

School canteens – places for increasing social connectedness?

Elizabeth Senior

Research has shown that students who have a genuine engagement with others in the school community are more likely to complete their school education.¹ There is evidence that a school's social atmosphere affects how happy students are at school and how well they learn. Creating opportunities for student participation in school life beyond the classroom has also been cited as helping to provide students with a sense of social inclusion.²

School canteens have traditionally been seen as places for promoting healthy eating as well as educating people about healthy foods.³⁻⁵ However, school canteens can also play an important role in increasing social connectedness in schools. In 2005, a survey conducted across 358 primary and secondary schools found that 96% of the secondary schools and 59% of primary schools operated a canteen.⁶

In 2010, 13 students from Years 7 to 12 at Maroondah Secondary School volunteered to work in the school canteen. These students were known as the 'Canteen Crew' and their duties in the canteen included: assisting with ordering; food preparation; cleaning and stacking shelves and serving at the counter.

At the end of the school year, all members of the "Canteen Crew" completed a questionnaire to assess their experiences of working in the school canteen. Six students also participated in a 40-minute focus group discussion, which explored their thoughts on being members of the Canteen Crew, to assess if their involvement had any impact on their level of social connectedness.

The school canteen project examined if there were any separate benefits of working in the school canteen, aside from promoting healthy eating habits as a strategy to reducing obesity by working in the canteen. All of the students agreed that volunteering in the school canteen had provided them with a valuable experience and new skills. These skills were unrelated to eating patterns and food consumption, which is what studies on canteens usually focus on.

The students gained personal skills such as improvement in mental maths, knowledge of food handling, improved confidence in working and mixing with a diverse group of people. Students also reported increased feelings of connectedness to the school community.

The project had a very small sample of students; however it indicates the potential role the canteen has to play beyond promoting healthy eating habits. The majority of the students placed a lot of meaning in their work as part of the Canteen Crew. They were proud of their achievements and valued the new skills that they had acquired.

As schools look for more ways to engage with their students, the potential of canteens in this area is underutilised. Schools may, within their grounds, have an excellent vehicle to increase social capital and community connectedness within the school. The role of school canteens as sites for increasing school connectedness needs more research.

References

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Author

Elizabeth Senior, EACH Social and Community Health – Health Promotion, Victoria

Correspondence

Elizabeth Senior, EACH Social and Community Health – Health Promotion, 46 Warrandyte Rd, Ringwood, Victoria 3134; e-mail: lsenior@each.com.au