



Mealtime and food provision environments in primary schools – an opportunity for nutrition intervention?

J. Kempler¹, C. Margerison¹, J. Nanayakkara¹ and A. Booth¹

¹*Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN), School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, Australia*

Mealtime environments and food provision contexts in primary school influence students' food behaviours⁽¹⁾ and are an opportunity for nutrition intervention⁽²⁾. This study aims to explore primary school food provision contexts including eating environments and food provision models and policies. A quantitative cross-sectional online survey of Australian primary school teachers undertaken between August 2022–July 2023 collected data about: (1) designated eating times and locations for lunch and snacks; (2) teacher use of mealtimes for food and nutrition education; and⁽³⁾ presence of food services and food-related policies. Descriptive statistics were generated using Stata 17.0 statistical software. Participants were 239 teachers recruited via social media advertising and education/nutrition networks. The majority of teachers reported their school provided allocated time for children to eat a morning snack (n = 201, 84%) and lunch (n = 234, 98%). Around three quarters of teachers reported an allocated eating time of 10 minutes or less for morning snack (n = 146, 73%) and 15 minutes or less for lunch (n = 174, 74%). Teachers stated lunch was most commonly eaten in the classroom with time to finish in the yard (n = 90, 38%) or in the yard as a group (n = 70, 30%). It was most common for morning snack to be eaten in the classroom (n = 119, 59%). Most teachers stated they had the opportunity to eat lunch with their students at least sometimes (n = 159, 67%). Of these teachers, 31% (n = 50) reported they used this time to teach students about food and nutrition, for example, in a pedagogical lunch. Of 109 teachers who did not use lunch time to teach students about food and nutrition, 43% (n = 69) stated they would be interested in doing this in the future. When asked about the availability of food services at their school, 62% (n = 147) of teachers reported their school had a canteen, 28% (n = 67) reported their school offered lunch orders via an external food outlet and 35% (n = 83) reported their school had a breakfast program. Only 34% of teachers reported their school had policies about the foods available from school food services. From these findings we conclude that a variety of mealtime and food provision contexts exist within Australian primary schools, and that there is opportunity to leverage eating occasions and food provision models and policies for nutrition intervention. This includes the opportunity to utilise mealtimes for delivering food and nutrition education, for example, through the concept of a pedagogical lunch.

Keywords: food education; primary school; pedagogical lunch; food literacy

Ethics Declaration

Yes

Financial Support

The research received no external funding.

References

1. Cohen JFW, Jahn JL, Richardson S *et al.* (2016) *J Acad Nutr Diet* **116**(1), 123–279.
2. Waling M & Olsson C (2017) *Health Educ* **117**(6), 540–550.