

Researcher looks at morality issues related to school lunches

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School lunches offer a break in the day from tests and lessons, a chance to eat a slice of rectangular pizza in a compartmentalized tray or even a source of stress over who would sit with whom. Chances are morality isn't the first thing that comes to mind when considering school lunch, but a University of Kansas professor is leading a national research effort to consider the moral implications of one of the most important parts of a student's day.

Suzanne Rice, professor of educational leadership and policy studies, has organized two symposia and is editing a special issue of a journal that has brought together educational scholars from across the country to consider moral issues related to [school lunch](#) such as nutritional implications, social issues, animal rights, [food sources](#), feminism and policy implications. The effort was a result of Rice and her colleagues reflecting on important educational phenomena that happen in school, but not necessarily during classroom time.

"We're so focused right now on 'does this math program or that reading program help kids succeed,'" Rice said. "But many of the things children remember from school happen outside the classroom. The school lunch experience matters to students in multiple ways."

There is growing focus on nutritional value of lunches. First lady [Michelle Obama](#) has drawn attention to the matter with her initiative to improve nutrition for kids and encourage them to be more physically active. The nutritional question ties into questions of obesity and kids

who live in areas where they can access McDonald's but not fresh fruit, but also a more basic moral need.

"For millions of children, this is the best meal they're going to get," Rice said of school lunches. "In providing meals to children, we're meeting the most fundamental need. How much more basic a need is there than providing food?"

Researchers who have taken part in the American Educational Studies and Philosophy of Education conferences have shared stories of teachers they've encountered who will provide energy bars to students on Fridays so they have something to eat over the weekend. The reality that students are unable to concentrate because they are malnourished is very prevalent for many educators.

Contributing authors also examine issues of morals and economics. Schools are often required to provide free and reduced price lunches for students from low-income families. The individuals working in school cafeterias—typically women—are often minimum wage earners themselves. There are also economic realities reflected in efforts of some fast food corporations to have their products sold in schools.

Of course what kids are eating is a concern with [moral implications](#). In her research, Rice examines the amount of meat served in school lunches that comes from factory farms, which are often accused of unethical treatment of their animals. She questions whether schools might have a responsibility to educate students about the sources of the food they eat at school.

Like the milkman or the newspaper carrier, the lunch lady is one of those occupations that has secured a place in American popular lore. Nearly everyone has interacted with them at some point in their life, but the job has a strong feminist history, the researchers point out.

"During the progressive era, home economics and nutrition science, both of which are related to provision of school lunch, were part of women's efforts to find meaningful work outside of the home," Rice said of the provision of school lunch. "Cooking and serving meals was seen as an extension of women's roles in the home."

Contributors to the symposia and special Journal of Thought issue, which will be published later this year, come from universities such as Virginia Tech, Washington State, Oklahoma State, Northwestern, Southern Florida and others. Rice said she also hopes to edit a book on the topic in the future. For now she has written and presented on topics including animal welfare and a brief history of school lunches—which began in the late 19th century in part as a way to help give immigrant children "American tastes"—as well as moral dimensions of school lunch. Food and mealtimes are such important part of life and culture, both inside and outside of school, she feels it is worthy of study and increased focus on its relevance.

"I'm really thinking of this as a moral phenomenon," Rice said. "The provision of food is such a basic human need. You can also think of school lunches as a training ground where young people learn, or fail to learn, how to treat and interact with each other."

Provided by University of Kansas

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