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# The 'wonderfulness' of children's feeding programs

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## SUMMARY

*When people involved in children's feeding programs were asked to describe them, without exception they were described using phrases that reflected the perception of 'wonderfulness'. This paper critically analyses the 'wonderfulness' of children's feeding programs by examining the language used to describe these programs, and the features of a 'wonderful' program through an analysis of a multi-site, qualitative case study of nine diverse programs in Atlantic Canada. When participants justified their comments about the 'wonderfulness' of children's feeding programs, they did so based upon five perceptions of program strengths: enhanced family coping; providing good food and nutrition; socializing and making friends; behaving well in school; and volunteerism. We suggest that programs can be designed to be innately 'wonderful' if they are community- and charity-based, support a noble cause such as the elimination of child hunger, engage good people as donors and volunteers, and provide a direct service to children apart from their families. We challenge health promoters to beware of the 'wonderful' program; its 'wonderfulness' may actually be masking unintended negative impacts upon its participants.*

*Key words*: children's feeding programs; evaluation; health promotion

## INTRODUCTION

Concern that many Canadian families are unable to meet their basic food needs (National Council of Welfare, 2000) and the perception that, as a consequence, children are going to school hungry (National Child Hunger Survey, 1997; McIntyre *et al.*, 1999; McIntyre *et al.*, 2000) has led to a children's feeding program movement across Canada (Canadian Education Association, 1989; McIntyre and Dayle, 1992; Tarasuk and Davis, 1996; Health Canada and Childhood and Youth Division, 1999). Volunteer-driven children's breakfast and lunch programs feeding hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren have been established in schools, churches and community centres in every province and territory (Canadian Education Association, 1989; Health Canada and Childhood and Youth Division, 1999). These programs are rarely established because of the results of a systematic needs assessment, and evaluations of their effectiveness are not conducted (McIntyre and Dayle, 1992; McIntyre *et al.*, 1999). Once in place, these programs shift beyond their initial focus on the alleviation of hunger. Instead, they purport to improve children's learning, model good nutrition, and relieve family stress for a wide catchment of children, not only the poor (Dayle *et al.*, 2000).

Studies examining the contribution of children's feeding programs to alleviating hunger, enhancing nutrition, and supporting healthy child and family development have raised concerns about

the appropriateness and effectiveness of these programs in meeting these goals (McIntyre *et al.*, 1999; Dayle *et al.*, 2000; Hay, 2000). Hay concluded that school-based feeding programs could be part of a comprehensive strategy to address hunger, but cautioned that *ad hoc* charitable programs could have unintended negative consequences, such as dependency and stigmatization (Hay, 2000). In addition to these consequences, we found that children's feeding programs take on a family substitution role, thereby systematically excluding most parents from participating in program planning and operations (McIntyre and Dayle, 1992; McIntyre *et al.*, 1999). We have also documented the institutionalization of children's feeding programs in Atlantic Canada, providing evidence to suggest that community participation wanes over time (McIntyre *et al.*, 2001). Such detrimental program impacts are only rarely publicly acknowledged. On the contrary, when people involved in these programs are asked to describe them, the most common response is that the program is 'great' or 'wonderful'.

The concept of a 'wonderful' program is not new. Fillos and Manger discussed the challenges of and techniques for evaluating programs that 'the whole world already calls wonderful' using three case examples of programs that varied in content—planetarium science, human ecology and aesthetic literacy—but that shared a focus on outcomes that are valued affectively but that are difficult to study empirically (Fillos and Manger, 1984). Unconditional professional and public acclaim for these 'wonderful' programs was based on a 'charity model' or a 'pork-barrel model', both of which use inputs such as the sincerity of funders or the willingness of program staff to give it their best try as the criteria for success rather than outputs or outcomes (Patton, 1981). Although Fillos and Manger propose steps to open 'wonderful' programs to evaluation research (Fillos and Manger, 1984), their implicit assumption is that the outcome of the evaluation will be congruent with the perception of wonderfulness. We disagree. Edwards, for example, provides evidence that despite being widely perceived as 'wonderful', child adoption programs of the past were used as a form of social control and punishment for relinquishing mothers (Edwards, 1999). Shame, stigma and social pressures in the form of blackmail, lies, coercion and manipulation were used to force unwed mothers to give their babies up for adoption, the culturally prescribed solution to illegitimate birth (Edwards, 1999).

Health promotion principles would define children's feeding programs as a tremendous success. These community-based programs mobilize community members, promote mutual aid, empower program leaders, foster intersectoral partnerships among schools, community organizations and the private sector, strengthen communities, and deliver health promoting messages and activities (Epp, 1986; Hamilton and Bhatti, 1996). These principles cannot explain, however, the aforementioned unintended negative consequences of children's feeding programs or why the more negative aspects of these programs are masked by the perception of 'wonderfulness'.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse critically the 'wonderfulness' of children's feeding programs in order to inform health promotion programming and policies. We define 'wonderfulness' as the widely held perception of program administrators/operators, volunteers/staff, participating children and parents that programs are 'great' or 'wonderful', i.e. that they have remarkable ability or are unusually good (Bolander *et al.*, 1988).

## METHODS

This study presents a content analysis of data from a larger original observational study of nine children's feeding programs in Atlantic Canada (McIntyre *et al.*, 1999). The methodology has been described in detail in previous reports (McIntyre *et al.*, 1999; Dayle *et al.*, 2000). Briefly, programs represented urban, rural and suburban settings in the Provinces of Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Programs were selected using theoretical sampling (Glaser, 1978) enhanced with snowball sampling (Patton, 1990).

Data were collected using participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989), semi-structured group and individual interviews (Spradley, 1979) with a variety of program administrators, operators, volunteers, staff, board members and parents who were referred by program operators, and focus groups (Krueger, 1998) with participating children. All data were collected between November 1994 and June 1995 by trained, qualitative researchers who spent ~1 month at each site. The field observations, interviews and focus groups were supplemented with a document review of program promotional material, operational reports and media articles.

The interview guide encouraged respondents to be honest and indicated that negative comments were just as valuable as positive ones. Virtually every interview or focus group asked specifically about the benefits of, and problems with, the program.

The face-to-face interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Telephone interviews with parents were captured through detailed note-taking. All data were coded using QRS NUD-IST qualitative data analysis software. The overall results from the larger study and for each site were presented to participants during which responses and clarifications were sought and recorded. Informed consent was provided by all participants according to the consent process approved by the Dalhousie University ethics committee.

For the purpose of this paper, the original uncoded transcripts were reexamined using content analysis (Weber, 1990) for language that reflected the perception of 'wonderfulness' of the programs. We also re-examined the original transcripts to discern responses to questions asked about any problematic aspects of the programs. Words or phrases that reflected both positive and negative perceptions of the programs were coded for each transcript by site, source and specific features relating to the perception of the program. Common examples of language used to describe children's feeding programs as 'wonderful' were compiled for each site. A word/phrase search using QRS NUD-IST data analysis software was also used to determine the frequency of the language representative of the perception of 'wonderfulness' of children's feeding programs. The resulting coding framework was validated against the original coding framework that was developed using QRS NUD-IST software (McIntyre *et al.*, 1999; Dayle *et al.*, 2000).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The programs

Consistent with the purposive sampling strategy, the nine children's feeding programs studied represented programs with diverse historical contexts and demographic features, described elsewhere in detail (McIntyre *et al.*, 1999). Briefly, of the six breakfast and three lunch programs, seven were school-based or school administered (even though two of these were operated

out of church facilities), one was operated by a church, and one by a community organization. The oldest program had been in place for 23 years, and one had been established for ~4 months before it was studied, but the majority had been in operation for 5–7 years. Program supervision was by paid operators and volunteers at four of the sites, teacher/principal volunteers at three of the sites, two parent volunteers at one site and community volunteers at the other. Most programs were funded in part by municipal, provincial or federal sources, and augmented by donations from charities and a wide variety of other organizations and individuals. No site had conducted a program evaluation, although some had received informal feedback from teachers about improved student performance.

Children attending the programs were generally between 5 and 12 years of age. Three of the programs were based in communities with residents of varied economic backgrounds, while six of the programs served communities with noticeably disadvantaged circumstances, including large numbers of residents living in public housing who received employment insurance or social assistance. Programs offered their meals for free, with the exception of one that requested low-cost voluntary payments. All programs followed the school year and therefore were suspended for the summer months. Despite a belief that their programs fed hungry children, the majority of sites acknowledged that many of the targeted children did not attend and of the children who participated, the majority were not poor and attended for other reasons, such as convenience and socializing.

### Children's feeding programs are 'wonderful'

Table 1 presents the frequency of language use that was representative of the perception of children's feeding programs, and illustrates the remarkable consistency that we found in the language of the study participants pertaining to the perception of these diverse feeding programs. Without exception the children's feeding programs we studied were all described using phrases that reflected the perception of 'wonderfulness'. The words most frequently used to describe the programs were 'great' and 'greatest thing', with 'wonderful' and 'really wonderful' the next most commonly used terms. We chose to focus upon the language of 'wonderfulness' because 'wonderful' is a much less frequently used word than 'great'.

**Table 1:** Frequency of language representative of the perception of the 'wonderfulness' of children's feeding programs

| Language representative of 'wonderfulness' concept | Sites | | | | | | | | | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6[a] | 7 | 8 | 9 | |
| Great; greatest thing | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 40 |
| Wonderful; really wonderful | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | 15 |
| Excellent | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 12 |
| Really cool; pretty cool; neat | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | 9 |
| Very lucky to have it; privilege; best thing that ever happened; vital, very vital | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | 6 |
| Fantastic | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | 5 |
| Godsend, absolute godsend | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | 3 |
| Marvelous; truly marvelous | | | | | ✓ | | | | | 2 |
| Super | ✓ | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Loves it | | ✓ | | | | | | | | 2 |
| Very successful | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Fabulous | | | | | | | | | | 1 |

[a]Not permitted to interview parents and children.

In addition, the language of 'wonderfulness' is consistent with the difficulty inherent in evaluating programs 'the whole world already calls wonderful' described by Fillos and Manger (Fillos and Manger, 1984).

All nine programs were described using phrases that represented the perception of 'wonderfulness'. Furthermore, these programs were uniformly perceived as 'great' or 'wonderful' by all the programs' administrators/operators, staff/ volunteers, children and parents who participated in the study. In addition to the choice of descriptor, superlatives were commonly used in the discourse. Without exception, when asked whether their program was a good program or about the benefits or strengths of the program, providers would respond with a superlative.

Interviewer: Is the program a good thing?
Parent: Yes, it is a **wonderful** thing, truly **marvelous** …

Interviewer: I mean overall would you say this is a good program?
Parent: **Excellent**, I think if it was to end there would be a lot of children out there would suffer …

Interviewer: And, from your point of view, what do you think are the benefits of this program?
Volunteer: Oh, I think it's **wonderful** …

Interviewer: What in your opinion are the strengths of this program?
Kitchen staff no. 1: Yes, yep it is.
Kitchen staff no. 2: **Fantastic**.

Interviewer: Do you think that this is a good program?
Parent: It's a **really wonderful** program.

This language reflects a pervasive perception among those either directly or indirectly involved in children's feeding programs that these programs are indeed 'wonderful'. Their conviction is unshakeable.

### Rarely a negative word

Forty-two interviews directly asked respondents to provide comment on negative aspects of the program. Such questions were phrased as: 'What do you think is the worst thing about the program? Are there any changes you would like to make? Are there any problems with the program? Is there anything you don't like about the program? What are the weaknesses?' Responses were 'no', 'none', 'nothing' or 'not really' in all but nine cases. Children remarked in two of seven focus groups on specific food items that they disliked eating. Volunteers or paid staff commented in five of 12 group interviews about their low pay, lack of government funding, difficulty in getting volunteers to come in early, children wanting food choices, and doing the dishes. There was one parent interview remark about student volunteers missing first period classes, and one comment on attempts to support a nutritious menu from a principal. Thus, all categories of respondents

were adamant in their denial of problems and offered no substantive criticism of the program.

## What is 'wonderful' about children's feeding programs?

Participants justified their comments about the 'wonderfulness' of children's feeding programs according to five benefit domains: enhanced family coping; providing good food and nutrition; socializing and making friends; children behaving well in school; and volunteerism.

### Enhanced family coping

Parent: … this program is an **absolute godsend** for those families.

Parent: … it is **fantastic**, if it closed [mother] does not know what she would do. It is really great.… [mother] thinks about what she would do if the program was to close … just thinking about it makes her worry, so she would not think about it, but immediately put it out of her mind … it was too difficult to deal with …

Field notes: [Principal] told me that in this school the program was **vital** to the happiness of many of the children.

School secretary: … I think it's an excellent thing for children that are from low income families, for children who have parents who work and leave early in the morning.

### Providing good food and nutrition

Parent: It's a **really wonderful** program. The children get nourishment to start their day, they have full stomachs to learn better in school …

Parent: … it is **lovely**, it is **great** … without the program her children would not eat at lunchtime.… often there is no food available for breakfast…

Program supervisor: … it is a **very vital** program for this area, definitely, a lot of kids wouldn't get the food without it, they wouldn't eat, or they wouldn't, that might be their only meal of the day for some of them. It's **very successful** I think, **very vital**.

### Behaving well in school

Volunteer: … it's **wonderful**.… the teachers have said the children are more alert in school, you know, it really made a difference, one little boy lost a whole lot of days … and since they've had this program he hasn't lost any.

Volunteer: I think it's **great**.… It's a benefit for the teachers too, because one of the reasons we took it on is the children were falling asleep, they weren't attentive and they were actually passing out …

Field note: … this was the **best** program yet to be implemented in the school. … since the program has started she has noticed a marked improvement in the behavior of the children … she [teacher] thought that the program not only fed them but served to settle the children down for the morning's work …

### Socializing and meeting friends

Parent: … and socially it's a **great** place to meet people and make new friends. [Child's name] loves having the seniors there and also the parent groups that do it. I think it's **great** that the kids get to meet with the teachers too, in an out-of-the-classroom setting.

Field note: … the children really seemed to enjoy the opportunity to attend the program and that they realized that it was a **privilege** to attend the breakfast.

Vice-Principal: … it's been a good thing for the community-at-large … for the image of the school … kids a chance to see the teachers on an out-of-the-classroom basis over there, you can sit down and chat to them … one **very positive** thing … for the kids to see seniors and understand what a senior is and what they're doing has probably been one of the greatest benefits … a **real positive thing**. And I mean, obviously the spin-off is that the kids are in school with full bellies. You know, obviously.

### Volunteerism

Field note: … the students were saying that it was 'really cool' to be a breakfast volunteer. They had been telling people that they were part of the volunteer team and that it was **really neat**.

Volunteer: … when you go home you're sort of full of self-satisfaction, you know, well from helping the little kids out … it's a **wonderful** program and I hope we're still here 30 years from now!

These program benefits are formulated upon certain assumptions about poor families such as their inability to cope or to provide nutritionally sound meals for their presumably hungry children, or upon presumptions about program effectiveness such as enhanced learning and socialization. They include the benefit that volunteers and the community-at-large derive from rendering a service to those in need.

Parents who were interviewed for the study uniformly described these programs as 'wonderful'. We learned as part of our study, however, that the majority of these parents had never visited the program first-hand. Despite the absence of direct knowledge of the programs, our findings suggest that parents subscribed to participants' beliefs about children's feeding programs.

Parent: I think it's the **greatest thing** that [principal's name] has ever come up with and if the other schools could come up with it they'd find …

Parent: the program is **really good, great** … it is a **great program**.

Parent: likes it all, … thinks that the program is going well, and that it is a **really neat thing** for the children.

Parent volunteer: … it is the **best thing that ever happened**.… I think they should get more schools involved and do it.

Parent: I like the whole program, it's **great**. It has been a long time coming and it is **great**. They have had these programs in the cities for a long time so it's so good to see it here in the rural communities.

Parent: … these programs are needed and they are **excellent** … It's **just great**.

Teachers also gave voice to the value of these programs, and supported them because they made them feel good about their role as program volunteer, because of community support for the program, and because they perceived that children were easier to teach, regardless of whether or not these children's impoverished circumstances were otherwise addressed.

Teacher volunteer: for me it's **another way of being of service to the children**.

Teacher: … the truck pulls up with maybe 6–700 dollars worth of food you know all different kinds just donated … I must say and that's an advantage of being up here is the **community-related type of spirit**, that when somebody is in need and as long as it is accepted as an acceptable need the community will chip in.

Field notes (teacher): … it was a **godsend** for many of the children because they were quite impoverished … an **excellent addition to the school**.

The benefits of children's feeding programs are thus spoken of with conviction and certainty, despite their subjectivity, speculativeness, and the absence of evaluative information or, in the case of parents, personal knowledge for justification.

## Why children's feeding programs must be 'wonderful'

Children's feeding programs are innately 'wonderful' by design and we have demonstrated that they are perceived overwhelmingly as such during the course of assessment. Participants' perceptions of feeding programs as 'wonderful' are congruent with why they were established and how they are personally received for those individuals who persist in the program. Our assessment did not include former or non-participating parents or children.

In their own right, *ad hoc* volunteer-driven initiatives such as the children's feeding program movement are often deemed 'wonderful' (Canada, Voluntary Sector Task Force, 2000; Brock, 2001). Fillos' and Manger's criterion around the charity model eliciting views of 'wonderfulness' are so

met (Fillos and Manger, 1984). Children's feeding programs also receive unconditional acclaim as 'wonderful' programs from professionals (e.g. teachers and principals), and the public including parents fulfilling Fillos' and Manger's criteria of the sincerity of donors and the willingness of program staff and volunteers to give it their best try. Children's feeding programs' objectives to reduce child hunger, improve child nutrition, enhance school performance and provide socialization opportunities for children are valued affectively by all direct and indirect participants, meeting another of Fillos' and Manger's 'wonderfulness' criteria (Fillos and Manger, 1984). Edwards has reminded us that programs that seek a better life for children, regardless of their context or greater consequences, are candidates for being touted by the public as 'wonderful' (Edwards, 1999).

In a society where state-provided programs are being eroded and replaced by *ad hoc* community-based programs (Tarasuk and Davis, 1996), the establishment of 'wonderful' children's feeding programs engages families, institutions, the voluntary sector and some government agencies in 'solving' the perceived child hunger problem. The fact that most children's feeding programs are designed according to the health promotion principles of community mobilization, mutual aid, empowerment of participants, and intersectorality (Epp, 1986; Hamilton and Bhatti, 1996) furthers their innately 'wonderful' attributes.

While there is evidence that the impacts of these programs often differ from their intended aims, and result in perpetuating inequities, stigmatizing participants, disempowering and excluding families, and creating dependent clients (McIntyre and Dayle, 1992; McIntyre *et al.*, 1999; Hay, 2000; McIntyre *et al.*, 2001), the innate 'wonderfulness' of children's feeding programs prevents participants from challenging their 'wonderfulness'. It is unclear whether the unintended negative consequences of children's feeding programs are masked by the perception of 'wonderfulness' or whether the individual experience of (remaining) participants in these programs is unequivocally 'wonderful'. One might guess that neither perspective would welcome an arm's length evaluator's negative or cautionary comments. In our experience, however, program personnel are thoughtful and receptive to broader assessments of their programs and do not stubbornly maintain that their programs are 'wonderful' when not-so-wonderful aspects are presented with evidence and in a respectful manner.

## CONCLUSION

Our analysis illustrates the paradox of why programs might be regarded as 'wonderful' despite unintended negative effects, such as stigmatization, exclusion and dependency. We suggest that programs can be innately 'wonderful' by design if they are community- and charity-based, support a noble cause such as the elimination of child hunger, engage good people as donors and volunteers, and provide a direct service to children apart from their families. Like the programs that the 'whole world already calls wonderful' described by Fillos and Manger (Fillos and Manger, 1984), we observed that the perception of children's feeding programs as 'wonderful' was largely unconditional, based largely upon proposed merit and sympathy for a worthwhile effort, and not readily subject to evaluation (McIntyre and Dayle, 1992; McIntyre *et al.*, 1999). We challenge those involved in children's feeding programs to question the 'wonderfulness' of such programs.

Our analysis can also be used to challenge any program that is universally perceived to be 'wonderful'. The perception of 'wonderfulness' is not benign. It can sustain programs by justifying their existence, precluding the need for evaluation and ignoring the negative impacts of these programs. We challenge health promoters to examine other 'wonderful' programs that serve vulnerable children apart from their families, whose purpose merits sympathy, where program champions seek support both morally and financially, that purport to do good in a charitable sense and with volunteers who seek the satisfaction that comes from doing good, and that *cannot* be criticized.

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