Ten Minutes School Lunchtime? You're Joking!

Shôn Ellerton, August 18, 2022

Imagine my surprise when I found out that kids get only 10 minutes for lunch at school.

What is going on? My 7-year-old son comes home with nearly a full lunch box from school. Food looks pretty good, I would say. My wife makes an effort to cook his food, fresh and packed with nutrients, every morning. On occasion, he might be given a simple sandwich just to break the trend, but more often than not, it's varied, delicious, and healthy.

Not long ago, I was invited to attend a parent/teacher progress session to see how he's going in class. It all went smoothly and, what the teacher tells us, he is making good progress in school. Apart from today's Australian schools' disregard of teaching cursive handwriting, keeping mathematics way too simple, and accepting, what I consider to be comic books, as official reading material, all personal bugbears of mine, the curriculum seemed okay.

I nearly fell off the edge of my seat when I heard that the students get ten minutes to eat their lunch. Let me just repeat that. Ten minutes! This explained the reason why, on many occasions, my son, and many other students, as I was later to understand, never get to finish their lunches. Or rather, they do not *want* to.

So, this is the daily lunch ritual I was told. The students get out their lunch boxes. Sit anywhere they like in the classroom, normally the floor with their friends, and picnic it out gorging their food down so they can maximise their play time afterwards. I'm sure there will be others who will disagree with me, but this is patently absurd, unhealthy, and outright wrong. And why? It diminishes the importance and value of food. It inculcates poor eating habits

which often leads to nutrient deficiency and obesity, both problems rampant in Australian society.

I asked the teacher why students get ten minutes to eat their lunch and enquired if this was 'normal' for Australian schools. I was not, all together, surprised to learn that this was normal practice in Australia, and, indeed, I was not very happy. I was assured by the teacher that students can stay there to finish their lunches, but this is the problem. By doing so, it encroaches on their play time. Now, this is the thing. You'd have to be downright stupid or naïve to think that a seven-year-old is going to be sensible and allot more of a proportion of his playtime to satisfactorily finish his or her lunch. Damned if I know, but what the hell goes on in the minds of those who make these policies and decisions? Call me a dinosaur, an outdated traditionalist, fuddy-duddy square, grandpa, or whatever description one can think of. I don't care, but this is a madness.

Food is more than mere fuel, the process of filling up as fast as you can. Food should be enjoyed and savoured. Eating lunch should be an occasion to learn to eat properly and provide that occasion to talk to different students at a *real* table while *enjoying* rather than wolfing down lunch.

I've experienced school lunches in the US, UK, and France during my early years in school. All three focussed on eating during a minimum allotted time of 20 to 25 minutes in a canteen-type environment. Never in a classroom. Food was *never* permitted in the classroom. In the US school I attended, the gymnasium room was converted to a canteen in which students were quietly filed to collect hot food or bring their sack lunches and sit down quietly amongst rows of tables set out at lunch time. The principal was always there to maintain decorum and then to announce a little Something of the Day prior to dismissing the students to enjoy another 20 to 25 minutes of playtime. I attended a French state school for a couple of months, and I was surprised to be sitting at a long table bedecked with red cloth complete with plates, cutlery, glasses of water, and baskets of freshly baked bread in the centre to share. The food was outlandishly good. The only thing that was missing was the wine! No wonder the French have adopted a far healthier attitude towards food than today's Britain, US, and Australia, where obesity has become a real pandemic. But we can't mention this because it's politically incorrect as we are encouraged to be accepting of being fat as beautiful, which is utter tripe.

I don't know why schools in the US, Australia, and the UK, are so flagrantly unconcerned about the importance of eating properly at school when it comes down to the students and yet, at the same time, they are taught about nutrition in science class or home economics. Maybe it comes down to laziness and nonchalance. For example, schools not bothering to create a proper dining environment for their students. Sure, it takes additional resources to make this so, but I don't prescribe to the argument that schools lack the resources to cater for this. What is that has changed then? When I was in elementary school in the US, reasonably good hot food was available at a subsidised cost. Moreover, the student can choose whether to have the Special of the Day, hot dog, pizza, tacos, or hamburger. Those parents that struggled to pay for hot food, were often given food free of charge. Some parents still wanted to pack lunches, but most were happy and freed from doing so by such a system. Moreover, the kids got decent hot meals for lunch.

And yet, many countries in Asia and Europe (excepting Britain), have kept up the tradition of making lunch an important occasion for the school student offering freshly cooked and healthy lunches. Isn't it ironic that those countries in which school lunch is an informal casual slot of the day in which little or no value is placed on the content of the food are those countries suffering the highest rate of nutrition disorders and obesity?