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## Wendy Wills

### The food and eating practices of young people in Scotland and England: Commentary on the *Food: Now and Then* report

The *Food: Now and Then* report (SHEU, 2012) makes for fascinating reading and I would hope that these commentary pieces offer, in response, some additional insights, drawing on other research, including qualitative studies, which can provide more depth about the 'why' questions which surveys are often unable to answer. In addition to qualitative work that I have been involved with over the last decade, exploring young people's food and eating practices, this commentary is informed by findings from a new survey module, funded by Food Standards Agency Scotland (FSAS), which aimed to investigate children and young people's food and drink purchasing behaviours 'beyond the school gate' (Scottish Government, 2011) in 2010; this is the first time such questions have been asked of a representative sample of children and young people in Scotland. The full report will be published by FSAS in summer 2012 (Macdiarmid et al.).

#### Buying lunch

*Food: Now and Then* shows that a minority of young people (2-9%) bought lunch from a takeaway or shop during the school day. The FSAS Survey of Food and Drink Purchasing around the School Day suggests that a much larger proportion of secondary school students purchase food outside of school and that takeaway-type outlets are not as popular as other retail food outlets like supermarkets (Macdiarmid et al.). The FSAS survey also shows the proportion of children who have access to food and drink outlets around the vicinity of their school (i.e. outlets within walking or cycling distance of school); the findings suggest that children and young people from more deprived areas are more likely to walk or cycle past food and drink outlets during the school day (Macdiarmid et

al.). The FSAS survey also suggests some of the reasons that young people leave school at lunchtime, including perceiving a wider choice of food to be available and preferring the taste of 'non-school' food (Macdiarmid et al.). Qualitative research in Scotland (Wills et al., 2005) has highlighted that some young teenagers like to get away from the school environment at lunchtime (including having a dislike of queuing for food), and this also sheds some light on why a minority of young people choose to go home for lunch during the school day (Wills et al., 2005). Young people who go home at lunchtime may also be some of the most marginalised students.

#### Missing breakfast

*Food: Now and Then* highlights an interesting relationship between lack of breakfast eating and the consumption of crisps, sweets and fizzy drinks. *Food: Now and Then* suggests that around a third of young women do not eat breakfast before school; this is significantly higher than was found in the 2010 FSAS survey (Macdiarmid et al.) and an earlier FSAS survey of children and young people, in 2006 (Macdiarmid et al., 2009)). The proportion of girls who skip breakfast is similar, however, to the proportion suggested by the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey in England (Brooks et al., 2011). Collecting data in the home (which the FSAS surveys did), rather than the school setting (as HBSC and the SHEU surveys do) could affect what children and young people report about breakfast eating. Analysis of HBSC data suggests that eating breakfast is related to better psychological wellbeing, regardless of factors like family affluence or family structure (Toda et al., 2002) therefore it is important to understand what factors influence the reporting

of breakfast eating.

### Snacking habits

The *Food: Now and Then* authors ask whether the frequent consumption of fizzy drinks, crisps and confectionery is related to what children and young people eat/find in their school packed lunches. The FSAS Food and Drink Purchasing survey shows, however, that fizzy drinks and confectionery are the items most frequently purchased *by young people themselves* before/after school and outside school at break or lunch time (Macdiarmid et al.), thereby suggesting that lunch boxes are not the only way that young people gain access to such food/drink. Young people from more deprived areas are more likely to consume crisps, confectionery and fizzy drinks (diet and non-diet varieties) (Masson et al.).

Given that *Food: Now and Then* asks about water consumption it is worth noting that the FSAS Food and Drink Purchasing survey found that around as many secondary school students were purchasing bottled water as were purchasing diet/low-calorie fizzy drinks. A greater percentage of young people were purchasing non-diet fizzy drinks than either water or diet fizzy drinks (Macdiarmid et al.).

### Weight and health

It is encouraging that *Food: Now and Then* shows that many young women are happy with their weight though more worrying that many of those who want to lose weight are already within the limits of a 'healthy' body size. Qualitative research has shown that there is significant anxiety amongst girls who perceive themselves as 'too fat' despite a 'healthy' Body Mass Index (BMI) (Wills et al., 2006). Many young teenagers with a BMI classifying them as overweight or obese, however, have positive things to say about their bodies therefore the relationships between body weight and wellbeing are complex and not clear cut (Wills et al., 2006). *Food: Now and Then* highlights that 'health' is not something that many children or young people think about when deciding what to eat. Our qualitative studies, which have a focus on the 'lived experience' of socio-economic status, show, however, that middle class young teenagers are more likely (than working class young people) to be 'moulded' by their parents to consider the healthiness of the

food they consume with a view to protecting their longer term health and wellbeing (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010; Wills et al., 2010; Wills et al., 2011). This health consciousness-raising also relates to middle class parents expecting their off-spring to keep their body weight to a 'respectable' standard, though parents across the socio-economic spectrum often struggle to discuss weight with their children (Wills et al., 2009).

*Food: Now and Then* is an incredibly rich and useful resource in terms of the insights it offers about children and young people's food choices across the years. Whilst the wealth of data it provides has breadth and depth it can usefully be supplemented with data from other surveys and also from qualitative studies to try and tease out the reasons that young people eat in the way that they do.

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