent relationships with adults is a valuable remedy for the challenges many youth face and that school staff beyond teachers can play a role as important adults in the lives of students (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Pittman et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2016).

In this paper, we show that school foodservice staff care both *for* and *about* students. Caring *for* describes the social reproductive labour that cafeteria employees do to feed students, namely, preparing and serving meals. Caring *about* describes the affective experiences that motivate this labour—the compassion and often parental-type love that school foodservice staff may feel towards the students that they work with. However, tight budgets, understaffed kitchens and short lunch periods constrain employees' ability to care *for* students in ways that would fully express the extent to which they care *about* them. Further, the relational elements of the school foodservice job are not generally recognised in the time allotted for their tasks, training or compensation. School foodservice staff often go beyond their official job duties in order to care *for* students in a way that corresponds with how they care *about* them.

Students are the recipients of care, and we analyse their perceptions of the care that staff provide in order to understand the barriers to the production of caring relationships. Feeding carries symbolic meanings, and students see the food they receive and the experience of being served as indicative of whether or not staff care *about* them. In some cases, students do feel that school foodservice staff care and may develop positive relationships with workers; in others, they judge foodservice staff as uncaring. We find these reactions are often moderated by students' level of development, as indicated by differences in reactions at different school levels.

Across grades, students respond positively when they feel cared for, creating the basis for meaningful relationships with adults at school (Biag, 2016; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2009; Rowe et al., 2007). However, our findings indicate that the labour necessary to care about students and thus develop and maintain these relationships remains undervalued and is increasingly marginalised due to other pressures faced in schools, notably time and budget constraints. In this article, we highlight the need for policy and practices as well as associated labour conditions that can support staff to create positive, caring environments that promote school connectedness and ultimately the social and emotional well-being of all stakeholders.

## **SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AND NON-INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF**

While schools have always been a place for much more than learning, educators, parents and advocates have grown increasingly concerned with the role of schools in supporting children's overall well-being, both to further their learning and as an end in itself (Graham et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2018). The types and quality of interactions among students and between students and teachers and other staff have been recognised as important to facilitating students'

feelings of belonging at school, which contribute to their attendance, academic success and socio-emotional learning (Allen et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2012; Hurd et al., 2018; Rowe et al., 2007).

Many terms have been used to describe students' relationship to school and the other people there, including school engagement, bonding, climate and attachment (Libbey, 2004; Waters et al., 2009). We use the term 'school connectedness' to refer to the social bonds that school community members feel with one another and the school community overall, which are important to students' well-being (Biag, 2016; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2009; Rowe et al., 2007).

Expressions of 'care' are integral to school connectedness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) defines school connectedness as the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals (p. 3). It recommends 'creat[ing] trusting and caring relationships' among all members of the school community as a means of increasing school connectedness and improving protective factors among youth (p. 15). Similarly, Rowe et al. (2007) suggest that students' experience of 'positive, caring interactions and relationships' (p. 532) is key to developing school connectedness.

The school relationships most frequently discussed and explored in educational literature are those between teachers and students. But studies often suggest that staff beyond teachers can and do play a role in supporting students and their sense of connection to school (Allen et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2018; Waters et al., 2009). Pittman et al. (2020) argue that 'a young person's learning and development is shaped in positive and negative ways by both the simple and the sustained interactions they have with the adults in their life', which includes those they engage with both 'on a regular basis' and 'in more targeted ways' (p. 1039). However, the contributions to school connectedness of specific types of staff and their respective activities has not been fully explored (Pittman et al., 2020; Waters et al., 2009).

Only a very few researchers have at all considered the school foodservice staff and their relationships with students. Stratford and Bradley (2019) note that they had not anticipated finding 'the value of having a more nurturing start to the school day' as a positive outcome of a school breakfast programme. Similarly, Haesly et al. (2014) included 'impact on social relations' as a construct to investigate when evaluating a school breakfast intervention and found that the programme built relationships between the staff and students. More broadly, Jennifer Gaddis (2019) describes the struggle of cafeteria workers to 'care well' for their students and their willingness to make personal and financial sacrifices to do so.

## METHODS

### Procedure

This paper presents findings from a secondary analysis of data collected as part of PreK-12 School Food: Making It Healthier, Making It Regional (MHMR), an exploratory project to better understand the experiences of stakeholders in schools and school districts serving healthier and regional foods. MHMR was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and conducted by School Food Focus and FoodCorps.<sup>1</sup> We used a critical research paradigm integrating ethnography and phenomenology, suitable for the exploratory and process-oriented nature of our questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). We selected the main mechanism of data collection, the interview, to better understand school foodservice processes from the perspectives of those

involved and to solicit their opinions (Mack et al., 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). We used observation and informal conversations with school foodservice staff to collect data and inform our understanding of school kitchens and cafeterias as well as to triangulate what we heard in interviews (Patton, 1999).

Our convenience sample of six school districts came from the 22 districts active with School Food Focus. We invited districts to participate based on their experience with procurement of healthier and/or regional foods and to reflect diversity in number of students enrolled and school district setting (i.e. both urban and suburban). (See Table 1.) In Phase 1 of the MHMR project, we conducted observations of school foodservice operations and interviewed a total of 23 cafeteria managers. Twenty of these interviewees were identified by the research team as women, and the staff they managed was almost entirely made up of women as well.<sup>2</sup> These 20–45 min interviews focused on the respondent's perspectives on healthy and regional foods in the school cafeteria.

In Phase 2 of the project, we visited two to four schools in each district and conducted a total of 17 focus group interviews in five high schools, seven middle schools and five elementary schools (see Table 2.) School staff or faculty chose the students who would participate (often those enrolled in a cooking or agriculture programme or members of the student council), and we only interviewed students whose parents had signed a consent form.

Focus groups took place during the school day and lasted 45 to 90 min. In each interview session, the students began by drawing their responses to prompts about the typical school lunch, a healthy lunch and the experience of the cafeteria (Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Honkanen et al., 2018; Nomakhwezi Mayaba & Wood, 2015). The facilitator then led an open-ended discussion in which students used these drawings as a starting point to explain their experiences with and reactions to school meals, including the cafeteria.

## Analysis

As we reviewed transcripts of foodservice staff interviews and student focus groups as part of our primary analysis for the MHMR project, student experience of the cafeteria emerged as a salient theme worth further exploration. To do so, we used phenomenological analytic strategies and a grounded theory approach, based on the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser, 1965). Grounded theory seeks to offer explanation rather than generalisations, through

**TABLE 1** MHMR participating school district details, 2016–17 school year

District location	Total student enrollment	Students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (%)	Lunch participation (%)
Florida	186 332	68	60
Georgia	180 000	54	70
Iowa	32 979	74	66
Kentucky	100 063	68	68
South Carolina	17 301	35	68
Virginia	89 901	40	62

*Note:* Data on student enrollment and students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch comes from the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Each district provided its lunch participation rate (the average percentage of students participating in the National School Lunch Program each day).

TABLE 2 Demographic characteristics of participating students and schools, 2016–17 school year

District location	School level	Number of students in interview	Age range of students in interview	Students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (school %)	Lunch participation (school %)
Florida	High	6	15–17	53	37
	Middle	5	12–14	52	43
	Elementary	3	6–8	100	98
Georgia	High	4	16–19	76	—
	Middle	3	13	26	—
	Middle	6	12–13	88	—
	Elementary	8	10–11	30	—
Iowa	Middle	8	11–14	78	92
	Elementary	7	8–10	83	—
Kentucky	High	7	15–18	32	35
	Middle	7	11–15	47	67
	Elementary	7	8–11	60	71
South Carolina	High	5	16–17	18	76
	Middle	3	11–12	55	69
	Elementary	6	8–11	100	77
Virginia	High	4	16–17	45	63
	Middle	7	11–12	53	82

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Total Students	Age range (mean, standard deviation)	Students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (school %) <sup>a</sup>	Lunch participation (school %) <sup>b</sup>
	96	6–19 (12.3, 3.3)	58	67
High	26	15–19 (16.4, 1.0)	45	53
Middle	39	11–15 (12.4, 1.1)	57	71
Elementary	31	6–11 (9.4, 1.3)	74	82

Note: Data on students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch comes from the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Each district provided lunch participation rates. Lunch participation rate data were not provided for schools in the Georgia district or for the elementary school in Iowa.

<sup>a</sup>Average of participating schools.

<sup>b</sup>Average of participating schools.

an ongoing process of continuous revision and refinement of theory as more information is gained (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). First, we developed a set of initial codes based on prior observations and discussion (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2009). Each author then read a set of transcripts, reviewed others' work and together discussed any coding revisions and emerging themes until reaching theoretical saturation (Bradley et al., 2007; Glaser, 1965).

## **FINDINGS: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FOODSERVICE STAFF AND STUDENTS**

### **The cafeteria context**

The structure of the school meals programme shapes the context within which students and foodservice workers interact. U.S. schools provide food at school through various federal programmes, the largest being the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). In order for a school to receive reimbursement for the meals it serves, it must meet regulations set by the federal government (covering, for example, food procurement and nutritional quality).

The per-meal federal reimbursement does not necessarily cover the full cost of food, labour and administration (Fox & Gearan, 2019). Spending on food must be balanced with spending on labour, and in order to purchase higher-quality foods, meal programmes may try to contain staff wages and hours. As of 2020, the mean hourly wage for food preparation workers was \$12.53 per hour, and most of these positions are part-time (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.).

Several of the cafeterias we visited in this study were understaffed, which combines negatively with the naturally time-pressured nature of food service. School foodservice tasks include preparing and serving food, processing student transactions and cleaning and maintaining the kitchen facilities (School Nutrition Association, n.d.). The school food service workers we spoke with and observed felt intense time pressure to complete their required duties in time within their limited daily hours and especially in time for meal service.

As they serve, staff must be aware of the many regulations that must be followed. A student's lunch must contain at least three of the five possible food group components and at least one must be a fruit or vegetable (Final Rule: Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch & School Breakfast Programs, 2012). Staff must be sure to serve the appropriate portion size, and they must make sure students take the items that reflect the appropriate combination of meal components.

Because of understaffing, there may not be an optimal number of staff to serve and restock the food during the lunch period. We observed and heard descriptions of very long lunch lines and bottlenecks that may arise as staff have to leave the line to restock an item. Staff described feeling a responsibility to serve students as quickly as possible so that all could go through the line during their lunch period. Many of the students we spoke to also felt time pressure associated with lunch, as they want to quickly get their food to maximise time eating and socialising with their peers.

### **Staff care**

We found that even within this pressure-filled cafeteria environment, school foodservice staff care both for and about students. Caring *for* takes place as staff do their jobs—they provide for the physical needs of students by preparing and serving food (as well as completing the ancillary

tasks related to the school food programme, such as doing paperwork). For some workers, this is the limit of what they do: they are paid to do these tasks and thus they provide this type of care.

But for many school foodservice staff we interviewed, their concern about what they do goes beyond what might be strictly expected by the bounds of the job. As the manager of a middle school put it:

So you have people who care and then you have people here for the paycheck, but it's like that everywhere ... I think I'm lucky that I think a good portion of my staff do care. Because I care and I portray it, this is my home away from my kids ... And yes, I do really care about what we're doing and so I try to ... make it so these kids get what they deserve.

Another middle school manager, asked whether her team takes pride in feeding the kids, agreed, saying, 'Very much so ... They pay very close attention to detail and care about everything'.

Underlying their attention to the tasks of caring *for* is the staff's care *about* students. For example, ensuring the safety of the food served is a basic component of caring adequately *for* students. But a comment by an elementary school manager, talking about the strict food safety protocols the kitchen staff must follow, shows the relational element underneath this responsibility: 'You serve those kids like it's your own child, or you serve it like it's your niece or you serve it like it's one of your family members'. Staff members' approach to their work goes beyond adherence to regulations or a desire to one's job adequately. Warmth, affection and other emotions colour how many of the staff in our study go about their work.

Caring *about* their students motivates foodservice staff to not only do their job but also to work hard. As noted above, foodservice staff often work under intense time pressure and potentially in cramped, loud, hot conditions. One manager explained that 'you have to like kids to be in this profession' because 'you're always doing something. We are hardly ever sitting down. It's 300% go go go'. Another manager, when asked if her staff feel adequately compensated given the difficulty of the job, said, 'No. Probably not enough, but I say I don't do it for the money, I do it for the kids'.

This manager also described coming in early and working off-the-clock to make sure everything would go well for each day's lunch. Other managers confirmed that the needs of the students might motivate staff to do extra work. As school meal programmes adapt menus to be healthier, especially by serving more freshly-prepared items, more involved food preparation may be required of foodservice staff. In a kitchen where staff had been asked to prepare more fresh produce (without corresponding increases in wages or hours), a manager explained, 'Some still say "this is ridiculous, more work", but for the most part we've tried to realise it's a positive thing for the kids. It might cause us a little more work, but in the end we're taking care of the kids'.

School foodservice staff care *about* students also manifests in the ways they recognise and attend to students' needs beyond physical nourishment. School foodservice staff show concern for students' current and future health in their desire to serve healthy foods and inspire healthy eating habits. One cafeteria manager noted that she and her coworkers are 'really passionate' about not just 'making sure that every child gets fed' but 'gets fed a good, healthy meal'. Even when this might mean more work for the staff, 'They know they have to do it because of the child, and they're willing to do whatever'.

A few managers explained their work to serve healthy food by framing themselves in a parental role, implying an attendant care about and sense of responsibility for students. A middle school manager said, 'I'm teaching my [own] kids to eat healthy and going in that route. So for



me, it makes me happy we're serving these types of foods [at school]. The foods have more whole grain,... lower sugar, lower sodium. It's all for our benefit. Kids don't see it that way but one day, when they continue to grow and learn, they'll probably appreciate it then'. Foodservice staff also expressed a sense that they may have to provide in place of parents who cannot. Explaining their efforts to get young students to try vegetables, an elementary school manager said, 'You need to introduce the vegetables. I think some parents aren't feeding them this at home, so that's a plus'.

Several staff members referred to the importance of students having a positive experience in the cafeteria. While this may be in part motivated by the need for student participation in the meal programme to help their bottom line, managers also expressed concern for fairness and students' happiness that seemed to go beyond simple provision of good customer service. A few managers commented on the importance of making enough of each item so that all students would have access to the same food options. One manager described a day when they served watermelon, a special item that she knew students enjoyed, but did not have enough: 'What we did, so everyone would have some, is we would cut pieces and we would put a half of an orange and then give them the other half with watermelon ... A lot of times it still wouldn't be enough. It's just so unfair to the kids'. Another stressed her concern about making the foods look appealing to students, describing that she spent extra time to improve the appearance of the macaroni and cheese. When the students found it appealing, she thought, 'Oh God, thank goodness you love it'.

Staff members also described showing care about and for students' social and emotional needs as they witness them in the cafeteria. How they provided this care varied in response to students' developmental needs. Younger students call forth more maternal affect and emotions. Elementary school managers frequently used the word 'love' in reference to both their job and their students. One manager who had previously worked in a high school explained that she enjoyed that job, 'but I love the little babies. I do. I just can't help it'.

Based on their reports and our observations as researchers, elementary school managers and staff warmly interacted with the students as they went through the lunch line. One explained, 'You're also that little mentor to the little people, to the elementary kids. There's that kid that always comes up to you and wants to know something about maybe their outfit, or tell you about their day. Or they're upset, and you're the one that maybe gives them a hug'. In one elementary school with a population of deaf students, the foodservice staff had learned some sign language to be able to communicate.

Managers treat older students with less obvious affection and more respect for their developing sense of autonomy. In middle and high school, staff demonstrated their warmth for students by calling them by name, asking how they were doing, or telling them to have a nice day. One high school manager noted, 'The kids like [being called by name.] The kids like being recognised'. Staff members may even joke with students, as one high school manager reported doing in order to get them to try unfamiliar fruits and vegetables.

Managers might still look out for older students' social and emotional well-being, albeit in different ways. A middle school manager described that she and her colleagues are attuned to what students are experiencing and will support them:

I still have some [students] come back here and want to eat. 'Ms. Karen, can I have lunch with you today?' Because they didn't want to sit at their table because somebody was bothering them, bullying them, so we'll sit here and have lunch together ... [If] they need me, come on by.

This manager had previously worked in a high school, where she said of the students, ‘You could talk to those kids like they were yours. We were their mothers, their mentors, their counselors, we knew if they were pregnant before anybody else knew, if they needed to talk, they could confide in us’.

## Student care

Across the K-12 spectrum, students demonstrated that they value being cared for and feeling cared about by staff, and alternatively, that they are disappointed when they perceive a lack of care. In the social environment of the school cafeteria, students interpret both the food and the service as evidence of how staff feel about them. When students do not feel cared about—that is to say, their expectations for respect and affection from the staff are not met—it is interpreted negatively. Alternatively, when staff express or demonstrate concern for their health and safety or for the student experience, students appreciate this care. Responses among students at different grade levels reflect their shifting attitudes and abilities of expression over the course of their development, as well as the different ways staff express their care about students of various ages.

The elementary schoolers in our study expressed both an awareness and appreciation of staff members’ efforts to care about them, with one observing: ‘Every time you go through the lunch line, the people here are very kind. They always welcome me, they’re always saying hi’. Another said, ‘Our old lunch lady that used to be at the counter, she’s my next-door neighbor, so she would always say, “Have a good day, [student name]”. So I’m like, “Thanks, you too”. She was really nice, too... They make you feel welcome’. These students not only notice the efforts of the staff to be pleasant but also remarked at how they feel welcome in their lunch room. Further, when care or kindness is not reciprocated by some students among this group of elementary schoolers, it is noticed with concern by other students. As one student noted, ‘There’s some boys that can be really nice, like are sweet, and then there are some others that are just mean... They’re not appreciative’.

At the elementary level, students may feel cared for when provided with suggestions and reminders for their meal; this is perceived as helpful and that staff care about the students’ well-being. One student explained, ‘Say that you just get the main meal, they’ll tell you to go back and get something, like some fruit or vegetable or something else, because they really care about what you eat and what goes in your body, and they want you to have what’s best and what’s healthy’. Another group of elementary schoolers saw indicators of food safety protocols (i.e. hats and gloves) as evidence that the staff prepare the food with care. In our sample, elementary schoolers were less likely to identify specific instances of lack of care compared to older students, but they did note incidents of less careful food presentation and service.

Middle school students also perceive foodservice as a proxy for care, both positively and negatively. The contextual factors that structure the lunch experience, especially the short lunch period found in most of the schools in this study, influence students’ interactions with the food-service staff and their sense of whether staff care about them.

Middle school students described their lunch as rushed, without adequate time to calmly go through the lunch line, eat and interact with their friends. The fast-paced nature of meal service makes interaction between foodservice staff and students both limited in duration and more transactional. As one student described, ‘The cafeteria ladies, they try rushing through every student. They’re like, “Oh, what’s your name? Okay. Go ... Go”’.

Many students also expressed a sense that lunch ladies are irritated, and students do not want to anger them further by interacting with them. Some students thought that if they slowed down the line with requests or questions, foodservice staff might punish them by giving less food or worse portions. For example, one student described: 'If you get specific, then they get all ballistic on you and then do the opposite of what you asked them to do'.

The role of foodservice staff in enforcing meal programme regulations also influences students' interactions with them. Several students described instances of foodservice staff giving them 'stingy' portions or forcing them to take certain food items, which they interpreted as representative of a lack of care about the students' desires and needs. Some students recognised that the staff might have students' interests in mind, but most did not seem to know anything about the rules or structures, such as the federal requirements regarding portion sizes or serving fruits and vegetables, that require certain staff behaviours. As one student explained, 'They probably think they're trying to help us [by making us take fruits and vegetables] but we're kids, so we probably end up thinking they're just being mean'.

Even if students did recognise some interest among the staff for their well-being, they might take the poor quality of the food indicated that the staff did not actually care very much. One noted, 'If they're concerned about our health they'd at least check the food or at least they'd try to eat it themselves. They make the food and serve it, they don't try it'.

However, we did hear examples of the continued efforts at care and connection between some staff and students. Given the long-term and repeated nature of student-staff interactions over the course of years, relationships still seem to blossom at times. One student described a cafeteria worker saying, 'I don't know her name, but there is one in the middle and since I always get slushies, ... she knows I will always have my money ready to give her... We're kind of like friends'. Other students described their own commitment to being polite to the staff: 'Every single day, I tell them like have a good day or something like that'. Also, as among elementary schoolers, lack of reciprocity is noted by fellow students: 'Some of the kids are nice to them, the staff, and some kids just disrespectful or they just don't say anything... I think they don't really get the respect that they deserve'. Another student expressed a desire for more time or a less rushed experience in the line, saying, 'I would like to interact with [the foodservice staff] more, but we don't really have time'.

Middle schoolers did feel cared about in certain interactions with foodservice staff, when staff noticed them in some way, such as complimenting a speech a student had given. Students also told appreciative stories of foodservice staff who had gone out of their way to care for them. One described a worker who made her a special lunch when the student was out of money. Another remembered a lunch lady from his elementary school: 'She knew that my whole family couldn't eat pork. So say there was something that had pork,...she would buy a sandwich for us or she would...make an egg sandwich or something'.

Indeed, many of our student interviewees expressed nostalgia for the lunch ladies of their elementary school, indicating the warmth and reciprocal care that they see as positive elements of their relationship with foodservice staff. One said, 'I remember there was this really nice lunch lady ... She always has a smile on her face ... I'm like, "Oh, thank you"'. Another student recalled, 'I knew my lunch ladies in elementary school. My lunch lady last year,... her name was [redacted]. That's how much I liked her. I know her first and last name'.

Many of the negative conditions of meal service settings persist into high school, such as long lines and perception of insufficient time to eat and socialise during the meal period. However, among high schoolers, there is greater recognition of the contextual factors shaping the meal programme. High schoolers were more likely to recognise national concerns around diet-related

disease and understand the school meals programme and staff as working to make their food healthier in response, even as they expressed dissatisfaction with the foods available. One group of high schoolers described negative experiences in which foodservice staff had denied students lunch because they did not have adequate funds in their account. Students did not blame the staff themselves but rather the district administration, whom they saw as responsible for the policies that foodservice staff had to enforce.

High school students were also more able than younger students to recognise the hard work staff put into the meal programme as well as the limits of time and the pressure on them to prepare meals for the students. In assessing the lunch experience, this student separated characteristics of the staff from the quality food served: 'I think the people are really friendly. Boring food. A low variety'.

In fact, many high schoolers used such positive descriptors for staff, like 'hard working', 'nice', and 'sweet'. Some students described warm, personal interactions such as staff knowing their names and keeping track of how they're doing or acknowledging when it seems like a student is having a rough day. One student described, 'I call one of them my mom, ... the one that's always "Hey baby doll!"... She's really sweet, and she gives me the best peanut butter and jellies'.

Like younger students, high schoolers perceive care through the food served to them. Similarly to the student who described her favourite staff member giving her 'the best peanut butter and jellies', other students mentioned staff baking cookies for them or giving them the ripest fruit. They saw these as examples of both the dedication of staff and their liking for students. Some high schoolers described making an effort to return this care, as one student illustrated: '...even though they may interact with a hundred of unenthusiastic students that may put their number wrong five times, you can be that one student that just, like, that actually cares about them'. Students observed that they themselves or others may not be interested in interacting with foodservice staff, but those who wanted them could create relationships with them.

At the same time, many students perceive a lack of care in the food provided as the fault of the school foodservice staff, even if unintentional. One student described the meal programme simply as 'careless ... I don't think I can go despicable yet'. Negative depictions of staff persisted as well, for example, of staff as agitated, unwelcoming and dismissive of students' needs or desires.

Like middle schoolers, high schoolers also expressed nostalgia for their past school food experiences. One student remembered, 'In middle school they let us have cinnamon rolls. Oh god. So good. So good'. Another explained that 'from elementary to middle to now, it got lower and lower quality'. These sentiments of nostalgia may reflect the more positive attributes of the meal programme experience in elementary and middle schools, including smaller meal programmes, quieter environments and more contact with staff, as compared to the high school experience.

## **DISCUSSION: WHAT COULD BE DIFFERENT**

The findings above show that as many foodservice staff go about their job of caring *for* students, they also care *about* them. This care *about* motivates workers to go beyond their regular duties, including developing relationships with the students they serve. Students in turn often express appreciation for these activities of foodservice staff or notice if they are lacking. These relationships may contribute to students' sense of connection to school, that is, students may explicitly or implicitly recognise that these adults care about them beyond their academic performance. As suggested by other literature on school connectedness, such caring and trusting relationships may offer benefits to students' academic achievement as well as broader well-being.

The school cafeteria has the potential to be a place in the school where students feel nurtured and respected by adults whom they see every day, and often over the course of several years, but outside of the traditional constraints of the classroom. Students in our study valued acts of care such as when staff knew their names and preferences or when they perceived staff as being careful in the presentation and service of food. Many older students expressed nostalgia for the more explicitly warm and nurturing environment of their elementary school meal programme. Moreover, many students expressed disappointment in their peers who did not reciprocate this care or were rude to staff, further suggesting they value the relationships and social climate of the cafeteria.

However, if foodservice staff are to provide this type of care they must be better supported to do so. Many foodservice staff knowingly go beyond the paid duties of their role to provide the care they feel is appropriate for their students. Providing healthy, appealing food with a warm manner is a tacit expectation they have of themselves or their colleagues – even if they are not appropriately resourced to do so or compensated for it. Yet foodservice staff are rarely thought of as meaningful adults in students' lives, and the value of even the most basic care they provide is not generally recognised in school communities.

This dynamic fits into the broader socio-economic context of care work in general. Feminist scholars have pointed out the ways in which emotional care is often leveraged to extract social reproductive labour while simultaneously devaluing it (Dodson & Zinca, 2015; Folbre et al., ). Certain emotions towards the recipient of care are expected of those paid to do care work. As argued by Folbre and Nelson (2000), '[c]aring feelings on the part of the caregiver are assumed to provide a motivation for doing caring activities, and to assure the effectiveness of the care received' (p. 129). Because school foodservice staff are mostly women, there are latent assumptions that their 'natural' maternal feelings will add a caring dimension to their work (England et al., 2002; Gaddis, 2019; Vancil-Leap, 2016a). The emotional elements of paid care work are rarely explicitly recognised, let alone compensated. As Gaddis (2019) points out, the descriptions of school foodservice jobs used by the School Nutrition Association do not mention the provision of care for students, but it is a 'gendered, unwritten and unwaged' element that is widely accepted as part of 'doing the job well' (p. 143).

When foodservice staff go beyond their job duties, it is part of systemic exploitation of care workers and often of their real relationships with their customers. Dodson and Zinca (2015) describe the familial-like relationships that develop between staff in a nursing home and the residents, which staff reported as a positive element of their job. But their relationships with residents were also used to 'institutionalise an expectation of self-sacrifice' (p. 198), in which staff were expected to put the needs of their clients above their own. Similarly, school foodservice staff may work off the clock or use their own money to provide what they feel is quality care for their students.

If we expect foodservice staff care about students and want students to feel cared about by the adults in the cafeteria, we must change the structural conditions of school meals to promote both these ends. Not all foodservice staff necessarily feel emotionally attached to their students, and even if they do, they do not necessarily use that as a motivation to do extra work. Any expected emotional work should not be implied but explicitly stated as an expectation of the job for which foodservice staff are resourced, trained, compensated and valued. Many foodservice staff work part-time hours at a low wage; both should be increased to reflect the time and effort required to provide for students' physical and emotional needs. Foodservice staff would also benefit from explicit training related to their relationships with students, and in particular how to respond to the developmental needs of the students of the particular age they serve.

Recognising not only foodservice staff but also the time and space of lunch as valuable contributors to school connectedness and the school community is a crucial first step. When foodservice staff rush students through the lunch line or are short with them or do not offer foods they like, students see evidence that adults do not care about their needs. Further, a hurried lunch period offers fewer opportunities for staff to show their care about students and connect to them in a meaningful way. A school schedule and environment designed with more attention to the potential value of the lunch experience (i.e. longer lunch periods, improved cafeteria infrastructure Ma) could offer time and space for stronger relationships between foodservice staff and students to develop. More investment into the quality of food provided would also help indicate to students that the adults providing meals do indeed care about them.

## CONCLUSION

While there are several strengths of this study, the primary limitation is that the initial MHMR project did not set out to study school connectedness or care, but rather these emerged as salient through the bottom-up analysis of the data set. It would be beneficial for future research to be conducted from the outset using the lens of school connectedness and with a focus on foodservice staff. Additional scholarship is also needed to better understand relationships between staff and students and specific ways in which school environments can feasibly support these.

However, interventions and experiments to facilitate student and foodservice staff relationships need not wait for more research. A crucial element to improving school meal programmes is an increase in the federal reimbursement rate for school meals, such that school districts can better compensate school foodservice staff and ensure that cafeterias are fully staffed. More funding as well as resources and technical assistance from the federal and state governments could support training for foodservice staff on developmentally-appropriate care for students. Additional funding would also help school foodservice staff provide meals of the quality they would like to provide to their students.

School districts and schools can take steps to acknowledge the value of the lunch period in supporting student well-being, especially by allotting more time for students to eat and socialise and by paying attention to the physical space of the cafeteria. Further, school foodservice staff should be considered by faculty and administrators as members of the school community who can have an impact on students and included in training, professional development and other activities for teachers and support staff.

As long as foodservice staff are interacting with students, students will feel the impact of their care, or the lack thereof. Failure to recognise and support this care means missing an opportunity to enhance the well-being of both students and workers in the school community.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> School Food Focus was a national non-profit that worked with school districts to encourage their procurement of healthful, regional and sustainable foods. As of January 2018 it merged with FoodCorps, a national service organisation that connects children to healthy food in school.
- <sup>2</sup> The MHMR project also included a survey of non-managerial foodservice staff members in each school, of which 92% of the 137 respondents self-identified as female.

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**How to cite this article:** Caruso, C. C., & Rosenthal, A. K.... Rosenthal, A. K. (2021). 'I don't do it for the money, I do it for the kids': Examining school foodservice staff and student interactions using the lens of school connectedness. *Children & Society*, 00, e12509. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12509>