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Voices on Food, Love and Miracles: Overcoming Student Malnourishment with Love

I

Providing school children with nutritious meals that are free or subsidized is an important social policy throughout the world with clear benefits. While many countries have increased budgets to fund long-term school meal programs, others continue to develop comprehensive solutions. The strategies to improve nutrition in schools are as diverse as the countries they stem from. And even within regulated national policies there is significant local diversity.

In the case of Mexico, primary school nutrition comprises a wildly complex array of activities and processes. Although there is no national school meal program, many schools in marginalized areas receive milk and breakfast bars through national family welfare programs. Other

schools may receive support from state governments, mainly to outfit the spaces where food is prepared, sold and eaten.

Mexican schools have a type of canteen that differs from those in the US in many ways: in addition to food prepared on site, children can access a wide range of ultra-processed snacks, cookies and candies. These canteens are often referred to as *cooperativas* in Spanish, and are usually outsourced. However, there are still some schools where *cooperativas* are administered by teachers and students. It's also common for schools to allow groups of mothers to sell homemade food for breakfast. Although some schools have formal kitchens and designated dining spaces, it is not the general norm. Schools that do have these facilities often charge a nominal fee to cover staff wages and buy provisions.

Since 2010, Mexican school food regulations have focused on improving the nutritious quality of the food options on offer, amid growing public concerns about

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nourishment and its impact on ideal body mass. However, missing from the discussion on student nutrition are often fair wages for the staff of *cooperativas*—which is almost exclusively female—as well as budgets for kitchen infrastructure and equipment. The voice of those who conceive food as *love*, and cooking as an expression of *care* need to be heard.

II

Emiliano Zapata Primary School is a small, rural primary school of around 140 students. It's located in Santa Rosa, a small town in the central region of the Mexican state of Veracruz. In 2016, I spent three months observing how a group of four women arduously transformed scarce ingredients into plentiful meals to nourish the approximately 80 students that lined up for breakfast every day. Back then, the price of the school meal was only 10 Mexican pesos—about 50 U.S. cents. However, not all students could afford to pay. With a daily average of 60 paid meals, the school collected 600 pesos. Half of the income went towards the salaries of the four cooks: 80 pesos for five hours of intense work. This left only 260 pesos for provisions to feed over 80 hungry students. And then there were other costs, such as the cylinder of propane that kept the stove running and needed to be replaced every two weeks.

A community of less than 2,000 habitants, Santa Rosa is a sugarcane town. In 2016, less than half of the male population had regular jobs. The rest made their living as day laborers in the cane fields, earning about 100 pesos a day. Most of the women—like the four school cooks—were homemakers who sought alternatives to bring in extra income. As a result of agricultural policy changes introduced in the mid-1990s under NAFTA, the Mexican cane sugar industry had been in sharp decline.

Limited work opportunities and low salaries pushed people from Santa Rosa to cross the northern border. Between 1997 and 2002, migration from Veracruz to the

United States increased by 500 percent and grew steadily until 2012. Migrating has paid off. By 2005, Mexico was receiving around US\$20 billion in remittances from the mostly undocumented Mexican workers. By 2016, remittances became the primary source of foreign exchange for Mexico, overtaking revenue from oil and tourism. Between 2020 and 2021, U.S. remittances reached an all-time high. The parents of about one third of the students at Emiliano Zapata worked in the United States.

The provision of food in the school was naturally framed by these conditions. The school kitchen operated under economic pressure, as the price of breakfast barely covered the cost of ingredients and labor. The four cooks—Doña Martha, Beatriz, Moni and Angela—started their shift at 8:00 am and finished by 1:00 pm, after the kitchen and dining area had been thoroughly cleaned. A set of old plastic tables, a makeshift stove, a microwave, a blender, a domestic fridge and heavily used kitchenware were the tools that the cooks used to *hacer milagros*, or “do miracles,” as they often referred to the act of cooking with limited resources.

Doña Martha, in her 60s, had a long history at Emiliano Zapata Primary School. Originally from the state of Hidalgo, she and her husband came to Santa Rosa in the late 1970s looking for work on sugarcane farms. Her three sons attended Emiliano Zapata in the 1980s. Her three sons attended Emiliano Zapata Primary School in the 1980s. She was initially the school janitor, paid daily from school funds. Starting in the late 1990s, she also sold food made from *masa* or corn dough at the school for several years, until the kitchen was set up. Her robust arms embodied hard work and cooking knowledge. Beatriz and Moni were in their late 30s. They had been working in the kitchen for about five years, and both of their children were sixth graders. Their husbands were day laborers in the cane fields. Angela, the youngest cook, was in her late 20s. She had two children at the school, and had been cooking at Emiliano Zapata for about two years. Of the four cooks, Doña Martha got by a little better since her sons were in their 30s and her husband had a regular job at the sugar mill. The other three women struggled to make ends meet. The 80 pesos they brought home every day were vital for their households.

Feeding children in Emiliano Zapata Primary School was a collective effort involving teachers, families, and the cooks. Since students were fed regardless of whether they

came with their ten pesos, this put more pressure on already-strained school finances. Money was always scarce, but the will to *serve*, as the cooks used to say, made up for it. Working in the kitchen required more than the ability to cook: it was a matter of endurance and a calling to serve.

III

Cooks in Mexican schools like Doña Martha, Beatriz, Moni and Angela not only face financial difficulties and structural disadvantages to feed children. Since 2010, their cooking knowledge and practices have been under scrutiny from public health officials in the name of public health. For example, in an attempt to adhere to the *Lineamientos 2010* national school food policy and advice of “experts” from SUMA-Nutrir—a nutrition program developed by Nestlé, the global food corporation, and state education authorities—Emiliano Zapata Primary School tried to restrict masa-based foods and incorporate “healthier” options.

Masa-based foods such as *empanadas* (deep-fried pockets of corn masa stuffed with cheese, usually topped with lettuce, sour cream and salsa), *tostadas* (deep-fried tortillas topped with black beans, lettuce, cheese, sour cream and salsa) and *picadas* (small tortillas with a lip formed around the edge, topped with beans, salsa, onion and cheese) are widely consumed by people in the state of Veracruz. These masa-based foods are not only culturally relevant meals for children in schools; they are also ideal options to sate hungry stomachs on a tight budget. Because of the deep frying, *empanadas*, *tostadas* and *picadas* were considered to be of low nutritional value. Student fondness of masa-based foods and the economic conditions around the school, however, made these recommendations unattainable.

School food regulations with a narrow view on public health assume Mexican schools are fully resourced, both in terms of budgets as well as infrastructure. These regulations also ignore the fact that school cooks possess contextual culinary knowledge that enables them to resourcefully overcome any difficulty in the kitchen. They are not passive subjects who lack the skills required to prepare “healthy” food. It is only when we listen to their voices that we learn how knowledgeable they are.

Doña Martha, Beatriz, Moni and Angela were fully aware of how students loved masa-based foods, and

prided themselves on satisfying this desire. Any food made from scratch requires hard work; however, *empanadas*, *tostadas* and *picadas* demand even more. Nevertheless, this wasn’t a problem. The cooks happily engaged in the production of labor-intense masa-foods, proudly asserting that preparing the foods students loved was their way of expressing *love* and *care*.

IV

One sweltering afternoon in May, I was in the dining area writing my notes. Inside the kitchen, conversations and cleaning noises could be heard while music played loudly on the radio. The cooks were washing dishes, mopping the floor, and putting away leftovers to take home. Doña Martha came out to sweep the dining room. When I commented that she had been working at the school for a long time, she responded: “I like to serve. I like to contribute and work for the community,” she said as she wiped sweat from her brow. “Also, my sons are married, and my husband is always working. So, I come here, do something productive, have some food, and receive 80 pesos. I enjoy it. I like to help. I like to cook.” I confessed my fondness for her tasty dishes. “It’s because I cook with love. Love is the secret ingredient that even if you eat only *frijolitos* [beans], they will be tasty because of love!”, Doña Martha stated proudly.

The idea that food is love may be a cliché. As a discourse, “food is love” has historically been mobilized in countless marketing campaigns to increase the consumption of ultra-processed products. “Food is love” is a fixed statement. However, in Santa Rosa, the association can also deepen socio-economic inequalities. When Doña Martha spoke of *frijolitos*, she was implicitly expressing how the combination of low salaries and food inflation made the worse off even more dependent on a few particular foods. While beans have been part of the Mexican diet from even before the colonial era—and most Mexicans appreciate them—their consumption has also been constructed as a class distinction: beans are associated with poverty.

To improve nutrition standards among school-aged children, we must first address the general conditions of schools. We must also listen to the voices of those who tenderly speak of food as *love*.

However, I think it can be fruitful to explore the idea of *food as love*, which, I suggest, is what Doña Martha was talking about. In the context of cooking, love can mean different things to different people; for some, this association might be meaningless. As a Mexican who was raised by a working-class, devoutly Catholic grandmother who treasured giving love through food, I interpret Doña Martha's meaning of love as the devotion invested in transforming dispersed and often scarce ingredients into a flavorful meal that nourishes the soul as well as body. This love, however, was not only verbal; it was also incarnated in the day-to-day practices of cooking.

Doña Martha managed the school kitchen as if it were her own household: resourcefully, patiently and generously. Knowing that provisions were limited, she administered them carefully. While mentoring the other women in the art of cooking, she was tough, but loving. But above all, as a Mexican working-class grandma, Doña Martha understood her kitchen as an expression of love and caring through food.

The love that Doña Martha spoke about materialized in her passionate cooking practices. It manifested in the descriptions of how the cooks overcome difficult working conditions. "I think we have given our best ... we care for the kids," said Beatriz when I asked what could be done for children to access healthier food at school. "We have

given our best," Doña Martha seconded. "Many times, we even make miracles!" Every single day during my field-work, I witnessed miracles in the kitchen as the cooks worked with scarcity.

The school cooks resisted the normative, technical character of "healthy eating," and instead continued to be guided by a view of food as a form of caring. They never spoke of food in terms of nutritional values or health impacts. Nonetheless, they were conscious of the adverse effects of high consumption of vegetable oil. They knew that offering empanadas too often was not ideal, because they were deep-fried. Yet they did not hesitate in adding a bit of lard to the griddle to give food "more flavor!" as they enthusiastically stated.

V

The provision of food in public schools in Mexico is done amid scant resources. Food in schools has multiple, often competing, roles. What is prepared, sold and consumed is significantly shaped by taste, culture and—notably—the economy, rather than exclusively by public health targets. To improve nutrition standards among school-aged children, we must first address the general conditions of schools. We must also listen to the voices of those who tenderly speak of food as *love*. ■■■



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