

# Children, Food and Jamie Oliver!

**KATE WAGNER and her colleagues on the Year One Early Childhood Studies course at North East Wales Institute of Education, were asked to ‘Select an article from a current early years/childhood journal that addresses a social issue that affects children’s lives’. They were required to ‘Outline the main argument(s) in the article and discuss these with reference to social theory’.**

**The article selected by Kate was: Grenier, J. (2005), ‘Food for thought’, *Nursery World*, 7 April, pp.14-15. Her analysis and evaluation of the article constitutes this paper.**

**Kate has clearly ‘Reflected on Early Years Issues’ in just the way we hoped people would! Perhaps the following article will encourage others to consider some of the current issues in depth.**

## **Introduction**

In the article under discussion, Grenier (2005) considers the social issue of children’s health and nutrition in schools in the context of the current ‘Feed me better’ campaign by the chef, Jamie Oliver. Four main points are addressed:

- the doubtful and sensational nature of Jamie Oliver’s argument, and values and attitudes;
- the influence exerted by Jamie Oliver as a media construct;
- the author’s perceived reasons for the decline in children’s health and nutrition; and
- the author’s suggested solution to progress.

I am going to suggest that Grenier’s article presents an over-simplified explanation of key sociological thinking underpinning the success of Jamie Oliver’s campaign. Grenier’s (2005: 15) solution that ‘Progress can only happen when there is systematic public policy, supported by detailed research and carefully planned action’ demonstrates a lack of understanding of the genesis of social policy and systems of power and influence in our society. Moreover, Grenier’s (2005) ‘straightforward analysis’ of his perceived reasons for the decline in the health and nutrition of children over the last twenty years (reduced funding and resources; lack of emphasis on physical education in schools; and domestication of children) fails to appreciate that pressure groups have been campaigning throughout this period of time with only small victories and shifts in policy. It could be asserted that Jamie Oliver has illustrated that progress can be the result of resonant and spontaneous pressure.

The Soil Association’s programme, ‘Food for Life’, has been operational since 2003 to pressurize the government to provide primary school children with healthy school meals (Soil Association,

2005, [www.soilassociation.org](http://www.soilassociation.org)); the School Nutrition Action Group has been campaigning since 1995 for a healthier diet and positive reinforcement of this message in schools from all those involved in the provision of school meals (SNAG 2005 [www.healthedtrust.com](http://www.healthedtrust.com)). So, how did Jamie Oliver achieve in a short period of time what many highly regarded pressure groups have been campaigning for over many years?

### **Developing Social Policy**

Banting has described five stages in social policy making: ‘awareness of the problem; importance attached to the problem; definition of the problem; consideration of alternatives; and, choice between alternatives’ (Yeo and Lovell, 2002: 16). Following this model, it is apparent that Jamie Oliver recognized that there was a problem in respect of the health and nutritional content of school meals, and having researched and investigated this problem, which became the subject of high profile and extensive coverage by the media, gravitas was attributed to his ideas. Grenier (2005) considers that Jamie Oliver’s arguments were based on ‘heady shots of emotion mixed up with bad science’ in dismissing the fact that politicians, professionals in education, welfare and the health service, the media and press, and the public have embraced his definition of this problem. Jamie Oliver’s alternative strategies have been duly considered, debated, assimilated and accommodated by these groups resulting in changes to practice as manifested in the package of measures that the government has recently announced to promote healthier school meals. The £280 million package is attributed with the capacity to ‘transform the quality of school meals’ and includes

£220 million new funding grants direct to schools ...including a minimum of 50p per pupil per day for all primary schools ... as well as providing increased training and working hours for school cooks; £60 million from the Big Lottery Fund and the Department for Education and Skills to enable a new School Food Trust ...; ...minimum nutrition standards ... from September 2005 ...; proposals to enable parents to work with schools and the School Food Trust ...; Ofsted to review the quality of school meals as part of regular school inspections...

(Teaching Times 2005, [www.teachingtimes.co.uk](http://www.teachingtimes.co.uk)).

Thus, it could be argued that this change in social policy has influenced not only practice in provision of school meals, re-focusing on health and nutritional standards, but also the delivery of the service in the context of training and terms and conditions of employment and the way that society has perceived the need to improve this service. It has re-attached importance to the concept of healthy children as expressed by Professor Sir Alan Craft, president of the Royal College of Paediatricians and Child Health, who said: ‘If we want a new generation of healthy

adults, then the best way is to start in childhood' (Sym 2005, [www.education.independent.co.uk](http://www.education.independent.co.uk)). And there has been a re-assessment of beliefs and values that reflect a child-centred approach and a prevalent desire to provide a good quality of life for children – hence, future policy is established (Yeo and Lovell, 2002).

I assert that Grenier's (2005) analysis is limited in its understanding of the relationships of this social policy to society in political, economic and sociological contexts as he appears to be unable to overcome his cynicism in respect of the celebrity status of Jamie Oliver. Grenier accuses Jamie Oliver of using 'the tactics of the bully': however, in contrast, it could be argued that Jamie Oliver uses the tactics of 'consumer identity that obscures the notions of class loyalty' to promote 'a common concern for commodity quality' (CPGB 2005, [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk)). It is evident that this policy is intended to be universal in meeting the needs of all children from every social class, race and culture and it could be argued that its effect will influence life chances in terms of a healthier life and, consequently, values and lifestyles that, in their turn, will eventually further affect the education, welfare and health services in respect of development and progress. This could be perceived as a perpetual circle of change in which the 'enabling capacity' is power (Bauman 1990: 113).

### **Power**

Grenier's (2005) view that Jamie Oliver's campaign success is based on 'a wave of hysteria' not only fails to recognize how social policy evolves, as discussed above, but also implies that his power and influence is a merely a facet of 'reality television'.

Bauman has described power as 'best understood as the ability to act – both in the sense of choosing freely the ends of any action and of commanding the means which make such ends realistic' (1990: 113). Thus, it could be hypothesized that the success of Jamie Oliver's campaign is attributable to the power that he has been able to exert over the government when he mobilized sufficient support and resources from the public and professionals in the education, welfare and health services, allowing him to cause the government to take the requisite action to attain his goal, that is, the implementation of the package of measures to promote healthier school meals (Bauman 1990; Haralambos and Holborn 1995). This exercise of power illustrates that if Jamie Oliver had chosen not to act then the government would not have acted in the same manner in respect of this issue from which it could be inferred that his power and influence represent more than the sum of a television programme.

It is acknowledged that the celebrity status of Jamie Oliver served to focus the attention of the public and professionals and it is clear that his influence directly affected the values of those groups in order for them to re-prioritise healthier school meals on the social, economic and political agenda. Those who were prepared to accept his values as invested with vision and wisdom, placed him in a position of authority (Bauman 1990).

### **Conclusion**

Lukes (cited by Haralambos and Holborn) suggests that one of the three faces of power is decision making whereby 'different individuals or groups express different policy preferences and influence the making of decisions over various issues' (1995: 502). Using this model, it could be considered that the action taken by the government in following policies advocated by Jamie Oliver confirms that he has power. Indeed, from a pluralist perspective, power exercised by individuals, pressure and interest groups should be promoted to encourage the maximum public participation in political debate beyond voting to assess and monitor our social policies in terms of their relevance and benefits. Lukes, however, has stated that 'power is exercised over those who are harmed by its use, whether they are aware that they are being harmed or not' (Haralambos and Holborn 1995: 503). From a Marxist perspective, the transformation of school meals in the context of social policy may appear to benefit society but I feel that this is a concession to minimise the voice of the working class to prevent further dissension and challenge to the ruling class (Haralambos and Holborn 1995; Yeo and Lovell 2002). Social policy may have been reformed but the status quo of power has been maintained.

Lukes has conceded that the concept of power is 'ultimately a matter of opinion what is in a person's interests or what is good for them' (Haralambos and Holborn 1995: 503). In consideration of the fact that Jamie Oliver was prepared to enter this arena, open this debate to a wider audience, and was able to mobilize public and professional concern about an issue that he believed to be overlooked by the government, I would suggest that this issue is perceived by society as in its interests.

Additionally, it could be argued that it was the right time for this issue to be addressed and the combination of an election year, Jamie Oliver's campaign and television programme, the increasing concern of public and professionals, and the perceived ineffectiveness of the

government's bureaucratic endeavour in this matter, provided a strong impetus towards progress and reform.

The article by Grenier (2005) is, in itself, evidence of the open dialogue and debate that continues in society in respect of this social issue. The importance of criticism and opposition is a feature of our democratic society. However, the level of criticism achieved by Grenier could be described as an echo of his accusations against Jamie Oliver in that he has chosen to focus his arguments on emotive and sensationalist sound-bites such as 'falling life spans', 'crap food', 'white trash' and 'bad science' whilst omitting any consideration of benefits, public empowerment and political relationships.

In conclusion, Westergaard and Resler (cited by Haralambos and Holborn) state that 'Power is visible only through its consequences' (1995: 512), and it would appear that Jamie Oliver has achieved 'consequences'. Contrary to Grenier (2005), it is proposed that 'consequences' or progress in social issues can be achieved not only as the result of 'systematic public policy' but, more significantly, from power recognized within a pluralist model of society. In an election year, the power of the vote is highlighted. However, it is contended that most members of society do not wish to become part of the government, but to give voice to their views, opinions and interests and influence the political parties. Thus, I would argue that Jamie Oliver has provided all members of society with a model of representation and reflection to do so.

**What are YOUR views on the issues of school meals and children's health?  
Has Jamie Oliver opened a useful debate that will be sustained and acted  
upon? How much should we rely on the government or should parents take  
a lead?**

**Have your say now by e-mailing [j.moyles@ntlworld.com](mailto:j.moyles@ntlworld.com)**

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