

# ETHNOGRAPHY OF LUNCH LADIES IN A RURAL COMMUNITY

A Thesis

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an ethnographic study of lunch ladies in the rural setting of Moscow, Idaho. The purpose of this research is to understand and explain the centrality of their roles within the educational food system, both as nurturers and intermediaries in federal meal programs. The existing literature surrounding this topic, often focuses on the logistics of federal policies, the nutritional policies of these policies or its relation to commercial agriculture, while little is focused on the responsibilities of the lunch ladies. This thesis examines the lived experiences of lunch ladies in a rural community through an ethnographic framework. I collected data through interviews with the lunch ladies and non-participant observations in the lunchroom. Findings from this research that I argue include COVID-19 as having both a positive and negative impact to the workplace, governmental policy in the kitchen and community mothering. The lunch ladies believe their work serving the community by feeding students, teaching them valuable skills, and exposing them to new foods.

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## **Dedication**

Thank you to my mother and my partner, David, whose supports were immeasurable and overwhelming even at my most frustrated. I am eternally grateful to the both of you.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This research is an ethnographic study of lunch ladies in the rural setting of Moscow, Idaho, and serves to understand and explain the centrality of their roles within the educational food system.

When people think of lunch ladies, stereotypical images come to mind of unappealing food and unfriendly ladies who assemble food on trays without care. However, I believe this is a disservice and misrepresentation of those who feed our children at school—women who are tasked with preparing and serving food and ultimately, interacting with children. These women are the eyes and ears of federal food policies as well as the children these policies serve. Most of the existing literature surrounding the food system in educational settings focuses on the importance of nutrition (or lack thereof), as well as the various federal food policies that exist in the US and how the requirements are applied. However, the people that deliver and immerse themselves in the policies and talks of nutrition are scarcely credited—lunch ladies. There is little in the literature that addresses the position of the school lunch lady. Within the education system, there are teacher appreciation weeks and student appreciation weeks, but no recognition is paid to lunch ladies. There is a lack of attention paid to those individuals who interact with children daily. These lunch ladies are not teachers or administrators but still cultivate a unique relationship with their students that may often go unrecognized and be taken for granted. Lunch ladies should not be an afterthought in the literature, nor should they be under-appreciated within the school system. They are tasked with the immense responsibility of feeding the next generation.

Why are the roles and responsibilities of lunch ladies not highlighted in the school system? Especially involving something we in Western society value so highly like nutrition and eating in general. Yet, we overlook the responsibility and care that lunch ladies put into their job to ensure that the meal kids receive away from home is the one they enjoy. Lunch ladies are intermediaries in the educational setting that allow other educational actors to successfully do their jobs. To elaborate further, a healthy meal at school is crucial to the learning environment, allowing students to focus on learning instead of their empty stomachs. Similarly, behavioral issues are much less common when children are fed. Lunch ladies play a critical role in maintaining and contributing to the learning environment as any other educational provider does.

The study of lunch ladies could be done anywhere, this work was conducted in the decidedly rural setting of Moscow, Idaho. Why rural? First, a practical reason was that I live in this community. Second, I chose rural because it offers a unique perspective of place and sense of community. Each rural community is different and has a specific set of circumstances, spatial elements and location. Rural research highlights the complexities of life in areas of the US that are historically and economically under resourced, have less access to social services and are places where federal funds are allocated. Yet, with all of these structural difficulties people still live and continue to sustain themselves in these areas. In most areas there is little variety, so there is a sense of ‘work with what you have’ and that is exactly the kind of attitude that is key to thriving in a rural community. Furthermore, on a personal level, this area has been my home for the past six years and I have grown deeply



connected to this place and there are certain areas of my community that are worthy of further study.

### *Significance of Research*

The purpose of this research is to explore the lives of lunch ladies in a rural community who directly interact with children, the school district at large, and to recognize the gap between federal policy and lived life in a rural community. Moreover, this research is structured to better understand and educate what the roles of lunch ladies are, how those roles are served in a rural community and the struggles and challenges that those working in school systems face when making sure kids are fed. The goal of this research is to allow individuals to speak for themselves and focus on the areas they deem important. By designing this research as an exploratory ethnography, I give control to the lunch ladies and empower them to share their story as they see fit, giving an authentic lens into their daily lives and not constraining it by rigid questions that only superficially scratch the surface of their responsibilities. The ethnographic structure of this research will provide a much more holistic perspective of the role of the lunch lady and paint a better picture of how they fit into our educational setting and educational food systems.

### *Outline of Project*

There are three main areas of focus for this research: lunch ladies' relationships with students, lunch ladies relationship with the system as a whole (federal and educational), and federal relationships to rurality. It is based on understanding the lived experiences of lunch ladies, and the struggles and challenges with their job. In Chapter 2 I will give historical context and discuss the existing literature surrounding school lunches and lunch ladies including, the emergence of school lunches, the

community of lunch ladies, federal food programs and policies, and the relationship between federal food policy and federal agricultural subsidies. Chapter 3 defines rurality, the demographics of Moscow, Idaho, the methods used for this ethnographic research, both interviews and non-participant observations. Finally, Chapter 4 contains analysis of themes and data interpretation from interviews and non-participant observations, and Chapter 5 concludes with the significance of the findings.

## CHAPTER 2 HISTORY OF LUNCH LADIES

### *Emergence of School Lunches*

Federally mandated school lunch programs began in 1946 with the establishment of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). However, serving meals in school started much earlier than 1946. As early as 1900, individual schools had launched pilot programs to begin feeding children while at school, initiatives undertaken in response to social reformers recognizing the problem of malnutrition and hunger (Ruis, 2017). Due to its complex nature, federalized support was difficult due to concerns about whether this was a public or private sphere issue, or whether changes needed to be made at the individual level or to the entire food system within the educational institution (Gaddis, 2019; Ruis, 2017). All of these concerns and more came up during the initial conversation of federalizing a school meal program. What is not as widely recognized as the NSLP is the local initiatives that some areas across the country took to tackle issues of child malnutrition and hunger. Pilot programs aimed at feeding kids at school slowly began in 1900, with a select few schools participating (Ruis, 2017). By 1924 a study from the *Journal of Home Economics* found that almost half (47%) of all cities containing more than 25,000 people had some type of school lunch program (Harrington, 1924; Ruis, 2017). These local initiatives became more and more successful that by the time the NSLP was signed in 1946, 60,000 schools already had some type of meal system in place, benefiting a national approximation of eight million kids (Ruis, 2017).

So, who was behind local initiatives to feed kids at school? What were the social and historical circumstances that pushed community members to the problem of children's nutrition? The answers to these questions are complex. To address this, I

will first highlight the historical and social conditions that lead to a focus on children's nutrition and health at the local level. Then I will discuss the events leading up to the federal initiative with the NSLP and conclude with who's responsible for trailblazing the efforts surrounding children's health and nutrition and how the federal food program was passed into law.

To discuss the initial interest in feeding children at school, we must start with the educational institution itself. Once state governments mandated children attend school, there became a significant distinction between public and private spheres (Gaddis, 2019; Ruis, 2017). Among the many questions to be addressed was who is responsible for feeding kids? Is the state only responsible when the kids are at school and—what are the limitations of this new government responsibility? Questions like these instantly arose and one could argue that even to this day we do not have a unified answer. The main concerns surrounded the issue of responsibility. Yes, student attendance was legislatively mandated but something as intimate as feeding children was still seen as the responsibility of the private sphere—most often being mothers (Gaddis, 2019; Lautenschlager, 2006; Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). Going forward, with more children in seats at school, growing research showed correlations between a child's nutrition and their intellectual performance (Gaddis, 2019; Ruis, 2017). Research like this allowed the topic of feeding children at school to gain significant support from medical professionals, educators, nutritionists, home economists and others all wanting to see meal programs in schools (Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). Although the support for school meal programs was national, the educational system existing in the early 20th century was not. Educated children were

not the federal government's responsibility but rather were the states. Thus, any early 20th century efforts to create a school meal program was driven by local members of the community, often associated with members of private advocacy groups (Women's clubs, mothers, parent-teacher associations, teachers, nurses, home economists) (Gaddis, 2019; Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017).

The federalization of a school meal program came at a politically and economically fraught time. Prior to the NSLP in 1946, federal efforts to feed children were made in response to the depression's effects on children (Lindenmeyer, 1997; Ruis, 2017). Established in November of 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the US Children's Bureau created the Child Health Recovery Program (CHRP) (Lindenmeyer, 1997). A goal of the CHRP was to provide emergency relief to children (primarily in rural areas) as well as food and medical services through the school system (Lindenmeyer, 1997). Unfortunately, due to a significant lack of funding, the two-year CHRP was unsuccessful at its core mission, however it was a significant milestone towards the federalization of meal programs at school (Lindenmeyer, 1997).

There are two main historical events that are responsible for the federalization of school lunch programs; the Great Depression and World War II (Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). Simply put, the Great Depression was riddled with irony, while millions of unemployed were starving, US agriculture had been dealing with a crop surplus (Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). There was an economic problem facing both citizens and agriculture in the 1930s and the NSLP was the solution. During the Great Depression there was increased public reliance (up to the millions) on federal assistance,

including emergency relief programs some of which focused on school meals (Levine, 2008; Lindenmeyer, 1997; Ruis, 2017). Unfortunately, as the program began to take shape it became less about scientific nutritional standards to curb child malnutrition and more about the USDA and agriculture surplus relief (Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). The ‘two birds one stone’ perspective only further intensified as the US entered World War II in 1941. With the war changing traditional household roles, the USDA, farm lobbyists, agriculture economists and other federal agriculture representatives saw another opportunity to use the social and political atmosphere as a means to gain support for their interests—a place (and contingency plan) for disposing of agriculture surplus under the moral guise of ‘feeding children’ (Lautenschlager, 2006; Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). As the war continues, support grows for a federal meal program, tempered somewhat by a few Congressional members concerned about dissipation of individual independence and increased reliance on federal assistance (Levine, 2008). Nonetheless, drafting the NSLP began in 1944 and ultimately was signed into law by President Harry Truman in 1946 (Levine, 2008; Ruis; 2017).

I believe it is fair to argue that the initial driver of federalization was the Great Depression, however, events like World War II are also contributing factors (Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). These two events brought issues of child malnutrition to the forefront of political and social discussions, both as a health issue, a parental and private sphere issue and, as national defense issue (Gaddis, 2019; Lautenschlager, 2006; Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). World War II acted as further justification for the federalization of school meal programs on behalf of the USDA and other agriculture

interests. As seen in World War I, child malnutrition was a significant problem, not only to the future citizens of our country but for our national defense (Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). Military statistics from both World Wars saw overwhelming cases of childhood malnutrition with a staggering 1.2 million men rejected for service due issues related to insufficient nutrition (Ruis, 2017). Drafted young men were too weak, unhealthy and undernourished to fight, this is where we start to see child nutrition become national government issue (Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017).

Additionally, another factor rallying support for federalization was the drastically changed job market after the war (Ruis, 2017). Mothers were working more frequently outside the home, filling occupational positions left empty from the draft, begging the question of who's responsible for feeding kids now? (Ruis, 2017). This amalgamation of child malnutrition, a recognition of a weakened national defense due to the lingering effect of poor nutrition, and disruption of household structure brought on by World War II was the perfect storm of reasons to federalize meal programs at school. Although it seems good and virtuous to have the federal government step in and feed kids, the NSLP was more about subsidizing agriculture surplus and encouraging the consumption of domestic products (Gaddis, 2019; Lautenschlager, 2006; Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017).

In the beginning the local initiatives of meals at school in the early 20th century were all the products of mothers, teachers, nutritionists, nurses, and home economists to name a few (Lautenschlager, 2006; Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017). Footing the funding and planning local initiatives was primarily a women-lead effort. As support began to grow and historical events such as the Great Depression and World War II happened,

this food movement brought other issues to the forefront and this gendered response began to shift. USDA officials, agriculture representatives, farm lobbyists, agriculture economists all jumped on the cause but for much different, and self-serving reasons—in stark contrast to the earlier women’s initiatives (Levine, 2008; Ruis, 2017).

Women were still involved but once this effort became a federal issue, most of the drivers behind it became government officials (men). This pendulum will swing back when I discuss the current occupation sphere of the NSLP, but it is worth noting that although women are increasingly more involved as we get into the 21st century, those who are in federal positions still hold all the power (Gaddis, 2019).

### *Community of Lunch Ladies*

Arguably, the most critical part of all school lunch or meal programs is the people that carry them out. In this section I will discuss the community of lunch ladies, the current demographic and what their roles and contributions are to both the educational system and food system.

It may come as no surprise that the majority of cafeteria workers are women. But historically, has this always been the case? Yes, especially in rural communities, meal programs were the responsibility of teachers and parents (primarily women and mothers) (Gaddis, 2019; Ruis, 2017). Not only were they responsible for the facilitation of lunch at school, but they were also burdened with finding funding for programs (Ruis, 2017). Funding, equipment, supplies and more were all more or less the efforts of private initiatives such as Mother’s Clubs or Parent-Teacher Associations (Ruis, 2017). Each rural county has a different system to fit their needs, but the efforts were almost uniformly women, and were focused on how to create and maintain a lunch system that was manageable for the teachers and nutritional for the



students. In rural areas from 1900 to 1920, lunch would be the added responsibility of the teacher. However, by the 1930s rural areas of the US were receiving more governmental health services, this ideally meant support from nurses, clerks, and other health professionals (Ruis, 2017). As part of this initiative federal efforts were also being made to aid in the delivery of meals in school (Gaddis, 2019; Ruis, 2017).

Today the educational system looks vastly different than it was 120 years ago. There are more roles and workers within the educational system so no one person is stuck with all the responsibilities of the school day, meaning that the responsibility of feeding children is now solely that of lunch ladies, the position emerging with the federalization of school lunches post 1946. Although a cornerstone of our educational system, the position of the lunch lady can go unrecognized and be taken for granted. The labor from lunch ladies is seen as valuable to the nutrition and health of students but inexpensive within the educational system (Gaddis, 2019; Ruis, 2017). The lunch ladies at Lena Whitmore Elementary typically work from 7:00 AM – 1:00 PM during the school year and 8:00 AM -- 1:00 PM during the summer months. During the school year they are responsible for preparing and serving breakfast and lunch—two meals a day. According to Stacy and Yvettee (the two women responsible for lunch at Lena Whitmore Elementary—and the two women interviewed) their annual income is roughly \$16,000 to \$18,000, for working 10 months out of the year. If they volunteer for summer, they do get more money but what draws both Yvettee and Stacy to this position is summers off to be with their kids, although both have worked summers before. I believe this lack of support is due in part to the misunderstanding of lunch lady's labor. At the surface level one could believe they are just serving food, but

their contributions to a child's life are so much more significant. The roles they take on are twofold; they provide the labor of serving and the emotional labor of community mothering (Gaddis, 2019).

### Roles

Lunch ladies and other cafeteria workers have been written off as 'just cooks', this designation is brought to light anytime there are conversations about increased wages (Gaddis, 2019). But lunch ladies are so much more than cooks. I will now discuss the emotional labor and care that lunch ladies provide to students. The job of a lunch lady is filled with emotions, altruism, sacrifice and balance (Gaddis, 2019). From kindergarten to high school, lunch ladies tend to the physical and emotional needs of their students daily (Gaddis, 2019). For younger students, they are encouraging manners, healthy habits, protecting them from allergies, motivating them to try new foods and eat more vegetables, acting as a mother away from home, a common trope of the school lunch lady (Gaddis, 2019). As the children grow and become older, the lunch lady's emotional involvement does not waiver but is rather emphasized in different areas of life, more associated with paths of adulthood (Gaddis, 2019). An example of this is the lunch ladies implementing strategies relating to home economics, allowing students to come into the kitchen and help them prep and cook food—teaching them valuable skills that they can take into adulthood. An overwhelming struggle that most all lunch ladies have endured is caring “too much” (Gaddis, 2019). I believe the struggle of caring “too much” often overlaps with the frustrations of being bound by policy or procedure, specifically when dealing with kids who cannot afford lunch. Most school districts have some type of lunch policy that can be embarrassing both for the student to receive and the lunch lady to

administer, often times it is a stamp on the student's hand or a cheaper meal alternative—drawing unwanted attention to the financial limits of some student's families (Gaddis, 2019). Here the lunch lady is bound by district policy or federal food procedure to administer public shaming on a struggling child, a policy that is easier written on paper than carried out in person (Gaddis, 2019). It is emotional frustrations and struggles like these that are not accounted for during compensation discussions or included in job descriptions but is intrinsically a part of the job (Gaddis, 2019). There are many other emotional roles present in the daily responsibilities of lunch ladies, but what the lunch debt issue highlights is how difficult it is to do a job centered around care. Yes, it is fair to say lunch ladies are cooks, but certainly not just—and the care and compassion brought to this position across the country impacts the lives of students beyond the school grounds.

### *Federal Food Programs/Policies*

There are several federal food programs and policies that assist US school systems, I will briefly discuss three programs and policies: the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA). All three of these programs are to some degree affiliated with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Established in 1946 by President Harry Truman, the National School Lunch Program has been feeding children in almost all types of schools, including public, private as well as childcare institutions (NSLP, 2019; 2020). The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service is responsible for managing the NSLP, as well as ensuring the meals meet federal nutrition requirements (NSLP, 2020). There are three standards that a child or family has to meet in order to become eligible for the NSLP; if a child

is homeless, runaway, migrant or a foster, if they are already enrolled in the Head-Start program or pre-kindergarten program, or if the child's household income is below 130% of the poverty level (NSLP, 2019; 2020). Participation in this national program has increased since its establishment in the late 1940s. In 2019 it was reported that 29.4 million children are participating in the program, with approximately 3.7 billion free or reduced priced lunches given in 2019 alone (NSLP, 2019; 2020). According to the USDA, the National School Lunch Program is the second largest nutrition and food assistance program in the nation.

Although not utilized as widely, the USDA also oversees the School Breakfast Program (SBP), which provides free or reduced breakfast to all students (SBP, 2017). This food program operates under the same policies, qualifications, and guidelines as the USDA's NSLP—children whose household income are at or below the 130% poverty level (SBP, 2017). This program was created in 1966 (Kennedy & Davis, 1998; Frisvold, 2015; SBP, 2013). Similar to the NSLP, the historical beginnings of the SBP were pioneered by a select few. The SBP was originally a two 'year pilot program' in the late 1960s and was made permanent by Congress in 1975 (Frisvold, 2015; SPB, 2013; 2017). The pilot project was created with the intent to "provide meals for children in 'poor areas and areas where children had to travel a great distance to schools'" (Kennedy and Davis, 1998). In the beginning, the SBP served 500,000 children and steadily grew to 7.5 million by 2000, and in 2019 schools involved in the SBP served 2.4 billion children across the country (SBP, 2020). The permanence of a school breakfast program was due in part to growing research surrounding the relationship between nutrition and a child's capacity to learn

(Frisvold, 2015). The SBP had impacts on other areas of education as well such as improving student attendance and reducing tardiness (Frisvold, 2015).

Comparatively, the SBP does not have the same high number of participants as its neighboring lunch program (NSLP), although due to COVID-19 the participation data has significantly changed and participation in both programs (has since re-opening) is expected to grow as more schools return to normal (Hayes and Williams, 2021).

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) was a piece legislation signed by President Donald Trump and passed in early 2020. Its aim was to provide US citizens support for paid leave and other disruptions brought upon by COVID-19, but the Act also included waivers for school meal programs such as the NSLP and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and other federally funded school meal programs. These waivers mean that any child regardless of their household income would be eligible to receive meals. Furthermore, the FFCRA's national waivers to school meal programs allowed children who were not at school to receive meals, allowing school districts to tailor delivery and distribution methods based upon the needs of their specific community. Although the FFCRA expired in December of 2020, the USDA extended meal waivers in April of 2021 to assist the transition back into full-time in-person schooling and plans to continue to offer waivers until June of 2022 (USDA, n.d.).

The impact that these federal food programs have on children on a national level is very clear and these safety nets benefit communities in a variety of ways. Each program tailors to student availability and accessibility, making sure that children are fed during and after school, regardless of whether they are on school grounds.

Similarly, policies such as the FFCRA are created to support children's nutrition in school and recognize that the education system is a pivotal part in raising healthy children, especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Relationship Between Federal Food Policy and Federal AG Subsidies*

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for both federal agriculture subsidies and federal school lunch programs. These two programs are very intertwined and dependent on each other. This close relationship between the programs and subsidies manifests itself strongly in rural communities. To begin, I will briefly go into the details of the USDA's federal agriculture subsidies and the relationship it has with the NSLP. To conclude I will discuss why this matters in a rural community, Moscow Idaho, and what are the repercussions of this relationship in north Idaho.

A subsidy as defined by the World Trade Organization (2006) is a "financial contribution by a government or any public body". Types of subsidies include loan guarantees, direct transfers (cash), tax exemptions and governmental purchases. Federal agricultural subsidies or farm subsidies are forms of government financial aid given to domestic agriculturalists to help with all aspects of food production, and variations of prices of foods due to unforeseen circumstances (EWG, 2020). Federal agriculture subsidies gained governmental traction in the 1930s with events such as the Great Depression, where taxpayer money was allocated to family-owned farms all over the country aimed at countering economic turmoil as well as literal agricultural turmoil from the Dust Bowl in previous years (Amadeo, 2021; Edwards, 2018; Russo, 2011). However today, federal agricultural subsidies have deviated from their original mission of helping small family farms and are now skewed to mostly large farms and

incentivize the growth of five major commodities: corn, wheat, cotton, soybeans, and rice. (Amadeo, 2021; Edwards, 2018; Russo, 2011) This prioritization of inexpensive commodity crops and away from other fruits and vegetables, as well as the shift from quality to quantity is due to a large piece of legislation known as the Farm Bill (Min, 2019; Mortazavi, 2011). The Farm Bill incentivizes the growth of certain products over others, it also has significant influence on conversations and other policies around nutrition (Min, 2019; Mortazavi, 2011). What was once a safety net for farmers is now a billion-dollar industry that has direct correlations to the increased production of livestock feed, junk food products and high-calorie, low-nutrition food that are being introduced into our schools and food systems (Amadeo, 2021; Mortazavi, 2011; Russo, 2011).

In the past 15 years agriculture subsidies have been highly criticized as a waste of taxpayer money with the price tag annually sitting at roughly \$25 billion while farmers are producing surplus of commodity crops (Amadeo, 2021; Drisker, 2021; Edwards, 2018; Mortazavi, 2011). In recent administrations, modest reforms to agricultural subsidies have been drafted however, with the events of COVID-19 these reform efforts were no longer prioritized (Edwards, 2018). From 1995-2010 \$260 billion was spent on commodity crops, "... a full \$77 billion went to subsidize corn; wheat and cotton growers received just over \$30 billion apiece; soybeans were subsidized to the tune of \$24 billion..." (Russo, 2011 p.5). Not all of the commodity crops subsidized by taxpayer money are consumed by citizens, often the soybeans and corn we grow is used as feed for livestock and is turned into vegetable oils, corn syrup, or corn starch (Amadeo, 2021; EWG, 2020; Min, 2019; Russo, 2011). An

unfortunate aspect of farm policy, are the hurdles to growing other fruits and vegetables that compound the challenges of changing behavior towards eating more healthy foods (Mortazavi, 2011). The 2008 authorization of the Farm Bill and the more recent 2016 reauthorization declare fruits, vegetables and nuts as specialty crops, furthermore until 2016, there were no subsidies for growing most fruits and vegetables and in some instances specialty crops are even prohibited from being grown on subsidized land—apples being the exception (Congressional Research Service, 2019; Mortazavi, 2011; Russo, 2011). The Farm Bill is one of the most influential pieces of legislations when it comes to school nutrition programs. When products like fruits and vegetables are designated as ‘specialty crops’ this results in the lack of these products in schools being due to cost (Mortazavi, 2011). Thus, schools that have an active NSLP and are concerned with meeting nutrition guidelines (which are also handled by the USDA) are reliant on product surplus from the USDA and the cheap, affordable, and subsidized products—most often corn, wheat and potatoes (Gaddis, 2019; Mortazavi, 2011; Ruis, 2017).

In the mid 20th century, the federal government saw two issues: a need to support its citizens and a need to mitigate the surplus of farm commodities which fed into the development of the NSLP (Ruis, 2017). The National School Lunch Program Act had two goals, “to address the food problem and the farm problem but the two agendas were not equally represented” (Ruis, 2017 p.114). Although feeding children was an important component to the NSLP clearly, it has historically prioritized supporting agricultural protection over children (Ruis, 2017; Russo, 2011). Today, these problems are only exacerbated with large amounts of low-nutrition, high-calorie



dense foods in our schools—which are a direct result of their affordability (Mortazavi, 2011). However, their affordability is directly tied to the quantity produced which is incentivized by the same governmental body—USDA that dictates the nutrition standards that schools are bound to follow (Gaddis, 2019; Mortazavi, 2011; Ruis, 2017).

This interconnected relationship has not gone unnoticed, multiple scholars such as Anthony Ryan Hatch (2016) and Julie Guthman (2011) have detailed this complicated relationship as it pertains to obesity, racial divisions and healthcare all through the same framework of Foucault’s Bio-power. The concept of Bio-power views the human body as a site of power and control via larger societal and governmental systems (Hatch, 2016). Similarly to their works, the relationship between federal agricultural subsidies and federal food programs is not linear or easy to recognize by the average citizen because socio-political and cultural dichotomies make this relationship messy and difficult to comprehend. We see policies and legislations (i.e. Farm Bill) that control bodies and what is put into them, specifically at the school level where kids are vulnerable and parents lean on food safety nets to help. To reiterate, this interdependent relationship is meant to be difficult to understand, the Farm Bill is jargon ridden and framed to fit special interests under the guise of saving farmers (Mortazavi, 2011; Ruis, 2017).

The result is a convoluted process where food gets taken out of a region where it is grown, only to be introduced back to the same region, in much healthier conditions than when it left. Furthermore, this type of rural food system affects everyone in the community in two connected ways. First, the community bears the

burden of purchasing food from corporate retailers (ie. Walmart) rather than from surrounding farms. Second, federal money from agriculture subsidies disproportionately does not benefit the local farm (and by extension the local community) but instead subsidizes corporate agriculture. I am by no means saying the rural food system in Moscow is the way it is because farmers are selfish, it's not the personal choice of a farmer but because the cost to run a farm is so unbelievably expensive that farmers do not have a choice. The cost of land is so high that they often lease, the price of combines and technology is so high, fertilizers prices continue to grow and farm labor is limited because you cannot just hire anyone but need someone that has a working knowledge of farming, thus these farms are often generational family farms (Winters, 2020). All these unfortunate circumstances lead farmers to become dependent on USDA and Farm Bill subsidies much like low-income families with federal food programs.

The other side of the Farm Bill impact on the food purchasing choices that people make. This certainly affects Moscow's food system and leads some families to be reliant on federal meal programs in schools or other social safety nets such as food stamps. But most often the, majority of residents chose what is cheapest and most affordable, paying into the system that is responsible for the circumstances they find themselves in.

There is clearly a relationship between federal agriculture subsidies and federal food programs that starkly impacts rural communities. The governmental organization that pulls the food out of the community, is the very same organization that is swooping down to save our kids from hunger in our schools. The USDA is a

very prominent and powerful force. The USDA dictates what crops are profitable to grow, what cash profit farmers will make, safety nets for farmers if the price of some crops goes down. It also provides food for the local school system, dictates what children can or cannot eat, is responsible for their supply chain and their nutritional standards and a multitude of other workings that significantly impact any community, much less a rural one. This relationship is by no means a rural specific problem, urban areas experience the repercussions of this relationship through institutions of fast food, healthcare and concerns regarding obesity (Guthman, 2011; Hatch, 2016). However, what is unique about this relationship in a rural setting, is the materialization of seeing all of the farmland around you, being immersed agriculture and yet relying on commodity crops and federal food programs instead.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS

For this research, following an ethnographic framework, my data collection was through non-participant observations in the lunchroom and interviews with lunch ladies. I choose these methods of data collection to prioritize the perspectives of those working in the lunchrooms and to let the personal experiences shape the conversation to what they deem critical to the job and environment. The data collection for this research was not conducted with specific questions in mind, but rather created to explore the lived experiences of lunch ladies working in a rural community and how they navigate federal lunch policies. Areas I do highlight are, the roles of the lunch lady, how these roles are served in a rural community and what struggles and challenges they face within their job.

I decided to do this research in Moscow, ID because I am a resident of the city and have lived here for the past six years. Through residency, I have developed a connection to this area and did not have the means to travel elsewhere to conduct this research. I also did similar research as an undergraduate, studying rural food insecurity in the surrounding local towns and wanted to expand my research on food systems within the education setting. I did this research at Lena Whitmore Elementary; a K-5 grade school. Choosing this school to conduct research was determined by the potential for access. Members of my committee were familiar with Lena Whitmore Elementary through their own children and were acquainted with the administration. Similarly, during my undergraduate schooling, I worked with Lena Whitmore's afterschool program and had experience working with both the district faculty and school staff.

My original research objective was to interview lunch ladies in multiple schools within the Moscow School District doing a comparative research study between grade levels (K-5 and high school). However, COVID-19 significantly impacted this research and the school system as a whole, making it difficult to get in contact with local school administrators to discuss the research, recruit lunch ladies and be granted permission to go into schools. I first reached out via email to the Principals of both Lena Whitmore Elementary and Moscow High school, with the IRB approved recruitment email on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021. In the email I introduced myself, my connection with the University and the contents of my research. I explained that the purpose of my research was to explore the lives of lunch ladies in a rural community and asked for permission to conduct interviews with their lunch ladies and six weeks of non-participant observations of the lunchroom setting during lunch hour, beginning on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. I was explicit in stating that my research interests involved the lunch ladies, and I would not be interfering with the student's ability to learn or directly interact with their students. I also stated that I had experience working within their district before and understood the responsibilities and expectations of the Moscow School District.

I received a same day response from the Principal of Moscow Highschool, expressing enthusiastic interest in their school being a part of my research. The high school Principal said that they would be forwarding my email to their district's Food Nutrition Supervisor to get their approval, so we could move on to the next steps. I received an email response back from the Principal at Lena Whitmore the following week on September 14, 2021, expressing interest in my research but stated that they

had checked with the district's Food Nutrition Supervisor, and they wanted to hold out until next semester, around January to let UI students into the kitchens to conduct studies. I responded clarifying the conditions of my research stating that I would not be needing to collect data within the kitchen, but rather collecting data only in the cafeteria and lunchroom to observe interactions between staff and students. There was a misunderstanding that I would be involved in the cooking and food process within the kitchen because most of the UI students they had been interacting with, were usually food science and nutrition oriented. I assured the elementary school Principal and Food Nutrition Supervisor that my research was more focused on the lunchroom dynamics and interactions of the cafeteria and less on the actual contents of the meals and preparations of the food.

Approximately two weeks went by with no further update from the high school or elementary school Principal, so on September 27, 2021, I sent a follow-up email to both asking if they had gotten approval back from the district's Food Nutrition Supervisor or needed any further clarification. I was getting concerned because the timeline I had planned for data collection was quickly coming up. I got same day responses from both Principals stating that the decision was ultimately up to the district's Food Nutrition Supervisor and that she was short-staffed district-wide and was personally covering those missing positions. Relieved to hear back, I was anticipating getting my data collection started on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. Unfortunately contact once again stalled and I did not hear anything from either Principals or the Food Nutrition Supervisor for another two weeks. I reached out to my committee chair for help and Dr. Warner emailed and called both Principals and the Food

Nutrition Supervisor, reviewing the project and clarifying what the data collection was going to be. He reassured the Food Nutrition Supervisor that the focus would be on observing interactions in the lunchroom and not obstructing the staff's ability to do their jobs in the kitchen. The district's Food Nutrition Supervisor responded the following week on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021, stating that the slow response time was due to short staff and shortages on food, creating a stressful situation. Ultimately it was decided by the Food Nutrition Supervisor that it was not be a good idea for me to do research at Moscow High School. They were down to only one lunch lady and were not comfortable with me conducting data collection while so short staffed. However, Lena Whitmore Elementary said that one day would work for a couple hours but it had to be on a Friday during an easy meal, their meal numbers had been at a record high, and they would not have the extra time to stop and talk. Understanding, I emailed both the Food Nutrition Supervisor and the Lena Whitmore Elementary Principal thanking them for their accommodations and set up a time. My first visit with the lunch ladies at Lena Whitmore Elementary was October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021, at 8:30 AM.

Lena Whitmore Elementary School is a public-school part of the Moscow School District #281. It is a certified Title 1 school, meaning its students have demonstrated a need for extra assistance, specifically with math and reading. They have an average enrollment of 250 students with two classes in each grade level. They have approximately 40 staff members and frequently have volunteers from University of Idaho and the surrounding community. The meal programs that exist are the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and the

Summer Food Service Program. The most utilized is the NSLP, serving approximately 150-170 hot and cold lunches daily.

### *Defining Rural*

There are many definitions and conceptualizations of rurality in the existing literature. For this research I will be using the USDA definition of rural, from the 2008 Farm Bill, “the terms ‘rural’ and ‘rural area’ mean any area other than— ‘(i) a city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants;” (USDA, 2013). Per this conceptualization of rurality, Moscow is designated as rural with a population of over 25,000.

### *Demographics of Moscow*

The population of Moscow Idaho is approximately 25,435 individuals, according to data collected in the 2019 Census Bureau. The city is located on the border of Idaho and Washington in Latah County, containing 60% of the county’s total population. According to the US Census Bureau with just under 25% of residents below the poverty line and 18% of children below the poverty line (Census Reporter, 2019). The Moscow School District #281 has a total of seven public schools: four elementary schools (K-5), one middle school (6-8) and one high school (9-12) and one alternative high school (10-12) (MSD281, 2022). The school district has approximately 2,200 students enrolled as of 2021.

### *Participants*

The sample of individuals I conducted interviews with had to be over 18 years old and had to be school lunch ladies working in a rural area. For this research, purposive sampling was most appropriate because it was conducted with a specific occupation group in mind and there were certain criteria needing to be met in order to participate.



I purposefully excluded participants that are not lunch ladies because this research has a specific interest in those who are working in school and interacting with federal food policies daily. Additionally, I choose not to interact with the students because the consent process for individuals under 18 is very challenging and getting their perspectives does not pertain to this specific research. My participant interactions were solely with the lunch ladies who consented to interviews and approved of me observing them within their working environment. However, being in an established educational setting there was limited interaction with individuals under 1. From an IRB standpoint there was minimal risk and any contact with students was not intentional but was rather due to the environment of my research at an elementary school.

I conducted interviews with two women employed at Lena Whitmore Elementary, Stacy and Yvette. Stacy has worked at Lena Whitmore Elementary for six years and worked at Moscow High School one year before. She's a middle-aged mother of two and has been a resident of Latah County for most of her adult life. Aside from cooking and serving, Stacy is mostly responsible for ordering food, processing paperwork and the electronic side of inventory and records. Yvette has worked at Lena Whitmore Elementary for about six years. She is also middle aged, mother of one who was a resident of Latah County. During my data collection she was in the process of moving to the East coast and had given her months' notice to leave her position at Lena. Yvette's daily responsibilities are prepping the meals, cooking, serving, and washing dishes. Both of the ladies' main daily tasks and responsibilities

are first and foremost to make sure the food is prepared and ready to serve at 10:50 AM.

### Interviews

I conducted two interviews with both women, on November 3, 2021. Each interview lasted roughly 35-40 minutes and were conducted about an hour before lunch service and took place in the kitchen while the ladies were doing their typical tasks (i.e., cleaning, prepping, cooking, and online inventory). I used semi-structured interview questions (listed in the appendix) with space for open-ended follow-up questions, encouraging exploratory thought while still maintaining the research framework focused on their experiences working within federal food policy and their daily interactions with students. These conversational topics were dictated by broad themes found within the existing literature and when applicable I asked probing questions in an effort to expand on specific issues.

Prior to the interviews I met with the two women and explained the consent form as adapted from University of Idaho's Institutional Review Board and answered any questions they had regarding their participation, their rights as a participant or any other concerns. They were also compensated for their time with \$10 gift cards to their choice of either Walmart or Starbucks. After I received their consent to participate, I began the interview process. A recording device was used with the consent of the interviewees that I later transcribed using ExpressScribe. The recording device and transcription service's Terms and Conditions were linked in the consent form for the participants. Upon beginning recording, I briefly went over the consent form one more time and asked for a verbal consent that was also recording and documented.

### *Non-participant Observation*

For this data collection, I conducted approximately a total of 14 hours of non-participant observations at the elementary school from October 29, 2021, to November 19, 2021. The lunch ladies and I worked out a visitation schedule that they were most comfortable with. This schedule was partly predicated on the departure date of one of the ladies who was leaving the position, as well as what types of foods were being served. They were more comfortable with me visiting on days where the food required minimal preparation, serving and utensils. This meant that the majority of meals I saw were finger foods, pizza, chicken nuggets, hamburgers—ensuring that my visitation did not disrupt anything. The stress of days with a lot of prep and serving are very hectic according to both women. One of the ladies was filling me in on their ‘Thanksgiving at school’ lunch, joking that I, “should of come on Thursday to see how crazy it was”. With this collaborative schedule I was primarily there Monday, Wednesday, Friday from the hours of 10:30-12:15 PM. Before lunch would start at 10:50 I would observe the ladies finalizing the meals and prep, opening the salad bar and placing everything in warming or cooling trays, anticipating the students. Then once the lunch proctors and janitor started setting up tables I would stand next to the salad bar and have a front seat to the interactions between the lunch ladies and elementary students.

I chose to do non-participant observation because I wanted to observe interactions between the students and lunch ladies in their most normal environment. This type of observation gave me insight not only to the daily exchanges between the ladies and students but also allowed me to see things discussed (or missed) in the interviews—in action. Some key interactions I observed include, responsibilities of lunch ladies that

perhaps might go unnoticed, atmosphere of the cafeteria and kitchen, visuals of the served food, exchanges between students and lunch ladies and the interrelationships between the women and the rest of the school staff. With this non-participant observation, I was able to (combined with interviews) collect different data sets that allowed this research to have a more holistic view into the daily lives of lunch ladies and the true extent of their responsibilities in the school system.

## CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS

There are five main themes present within the data I collected from non-participant observation and interviews. These themes are COVID-19 as a Positive, COVID-19 as a Negative, Government/Policy in the kitchen, Community Mothering, and Relationships in the School. These themes highlight the dynamic environment that the lunch ladies interact in, one that balances the navigation and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the expectations of the federal government, their imposed view as nurturers and their place within the larger education structure.

My first day of non-participant observations was pizza day. I was nervous about observing these ladies for the first time and being exposed to this environment. Questions in my mind arose like, what the atmosphere was going to be like, and why it was challenging to be allowed access into the cafeteria and these lunch ladies in the first place. It was a Friday which meant shorted periods, which is why the district Food Nutrition Supervisor schedules pizza as an easy meal for these shorter days. So, although there was less stress for the ladies about the extensive food prep, they are still in a rush to get the food and prep work done so they can serve kids quickly. Their daily routine for setting up the cafeteria, was consistent throughout my observation times at the elementary school. It is broken up into two areas, setting up the salad bar/serving which was the responsibility of the lunch ladies and setting up the lunchroom/seating area which was the responsibility of the lunch proctors and janitor.

At about seven minutes until the first Kindergarten class comes in, the ladies start opening the salad bar and setting up the serving station. The lunch ladies put the mini pizzas in the warming trays, along with the vegetable of the day, celery and the 'fruit' of the day sour candied raisins called "Raisels". The ladies then start setting up the

cold lunch and milk section. All the cold lunches have been prepped, and brown bagged with each student's name on it, keeping cool in one of the three industrial sized refrigerators. They pull out each grade level at a time, to save space and keep the items at appropriate temperature. They house the milks in barrels of ice, roughly the size of trashcans, which sit at the end of the salad bar. While the ladies are setting up the serving section, the rest of the lunch staff is converting the multipurpose room into a cafeteria.

The janitor an older male and two lunch proctors both older females, begin by retracting the tables from the wall and placed COVID-19 protocolled clear white dividers along them. In the center of the cafeteria, they set up a trashcan and a metal shelf for the empty trays to be dumped and stacked after each kid is dismissed for recess, on the bottom shelf there is a sanitizer bucket filled with some cleaner and two dish towels. Ideally the proctors and janitor are to wipe down all the tables after each class leaves but often times, the class periods are too close together. Towards the entrance into the kitchen, they roll out a second metal shelf that has a few napkin dispensers, wet wipes, small paper cups and a large Gatorade branded plastic beverage dispenser filled with water. Finally, they have a countdown clock for each grade level's lunch period projected on the back wall of the cafeteria, because each of them comes in at different times, the visual helps both the lunch staff and students maintain awareness. They are now all ready for the first class of kindergarteners to come and eat lunch.

### *COVID-19 as a Positive*

The strengths and difficulties brought upon by COVID-19 in this school environment were hard to ignore and managed to be a significant influence in my

research. This project was not intended to be a COVID-19 based research project but the data I collected lead me to this adjustment. What is most critical to recognize upon detailing this added research lens is that COVID-19 was not all terrible and in some areas was rather helpful. As controversial as that statement may seem on the surface, when you view it from the perspectives of the lunch ladies, you can recognize that COVID-19 brought structural adjustment to their job for the better in most cases. I do want to be clear that the overall repercussions and complications that COVID-19 had brought onto people in general has been very difficult and hard to endure and these ladies were not immune to it by any means, but what I am trying to argue is that COVID-19 impacted their jobs for the better. The pandemic gave them more support within their school and created structural adjustments to their job that have allowed them to focus more on feeding their students.

Now that the initial panic of a global pandemic has worn off, we can look back at all the influences, adjustments and changes COVID-19 has brought upon our daily lives. Often when we hear things about COVID-19, it's almost entirely negative and disruptive. In some areas the negative aspects of COVID-19 were unavoidable and affected everyone, but conversely, in some areas COVID-19 was beneficial and a positive change—this is true for the lunch ladies. The data shows that COVID-19 brought beneficial change to their job, and they hope some of these changes will remain permanent. Some key themes highlighting COVID-19 as a positive I will discuss below include electronic hot/cold lunch sheet, changes to inventory management, serving/choice and free lunches. These themes were often brought up in the interviews and observed during lunch time. Lastly maybe the most important

change from COVID-19 for these ladies was the increase in support from other school faculty and administration. This change significantly impacted the ladies and adjusted their job for the better.

Every morning I visited the elementary school one of the ladies would be highlighting a clipboard full of papers. She would color code in highlighter the cold from hot lunch, whether the students wanted white or chocolate milk. These hardcopy cold/hot lunch sheets are printed out from a Google doc that the teachers and lunch ladies have access to. Further illustrating the process; in the morning, teachers ask each of their students what type of meal they want, the details of meal choice, and additionally marking what kids are absent. This system not only helps the decision-making process, but also curbs overcooking and keeps food waste to a minimum. In addition, both ladies stated that this improved their jobs in less obvious ways, saying that it gave them more support within the school system. Before teachers would not even ask students what they wanted to eat, and sometimes they would just guess.

Yvettee states:

This is new since COVID actually, it's actually really nice because we can see what each kid ordered, so we don't have to, before we would just know a class total like, and some teachers wouldn't even ask the kids they would just guess...yeah just throw a number into the computer system, it might be right, it might not be right and so then we would have kids that would switch all the time on the line and then we'd run out of food, so we don't run out of food very often now...we have less waste.

The system that existed prior to the Google doc sheet was unmanageable, prone to waste and rarely accurate as illustrated briefly above. Now this Google doc, color coded system allows for more accurate prep, significantly cuts down on food waste,



and most importantly saves valuable time. Additionally, this Google doc system also allows better inventory management.

Since early 2020, the Moscow School District switched entirely to an online inventory system, this is due partly from COVID-19 and mishandling of inventory according to one of the lunch ladies. The previous Food Nutrition Supervisor had a poor handle on the district's inventory which resulted in them constantly running out of food, no alignment between the menus and the actual inventory which made the lunch ladies jobs very difficult. To add insult to injury certain schools within the district would not disclose how much of what they had and would even hoard certain popular items. Stacy discussing this frustration with me during non-participant observations and stated that some people "would hoard certain items like peanut butter or cereal and there wouldn't be enough for everyone". Frustrations from a mismanaged inventory were fairly common but during the start of COVID-19 back in 2020, the former Food Nutrition Supervisor left and was replaced with the current one. The current Food Nutrition Supervisor made drastic changes to the old way of inventory management and according to both women, they've been very relieved by the changes. During interviews Stacy concluded with, "we've got a pretty good team going on now...we have a whole different crew and now everything is really pretty good". One of the biggest changes is transparency and hierarchy of distribution within the school district. There is clear transparency between the schools, the ladies, and the Food Nutrition Supervisor. All the district's inventory and individual school's inventory are on electronic spreadsheets that are made available to all parties involved. Not only does this strategy eliminate the hoarding issues experienced

previously, but it also allows for schools to borrow and trade for items they may need or have extra to give away. Those that were frequent hoarders of peanut butter and Cheerio's cereal have since left their positions but nonetheless, this transparent online inventory system encourages support between schools in the district which was not common before COVID-19.

The hierarchy of distribution within the school district is fairly straightforward and is as follows; First the Food Nutrition Supervisor creates the monthly menus very early in advance, then the Food Nutrition Supervisor orders the food from a USDA approved domestic distributor for the whole district, she typically orders all items two weeks in advance if possible. Side note: present in each school's kitchen in a big white binder filled with every USDA approved meal item that can be served, with distribution facts, all nutritional ingredients etc., the list of these items undergoes an annual revision. After the Food Nutrition Supervisor orders all the food items for the entire district, she houses them in another warehouse where lunch ladies can then grab their inventory from the district's warehouse. These two main changes with the adjustment to inventory management have been most helpful to both the lunch ladies and the overall district, especially with the food shortages brought on by COVID-19.

Another adjustment brought upon by COVID-19 was the change from student serving to student choice. Prior to COVID-19, the kids would be partially responsible for serving themselves, this method had its pros and cons according to the lunch ladies, but overall, they both stated that this system was chaotic and time consuming. Stacy stated how yes, the kids serve themselves method ideally saved more money, it was too time consuming, and the student workers were just older elementary school

kids so “they often goofed off and were inconsistent with the portions” (which goes against the USDA’s portion policies). Illustrating the previous process; first students would grab their tray and utensils and then slide the trays on the salad bar to be served from student workers. Then Stacy would be sitting at the end with the cash register checking kids out while Yvettee would be prepping more food to come out. According to both ladies, this method was time consuming and inefficient. The serving would take much too long, the portions were very inconsistent and cashing kids out at the register was a whole other struggle in and of itself because it was very time consuming to cash out students while trying to maintain speedy efficiency. Additionally, it meant that only one lady was responsible for serving and prepping which added to the slow pace. However with COVID-19, the entire serving system radically changed for several pandemic related reasons. First, due to the unsanitary concerns of kids serving food and inconsistent portions and secondly, with free food for all students due to the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) there is no longer a need for a lunch lady to be on a cash register—which eliminated the cash register checkout line. The district has now opted for a choice method of serving lunch, now all the serving is done by the two of them, but the kids tell them what they want, and the students still have choice. This method is hygienic and saves time thus giving kids more time to be actively eating rather than waiting in line. Saving time is always the highest priority to these ladies.

As briefly mentioned above, due to COVID-19’s Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) all students are allowed free lunch (via waivers) regardless of if they are below the federal poverty line. This was seen by the lunch ladies as an

improvement not only on their behalf working, but for the kids as well. The FFCRA also temporarily suspended the application process to qualify for free or reduced lunch, thus allowing more students to get food without the embarrassment or shame of applying for federal assistance which both lunch ladies stated is certainly an issue they see. Having free lunches, frees Stacy up to be serving instead of checking students out at the cash register during lunch service. Free lunches for all reduced the physical and emotional burden of trying to manage serving and checking out kids. But more importantly to Stacy and Yvettee, for the time being, they no longer have to turn kids away for not having money on their lunch account or stamp kid's hands as an embarrassing message for the parents that they do not have money. Which according to Stacy she disapproved of from the jump because judging from her extended experience as a lunch lady, she stated, "the parents of the kids who are getting these hand stamps, know that there isn't money for them", indicating that, that method of bringing awareness is inherently flawed and all it does is signal to others that the student or their family doesn't have money.

Overall, the free lunch for all brought upon by the FFCRA has been very beneficial for the students and extremely helpful for the lunch ladies. Although it is still up in the air, both ladies believe (and hope) that this free lunch policy will be a permanent change.

### *COVID-19 as a Negative*

Much like the rest of the world, these ladies were not immune to the global disruptions brought upon by the Coronavirus Pandemic. Food availability and shortages, staffing shortages, switching from scratch cooking to processed, and mask complications are the main themes found within the data I collected. Themes

mentioned mostly represented the national disruptions from the pandemic that affected the country as a whole.

Prices for things were skyrocketing according to the brief conversation I had with the lunch ladies and Food Nutrition Supervisor, specifically the prices of utensils, plates and trays. All of them were concerned with the significant food shortages they were experiencing because it was affecting the USDA's nutritional guidelines. Stacy was venting to me one day while doing online inventory, that they ordered carrots but instead got celery and was concerned because they still needed to fulfill the USDA's red/orange weekly vegetable/fruit requirement. Similarly on another observation day, I walked into the kitchen to find both ladies in deep conversation about the upcoming week's vegetable servings, throughout the pandemic they told me that they haven't had a shortage of potatoes, so their nutrition supervisor created the monthly menu for November with potatoes three days in a row (even though starchy foods are not nutritious vegetables as per USDA's NSLP guidelines). Because they were not comfortable serving starchy 'vegetables' three days in a row they were trying to adjust meal days for that week and substitute leftover celery for one of the days. These executive last-minute substitutions I observed quite often and was reflective of the past year and a half due to food shortages and availability issues. In these situations, they were more comfortable 'breaking the rules' for the sake of nutrition content for their students, knowing full well the repercussions if they were to be suddenly audited or to have a sudden supervisor visitation.

Staffing shortages were amongst the primary reasons for me not being able to go to other schools within the district. At the elementary school, this was not an issue at

the time of my observation but was soon going to be an issue. Yvettee was scheduled to leave at the beginning of December, and this was a huge concern because in other schools, they only had one lunch lady and they know how only having one person would go. Unfortunately, throughout the time of my observations they had still not gotten any job applicants to the online posting for her replacement, this was also a problem at the high school. Luckily, at the elementary school there was a supportive community of other staff members that in the past have actually gotten in gloves and served at the salad bar when they were overwhelmed with kids. Although this help is appreciated, they know it is not a sustainable fix to only having one lunch lady do the serving of two.

With all the national supply chain issues causing shortages of items as briefly mentioned above, the district made the switch from scratch cooking to a mostly processed/package meal system. This was an interesting phenomena to discuss with the ladies because there were pros and cons to this switch. On one hand, for the federal government and budget, it made tracking money and waste easier as well as lessened their workload. According to Yvettee, regardless of how much time it takes prepping all the scratch baking, they'd always find the time. Thus, from my interpretations, they don't really view the time constraint as an ideal justification for the almost complete transition from scratch to processed but rather they recognize this transition as helpful to the government at the expense of the kid's interests. They recognize the students being dissatisfied with the lack of variety and quality of the processed food. Yvettee gave the example, "When everything is pre-packaged then it's a little—it's easier... [but] I would say they like the homemade food more ... I

mean who doesn't like homemade food?". So, while in some regards the national supply chain issue still affect's their ability to make their scheduled meals, the transition brought upon by COVID-19 from scratch to processed mitigated a lot of the problem—however at the expense of their student's satisfaction.

According to both women during the interviews and non-participant observations, mask compliance was "fine". Most kids didn't seem to be bothered by them for the most part, occasionally they'd break theirs', or drop them or forget to put it back on while walking around. I did notice and over-hear more frustration about things from the older grades and not from the younger ones. When I asked Stacy if it was hard for the kindergartens to follow these rules she said, "no not really, unfortunately this is all they know and haven't done anything different because they are so young".

Compared to the conversations I would overhear from the fifth graders arguing over their vaccination statuses. Overall, mask compliance was not an issue, however masks were something that did make their jobs a little more challenging. The communication between the students and lunch ladies is already a little difficult due to the noisiness of the cafeteria environment, so to add a mask just increased the communication barrier. However, just like they did with most other obstacles they adapted and used it as a teaching opportunity to teach kids hand signals and encourage them to use "loud and clear voices". Just about every student who came up to the salad bar to be served used a clear loud voice, pointed to the foods they wanted or used thumbs up/thumbs down hand signals.

### *Government/Policy in the kitchen*

When you first walk into the multipurpose room, at the entrance there's a white stand with an interactive whiteboard titled 'Fuel up to Play 60' (Figure 1). 'Fuel up to

Play 60' is a program founded by the National Football League (NFL) and the National Dairy Council that encourage students, schools, and parents to be active and healthy. Additionally, it provides participating schools with nutrition information and resources to better ensure students thrive within their communities. Every day the lunch ladies utilize the 'Fuel up to Play 60' whiteboard writing down the hot meal of the day. Branded with the date its visible for everyone to see as soon as they walk into the school, reminding kids of what's on the menu before their teacher asks their choice of hot or cold lunch.

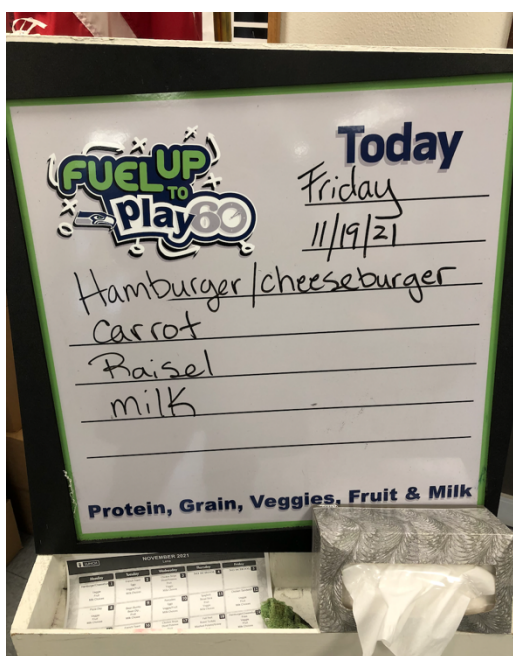


Figure 1: 'Fuel to Play 60 Whiteboard' 1



Figure 2: USDA's Child Nutrition Sign 1

Once you enter the multipurpose room, it is usually bustling with kids partaking in P.E. activities before lunch period starts. More healthy food advertisements decorate the walls the closer you get to the kitchen, 'Fuel up to Play 60' logos with the Seahawks emblem, accompanied by two USDA's Idaho Child Nutrition Program signs "What's for Breakfast?" (Figure 2) and "What's for lunch?". These Idaho Child Nutrition Program signs are also changed daily with the corresponding hot meal



options. Bright, colorful, and bold, the signs show kids what their food options for the day are, at the bottom in white is the sentence “Must take fruit/vegetable”. The ladies also post a printout of the monthly menu that goes home to every student’s household. A USDA ‘And Justice for All’ poster hangs right outside the kitchen door, the contents of this poster go over anti-discrimination hiring policies, contact information, complaint systems and disability accommodations. All these program advertisements represent a bigger strategy within the school cafeteria, power.

Foucault’s concept of disciplinary biopower targets individual bodies in environments such as schools, prisons, and the military and is more concerned with the subjugation of bodies rather than overt control; this type of power manifests itself through things like trainings, education, and tests (Taylor, 2014). School cafeterias and school lunches are a unique intersection between politics, the economy, nutrition, and control. Within the framework of Foucault’s disciplinary biopower, children’s bodies are sites for control by federal programs overseen by the USDA. Examples would be the School Breakfast Program and NSLP, where the student’s personal autonomy and agency of choice is limited to what options are given by broader systems of power (Gibson & Dempsey 2015). Not only is this control exercised with students, but it also subjugates those maintaining the programs—lunch ladies.

The main federal food programs that exist at Lena Whitmore Elementary are the School Breakfast Program, the National School Lunch Program, and the Summer Lunch Program. These programs dictate what types of food to be served, where that food comes from, how to cook the food, the portion size and much more. There are two components to the success rate of these federal food programs, the cooking, and

the paperwork. Each lady has their respective roles when it comes to acting within these food programs, for most of my observation periods, Stacy sat at the counter doing paperwork, mostly production records. When asked about the clerical side of her work she said,

There's some paperwork, there's some ordering. Ordering I usually only do once a week, paperwork—doing our productions records that's done after breakfast and after lunch to keep track of how many we served, what we served, how much we served.

Once Stacy has completed the production records, she sends them off to her boss, the Nutrition Supervisor, who then shares it with the USDA. According to Yvettee, all this paperwork ensures accurate maintenance of the budget, keeping track of the money and under budget is of the utmost importance to the USDA. The budget aspect of the clerical work is crucial, but it is not something these ladies spend too much time on anymore. Rather they are the middle piece, providing the serving information that their nutrition supervisor needs for the USDA.

The federal paperwork that the lunch ladies are more involved with pertains to the food. Ensuring they are meeting the nutrition standards and meal requirements put forth by the USDA. The USDA has nutrition standards for each age-cohort and have specific dietary requirements for five food categories: fruits, vegetables, grains, meat, and milk. They also have restrictions for amounts of sodium and saturated fat the ladies can serve. During our interviews in the kitchen Yvettee showed me an example of their 'Daily/Weekly Vegetable Planner' which was a 5-day week chart with the

USDA required vegetable types and portions (Figure 3).

**Daily/Weekly Vegetable Planner (5-day week)**

Instructions: Using a week of your menu, classify the different vegetables offered throughout the week by the required subgroups. Record the name of the vegetable and the amount planned to credit each subgroup accordingly in the Vegetables (cups) - Weekly chart. Note: Use the Food Buying Guide to help classify what subgroup the vegetable item falls under.

**Vegetables (cups) - Weekly chart**

	Day 1		Day 2		Day 3		Day 4		Day 5		Weekly Total
	cups	veg	cups	veg	cups	veg	cups	veg	cups	veg	
Dark Green	0.000		0.000	1c salad	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000
Red/Orange				1/4 salsa					1/2 carrot		0.000
Beans/Peas				1/4 beans			1/4 beans				0.000
Starchy	1/2 fries										0.000
Other					1/2 lbs						0.000
Additional	1/2 cuc						1/2 pea				0.000
Daily Totals	Day 1 Total: 0		Day 2 Total: 0		Day 3 Total: 0		Day 4 Total: 0		Day 5 Total: 0		Weekly Total: 0.000

Notes: 1/8    125  
1/4    25  
3/8    375  
1/2    5  
5/8    625  
3/4    75  
7/8    875


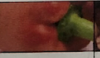



						Additional vegetables to meet weekly requirements
Grades K-5	1/2 Cup	3/4 Cups	1/2 Cup	1/2 Cup	1/2 Cup	1 Cup

Figure 3: USDA Daily/Weekly Planner 1

Everything they serve comes from the USDA. With COVID-19 there were radical shifts to their cooking and serving strategies such as going from scratch cooking to processed food, but the federal influence has stayed constant.

When asked if they felt restricted by these federal food programs like the summer food program or the NSLP, they both said yes but were more concerned about the policy's influence on the students. Stacy answered with, "Sometimes yes, because some items don't fill the kids up". Yvette shared a similar remark, their frustrations with these federal food programs lie with the disconnect between the policy and its reality in schools. They are bound by policy to only serve certain amounts of meat for example (i.e., three chicken nuggets per student) but what the USDA is not understanding is that they kids are still hungry. The USDA has created these meal

requirements and dietary portion guidelines based on nutrition, but it is only if they eat everything on their tray—which often they do not. These are the struggles they voiced to me when discussing the restrictions of federal food programs, that they cannot exceed the allotted portion sizes even if the kids are still hungry. What’s more is the disconnect between plate and consumption. When I asked them to go into more detail about their serving procedures based upon the NSLP, Stacy states that the students must choose a fruit or vegetable or both, but they do not have to *eat* it. So, in theory, the USDA’s nutrition guidelines for the NSLP are all well and healthy—on paper. In the kitchen it is a different story. From Stacy and Yvette’s perspective’s it is all bureaucratic, “it’s kind of like just to check the box kind of deal” or is referred to as a “government thing, like a USDA thing”. This federal policy disconnect between paper and reality is most bothersome to the ladies when they have to face hungry kids. Telling students, no to more hot food or seconds is an unfortunate element to their job that happens all too often and is due in part to the policy restrictions embedded within the federal food programs.

During the section of interview questions, we started to discuss the stigma surrounding the utilization of the federal food program safety nets but how vital this information is to the school and its Title 1 funding. During the interviews Yvette said, “I think that there definitely is a stigma in the community of people like taking from food programs”. Stacy responded to her comment with:

Yeah, some people, they don’t want to fill out the free and reduced form and what they don’t understand is when we don’t get them filled out, we don’t get enough then, our Title 1 program which is a reading assistant program, we lose our, our kids don’t get the funding for that. So, we’ll lose our Title 1 teacher because that’s her funding so, it’s really important to fill out those free and

reduced forms even if you are not going to use them...it definitely betters the community of the school.

When I asked why they believed the parents didn't want to fill these out, they plainly stated that, "it's a pride thing, I think people just like—they don't want to lean on". So not only do the federal food programs impact what the kids are eating and how the lunch ladies can do their job, it also impacts additional funding opportunities for the school outside of the cafeteria—like their Title 1 funding. Stacy stated, "I try to tell them, the school or whoever interacts with these people that it really benefits the school, just as much as it would benefit you guys to use it but...it's a really hard stigma to break". In their opinions, for the stigma surrounding federal food programs and safety nets to be erased, parents and community need to be educated on all the other ways the school benefits from these programs.

When asked if these policies impact the way they do their job, nervous laughter ensued between the two of them, filled with sideways glances concluding with a comment, "We definitely have to follow them ... [we] try to work within the guidelines as best as possible". Throughout my observations and time spent with these two women I saw numerous examples of them acting within these guidelines to the best of their ability or even flat out just making an executive decision when faced with a negative situation. An example comes to mind of a breakfast for lunch day I observed one Tuesday. On that Tuesday they were serving mini pancakes, scrambled eggs, cucumbers/carrots, bananas, and milk. The mini pancakes were approximately the size of a hockey puck and 1/3 of an inch thick, objectively it was a small serving of grains. Stacy and Yvettee did not think that the single pancake serving size per the USDA guidelines was enough and decided to give every kid an extra. Recognizing

the reality of the NSLP in action, they knew from experience that the kids often do not eat everything on their tray and the single pancake was not going to be enough and prioritized the student's interests over the portion guidelines of the NSLP.

Another manifestation of the government's influence in the cafeteria is the transition from scratch/homemade cooking to processed meals. The ladies have a theory that this transition was due mostly to COVID-19, the processed food is easier to keep track of for the budget, so they have seen a quick departure from scratch cooking to preparing almost only food that is more processed and packaged. The data shows that the budget is a significant factor when dealing with the federal food program. Yvettee stated,

So, I think since COVID we've started doing more packaged things because I think they're easier to get a hold of right now than some of the ingredient things and it's crazy, it's easier to keep track of waste and like money wise, budget wise when it's pre-portioned.

But what concerns the lunch ladies is this transition's effect on their students. The kids liked the meals made from scratch cooking much more, in some cases. When asked if the students liked the packaged stuff more or the homemade meals the ladies said that it depended on what was being served, but they notice that they do get tired of the lack of variety. Stacy gave the example of pizza, prior to them switching over to primarily processed/packaged meals they would make pizza Fridays from scratch. Making their own pizzas meant they had the liberty to "jazz it up" with toppings that they knew the kids would like and ham, cheese, and some vegetables, providing multiple options to their students, "They would get excited about having like choices, variety". But now all the pizza for pizza Fridays is individually packaged frozen cheese and pepperoni pizzas, that I would see the kids clearly disliked. My first

Friday observation of pizza day was filled with middle pointed thumbs when asked “Do you like the pizza?”. The lunch ladies pride themselves on responding and adapting to feedback from their students about their satisfaction regarding the food choices but there is only so much to be done when they are but intermediaries enveloped in a larger program. Regardless of their student’s feelings about it, from the lunch lady’s perspective, it is unfortunately out of their control.

Utilizing the theory of disciplinary biopower (Foucault, 1978) federal school food programs like the NSLP and the School Breakfast Program regard children and lunch ladies as sites for control. Whether this is through rigid adherence to policies that may leave economically disadvantaged kids hungry to frustration with a lack of meal variety, the federal food programs operating in schools exercise power of the cafeteria environment.

### *Community Mothering*

The labor of feeding kids is inherently gendered based on traditional western gender roles, this responsibility most often fell on the feet of women. The historical roots of school lunches follow this trend, the pioneering individuals were women, those that took on the responsibility in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were women, and today, the vast majority of cafeteria workers are women. There is a large amount of emotional labor present within the position of the lunch lady, and it manifests itself in bold and subtle ways. The term community mothering or “community othermothers” comes from urban and low-income social science research, highlighting the various ways in which women other than mothers contribute to a child’s wellbeing (Edwards, 2000; Naples, 1992; Vancil-Leap, 2016). There is a caricature of the lunch lady that

mirrors this concept of community mothering, due in part to the care work expected in this position.

All the work the lunch ladies do is in the best interest of their students. They view their jobs as nurturing, and pride themselves on creating a positive environment for their students during lunch filled with meals that they know interest them. During the interviews, when asked what the most satisfying part of their job was, they both responded with the kids. As Yvettee said:

I would say interacting with the kids is the most satisfying part of the job. I really like interacting with the kids and I like to hear about their stories and ... about how their day's going. Just watch them interact with each other too is really interesting so, I would say that is the best part.

Stacy responded with a little more saying,

Just seeing the kids and knowing that they are happy and content with what we gave them, we, we love to bake for them and make them foods that they like ... just getting to know them and honestly just getting to know the kids and their personalities is pretty satisfying.

I asked Stacy if she thought these feelings were mutual, she excitedly said, "Oh yeah! Yeah, definitely, they get to know us and they'll come and tell us about their day or their cool little thing they found...or they'll pick us flowers on the way to school and give us flowers".

Both women when asked this question, had big grins on their faces and spoke compassionately about their interactions with their students. These quotes highlight that to these ladies, the job isn't just about putting food on trays or cooking. It's about the kids and being a part of their lives, caring for them, watching them grow and contributing to their well-being. During one of my first non-participant observation days, there was a scheduled fire drill before lunch around 9:45 AM. In accordance



with school procedure everyone exits the building (staff included) and waits in the field for roll call. Due to the location of the kitchen, we were out of building quickly and were able to watch all the classes walk out. I got to witness first-hand the level of care and impact these two women had on the students. Just about every grade from kindergarten to fifth made some sort of acknowledgement to the women while walking to the field, whether it was a small wave or greeting, or the phrase “see you at lunch”. It was these little lunch lady-student interactions that really spoke to the concept of other/community mothering and the emotional labor of their job. This care manifested itself in several ways, outside of their occupation’s main responsibility of feeding their students—which is an inherently compassionate act.

The cold lunch option served every day at the elementary school is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a chocolate or white milk and snack most often Goldfish, applesauce, or raisins. Peanut butter is a highly contentious food in schools because so many kids have peanut allergies, some that can result in serious medical intervention. The lunch ladies are very aware of this possibility and make sure to be extra careful of cross contamination when dealing with peanuts, because there is a small minority of students who have this allergy. It is the lunch lady’s responsibility to be aware of the allergies of their students and make sure that what each individual student is eating is safe. This responsibility didn’t come to my attention until I was well into my observations and had noticed a student when released for lunch, be very quick to grab their cold lunch brown paper bag and exit the cafeteria. I asked Stacy why some kids did this, and she responded saying that it was because those students have allergies, and they have special seating outside in the hall. In the hall right next

to the entrance to the cafeteria is a small desk with two chairs, this is the special seating for the kids with allergies. Only not every kid with allergies must sit and eat alone, this special seating is only if the parent is uncomfortable with them eating around the rest of the students. Upon briefly discussing this with Stacy, she seemed against this method of protection from allergies stating, "I have other kids who have allergies, and they are allowed to sit here with their friends but its ultimately up to what the parents want". She felt that the hallway seating alternative was isolating and unnecessary because they are very observant in the lunchroom and can keep a safe eye on their kids, but ultimately recognized that she must respect the choices of the parents. This illustrates the caring nature of the women in their serving positions but also the limitations that come with their job.

The lunch ladies' pride themselves on creating meals and choosing foods that will appeal to their students. Other times, they try to introduce and expose the kids to food and meals that they know, they've never tried before. Sometimes it is extravagant meals like quiches and other times its simple like a plum or bell pepper. They enjoy exposing their students to new foods and welcome the feedback and criticism from their students at their choices. During interviews Stacy said, "We did have one girl, we love her because she definitely told us what she thought ...she did it politely and it was great because we were getting feedback and it went really well" At the root of all their meal planning is an emphasis on good nutrition for their students.

One day in particular stands out, the meal was chicken nuggets with ketchup/mustard, baked beans, potatoes, and apple sauce. Every day of observations I came in about 30 minutes before serving started to write up the meal for the day and

talk with the ladies about what they were serving before service got too crazy. This day specifically we were talking about whether the baked beans were going to be well received. Both ladies told me to help them encourage the students to get baked beans on their plates and be excited about the side. They told me to help them out because they knew that most kids had never had them before, and they always want to encourage them to “just try it”. What’s more is that the students truly trust the lady’s perspectives and opinions on the food and know that they wouldn’t serve them foods that they would not like. So, throughout the entire lunch period we encouraged students to give the baked beans a try, little conversations would ensue in the serving line between Stacy and the students coaxing them to give them a shot. “Are you sure Mrs. Yvettee made them special” or “Are you sure, they are BBQ?” in a pleasing tone with encouraging nods. Once a student would accept, we’d get excited and praise their choice which would in turn encourage the student behind them to want to try them out and get the same reaction. Moreover, during observations I would actually see kids trying them out and not just letting the beans get cold on their tray, its true not all kids would enjoy them, but some would and if it was not for the ladies exposing them to different foods they wouldn’t have known.

Other examples of the lunch ladies encouraging good nutrition is serving the vegetables that they know they like. They know their students like green bell peppers but not yellow or red, so they only serve that flavor, they also know that they do not like the cinnamon flavored apple sauce, so they only order the regular kind. Whenever they are serving carrots or cucumbers, they offer ranch as a dipping side to try and coax them into taking a serving of vegetables. According to the ladies, they

listen to what the kids like because they want to make sure they enjoy their lunch time and “be happy with the meals we make them”. This further reinforces the sentiment that this is not just a serving job to these women, but their perspective is, it’s about making sure the kids are happy with what they are providing them.

Once more they align with the community mothering concept by teaching the kids manners and encouraging good behavior when in the cafeteria. During my observations, I saw them correcting misbehavior in their line and putting a stop to rough housing. The ladies themselves view their role in the student’s lives as nurturing and less of a disciplinarian—even when occasionally they must remind their students about proper line behavior. From Yvettee’s perspective they have a more intimate relationship with the students that’s different from the teachers, she stated, “[teachers] they have to be a little more strict and ...its more of like, yeah it’s almost like a mom or a grandma situation where it’s like [we] make sure they’re eating their food and behaving...so it’s definitely like a nurturing”. Not only do the ladies make sure they are well behaved during lunch time, but they also teach and encourage the use of manners.

When the kids waiting in line would get their turn to be served Stacy would respond enthusiastically when a student would say “please” and “thank you”. Which much like the trying new foods tactic, would encourage the students behind them to want to receive that same reaction and use manners. On the rare occasion, if a student was responding rudely or having some behavioral issues, they would even more so motivate the student to be more respectful. “If you ask nicely, I will” or “I hate this”, “So you mean no thank you, right?” was a frequently used response by Stacy and

Yvette to these less than respectful interactions. But most often the kids were very well behaved and respectful of the lunch ladies because they treat their students well and compassionately.

The lunch ladies view themselves in a unique position within the school system, one that is not so strict as others such as the teacher or principle. Furthermore, they recognize and value the nurturing element of their serving position, understanding their similarities as a mother away from home to their students. The community mothering concept presents itself at Lena when the ladies go above and beyond serving and encourage their students to have good manners, behavior and nutrition as well as protecting them from allergies. Although not written in the job description, these ladies' pride themselves on the nurturing and parenting skills they bring to the job to ensure that their students have a positive experience in their cafeteria.

### *Relationships in the School*

Most workplace environments thrive on a cohesive system that involves teamwork and supportive members. From the moment you walk into Lena Whitmore Elementary, you recognize the value and importance all the staff members place on teamwork. There's a visible, continuous flow of communication from the front desk to the administrators, to the teachers, lunch ladies and their proctors, all the way to the maintenance and janitorial staff. If a student suddenly had to leave or came in late, the information is funneled down the chain, so everyone is on the same page. Not only is there steady communication amongst the school staff, but there is also communication with the district and amongst the other schools. Although all schools within the district run and operate differently, they do see the value in making sure there is transparency and communication.

According to the ladies, this clear flow of communication was not always present, in the district or within the school. During my interview Stacy I was asking her about the struggles with food inventory brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and she stated that yes it was frustrating but “we are very fortunate at this school that everybody works as a pretty good team”. And now that the district has a new Food Nutrition Supervisor, other cooks at the other schools in the district are more willing to help each other out because she has implemented a better system of communication. For example, all of the district’s cafeteria staff are in a group message board that they can text. Stacy was giving me an example of this new communication system in action saying,

They’ll send out a kitchen wide text saying ‘hey anybody got extra white milk I need a case’ and someone will be like I got it ... that will go for anything we are serving really its if someone’s short on something and then they’ll just send out the text asking if anybody has 20 extra ...the kitchens right now are really, willing to help out and let go of some of their stuff and help out the other kitchens.

This was not always the case, before COVID they had a different nutrition supervisor and different staff in the other schools’ kitchens that were “cranky” and actually hoarded things from other schools within the district like peanut butter and cereal—even if other schools needed them. Luckily this no longer happens, the older cooks that were less friendly and team oriented quit during the beginning of COVID-19, along with the previous nutrition supervisor. Now, it is a “whole different crew”, and the ladies are happy with this new communication system that unifies all the school kitchens together.

Not only has COVID-19 brought improvement to school relations within the district, but it has also improved staff relationships in the school. The ladies make it

clear that they are lucky (within the school) to have a good team and supportive administrative staff—this is not always the case among other schools, but they are grateful for it at Lena Whitmore Elementary. During a semi-joint interview with both Yvettee and Stacy, when on the topic of challenges Stacy said, “Definitely, there are way more good days than rough days here” Yvettee responded with,

Yeah, our school is I think pretty good, I mean every school is a little bit different, depending on kind of administration and teach dynamic but, yeah and our principle is very supportive, and she’ll jump in if we’re shorthanded or something happens to she’ll just on the time and help serve food.

I witnessed this helpfulness a couple times where the lunch line was getting longer and the meal of the day required extra serving steps, so the Principal or Guidance Counselor came up to the salad bar and asked what they could help with. Other staff members also help the lunch ladies when they can. The lunch proctors and the janitors are responsible for setting up the multipurpose room as a cafeteria, setting up the tables and the trash areas but during service, if they see the ladies getting swamped with a bunch of kids in line, they help where they can by taking back trays or refilling the water station. The cafeteria environment works much better when everyone is helping out according to the ladies.

The relationships between the lunch ladies and the teachers is one that’s a little more dynamic, than that of the administration. The ladies will say that since COVID-19 the relationship with the teachers has gotten a lot better and they are more involved. An example being the Google doc sheets, now the teachers will actually ask the students what meals they want and provide an accurate head count for hot lunches, unlike pre-COVID-19 times where they would just throw out an estimated number. Now some teachers really encourage the kids to try the hot lunches and don’t

give their opinion on whether they'll like it or not. The ladies see this teacher involvement as a plus and appreciate their participation as a positive. During my observations, however, I noticed a power dynamic between the two parties, especially with the younger grades' teachers. Often the teachers for grades K-3 would lead their classes to the lunch line and help with line facilitation. Most of the time it was helpful according to the ladies, the teachers would complement the food, encourage manners, and help the line move quicker. Usually, they understand that it is not their place to be the teacher but rather their place to be a staff member helping other staff members.

One day in particular a teacher (in the ladies' opinion) overstepped their boundaries. It was a Friday which meant that the lunch periods were significantly shorter, meaning less eating time. And to add insult to injury it was their most popular meal—pizza, which meant more kids. So, the atmosphere from the start was very chaotic, the ladies were trying to go as fast as they could and get kids served and seated quickly. During this pizza day there was a bit of choosing of sides, it was a choice of either carrots or potatoes and raisins. One thing to note here is that no matter how quick and time efficient the ladies are they never pressure the kids when they are indecisive, they always let them freely decide and don't rush them. But during this specific instance, the second-grade teacher thought either the students were taking too long, or the lunch ladies weren't not being quick enough, so she reached over the salad bar counter and took a pack of raisins and walked down the line asking the students if they wanted raisins or vegetables. Both ladies were visibly annoyed by the overstepping of work boundaries and the literal overreach to grab food off the line. Stacy flat out said, "I did not appreciate that", what's more is that it



didn't make any noticeable difference in the speed of the line and if anything, it negatively impacted the flow of the line because the students were distracted. I had a chance to briefly discuss this incident with them during a break between serving and Yvettee confided that sometimes they felt the teachers overstep with their responsibilities in the lunchroom and treat it like a classroom, without even asking first if that would have been helpful or not. Although this is not a common occurrence, through my observations, it seems as though the teacher-lunch lady relationship is somewhat less harmonious than the administration staff-lunch lady relationship.

To conclude, the successfulness of a cafeteria relies on the teamwork and support system of all staff, lunch ladies, teachers, proctors, and administrative staff. Although it is not always the case that these relationships run smoothly, it is most beneficial to the lunch ladies and students if everyone within the school and throughout the school district works together towards the common goal of happy, fed kids. Whether that is through clear communication between cooks, the nutrition supervisor or help on the salad bar, all these elements and more significantly help the lunch ladies do their job.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

When doing qualitative research, the words you use when interacting with participants matter and frame the data you collect in a certain way. This is something I was struggling with when interpreting the data from two types of methodologies, something could be said in the interviews that would run counter to what was seen in my observations. It is my job to interpret these findings based upon my position as a researcher. Ultimately from combining interviews and non-participant observations, I was able to create a bigger picture of life in the lunchroom.

I argue that these lunch ladies are restricted by the federal food policies present within their school. They are bound through serving strategies such as portion control, nutrition and meal control, policy for students with negative accounts. I have also found that COVID-19 in some regards, impacted their jobs for the better, giving them much needed structure and accountability when it comes to inventory and support from their school staff. I've also found that teamwork and support among other cooks in the district has been very beneficial. Although there are still some power dynamic issues present within their school, they recognize the positive changes brought on by COVID-19 to this area no matter how small.

One of the most important issues that the ladies brought up during my time with them was the importance of teaching kids to cook and feed themselves. From the ladies' perspectives, they believe their job serves the community, but each lady had different justifications. Yvettee stating,

Yes I do, Because you know, I mean, parents trust us to feed their kids everyday in the schools so ... yeah that's kind of big [responsibility]. And we are providing meals to the kids that parents don't have to make a lunch in the morning, I mean that's one less thing that they have to do... You know, so I definitely think we are the helping the community for sure.

From Stacy's perspective, she used the summer program and the free waivers as an example of their job serving the community when she said,

In the summer time... [but] definitely when there's opportunity then yes we are serving the community but we, we are, are [the] local community feed them inside because its free and it does help a lot and we have a lot of kids that are, that would be full priced that are, eating every day that wouldn't normally be eating everyday...so it definitely helps the community.

What I found most interesting about these two statements responding to their service to the community, is that it was limited to what is materialized, and physical. They see their service to the community solely from the stance of them serving food to kids or helping the student's parents by having one less thing to do in the mornings. But what I've come to find while interpreting my data is that they are serving their community in other ways as well—through teaching.

These lunch ladies see the value in educating and exposing their students to new foods and cooking in general and they understand the importance and see the value of teaching and showing kids how to do things for themselves in the kitchen. "Bring back home ec[onomics]!" Yvettee exclaimed when we were discussing the ways in which food programs are lacking, she believes that they aren't doing enough to teach kids the skills they need to be more self-sufficient. Yvettee also goes on to say,

Like so, kids don't know how to feed themselves...which is part of the reason that [Stacy] and I started doing, having the kids come in and help us in the morning...they would come in and they would ask us questions about like 'why do we do this, how do you do this?' and they were truly interested in like how to make things. So, we actually would have them like help us cut the apples or help us to pan out food or whatever—because they were hungry for learning how to do that kind of stuff.

Its efforts like these that truly highlight the way that these ladies go above and beyond the job's expectation of just feeding kids by making a difference in their

students' lives and imparting knowledge to make them more capable and self-supporting.

When I look at the themes found within the data I see two clear distinctions within the lunch ladies' duties, federal responsibilities, and the emotional labor of community/other mothering. Through the ethnographic framework for this research, I was able to have a holistic view into the dynamics of the lunchroom and the responsibilities of lunch ladies. What I have found is that these women are the intermediaries with the federal system and with families. They exist in a hierarchy that forces them to follow procedures that are difficult to carry out when you are facing a hungry child. But these ladies exercise what control they have to its highest ability—and even breaking the rules for the sake of their kids. But above all, even existing in a difficult liminal position they were kind, efficient, caring, friendly women who love their job and truly revere their kids—going above and beyond to ensure the lunch experience the students have is a great one, every time. Based on my observations, these women are community mothers to all students, encouraging them to try new foods while at the same time protecting them from allergies. It is one thing to fulfill the basic requirements of a position without any elaboration in the pursuit of a paycheck, but what I observed from these ladies is a whole other choice. They make a conscious choice to bring a nurturing and emotional element to serving lunch in a federally bound environment and in doing so make a vulnerable time like lunch, occur in a space that lets the kids feel safe— a duty not bestowed in the job description but one they chose.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

### Informed Consent for Interviews

Erin Geslani from the University of Idaho's Department of Anthropology is conducting a research study. The purpose of the research is to study rural food systems and federal food programs through educational institutions. You are being asked to participate in this study because you meet the participant criteria of being employed in educational institution and work in the cafeteria or lunchroom.

Your participation will involve interviews either face-to-face or via Zoom as well as observations of student interactions during lunch hour. The interview should take about 30 minutes to complete. The interview includes open-ended questions such as what are the roles of the profession and the challenges that arise as a lunch lady. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate. You can refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There are no names or identifying information associated with your responses. There are no known risks in this study, but some individuals may experience discomfort or loss of privacy when answering questions. Data will be stored in secure location accessible by the PI, on the University of Idaho cloud and will be stored for five years. The interviews will be electronically recorded and transcribed using ExpressScribe. Provided is a link to the Zoom Terms of Service/Privacy Policy: <https://explore.zoom.us/en/terms/> and ExpressScribe's Privacy Policy: <https://www.nch.com.au/general/privacy.html>.

The findings from this project will provide information on the role and responsibilities of lunch ladies in a rural community that often go unnoticed. If published, results will be presented in summary form only.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call Erin Geslani at (909) 241-9497. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or about what you should do in case of any harm to you, or if you want to obtain information or offer input you may call the Office of Research Assurances at (208) 885-6340 or [irb@uidaho.edu](mailto:irb@uidaho.edu).

By signing (If conducting interviews via Zoom, a typed signature) below you certify that you are at least 18 years of age and agree to participate in the above-described research study.

Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date
Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How long have you been at this current job?
2. Are you a resident of Latah County?
3. What does a typical workday look like for you during the school year? What is your role?
4. What does a typical workday look like for you during summer?
5. What is the most satisfying part of your job?
6. Are there any challenges that you face in your job?
7. Do you feel your job serves the community?
8. How often and to what degree do you interact with students?
  1. What do those interactions look like?
  2. Do you see students struggling to get food?
  3. Are there any safety nets that allow them to be fed through federal programs?
  4. What federal meal programs exist at your school?
  5. Do you as an employee feel restricted by federal food programs? Why or why not?
  6. Are there any state or local school level policies that impact you?
  7. Do you believe these programs support the students adequately or are they lacking in some regards?
  8. Are there meal programs at your school that support students on weekends or school breaks?
9. What do you think the students like best and/or dislike about school meal programs?