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Education Service



School Dinners

Why were School Dinners brought in?

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Introduction

Around the year 1900 there was a lot of concern about the physical state of the people of Britain. Even though there had been tremendous efforts in the late 19th century to provide better public health, housing and education, many children were still no more healthy than they had been back in the 1840s.

The new Liberal government elected in 1906 passed various measures to try to deal with this problem. They were particularly concerned to try to improve the health of children. They passed laws to ensure midwives were notified of each new-born baby, they introduced School Medical Examinations. And, in 1906, they gave permission for schools to offer meals to their pupils. But what kind of meals?

These documents show how one city, Bradford, carried out an experiment to see how the system might operate.

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. This is an extract taken from City of Bradford Education Committee Report by the Medical Superintendent, Ralph H Crowley M.D., M.R.C.P. in conjunction with the Superintendent of Domestic Subjects, Marian E. Cuff, on a Course of Meals given to Necessitous Children from April to July, 1907:
 - a) Make a summary of what the experiment involved: how many children? for how long? which meals? etc.
 - b) How were the children chosen? Why do you think they chose these children?
 - c) Look at paragraph 3. "Every effort was made to make the meals, as far as possible, educational". What does "Educational" mean here? What was being taught? How did the children react?
 - d) Why were the tablecloths dirty afterwards?

Look at Source 2

2. This is another extract from the same report about what food was provided.

The breakfasts

- a) How did the children react to being offered porridge for breakfast - at first? After three days?
- b) How would you react to being offered porridge for breakfast?

The dinners

- a) What problem was Miss Cuff trying to solve with her dinner menus?
- b) What criticism might be made of some of the recipes?
- c) How does the Report meet that criticism?

- d) What seems to be the attitude of Bradford Education Committee towards poor parents? Do you think this is fair?

Look at Source 3

3. This is a graph from the report showing how the weights of the children involved were affected.
- a) What effect did providing meals have on the weight of the children?
 - b) What happened to their weights during the holidays?
 - c) Why does the dotted line go up?

Look at Source 4

4. These are children queuing for Salvation Army "Farthing breakfasts". A farthing was a quarter of an old penny; there were 12 old pennies in a shilling. A shilling = 5p; an old penny = less than half of 1p; a farthing = one tenth of 1p.:
- a) What does the photograph tell you about the kinds of children who took these breakfasts?
 - b) One farthing was very little, even then. Why do you think the Salvation Army charged anything at all?
 - c) Why did the government bring in school meals, rather than leaving it to charitable organisations like the Salvation Army?

5. Conclusions

- a) Miss Cuff has to give a short report to Bradford Education Committee about her "experiment". Note down the five key points you think she should make.
- b) Apart from the children putting on weight, what was the "experiment" intended to teach - the children? Their parents?

6. For discussion

- a) From 1907, when they began, school meals had to meet certain nutritional standards. These were abolished in 1981: kitchens could serve up what they liked provided it made money, children could buy what they liked. Recently, the government has become worried about child health issues such as malnutrition, but also obesity. Nutritional rules have been re-imposed.
 - Is it the government's job to tell children what they should eat?
 - What do you think school meals should be like?
- b) Recently some schools have begun to offer breakfasts as well as dinners.
 - Why have they done this?
 - Do you think this is a good idea?

Background

In 1900, there was a great deal of anxiety about the health of the people of Britain.

The government and the armed forces had been shocked by the physical health of the young men of Britain when they were trying to recruit for the Boer War. (1899 - 1902). They had found that many of the young men were too small or under-nourished to join up. As a result of this, a "Committee on Physical Deterioration" was set up.

The government had worked hard to deal with conditions such as cholera, and passed laws to ensure everyone had access to a clean water supply, better houses and education. These efforts however did not do anything to help with peoples nutrition. Approximately a quarter of the people in London did not have enough money to live on, even if they had a permanent job and spent their wages wisely.

Seebohm Rowntree carried out a survey of working class families in the city of York in 1901. He found that even if they had jobs, wages were often too low to ensure a decent standard of living. The losers were usually mothers, who went short rather than let their husbands or children go hungry, and children. Children did not get the good diet they needed -partly because their parents were too poor and partly because the parents did not understand nutrition. Medical care cost money, and parents did not call a doctor for their children unless they were desperate.

Some organisations, like the Salvation Army, intervened where it was most needed by offering cheap meals for children, see Source 4. Some School Boards, notably the London School Board, began to offer cheap, or free, school dinners. Their motive was practical: hungry children cannot learn.

The Liberal government, which was elected with a huge majority in 1906, was committed to reform. The Labour Party, newly formed in 1900 had its first M.P.s and the Liberals wanted to show that they could look after working people just as well as the Labour Party.

In 1907 they ordered that midwives had to be told of all babies born, so that they could check on their physical condition and give advice to the mothers. In 1907 they ordered School Medical examinations to be carried out, so as to catch ill children early. The Education (Provision of Meals) Act of 1906 was part of the government's plan to ensure that British children grew up healthy.

Teachers Notes

This lesson could fit into a number of curriculum contexts.

- As part of the story of improving public health. The 19th century had seen legislation to ensure the basics -clean water, sewage disposal, decent housing. But still, this did not seem enough to ensure a more healthy population. School meals are one of the markers of the state becoming more and more drawn into people's lives in the 20th century. Compulsory notification of births came in 1907. After the First World War came council

houses and after the Second, the National Health Service, offering security "from the cradle to the grave" - something the Victorians would never have dreamed of.

- As part of the story of increasing government intervention in people's lives. By the latter part of the 20th century, the well-being of individuals had become the concern of the state with regard to their birth, education, child and adult health, housing, old age and death.
- As an debate about the role of the nanny state in socitey as a whole
- As an example of the way local government used to regard the people they served: caring for them, ready to intervene in their lives in a big, but rather paternalistic way, and not uncritical.
- For any 20th Century exam course on the development of the welfare state
- Sources

Sources 1, 2 and 3 - ED 80/5 - Taken from City of Bradford Education Committee Report by the Medical Superintendent, Ralph H Crowley M.D., M.R.C.P. in conjunction with the Superintendent of Domestic Subjects, Marian E. Cuff, on a Course of Meals given to Necessitous Children from April to July, 1907.

Source 4 - Children queuing for Salvation Army "Farthing breakfasts", about 1900 'The Salvation Army International Heritage Centre'

Schemes of Work

Twentieth-century medicine how has it changed the lives of people?

Key Stage 3 Unit 20

Source 1 : Extract from the report. How was "the experiment" carried out? (ED 50/8)

The following report gives the account of a feeding experiment, carried out on about 40 children during the early summer, namely, from April 17th to July 24th, 1907.

The meals, consisting of breakfast and dinner, were given in a School in one of the poorest quarters of the city, about 30 of the children coming from this school, and 10 from an adjacent one. The children were selected out of Standards I. to IV. by the Head Teacher and myself. The children apparently most in need of meals were chosen, though a few were included primarily on the ground of the then particularly poor circumstances of the family. In the majority of the cases either the family income, for one reason or another, was very irregular, or the mother went out to work or the family was a large one ; but in one or two of the cases the circumstances were comparatively good.

Every effort was made to make the meals, as far as possible, educational. There were tablecloths and flowers on the tables ; monitresses, whose duty it was to lay the tables and to wait on the other children, were appointed, one to each group of 10 children ; they were provided with aprons and sleeves and had their meals together after the other children. From almost the first there was very little to complain of in the general behaviour of the children, for children soon respond to orderly and decent surroundings. The table cloths, it is true were very dirty at the end of the

week, but this was chiefly due to the dirty clothing of the children, and owing to the very inadequate provision at the school for the children to wash themselves, it was difficult to ensure that even their hands were clean.

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Source 2 : Extract from the report. What food was provided? (ED 50/8)

Breakfast consisted every day of oatmeal porridge with milk and treacle, followed by bread and margarine or dripping, with milk, hot or cold, to drink. In Appendix I. will be found a table showing the quantity eaten on the average by each child. the food value in proteid and fat and the cost. It will be noticed that oatmeal porridge was given to the children every day. I ascertained from the children that only one of them was in the habit of eating porridge, and he was a Scotch child. At the first breakfast 13 of them refused to eat it ; the next day there were only 2, and from that day it was eaten and enjoyed by all.

It was originally intended to have varied the diet for breakfast but on any occasion when this was done the children were so disappointed at having no porridge, that practically no alteration in the menu was made. A more satisfactory breakfast, from the food value point of view probably cannot be given for the money.

If cocoa be used instead of milk the nutritional value will be lowered in proportion as less milk is taken, there being but little actual nourishment in the small amount of cocoa used. The bread may be partly replaced by wholemeal currant loaf, but this will cost almost as much again as the equivalent quantity of bread. An egg, of course, adds very greatly to the cost of the meal, even though less milk be taken.

On the question of the dinners, a very large amount of time and energy was spent on experimenting by Miss Cuff, and to her is entirely due the credit of the excellent menus provided. The problem it was desired to solve was that of providing a good variety of two-course dinners, which should be practical as regards their preparation and serving, should be up to a certain standard as regards the proportion of proteid and fat, would cost between 1d. and 1½d. for the material used and would be enjoyed by the children.

Seventeen dinners fulfilling the above conditions were arranged and the recipes for these are given in full by Miss Cuff, in the Appendix. On these recipes Miss Cuff has expended much thought, and the success of them depends on careful attention to detail. It is true that many of the meals suggested are not such as one is accustomed to find in the ordinary cottage home, and it might be objected that some of them involve too much thought and time to be used in the homes of the children. It would seem, however, that if such be the case, the fault lies with the upbringing of, and with the conditions under which many of the people live, rather than with the recipes.

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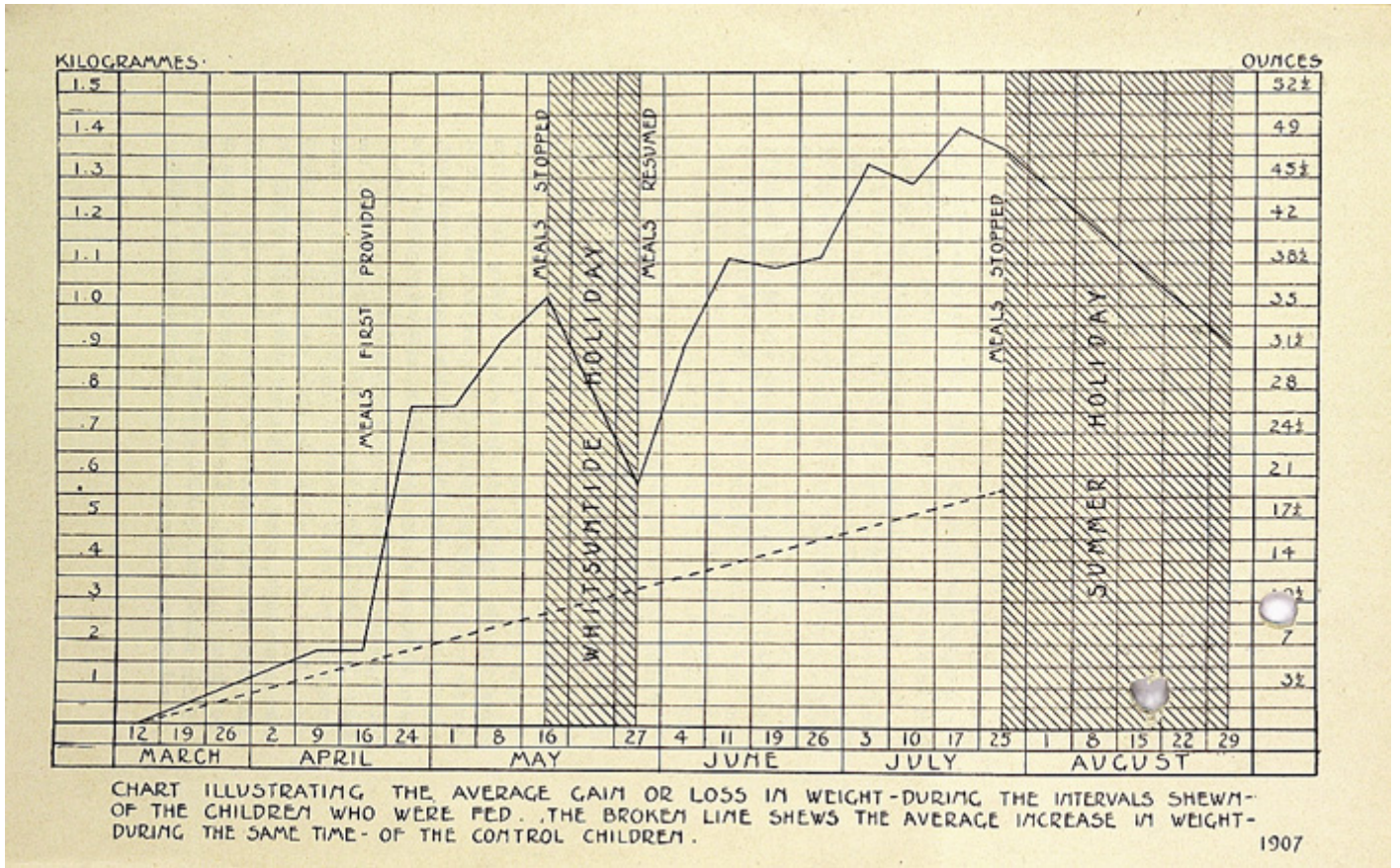
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Source 3 : What effect did "the experiment" have on the children? (ED 50/8)



Source 4 : Children queuing for Salvation Army "Farthing Breakfasts", about 1900

