
Unpacking the lunchbox: biopedagogies, mothering and social class

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Abstract This study investigates how mothers respond to school surveillance of their children's packed lunches. In a context where increasing attention is focused on healthy eating, we adopt a biopedagogical approach to illustrate different positions and strategies which mothers occupy in relation to feeding their children in the school setting. We use photo-elicitation interviews and focus groups to trace both the discursive and practical significance of these biopedagogies. We find that the subjective experiences of feeding children at school are infused with classed notions of mothering in public. Our analysis highlights two broad positions. Firstly, there were those with strong distinctions between home-food and school-food, which was associated more clearly with middle class families. Secondly, there were those with more fluid boundaries between home-food and school-food. This was more commonly encapsulated by working class mothers who were seen to place more emphasis on their children as autonomous decision-makers. Overall the findings document localised and classed practices of resisting the school's normalising gaze.

Keywords: Food, mothering, biopedagogies, social class, gender, consumption

Introduction

Approaches to children's food have changed considerably since the introduction of school meals in Britain in 1906. Over time policies have been 'transformed from a concern with preventing malnutrition, through a preoccupation with nutritional standardisation and the introduction of consumer choice, to encouraging children to make healthy choices' (Gustafsson 2004: 53). At the current time concerns about childhood obesity and children not receiving sufficient food at home dominate debates (Schabas 2014). Within this context *The School Food Plan* (Dimbleby and Vincent 2013) reviewed school food in England. The Plan recommended that free school meals were made available to all children during their first three years in state schools in England (Section 106 of the Children and Families Act 2014). The Plan also advises schools to discourage packed lunches and intensify their control on the food children bring from home (Elliott and Hore 2016). In June 2015, the contested issue of inspecting packed lunches reached the House of Lords, where, Lord Nash, an education minister,

responded that ‘Governing bodies are responsible for their school meals service including their packed lunch policies and whether to ban certain products to promote healthy eating’ (Nash, 2015), although consultation with parents was advised. He also stated that schools have common law powers to search pupils with their consent.

Given the considerable attention devoted to children’s diets within and outside the school setting, it is an opportune moment to study how parents understand and respond to school food policies on packed lunches. Our study set out to explore parents’ practices and perceptions regarding preparing lunchboxes for their children. However, our initial focus on parents was later redirected to a focus on mothers’ perspectives, following the pattern of responses we received during the fieldwork which fits with existing literature about the gendered nature of food work.

Mothering and classed food practices

The way mothers feed their children inside and outside the home is integral to understanding the relationship between food work and gendered and classed identities. From DeVault’s (1991) seminal work on *Feeding the family* to the most recent work on food and mothering, feeding children is still largely seen as a mother’s domain (Cairns and Johnston 2015). In addition, food and eating practices do not happen in a vacuum, but are entangled with classed ideals of good mothering and childrearing (O’Connell and Brannen 2016).

Lareau (2003) suggests that middle class ideals of good mothering reflect a specific logic of childrearing, called ‘concerted cultivation’. Seeing childrearing as a project to be managed, middle class mothering involves a labour-absorbing and financially demanding set of strategies aimed at transmitting taste, dispositions and life skills to children (Halldén 1991, Lee *et al.* 2014, Tomanovic 2004). As Wills *et al.* (2011) have shown, middle class parents see domestic food practices as a way of increasing children’s cultural capital, by acquiring a ‘good’, varied and cosmopolitan taste that might also be useful in developing their future social capital. Such a taste is developed together with a concern for health, achieved via strict routines, parental control over children’s diets and the development of self-discipline (Backett-Milburn *et al.* 2010).

Working class ideals of good parenting and ‘putting the children’s needs first’ resonate with the so called ‘accomplishment of natural growth’ (Lareau 2003). Seeing the child more as an autonomous human being than a project (Halldén 1991, Lee *et al.* 2014), good mothering is less focused on developing children’s capitals and future cultural advantages. As Lareau (2003: 748–9) highlights: ‘these parents believe that as long as they provide love, food and safety, their children will grow and thrive. They do not focus on developing their children’s special talents’. This less intensified approach to the child’s growth is also reflected in the way food and eating practices are managed. Despite recognising the importance of healthy food habits, working class mothers tend to exercise a less intensified control over their children’s diet, since they tend to promote the development of autonomous food choices (Wills *et al.* 2010). Driven in part by financial constraints, it is also important to avoid wasting food (Backett-Milburn *et al.* 2006, 2010).

These classed ideals of mothering are not confined to the home, but are entangled with public discourses and state-driven initiatives on childrearing (Maher *et al.* 2010). Such discourses and initiatives, although often referring to the gender neutral term ‘parents’, in fact address mothers directly, reinforcing the idea that feeding children is a woman’s responsibility (Halse 2009). However, such initiatives can be problematic, since they often hide moral understandings of family life. Indeed, as Burrows (2009: 134) has shown, practices of healthy eating and

feeding promoted via advice brochures, campaigns and TV programmes that reinforce class-based health imperatives ‘are not necessarily themselves aberrant. Rather, what is troublesome is the parent’s capacity to manage these imperatives [...] mapped onto notions of what constitutes a good parent *per se*’. Often the normalising ideals of good parenting resonate with a middle class lifestyle and family life, seeing those deviating from such ideals as deficient and ‘lacking’ of the right capitals (Lee *et al.* 2014).

Bach (2014) coined the expression ‘concerted civilizing process’ to highlight how parents and educators are expected to work together in ‘producing’ the ‘civilised’ child, following imperatives of good parenting that resonate with a middle class lifestyle. Given this assumed partnership between parents and educators, it is not surprising to see that the relationships between working class mothers and health initiatives might be troublesome. For example, Warin *et al.* (2008) highlight how working class mothers find it difficult to follow government guidelines, such as body mass index targets, because their priorities, obligations and financial constraints are not necessarily in tune with the State’s in this area. Murphy (2003) shows how government health advice on infant feeding – administered via midwives, health visitors and other professionals – can be read as challenging the received wisdom of working class women, who argue that as mothers they have special expertise about their children and that their children’s needs are being put first (Murphy 2003).

Studies documenting the growing level of scrutiny towards children’s packed lunches, have shown how children from ethnic minorities and working class backgrounds can feel stigmatised by school healthy eating initiatives as their food preferences are often not in tune with them (Andersen *et al.* 2015, Karrebæk 2012, Metcalfe *et al.* 2011, Welch *et al.* 2012). While these studies examine children’s experiences of this growing scrutiny (Pike and Leahy 2012), little has been said about mothers’ experiences, especially in relation to the recent discouragement of packed lunches. Using the concept of biopedagogies, this paper explores how lunchboxes operate as a key object within wider surveillant assemblages seeking to shape and construct the healthy child. Surveillance is both internalised and resisted by mothers at the individual level, not only discursively but through practical strategic choice of food for their child’s lunchbox. These strategies are influenced by mothers’ social class and involve distinctions between home-food and school-food. Surveillance is manifested not only top down but is dispersed in its effects with parents and children frequently surveilling and monitoring one another.

Lunchboxes, biopedagogies and surveillant assemblages

Biopedagogy is a term used in critical health sociology indicating how health practices might hide systems in which certain bodies and subjectivities are valued and others are devalued (Halse 2009). It originates from Foucault’s concept of ‘biopower’, which is ‘the governance and regulation of individuals and populations through practices associated with the body’ (Wright 2009: 2). Accounts of biopedagogies describe how practices, technologies and devices – disseminated via formal and informal education, and the related processes of subjectification (Leahy 2009) – ‘work to instruct, regulate, normalize and construct understandings of the physical body and the virtuous bio-citizen’ (Wright and Halse 2014: 838). Examples of biopedagogies in schools are sport and in-class learning activities (Azzarito 2009), and eating practices, including the organisation of school dinners and checks on packed lunches (Karrebæk 2012). Empirical studies of school meals show how these eating practices are ‘highly regimented’ (Pike 2008: 278) and are aimed at creating healthy children who, as self-regulating subjects, can ‘correct’ their food choices outside the school (Pike and Leahy 2012) and

maximise their contribution across the life-course (Murphy 2003). However, some of the unintended consequences of enforcing healthy eating initiatives are problematic, including, for example, the potential stigmatisation of ethnic minority children or those with a ‘specific’ diet (see Andersen *et al.* 2015, Karrebæk 2012) and the promotion of ‘negative and moralistic ways of thinking about the body’ (Wright and Halse 2014: 839) affecting particularly those deviating from the normalising assessment of a ‘healthy’ weight (Azzarito 2009, Halse 2009).

According to Webb and Quennerstedt (2010: 786), the current proliferation of fragmented techniques of surveillance are part of a wider ‘climate of health surveillance’, in which children are seen as subjects at risk (Maher *et al.* 2010), to be protected via public policies and government initiatives. Rich (2012) argues that the focus of UK children’s health policies, including the influential Every Child Matters policy (DfES, 2003), has been to ensure that organisations providing services to children (including schools and health professionals) take a more integrated approach to care and health, through a surveillance-based relationship with children and their families. However, this approach has not resulted in a central surveilling authority transmitting coherent health imperatives to children and their families, and, as McCahill and Finn’s (2010: 288) observe, ‘there is no such thing as a “unitary surveyed child”’. Haggerty and Ericson (2000) coined the notion of a ‘surveillant assemblages’, comprised of a variety of technologies, practices and sources of surveillance responding to different and sometimes contradictory imperatives around the construction of the healthy subject.

Lunchboxes have acted as a lightning rod for wider debates around childhood nutrition, healthy eating and obesity (Schabas 2014). They are a vital conduit through which (often moral) discourses of mothering, health and nutrition come together (Harman and Cappellini, 2015). As such they are important symbolically, but also in understanding how more abstract discursive governmentalities are enacted in practice (Leahy 2014, McKee 2009). This is because the lunchbox is an object around which practices are organised (those of choosing, purchasing, preparing and eating its contents). The lunchbox takes on increased significance within surveillant assemblages because it renders these practices visible and is easily scrutinised by a range of actors (other children, parents, school staff). The relatively standardised format of the lunchbox also makes comparison between lunchboxes, (and therefore the practices of monitoring and measurement that are central to surveillance) very easy. The lunchbox also spans the boundaries of private and public, of home and school. As such lunchboxes extend the potentialities of surveillance into relations between parents and children and also into the domestic sphere.

Studies of school dinners highlight how children resist biopedagogies, repositioning themselves as active social agents in the school setting (Leahy 2009). Ethnographic studies have shown how children elude the control of teachers and catering staff, by hiding, swapping and stealing food (Metcalf *et al.* 2008, 2011, Pike 2008). While this literature offers a relatively detailed picture of children and teachers’ experiences of school dinners, our understanding of mothers’ experiences is limited.

Research methods

This study emerges from data obtained through photo elicitation interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with 30 mothers of primary school children. Participants with children aged 9–11 were recruited, since at this age children can negotiate their food preferences with their parents (Roberts and Pettigrew 2013). Participants were mainly recruited from two primary schools, a rural Surrey school in a wealthy, white middle class catchment area and an urban West London school in a more diverse catchment area in ethnic and social class terms.

Both schools offer parents a choice between lunchboxes or school dinners. The schools operate a system where letters are sent to parents opting for lunchboxes at the start of the year. In these letters parents are informed which items are not allowed in lunchboxes, but no advice is given about what should be included. However as school staff were not included in our study, we know less about how these guidelines are applied and monitored. From interviews with mothers we know that monitoring is mainly delegated to catering staff who ‘occasionally’ inspect lunchboxes. But we also found occasions in which teachers and headteachers were involved in inspections. We also found a combination of mechanisms of rewards and punishments, including allowing children to sit on a ‘healthy food’ table, attaching traffic light stickers to lunchboxes, confiscating items from lunchboxes and phoning parents.

Recruitment letters were e-mailed to parents and posted on social media with the help of school administrators and head teachers. These asked for parents who ‘regularly prepare packed lunches for their children’ to participate in a study about parents’ experiences of, and perspectives on, preparing packed lunches. We did not specifically set out to focus on mothers but as only one father was recruited, this paper focuses only on mothers’ perspectives. Ten mothers were recruited from the Surrey school, 15 from the West London school and five were friends or acquaintances of participants living in West London. The sample consists of 19 middle class and 11 working class women, aged between 27 and 50. Twenty-six of these women were white British, one was a black British woman, two were Indian and one was Croatian. Apart from a widow and a lone mother, all participants were married and living with their husbands. While some parents had older and younger children, the focus of our interview was on the lunchbox of the child aged 9–11. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors’ institutions before the fieldwork commenced.

Applying the theoretical frame of biopedagogies meant exploring both the discursive dimension of lunchboxes and the practices surrounding them in order to unpack how discourses govern behaviours in a specific context. As such we employed photo-elicitation interviews and focus groups to understand how ideas and understandings are ‘translated’ into practices. Mothers were interviewed twice. In the first interview they were invited to give an overall description of how food was managed in their family, their approach to feeding children, their experience of making lunchboxes, their understandings of guidance given from the school and other sources, and how the content of the packed lunch was decided. At the end of the first interview mothers were asked to take photographs of a week of packed lunches. These photographs were discussed in the second interview, when participants described the content of the lunchboxes, their motivation to include or exclude certain food and brands and their ideas of what constitutes a good lunch. The second interview provided an opportunity to discuss the material aspects of providing a packed lunch for children and to follow up questions that arose from the first interview.

Interviews were followed by three FGDs. The first group was attended by 7 mothers from the Surrey school, the second group (5 participants) and third group (7 participants) were with mothers mainly from the West London school. Discussions explored participants’ reactions to, and views of, the media coverage of school meals and lunchboxes, as such they have not been used in this paper. However, FGDs confirmed that preparing packed lunches was not a typical topic of discussion among participants and that sharing ideas and understandings of feeding children is often an uncomfortable experience since it is linked to moralised ideals of good and bad mothering, as well as doing mothering in public. Therefore participants’ comments about lunchboxes not being a common source of conversation made during the FGDs direct our analysis toward the distinctive role of the lunchbox in wider surveillant assemblages.

Interviews and FGD data were transcribed verbatim. Photographs were used as a source of discussion within the interviews but were not coded separately from the transcriptions. A thematic data analysis of the interview transcripts (Silverman 2006) began after the first interview and was ongoing throughout the data collection. The researchers developed an initial coding framework based on the literature on mothering and classed food practices, and biopedagogies. Themes emerged inductively through a reading of the transcripts, these included: 'packed lunch checks', 'silence', 'women's work', 'maternal expertise', 'good mothering', 'bad mothering', 'resistance', 'discipline', 'home food', 'school food', 'treat', 'junk food' and 'children's requests'. Our biopedagogical approach also focused our attention on the way in which participants positioned themselves (and their children) in relation to the institution (school) and other parents and their children. We looked for inconsistencies as well as differences and similarities across interviews. We returned to the literature on biopedagogies and in particular surveillance to organise our analysis and interpret the relations between localised individual practice and the wider systems they are located within. Given the small number of participants, this analysis aims at providing an in-depth understanding of the ways participants negotiate, confront and/or resist the school's surveillance of their food provision practices.

A matter of mistrust: who is surveilling whom?

A first effect of the 'climate of health surveillance' (Webb and Quennerstedt 2010: 786), was a diffused sense of mistrust towards various actors, including the schools, other mothers and the children. Food served at school was viewed with suspicion and parents observed that combinations of items were served which they thought were unhealthy, portions were argued to be too small, the quality of food was debated and children's menu preferences were not always seen to be met. Interestingly, such judgments were formed through children's accounts of school dinners, which mothers valued as accurate, as well as mothers own scrutiny of the school menu. As Sarah, a middle class mother, commented:

They [school meals] include a lot of treats, like chocolate cake and things like that, that they don't advocate us putting in our lunch boxes. So, I find that a bit – not really keeping to your standards.

Doubting the school's ability to provide what they saw as healthy lunches was not the only reason for opting for packed lunches. Some mothers mistrust their own children, especially those described as 'fussy', 'picky' and 'difficult'. Opting for packed lunches, was a way of 'keeping an eye', as one mother says, on the food eaten at school by her son. Prya, a middle class mother, observes:

They're not allowed to, really, throw away their packed lunches. Even a sandwich or something, if it's half eaten, they bring it back. So at least I know, okay, fine, he's had so much.

As food served at school did not, in mothers' views, appear to satisfy the children's need to be 'well' fed, providing food from home, was seen as the 'obvious' solution. Having prepared packed lunches for several years, participants affirm that they now have a very formulaic way of making packed lunches that they know will be eaten by their children. The formula is also influenced by other mothers. For example, one participant admitted to asking her daughter about the packed lunches of her friends, as she did not want 'to lose the plot', as she says, implying that there is indeed a 'plot', that needs to be followed. Sarah similarly asks her son

what his friends have in their lunchboxes: ‘Danny’s like “Oh, such and such has this today” and I’m like “Really?”’ Despite keeping an eye on each other, participants observed that packed lunches are avoided as a topic of conversation, as they were seen as loaded with possible tensions surrounding appropriate eating and mothering practices.

While mothers are balancing their children’s preferences with their own sense of health and nutrition and monitoring this against the practices of other parents, school guidelines also need to be followed carefully. In both schools, guidelines were communicated annually via a letter sent to parents providing a list of what not to include in children’s lunchboxes. Such a list varies from school to school, as polemically highlighted by parents with children attending different schools. In addition it seems that guidelines are applied inconsistently, as Genevieve, a middle class mother, highlights:

He’s [her son] also come back with stories about the headmaster lifting chocolate out of a child’s packed lunch and confiscating it. The headmaster went on the rampage, a little bit, with the packed lunches and started pulling things out of people’s packed lunches. I think it was about six months ago, or something. One of his friends, in particular, (I think this girl has got a sweet tooth), he said, ‘Oh, the headmaster took several, several chocolates out of this kid’s packed lunch’, he said it quite gleefully.

Here, scrutiny takes the form of a spectacular *ad hoc* inspection by the headmaster who confiscates chocolates as a way of making an example of a child (and parent) who have deviated from the school ideal of a healthy packed lunch. There are significant melodramatic and affective dimensions to the scene described, Leahy (2014) observes that these elements contribute an intensity to governmentality in the school setting. Having internalised these surveillant processes, Genevieve and her son do not express any sympathy for the child in question. On the contrary, Genevieve individualises and responsabilises the child for her lack of self discipline, describing her as ‘having a sweet tooth’. Later on in the interview she calls for increased surveillance observing that the school is often ‘too relaxed’ in its implementation of the guidelines.

As well as potential sanctions, there were also some rewards reported for packed lunches adhering to the school’s ideal of a healthy lunch, including stickers and the opportunity to sit at a ‘special’ table:

There are incentivised to bring a healthy packed lunch, they get to sit at a special table if they bring a healthy packed lunch. They encourage them to bring two pieces of fruit or something to do with fruit in their packed lunch, yoghurts, and their sandwich. They have a look and they can incentivise them then, ‘Right you can sit on that table’. It is quite a good way but then they send home a list of things they shouldn’t have like cakes and bits and pieces in there as well. (Jannah, working class mother)

Like Genevieve, Jannah is supportive of the school’s scrutiny of children’s packed lunches. However, she admitted that the school has been ‘too strict’ with her ‘fussy’ child who now refuses to have school dinners. As documented in the literature (Karrebæk 2012, Leahy 2014), school food policies might have unintended consequences for children like Jannah’s son. Jannah understands the importance of a balanced diet, but she also faces the difficulties of accommodating her child’s requests, going against school guidelines and including cakes with the hope that ‘at least he will eat something’. The following section presents two main ways mothers position themselves in relation to school food policy, responding to the perceived surveillance by enacting their own classed understanding of good mothering.

Conformity and display: Strong home-food/school-food boundaries

A strategic response to school scrutiny, adopted by this first group of mothers, was to conform to school regulations, operating a strong distinction between food eaten at school and that eaten at home. Genevieve's description of her son's packed lunch illustrates this:

He knows the routine and it's a routine I follow myself. During the week, particularly at lunchtimes, it's healthy. Weekends tend to be a bit more relaxed in terms of healthy or non-healthy food, but during the week, that is time for discipline. The lunches that I make are probably the healthiest things I make. [. . .] I know that his friends get more chocolate and crisps than him, in their packed lunches. I would take a guess that his friends don't have more chocolate and crisps overall than him, I think he's probably quite average, but, in his packed lunch, he very, very rarely gets anything like that. I just see crisps and chocolate as a treat. I would rather give him that at the weekends, rather than a daily thing, which is just part of the normal day. (Genevieve)

For Genevieve a good diet is a matter of balancing health and indulgence (see Warde 1997), restricting the consumption of food she deems unhealthy and promoting the appreciation of food she considers healthy. She follows this diet which involves a constant negotiation between abstinence and indulgence planned around work and school activities. In describing the packed lunches she prepares (see Figure 1), she admits that 'there is no joy in it', implying that her packed lunches are positioned as a space for discipline, used for providing food considered good for concentration in the school setting.



Figure 1. *Genevieve's lunchbox.*

Genevieve suggests that her son doesn't necessarily consume fewer treats than his classmates, but those that he does consume are eaten outside of the school gates. Several other middle class mothers admitted to giving their children treats that they considered unhealthy at home as a way of rewarding them for tasks or performances. This separation between school and home food is a way for these women to avoid conflict with the school. It is also a way of displaying a type of good mothering recognised by the school.

I wouldn't want the school to think, 'Oh my god', like, 'Mark's mum has just spent two seconds packing this'. Or it to look specifically like he's packed it himself, in terms of the content. So, yes I wouldn't want them to think 'I don't want to be judged, on the basis that my kid's got inappropriate food regularly, on a regular basis'. Because you want people to think you're at least a good parent or trying your best anyway. (Mary, middle class mother)

Like Mary, most of the middle class participants display compliance inside the school gate (see also Bach 2014) but operate different choices in domestic settings, showing how their subjectivities of good mothers emerged also in relation to the school food policy. The few examples of middle class women including 'inappropriate' items, to use Mary's terminology, were extensively justified as exceptions such as having to treat the child for special occasions, like birthdays. For example, Lynne, a middle class mother, admits '*I do sneak in a chocolate crêpe, or something like that, especially on days when I know they're not feeling well, or something*'. Such justifications are used by these mothers to distance themselves from mothers who do not provide the correct food, who were commonly labelled in interviews as 'lazy', 'offenders' and 'in need of discipline'.

Fluid home-food/school-food boundaries

For the second group of mothers aligning themselves to the school food policy was not a main concern, but feeding their child with food that could be enjoyed was seen as a priority. Being on a 'tight budget' and confident that they could feed their children 'well' for less than the cost of a school meal, mothers in this group judged school dinners as not a good 'value-for-money' option for their households. However, two participants were entitled to free school meals and yet they chose to provide packed lunches for their children. As in the case of Brenda, a working class mother, who opted for packed lunches in order to accommodate her daughter's food preferences:

Tracey doesn't like sandwiches, so she asks for the brioche roll. She had one one day and said, 'Can I have that in my packed lunch?' The lunch box is totally her decision [...] As long as she's happy with what she gets in her packed lunch at school, and she's eating, that's fine by me.

For the last two years Tracey's packed lunch has had the same content: a brioche roll, a packet of crisps, some grapes, a piece of cake and a sugary drink (see Figure 2).

Aware that this combination does not meet the school's guidelines, Brenda prioritises controlling her daughter's anxieties by making sure that she has food she will eat and enjoy. This seems to echo other studies (Backett-Milburn *et al.* 2006, Willis *et al.* 2011) showing how for working class parents dietary matters are less important than other aspects of their children's well-being. This is also the case for Sandra, a working class participant, who admits that the only restriction she imposes on her son's requests is related to financial constraints. As she



Figure 2. *Brenda's lunchbox.*

says 'It's because of money; that'd be the only reason I would say, 'No', to him. He is quite good anyway, he wouldn't throw a tantrum'. Similarly to Sandra, mothers in this group feel that it is their duty to accommodate their children's food preferences in the school setting. These women did not lack an understanding of a nutritionally balanced lunch, knowing, for example that fruit and vegetables are indeed good for their children, but they found encouraging them to eat such food in the school setting too risky, because the child could go without food for long periods of time.

I know he shouldn't have chocolate but he's at school, he's eating all the time when he's at home. He's burning off so much energy. He asked me to get the other day the Kellogg's Cornflake Rice Krispie chocolate squares. I've got him Jammy Dodgers this week. It's just something that I know that he's going to eat. At the weekends, he would have his lunch, his crisps and a treat so I do the same for him at school, whether the school like it or not.

(Tina, working class mother)

For Tina providing food that her son will eat and enjoy is a priority at home as well as at school, and as such she maintains the same diet in both settings, disregarding the school guidelines. In her narrative discipline and healthy food are not regarded as priorities, but her son's enjoyment through food is considered a non-negotiable need that she puts first, disregarding the school food policies. Tina as well as the other women in this group admits eluding the diet suggested by the school without direct confrontation with school staff.

Harriet, a middle class mother with four children, is an exception in this regard because she described engaging in more confrontational interactions regarding food and drink in school. In encouraging her 'picky' son to eat 'something' at lunchtime, Harriet has a long list of trial and errors of different combinations of items provided in her child's packed lunch, as well as some attempts to opt for school dinners. Such attempts have not always been appreciated by the school, and on several occasions it has been suggested that the content of her packed lunches was inappropriate. Also, she has been reprimanded several times and the school phoned her on two occasions, once when her son did not eat any of his school dinner, and another time when he had forgotten his packed lunch and they asked Harriet to bring it in straight away. At the



Figure 3. *Harriet's lunchbox.*

time of the interview Harriet's packed lunch was a compromise between the school's regulations and her attempts to provide food that her son will eat (see Figure 3)

Sausage rolls, pork pies and cocktail sausages are all items that have been successfully eaten, as such they are usually included along with 'a token apple to keep the school happy, to think that we're trying'. The apple usually comes back uneaten, but as Harriet points out, this is her way of appeasing the school. Harriet has been proactive in defending her position of a caring mother and has been critical of the way guidelines were implemented. On one occasion, she went to the school to speak to teachers and lunchtime staff about her son not drinking enough during the school day:

I said to the school, 'You promote healthy eating but you're not promoting drinking enough in the school' and that's been annoying me for quite a few years actually. So I was glad that I actually said it to them.[. . .] They didn't seem very happy and they said, 'Oh, he does drink' and they were a bit defensive, and I said – in front of the teacher – I said to my son, 'Did you drink your drink yesterday?' and he said, 'No I didn't mummy' and then the teacher couldn't really say anything else. So I probably really annoyed her.

(Harriet)

Here Harriet is deliberately creating a 'melodrama' (Leahy, 2014) through which she turns the gaze back on the school, judging the institution as deviant on the basis of other plausible normalising health imperatives (see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983).

Discussion

Having explored the role that packed lunches play within wider biopedagogies, our findings have shown how techniques of surveillance are at work in such a mundane object that children

bring to school. If the literature argues that biopedagogies implemented by public policies are aimed at surveilling children and parents, with a bottom-up mechanism of scrutiny (Leahy 2014), our study reveals a more complex network of surveillance, in which surveillance ‘comes from everywhere’ (Foucault 1983: 93), and operates as a conglomeration of ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ flows of scrutiny. In fact, the school is not the only actor operating a normalising gaze addressed to mothers and children. Other ‘bottom-up’ normalising mechanisms outside the school gates are in operation, and the school itself is the object of scrutiny by mothers. Other mechanisms of intra-surveillance between mothers and children and between mothers (Henderson *et al.* 2010) are at play. All these scrutinising practices, are justified and narrated with a great emphasis on technical imperatives, which in this case are the apparently neutral notions of healthy food (Lupton 1996). However these notions go beyond nutritional understandings of feeding children and indeed hide moralising and classed ideas of how to do and display good mothering outside the home.

Our findings confirm the assumption that the school exercise of surveillance is not totalising and thus fails to generate passive and obedient subjectivities. As studies on biopedagogies (Harwood 2009, Wright 2009) remind us, surveillance produces resistance, as individuals activate localised strategies to escape the normalising gaze and the immediate conditions that institutions impose upon them. For example, Pike (2008) has shown how the school’s normalising gaze at lunch time, generates certain forms of behaviour and events rather than simply censoring children and passive students. Similarly, our findings reveal how mothers respond to the school’s scrutinising gaze of their packed lunches, activating different resisting techniques which are framed with the unquestionable mothering principle of putting the children’s needs first (McCarthy *et al.* 2000). Although many of our participants question the school’s authority and competence in feeding their children, Harriet is the only one who talks back to the school, responding to its melodramatic discipline with a counter-melodrama in which the school’s incongruities are openly denounced. Apart from her case, mothers do not openly confront the school – revealing a relationship of mutual mistrust and silenced suspicion – instead they enact resistance strategies that resonate with their classed notions of feeding children well. Two positions have been identified that mothers occupy in relation to the school scrutiny, which also echo their broader understanding of good mothering and satisfying children’s needs (May 2008).

For the first group of mothers putting the children’s needs first seems to be a matter of controlling their children’s body, thus feeding them with food understood as healthy. Food forbidden by the school, and associated with lazy, overindulgence and uncaring mothering, is consumed as reward in domestic settings, becoming symbolically associated with intimate and bonding family occasions. This is indeed an interesting and unexpected result showing how the resistant practices of middle class mothers result in a change in the way food that they deem unhealthy is consumed and the symbolic significance it has for the family collective identity. Consumed away from the scrutinising eye of lunchtime staff, it becomes an exciting secret, to be shared only with intimate family members, thus reinforcing the boundaries between rewards and punishments, the family and the school, the private and the public. This approach frames the child as an individual developmental project (Halldén 1991, Tomanovic 2004). As such the children’s successes and failures and physical appearance are understood as mothering outcomes, rather than something to be attributed to the child, genes or other factors such as socio-economic status. The child is therefore positioned as less capable of making his/her own decisions, and needs to be monitored closely (Tomanovic 2004).

For the second group of mothers putting their children’s needs first is a matter of providing gratification through food in the school and home settings, avoiding the risk of providing challenging food for their children. In line with the existing literature (Backett-Milburn *et al.*

2010, Willis *et al.* 2011), our findings have shown how these women plan their children's diet around the household's financial constraints, thus preferring to purchase food that they know will be appreciated and not wasted. They know that food that has been tried and tested at home will certainly be eaten at school. Thus food consumed at home easily crosses the domestic borders to enter in the school settings, with very little negotiation to accommodate the school's requests. Items that they view as unhealthy are not reserved for family occasions, or classified as rewards, but they are part of ordinary public and private meals and snacks. Interestingly many of the working class mothers in our sample seem less concerned about their relationship with the school and more interested in accommodating their children's food preferences. We think that this different positioning towards the school food policy and this more relaxed attitude towards their children's diet is linked to a different understanding of mothering. Seen less as a matter of managing a project, these mothers relate to their children as beings that can be trusted to autonomously make their own food choices following their own preferences (see also Halldén 1991, Tomanovic 2004, Willis *et al.* 2011).

It is also notable that the aforementioned practices of resistance do not appear to jeopardise the gendered imperative that feeding the children is seen as a woman's domain. They reinforce the unspoken unbalanced division of domestic labour that making packed lunch and renegotiating school policies are a mundane way of mothering, in which 'a woman conducts herself as recognizably womanly' (DeVault 1991: 118). Despite different positions that mothers occupy in relation to the school food policy, they all justify their stance as 'a non-negotiable obligation to put children's needs first' (McCarthy *et al.* 2000: 791). Our discussion of mothers' narratives on their children's packed lunches suggests that it is how children's needs are interpreted that shapes women's resistance.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how lunchboxes play a key role within a wider surveillant assemblage, which comes together at certain times and places to further institutionalise healthy eating initiatives. At the same time it is harnessed in the individual domestic project of good mothering. By focusing on its differential enrollment in these assemblages in particular times and places, in the kitchen, and in the school lunchroom, the paper has revealed some of the entanglements between individual and insitutional projects of creating the subject of the healthy child. It has also shown how these entanglements are negotiated by mothers not only discursively through language but in practice in the everyday choice of food for their child's lunchbox. This focus on 'how governmentalities are brought to life at the point of their application' (Leahy 2014: 171) also reveals possibilities for resistance not captured by a focus on discourse alone. However, capturing negotiations and resistance is not easy, particularly considering the tricky question as to where the boundaries of these assemblages lie. In fact, the complex network of boundaries is in operation between mothers and children, but also between mothers and schools, and between mothers themselves. Rather than thinking of a central surveilling government which translates health principles into policies to be then coherently implemented by schools and health professionals, it is more useful to dismantle the assemblage (Harwood 2009, Leahy 2009, Rich 2012) by looking at a specific 'biopedagogical object', in our case packed lunches, and the way it operates in constructing specific subjectivities.

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