

The failure of charitable school- and community-based nutrition programmes to feed hungry children

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ABSTRACT *Growing rates of child poverty in Canada and recognition of relationships among poverty, compromised nutrition, health and educational opportunities have led to a proliferation of child-feeding programmes. The purpose of this paper is to explore the contributions of charitable school- and community-based nutrition programmes toward meeting their goal of feeding hungry children through a critical ethnography of nine diverse programmes in Atlantic Canada. Data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that programmes were initiated in response to perceived hunger rather than to documented need, and were characterized by an ideology of service. Although some hungry children were being fed, only a minority of the target population was being reached. Failure to reach poor children could be partly attributed to parental resistance for fear of stigmatization. To a large extent, feeding hungry children became displaced by goals of nutritional improvement for all children, and care-giving. Programmes, therefore, largely failed in their mandate. The programmes believed they provided a solution to child hunger, yet the authors observed cases in which feeding programmes were alienating and stigmatizing, weakening the status of poor children and families. The charitable model keeps hunger out of public debate by drawing attention away from the underlying causes. This depoliticization legitimizes hunger as a matter of charity, not social justice. Alternatively, the social justice model attempts to reduce dependency and programme need through a commitment to addressing poverty and social inequities. If conceived from a social justice rather than a charitable perspective, it is possible that child-feeding programmes may be part of a comprehensive strategy to enhance food security through poverty reduction.*

Introduction

About one in five Canadian children lives in poverty (Health Canada, 1999). It is known that dietary adequacy and nutritional health are directly related to the level of household income and the amount of money spent on food (Myres & Kroetsch, 1978; Bureau of Nutritional Sciences, 1981; Maxwell & Simkins, 1985; Shah *et al.*, 1987; Campbell &

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Horton, 1991). Families living at or below the poverty line are often unable to purchase foods necessary to provide a balanced and adequate diet (Miller *et al.*, 1985; Emmons, 1987; Nova Scotia Nutrition Council, 1988; Travers, 1996). As a result, children in these high-risk families may be consuming insufficient and/or inadequate food at home. Overall nutritional intake is also inadequate and specific deficiencies are more likely in the face of inadequate dietary intake (Rose & Oliveira, 1997). Nutritionally disadvantaged children suffer more frequently from health problems such as anaemia, weight loss, colds and infections than nutritionally advantaged children (Maxwell, 1985; Shah *et al.*, 1987; Fierman *et al.*, 1993; Miller & Korenman, 1994). Insufficient food intake is also associated with impaired growth and mental development (Brown & Pollitt, 1996).

In school, nutritionally disadvantaged children have also been shown to have higher rates of absence and learning impairment compared with their peers (Wehler *et al.*, 1992; Skolnick, 1995). Adverse effects in psychosocial functioning are seen in children who experience chronic hunger (Murphy *et al.*, 1998). Substantial evidence suggests that inadequate nutritional intake is related to poor problem-solving ability, task completion, concentration and social interaction in children (Pollitt *et al.*, 1982–83; Connors & Blouin, 1983). Consequently, poor children are more likely to experience difficulty with schoolwork than children from higher income households (Starfield, 1982; Maxwell, 1985; Shah *et al.*, 1987). Healthy growth and development in general are impaired in the face of food insufficiency, and children are less likely to succeed as healthy citizens over the long term as a result (Wachs, 1995). A malnourished child may fail to reach his or her maximum physical and intellectual potential.

That so many children live in disadvantaged conditions is troubling to Canadians who recognize that poor children are at risk for compromised nutrition, health and educational opportunities. These concerns have led local community groups and agencies across Canada to initiate both school- and community-based child-feeding programmes. First reported in 1989 when the Canadian Education Association identified 121 such programmes (CEA, 1989), this social movement has expanded into virtually every Canadian province and territory and has assumed responsibility for feeding hundreds of thousands of children every school day (Health Canada, 1999).

Programmes reflect local conditions and most engender strong community participation and support (Lemieux, 1988; McLennan, 1989; Health Canada, 1999). Monies for programme operations are transferred from municipal governments, school boards, social and public health agencies, food producers, private donors and local community groups (McLennan, 1989; Mitchell & Chu, 1989; Cassell, 1990; Health Canada, 1999). Only British Columbia has a provincially sponsored programme with an annual budget of approximately C\$14.8 million (Health Canada, 1999).

Unlike the United States where school feeding programmes are legislated and federally supported (Pollitt *et al.*, 1978; Congressional Digest, 1990), in Canada, the proliferation of feeding programmes for children in schools and in the community has occurred primarily through volunteer efforts to 'feed hungry children'. Programme operations largely reflect a 'charitable model' of delivery, which we define as poverty-mitigating services rendered by volunteers to distribute donated goods to self-identified needy recipients.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the contributions of charitable school- and community-based nutrition programmes toward meeting their goal of feeding hungry children through an analysis of a multi-site, qualitative case study of nine diverse programmes in Atlantic Canada.

Methodology

A detailed description of the methods used in this study is described elsewhere (McIntyre *et al.*, 1999; Dayle *et al.*, 2000). In brief, we collected data between November 1994 and June 1995 from six breakfast and three lunch programmes in three Atlantic Canadian Provinces. Data collection methods included participant observation over approximately a one-month period which was conducted by a trained qualitative researcher, based on Jorgensen's methods (Jorgensen, 1989) who functioned, in all but one site, as an active participant in programme activities. The qualitative researcher also conducted individual interviews and focus groups with programme providers and children, respectively, which were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Telephone interviews with parents referred by programme personnel were also conducted and their comments were recorded through detailed note-taking. Other sources of data included published programme reports, newspaper articles and promotional materials. All participants gave consent for their participation, according to the protocols approved by a university ethics committee.

Originally eight programmes were selected for inclusion in the study based on a theoretical sample that was drawn from an inventory of programmes operating in the region which we had previously compiled (McIntyre & Dayle, 1992) and which we augmented by snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) of public health units and community agencies. The theoretical sample (Glaser, 1978) was based on programme characteristics related to community size, province, school versus community setting, breakfast versus lunch meal, and years of operation. As we began the study, we learned of a newly opened programme and included it to study its unique inception features.

The transcribed materials, which exceeded 1000 pages, were coded using QRS NUD-IST qualitative data analysis software. Interpretation of the coded data was undertaken using constant comparative methods of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) and logical analyses of others (Achterberg, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Interpretation was informed by theoretical perspectives on values and power, and thus took an explicitly critical stance. We returned the case study analyses and overall results of the study to programme operators during site visits that followed in the year after data collection. At this time, attendees' comments and clarifications were encouraged and recorded as part of the data set.

Results and discussion

Programme descriptions

Details of the nine programmes have also been described elsewhere (McIntyre & Travers, 1999; Dayle & McIntyre, 2000). Programmes ranged in age from four months to over

23 years of operation. Most had been serving meals to children for between five and seven years. Three programmes were small, serving fewer than 20 meals per day; four served between 20 and 60 meals a day; the other programmes served 92 and 800 meals per day respectively. Programme settings included schools (5), churches (3) and a community agency. Community economic status of the programme varied with six programmes being located in poor neighbourhoods characterized by public housing and/or reported to have many residents in receipt of social assistance benefits; the other programmes were located in economically mixed neighbourhoods.

Programme operations were supported by paid operators (4), and volunteer staff including parents (2), teachers or principals (3), and community volunteers (1). Volunteers also operated in sites with paid staff. Programme organization varied with four programmes supported by schools; two operating as programmes through charitable organizations; two operating informally; and the last incorporated as a non-profit organization. Annual budgets ranged according to programme size and staffing but the operating costs of the majority of sites ranged from \$2000 to \$8000 (Canadian dollars). Funding sources included municipal, provincial or federal grants as well as donations through charities, non-charitable agencies and individuals. Programmes generally served their meals free with only one site requesting low-cost voluntary meal payment.

Thus, while each programme had features of a charitable delivery model, our study included representation from a wide variety of contexts that would characterize children's feeding programmes.

Charitable model of delivery

Ideology of service: We found that all programmes operated according to a charitable model of delivery as we have previously defined it. Beyond the programme structures that relied heavily on donated food, money, equipment and facilities, volunteers in a variety of capacities, and grants for paid staff (where there were any paid staff), most of the programmes were characterized by an ideology of service. In some programmes, it was the dominant ideology. This is illustrated by typical statements from two community volunteers:

...because I think of the self-satisfaction. I think you know that you are doing good for the kids.

... community service is a very important thing in our faith. ... When we are of service to our fellow beings we are serving God and that's a wonderful opportunity to do just that.

The ideology of service, with its emphasis on altruism, volunteer effort and donations, characterizes the charitable model of service delivery. Other ideologies from which programmes derived their philosophies were the ideology of family—families eating together, and the ideology of equality—all children should be treated the same.

Programme justification: Providers were convinced of the need for their programmes, despite a paucity of evidence that there were in fact hungry children in need of their services. Most programmes were initiated in response to perceived individual need. In one instance, a child was observed eating chalk, in another, children were reportedly seen searching garbage cans for food. In only two cases were mini needs assessments conducted: one a survey, and the other a series of informal interviews.

Widespread child hunger, as manifested through missed meals, was never documented, although isolated cases were observed. This is consistent with previous research by McIntyre (1993), whose validated breakfast survey instrument revealed that only 5% of young schoolchildren in Nova Scotia skipped breakfast. Despite a lack of documented child hunger cases, the perception of widespread child hunger in the present study was strong, and the primary justification for programme existence was poverty. Most programme operators were sensitive to the concern that parents on social assistance, especially single parents, simply cannot afford to provide adequate food for their kids. In Newfoundland, this justification was particularly evident. A programme director is quoted as saying:

... it's atrocious that we even have to have a programme. That the kids really need it that badly, that the families need it that badly, that our society has deteriorated to the point that they just don't have the money to feed their kids.

The implicit assumption in establishing feeding programmes appears to be that poverty is the underlying cause of failure to meet children's basic needs, including food needs. Feeding programmes are justified as one potential means of counteracting the effects of poverty. The school was often considered a logical site for feeding programmes, possibly because of popular and professional discourse associating nourishment with capacity for learning. A teacher's comment reflects this belief:

Kids can't really learn if their basic needs aren't filled and one of those basic needs is to be fed ... adequately and if ... their stomachs are grumbling and they are thinking about food and then obviously they are not concentrating on what is going on.

Interestingly, once in operation, non-food issues such as absent caregivers (working parents), and long bus rides to school seemed to provide additional justification for the programmes. With parents working and/or early bus rides, feeding children breakfast at home is a challenge, and a school programme provides an alternative. A student volunteer said:

Other kids get dropped off by taxis ... this is the time they're at school anyway, sometimes they don't even get a chance to get breakfast.

For some children, having breakfast with friends is preferable to sitting alone or being hurried. The idea that the feeding programme provides a place for them to see their friends in a 'club' atmosphere is evident in these words from one parent:

It is a social thing for the kid. They get to sit and chat with their buddies before school starts. It's just great.

The fact that the programmes were attended and that the kids enjoyed the food was adequate justification to sustain some programmes. Providing an opportunity for socialization and having 'a place to go' were, in some cases, becoming the primary reasons for continued programme operation. Although the importance of the social functions of feeding programmes cannot be denied, justifying continued existence based on meeting social needs makes the goal of feeding hungry children secondary or even unimportant. This change in focus has major implications for judging the success of these programmes, which are promoted as feeding hungry children but which in fact have placed that goal as functionally less important than the social impact of the programme on participants.

The National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY) in its first cycle in 1994 asked all participants whether or not their child, aged 0 to 11 years, had ever experienced being hungry because the family had run out of food or money to buy food (McIntyre *et al.*, 2000). Two hundred and six, or 1.2% of the NLSCY sample, responded affirmatively. While this is a very small percentage of the Canadian sample, the number does represent over 57 000 Canadian families.

The perception of child hunger in Canada is much greater than the NLSCY statistics show, however. The 'National Child Hunger Survey' (Thompson Lightstone, 1997), commissioned by the Canadian Living Foundation and conducted by a consulting firm in 1997, asked 2000 randomly chosen adults: 'In your estimation, in Canada, what percentage of children are not regularly eating a proper nutritional breakfast before going to school?' It found that respondents believed that 42.2% of Canadian schoolchildren, on average, were not eating an adequate breakfast. The next questions asked Canadians to rank child hunger in terms of importance compared with other national issues such as quality education, national unity, quality healthcare, and unemployment/job creation. Not surprisingly, perhaps, between 85% and 89% of respondents stated that they believed that child hunger was at least as important as these other issues. This type of study has been used to justify the need for children's feeding programmes and documents many Canadians' uncontested belief that child poverty equals child hunger in Canada.

The NLSCY 1994 study is a radical challenge to the misrepresentation that childhood hunger is synonymous with child poverty in Canada. The study did, however, determine that hunger is a genuine phenomenon in a small, but societally significant, number of Canadian families. Pointing out the lack of documented evidence of child hunger in initiating feeding programmes is in no way attempting to belittle the plight of poor families and their risk of food insecurity as targeted by these programmes. However, the observation remains that children's feeding programmes are initiated as a response to *perceived* hunger rather than to objective documentation of their need.

A failure to feed hungry children

Programme reach: One way to assess whether the programmes are feeding hungry children is to analyse how effectively programmes reach their target groups. Although providers at all nine sites believe that they feed poverty-stricken children who do not get

adequate food at home, in eight of the programme sites they also estimate that of those children who attend an estimated 75% are not perceived as poor and are assumed to attend for reasons such as convenience and socializing.

Serving beyond the target group can be positive if the needs of the target group are being met, but this does not seem to be the case. Six of the seven school-based sites serve less than 30% of the school population, far lower attendance rates than they would like or could handle.

Only one church-based site restricts its service to children from poor homes, and operators report that they believe many children from the neighbourhood who are in need of the programme do not attend. Attendance and non-attendance appears to be divided by race—white children in the neighbourhood do not use the programme even though they need it.

The one community-based programme, located in a distinctly 'poor' neighbourhood and serving only low-income children, has capacity attendance but a waiting list equal to the size of their capacity. This was the only site studied that was reaching the target group but did not have adequate resources to fully serve those deemed 'in need'.

Finally, the one large school-based programme serves 800 meals to a school population of 914; however, estimates based on ability to anonymously pay a voluntary fee suggest only 25–30% of recipients are poor.

For the programmes we studied in Atlantic Canada, the primary intended function of feeding hungry children was not realized. Although some hungry children were being fed, only a minority of the target population was being reached. These findings are consistent with results from the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY) which found that only 2% of families who report inadequate income for food use school feeding programmes as a coping strategy (McIntyre *et al.*, 2000). This extremely low number is probably influenced by limited programme availability as well as poor programme reach. American data regarding the School Breakfast Programme also shows a similar pattern of disuse by target groups. This programme, more prevalent in schools in lower income districts, is only accessed by 20% of students to whom it is available (Devaney *et al.*, 1997). The question that arises is: if these programmes were developed to feed hungry children, why are so many of them failing to reach a significant proportion of their target group?

Resistance: One possible explanation for failure to reach children in poverty is that parents of targeted children resist sending their children to the programmes. The reasons for resistance are complex but the bulk of our data suggest that parents fear that they and their children will be stigmatized if they attend. The ability to resist dependence on charity may be a way for parents to exert some power and control over their own homes in a social system that strips poor families of dignity, often through stigmatization. Unfortunately, we were unable to gain access to interview many parents so most of the following comments are the reflections of programme operators and volunteers. It is noteworthy that in seven of nine sites, even in those with high attendance rates, there is mention of parental resistance for fear of stigmatization. Some illustrative quotations by programme operators and volunteers include:

Because their parents know that the kids are coming here 'cause they need it, and they don't want theirs in because they think, 'well, they are going to start thinking my kids aren't being fed at home'.

Some parents think that if they can't do it for their own children they shouldn't send them to the programme—like it's charity and so it's demeaning to them.

In one community, which has a reputation for being very poor, the programme has by far the lowest participation rate (2%). The community as a whole has resisted the programme. One organizer said:

I think there was an underlying feeling that the community would lose face because they had hungry children.

Consistently, we found that it is the parents, rather than the children, who bear the brunt of stigmatization. In every programme we found evidence of parent-blaming (most often mother-blaming) associated with the assumption of neglect. Parental stigmatization included harsh, stereotypical assessments. For example, in reference to parents' use of welfare cheques, a programme operator is quoted:

They drink, they play bingo, they smoke it up or they booze it away.

This comment, by another volunteer, reflects a common assumption made about parents whose children attend the breakfast programmes:

Like it is easier for Mom and Dad, or Mom, to stay in bed and just send the kids out and say 'go down and get breakfast at school', you know, it's not costing anything.

While parents were consistently blamed for their children's dependence on the programmes, they were also criticized for their children's non-attendance and for not participating as volunteers in the programmes. Non-participation was interpreted as lack of interest. One apparently 'non-needy' parent said:

If the parents would not bother to get up to see their children off to school then why would they get up to help out at the programme?

One principal recounted excuses for non-participation:

People said, 'Look I have a baby at home', which a lot of them do, or 'No, in the morning I go to work or I volunteer or I did this or that', you know a lot of excuses, but you can't ignore the excuse that people don't want to get up in the morning.

Although there were many excuses that were legitimate, the assumption of parental disinterest prevailed.

Interestingly, in five of the nine sites parents do participate as volunteers. In an additional three programmes, parents had participated at one time but were made to feel uneasy, unappreciated and in the way, or were questioned about why their children had to be there. It appears, therefore, that even though workers in all nine sites lament that more parents should be involved, programmes may be systematically (albeit unintentionally) working to alienate parents and facilitate programme resistance. Our findings corroborate others, which have reported that school-based programmes have often left families out of decision making, whereby parents are co-opted into passive participation (Fruchter, 1989).

Beyond the fear of stigmatization and rejection of charity dependence, in two sites there were reports of parents fearing cutbacks in their welfare allowances because of programme participation. Regarding this concern, a vice-principal makes the following comment:

They were worried too, about if social assistance found out they were going [that] would interfere with their money, because they do get grocery money.

So, in provinces where social assistance payments have been regularly assessed as far below low-income cut-offs (LICOs), the unofficial 'poverty lines' (National Council of Welfare, 1997), and where food allowances have been repeatedly shown to fall short of adequate to purchase food for a healthy diet (Nova Scotia Nutrition Council, 1988; Travers, 1996), feeding programmes that could potentially contribute to mitigating the effects of poverty for school-aged children are rejected by families in need for reasons of perceived vulnerability to further social assistance reductions.

Justifying continued existence

Nutrition versus feeding: The goal of feeding a hungry child can easily be achieved by providing any food for consumption. Perhaps in response to their failure to reach the target group and as a means of justifying the continued existence of feeding programmes for non-needy recipients, many programme providers have opted to strive for improved nutrition for needy and non-needy children alike. Programme providers and parents from all nine programmes believe the children receive nutritious meals. Four programme operators have planned their menus with a nutritionist—two have nutritionists as volunteer board members or organizers, and two have consulted with a public health nutritionist. All four of these programmes explicitly follow *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*. The other programmes use 'common sense' and practical knowledge in menu planning and appear to be achieving some degree of nutritional adequacy. Unlike some jurisdictions in Canada (e.g. Edmonton School Lunch Programme), and the National School Lunch Programme in the USA, the programmes we studied did not employ dietitians or nutritionists, and could be viewed as being comparatively less 'professionalized'.

In addition to concern for providing nutritionally adequate meals, operators from five of the nine programmes explicitly state that they believe they serve a nutrition

education function. Programme operators believe that they set a good example for the children, and also for their parents. One volunteer commented:

I think parents could learn a lot from the programme, what a nutritious breakfast consists of, and I think it would be nice to have some parents involved in the programme.

Again, there is an apparent assumption that children's need for these programmes is at least in part related to their parents' lack of nutritional knowledge, and that participation could facilitate more positive parenting skills.

Despite the desire to provide nutritious food, and the belief that they set an example for unskilled parents, programme operators frequently reported 'barriers' to providing meals of optimal nutritional content. Budgetary realities were explicitly mentioned by two programmers as being directly connected with the nutritional quality of their meals. Tight budgets also meant that many programme operators readily accepted food donations from local businesses. Although some programme organizers refuse donations of foods with perceived lower nutritional quality, such as sugary cereals, others gladly accept all donations but serve 'treats', such as doughnuts and toaster pastries, in limited quantities only after more 'staple' foods have been consumed. Interestingly, it is children's preferences that are cited most frequently as reasons for compromising nutritional quality. Programme operators recognize that foods such as hot dogs, hamburgers and pizza are much more popular than chicken casserole and baked beans. Concerned with waste, programmers have modified their menus to accommodate preferences. One programme operator said:

We were getting nice things, we were having real chicken prepared, it wasn't battered chicken or frozen cut-ups, it was chicken, and homemade macaroni and cheese—it was lovely with broccoli, and they cut the broccoli out because it was getting thrown out you know ... broccoli is probably one of the most nutritious vegetables but if nobody is eating it then nobody is getting the nutrition.

Limited budgets and children's preferences are also cited as constraints in attempting to meet nutritional guidelines for the US National School Lunch Programme (Snyder *et al.*, 1995). In this almost universal programme, available to 92% of US students (Devaney *et al.*, 1997) there is increasing pressure for school food services to compete with the food industry (Snyder *et al.*, 1995), and some programmes are heralding great financial success through privatization (Donovan, 1996). The programmes in this study were nowhere near as institutionalized as the US programmes; however, as was seen in studies of the American programmes (Donovan, 1996; Moretti & Boss, 1996; Cline & Fitzgerald, 1997), organizers were already being pressured to 'market' their programmes in order to sustain themselves and to compromise nutrition in doing so. The question is whether or not marketing is inevitable, and what is the outcome?

Family substitution: With the primary goal of feeding hungry children not being met, and the secondary goal of improved nutrition only partially being met, analysis revealed that care-giving, not hunger relief or nutrition, has become the major focus of most programmes. The following statements illustrate this notion:

Oh yes, yes, it has gone beyond feeding, it's caring you know, its caring for the kids and letting them know that somebody cares. (Board Member)

They have a good feeling once again if people are caring for them . . . the full belly is just the start. (Principal)

In eight of the nine sites observations and interviews suggest that programme operators and volunteers see themselves as providing support presumed absent in the children's homes. One organizer comments regarding participants in the programme:

They need the attention . . . you know the very fact that they are there must mean that they want to be there, you know they don't necessarily need to get the breakfast, so there is something obviously good that they are seeing.

Care-giving extended to family substitution in some programmes. In three out of nine sites, providers will directly interfere with parents' wishes, usually by encouraging children whose parents have chosen not to send them to the meal programme to attend anyway, without their parents' knowledge. By implying that the programme staff and volunteers know better than the parents do, the care-giving role is further legitimized and reinforced. Parental exclusion may be one more way of encouraging parental resistance, further reducing programme reach and impact.

The extended hours of childcare that these programmes provide is recognized as meeting a legitimate community need consistent with many families' needs to care for school-aged children before school hours and over the noon hour. We have previously found that provision of additional services or supplies such as child supervision, clothing, money or information (McIntyre & Dayle, 1992) by some Canadian feeding programmes may enhance individual families' abilities to cope with the daily struggles of survival. However, the findings of this study suggest that providing these services under the guise of 'feeding hungry children' may actually be alienating, contributing to resistance by families who fear stigmatization and could benefit most from supplemental food.

Conclusion

The explicit goal of children's school- or community-based nutrition programmes is to feed hungry children. For the programmes we studied in Atlantic Canada, although some hungry children were being fed, only a minority of the target population was being reached. To a large extent, feeding hungry children became displaced with goals of

nutritional improvement for all children and care-giving. Programmes, therefore, largely failed in their expressed mandate to feed hungry children.

Is this failure a failure *per se* of the charitable model of delivery? Partly, because despite children's feeding programmes' limited impact on child hunger, programmes remained in operation, and many were driven to expand their services. Elsewhere, we have described this phenomenon as programmes 'feeding' themselves (McIntyre *et al.*, 2001). This could be a function of 'The Fifth Estate' (Funciello, 1994). The Fifth Estate recognizes poverty as a business that promotes the charitable model and justifies programmes as a means to sustain the services for those who run them. The implications of both the continued operation of these charitable programmes, and their failure to feed hungry children, are potentially serious.

Riches (1997) describes the dilemmas of the Canadian charitable model for child-feeding programmes and, similarly, food banks. He argues that charitable programmes enjoy significant community legitimacy by providing emergency relief, as well as an outlet for people to demonstrate altruism. Yet charitable programmes keep hunger out of public debate by providing the illusion of a solution (an illusion that all of the programmes that we studied believed). This depoliticization legitimizes hunger as a matter of charity, not social justice. Hunger is socially constructed as a private problem. As such, public funds are no longer perceived as appropriately spent on alleviating hunger. Attention is drawn away from the underlying causes of the 'hunger problem'. In this study, we observed cases in which feeding programmes were alienating and stigmatizing to both children and their parents. The charitable model may, therefore, not be an innocuous 'band-aid' solution. Instead, charity may be weakening the status of poor children and families in a post-industrial welfare state.

But in Canada, a country that prides itself in its commitment to universality in education and healthcare, we have created a vast charitable network of community- and school-based children's nutrition programmes, implemented ostensibly to feed hungry children but now serving nutritious meals within a caring environment to all kinds of children (Health Canada, 1999). Attendees are happy, as are the volunteers, and the donations and grants come easily now—yet only a few of the hungry kids benefit.

The charitable model is distinct from the social justice model (Welsh & MacRae, 1998), which attempts to reduce dependency and programme need through a commitment to addressing poverty and social inequities. A feeding programme based on a social justice model supports recipients/families and operators in their own analyses of the root causes of food insecurity (Wallerstein & Berstein, 1988) so that they can mobilize community resources toward a reduction in the root causes of inequities.

If conceived from a social justice rather than a charitable perspective, it is possible that child-feeding programmes may be part of a comprehensive strategy to enhance food security through poverty reduction. However, as Hay (2000) asserts, 'responses to hunger and inadequate nutrition in Canadian children and families will need to engage and involve many actors—parents and children, governments, community organizations, schools, private business, charitable organizations, and so on—in collaborative action to ensure success' (p. 21).

We suggest that a social justice perspective would ensure that families have sufficient economic resources to fulfil their basic needs, including essential nutrition for all

members. Occupational opportunities would be provided for participation in a labour force that is protected from the low-wage demands of a globalized environment and quality childcare would be available to support occupational participation. Access to universal programmes such as education and health would not be eroded by fees, either hidden or explicit. Healthy food staples such as milk and dairy products, eggs and meats that are currently managed through federal marketing boards would be affordably priced or otherwise made more accessible to low-income families with children. And finally, the charity discourse of the public, content to see that 'hungry children' are being fed by well-meaning volunteers through community-based feeding programmes, would be replaced by a re-politicized discussion of whose needs are being served and at times ill-served by their proliferation.

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