

*Essay*

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## Theorizing Food Sharing Practices in a Junior High Classroom

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### Abstract

*This reflective essay analyzes interactions where food was shared between a teacher and her junior high school students. The author describes the official uses of food in junior high school classrooms and in educational contexts in general. The author then theorizes these interactions, suggesting other semiotic, dialogic, and culturally encoded possibilities for interpreting food exchanges between teachers and students. These possibilities are contextualized using several stories that demonstrate socially grounded interpretations of food use, which contrast with typical notions of how food operates in educational contexts. The implications of these stories raise questions about how relationships are built and maintained in classrooms, what happens in reality when items are banned at school, and what possibilities exist for teachers as they approach classroom interactions in more strategic ways.*

*Key words:* food practices, food in education, classroom life, classroom semiotics

This essay is about a teacher, her students, and the food that was exchanged between them over the course of several years. Its purpose is to analyze and then theorize the interactions I (as the teacher) had with individual junior high school students, both in and out of school, where food was shared. I describe the official uses of food in junior high school classrooms. Then I suggest other possibilities for making meaning from these food sharing events. Finally, I contextualize several of these stories and demonstrate how socially grounded interpretations of food use in my classroom contrast with typical notions of how food operates in educational contexts.

### Background

I taught junior high school students for 10 years before I entered a doctoral program. When I was a teacher, I taught several kinds of classes: English as a Second Language, reading support, general education language arts for eighth and ninth graders, and ninth grade honors English. While the single section that I taught every year for English learners' targeted language development was never larger than 12 students, my other classes often had over 30 children, sometimes closer to 40 children. Concerns about the

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tight space and the need to keep it tidy led me to develop a particular class policy regarding food. Specifically, the policy directed that children would not be allowed to have or eat food in class unless I provided it. I did this so the room would not be filled with crumbs, wrappers, and stains at the end of each school day, but also to eliminate the obtaining, consuming, and disposing of food, which could become distractions in a classroom that was filled to the brim with learners most of the day. Curtailing the traffic of food was one of the ways in which I attended to Kounin's (1970) idea of minimizing distractions to maintain order.

I had reservations about my food policy. Before becoming a teacher, I had worked in the folklore archives at the university I attended as an undergraduate. I took courses and worked with one professor who conducted scholarship in the academic study of food preparation and consumption practices (e.g., Rudy, 2004). Because of my experience with folklore as a student and an archivist, I was aware of anthropological understandings of the purpose of food consumption in groups, both large and small, as a means of social bonding (Barthes, 2008). I was also aware of the ways in which food connoted social class and could therefore cause tension between groups of students with varying levels of access to different types of food (Levi-Strauss, 2008).

Because of these understandings, I tempered my "no food" policy with the loophole that some sustenance could be consumed if I distributed it. I intended to provide food to the class on occasions where the sort of ritualistic bonding that I had learned about in my folklore training might take place while eating with others. I understood that food and the preparation of it was important to social life in many cultures, for instance. However, I also needed to account for the fact that sometimes I was going to need to eat food in my classroom since I was there all day long with only a 20-minute lunch break. I realized it was inevitable that students would occasionally see me tap into my provisions. Thankfully, the language of my policy essentially allowed me to give food to myself so that I could eat it!

I taught for four years with this policy. The students were well aware of it and often quoted it to one another when, occasionally, a student walked into class holding an open bag of chips, drinking a can of soda, or snacking on candy or sweets. The offenders usually apologized to me, walked out the door, and crammed the food into their mouths before returning. The school did not have an official policy about food in classrooms, but my colleagues and I did confer with one another on the issue. During faculty meetings, we discussed issues such as classroom behavior or respect for the school, and I touted my policy as one that was grounded in good management, social equality, and the prevention of acts of poor citizenship, such as littering.

One day during my fifth year teaching under this foodless regime, a student proudly pronounced, "I really like this class; people are always eating in here." I was taken aback. It was impossible that people were *always* eating. Food had been banned. Not just recently, but years ago, by none other than me. Surely, the child was engaged in adolescent exaggeration; there was not as much food as he thought. I went home that evening still thinking about his comment. During my initial teacher induction, I had learned about the merits of keeping a professional journal, so I had been writing about life as a teacher ever since I began my career. Looking through my professional journal that night, I discovered several recorded instances of students bringing particular kinds of

food to me in class on expected occasions, such as before Christmas. However, there had also been times when students had imparted to me everything from snacks to entire meals for seemingly random reasons. He was right. Apparently, there was a lot more eating occurring in my classroom than I realized. At first glance, the students seemed to mostly be heeding my policy. They were not eating individual items; we were eating as a class. However, they had also been subverting my directive that I be the person to distribute the food. In fact, the students were supplying to me large quantities of what should have been contraband food. Not only were they bringing and eating food, but also they had reversed the flow of food *from me to me*. Later, I began to remember additional instances where students had given me food or when I had eaten with children at their homes or out in the community for various reasons.

These realizations sparked a number of questions for me about how food was operating in my class, especially when food had been banned, and how I was making sense of the individual food items I was being generously, albeit obliviously, provided. It is from my wonderings about food and my understandings about its semiotic potential that I came to engage in this exploration.

### **Previous Literature**

I consulted three strands of literature during the course of this analysis. The first strand includes the research on the use of food in classrooms. To explore the meanings of the food that was shared, I drew on research related to the semiotics of food. Since the shared food constituted a social interaction, I considered research on student–teacher relationships.

### **Extant Appearances of Food in Classroom Settings**

In order to contrast what was happening when food was brought into my classroom with why or how food typically appears, I began to read about officially sanctioned uses of food in classrooms. The professional literature on food in classroom settings focuses on three purposes: fostering a culture of nutrition, offering food as a reward, and developing curriculum around food. The first purpose of food in school is to expose children to a curriculum of nutrition. One element of this curriculum includes what children eat at school. Whelan (2008) profiled a group of food-service workers who mobilized to revamp their school's menu options and lead efforts to help students make informed choices. In another study, nonschool officials came into a school to teach students aspects of nutrition that they thought were inaccessible in the regular course of school (Richards, Skolits, Burney, Pedigo, & Draughon, 2008). These nonschool officials were unsuccessful, presumably because food preparation and consumption practices are meaning-making practices grounded in relationships, and nonschool officials are viewed as outsiders.

Another area of research asserts that teachers of all subjects are responsible for providing experiences with food in the curriculum, acting as role models of healthy eating and lifestyle choices in general as they use food to promote nutrition. Rossiter, Glanville, Taylor, and Blum (2007) cited poor eating habits by prospective teachers as detrimental to the long-term attitudes and beliefs about food for students. The

responsibility of modifying the environment to change unhealthy nutritional beliefs falls not only on teachers but also on schools in general (Baranowski, Perry, & Parcel, 1997).

Food is also used in school as a reward. When food is utilized as a reward, it is less likely to have nutritional value. In one study, middle-school teachers were surveyed about their use of food (Kubik, Lytle, Hannah, Story, & Perry, 2002). The researchers found that the use of food as a reward was a common occurrence. Food rewards included candies for answering questions right in a review exercise and larger food items, such as candy bars, for proper behavior. These findings were disturbing to the researchers that conducted this study because they thought that food should fuel the body for work while optimizing health and lifespan, not function as a social and emotional reward.

The final often-cited purpose for food in schools revolves around its curricular uses. Researchers suggest that food can be used for a variety of curricular purposes in multiple content areas. Waxman (2008) propounded the utility of writing food narratives in a variety of classroom settings. Mowell (2003) listed ways that food could enrich a geography classroom that included making and eating food from various countries. In the same vein, Desjardins (2004) suggested providing and talking about food as a part of religious education. For example, students in classrooms might discuss foods with religious significance in multiple religions (e.g., bread for sacrament) as well as food taboos. Research on teaching science has also found opportunities for students to use food in classroom examples. Some examples include studying the properties of self-heating food (Oliver-Hoyo, Pinto, & Llorens-Molina, 2009) or food contamination (Kimbrough & Jensen, 2010). In my work with preservice teachers, they often designed lessons for teaching fractions that involved real or fake food.

In short, the ways in which food can be used as a curricular vehicle are numerous. The curriculum that we build with food is a curriculum of lives (Schwab, 1978), in which teachers, learners, subject matter, and a milieu, which includes social and cultural elements, interact to produce activities. These activities can be based on highly prescribed material, but they are also unique to every single class of children. The experiences in a classroom can form what Wilson and Rudy (2006) call chapters in a *family novel*, a set of episodes that reveals group identity through narratives. Telling stories about food forges bonds of affiliation and may even reveal processes for sharing social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The professional literature advocates for the use of food as objectified cultural capital only as part of the *habitus* of the middle class (doing the work of promoting health, a reward for work, and a tool for work, etc.). By contrast, I wanted to explore uses of food beyond these.

These stories in my inquiry reinforce power relationships as the storyteller assumes narrative authority. In the case of this work, I am the primary storyteller. Although I talked to these former students about what they and I remembered, these are still my stories about them and their food.

### **Semiotic Meanings of Food**

Food can be used to perform symbolic functions in a text. In this work, my classroom is the text. When people eat food in a story, they are brought into multiple dimensions of time. In one famous example of food as *entrée* to time travel from literature, the main character from *Remembrance of Things Past* eats a madeleine (Proust, Moncrieff, &

Killmartin, 1982). Suddenly, the character is able to recall his childhood in ways that had been hidden from him for many years. The madeleine and the consumption of it bring forth his memories and changes the direction of his future. In addition to bringing forward memories of the past, performing in the present, and changing the future, food also has transcendental power in literature as the characters consume food together, take in sustenance in each other's presence, and form a bond that permeates multiple spaces and dimensions. A classroom provides a public space in which food can be consumed as either a public bonding practice with the teacher or a clandestine operation among the students in solidarity against a teacher.

The way that food is presented and consumed is also a text. Barthes (2008), the French literary theorist, philosopher, and linguist, proposes that conventions inform both language and style and, therefore, neither language nor style is purely a creative construct. Instead, what makes a text creative is form, or the way in which language and style come together in a context. In terms of semiotics, this means that food and its presentation in a context have the potential to be unique and creative acts of communication as well as standardized uninteresting occurrences. In a classroom, food can be presented in a variety of ways, some of which may be highly creative, breaking up what might be a monotonous day, part of a secret ritual among certain students, or a simple human impulse to satisfy hunger.

Finally, food can be considered a symbolic text, as argued by Levi-Strauss (2008) and de Certeau and Giard (2008). They also outline meaning-making processes that can occur by interpreting food exchanges among characters in narratives. Barthes (2008) focuses much of his work on literary narratives. Levi-Strauss focuses on narratives collected in anthropologically grounded research. Levi-Strauss (2008) articulates the more specific, linguistically based, semiotic processes for using food as text for sending other types of messages. These messages might be about personal, cultural, or social identity. De Certeau and Giard (2008) build their theories from historical, psychoanalytic, philosophical perspectives. Although their fields are diverse, these scholars all suggest that food—the making of it, the presentation of it, the sharing of it, and even the disposal of it, in contexts where food is not expected—carries significant social meaning that can be denuded or denigrated when forced or taken up in official ways.

Food in my classroom served all three purposes (symbol in a text, presentation as text, and text itself). Whether there was a plate, what was on the plate, how contents of the plate were arranged, and so forth, were all grammatical features of sending messages with food. Food that entered my classroom for some official reason, either for curricular uses or according to the teacher's policies, was rarely served on a plate. Usually, it was wrapped and had been purchased from a store specifically for class. There was very little variety. The food that just showed up every few weeks or so had more diversity in composition, had variation in the levels of preparation, was given under a variety of circumstances, and was shared with a range of presentation strategies.

The food that I received was more likely to come from students from working-class families, but who were also not destitute or in dire financial circumstances. Some of the students who brought me food were recent immigrants or had recently moved from other towns or states. Some of the students had lived in the town all their lives. Some of the students were from two-parent families that were traditional or blended; others were from

single-parent families, were being raised by grandparents, or were in foster care. It was interesting that food often came with an opportunity to learn more about family life as students mentioned that their mothers helped them make the food, that this dish was a family favorite, that grandparents taught them to make it, or that they bought the food with the babysitting or lawn-mowing money they had earned.

### **Relational Interactions in Teaching**

The relational work of teaching is another area of research that informs this work. Here I share several concepts that are particularly relevant to food sharing. The first is the concept of *presence* (Rogers & Raider-Roth, 2006). The concept of presence, according to the authors, requires teachers and students to see each other as interesting beings. In a present moment, a teacher seems to devote or actually does devote exclusive attention to the whole range of needs of one or a few children. Unlike the concept of *with-it-ness* (Kounin, 1970) in the classroom management literature, where the emphasis is on noticing and extinguishing misbehavior, a teacher exercising presence is looking to see what is happening with the children physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually during a given moment. In that moment, the teacher attempts to draw forth an increasingly sophisticated performance. In terms of eating in a classroom, there are many possibilities for moments of presence. A teacher might notice that a child needs food and give some to him/her or the teacher may allow a child to eat food that he/she has brought. A child may also realize that someone from the class can benefit from receiving food and offer to share. There are moments while eating the food when the giver and the receiver discuss where the food came from and how to make it, or tell stories about the food as a family favorite, a personal favorite, or an acquired taste. It was rare for my students to share food with others that they themselves did not enjoy. In these ways, food can serve as a key part of student-teacher relationships as they initiate and/or sustain moments of presence.

Another important concept of teacher-student relationships comes from Buber (1937) who proposes teaching as an I-Thou relationship. Teachers and students have very familiar relationships that are also highly formal for both parties. In the context of these two relational concepts, sharing food in a classroom suggests opportunities to demonstrate the devotion of attention as well as the meeting of fundamental needs in ways that preserve and reinforce familiar formality. Eating is a familiar act because it is universal, but it is also a formal act because there are social expectations around consumption that vary by culture and by context.

The interactions occurring in classrooms are also assumed to have certain meanings in terms of power. The persons giving and receiving the food are both eligible to display and submit to power. Delpit (1988) proposes that teachers are powerful people in the classroom and that they empower students by embracing their own status. In embracing status, Delpit says, a person uses direct language. This is what I did when I said, "No food unless I distribute it." Other considerations of power include questions of whether students were bringing food to me and to other students as an expression of submission to power, or so that they could display their power to subvert my authority, to capture the interest of their peers, to make friends, or to further a host of other goals.

### Reflective Approach

This essay draws from the autoethnographic tradition, where narrative inquiry methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) are employed for analyzing stories. This work most closely resembles Anderson's (2006) description of *analytic autoethnography*, which takes place in settings where the researcher is a full member of the researched group. I was a teacher operating in the setting of my classroom. The second criterion for analytic autoethnography is that the researcher should be visible as a member of a particular scholarly community. I have written about my teaching previously in academic journals, and I derive additional visibility from the nature of teaching itself as a public act (Doyle, Sanford, French, Emmer, & Clements, 1985). The third criterion is that the researcher has interest or commitment to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. In my case, I am interested in theorizing food as it operates as a relationship-building tool, and I want to push for broader theory about material items that come into spaces like classrooms and the purposes they serve.

### Context for the Inquiry

The school where I taught is in a rural area in the western United States. Even so, it was a large school with enrollment fluctuating between 1,000 and 1,400 during the years that I taught there. Most of the students in this community came from working-class families, especially after a new junior high was constructed in the more affluent, adjacent community. This school qualifies as a Title I school. The school had performed very well on state achievement tests but suffered drops in scores when the new school opened and many of the more socioeconomically well-off students were assigned to the newer school. My school was one of the lower performing junior high schools in the state as of 2012-2013. It is almost 90% White and 8% Hispanic, with small numbers of Black, Pacific Islander, and Asian students making up the smallest portion of the population.

Since this is an autoethnographic essay, I am the primary participant, but since I was collecting and analyzing narratives from myself about former students, I also communicated with them in order to analyze the narratives and triangulate my autoethnographic understandings through open-ended and focused listening, questioning, and participant feedback (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). The three students whose narratives I decided to share for this study consist of two boys and one girl. Each of these former students was a member of my class in a different academic year and each was an adult when I began this reflective inquiry. One student graduated in 2007, another in 2010, and the third in 2012. Two are enrolled in institutes of higher education, and one is employed. One still lives in the community, and two have since moved to different states, but they both return periodically to visit friends and family. All three are from White working-class families. I selected these participants from a larger list of students who are now adults, whose whereabouts were known to me, and for whom I had contact information, but with whom I did not have regular contact; this was important so that we still had a familiar relationship, but these are not students that I met with and talked to often. I approached the students on this list about participating and these three indicated a willingness and ability to participate in this exploration.

### **Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation**

My early academic training as a folklorist led me to be interested in the ways in which classroom life is ritualized. Therefore I often recorded these events as they unfolded in my classroom. I drew the specific stories about food from the larger collection of my writings about classroom life in general. I realized that I would be able to identify stories of how food showed up in my classroom from these personal journal entries. I began by reviewing my journals. During this process, I made an initial list of food stories recorded in my journal and then began to develop the list by adding additional text, which constituted a field text. The text became a more developed research text as I recalled more details, talked with students and colleagues, and started writing a manuscript (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The analysis of these stories involved isolating the emblematic narratives (Mishler, 1990) and retelling them to move them from taglines into stories. Building on Mishler's notion of emblematic narrative, Clandinin, Pushor, and Murray-Orr (2007) note that stories selected for inclusion in research often emerge because they resonate with the unfolding exploration of the puzzle under consideration, the audience for the study, and with the relevant research literature. I identified the emblematic narratives based on the notion of resonance. For me, resonance in this study emerged as I found myself telling certain stories to others, retelling certain stories with students when they visited, and thinking about certain stories under the conditions of particular memory triggers (Conle, 2010). In order to gauge which narratives from my writings might resonate with the research community, I received feedback from colleagues at a conference for works in progress.

### **Food Narratives**

In this section, I share narratives that emerged as emblematic (Mishler, 1990) and then interpret them by drawing from the literature on officially sanctioned, textual, and relational uses of food. By sharing the narratives, evaluating them alongside the literature, and examining their meaning, I theorize the relational dynamics and the power structures that potentially operate in these stories. I present the narratives and offer several perspectives about potential meaning, rather than saying definitively what each story means. Since my analytic process was highly reflective in nature, I find it valuable to allow for multiple interpretations in addition to the one I constructed with the former students whose experiences are shared here.

#### **Angela's Pizza**

The first story is about Angela. She was a student in a ninth-grade, general education, Language Arts class that met just after lunch. During this academic year, I taught in a portable classroom away from the main body of the school. Sometimes members of the class talked about how fun it would be to have pizza delivered to the class and how easy it would be to do so because our portable classroom would give a pizza delivery employee greater access to us. I wrote:

Angela decided that she wanted to share pizza with all of the class. One day we heard a knock on our portable classroom door. When the door opened, pizza that

Angela arranged to have delivered was on the other side. Before I could process what was happening, the students began serving themselves. I noticed that Angela had become agitated. The source of her agitation became apparent when she exclaimed that no one else could have any more pizza until I had some. Angela retrieved a plate, grabbed some pizza, and brought it to me. She came over to where I was sitting with another group of students and presented me with the pizza she had selected for me. When I thanked her, she explained that I had to eat some since I was the teacher.

Angela was the person who possessed the pizza. It was entirely her idea to bring it. She also took responsibility for distributing the food, even though she brought it into my classroom and I was the adult who might have been in charge of making sure that the slices were pulled apart and distributed.

It is also significant to me that Angela believed that if she brought pizza, I would allow it to remain in the room and that she would be welcome to give it to members of the class. Although it would seem that Angela was insubordinate to my authority by bringing a large quantity of food into a classroom where food was forbidden, her insistence that I have some demonstrated honor and respect.

Although pizza is a widely available food, bringing a sufficient quantity for a class with over 30 members is not a cheap endeavor. Yet Angela was able to convince her mother to spend family money on the food. Angela said that she did this because she liked the class. She liked being there, she liked her friends in the class, and she liked me. Because Angela enjoyed the class, she brought them food; in fact, she brought a particular type of food that they had said that they wanted. We had talked about how lucky we would feel if pizza appeared at our door. The food acted as a relational tool that demonstrated regard because the food was brought and represented careful thought, planning, and execution. The entire act was a series of small generosityes that culminated in a novel experience for her peers and for me.

### **Robert's Wontons**

Robert was a student in a ninth-grade, honors English class that met during the very last class period of the day. I have written more about Robert's literacy in other work (Rice, 2011). By this time, my classroom was in the regular school building. In fact, it was in the hallway with the highest traffic during passing period because students from all three grades at the school had to pass one another through that corridor. Robert was often the first person to make it into my classroom. He frequently came in and sat in various places around the room greeting his friends until the bell rang. I wrote:

Before class began one day, Robert offered me wontons. In a later conversation, he revealed that he had them left over from his health class and he intended for me to have them. When the rest of the students entered the room and saw Robert with the food, they became interested in the food. The other students began asking for wontons, which Robert shared. Meanwhile, other students walked out of the class, and then reentered with their leftover food, too. One student ran out in the hall shouting, "Don't put that stuff in your locker; bring it in here." By the

time the class began, several types of food had been collected in the classroom and everyone was eating. I realized that if I were going to stop the influx of food into the classroom, I would have to disrupt the class more by shouting and coercing than if I just let them finish their food while I started previewing the goals for the day's learning.

Robert's wontons served as the catalyst for combining the food resources of the class because other members brought in food after he did. The students were not allowed to carry backpacks or book bags during the school day, and their lockers were subject to search without notice. Since this was a secondary education setting, the students did not have individual spaces in classrooms to store their belongings. They could not even wear a hood, a hat, or a long coat in class. Although there was no presumption of personal space at school, teachers generally took up certain spaces as stewards. Most of the time, this space was the classroom. Teachers governed the way in which the space in their classrooms was used. They made seating charts and posted rules; their names hung on placards outside the door. In a secondary setting, students are itinerant—they come to the space of the teacher. When students feel comfortable in the space, it is likely that they do so because teachers have made efforts to make it inviting.

Students called my class "English," but they also called it "Mrs. Rice's class." Administrative edicts, state and local accountability documents, parents, students, and even I conceived of a class and the classroom space as the teacher's stewardship, not a collaboratively owned endeavor. Although the basic circumstances in which teachers are the *de facto* owners of the classroom space still exist in the food stories I collected, the events of food sharing demonstrate instances where students took up the classroom space as their own. They took charge of the environment and provided the food. The food served as an indicator that they had settled into the space.

Robert originally brought the wontons for his health class. They were supposed to make healthy food and bring it. This is precisely the curricular use of food that comes to mind when food is conceived of in school. Robert was slightly apologetic about the fact that what he had brought was fried and filled with cream cheese and, therefore, would not fit the definition of "healthy" according to many nutritional specialists. Why, then, did he bring this particular dish? When we talked, he indicated that he brought wontons because he liked them, and they were one of his family's favorites. Robert disregarded the curricular purpose of the food so that he could meet his own relational purposes of identity making and friendship building. The professional literature on food in classrooms does not consider that students will take control of their edible contributions and uses of food in classroom life. It assumes instead that teachers can and want to control every dish brought into the classroom in form and purpose. Angela's story about pizza, and now Robert's story about wontons, suggests that this view deprives students of their personal will.

In this story, Robert prepared the food ahead of time and brought it into the classroom space. The wontons were intended for me. He indicated that he had brought them into class as a gesture of politeness. When Robert offered me the wontons, other students saw his actions and realized that they also had food that could be shared in class, and they were empowered to offer each other food. Robert was a very generous

individual, not just with food. He wrote poetry, which he liked to read to the class. After Robert shared a few poems, suddenly other students also had poems that they wanted to bring. Some of these poems were also read to the whole class, while others were read just to me, just to Robert, or just to a few other class members. The food that Robert brought illustrated how he instantiated a tone of “we are going to share here,” through his poetry and his food.

### **Taft’s Mints**

Taft was a student in my ninth-grade, general education, Language Arts class. He liked to talk about his cousin who was in a musical band, and he was always very cordial and personable. I had also taught one of his siblings, who was also very affable. I wrote:

Taft came into class one day and, just before the bell rang, announced that he had a story to tell. I liked to use student stories as bridges to course content and so I encouraged him to do so. He told me that he had been eating mints at lunch and they were the most glorious mints that he ever had in his whole life, and just when he was starting to finish them, he said that he thought to himself: “Mrs. Rice might really like one of these amazing mints.” He then dug a mint out of his pocket and offered it to me. I took it while the class watched and popped it into my mouth. They were, in fact, delicious. I told the class that Taft had indeed found a tasty treasure and I thanked him for sharing with me. Then, I proceeded with my agenda.

In the narratives that I collected, many students positioned themselves as having experience with a particular food that I lacked. The students desired that I should have that experience and so they opted to share the food with me. Taft’s story is one such example, where a child came to class and positioned himself as a possessor of knowledge of something glorious and me as an unwitting novice.

While Taft was away from me, he came upon new knowledge of the mints; in particular, he learned how good they tasted. Rather than merely tell me about these mints, he opted to save some and give me the experience of having tasted the mints on my own. The fact that Taft insisted that I taste the mints suggests that he believed that tangible, first-hand experiences are more valuable than descriptions alone. He also positioned himself as a person who feels that experience ought to be shared. I had received food from students in a variety of conditions: some food was tidy and appetizing, and some was crushed, smashed, crumpled, and even unsanitary. Whatever the condition the food came in, the preface had almost always been something along the lines of “Here, I love this. I thought you would too.” That kind of sharing—the metaphorical breaking of common bread—is at the core of relationship building. And since I felt that way, it was impossible for me to turn down those mints that came from the linty pocket of unwashed jeans and from a bare, but completely sincere, hand. When I gave my students food, it was often because I bought it on sale and because students would be less likely to be allergic to it. I also selected food that would not be messy and would not spoil. When students brought me food, they brought me something that they thought would help us to bond. Once again, these narratives illustrate agency and deliberation on the part of the

students. I was honored and humbled as adolescents, through food, helped me know them as learners and as people.

### Discussion

The food sharing experiences that I have related exemplify Barthes's (2008) work in text as a creative act through form. In essence, food became a meaningful text as what was served and how it was served came together in the context of our class. Each of these experiences with children was different in terms of the circumstances and presentation, yet they all contained resonant threads that moved beyond the traditional script of school, where food is a nutritional imperative, a reward, or a novel way to introduce an academic topic. Although I said we would eat only when I brought food, we ate at other times. In saying "no food," food became a taboo, which then made it sacred. The phrase "unless I distribute it" ensured that any food that appeared in my classroom came from my auspices, even if it did not directly come from me. In this delicate negotiation, food as nutrition was not as important as food as sustenance; food as reward was not as important as food as gift; food as curricular supplement was not as important as food as curriculum itself.

A state of presence (Rogers & Raider-Roth, 2009) is truly required for a teacher to determine the many purposes food or other objects might have in a classroom space. Angela's pizza was a grand gesture aimed at pleasing her classmates first and me second; Robert's wontons started out as a modest gesture and resulted in widespread and integrated sharing; Taft's mints were a small moment of experience sharing. The dialogic quality reflected in these experiences allows for multiple interpretations of teacher and student identities and relationships because that is what dialogue is about—bringing experiences onto a landscape to hear and be heard.

This study suggests a number of uses for food in the classroom that go beyond nutritional utility, rewards, and hands-on learning experiences. Indeed, the stories of food reveal a number of things about the students' cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The students that give food are often able to share items that are culturally appropriate in the school and wider community; they have social knowledge of what kinds of food are valuable under certain circumstances in a classroom. This capital sharing can happen with food that is store-bought as well as with food that is homemade. Further, it need not be traditionally ethnic to reveal social identity. According to Kang & Glassman (2008), cultural capital is knowledge that helps people achieve recognition of belonging to a group, and social capital is an individual's capacity to enact their cultural capital. When people know the rules of a group and they can act according to those rules, trust develops and true community results. In that kind of community, the liminal space (Turner, 1967) exists for ritual to occur, identities to be built, and the power that rests in relationship to be forged.

Given the fact that food functions as a relationship-building tool, a question that might be asked is: What other natural, sociocultural structures are in place or might be easily instantiated that also do this work of cultural capital transmission and trust building? Capitalizing on these structures might lead to better results (decreased bullying, suspensions, etc.) than many of the pro-social programs currently operating in schools. There is also the question, of course, of how to engage students who do not possess the

cultural capital to know what types of food (and other resources and dispositions) are valuable in school. Do food sharing choices function as indicators of more subtle aspects of cultural capital? Are there official rules about from whom students and school officials may take food? Do these rules apply to other resources that may already be in the classroom or be brought in by students like books, paper, makers, tape, or glue?

Another implication of this analysis is the reality that forbidding certain items in schools does not guarantee that students will stop bringing them. While the typical administrative reaction to things like technological devices is to ban them, this study suggests that banned items actually play critical roles in the day-to-day operations of schools. It might be worthwhile for administrative bodies to consider this fact as they formulate policies regarding various items, not limited to things like food and electronic devices. It could be beneficial to engage with the discourse of the banned item rather than pretending that banning something will prevent it from appearing on the premises.

Dewey (1938) argues that education should be connected to life. There might not be a greater connection to life than food because everyone needs food to live. Noddings (2013) echoes Dewey when she argues that curriculum should not be just about facts but also about civility and the well-made life. Even though food seems to be an obvious motif for bringing about educative aims and purposes, there are also miseducative uses of food. These uses might involve proscribing food sharing against the students' will, such as when children are pressured to provide food for parties.

There is also the possibility that demonizing certain foods or elevating others could alienate groups of students and/or their parents. One recent example of this comes from Canada, where a child's lunch did not have enough carbohydrates, leading the daycare providers to supplement the lunch with crackers and then charge the parents ten dollars. This had the potential to be alienating to the mother because she believed she had packed a perfectly fine lunch of roast beef, potatoes, and carrots (Annable, 2013). The daycare workers may not have thought the lunch was unhealthy, but they said that they felt they had no other choice but to follow government regulation (Annable, 2013). Stories like this reinforce the idea that food in school is not a trivial matter. It can be a tool of disempowerment and demoralization for both teachers and parents when it is highly regulated.

Finally, food can be miseducative when schools focus on its commercial properties and use it to raise money. In these circumstances, students can become mired in a consumptive frame of mind instead of the productive one necessary for adolescent growth. Although fundraising campaigns are not inherently malevolent, complications can arise when students are punished socially or academically for not participating in school fundraisers or charity food drives.

While the possibility exists that students would bring food to school to undermine a teacher's authority, there are also more sinister possibilities. Teachers have been harmed by students who added toxic substances to a teacher's food or beverage (Kenworthy & Dolak, 2013). Teachers should, of course, be aware of incidents like this and exercise caution. While I never experienced adverse side effects from eating gifted food or the food I brought for myself, I realize that caution and good judgment should be exercised. I have demonstrated that food functions symbolically, and so I also wonder if adolescents who poison or attempt to poison teachers should be dealt with as people with deep-seated

traumas rather than as just rebellious or delinquent juveniles (Kenworthy & Dolak, 2013). It might be valuable for educators and parents to consider the symbolic implications when determining disciplinary measures and when developing policies to protect teachers and students from inedible or unsafe food sharing.

The stories in this reflective essay make critical assertions about how power is distributed, shared, and traded in the classroom. My junior high students do not qualify for lucrative employment, and they generally do not often come from wealthy families. In fact, they usually have very little access to material resources (money, cars, clothes, jewelry, and technology), and their status as adolescents prevents them from having the kind of open relationships that might allow them to offer honest and sincere gratitude, especially in front of their peers. Small items of food are inexpensive, yet they do the work of demonstrating deference, loyalty, appreciation, and host of other obliging orientations towards teachers and their classmates. It was not until I conducted this inquiry and performed the analysis that I realized that my students were making real efforts to be amicable to me. Knowing this makes it more difficult for me to be ungenerous toward them. The power that dominates the classroom can no longer be a power based on coercion. Instead, it has to be a power based on mutual regard. According to Kozol (2008), schools should be full of aesthetic merriment. Food is not only an expression of creativity, but it also brings joy. In places of joy, the thoughtful work of education can occur.

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