

Special Report: School Meal Program

History of Japanese School Lunch: A Perspective from Vietnamese Dietitians No. 2 in a Series

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We are the first generation of dietitian in Vietnam, currently studying in a graduate program in Japan. When we were in university, through student exchange programs to Japan, we had opportunities to observe school lunches in Japan. Since then, we have been interested in this field, so we decided to study abroad in Japan to learn more about nutrition in schools, specifically school lunch. The most significant feature of the Japanese school lunch program is not only its concern with the management and nutritional aspects of the food served in schools but also its integration of the school meal into children's educational, social, and cultural experience. This integration is facilitated in a number of ways. Meals are served by children themselves in the setting of the classroom, making lunch part of the educational continuum of the day. More importantly, aspects of the meal are incorporated into instruction, for instance by having students investigate the origins, sources, and traditions of the food they are eating. Children are introduced directly or indirectly to the producers and preparers of their food, making them aware of the agricultural, economic, and social connections of their lunch. The links of their food with cultural traditions are also presented, with attention to distinctive Japanese foods and methods of preparation, regional and seasonal specialties, as well as the role food plays in festivals, traditional holidays, and so on.

Central to the Japanese school lunch is the role of the licensed school dietitian/nutrition teacher, a specialized profession that has developed in Japan. The nutritionist/nutrition teacher is concerned not only with the planning, procurement, and preparation of nutritionally adequate food for the children in a school but also with raising children's awareness of the nutritional aspects of their meal and of its social and cultural interconnections.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the history of Japanese school lunch and inspire the next generations of Vietnamese dietitians, thereby contributing to the development of school meals in Vietnam, thereby strengthening the health of Vietnamese children.

1. HISTORY

The modern Japanese school lunch program traces its origins to support in 1945 from the USA, UNICEF and other organizations in 1945 to save children from hunger after the Second World War. In 1951, a school meal law was established under the Ministry of Education. It was understood not only to encompass drop meals but also to be an extension of education. The program has developed gradually from one focusing on energy requirements, to energy and other nutrients, then to food culture and has at present



Photo 1: First generation nutrition students of HMU in front of a primary school

led to nutrition education. Nutrition education is provided by professionals (licensed school dietitian/nutrition teachers as well as by the teachers of other subjects. They try to teach dietary habits, gratitude for food and its producers and the people involved in providing food. School lunch also serves as a topic for instruction in science, social studies, geography etc.

1) Initiation of school lunch in Japan

Providing lunch at schools began in Japan in 1889. Lunches were provided by a Buddhist confederation for poverty-stricken children in an elementary school in a city located in northern Japan. The simple lunches that were offered consisted of "onigiri" (rice balls), grilled fish, and pickled vegetables. A school lunch encouraged poorer children to come to school. Other children brought lunch boxes (bento) with food from home.

After World War I (1918), because of an economic depression more than a million children were suffering from malnutrition. Because of the issue of children's health, the importance of school lunch was recognized and lunch was expanded to a certain extent but the majority of school lunches were limited to impoverished children and had the purpose of encouraging them to attend school. During World War II (1939-45), healthy and strong young people were necessary for the war effort and school lunch was maintained until the final stages of the war in 1944.

2) After World War II

After the defeat in the Second World War (1945), the Japanese were suffering from severe hunger. The nutritional situation of Japanese children was deplorable. It is estimated that sixth grade students at the time had bodies equivalent to those of fourth grade students today due to stunted growth. The General Headquarters (GHQ) of the US occupying forces conducted a nutrition survey in Tokyo to estimate food needs and to arrange possible donations of food and

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suggested starting a school lunch program to the Japanese government in October 1945. GHQ and the Licensed Agencies for Relief in Asia (LARA: a U.S. non-governmental organization) actively provided food supplies for this purpose. Their assistance consisted mainly of canned foods (meat, fish, and vegetables), powdered skim milk, sugar, salt, raisins, wheat flour, soybean flour, soybean oil, and fish meal.

In 1946 this support was limited to the Tokyo metropolitan area, but the following year the effort was expanded to reach children throughout the country. In 1949, skimmed milk began to be supplied by UNICEF and was called UNICEF Milk. A clear effect on height was observed. This milk was very effective in improving the health of children.

At that time there were no school dietitians or cooks; therefore, students' parents came to school to prepare lunch. The government paid for the costs of personnel and facilities. Local governments also tried to cover other expenses for the improvement of meal quality.

3) Establishment of the school lunch law

Japan regained full independence through the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951, but this brought about the first crisis in school lunch services because Japan no longer received Government Appropriation for Relief in Occupied Areas (GARIOA) funding, which had financially supported school lunches but ended in 1952. The following year, support from LARA was also stopped. The cost of school lunch rose for families and it became difficult for many schools to provide meals.

The government argued for the termination of school lunch. However, Parent and Teacher Associations nation-wide had initiated a broad movement demanding that the government support meals in schools and opposition political parties jointly proposed legislation for school lunches and the School Meal Law was established in 1954. Under this law, Japanese school lunch has developed impressively. Initially, the law was aimed only at primary schools. However, beginning in 1953 several major natural calamities (typhoons and floods) struck Japan and malnutrition increased among children in the affected areas. Because of such problems the law was expanded in 1956 to cover all schools providing compulsory education as well as part-time high-school level night courses (1956) and special-needs pre-primary and upper secondary schools (1957). School lunch was recognized as a part of education, teaching about nutrition, how foods are produced, how many people are involved by the time food is eaten, traditional foods and customs. Fresh cow's milk replaced powdered milk. Various breads such as rolls, fried bread and other forms of baked bread began to be used. Soft noodles also became a popular staple food.

4) School dietitian

Before 1964, the position of dietitian did not exist and appropriate job titles were not used. In this situation the main activity was cooking; schools struggled to satisfy dietary recommendations. Staff mainly cooked, and planning and preparation of nutrition education were done during the staff's free time. In 1964, the Ministry of Education started partial support for salaries at kitchens covering several schools in a given area.

In 1974, the Ministry of Education defined the

title of school dietitian and the role of the dietitian and decided on the legally required number of dietitians working in kitchens at public schools and in kitchens covering several public schools and their salaries (paid half by the local government and half by the central government). This was gradually expanded to place at least one nutrition teacher or school dietitian in each school kitchen or satellite kitchen, which prepares meals for several schools in the same area.

5) Establishment of the Nutrition Teacher and the Shokuiku Basic Act

Since the 1990s, the social environment, including the family, has changed considerably and nutrition-related health problems have become more prevalent. In this situation, nutrition education has become important at school, too. To meet this need, the school dietitian was required to have mastered highly specialized knowledge and education techniques and a License of Nutrition Teacher was established in 2005. In 2014 there were 12,143 school dietitians and among them 5,021 were diet and nutrition teachers (2014).

Shokuiku is a Japanese word meaning food and nutrition education. The "Shokuiku Basic Act" was adopted in 2005. Under this act, school lunch plays an important role. In 2008, curriculum guidelines were revised and provisions relating to "the promotion of Shokuiku" were included. From the standpoint of Shokuiku, the School Meal Law, school lunch dietary reference intakes were revised and additional school lunch safety regulations were added. The guidelines clearly indicate that school lunch should provide a good model of a daily meal. By eating school lunch frequently, children establish desirable food habits and develop practical skills in choosing appropriate foods.

2. MENUS

Daily school lunch menus, totaling about 200 a year, are drawn up by the diet and nutrition teacher/school dietitians in the kitchen of each school or the area kitchen covering several schools in a given area. Menu charts are also delivered to every student's family a month in advance so that family members know what their children are eating. It is also recommended that the menu chart, along with the food items and their weights, be posted in the home so that everyone in the family can easily refer to it. Knowing the menus is useful so that parents can avoid serving the same items for dinner. The menus are also useful in preventing food allergy problems. Many schools also post the lunch of the day on line on the internet together with comments about it by children. The fact that everyone knows what the menus are means that parents can ask and find out whether children enjoyed lunch or not. It is also an interesting and common topic for family conversation at home.

The cost of the school lunch is also reflected in menu planning. The diet and nutrition teacher/school dietitian creates menus that take into consideration the recommended school lunch allowances and costs. The cost that parents/guardians pay is only the cost of food materials, with no labor costs. According to a nation-wide survey of children by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2013, the average cost of each meal was about 240 yen (about \$2) and about 280 yen (about \$2.50) for elementary and junior high school students, respectively.



Photo 2. Lunch time in a classroom



Photo 3. Vegetables used in today's lunch displayed where it is easy for students to see them.



Photo 4. School lunches at a school

Table 1. Menus in Feb at a public school

Date	Menus
1 Feb	Rice flour bread with pumpkin filling, Milk, Udon, Small sardines tempura, Ponkan, Setsubun beans
4 Feb	Rice flour bread, Reduced sugar jam, Milk, Pork and beans, Salad with mayonnaise
5 Feb	Bibimbap, Milk, Wakame soup
6 Feb	Rice, Milk, Braised Meat, Vegetable, Vegetable with sesame sauce, Small piece of cheese
7 Feb	Rice, Milk, Deep-fried tofu, Clear soup, Rice sprinkle
8 Feb	Rice flour bread with apple filling, Milk, Mushroom spaghetti, Seaweed salad with sesame dressing
12 Feb	Rice, Milk, Sauteed pork and burdock root, Thick vegetable omelet, Yukari pickles, Mixed nuts
13 Feb	Rice, Milk, Simmered lemon chicken, Satsuma soup
14 Feb	Curry rice, Milk, Almond jelly, Fukujinzuke
15 Feb	Sandwich, Milk, Shell fish, Shrimp and Mizuna soup
18 Feb	Fried bread sprinkled with roasted soybean powder, Milk, Pumpkin potage, Omelet
19 Feb	Rice, Milk, Mackerel simmered with miso, Braised dry radish, Hijiki seaweed
20 Feb	Rice, Milk, Simmered Chinese-style tofu, Bangbang chicken with dressing, Cream stew
21 Feb	Rice, Milk, Grilled Miso Marinated Fish, Fushimen soup
22 Feb	Rice flour bread with chocolate filling, Milk, Borscht, Japanese style salad
25 Feb	Rice, Milk, Grilled mackerel, Chinese cabbage garnish with ponzu soy sauce, Braised lotus root
26 Feb	Rice, Milk, Two-color fried chikuwa, Miso soup, Bonito flakes
27 Feb	Rice, Milk, Simmered deep-fried tofu, Vinegared cucumber and wakame
28 Feb	Kimchi Donburi, Milk, Lotus root-filled dumplings, Boiled broccoli with Mayonnaise

Above is some information about Japan school lunch that we have learned from our studies. We are now serving internships at Japanese primary school kitchens. The more we learn about the school lunch program, the more interested we become. We recognize the value and significance of the program that the Japanese have developed as a society for their children. The knowledge and habits formed by the school lunch program play an important role for children.

The school meal program in Japan started very

early, right after World War II, with simple meals to save children from hunger; not long after that the School Meal Law was adopted and now school lunch has special qualities. In Vietnam, although school lunch was begun some time ago, the present situation may be similar to the initial period in Japan, with simple meals to provide energy and nutrients and a School Meal Law has not yet been adopted. Therefore, we want to learn about the school lunch model in Japan and to consider some aspects of it for possible emulation in our own country.