**Feeding our future: a brief history of free school meals in the UK**

The importance of nutrition has gained global attention in the last decade, we are half the way through the Decade of Nutrition, which ends in 2025. Countries have committed to ending hunger, however, 800 million people still go to bed hungry every night. While one in three people do not have the essential nutrients they need to stay healthy (<https://globalnutritionreport.org/reports/2020-global-nutrition-report/>). We have seen the negative impact of this with the COVID 19 crisis affecting the poorest populations with higher levels of diet related non communicable diseases (NHS 2020 <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/whos-at-higher-risk-from-coronavirus/>). Covid 19 has had a devastating impact on household food security with 5 million families now food insecure and 200,000 children missing meals (Food Foundation 2020: <https://www.sustainweb.org/news/may20_children_skip_meals_in_covid19_lockdown/>). There is evidence that children who are living in food insecure families are more likely to suffer from education losses (Food Foundation 2019: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Childrens-Future-Food-Inquiry-report.pdf> ). Research also highlights the importance of eating between five and ten portions of fruit and vegetables each day (<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/177778/eating-more-fruits-vegetables-prevent-millions/>), yet over a quarters of UK children eat less than one portion a day (Food Foundation 2016: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/FF-Veg-Doc-V5.pdf>). Research carried out by Keith et al (2018) in Tower Hamlets, highlighted that 20% of children were skipping meals. Holiday clubs with food and activities improved children’s willingness to learn, their confidence, aspiration and their consumption of fruit and vegetables.

School meals have a long history in the UK from 1879 in Manchester following the introduction of compulsory education when thousands of poor children went to school hungry. In 1906 the Education Act (Provision of Meals) allowed authorities to provide meals, but very few did. In 1921 criteria was set regarding which children were able to have school meals but again the act was not implemented. *“…In 1936 a survey of twenty-six LEAs, where unemployment was above 25 per cent showed that out of a school population of half a million, less than 15,000 children (2.7 per cent) were receiving free meals”* (Gillard 2003: <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/articles/22food.html>).

It was not until 1944 that laws were passed, compelling all local authorities to provide free nutritious meals for school children (Bradshaw 2017: <http://www.foodactive.org.uk/infant-school-meals-a-brief-history-and-why-we-need-to-save-them/>). In 1946 universal free milk was introduced. These provisions ensured essential nutrition for thousands of children. When Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minster she stopped universal free milk and introduced a new Education Act in 1980, which halted the minimum nutrition requirement for school meals. Local education authorities only had to ensure food for children of families receiving supplementary benefits and family income support. She encouraged privatisation of the school meals services, through The Competitive Tendering Act, allowing private companies to bid to provide school meals. These changes, without adequate measures to ensure adherence to minimum nutrition standards, resulted in meals that were cheap rather than nutritious. Her 1986 Social Security Act cut the numbers of children who were eligible for free school meals, at a time when unemployment and inflation were rising. Aggressive advertising of unhealthy foods by celebrities encouraged children to eat increasingly unhealthy processed foods. This food was sold cheaply by supermarkets, parents found it harder to purchase fruit and vegetables for their families. These changing food patterns have become known as the nutrition transition. The combination of neoliberal economic policies and the growing unhealthy food environment, including in schools, resulted in the children of the 1990s being assessed as poorly nourished when compared to the children of the 1950s, according to an MRC research report (<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/articles/22food.html>).

Inadequate investment in the health and nutrition of children continues to have negative impacts on health and education outcomes, especially for children from low income families. The food system has become unhealthier in the new millennium, with vending machines being placed everywhere including in schools and many children using fast food outlets to fill up on cheap processed food.

It was not until April 2001 that school meals were again called to adhere to nutritional standards, however aggressive marketing of unhealthy low-cost food has resulted in rising childhood obesity levels despite rising levels of hunger in the poorest families (<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/articles/22food.html>).

The UK established the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to promote healthy eating practices with many local governments developing healthy eating policies, however fewer children were entitled to school meals, while unhealthy food had become cheaper and more easily available. Ten years of austerity and cuts to local government budgets have resulted in increased levels of inequality and growing childhood poverty. The Covid 19 crisis will only deepen these challenges.

Finch (2019) suggests that we should invest in gold standards for nutritious school meals (<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-provision-of-school-meals-since-1906-progress-or-a-recipe-for-disaster> ) while others suggest that all children should have free school meals, ensuring that we feed our future leaders.

Can we follow Marcus Rashford and stand up for food security for all children in England? (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jun/16/boris-johnson-faces-tory-rebellion-over-marcus-rashfords-school-meals-call>).