

Paper bags to food relief: Whither the tuckshop?

1 | MUSINGS AND MEMORIES OF SCHOOL CANTEENS

I can distinctly remember the simple joy of writing my name, primary school class, and lunch order on a brown paper bag. After calculating the money my order would cost, I would place the correct amount of coins in the bag before carefully folding the top to prevent the money from falling out. The brown paper bags were collected in class in a basket each morning and taken to the school canteen, to return at lunch time filled with our lunches. Sometimes the change was placed back in the bag along with my lunch. It was the only time I dared to eat a salad sandwich at school. Made fresh, it was bearable and much better with pineapple and tomato, those risky fruits that need to be consumed with haste. If I had packed the same sandwich in my lunch box, it would have been an inedible soggy mess. But as a sandwich fresh from the canteen, made by one of the many volunteers, it was the perfect lunch for a primary school student growing up in regional New South Wales, Australia in the 1990s.

Students would also visit the canteen at break times. We would line up eagerly awaiting our turn at the canteen window. I would purchase rings of frozen pineapple (there was a lot of tinned pineapple in my diet as a child), a bag of red frog lollies, cups of frozen juice with a popsicle stick inside to make an ice block, or a flavoured milk. The options were not always healthy, but the experience of looking after money in my bag, learning to wait patiently in line, politely ordering from the counter and receiving change were prime social and life skills.

Growing up, I did not question that we would have access to a school canteen. It was just there. Each primary and high school had a different canteen, reflecting the communities that sustained them. Canteens were often run by the parents and citizens associations of the school and staffed by parents, grandparents, or guardians who would volunteer their time. I do not know how they decided what was on the menu. I'm sure many canteens sold the ubiquitous sausage roll, meat pie, and cheese sandwich, maybe even a vegemite sandwich. But did all canteens have frozen pineapple rings, or was this unique to my public primary school?

By the 2000s, there were many more food options available at my high school canteen. I distinctly remember hot chips, chicken burgers, salads, and sandwiches being on the menu. However, the canteen line was much longer at a school with 950 students. There were no paper bags full of lunch orders delivered to classrooms. Instead, frequenting the canteen was more of a patience game with only those willing to wait in line able to purchase the food available, which I rarely did. By senior high school, my friends and I were more likely to walk across the park to the supermarket for more convenient food than spend our precious lunch breaks waiting in line to visit the school canteen.

2 | CHANGING MATERIALITIES AND TEMPORALITIES: GOODBYE RED FROGS

Fast forward a couple of decades and I once again am connected to the world of school canteens, although my role is somewhat different, as are the canteens themselves. But canteens have become a renewed *matter of care* for me, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) might put it: a way of considering how things could be more caring if they were different. Canteens in Australia do not provide a full meal service to every child like elsewhere in the world (Sweden, Italy, Japan, France). Instead, they are an extra support structure; an addition to the ordinary lunch boxes packed each day, and a way for carers to take some respite from the pressure of preparing lunch boxes, for which I am very grateful.

Canteens or tuck shops across Australia have undergone a transformation. Some have been refashioned by healthy school canteen policies which would make red frogs no longer a canteen staple. The cultural diversity of people, palates and food choices have reshaped canteen menus. On becoming parents of a kindergarten child, the first canteen we accessed was open three days a week and offered a diverse menu that included sushi, lasagna, and butter chicken ordered online via an app. The canteen building I am most familiar with now is likely the same as it was when it was first built in the 1970s. It is a room with a big oven and stove, benches for preparing food, fridge,

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microwave, sink, cupboards, and a roller door opening for serving. This basic infrastructure is important. It provides the school with somewhere to provision and dispense food, including toasted sandwiches before school on a Tuesday. Despite having this resource, the school does not have a conventional canteen service run by parents anymore. The school grew smaller and fewer parents could volunteer, because many are working full time. Now a private provider makes lunches that are preordered from a website and delivers these to the school each Wednesday. This has impacted the affordability of the canteen for many students. A small number of parents volunteer to pack these orders into baskets and deliver them to classrooms. This modified canteen service is not unusual. This shift in operations is concerning health and nutrition experts across Australia.

3 | WHITHER THE SCHOOL CANTEEN?

School canteens and tuckshops are a critical support system that offers nutritious food options to children, many of whom may not have reliable access to healthy meals at home. As food insecurity rises across Australia, the role of school canteens in promoting healthy eating habits and supporting children's overall wellbeing has never been more crucial. (Leanne Elliston; Education HQ News Team, 2024)

Something is happening to school canteens in Australia. According to the Federation of Canteens in Schools (FOCIS) Australia chairperson and senior dietician, Leanne Elliston, "there's been a 20 per cent reduction in school canteens services within ACT public schools" (Orr, 2024). A once staple institution in Australian schools, FOCIS is concerned that school canteens are at risk of closing due to the price of food, unaffordability of food for parents struggling to afford extra costs, insufficient canteen infrastructure and reliance on dwindling numbers of volunteers (Kershaw-Brant et al., 2025).

Recent media articles on school canteens closing in South Australia due to a lack of financial viability reveals the impact of rising food costs (Balutis & Stewart, 2025). The cost-of-living crisis, or what I prefer to call the cost-of-profit crisis (Oxfam International, 2022), seems to be a common theme in many of these articles which highlight how:

Hot meals from the school canteen are now an unaffordable luxury for many Australian parents, with as many as one in four families struggling to afford school lunches and snacks. (Sproul-Mellis, 2024)

The closure of school canteens has cultural, social, and health ramifications. Canteens matter to families in distinct and diverse ways. They help ease the burden of unpaid care labour for parents and guardians, provide children with the experience and choice of purchasing food, and they can also be places where students experiencing food insecurity can access food (Orr, 2024). As Schools Victoria (2020) notes:

School canteens and other school food services are important educational resources. They have an important role in the provision of food to students and the school community as well as being an integral part of the school environment. The school canteen should reflect the educational goals of the school and support and complement student learning. When consumed daily, the food provided through the school canteen may comprise a third of a student's total daily intake and have a significant influence on their health and nutrition.

Increasing levels of food insecurity, or the lack of secure access to sufficient, nutritious, healthy, affordable food that is not sourced through charitable means (Gallegos et al., 2023), demonstrate the importance of schools as places where students might be able to access healthy food on a regular basis. Consuming healthy food is important for student wellbeing and academic success (FOCIS, 2024). Whilst we do not know the true prevalence of food insecurity in Australian households due to a lack of measurement (Kleve et al., 2025; Williams et al., 2022), we do know that many schools across Australia are partnering with food relief providers such as Eat Up, which provides lunches to over 890 schools across Australia to ensure students have food (Eat Up, 2025). This is vital work preventing hunger in difficult times. Yet Gallegos et al. (2023) remind us, someone is not food secure if they are reliant on charitable food relief.

What is happening to school canteens seems reflective of other broader structural shifts: declines in voluntarism, rising levels of food insecurity and inequality, private providers and not-for-profit providers stepping in to fill the gaps, and the erosion of public infrastructures of care (Power et al., 2022). These concerns are geographical in nature, interwoven with complex issues surrounding food systems (Williams et al., 2024; Williams & Tait, 2023) and welfare systems (DeVerteuil, 2015; Power et al., 2022). Any response to these problems will also need to be geographically informed and place-based. But what can be done to address the decline of the tuckshop?

4 | TUCKSHOP TRANSFORMATIONS

In response to the closure and decline in the number of school canteens, FOCIS held a national roundtable on 25 February 2025, which I assisted with. The roundtable discussed how canteens in Australia might be saved and solutions developed to address present challenges (Education HQ, 2024). This discussion led to the development of a national consensus statement released on 24 March 2025 which identified a number of actions from government that could support the survival of the humble school canteen (Kershaw-Brant et al., 2025).

At the same time, new models and reinvigorated ways of doing food in schools are also emerging. Some schools across Australia have partnered with Food Ladder, which relies on philanthropic donations to develop climate-controlled greenhouses and hydroponics systems for food growing to achieve food security (Food Ladder, 2025). Other schools are also making use of the food grown on site through the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program (2025) which is a “a fun, hands-on learning program delivering curriculum integration and a focus on student health, wellbeing, collaboration and leadership”. The programme helps students learn how to grow, prepare, cook, and eat food together (Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, 2025).

Other new initiatives involve more substantial transformations of school canteens. Tasmania’s School Food Matters (previously known as Tasmanian School Canteen Association) recently evaluated their pilot school lunch project that was run across 30 schools in Tasmania (Jose et al., 2024). In 2024, the School Food Project partnered with Berrima Public School, NSW, to pilot a daily universal school meal programme for every child that attends (School Food Project, 2024). Other pilots and research projects are being conducted with the support of interdisciplinary teams of academics across Australia, such as that being led by Professor Rebecca Golley from the Caring Futures Institute at Flinders University, South Australia. These academics and non-government organisations are reworking existing infrastructures, advocating for change, and working to reinvigorate school food provisioning in Australia. Much of this involves raising awareness and advocating about the importance of food provisioning in schools. It also means asking governments to care for, about, and with communities through adequate resourcing to support our vital human right to food (Carey et al., 2024).

5 | RENEWED CARE ABOUT THE TUCKSHOP

As a geographer with a keen interest in food insecurity solutions, I have been vocal in pointing out the need for

welfare system reform so that people on low incomes can afford food with dignity (Williams, 2022; Williams et al., 2024), the need for regular, comprehensive monitoring of food insecurity prevalence in line with international best practice (Williams et al., 2022), and the role that diverse community food initiatives are playing in caring for people and planet in response to glitches in food as a key infrastructure (Williams et al., 2024; Williams & Tait, 2023). Australia is not a nation with household-level food security and many children are living in households where skipping meals, reducing the nutritional quality of food, or worrying about where your next meal comes from is the norm (Kleve et al., 2021). It is through contemplating potential solutions that I came to be working with an interdisciplinary group of scholars and exploring schools as places where food systems might be transformed with long term health and wellbeing impacts. Canteens, tuckshops, and universal school meal programmes are all part of the picture. Schools are part of food systems and play a significant role as providers of food mediated by the state to address child hunger in other contexts, so why not in Australia? Could schools become a vital place where we might do more to address food insecurity?

As a parent of two children with many years of schooling ahead of them, I am concerned about the future of the humble school canteen or tuck shop. I dream of a future where all children attend a school with a universal school meal programme that meets their nutritional, sensory, cultural, and social needs. Imagine if all students in Australia had the experience of sitting down to a healthy meal at least once a day. They might not be able to buy red frogs, but maybe they could eat a freshly made salad sandwich, made with lettuce and tomatoes they grew themselves in the school greenhouse. Maybe they could have the option of putting tinned pineapple on it. But more importantly, it would be great to see universal meals in schools with high levels of food insecurity. Imagine if schools could be supported to host food programmes to ensure all children have access to safe, healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for at least one meal a day. Now that would be so much better than putting some money in a brown paper bag.

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Miriam J. Williams 

School of Communication, Society and Culture, Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University, Sydney, 2109, Australia

Correspondence

Miriam J. Williams, School of Communication, Society and Culture, Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University, Wallumattagal Campus, Sydney 2109, Australia.
Email: miriam.williams@mq.edu.au

ORCID

Miriam J. Williams  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6017-6655>

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