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**Scaling a “Bite-Sized Implementation Strategy”:
Promoting Educational Equity and Social Justice through
a Farm to School Food Program**

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Institute for the
Study of
Societal Issues

**Scaling a “Bite-Sized Implementation Strategy”:
Promoting Educational Equity and Social Justice through a Farm to School
Food Program**

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While the farm to school movement has been growing since the 1990s, it was officially incorporated into federal child nutrition programs through the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010. In 2013, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) received a \$100K farm to school grant via the HHFKA to pilot “California Thursdays” (CT). CT was developed through a partnership between the Center for Ecoliteracy (CEL) and OUSD to increase students’ access to local, fresh, and healthy school meals procured entirely from California. As of January 2017, through the efforts of and leadership provided by CEL, CT has been implemented across 84 districts in California, which together serve over one-third of the one billion school meals distributed in the state each year. CT is an excellent demonstration of the agency of local level actors to respond with innovative action to implement federal policy. The network of CT schools is using farm to school food programs to address a primary goal of the HHFKA: the amelioration of childhood hunger and obesity. Informed by the theory of policy-implementation as a “co-constructed” process, and drawing on data from both a case study of the implementation of CEL’s Rethinking School Lunch planning framework in OUSD and a three-year (2013-2016) ethnographic study of OUSD’s implementation of the HHFKA, this paper examines the factors and enabling conditions that allowed CT to go to scale across 84 districts in California. CT went to scale for three specific reasons: the use of (1) a scaffolding approach to the CT initiative that was implemented through a “collective impact model,” (2) implementation practices that were scalable across different district contexts (urban, rural, large, small), and (3) CEL’s cultivation of positive discourse around the narrative of school lunch. The creation and scaling of CT reflect the ways that local level actors use their agency to develop innovative solutions for promoting educational equity and social justice across various contexts – despite numerous constraints. While CT cannot address the structural inequities that produce childhood hunger and obesity in the first place, it has reshaped the school food landscape in California.

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Introduction

During one of my participant observation sessions in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), I watched as Alex Emmott,¹ OUSD's Farm to School Supervisor, led a professional development session for about 80 of the District's food service staff in preparation for an upcoming California Thursdays meal: fish tacos, using grenadier (a fish from a local company called "Real Good Fish," which engages in sustainable fishing practices), and organic strawberries from ALBA Organic Farms in the Salinas Valley. California Thursdays is an innovative farm to school initiative created in 2013 by the Center for Ecoliteracy (CEL)² and the OUSD Nutrition Services (NS) department to increase students' access to local, fresh, and healthy school meals procured entirely from California. As of January 2017, California Thursdays has been implemented across 84 other districts in California, which together serve over one-third of the one billion school meals served in the state each year (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2016). The California Thursdays model has also been adopted in other states by school districts like New York City (New York Thursdays) and Minneapolis (Minnesota Thursdays) (School Food NYC, 2016; Minneapolis Public Schools, 2016).

As Emmott continued with the training, she told the staff, mostly women of color and immigrants, "ALBA is cooperatively owned, meaning that it is owned by everyone that works there, and helps immigrants, has internship programs, and farms organically." As the staff responded with facial expressions and nods that conveyed that they were impressed with this

¹ Due to the public nature of leadership roles in OUSD's Nutrition Services (NS) Department and central office, as well as its community partner organizations, such as the Center for Ecoliteracy (CEL), real names of these individuals are used with permission from the study's participants. However, OUSD school sites and their food service staff are not named to protect confidentiality.

² CEL is a non-profit organization in Berkeley, California, which has been working in partnership with OUSD NS on various school food projects since 2009 and has been working to implement farm to school programs and local food programs for schools since 1995 (Z. Barlow, personal communication, December 10, 2016).

information, Alex then discussed how strawberries, being a highly perishable crop that grows close to the ground and inviting of pests, are heavily sprayed with pesticides as part of conventional farming practices, and she noted that they are also a fruit that requires hand picking. She then asked, “Who do you think mostly picks strawberries? Men or women?” To which the staff responded in unison “Women!” Emmott replied, “Yes, it is mostly women that pick strawberries, and this has child and maternal health consequences, it affects babies, so by purchasing our strawberries from ALBA we are supporting moms and kids.”

Not only is OUSD’s California Thursdays initiative supporting sustainable agricultural and fishing practices, and child and maternal health, it is also promoting what the National Farm to School Network has called “cross-sectoral benefits” of farm to school programs (National Farm to School Network, 2016a). According to the National Farm to School Network (2016a), California Thursdays, and Farm to School programs like it, positively impact and shape public health (through boosting child health and reducing health care costs associated with diet-related diseases, like childhood obesity), local economies (through school food dollars being used to support local farmers and food systems), the environment (through reduction of packaging and food transportation miles), and education (through experiential learning within school garden and nutrition education programs associated with Farm to School).

While the farm to school movement has been growing since the 1990s (National Farm to School Network, 2016b), in 2010, farm to school became embedded within federal policy through the enactment of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) (USDA, 2016). The HHFKA is the most recent reauthorization of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)³, and

³ The NSLP, also known as the Child Nutrition Act (CNA), is reauthorized every five years with the HHFKA being its newest iteration. The HHFKA was due to be reauthorized on September 30, 2015. However, Congress allowed that deadline to pass, which means that child nutrition programs will continue operating under the 2010 legislation guidelines until they complete the reauthorization process. On December 6, 2016, U.S. Senator Pat Roberts, and Chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, announced in a press release that the reauthorization process will not happen under the 114th Congress

endeavors to “reduce childhood hunger, [and] improve the nutritional quality of meals to promote health and address childhood obesity” (S. Rep. No. 111-178, 2010, p. 2). Both childhood hunger and obesity are preventable health threats that significantly and negatively impact children’s overall health, long-term well-being, and quality of life (Holben & Taylor, 2015; Pyle, Sharkey, Yetter, Felix, Furlong, & Poston, 2006). As part of Congress’ efforts to redress these problems, the HHFKA established a Farm to School program within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (which administers the NSLP/HHFKA at the federal level) and mandated the USDA to “assist eligible schools, State and local agencies, Indian tribal organizations, agricultural producers or groups of agricultural producers, and nonprofit entities through grants and technical assistance to implement farm to school programs that improve access to local foods in eligible schools” (Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, 2010, Sect. 243, 2010).

The case of California Thursdays is an excellent demonstration of the agency of local policy implementation actors⁴ and their role as change agents through their translation of federal level policy goals (outlined in the HHFKA) into meaningful actions that can advance educational equity and social justice at the local level. As stated by USDA Secretary Vilsack, “Children’s ability to learn in the classroom and reach their fullest potential depends on what we do right now to ensure their health” (as quoted in USDA, 2016). Several studies have demonstrated that insufficient access to healthy food has a negative impact on students’ health, cognitive development, and academic outcomes (Holben & Taylor, 2015; Taras, 2005; Nestle, 2002). And others have shown that healthier students learn better (Basch, 2011). Moreover, childhood hunger and obesity disproportionately impact children along intersecting lines of gender, race,

(Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, 2016). As of November 2017, it has not been reauthorized, which means that HHFKA still stands.

⁴ “Local actors” includes both OUSD and CEL staff.

and class with rates of prevalence being substantially higher than the national average among Black and Hispanic households, single-parent families, and households with low educational attainment and incomes near or below the federal poverty line (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, & Singh, 2014; Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014).

School food policies (such as the HHFKA) and programs like Farm to School and California Thursdays, which increase students' access to nutritious food, are especially significant in districts such as OUSD where 71.4 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (OUSD, 2016). These initiatives are also a critical resource for all students who experience food insecurity at home and rely on the school meal program for a substantial portion of their daily caloric intake and nutritional needs (Cullen, 2016; USDA, 2016a). Therefore, I argue that the amelioration of childhood hunger and obesity through school food programs promotes educational equity and is thus a form of social justice.

This study asks: What factors and enabling conditions allowed California Thursdays to go to scale across 84 other districts in California? Before answering this question, I first situate the case of California Thursdays in relationship to the broader context of education reform by providing a brief history of scholarship on education policy implementation. I then introduce the “co-construction” theory of policy implementation (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002) as a useful analytic framework for explicating my findings regarding the factors and enabling conditions that allowed California Thursdays to scale across 84 other districts in California. Finally, while the case of California Thursdays has encouraging implications for the role of education policy and schools in the promotion of educational equity and social justice, I conclude on a critical note. Specifically, I argue that the larger issue of childhood hunger and obesity that the HHFKA, and, subsequently, California Thursdays and Farm to School programs

attempt to redress reflects a larger problematic of the “educationalized welfare state” (Kantor & Lowe, 2013), or the American predilection for using and relying on education reform as a substitute for public policies that attend to poverty and social inequality.

Education Policy Implementation: A Brief Review

Early education policy studies (1960s-1970s) conceptualized the policy process as a techno-rational endeavor and top-down, unidirectional process (Honig, 2006). Policy outcomes were evaluated along the criteria of “fidelity to design”—that is, how closely subjects followed policy-makers’ guidelines (Odden, 1991). And policy failure was largely understood as the result of conflicts of interest between policy-makers and local level implementation actors, or “street level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1980), and inadequacies or disinclinations to carry out policy makers’ intentions in a faithful manner (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). However, these perspectives “assume a relatively direct relationship between federal policy ‘inputs,’ local responses, and program ‘outputs’” (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 11); and they lack capacity to explain the “multi-dimensional character of the policy process” (Hupe & Hill, 2016, p. 104), and the way that variation is produced when a policy moves from text to enactment at the local level (Hupe, 2014; Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012).

During the 1970s-1990s, scholars began to have more dynamic understandings of the policy process; for example, as one of “mutual adaptation” (McLaughlin, 1990) between a policy and sites of implementation. More specifically, “...a two-way process of adaptation, in which the [policy] is modified to suit the institution, and the institution changes in some degree to accommodate the [policy]” (Berman & McLaughlin, 1974, p. 10). Furthermore, scholars also started to consider the ways in which context (local level variation) matters to the

implementation process. Specifically, policy studies began to account for how factors such as “size, intra-organizational relations, commitment, capacity, and institutional complexity molded [different] responses to policy” (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 10). However, this era of policy scholarship did not engage questions regarding what “dimensions of context...mattered, under what conditions they mattered, whether context could be attended to, and if it could, how policy makers should do so” (Honig, 2006, p. 7).

Policy implementation studies from the 1990s to the present have engaged in explicit considerations of the ways that context matters to implementation through analyses that have explored the ways that “policies, people, and places” (Honig, 2006) influence implementation in specific ways and interact to produce variability in policy outcomes. The most salient aspects of this body of scholarship have been the use of sociocultural approaches to the study of education policy (for example, studies that investigate the policy process through an anthropological lens and that use qualitative methods, such as ethnography) (Levinson & Sutton, 2001); and scholarship that has broadened our understandings about who counts as actors and stakeholders in the implementation process and the ways in which they influence outcomes in substantive ways (McLaughlin, 2006). For example, Coburn (2005) has explored how “nonsystems actors,” such as “independent professional development providers, reform organizations, publishers, and universities...promote, translate, and even transform policy ideas as they carry them to teachers” (p. 23). And Honig (2004) has investigated the role of “intermediary organizations”⁵ in their “operat[ion] between policy makers and implementers to affect changes in roles and practices for both parties” (p. 65).

⁵ The Center for Ecoliteracy, and its role as an intermediary organization and in the scaling of California Thursdays beyond Oakland, will be discussed in the findings section.

Taken together, contemporary policy studies have illuminated the ways in which the implementation process is a “complex social practice” (Levinson & Sutton, 2001, p. 1) and draw attention to the fact that although federal policies provide authoritative statements to guide enactment at the local level, “policy still has to be negotiated and implemented through interaction” (Hargreaves, 1985, p. 43). Policies are therefore mediated by actors through their daily work activities, or implementation practices, which involve “sensemaking” (Spillane, 2004; Coburn, 2001), meaning that actors’ interpret policy texts from different positionalities, which subsequently influences how policies are adapted (through interaction and negotiation) to local contexts in distinct ways; furthermore, these variegated policy spaces reflect different regional and institutional histories and cultures – all of which mediate policies to produce variation of outcomes across contexts.

The development of California Thursdays reflects the complex nature of the implementation process and illustrates what Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead (2009) refer to as policy “appropriation.” OUSD NS actors, in partnership with the Center for Ecoliteracy, appropriated federal school food policies and programming at the local level as is evidenced by their creation of an initiative that is unique to their context and implementation process. The emergence of California Thursdays in Oakland demonstrates that implementation actors are not just passive receivers of top-down policy directives; instead they are “active agents [of change], not just responding to but making policy” (Datnow, et. al., 2002, p. 13). In fact, CEL had been working on farm to school programs for fifteen years prior to the passage of the HHFKA in 2010 and thus helped create the larger context that led to the inclusion of farm to school in federal policy. Therefore, accounting for the ways that context mattered for producing California

Thursdays is important for extending knowledge regarding “what works for whom and under what conditions” (Honig, 2006; Means & Penuel, 2005).

However, my case study of California Thursdays also extends this knowledge in that the initiative has successfully⁶ traveled and been implemented across a diverse array of contexts⁷ (84 different districts⁸) (Cohen-Vogel, Tichnor-Wagner, Allen, Harrison, Kainz, Socol, & Wang, 2015). Given this success, what factors and enabling conditions explain California Thursdays ability to scale across the state? The theory of education policy implementation as a process that is co-constructed across interrelated contexts (Datnow, et al., 2002) provides a useful framework for exploring and answering this question.

Education Reform: A Co-Constructed Process

The theory of “co-construction” was developed by Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan (2002) in their study, *Extending Educational Reform from One School to Many*, which explored the process of “scaling up,” or the intentional replication of education reforms across school districts

⁶ Success is being defined here as a district’s commitment to implement California Thursdays per the letter they are asked to sign by the Center for Ecoliteracy when joining the California Thursdays network. As discussed later on, CEL assesses districts first to gauge their capacity before inviting districts to join. Those that accept the invitation agree to serve a California Thursdays meal (reimbursable meal, freshly prepared with CA-grown ingredients) in at least 25% of district schools at least one Thursday per month for the first school year’s participation, and every Thursday for the second school year’s participation in the implementation of California Thursdays. Participating districts also commit to working toward increasing the frequency or offerings of California Thursdays meals throughout the week (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2016b). While an analysis of the specific district implementations is outside the scope of this paper, some districts have moved from just serving produce to adding local proteins and/or grains, and some have moved from serving it once per month to once per week. Because California Thursdays is an initiative that is meant to meet districts where they are at and supports a “progress-based journey” towards serving a meal in which all items on the plate are fresh, healthy, and procured entirely from California, the initiative is more about incentivizing districts rather than punishing them if they cannot meet the agreed-upon commitment. As relayed to me by Jonathan Foley, CEL’s California Thursdays Network Coordinator, CEL “understands that occasionally there can be roadblocks or delays in implementation or growth, and that each school district is unique and that change takes time. The program is certainly not about pressuring districts to conform to an exact course of action, rather to offer the support and resources of a connected network to help us all to progress together. We understand the importance of being flexible” (personal communication, November 22, 2016).

⁷ Since 2013, California Thursdays has expanded from OUSD to “15 [other] school districts in 2014, to 42 districts in 2015, and to 58 districts in 2016” (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2016). It is now in 84 districts in California as of November 2016.

⁸ Districts participating in the implementation of California Thursdays “reflect the tremendous diversity of California and represent different regions of the state (from San Diego to Sacramento), different scales (from Los Angeles to Turlock Unified School Districts), and different communities (urban, suburban, and rural)” (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2015c, p. 3).

with different implementation contexts. The theory is based on four separate longitudinal qualitative studies that took place during the time frame of 1996-2000, throughout different locations within the United States, and in which the authors investigated the scaling up of seven “externally developed reform designs.”⁹ These external reforms, which Datnow, et al. (2002) define as “model[s] for school improvement that [were] developed by an organization external to the school or district” (p. 2), were “whole-school” reform models that focused on changing pedagogical practices, school culture, or the organizational structure of school districts. The design teams that constructed the models also operated “somewhat according to a ‘franchise approach’ [in that they] grant a school the right to the reform design and assume that the school will use the entire package of standardized components, including manuals, materials, and training” (Datnow, et al., 2002, p. 5).¹⁰

Datnow, et al. (2002) illuminate how the enactment of external reforms across multiple contexts involves much more than “mutual adaptation” between policies and institutions (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978). Instead, the authors demonstrate that “educational innovations play out as social, negotiated features of school life” (Datnow, et al., 2002, p. 11) on a “contested terrain” (Ogza, 2000) whereby the implementation process is shaped by local politics, power (along intersections of gender, race, and class), and by the interrelationship of local level and macro sociocultural and structural forces. Their theory of co-construction attempts to capture the complex and dynamic nature of the policy implementation process through an analytic framework, or heuristic, that accounts for three dimensions of education reform/the change

⁹ The externally developed reform designs studied by Datnow, et al. (2002) include Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID), Audrey Cohen College System of Education, The Coalition of Essential Schools, Comer School Development Program, Core Knowledge Sequence, Modern Red School House, and Success for All.

¹⁰ California Thursdays also takes somewhat of a franchise approach in that participating districts use open source, trademarked materials that promote the California Thursdays brand. However, a key difference is that rather than California Thursdays being an externally developed model, it was co-developed by both OUSD and the Center for Ecoliteracy (CEL). The model also continues to evolve as part of a partnership between CEL and the 84 districts that are implementing the initiative and part of the California Thursdays network.

process: (1) a relational sense of context, (2) perspective and power, and (3) the interplay between structure, culture and agency.

After describing my methods of data collection and analysis, I will provide a brief description of each dimension of the theory of co-construction. However, this paper is primarily informed by the relational sense of context dimension in that it best explains the factors and enabling conditions that facilitated the process and enabling of California Thursdays going to scale: the case highlights “how the scale up of reforms, and school improvement more generally, is constructed through the interaction of multiple institutions and individuals” (Datnow, et al., 2002, p. 2). I return to this point later in my findings section to explain how the emergence and scaling of California Thursdays is the product of co-construction between the Center for Ecoliteracy (CEL) and OUSD, and the role that CEL plays as an “intermediary organization” (Honig, 2004) for a statewide network of 84 school districts that are implementing the initiative across California.

Methods

Data Collection

This paper asks: What factors and enabling conditions allowed California Thursdays to go to scale across 84 other districts in California? To answer this question, I used data from both a case study of the implementation of CEL’s Rethinking School Lunch planning framework in OUSD, for which I was a research associate¹¹ and a parallel, three-year (2013-2016) qualitative case study of the implementation of the HHFKA in OUSD, which I conducted.

¹¹ The official name of the case study of the implementation of Rethinking School Lunch (RSL) in OUSD is *Rethinking School Lunch Oakland: Comprehensive School Meal Program Reform to Increase Equitable Access to Healthy Food, Establish Career Pathways in Sustainable Agriculture, and Improve Local Food Systems*. For this paper, I drew data from three key informant interviews (two of which were conducted by one of the Principal Investigators of the RSL Oakland (RSLO) case study, Moira

The three-year qualitative case study employed ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, to observe and document the unfolding of the policy implementation process at the local level and over time (Yin, 2014; Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). As stated by Datnow, et al. (2002), actors' participation in "school reform [is] found in the mundane details of the everyday life of the school – getting meetings set up, assigning tasks, [and] carrying them out" (p. 11). These "mundane details" as well as implementation actors' sensemaking processes were documented within ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) collected from 60 hours of participant observation at OUSD cafeteria sites and staff professional development and other meetings, as well as informal conversations with key informants. I also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 13 key informants¹² (some of whom were interviewed multiple times) involved with the implementation of the HHFKA in OUSD and the creation and development of California Thursdays.

In addition to the field notes and interview transcripts, the full study draws data from over 700 pages worth of documents (the bulk of which were Congressional documents regarding the reauthorization of the HHFKA); this paper focuses on over 100 documents specifically related to California Thursdays. These documents include marketing materials, local media articles and press releases, OUSD NS and CEL's USDA Farm to School grant applications, OUSD NS and CEL's internal and public reports, and emails from the California Thursdays Network, which is a listserv that serves as an online forum for districts that are participating in the implementation of

O'Neill, and one of which I conducted). For quotes drawn from RSLO interviews, I include an "RSLO Case Study, 2016" citation. Finally, I also drew on data from documents collected from CEL under the RSLO case study: one internal report and CEL's two USDA Farm to School Grant applications for Fiscal Years 2015 and 2016. The RSLO case study was funded by the Berkeley Food Institute and the TomKat and Stupski Foundations. More information regarding the RSLO case study can be found at <http://ced.berkeley.edu/events-media/news/uc-berkeley-faculty-to-study-oakland-schools-lunch-program>

¹² Key informants included OUSD NS administrative and school site cafeteria staff, FoodCorps service members (an OUSD partner organization that places members at school sites to engage in school food procurement, nutrition education, and garden education), and CEL's co-founder and leadership staff.

California Thursdays. These documents illuminate various implementation practices and the factors and enabling conditions that led to California Thursdays going to scale.

Data Analysis

MAXQDA software was used to perform a content analysis of these data using deductive and inductive codes that identified cross-cutting themes, patterns, and anomalies (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). My focus was actors' policy implementation practices, which "indexed" (Ochs, 1992) the "processes of interpretation and recontextualization – that is, the translation of texts into action and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualized practices" (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012, p. 3); practices include local level actors' expressed beliefs (in interviews, press releases, internal reports, and emails on the California Thursdays Listserv) about the role of school food in addressing broader intersecting social and educational issues, values (commitments and priorities), sensemaking (interpretations of the HHFKA and California Thursdays and their application to the local level as reflected in programmatic practices), negotiation of interpersonal/institutional and geographical constraints (for example, facilities limitations or balancing the cost of food and labor), and tools and strategies used to enable California Thursdays to go to scale (for example, professional development, recipe development, sharing of best practices, coordinated events, trademarking, branding and marketing).

Dimensions of Co-Construction

Relational Sense of Context

A relational sense of context accounts for the interrelationship between the broader social context in which reforms are produced and the local contexts in which policies are implemented.

This means that policy implementation actors are situated within a larger social context, which both impacts the local level conditions in which they work and influences how they interpret policy texts that, in turn, shape their implementation practices and mold their responses to policy directives. As argued by Datnow, et al. (2002), implementation actors are “part of a complex dynamic, shaping and shaped by the structural and cultural features of school and society” (p. 13). This dynamic is reflected in the case of California Thursdays: it is both a local level response to federal policy (HHFKA) and a “bottom-up” initiative that has gone to scale that, as my findings will show, is reshaping the school food landscape in California. The initiative also demonstrates how contexts or different levels within a policy system are interrelated and mutually constitutive of one another. More specifically, California Thursdays (as an outcome of the implementation of the HHFKA in OUSD) reflects how “interactions in one policy context generate ‘outcomes,’ such as policy statements, new rules or procedures, which in turn potentially condition the interaction of other actors in other contexts in the policy chain” (Datnow, et al., 2002, p. 12).

Perspective and Power

Local level actors are “not just passively responding to directives mandated from higher levels of bureaucracies....” (Datnow, et al., 2002, p. 13). Instead, they play an active role in the implementation process through their appropriation of policy to the local level and are therefore makers of policy as well (Levinson, Winstead, & Sutton, 2009). However, implementation actors are differentially positioned within social hierarchies along lines of gender (Datnow, et al., 2002), race and class (Dumas & Anyon, 2006), which both influences interpretations of policy and enables or constrains actors’ implementation practices.

In the context of the HHFKA and in relationship to California Thursdays, OUSD's NS Department and its food service workers are in a marginalized position within the district (meaning they lack power in the OUSD system).¹³ This issue of marginalization is the consequence of how school meal programs are funded (at the federal level through meal reimbursements rather than integrated into a district's general fund, which means they must operate as self-sustaining enterprises). Furthermore, key informant interviews revealed that OUSD NS and its food service workers do not think they are viewed by staff (principals, teachers, and other school site staff) as playing an important role in the educational mission of schools – even though both the OUSD NS administrative and school site staff felt that they play a significant role in ensuring that children are not hungry and have the nutritional foundation they need to engage in the learning process. The success of California Thursdays reflects the agency of OUSD NS employees (at the administrative level) despite these constraints. However, because of the school meal program and its employees' marginal position in OUSD, to achieve the broader goals of the HHFKA, OUSD NS had to secure outside private and public funding as well as assistance from community partners to achieve the broader goals of the HHFKA (redressing childhood hunger and obesity). This marginal position of OUSD's school meal program and its food service workers reflects the ways that perspective and power operate within the school food context.

¹³ Key informants (in interviews and informal conversations) stated on numerous occasions that OUSD NS' food service workers (primarily comprised of women of color and immigrants whose primary language is not English) are the lowest paid in the district.

The Interplay between Structure, Culture, and Agency

This dimension of the theory of co-construction highlights the way that broader structural and cultural forces both constrain and enable implementation actors' work, but do not determine outcomes (as reflected by the creation of California Thursdays). Implementation actors have agency through the mediating influence of the local context. Taking the case of school food as an example of this dynamic, a policy, specifically, the HHFKA, seeks to address the issues of childhood hunger and obesity. The problem of childhood hunger and obesity reflects larger social structural problems, while the use of schools and education policy to ameliorate these issues reflects a cultural one. Critical food systems scholars have argued that diet related issues, such as childhood hunger and obesity, are manifestations of structural inequality, or the unequal distribution of resources in society, such as access to nutritious food and healthy built environments (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Guthman, 2011; Paarlberg, 2010; Larson, Story, & Nelson, 2009; Patel, 2008; Poppendieck, 1998).

Regarding the cultural component, the HHFKA is a quintessential example of the American inclination for employing education policy as a mechanism for improving education and society (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), as well as making use of public schools as "agencies of broad social welfare" (Tyack, 1992, p. 28). Childhood hunger and obesity impact students' academic experiences and outcomes (Basch, 2011; Taras, 2005). And because the HHFKA places the resolution of these issues in the realm of education policy and schools (a tall order), the development of California Thursdays reflects the agency (albeit constrained) and ability of implementation actors to develop local level responses to larger structural and cultural issues.

Findings

How Context Mattered in OUSD: The Emergence of California Thursdays

School food reform is not separate from school reform; it's part of the basic work we have to do in order to correct systemic injustice, pursue equity, and give our children the best future possible. We are committed to building a school district that provides quality education and equitable outcomes for all children—and to make this goal a reality, we have to create conditions that allow children to grow and learn at high levels. This starts with taking care of our students' most basic needs, such as nutrition, so they can develop and reach their full potential. (Tony Smith, as quoted in OUSD, 2012, p. 47)

In 2011, under the leadership of then OUSD Superintendent Tony Smith, the district adopted Community Schools, *Thriving Students: A Five-Year Strategic Plan (2011- 2016)*. The mission of the strategic plan was to address out-of-school factors that impact students' academic achievement through the creation of “a Full Service Community District that serves the whole child, eliminates inequity, and provides each child with excellent teachers for every day” (OUSD, 2011, p. 1). During the 2010-2011 school year, the OUSD Nutrition Services (NS) Department partnered with CEL to conduct a Rethinking School Lunch Oakland (RSLO) Feasibility Study (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2011). The study evaluated OUSD's school food program using CEL's “Rethinking School Lunch” (RSL) planning framework¹⁴ to assess the district's capacity for implementing comprehensive school food systems change – an essential component of the district's transition to a full-service community school district¹⁵ (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2013a). As stated by OUSD's communications officer at the time, Troy Flint,

¹⁴ The RSL planning framework presents ten interrelated pathways to address school food system reform in a comprehensive way (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2010).

¹⁵ In a press release from CEL regarding the implementation of California Thursdays in Oakland schools, the work of OUSD's school food transformation was specifically linked to the Strategic Plan: “The Center for Ecoliteracy is working closely with [Jennifer] LeBarre to transform the district's meal program in support of Superintendent Tony Smith's strategic plan to overcome inequities and raise academic achievement in Oakland schools” (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2013a).

We are trying to build America's first full-service community school district where every public school in Oakland provides not only high quality instruction and rigorous academics but also a full range of wrap-around services that promote high achievement.... Wrap-around services include access to health care, mental health care, dental and eye care, language acquisition courses, nutrition and recreational services.... We expect a lot of our kids and if we want them to achieve at high levels we need to ensure that the conditions exist that can promote achievement.... A student who is not healthy or is not well-fed is most likely going to be inattentive and a less effective student. One way to address this social need and make progress toward our academic goals is to make sure every child is well fed and not just that they are full but also that they are fed with nutritious offerings. (as quoted in Adams, 2012, para. 8-10)

The findings of the feasibility study revealed that the greatest barrier to OUSD's transformation of its school food system is decaying and inadequate cafeteria facilities. OUSD has 89 schools that are served by the NS Department, of which 25 have "cooking kitchens" where meals are cooked and prepared on site. Three of these kitchens are "central kitchens," which cook, prepare and package both breakfast and lunches for delivery to OUSD's 64 "satellite kitchens" (school sites without kitchens or facilities to do any cooking). The district serves 6.6 million meals a year: 73 percent of those meals are prepared by these three central kitchens (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2011, p. 6). The high need for school meals (84.4 percent of OUSD's students qualify for free and reduced-lunch) coupled with a lack of adequate facilities has placed a strain on OUSD's central kitchens. The district's main "Central Kitchen, at Prescott Elementary School, was designed to serve 8,000 meals a day [and] it is currently preparing 20,000" (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2011, p. 6).

Moreover, the study also found that most of the equipment across the District's 25 cooking kitchens is outdated or lacking in functionality. I observed this issue during one of my participant observation sessions at the Prescott central kitchen where I watched a food service staff member work with an industrial sized can opener. As I observed the staff member's process of having to continuously reposition and adjust a large can of tomato sauce to get it open, I was told that the device was basically broken. Hence, a task that should only take a few seconds

required a minute or more (an inefficient and time-consuming process that adds up when needing to prepare 20,000 meals a day).

The study also detailed how inadequate facilities and lack of functional equipment were limiting OUSD NS' ability to engage in extensive "scratch cooking" and serving of freshly prepared food procured from local suppliers – a situation that required a heavy reliance on pre-made meals purchased from Sysco (a global distributor of food products), such as frozen burritos that OUSD cafeterias can just heat and serve (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2011). As stated by a FoodCorps service member, "School food is so industrialized. A lot of the food products are packaged, they're frozen, they're preserved. We [used] to buy everything through Sysco [which means] that [the food we purchase has] already gone through a massive transit process to get to [OUSD]". These conditions are the result of stretching "limited federal dollars [over] a long way for school meals, [and thus] many districts have had to rely on big, out-of-state food manufacturers and processors, even as California grows the most fruits and vegetables in the country" (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2013b). This situation has greatly limited the opportunity for NS school site staff to cook school meals and has also diminished the quality of their work environments (as reflected by the can opener example), which, by extension, impacts the mealtime experience for OUSD's students.

The cafeteria experience for students is an important consideration for school meal programs because they are primarily funded by a federal reimbursement for each qualifying meal served. "Full-priced lunches" are somewhat of a misnomer since they are also subsidized through the NSLP, with paid, reduced-price, and free lunches being reimbursed at a rate of \$0.44, \$2.99, and \$3.39, respectively (USDA, 2016c). This amount, together with a California state reimbursement rate of \$0.23 (California Department of Education, 2017) and fees paid for

lunches by students, is used by school meal programs to cover the cost of labor, facilities, equipment, and food. In the case of OUSD, as relayed to me by Alex Emmott, this leaves the NS department with about \$1.25 to spend on the ingredients for a five-component meal that includes a serving of milk, fruit, vegetable, protein, and whole grains that must adhere to the HHFKA's nutritional guidelines. Therefore, driving student participation is an important component of not only maintaining the fiscal solvency of districts' school meal programs but also meeting the goals of the HHFKA: mitigating childhood hunger and obesity, which negatively impact students' educational experiences and academic achievement.

My participant observation sessions across school sites and informal conversations and interviews with food service staff revealed frustration with the way that deficient facilities and equipment impeded their ability to do their jobs. The quote below illustrates this frustration:

So, as staff we may be asked to, for example, make a parfait and are told to use a fourth of a cup of granola, but we don't have a fourth of a cup. We don't have a scoop that's a fourth of a cup, so we are asked to do things that we can't do because we don't have the right equipment. And I think that's beyond frustrating because when we ask [NS] for equipment, we're told it can't be bought because there's not enough money. So, that's difficult. There was a professional development session last week regarding salad bars. And this woman said that she can't follow a recipe because she doesn't have a can opener. So basically, she's never put beans on her salad bar because she doesn't have a can opener. And I guarantee you, like she would get written up for that but like how's she supposed to open it if she doesn't have a can opener? So, I think that that's frustrating for people. We get asked to do things and don't have the tools or equipment we may need to do it.

Another critical finding from the feasibility study was that even though OUSD NS had developed a Farm to School plan during the 2009-2010 school year, which developed criteria and goals for sourcing local ingredients for school meals, the District's facility limitations (specifically, a lack of an adequately-sized central kitchen) prevented the department from achieving those goals.¹⁶ As a result of these findings, the RSLO Feasibility Study created a plan

¹⁶ The OUSD Farm to School Plan was developed in partnership with the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) through a series of community engagement sessions in Oakland (Emmott, 2013, p. 2) that brought stakeholders together, such as parents, students, community activists and public health administrators to discuss what, exactly, the Farm to School movement is; and to find out what the community wanted in a Farm to School program (Mason, 2010). The final plan prioritized 25 percent of all produce purchases being procured from local sources by the end of the 2012-2013 school year and defined "local" as within a 250-mile radius of Oakland. It also set forth goals regarding purchasing fresh, sustainable, and organic/pesticide free produce, an

of action, which included a budget and timeline, for a comprehensive reform of OUSD's school food system. A central component of the plan was a recommendation that the district renovate its facilities as the primary effort in advancing the NS Farm to School plan and OUSD's vision of becoming a full-service community school district. Specifically, the study provided detailed recommendations for the development of a district-wide network of school kitchens, gardens, and produce markets, with a central kitchen and one-acre instructional farm at the core of this network. OUSD adopted the study recommendations into a Nutrition Services Master Plan, as part of the OUSD 2012 Facilities Master Plan (OUSD, 2012), and received unanimous approval from the Board of Education.

OUSD then used the proposed central kitchen project as the centerpiece of its Measure J campaign (which was co-chaired by Zenobia Barlow, CEL's Executive Director). Measure J was a 2012 bond measure of \$475 million to finance facilities improvements in OUSD,¹⁷ outlined in the District's 2012 Facilities Master Plan, of which \$44 million was earmarked for the central kitchen project (OUSD, 2012) (now referred to as "The Center") (for further information regarding The Center, see OUSD, 2016b). The Center was supposed to be completed and operational by the 2016-2017 school year, but construction did not officially begin until April 7, 2016 (OUSD, 2016c) and is now slated to be completed by sometime in 2018 (OUSD, 2016d). Among one of the reasons for the project's delay was that in April of 2013, Tony Smith, the central kitchen project's key champion, resigned from his position as OUSD's Superintendent. His departure in June of 2013 created a lack of continuity in advancing the vision and support needed within OUSD to keep the project moving forward as planned (O'Neill, 2016). Data

increase in purchases from small and medium-sized family farmers and the labeling of farm name and location of all produce purchased from distributors; and finally, the implementation of Farm to School education programs in schools (Emmott, 2013, p. 1).

¹⁷ Measure J only needed a 55% voter approval rate and passed by 83.49% approval from Oakland voters (League of Women Voters of Oakland, 2012).

drawn from interviews for the RSLO case study showed that the District's leadership transition between Tony Smith (2009-2013), former OUSD Board Member and Interim Superintendent Gary Yee (2013-2014), and Superintendent Antwan Wilson (July 2014-December 2016)¹⁸ left the central kitchen project in somewhat of a limbo state as key players involved with its implementation left OUSD during the leadership changeover process (O'Neill, 2016).

Taking California Thursdays to Scale

This study explores the factors and enabling conditions that allowed California Thursdays to go to scale across 84 other districts in California. This research finds that California Thursdays went to scale for three specific reasons, which I will explain briefly here and return to in more detail in the remainder of the paper. First, actors employed the use of a “bite-sized implementation strategy” and “progress-based journey,” terms used by CEL to describe what is essentially a scaffolding approach to policy implementation. Specifically, CEL met districts where they were at (baseline level) and then guided them through an implementation process made up of actions (small, manageable tasks) that were the component parts, or building blocks for the co-construction of a desired outcome – in this case serving freshly prepared meals from California grown food in a California Thursdays meal across various districts in the state of California. As defined by Jonathan Foley, CEL's California Thursdays Network Coordinator,

A California Thursdays meal is a meal that is completely sourced from California-grown ingredients, which is as fresh and as healthy and as nutritious as possible. It's one thing to serve like a fish stick from California but at the same time that's not ultimately what the program is about. The program is about trying to improve the nutritional quality of a meal to its ultimate place. We have school districts that are really taking on the challenge of localized and Farm to School purchasing. We have a number of school districts that are purchasing from growers and like fishermen actually that are completely local to their region, and are providing products that are really cleanly sourced. They're not processed products. We're trying to move away from processing. Everything should be as fresh as possible, focus on whole grains, fruits and

¹⁸ In November of 2016, Superintendent Antwan Wilson announced that he had accepted a new position as Chancellor of Washington, D.C., public schools and left OUSD before the end of the 2016-2017 school year (Tsai, 2016).

vegetables, and lean protein that's produced in the most ethically and cleanest way possible. So, while [CEL has] broad definitions of the California Thursdays meal, there's also a real intention and goal to move California Thursdays to its furthest logical place in terms of quality and procurement.

This scaffolding process, or completion of small, manageable tasks that lead to an ideal California Thursdays meal add up over time to produce a larger impact that results in systems change – specifically, the transformation of school food systems into ones that promote educational equity and social justice.

I refer to these small tasks as “scalable, transformative implementation practices” because when they are used by any district they enable positive, systemic transformation of school meal programs – despite variations in contexts (districts) in which California Thursdays is implemented. These scalable, transformative implementation practices include recipe development and professional development, both of which serve as important drivers of programmatic transformation. And while their evolution in OUSD speaks to the ways that context matters for understanding particular policy outcomes, their transfer to and adaption in other contexts and the way that these practices produce a desired outcome illuminate the ways in which context can be intentionally moderated through transferable approaches to policy implementation.

The second reason California Thursdays went to scale is because the Center for Ecoliteracy served as an “intermediary organization” that took the “bite-sized implementation strategy” and “progress-based journey” approach to implementing California Thursdays and structured it into a “collective impact model.” This model served as a framework for CEL to transplant the transformative implementation practices piloted in OUSD across the districts participating in the scaling of California Thursdays. The model also informed CEL’s recruitment, onboarding and orientation, and organizing of other districts’ participation in the implementation of the initiative through the creation and use of a “California Thursdays Network Listserv.” The

listserv is a communication tool that digitally enables co-construction through learning and the sharing of best practices and resources across CEL and participating districts. The collective impact model also provided the rationale for CEL's use of "Collective Action Days," which were coordinated California Thursdays events across the state that served as "mutually reinforcing activities" – the purpose of which was to strengthen ties across the California Thursdays Network, and the visibility and impact of the initiative across the state.

Finally, another factor that enabled California Thursdays to go to scale was CEL's cultivation of positive discourse through the California Thursdays Network listserv. This cultivation of positive discourse is an intentional activity on the part of CEL and participating districts in the California Thursdays Network to encourage superintendents, principals, teachers, families, students, and the communities in which they are situated to "rethink school lunch." More specifically, the use of positive discourse was a purposeful reframing of the narrative of school lunch from negative and stereotypical associations of the "lunch lady" and the kind of food being served in schools through the fostering of positive images of and experiences with school food programs and food service workers. CEL also trademarked California Thursdays and used branding techniques and marketing campaigns to create a movement for spreading awareness of and excitement about California Thursdays. These three factors and enabling conditions facilitated California Thursdays going to scale and are key to understanding how the initiative is reshaping the school food landscape with the goal of promoting educational equity and social justice in California.

Co-Constructing Solutions from Constraining Conditions

While the limbo status of the building of the central kitchen was a contextual constraint for other changes in OUSD school food, in an interview with Jennifer LeBarre, Executive

Director of OUSD NS, it became apparent that the delay ended up being an enabling condition for the creation of California Thursdays. In our discussion, LeBarre told me that CEL and OUSD NS began to brainstorm “what the next thing was that [they] could be doing while waiting for the central kitchen to be done.” LeBarre explained,

The Center for Ecoliteracy and I were playing with ideas about how we might extend the Farm to School work that we had already been doing beyond produce, to center of the plate type of things [such as proteins and grains]. And to work on recipe development in preparation for the new kitchen. We still needed to do constant improvement [to the school meal program] and milk it. [OUSD] kids are going to be eating these meals for the next two to three years while we’re getting ready to build this kitchen. What can we do to keep tweaking what we’re doing?

As Jennifer LeBarre’s thinking shows, California Thursdays emerged as part of OUSD NS and CEL working together to resolve local level constraints that were hindering programmatic and policy implementation goals, as well as OUSD NS’ school food reform efforts. Furthermore, the idea for California Thursdays, which drew on OUSD NS’ other farm to school efforts and CEL’s *Cooking with California Food in K-12 Schools: A Cookbook and Professional Development Guide*¹⁹ (Brennan & Evans, 2011), reflects the beginnings of the co-construction of a solution across multiple individuals and institutional contexts.

Taking Root to Grow: Co-Constructing Scalable, Transformative Implementation Practices

California Thursdays began to take root when in May of 2013, Alex Emmott, OUSD NS’ Farm to School Supervisor, submitted a USDA Farm to School grant proposal in which she described the purpose of California Thursdays as follows:

As a district serving almost 7 million meals every year, Oakland has an important opportunity to partner with local agricultural producers to make positive systems change, support student well-being, build healthy life-long habits, and promote our economy and environment. The “California Thursdays” program will accomplish this by sourcing an entire school lunch from California once a week at all schools across the district. The meal will meet the USDA guidelines for a reimbursable school lunch and include a protein, grain, and fruit or vegetable. (Emmott, 2013, p. 4)

¹⁹ The *Cooking with California Food in K-12 Schools* (2011) is an “open source” cookbook that is freely available online as a PDF for download. It is part of “a suite of publications and projects created by the Center for Ecoliteracy under the title Rethinking School Lunch.... These productions include ideas and strategies for improving school food, teaching nutrition, supporting sustainable food systems, and designing education programs focused on understanding the relationships between food, culture, health, and the environment” (Brennan & Evans, 2011, p. 11).

Five months later, in October 2013, the USDA awarded OUSD NS with a \$100K Farm to School grant for fiscal year 2014 to implement California Thursdays in Oakland. That same month, and coordinated to happen on “Food Day”²⁰ (Thursday, October 23, 2013), OUSD NS launched its first California Thursdays pilot meal: “Chorizo & Greens over Penne Pasta.”

In a press release regarding OUSD receiving the USDA Farm to School Grant for California Thursdays, OUSD NS stated, “In our first pilot CA [*abbreviation in original*] Thursdays menu this year, we served 1200 pounds of organic dinosaur kale; 875 pounds of chorizo; and 2,000 pounds of organic chopped tomatoes—all from California and in one day. We look forward to using the USDA grant to develop and expand this program so it is a weekly institution at OUSD” (OUSD, 2013).

Recipe Development. From October 2013 to March 2014, OUSD NS served a California Thursdays meal once a month and piloted dishes such as “Kung Pao Chicken with Bell Peppers,” and “Sesame Noodles with Tofu and Bok Choy”²¹ (OUSD, 2014b). Through these meals, OUSD NS began to develop co-constructed, transformative implementation practices. For example, OUSD NS, CEL, and OUSD youth participating in the Hope Collaborative²² program partnered to facilitate: “...peer-to-peer taste tests and student-led conversations about what students liked about a meal – how it looked or tasted – and whether or not it would land them in the lunch line to order it. When recipes weren’t drawing students in, [Jennifer LeBarre] and her staff tweaked them until they worked” (Leschin-Hoar, 2014, para. 10).

²⁰ “Food Day” is a national day of action whereby “thousands of events all around the country bring Americans together to celebrate and enjoy real food and to push for improved food policies.” It is “a day to resolve to make changes in our own diets and to take action to solve food-related problems in our communities at the local, state, and national level” (Food Day, 2016).

²¹ Both recipes, which are scaled to serve 50 and 100 people, can be found in the Center for Ecoliteracy’s cookbook “Cooking with California Foods in K-12 Schools” at <https://www.ecoliteracy.org/download/cooking-california-food-k-12-schools>.

²² HOPE Collaborative (Health for Oakland’s People & Environment) “is a community collaborative working to support community-driven, environmental changes which will reduce health inequities within the most vulnerable communities of the Oakland flatlands” (HOPE Collaborative, 2016).

This iterative process of recipe co-development—between institutions and individuals, and with a focus on California food—led to increased fortification of local supply chains (through procurement of ingredients for recipes featuring California food); Furthermore, these implementation practices strengthened OUSD NS’ capacity to transform its school food system – even though NS staff were still navigating the constraining condition of inadequate kitchen facilities. As relayed to me by Alex Emmott, OUSD NS Farm to School Supervisor,

Since implementing California Thursdays, we’ve increased [our] humane and sustainable purchases. We’re now procuring local chicken raised without antibiotics. Two times a month we buy about 11,000 pounds every time we menu it. We’re buying local, organic, grass fed ground beef once a month. And we’re buying about 4,000 pounds every time we menu it. We’re now buying organic Community Grains pasta, which is a local Oakland-based company. We’ve been buying Sun West organic brown rice, too, and switched that out from Uncle Ben’s. (RSLO Case Study, 2016)

Professional Development. The transformation of OUSD NS’ school food system was further demonstrated on April 24, 2014 when, on “Earth Day,”²³ the District launched California Thursdays on a weekly basis with a lunch of “Roasted Lemon Oregano Chicken with California Brown Rice,”²⁴ which featured chicken drumsticks raised without antibiotics from Mary’s Chicken in Sanger, CA (OUSD, 2014c). The ability for OUSD NS to procure and serve chicken raised without antibiotics was also an important leverage point in OUSD’s continued effort to transform its school food system (while also evidencing that transformation). As explained by Emmott:

A big piece of California Thursdays was looking at, if we’re going to get better quality meat, and local meats for the menu, what’s needed to really make that happen? We found the missing piece was professional development for our staff, because our staff hadn’t prepared and cooked raw poultry for over a decade. We needed to do that capacity building. To be able to afford high quality pre-cooked local protein was just way outside of our price point. But with some creative recipe design, and creative procurement, we found that we are able to afford locally sourced raw protein. The USDA farm to school grant funded a lot of our professional development so we could make that investment, and make sure that our staff could handle raw chicken safely.

²³ “Earth Day” is a national day of action whereby individuals participate in events, e.g., tree plantings across the nation, to move forward an environmental movement through “channeling human energy toward environmental issues” (Earth Day Network, 2016).

²⁴ This recipe can found in the Center for Ecoliteracy’s cookbook “Cooking with California Foods in K-12 Schools” at <https://www.ecoliteracy.org/download/cooking-california-food-k-12-schools>.

As this statement from Emmott highlights, moving to what NS staff refer to as “center of the plate items,” specifically proteins, required OUSD NS to increase the culinary capabilities of its staff, which was done through professional development in partnership with CEL (another example of the co-construction of California Thursdays). For example, Adam Kesselman, CEL’s former Rethinking School Lunch Program Manager, helped train staff to cook recipes that were developed by OUSD NS and CEL for California Thursdays, such as “Oven-Fried Mary’s Chicken Drums”; Kesselman also worked with 60 of OUSD NS’ cafeteria managers on essential knife skills (one of several types of professional development activities) needed for processing ingredients for California Thursdays recipes (California Thursdays Listserv, 2014a).

These new culinary skills served as part of a positive feedback loop whereby OUSD NS staff now had the ability to work with locally procured, fresh ingredients (rather than pre-cooked, processed meals) to make school lunches that kids would find delicious, and therefore, eat. This is important for two reasons. First, driving participation in the school meal program increases the funds that OUSD NS can work with to maintain their services. As articulated by Joyce Peters, OUSD NS’ Dietician and Nutrition Educator,

The managers at the school cafeteria sites, they’re almost like mini-business people too, because they have to watch the bottom line. If participation goes down, then eventually they’re going to lose an employee. Ultimately, if enough kids decide they don’t like our lunch entrees, participation goes down. And that impacts our income and the hours for the employees. So, we need to get participation up because we only get paid for the meals that are taken by students.

Second, boosting participation also allows OUSD NS to fulfill its mandate of increasing students’ access to nutritious food and fulfilling the larger goals of the HHFKA to address childhood hunger and obesity, which promotes educational equity and social justice.

Furthermore, the transformation of OUSD’s school food system also extends beyond the district, which speaks to the cross-sectoral benefits of Farm to School programs, like California Thursdays. During the 2014-2015 school year, OUSD bought “approximately \$20,000 worth of

chicken each month from Mary's" (Tsai, 2014), which benefited the California economy. This purchase also supported public health efforts in that procuring antibiotic-free chicken contributes to ameliorating increasing antibiotic resistance in the U.S.

As the development of California Thursdays in OUSD illustrates, the initiative enabled a multi-pronged approach for OUSD NS to build out implementation practices that would be transformative of their school food system, specifically, recipe and professional development. These transformative implementation practices also sparked CEL's consideration of how other districts might also benefit from implementing California Thursdays in their own contexts. Chris Smith, CEL's Communications and Development Director, described California Thursdays as: "...one effort, one tool in the toolbox to prepare for the new operations as the District-wide integrated Rethinking School Lunch [Oakland] really took root. However, that particular tool was so impactful that there was a decision made to see if [CEL] could pilot [California Thursdays] statewide" (RSLO Case Study, 2016).

Scaling a "Bite-Sized Implementation Strategy" through a "Progress-Based Journey." While California Thursdays emerged in OUSD as a response to local contextual constraints, CEL quickly intuited that the initiative would be relevant to other districts engaging in school food reform. As noted by Zenobia Barlow, CEL's Executive Director,

Oakland is not an atypical condition. Out of sheer need, the conditions [in OUSD] created a model that could operate in so many other districts. [California Thursdays] wasn't something we dreamed up in an ivory tower. Something about the aliveness of that process [i.e., creating California Thursdays as a way to reconcile constraints in OUSD] turned out to be something that many school districts could replicate. (RSLO Case Study, 2016)

This recognition of the initiative's relevance to other districts was based on CEL's experience working in the arena of school food reform since the early 1990's. During that time, CEL was engaging in "statewide efforts to provide Rethinking School Lunch (RSL) seminars to teams from more than 400 cities/towns from 28 states and 11 countries that featured CA leaders

in food service” (Z. Barlow, personal communication, December 10, 2016). OUSD’s use of California Thursdays demonstrated that it was an effective implementation strategy because of the way that it breaks down the task of serving locally procured, freshly prepared, and healthy school meals into “bite-sized,” manageable components, or tasks through recipe and professional development (or scalable, transformative implementation practices). As further elaborated by Chris Smith, California Thursdays is “intended as a bite-sized implementation program designed to increase the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables and freshly prepared food on students’ plates. We understand there are complexities and challenges to doing that. We figure one day a week gives us an opportunity to address those” (as quoted in Breier, 2014, para. 18).

The initiative is also an effective systems change strategy in the way the tasks combine to engage specific levers that make up, and can be used to transform, a school food system (such as procurement of local ingredients to develop local supply chains, creating menus featuring fresh and local ingredients to meet nutritional standards set by the HHFKA as well as making food that kids will eat, and increasing staff capacity to prepare a California Thursdays meal, etc.). As described by Kesselman, “California Thursdays is a catalyst for the other days of the week. It’s not about changing one thing. It’s about looking at the system. Policy changes need to be tied to all the other pieces of systems change. Policy change without a vehicle for it is not necessarily going to be effective. The vehicle needs to bring a very complex system forward.”

OUSD NS’ success with implementing California Thursdays demonstrates how the initiative is a vehicle for transformative systems change through a scaffolding approach to implementation. OUSD NS showed that serving locally procured, freshly prepared, healthy, and delicious school meals can be broken down into a process of smaller tasks that add up to big changes. This scaffolding process, or “bite-sized implementation strategy” and “progress-based

journey,” or “PBJ,”²⁵ was first shown to work in OUSD NS, which started with just one meal, one day, then moved to once per month, and then once per week. This scaffolding process simultaneously built the capacity of OUSD to positively transform its school food system. And it is a process of policy implementation that was transferrable to other contexts and enables the possibility that “someday, maybe every day can be California Thursdays.”²⁶ As further elaborated by Jonathan Foley, CEL’s California Thursdays Network Coordinator,

The California Thursdays model is not a highly pressurized system. It allows for districts to enter into the process at various stages. So, for example, maybe there’s a way to incorporate a local ingredient from a farm that is regional or local to a school district; or maybe [a district can’t do] the entire entree but there’s a way that [they] can start with one of the ingredients, or one meal they repeat every month, and then scale up from there. That’s happened in a number of the districts, where they really open the door in one direction, and then a couple more have opened behind it, and then it kind of snowballs into a larger chain of success. I think that it’s like once they take the first step, it’s kind of like the hardest step, but then they have the ability and the know-how of how to source a bit more locally, how to do the procurement. And if they have to do professional development or train staff, that may only have to happen once or twice or three times and then they have all these new skills that they’re able to utilize in the kitchen.

The concept of California Thursdays as a “bite-sized implementation strategy” and “progress-based journey” was extended to other districts through CEL and reflects the co-constructed evolution of the initiative across multiple contexts. This is illustrated in an email message from CEL to districts participating in the implementation of California Thursdays:

Some districts expressed concern with their ability to serve a fresh meal featuring 100% California-grown ingredients. So, I want to take this opportunity to remind us that California Thursdays is a journey - in fact, it is a progress-based journey; we are starting with one Thursday a month, expanding to every week, and in time, maybe every day will be California Thursday! We want to focus on doing the best we can, telling the success story of feeding students fresh, healthy California food. For some, maybe success looks like working with one new local vendor and building a relationship between them and your district; for others it might look like featuring a new, fresh entree in elementary schools with plans to expand from there. You may not hit your goal for the program [at first], but you have [time] to continue to innovate by exploring new vendors and ingredients, responding to feedback from students and staff, and building on a successful marketing strategy. Change does not happen overnight, it takes time, and we are excited to support the network through this exciting evolution. (Kesselman, 2015a)

²⁵ The use of the acronym of “PBJ,” is an intended pun on Kesselman’s part since “PBJ” is a common acronym for peanut butter and jelly. Kesselman coined both “bite-sized implementation strategy” and “progress-based journey” to describe the California Thursdays initiative.

²⁶ “Someday, maybe every day can be California Thursdays” is drawn from the last statement in an animated California Thursdays commercial, which can be accessed on the landing page of CEL’s California Thursdays website (<http://www.californiathursdays.org/>).

As this section illuminates, the conditions that led to the emergence of California Thursdays in OUSD have had implications for other, interrelated contexts (different districts) and demonstrate how the relational sense of context dimension, outlined in the theory of co-construction, is operating within the case of California Thursdays going to scale.

The Center for Ecoliteracy: An Intermediary Organization

In addition to transformative implementation practices used to engage districts in a “progress-based journey,” another key factor that enabled California Thursdays to go to scale was the role of CEL as an intermediary organization. As defined by Honig (2004), intermediary organizations “occupy the space in between at least two other parties” and “primarily function to mediate or to manage change in both those parties” (p. 67). More specifically, intermediary organizations can “play a crucial role as translator between the top and the bottom of the policy system, and [as discussed in the brief review of education policy implementation literature] suggest a response to a policy implementation dilemma of longstanding, the uneven and unpredictable relationship between policy and practice” (Wechsler & Friedrich, 1997, p. 386).

In Wechsler & Friedrich’s (1997) article regarding the role of mediating organizations for school reform, the authors describe the ways that intermediary organizations help facilitate the implementation process through the provision of external resources such as funding and materials, programmatic assistance through on-site support such as consulting and professional development, organizing implementation actors around a common goal (such as serving California Thursdays meals), and fostering a “learning community” through facilitation of information sharing across contexts. CEL’s work with OUSD and the other 84 districts participating in the implementation of California Thursdays across the state embodies many of these characteristics in how it recruited and partnered with districts to scale the initiative.

Proving the Concept: Building on Foundations and Strategic Recruitment for Going to Scale. As part of the foundation for taking California Thursdays to scale, CEL was strategic in its effort to demonstrate proof of concept, or the replicable viability of California Thursdays. First, Zenobia Barlow noted that CEL’s past “Rethinking School Lunch” (RSL), or intermediary work with food service directors – including three statewide “California Food for California Kids” conferences – had “already forged essential relationships in order to create the underpinnings of a statewide network of skilled innovative food service directors in high performing districts into which to embed the program” (personal communication, December 10, 2016). Second, CEL was also very intentional in recruiting districts that both “demonstrated a level of readiness to take [California Thursdays] on” (Kesselman, as quoted in Breier, 2014, para. 21) and were “the highest performing and most innovative, creative food service directors in the state that could run with [California Thursdays]” (Z. Barlow, RSLO Case Study, 2016).

CEL identified these food service directors through their participation in three of CEL’s statewide “California Food for California Kids” conferences,²⁷ where CEL “engaged those leaders in pop up kitchens in which [they] collectively cooked recipes from [Cooking with California Food in K-12 Schools (2011)] and carefully constructed professional development experiences that served as the foundation for later scaling the California Thursdays program” (Z. Barlow, personal communication, December 10, 2016). This meant that these districts had the necessary will, leadership, and foundational capacities to take on and adapt California Thursdays to the needs of their districts.

²⁷ The *Cooking with California Food in K-12 Schools* (Brennan & Evans, 2011) “was the basis for a statewide conference [called “California Food for California Kids”] and cooking school for nutrition services directors and other school reform advocates that included practice with scratch cooking from fresh ingredients, as well as presentation of a range of strategies for change” (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2012). The goal of the conferences is to cultivate “innovative ways to make the 900 million school meals served each year in the state healthier for our kids” (Larson, 2012).

The California Thursdays Network and Listserv: Implementing a “Collective Impact Model.” In preparation for taking California Thursdays to scale, in August of 2014, CEL brought together the 15 food service directors they recruited, who as leaders of school meal programs in their districts “collectively serve 190 million meals annually and represent large and small, urban, rural, and suburban districts across the state – to prepare for a statewide rollout of California Thursdays on October 23, 2014” (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2014a). These districts became CEL’s first cohort and the “California Thursdays Network” and were the pioneers for CEL’s effort to scale California Thursdays.

The first cohort of districts committed to collectively implementing the initiative in their districts at the same time. To support the planned statewide rollout, CEL held a California Thursdays day-long orientation session on August 7, 2014, in Berkeley, CA. The agenda for the day included (1) a presentation from Jennifer LeBarre and Alex Emmott regarding their piloting of California Thursdays in OUSD; (2) a session called “Learning from Parents and Kids”²⁸; (3) an activity for “How to Run a Taste Test”; and (4) sessions in which participants were walked through a “toolkit”²⁹ of resources that [CEL] provided to implement their own California Thursdays programs” and were given “media training” to “prepare [participants] to maximize media coverage and effectiveness” (A. Kesselman, personal communication, December 10, 2016). Participants were also walked through a “detailed statewide rollout calendar” (A. Kesselman, personal communication, December 10, 2016). The calendar was a detailed action plan (and an artifact of the “bite-sized implementation strategy” and “progress-based journey”)

²⁸ This session presented results from three different focus groups conducted in July 2014, with parents of children in school districts in Riverside, San Diego, and Berkeley, CA. The focus groups were held to “understand parents’ perceptions and attitudes about their children’s school meal program and the impact of serving more fresh California fruits and vegetables” (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2014a).

²⁹ In an interview with Kesselman, he told me that the “tool kit” given to districts initially included “high-resolution graphics to be used to make stickers, posters, shirts, etc.; a design guide on how to use the marketing materials; print-ready posters; press release templates; recipes; student tasting templates; and a strategic timeline leading to their collective launch [of California Thursdays on October 23, 2014].”

that included specific tasks that the districts needed to accomplish in preparation for implementation of California Thursdays. The plan included social media campaigns in addition to the logistics of procuring and preparing staff to serve their launch California Thursdays meal.

After the convening, CEL created a California Thursdays listserv named “A Network of School Food Innovators” to enable communication and coordinated efforts between CEL and the network. This coordinated effort was key in that it structured the scaling of implementing California Thursdays across the state into a “collective impact model.” As relayed to me by Barlow, “collective impact is the commitment of a group of actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem, using a structured form of collaboration” (personal communication, December 10, 2016). The concept of “collective impact” was drawn from an article, “Collective Impact” (Kania & Kramer, 2011), that articulates five criteria that organizations must meet to be considered engaging in a collective impact approach to implementation: (1) a common agenda (such as the transformation of school meals into ones that are healthier); (2) a shared measurement system (tools used to measure progress toward the common agenda); (3) mutually reinforcing activities³⁰ (such as events that CEL organizes for the California Thursdays Network³¹); (4) continuous communication (frequent communication between actors engaged in a collective impact endeavor, such as CEL’s use of a listserv); and (5) a backbone organization (an organization that operates as an intermediary in its dedication to the provision of support for the group participating in a common agenda for a collective impact – case in point, CEL’s role as an intermediary organization for the California Thursdays Network).

³⁰ “Mutually reinforcing activities” are any activities that strengthen the bonds of a group that is engaging in collective action.

³¹ One example of these types of events was held on March 16, 2016. The “California Food for California Kids Lunch” was hosted in San Diego in partnership with Supervisor Ron Roberts. The event was “held underneath a white tent in beautiful Waterfront Park, the event brought together regional, state, and national stakeholders from the farm to school community to celebrate our theme ‘*what local looks like*’. Nine San Diego school districts were paired with local producers at tables along the periphery of the tent to offer samples of their California Thursdays meals, and insight into the local partnership that made it all possible. The location, showcase tables, and speakers all came together to create a fun and lively atmosphere, highlighting the success of the California Thursdays network” (Foley, 2016).

In a review of the Network's listserv archives, there are several instances where this model is articulated to participants in the network. For example, in an email to the listserv from Kesselman regarding the October 23rd rollout of California Thursdays, he announces:

We are excited to work as an innovative network of school districts to promote healthy, freshly prepared meals featuring California ingredients with a **collective voice**, through **collective action**, to achieve a **collective impact** [*emphasis in original*] on the food we serve to California's children. We want this incredibly innovative and powerful network of schools to shift their procurement more towards California and more towards fresh, and we want to do it collectively. By working together, we can share best practices and form a collective voice that speaks to the importance of serving our children freshly prepared meals made with fresh, California-sourced ingredients; important for the health of our kids, our schools, and the health of our communities. (Kesselman, 2014a)

This collective impact model, expressed in and nurtured by the listserv managed by CEL, was a significant factor in the scaling of California Thursdays. The listserv provided a forum for a process of co-construction since participating districts, including OUSD, and CEL co-developed the initiative for scale through the sharing of best practices and resources.

During the first year of the statewide launch of California Thursdays, as relayed to me by Alex Emmott, districts would reach out to her through personal email communication with programmatic questions and requests for recipes and procurement resources. This is also reflected on the listserv. For example, soon after the first cohort's orientation, Emmott sent the following email to the listserv:

I've had a couple of requests for materials from some folks and thought I would share via the listserv. Here's a link to my presentation from 8/7, which lists how we define Level 1 and Level 2 California products: [link removed]. Second, here's a link [link removed] to OUSD's garden to cafeteria materials. We piloted a garden to cafeteria program last year at a handful of sites - really token amounts of product to start, but it's something we're hoping to expand. (Emmott, 2014)

A few days later she received the following request from one of the districts in the network:

"Would you be able to provide the information on the Asian Slaw and the Carrot salad?"

(California Thursdays Listserv, 2014c) To which Emmott responded: "Hey Everyone – Here's the recipes for 3 salads (carrot + two corn salads) attached in excel form. We're finalizing the

Asian slaw recipe & can send that out along with the updated carrot salad recipe shortly.

Thanks!” *[formatting in original]* (California Thursdays Listserv, 2014c)

Other best practices shared within the California Thursdays network that shape the continuous co-construction of the initiative include districts, through the encouragement of CEL, sharing innovations to promote their California Thursdays programs. For example, in February 2015, Adam Kesselman discusses the purpose of the network and the listserv (and expresses its role as an intermediary organization in its facilitation of communication and sharing across districts):

The strength of a network is in its ability to aggregate ideas, effort and resources, and to speak and act collectively - in this case, about freshly prepared meals made with California grown ingredients. In order to jumpstart the connecting and sharing of resources, I would like to request that each member district **contribute one resource or idea to the listserv in the next week** *[emphasis in original]*. This might look like a recipe your district enjoys, a training resource, or a product or grower you like to use. (Kesselman, 2015c)

Responses to this type of request include a district sharing their idea of holding a “California Thursdays barbeque” for their students. As described by the district:

We had our kick-off barbecue event on our high school campus last Thursday. We offered a choice of Grilled Chicken Tacos or Grilled Teriyaki Veggie Kabobs, recipes courtesy of one of our district employees and of a local restaurant, respectively. Each meal we served that day was reimbursable, and participation at there [sic] was up by over 300%. We had students come through who had never before stepped foot inside the cafeteria. We built our own little produce stand to feature samples of local tangerines and freshly-picked strawberries that was made available for free to the entire student body. The students went after the fruit like it was candy! We had great feedback from faculty, parents, and students. We are so grateful to be a part of this amazing initiative. (California Thursdays Listserv, 2015a)

In another example of sharing practices, an email from CEL to the network regarding “What the California Thursdays network is up to...”, discusses another district’s use of automatic “robo-calling” tactics to inform parents about California Thursdays being served at their schools:

Hello families! Tomorrow October 15th is Thursday, but not just any Thursday...It’s California Thursday. That means Child Nutrition will be serving up California food for California kids! We are proud to be offering our students Rotisserie Chicken with Cilantro Lime Rice or a whole-grain Bean and Cheese Burrito. Our Farm to School Salad Bar can’t be beat, with fresh, seasonal and local fruit and vegetables. We are also featuring a brand new all locally sourced item at our Middle and High Schools: Margherita

Pizza, with sauce made in our own Central Kitchen topped with fresh local sliced tomatoes and basil. We hope to greet your student at lunch tomorrow! (California Thursdays Listserv, 2015b)

Fostering a Learning Community Through the Listserv. As the “robo-call” example illustrates, the sharing of best practices on the listserv shows how districts within the California Thursdays network are a learning community, or a “community of practice”³² (Wenger, 1998) that enable the co-construction of the initiative across multiple contexts. While CEL facilitates this community of practice, the listserv also provided an opportunity for CEL to learn from approaches, or the implementation processes of each district to adapt California Thursdays to their contexts. This co-learning between CEL and districts is documented within the listserv. CEL often sent email requests to the network requesting an information share to the listserv regarding districts’ implementation of California Thursdays. For example, in an email from Kesselman to the listserv he asks for districts to “share three bits of information that will help [CEL] build a better program, and support each other” [*sic*] (Kesselman, 2014b) through the following request:

Successes – can you name some new vendors you found, new products or recipes you used, new methods of serving, or successful presentations and/or marketing efforts?

Challenges – what challenges did you have to overcome in serving a California Thursdays meal, and how did you overcome them? Are you still trying to find solutions to challenges that the network might be able to facilitate?

Where do you look for procurement help? – Many of you have robust farm-to-school programs, others are building stronger local procurement strategies. To what organizations - non-profit or for-profit – do you look to help you put locally sourced, fresh meals on the plates of your students? [*formatting in original*] (Kesselman, 2014b)

While the listserv archives provide several responses to this type of request, one response from a district in the Northern Sacramento area is particularly informative. In this email, the Director of

³² In Wenger’s (1998) book, *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*, he defines a community of practice as “a living context that can give newcomers access to competence and also can invite a personal experience of engagement by which to incorporate that competence into an identity of participation. On the other hand, a well functioning community of practice is a good context to explore radically new insights without becoming fools or stuck in some dead end. A history of mutual engagement around a joint enterprise is an ideal context for this kind of leading-edge learning, which requires a strong bond of communal competence along with a deep respect for the particularity of experience. When these conditions are in place, communities of practice are a privileged locus for the creation of knowledge” (p. 214).

Nutrition Services writes about how their school food program “combined the imagination and innovation of [the district’s] kitchen staff and Culinary Club to develop a recipe for Quinoa-Tabbouleh to pair with their locally-sourced rotisserie chicken” (Kesselman, 2016). In the

Director’s own words:

Our approach towards menu items has changed this past year, prioritizing a shift towards focusing on the customer experience first and working backwards to make it compliant. This menu item, which we serve with our locally sourced rotisserie chicken, is special because it wasn’t created by me, but by the kitchen staff and the [district’s] Culinary Club. I found that when you get the buy-in from staff of all levels and input from a diverse student population, you end up with a dish that is truly reflective of the community. By myself, I could not come up with an idea like this, but after the student club and kitchen staff worked on it I have come to realize how the dish has taken on the personalities of staff and students. (California Thursdays Listserv, 2016)

As this portion of the email documents, the Director of Nutrition Services shares what they learned from the process of co-constructing recipes through teaming up with the district’s student culinary club and its food service staff. The note also highlights the importance of this co-construction for the development of a meal that is “reflective of the community,” which the Director felt was primary to the task of making the meal “compliant”³³ since it was a “customer service oriented approach” (which reflects the need to drive participation by appealing to a school meal program’s customer base: students). As the Director elaborates:

Looking at, and sampling the rotisserie chicken and quinoa tabbouleh together on a plate, I think to myself, “*This is awesome. It works on so many levels.*” [*italics in original*] Naturally, the students love it too. At a recent meeting, I overheard things like, “*I think we should add more lemon juice to make it acidic,*” or, “*Should we try this recipe with Israeli Cous Cous?*” [*italics in original*] But this is not a Michelin star kitchen, these were conversations our students were having with our kitchen staff about how to introduce whole grain items in our school menu. I am a fan of this customer experience approach when it comes to rolling out whole grains and other menu items. I changed the way I think about menuing items. I no longer create a recipe that I think will be successful and hope my staff will willingly serve it. Now, I try to provide this service where staff and students have input on what we offer, which in turn leads to successful menu items. It is truly a win-win situation for all. (California Thursdays Listserv, 2016)

³³ The reference to “compliance” is regarding making the meal meet the HHFKA’s nutritional guidelines. As already discussed, the standard for a California Thursdays meal is that it uses fresh ingredients (not processed ones) and is healthy. Under the HHFKA, a chicken nugget can meet the nutrition standards by, for example, using whole grain breading, and complying with sodium level and calories from fat limits. This does not mean that the chicken nugget is healthy. Therefore, when the Director of Nutrition Services states that they will work backwards to make their California Thursdays meal compliant, the context of this statement is likely about, for example, how to meet serving size requirements for, e.g., proteins, whole grains, etc., for each grade level.

The Director of Nutrition Services' response to CEL's request for information demonstrates two things. First, it shows how communication through the listserv is facilitating a process of learning among districts and CEL. And, second, it also makes visible the ways in which co-construction operated across multiple contexts throughout the process of taking California Thursdays to scale and how all members of this community of practice, through their joint effort participated in a model of collective impact. Finally, the email also reiterates the power of recipe development in the way that it serves as a significant lever (or scalable, transformative implementation practice) for systems change across school meal programs regardless of variation in contexts.

Cultivating Positive Discourse: Reframing the Narrative of School Lunch

As a participant-observer, I worked with Alex Emmott, OUSD's Farm to School Supervisor, to conduct workshops on three different occasions. One of these workshops was a co-facilitation of "Social Justice, Food Justice, Education, and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)" at the 5th Annual Social Justice Forum on Food Justice hosted by Holy Names University in Oakland, CA. Alex Emmott and I began the workshop by asking participants³⁴ to write down what comes to mind when someone says, "school lunch." When participants shared what they wrote, the word "nasty" (and its synonyms) was a ubiquitous response. Moreover, statements like "not fresh," "cold," "packaged," "fake," "preservatives," "not culturally appropriate," "only option many have," and "ketchup as a vegetable" expressed the negative associations that people can have with school food.

³⁴ Approximately 25 people attended the workshop. Participants were from the Bay Area (specifically, Oakland, Berkeley, Richmond, and San Francisco) and included individuals of various ages (from 60 to 15 years-old), genders, and positionalities (teachers, OUSD students, community members, individuals from non-profit organizations that work with youth and in community health) that were interested in the topic of food justice and its relationship to the school meal program.

These negative associations, or descriptions, of school food reflect a form of discourse in the way that they attribute contextual meanings to school lunch beyond the food itself. For example, the “ketchup as a vegetable” statement harkens back to the Reagan era, specifically, the President’s Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, which cut subsidies to many social programs such as the NSLP. One of the ways that the administration tried to save money was to allow ketchup to be counted as a vegetable under the school lunch program’s nutrition standards (see Poppendieck, 2010 and Levine, 2008 for a more detailed history of the impacts of the Reagan administration on the NSLP). Likewise, the statement that school lunch is “the only option many have” reflects a larger social issue of inequitable access to food in the U.S. These statements constitute a type of narrative about school lunch. California Thursdays offers an alternative discourse, one that is positive and that is reframing how individuals in districts exposed to the initiative might think about and characterize school lunch.

This positive discourse has been intentionally cultivated by CEL in two ways. The first is what I refer to as “internal positive discourse” to describe the empowering and affirming ways in which CEL communicated with districts, and the ways in which districts in the network communicated with one another internally through email exchanges on the California Thursdays network listserv. The second form of positive discourse cultivated by CEL – through trademarking and branding of California Thursdays, and marketing of the program through multiple forms of media such as press releases, local television, online newspapers, and social media campaigns – is what I refer to as “external positive discourse.” This term is used to describe the ways that CEL engaged in efforts to influence external public perceptions of school meal programs.

Internal Positive Discourse. CEL's use of internal positive discourse through the listserv appears to have positively influenced the way that food service workers are thinking about and describing their work. For example, after the first cohort's orientation for the statewide roll-out of California Thursdays, one Director of Food Services from a district in the network emailed the listserv to say:

Center for Ecoliteracy,
I just wanted to say thank you for a wonderful event, jam packed full of information and inspiration. It is an honor to be included with such a great group of forwarding [*sic*] thinking Districts that are truly changing the plate. (California Thursdays Listserv, 2014)

To which Barlow responded, "We were thrilled to convene the great group of forward thinkers who are truly changing the plate in California (and influencing the country)" (Barlow, 2014).

The name of the listserv, "A Network of School Food Innovators," also reflects CEL's intentionality with which it communicates with the California Thursdays network. CEL often sent emails to districts that used positive discourse to emphasize the transformative work that members of the network were engaging in. For example, in an email welcoming the second cohort of districts to the California Thursdays network, Adam Kesselman expresses his gratitude to the districts stating, "Thank you for inspiring us, and leading the movement for fresh, healthy meals in schools. We are excited to be your partners! (Kesselman, 2015c). An additional email below from Kesselman highlights this positive discursive approach to communicating with the network:

As members of the California Thursdays network of participating school districts you are part of a cohort of innovative school districts pushing the boundaries of what is possible in school meal programs; you are committed to serving FRESH food, LOCALLY SOURCED [*emphasis in original*] from California (and most likely very near to your district), and of a high quality. Perhaps you will find it encouraging to know that the work you are spearheading is on the cutting edge of food trends in the U.S, as I am sure you are already aware. (Kesselman, 2015b).

Positive discourse was also exchanged between districts through the listserv. For example, a Director of Nutrition Services sent an email to the listserv in which they share a San

Francisco Chronicle article entitled, “‘Ugly’ fish a prized catch for Bay Area school cafeterias.”³⁵ In the email the Director states, “Sharing this article that came out in the SF Chronicle yesterday - you can see the connections through this network and how it helps us to make a larger impact. I feel so fortunate to be a part of it with you all!” (California Thursdays Listserv, 2015c). The examples of positive affirmations provided in this paper are representative of both CEL and districts’ postings on the listserv. While many education reform projects are met with contestation at the local level, the California Thursdays model has been and continues to be eagerly embraced by participating districts. While this embrace can be seen in the internal positive discourse, it is also likely shaped by the external positive discourse.

External Positive Discourse. CEL’s use of external positive discourse started with trademarking the California Thursdays program on March 19, 2014 and the initiative’s logo on July 21, 2015 (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2015). In interviews with both CEL and OUSD NS key informants, I was told by multiple individuals that the purpose of trademarking California Thursdays was essentially to “maintain the integrity of the meal.” An example of maintaining this integrity was discussed with me in an interview with a FoodCorps service member:

“One of the companies that makes our breakfast muffins threw a California Thursdays logo on it, and nothing in that muffin is grown in California. And because the logo is trademarked we were able to be like ‘no, take that off.’ So, there is power in having had it trademarked.”

As elaborated further by Kesselman, “We started to have the conversation about what is freshly prepared. We also inserted into the conversation like clean-labeled food. Trying to get to a cleaner product, because we had companies like Cheetos, saying Cheetos is a California Thursday food because it’s made in California.”

³⁵ <http://www.sfchronicle.com/food/article/Ugly-fish-a-prized-catch-for-Bay-Area-6465219.php?t=604d166e5b883cbd7b&cmpid=twitter-premium>

One key element of external positive discourse in the California Thursdays implementation is branding and marketing. As Adam Kesselman said, “Marketing [the California Thursdays initiative] is a huge piece. That was something I saw very early on in Oakland. It was like, ‘Well, we need a way to tell the story. You can’t just make the change and nobody knows about it.’” The connection of branding and marketing to external positive discourse and thus to successful implementation was articulated in an interview I conducted with Jonathan Foley:

The goal is to try and create this larger consciousness around farm to school, and around localized procurement through California Thursdays as a recognizable brand. There have been a lot of successes that have come out of a unified marketing campaign at a school. When you create brand awareness about what California Thursdays can do, there is a recognition and a familiarity among students and community members and an association that allows the program a bit more credibility. And it also ties the food service director in the district to a larger statewide movement. In several of our districts, marketing campaigns have really paid off in terms of [student] participation [in the school meal program]. When you increase participation, you have a higher budget and it allows you more flexibility in terms of recipes and procurement.

Marketing California Thursdays also helps to reframe how students and families are perceiving school food. As further elaborated by Foley:

I think that for a long time there was the school food service and the cafeteria and the lunch break. It was just seen as this time where students are sent away into the lunchroom and something was slapped on their plate and who knows what it is, and there’s no real understanding or there’s no real almost respect behind it at all. So, the marketing specifically is kind of like one manifestation of what happens when you kind of put more of a spotlight on to school food, and treat it with the attention and respect that it deserves for a bunch of reasons... for the student health and well-being, for nutrition, for environmental reasons, for economic reasons. When you present a product or a food or a service to your community and to your students, it will be reflected in participation or understanding or a recognition on behalf of the student body that there’s more to school food than a time to sit in the cafeteria.

Discussion

The emergence of California Thursdays reflects the co-construction of solutions that emerged from local level conditions. Specifically, OUSD’s construction of its central kitchen was delayed leaving the project in a limbo state. To work through this issue, CEL, in partnership

with OUSD NS, developed the California Thursdays initiative to advance improvements to OUSD's school food program, despite the constraint of inadequate facilities. According to the theory of co-construction, local level constraints also reflect broader, structural constraints that school districts must contend with in the process of educational change and reform (Datnow, et al., 2002). In the case of the factors and enabling conditions that facilitated the process of California Thursdays going to scale, the initiative resolves broader constraints that are common to and shared across school food contexts regardless of variability. Therefore, a significant implication of the case of California Thursdays for policy scholars and practitioners is the need for education reformers to identify constraints that are common across contexts. Once identified, the process of reconciling these constraints should be broken down into small, actionable tasks (a "bite-sized implementation strategy") that scaffold, or build upon one another (a "progress-based journey") to not only produce systems change but to simultaneously build the capacity of implementation actors to sustain and continuously improve upon the system.

As we see from this study, CEL plays an important role as an intermediary organization in supporting the 84 districts that are currently participating in the implementation of California Thursdays. CEL organizes implementation actors around a specific goal: serving freshly prepared California Thursdays meals to the furthest extent possible (as often as possible and to the highest level possible, i.e., fresh, healthy, delicious, locally procured and ethically sourced ingredients, etc.), and facilitates their collaboration in direct application toward that goal through collective action, sharing of best practices, and by fostering a community of practice where participants learn from one another and co-construct the evolution and expansion of California Thursdays.

At the district level, each participating district is changing their school food system through engagement of transformative implementation practices and through an approach to policy implementation that scaffolds the process of reforming, or changing a complex system. However, because of CEL taking the initiative to scale, this systems change effort is now happening at the state level and is facilitating a significant transformation of California's school food system (as noted in the introduction of this article, the 84 districts participating in the implementation of California Thursdays are collectively serving one-third of the state's annual one billion school meals). This transformation includes not only changes to the meals being served in California, but it is also positively reframing the discourse of school lunch both internally with school food service workers and externally with the broader public.

An analysis of California Thursdays as an outcome of the implementation of federal school food policy at the local level contributes important lessons regarding the role and use of education policy and schools in the promotion of educational equity and social justice. While I have focused on the meso-level of the school, I agree with Powell that childhood hunger and obesity should be understood in the "context of structural inequality" in that these problems are manifestations of "structural marginality" (Powell, 2013, p. 3). The concept of structural marginality, as applied to the issues of childhood hunger and obesity, shifts the focus away from individual actors (families and their diet related choices and physical activities) to the ways in which structures marginalize whole groups of people and "unevenly distribute opportunities [and] depress life chances" (Powell 2013, p. 3). It reframes these poverty and diet related health issues that fall along lines of gender, race, and class as symptoms of an unjust food system that shape and limit people's choices (Paarlberg, 2010; Patel, 2008; Nestle, 2002; Poppendieck, 1998), and as the outcome of inequitable access to healthy food and built environments (Larson,

Story & Nelson, 2009). Given that the problems of childhood hunger and obesity are reflective of social inequality (and are a larger public health issue) is it appropriate that schools, through federal policy, are being tasked with resolving what is arguably outside the scope of their educational mission? As argued by Anyon (2005), “Rules and regulations regarding teaching, curriculum, and assessment certainly are important, but policies to eliminate poverty-wage work and housing segregation (for example) should be part of the educational policy panoply as well, for these have consequences for urban education at least as profound as curriculum, pedagogy, and testing” (p. 66).

The U.S. proclivity for using education policy as a mechanism for social intervention, and public schools as vehicles for the delivery of social provision (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack, 1992) is an American phenomenon that Kantor & Lowe (2013) refer to as the “educationalized welfare state.” This concept is further elaborated by Tyack & Cuban’s (1995) statement that “Reforming the public schools has long been a favorite way of improving not just education but society” (p. 1).

The genesis of the American predilection for depending on schools to fix social problems arises out of two historical foundations. The first is a preference for educational rather than social entitlement programs – a “doors not floors” approach to social provision, meaning the U.S. has “little inclination to provide ‘floors’ – that is, social guarantees for a minimum standard of living, but most Americans are willing to open ‘doors’ of opportunity by providing education” (Cohen, 2005, p. 513). The second condition arises out of the first. Twentieth century social program activists strategically used the nation’s commitment to compulsory, universal education to generate support for social services, specifically, mother’s pensions (the predecessor to Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC]), and child labor laws (Cohen, 2005). Furthermore,

during this period the U.S. federal government did not have the right to tax business profits or individual incomes of citizens (until 1914), nor the bureaucratic infrastructure to collect taxes (Berkowitz & McQuaid, 1980, p. 25). Hence, Progressive era welfare advocates built with what they had available and used the public schools, since it was one of the only institutions that had the capacity to implement the development of a welfare state (Steffes, 2012). The evolution and growth of the NSLP is rooted in this history (see Levine, 2008 and Gunderson, 2003) and is a quintessential example of the American educationalized welfare state. And the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, its integration of Farm to School within the legislation, and, thus, California Thursdays (an outcome of the implementation of federal school food policy at the local level) continues this tradition. However, expecting so much from institutions of education has placed a heavy burden on our schools. I will conclude by discussing how the very success of California Thursdays shows the problems inherent in the educationalized welfare state, particularly in the neoliberal era of privatization.

Conclusion

Students' academic achievement, their health, and overall well-being are negatively impacted by childhood hunger and obesity. I have argued that these problems are symptoms of structural inequality that is converging upon and within the nation's classrooms. The nation's school meal program has been one longstanding measure for attempting to ameliorate issues such as food insecurity. However, if we as a nation are interested in eliminating these problems as opposed to simply placing a bandage on them, then we need to engage in careful consideration of the types of policies and programs that truly have ability to address the task at hand. While

focused on the impact of social class, Richard Rothstein's (2004) perspective is relevant to this argument. Rothstein states,

Eliminating the social class differences in student outcomes requires eliminating the impact of social class on children in American society. It requires abandoning the illusion that school reform alone can save us from having to make the difficult economic and political decisions that the goal of equality inevitably entails. School improvement does have an important role to play, but it cannot shoulder the entire burden, or even most of it, on its own. (p. 149)

Using education policy and schools to solve broader social issues is at once deceptive and pernicious. It is deceptive because it obfuscates the extent to which we as a nation should be held responsible for social inequality and accountable for supporting viable solutions to these problems. It is pernicious because the historical trend of placing the responsibility on schools to redress social inequality silently and effectively cuts off the reach that policy can ultimately have in changing the status quo. The use of the HHFKA to address childhood hunger and obesity is an example of this. As stated by Poppendieck (2010), "hunger is at once a radical and conservative issue: radical because it reveals the depth of the failings of the economic system, conservative because it can be ameliorated without seriously undermining that system through the provision of 'in kind' food assistance" (p. 63).

The creation and scaling of California Thursdays reflect the ways that local level actors use their agency and will to develop innovative solutions for promoting educational equity and social justice across various contexts – despite numerous constraints. Clearly, California Thursdays cannot address the structural inequities that produce childhood hunger and obesity in the first place, but it can reshape the school food landscape and create broader impacts. More research is needed into systems change at the macro level, specifically, how Farm to School initiatives like California Thursdays change public health outcomes, local economies, the environment (through reduction of packaging and food transportation miles), and educational outcomes and experiences.

California Thursdays is exciting because it is an initiative that has been scaled across various school contexts; however, in terms of scaling the initiative outside of California context still matters in important, and perhaps unresolvable ways. For example, OUSD NS has progressive and innovative leaders in its Executive Director, Jennifer LeBarre, and Farm to School Supervisor, Alex Emmott. The initiative is situated in California (arguably the bread basket of the nation in terms of agricultural outputs), which makes it much easier for schools to procure locally grown, seasonal produce compared to states with less robust agricultural economies. Finally, not all districts have access to an intermediary organization like CEL, which is supported by philanthropic donations from private foundations. Therefore, school food innovation (California Thursdays) that attends to larger public health issues (childhood hunger and obesity) and, by extension, social inequality, is largely dependent on the hard work and innovation of local actors and relies on the fortunes and good will of private and non-profit organizations. However, educational inequality and childhood hunger and obesity are the outcomes of broader systems of inequity in which schools are situated. Therefore, education reform needs to be reframed as a feature of broader social and economic policy efforts that intentionally attend to social inequality, rather than serving as a substitute for them.

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