Children’s lunchboxes as a biopolitical arena: Guidelines for food practices in Norwegian kindergartens

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Food is basic for all human life at all historical times. Small children depend on others for food supply. Food is a significant material object in transactions between children and their caregivers, bearing strong symbolic significances. Food practices are culturally and historically situated, and are thereby suited as empirical objects for a range of analytical aims. Within childhood studies, there has been a growing interest in studying children’s food practices in childhood institutions. The food practices serve as a lens for studying various aspects of children’s lives, e.g. as an arena for intergenerational power and control, or as an expression of children’s belonging and not belonging in residential institutions. In many countries, children’s food in schools and kindergartens is subjected to public and political debates. Regulation of food practices in childhood institutions may be analyzed as biopolitics, as control and surveillance of children’s present and future bodies. When children bring lunchboxes from home, this could be regarded as a material and symbolic transaction from home to kindergarten, from the private to the public sphere. The lunchbox serves as a symbolic artefact, bearing significances of the parents’ identities, preferences and practices – which are open for surveillance and correction.

In this paper, guidelines for food practices in Norwegian kindergartens serve as an empirical case. National and regional policy documents are analyzed in an intersectional perspective. The dynamic relationship between age, gender, class, generation and ethnicity is highlighted in the analyses. Analytical questions are: Which discourses are represented in the texts? How is food represented in the documents? How are children, parents and kindergarten professionals represented in the documents? The analyses demonstrate that food in the texts is reduced to nutrition, while the social and symbolic aspects of food and meals are widely neglected. A future oriented health discourse is dominating, as well as a pedagogical discourse, in which both parents and children are positioned as pedagogical objects. The discourse of children’s rights, children as subjects, seems to be absent in the texts. Working class mothers and minority mothers seem to be the primary objects for the welfare state’s biopolitical pedagogy.

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