

## Will dinner duty ever be the same again?

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May 2020

As an impecunious supply teacher in a 1970s London comprehensive I learned from my first Head of English that if I accompanied him on lunch duty, I could get a free meal. Previously in publishing, I had been told that there was no such thing as a free lunch.

I never looked back.

I have spent much of my professional life on free meals, eating alongside children (pinching their chips in days when that was permitted), and supervising breakfast, break and lunch queues. From house rooms to dining halls, from cafeterias to burger vans (in a new school waiting for the restaurant to be built), I have enjoyed the fun of the food queue.

As a head of year with 320 students, the lunch queue (two sittings) was always the place that I could have a word in a student's ear rather than wasting both our energies on after-school detentions. Or catch up to congratulate them on their classroom and sporting successes. Or listen to them entertaining their peers, rehearsing lines, dances and songs for school productions.

Amongst the colleagues I got to know best working in five different schools - three as headteacher - were the kitchen staff. Nurturing professional relationships with them meant I always received generous portions. Invariably they had children in the school so were able to tell me, warts and all, about the quality of teaching, homework and report writing.

Teaching in a US high school of 3000 students in the 1990s - courtesy of a British Council scholarship - I learned the three Disney laws of queueing. The queue must always keep moving. The queue must be entertained. You must always be able to see the front of the queue. Running a lunch line-up, I have tried to follow these laws, entertainment invariably coming from the students' own conversations and portable devices.

It was not always thus, but today there are many, many schools across the country which offer appetising breakfasts. I regularly arrive early to secure one and meet folk.

One outstanding secondary provides free breakfasts for students and supervising staff from 7.30am. The healthy fried eggs, bacon and beans competes with any 'greasy spoon' and guarantees that student lateness to school is almost zero. Their head of kitchen is a living legend and brings so much personal warmth to the school community. The headteacher, supervising the queue and never wasting a learning opportunity, quizzes students on the school's 'words of the week'.

To this day when visiting schools as a reviewer, inspector or trainer, I choose to eat with students at mid-day rather than have sandwiches in an office. To take the temperature of any school, observe children at play and listen to their lunchtime conversations. Have supper with the boarders in order to sense the spirit of an excellent boarding school, not least tasting the multi-cultural wizardry of the chef.

I once inspected a school for autistic children. The 'family' lunchtime dining arrangements seated in the round with immaculate tablecloths, staff serving students, were a special part of the day, missed by no-one, valued by everyone.

The Brits have always prided themselves on orderly queuing, though teenagers in schools are not always quite as compliant when hunger calls. I have a good headteacher friend who oversees his cafe queues with a hi-viz *gilet jaune* and a loud-hailer. He never misses the daily opportunity to hear from his students about the latest gossip, fads and fashions.

So the bustling food queue, rich in chatter, matters to the well-being of a good school. It always has, no matter the context - special, primary, secondary.

Post Covid-19 and with the new vocabulary of 'social distancing', will school dinner queues ever be the same again? Standing outside Sainsbury's two metres from my fellow humans, separated by yellow lines within the store, then by arrows at the checkout - as social animals we are not made for these restrictions.

As schools reopen over the coming weeks, headteachers - amongst a myriad adjustments - will be giving serious consideration to how snacks and lunches are served, and how children wait in line at a safe distance from one another.

I do hope they will continue to share stories, sing songs and enjoy each other's company while waiting to eat. And that in the autumn, the craic and the jostle will be back in the queues.

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