Why Complexity Matters: An Assessment of the NL School Food Environment

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Presentation Overview

• Provide context on current school food in Canada
• Explain how the school food environment (SFE) is a complex concept
• Review the emergence of complexity in school food environment research
• Demonstrate how a complex understanding of the SFE factors into my research
• Thoughts on how this connects to ‘cost and value’ in health care
Context on current school food practices in Canada
School food policy/programs or lack thereof are a perpetual source of debate:

Why Canada could benefit from a national school food program

Food Secure Canada is lobbying Ottawa to consider a cohesive school program as part of a national food policy

• In a UNICEF report published this summer, Canada ranked 37th out of 41 countries on access to nutritious food for children

• Food Secure Canada is seeking an investment by the federal government in a cost-shared universal healthy school food program, so students can have daily access to healthy meals at school.

Quality of Canadian kids' school lunches reveals room to improve

New study launches a long-term look at the quality of food eaten by Canadian children during school hours

Lunchbox letdown: parents grapple with long list of banned foods at schools

Peanut butter alternative Wowbutter too close to the real thing for some lunch monitors in local schools
By David Moores

If you are what you eat, our kids are in trouble. Newfoundland school children eat more high calorie, low-nutrition food than any in Canada. One of the offenders is the schools themselves.

You can get two very different messages, depending on which room of some schools you visit. In the classrooms, you’re in the land of granola and ripe apples. The Canada Food Guide reigns supreme here, teachers tell the virtues of grains, proteins and vitamins.

For a different view of the world, go down to the canteen or the cafeteria. In far too many of Newfoundland’s schools, this is the stronghold of garbage food: slivers of potato drenched in oil and covered with salt, sugary glue dipped in what passes for chocolate, and of course, everybody’s favourite, fizzy sugar water in a can.

Translation: it’s easier to find a bag of potato chips in a Newfoundland school than a bag of nuts; easier to find soft drinks than apples. Given the fact that those same schools teach nutrition, they obviously know better.

It’s a problem that Annette Stapenhurst knows quite a bit about. As the provincial nutrition consultant with the Department of Health, she has been trying to get the junk out of our schools and out of our kids’ diets — for some time have been talking about this past 15 years because there is a basic contradiction between teaching nutrition in the classroom and selling junk in the canteen,” she says, saying that whatever the home ec. or phys. ed. teacher about nutrition is not important cause the principal or who runs the cafeteria sells junk.

Bad food, bad health

Certainly there is a need for improvement in our eating habits, especially among young people. Recent study of eating habits, St. Land Health Attitudes and Behaviour Survey, confirmed what most people suspected all along: these are the worst junk food addicts.

The Newfoundland Herald, November 23, 1986
We use the many varieties of dried fruits and vegetables, with a plentiful supply of potatoes, turnips, carrots, parsnips, onions and beets, …Cod and salmon are used fresh during the summer months and salted and dried for winter use.... Venison, partridge, rabbits, an occasional seal and often a black bear provide fresh meat…we feast on wild duck and wild geese…Gardens have been built around each school, and enough vegetables can be grown to supply the needs for the summer and early fall”

(1933 Article published in ‘Hygeia’ : A journal of individual and community health)
Explain school food as a complex concept

“Who feeds whom what, how, and for what purpose?” (Jen Sandler, School Food Politics, 2011)

- multiple actors
- competing interests
- connected to broader education/ societal norms/ conditions
Map of NL School Food Environment Stakeholders
School food is complex

- Critique of Canadian School Food Policy
- Critique shared by broader field of public health promotion (and efforts to implement the Ottawa Charter)
- One hypothesis for this slow uptake of systems level action is that the ecological approach at odds with the dominant model governing health care system
One Challenge of Researching, Understanding and Planning for Complexity

“we must recognize...that ultimately all social life is interdependent and, as a result, that it is artificial to isolate any set of social relations from the whole for special attention...since everything is related to everything else, the task of pursuing the determinants of any given relation would be so vast and ramifying that it would defy any tools of investigation available to either the social or physical sciences”

(p.97, Easton in Weaver-Hightower)
Review the emergence of complexity in school food research

• Complexity in health promotion
  o Settings-based health promotion
  o Place based health promotion
  o Ecological health promotion
An Ecological/ complex model of health

The ecological model of public health sees public health as a social-ecological set of relationships over time.

Rayner and Lang, 2012
Ecological Model of School Health

• Comprehensive School Health (Comprehensive School Health/Health Promoting Schools)

• Whole school approach to school health grounded in ecological/complex principles

Joint Consortium for School Health, 2013
The use of complexity theory in school health promotion literature

"…implementation and evaluation strategies are needed that will capture the synergistic interactions and impact of multiple interdependent interventions and systems operating at different levels and spheres within the context of specific settings" (Dooris)
Two Canadian examples of complex understandings of the (School) Food Environment:

• The Alberta Food Environment Report Card

• Think and Eat Green at School  School Food Environment Assessment Tool
The Food Environment as depicted in the Alberta Food Environment Report Card (POWER UP!, 2015)
Components of an adapted version of the School Food Environment Assessment Tool (SFEAT) (Developed by Black et al., 2014)
The Nutrition Transition

• Societal Transitions can be understood from an ecological framework

• New broader and systematic considerations emerge which public health officials need to address
Why complexity matters in the food environment

- These more broad environmental or ecological conceptualizations of the school food environment have not traditionally been incorporated into school food research in NL

- Avoiding the danger of practice silos
Why complexity matters in the food environment

• A complex situation calls for feedback (research/evaluation/assessment) that can feedback to the broadening focus of concern/broad societal changes

• Changing understanding of food and nutrition (connecting previously silo-ed disciplines helps to bridge concepts and approaches)
Systems factors in school food
Demonstrate how a complex understanding of school food factors into my research
Unpacking the use of a systems/complex approach in my research

- Multi-method
- Interdisciplinary
- Systems framework and feedback

Components of complexity-framed research:

- Focus on process
- Relational understanding within a specific context
- Active role of researcher
- Feedback into complex system being investigated
Unpacking the use of a systems/complex approach in my research

- Development of Research Questions
- Literature Review/ environmental scan/ case study
- School food environment survey- analysis- incorporating the dimension of time and context
- Stakeholder interviews- ecological public health as frame in analysis
Thoughts on how this connects to ‘cost and value’ in health care

• Who is accountable in a systems response to school food?
• How do we conduct sensitive research and evaluation that can inform effective systems’ responses’?
• For ex: Fish for lunch
Concluding remarks

- Transferable lessons from this research on the school food environment
  - Barriers to cross-sector collaboration for health promotion purposes
  - Ways to ameliorate the relationship between the four dimensions of existence
References


References


