

# A free school lunch isn't just about hunger, but about dignity



**By Julie Spray**  
Guest writer  
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## OPINION

**Dr Julie Spray spent 2015 eating lunch with primary school students in a disadvantaged part of South Auckland, where she learned that providing free food can be a lot more complex than simply sating hunger.**

*To protect the privacy of research participants, pseudonyms are used throughout this article.*

“Where’s your lunch, Caleb?” I asked the nine-year-old sitting next to me on the concrete steps outside his classroom. He shrugged. “I’m not hungry.” But he accepted a handful of cheese-flavoured puffs from Teuila, next to him, before she tipped the crumbs into her mouth and licked her fingers. This packet of chips was Teuila’s complete lunch and a staple food for the kids I worked with during [my doctoral research](#). They were imported from Asia and families could buy them from the shop around the corner for \$1 each.

“Julie, what’s that?” Teuila asked, looking at my lunch. I told her how I made the chicken and spinach-filled wrap that morning.

“Can I have a piece?” she asked.

“A piece?”

“Of that.” She pointed to the spinach.

“You want a leaf of spinach?” I let her pick one out. How could I not?

For the whole of 2015, I ate lunch nearly every day with year 5 and 6 children (age 9-11) at their decile one primary school, “Tūrama School” in South Auckland. Or rather, I ate – and shared – my lunch, while the kids like Teuila ate chips or, like Caleb, nothing at all. These kids had parents who loved them very much but who really struggled, often working long hours and multiple jobs to cover the [rising costs of Auckland rentals](#). [Affording food](#) or [finding time](#) to prepare nutritious lunches was often not possible.

Now, six years later, the [Ka Ora, Ka Ako](#) school lunch programme is providing free lunches to around 132,600 kids in low decile schools across New Zealand. As the programme expands we have started to hear feedback from [parents](#) and [school principals](#) about its positive effects as well as concerns about [wastage](#) or what happens to parental responsibilities. A number of those concerns were raised in [The Spinoff's recent story](#) about the response to the programme in Māngere. Some, like National's Paul Goldsmith, suggest the programme needs to target those who need it, rather than provide enough lunches for every child in a school. But as we evaluate this programme, it's also important that we remember what it's like when we don't provide school lunches – especially from children's perspectives.



A sample of FED's term two menu for the school lunches programme. (Photo: Supplied)

My research involved what we anthropologists call “participant observation,” or participating in daily school life to learn the taken-for-granted things that are normal for Tūrama School kids and staff. Watching them every day, I learned about Tūrama School kids' standard diet: no breakfast, chips or biscuits at lunchtime, and a carton of milk and a piece of fruit courtesy of Fonterra's [Milk in Schools](#) and the government's [Fruit in Schools](#) programmes. When kids had a little money they might buy chips or a pie on the way to school; other times they had no food to bring at all.

Numerous studies have shown how this kind of food insecurity impacts kids' [learning](#) and [health](#). My study was unique because I was observing how children themselves were understanding and responding to their experiences of food insecurity. In our adult-centric society, we tend to overlook children's perspectives, and imagine children as passive recipients of care. We assume that if adults provide food, hungry children will eat it. But children are people with their own social lives, who make their own decisions and make meaning from their experiences together just like adults do.

At Tūrama School kids could request a “spare lunch”: a peanut butter sandwich pulled out of the freezer, made by volunteers out of donated ingredients once a week and often accompanied by a muesli bar or fruit cup. But these lunches were unappealing – one child described them to me as “cold bread” and, probably because it featured in the sandwiches, all the kids hated peanut butter. (I began bringing peanut butter sandwiches for my own lunch because it was the one thing kids would not “scab” (beg) from me).



Kids also gave these spare lunches symbolic meaning. Asking for a spare lunch made a statement about the kind of parents that child had and the kind of person that child was. The kind of child who was “pōhara” (poor) or uncared for, who was only worth cold bread.

Some kids would take a spare lunch and accept the indignity and social stigma, or, as I saw in one case, throw the lunch away under pressure from teasing. Or, at times when the spare lunch came with a popular food item like fruit cups or trail mix, some groups of children would collectively decide it was acceptable to ask for a spare lunch to get the high-value item. Then, hungry kids could make a performance out of picking out the chocolate from the trail mix, and quietly eat the rest as well. But most of the time, kids would just say “I’m not hungry.” To kids, not having food was shameful, but not being hungry was socially acceptable, reframing not eating as a choice.



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Most concerning, though, is that kids weren’t just *saying* they weren’t hungry. Watching them for a year, I could see that many kids seemed to be embodying “not hungry” – they were distracting themselves from the bodily cues that signal hunger to the point where they actually did not *feel* that they were hungry. [A ton of evidence in health psychology](#) teaches us that our feelings of hunger are externally cued as much as they are internally – we learn to feel hungry at certain times and in response to things like plate size or memory of our last (culturally-defined) meal. When kids have to cope with chronic lack of lunch, they don’t feel hungry the way they’re supposed to anymore. Leaving kids without lunch potentially means disrupting their normal processes of bodily perception in ways that may well be carried with them into adulthood.

While children told me they weren’t hungry, politicians were telling me providing them lunch would discourage parents from “taking responsibility” for feeding their kids. In 2015 parliament was debating the [“Feed the Kids Bill”](#) which was eventually voted down with [Paula Bennett telling the media](#) that providing lunch was the parent’s responsibility. Parental responsibility has inevitably become a concern for some with Ka Ora, Ka Ako, as well. But adults may not realise that aside from the obvious question – what then happens to kids when parents won’t or can’t provide lunch – this neoliberal rhetoric of parental responsibility and [lunchbox shaming](#) also affects how children make sense of their circumstances. I heard kids blaming their parents for a failure of responsibility rather than a lack of income if they didn’t have lunch, and kids could be embarrassed that their parents were “not responsible” if they asked for a spare lunch. One girl would buy \$1 worth of lollies at the dairy as her “lunch” so she could tell me her mum “always” provided her lunch.

## **MORE READING**

- [To be a man: a message to old boys of Otago Boys' High School](#)
- [When the lessons end](#)
- [The Sunday Essay: Jerry](#)

Free lunches don't have to carry such shame and stigma, though. Fonterra's Milk in Schools programme (which [ended in 2020](#)) was universal, and I watched classes handing the milk around a circle on the mat, drinking together peacefully while their teacher read them a story. They created their own rituals, like "milk 'n cookies" on someone's birthday or "banana milkshakes" when bananas were the fruit of the day. At first I declined the milk – it's not something I would usually choose to drink – but I couldn't resist the pleasure of being part of the group. The kids taught me the technique for folding the cartons for recycling, and the chant: "Drink it dry, fold it flat, send it back!" Children drank milk not only because it was provided, but because everyone had it, creating a shared social experience of togetherness where kids were nurtured and cared for.

Tūrama School children teach us that the food we give kids is not only functional but symbolic. Good quality lunches are important because they send the message that children are worth caring for properly. Appealing lunches are important because they make eating them socially acceptable. [Universal lunches](#) are important because they allow kids to socially create healthy eating habits and don't mark some children as worth less.

Children's perspectives might be mostly invisible to us, but they matter because children are the ones who will collectively determine the success of a programme in a given school. As we evaluate and develop Ka Ora, Ka Ako, we need to make sure that we don't cut corners on any of these three things. We need to treat children as the valuable people they are, care for their dignity as well as their bodies, and make sure our school lunch programmes are good quality, appealing, and universally free.