

# Please Sir, can I have less?

By Suzanne O'Connell

Lunchtimes are in the balance. Some say the tradition of a long Spanish lunchtime in school should go. The campaign for a 'continuous day' is gathering momentum. But would this be a change for the better?

The prospect of a school dinner does not generally get the taste buds going. Drab canteens, the smell of boiled cabbage and dingy looking cloths for wiping down tables may not have put Oliver Twist off but certainly hasn't added to the experience for many. Of course, things have been changing over the years. That other Oliver, Jamie, has brought a different dimension to the dinner lady as exponent of healthy eating. Vegetarian lasagne is more likely to be served now than jam roly-poly.

However, my impression of school lunchtime is still of a time that is got through rather than enjoyed. So when it came to deciding last year whether my son Joseph (3 years old) should stay for school dinners or not, it was the 'not' that had it. We'd pick him up at 12.30, feed him ourselves and take him back for the last 1 ½ hours of school.

It was only as we began to think through the arrangements that it dawned. What on earth was a two and a half hour lunch break about? What could they possibly do in that time and exactly how many courses would it take to fill it? I know that people lunch longer in Spain but for 2 ½ hours?

And then there were the practicalities of bringing Joseph home. Collecting him at lunchtime would seriously disrupt his (and our) day and we might find that getting him back in to school was yet another hurdle. So we made the decision at the eleventh hour to let him stay for school dinners. After all, having that additional time to socialise and learn Spanish would be beneficial for him too.

## Lads at lunch

And we've not regretted the decision. He seems to enjoy his lunchtime and brings home a little report that happily informs us of his excellent table manners and willingness to eat all his food. A description that is poles apart from his meal times at home. The cost has been a little daunting, at around 80 euros a month, but we understand that we are paying not just for the meal on his plate but all the

extras too. From Infant 5 there are grants that are available depending upon how much you earn and where you live.

But could things be about to change? A headline set me wondering. 'Classroom Revolution' announced a campaign in the Valencian region for schools to opt for a 'continuous day'. The 'Associacio Educativa' is allegedly collecting signatures to petition the regional government to change the current arrangements. The proposal is that the school day should be from 9.00 to 2.00 with two short breaks and no lunchtime instead. No one has asked for my signature, but apparently it is a hotly contested debate.

Would such a change be for the better? Certainly in England there is the belief that you should cram all your learning into the morning slot because in the afternoon the children are half asleep. As a result, lunchtimes have gradually been eroded. Often left with the minimum amount of time, children tend to be herded in and out of the dining hall. Not exactly conducive to the digestion or the canteen climate.

Another reason for minimalist lunchtimes in England is that this is often when children fall out. Left to their own devices and unused to entertaining themselves, they argue and bicker and teachers can feel that their return to class in the afternoon is as a counsellor and mediator rather than educator. Cutting down free time is seen as one way of avoiding a build up of casualties over the lunchtime period.

So would this be beneficial for Valencian schools? Would reducing or removing lunchtime enhance pupils' learning capacity and what exactly would they be missing? I decided to take a look for myself and find out what does happen during that 2 ½ hour lunch break. I asked Colegio Público, Las Culturas, if I could pay them visit.

## Lunchtime but not as I know it

At 12.30 I found myself inaugurated into another world. Shown around by Catalina Ródenas (Cati for short) I was amazed at the calm and orderly environment that I entered. Here were more than 400 children (90% of las Culturas' 600 pupils stay for school dinners) and not one of them was running around or causing havoc. In fact, had it not been for my tour of the canteen, I wouldn't have guessed it was lunchtime at all.

I saw children 'blogging' in the ICT suite, reading and writing in the library, preparing the 'caseta' or stall for the

May fair. They all knew what they were doing and were obviously enjoying it. This doesn't just happen by chance. Cati and Eduardo are just two of the key members of staff who help organise the rotas, the staff and the activities so that every child has a range of experiences and opportunities. This was lunchtime but not as I knew it.

"It's a time for developing good eating habits, good manners, an opportunity to socialise but the children don't waste their time, there's lots of activities for them."

And these include some catch-up programmes. Las Culturas has received additional money to fund catch-up Maths for pupils. "We have a programme at lunchtime so that children take part in some very practical maths activities," Cati explains. I can see they are not just twiddling their thumbs. I don't see any bored dinner ladies catching up on the evening's TV or any children marking time until the bells goes.

"It's also a time to encourage pupils to take on responsibilities. All the pupils are involved in looking after the 'huertas'."

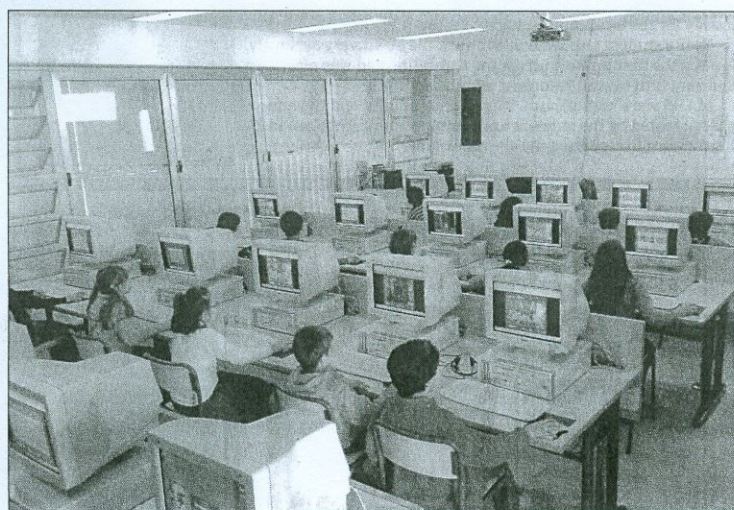
Huertas I discover are areas of garden where the school pets and farm animals live. There's quite a mixture - doves, hens, rabbits as well as a selection of vegetables and fruit. "Children need to see where their food comes from otherwise they think it grows on the shelves of Mercadona."

It surprises me to see teachers engaged in lunchtime activities. I had thought that they might benefit from an extremely long lunch break too, but instead they were all leading and supporting activities. Lunch was waiting for them though. Their places were set (complete with name cards) at tables in the dining hall. They would be eating what the children eat. I can't think of a better recommendation for the food.

## Brussels sprouts and boiled cabbage?

It's sometimes difficult to get all my family of four to sit down together and eat their meals without it resulting in a bun fight. Even more amazing is when I manage to get the food out at the same time as bums on seats. But here, in the school dining room, there weren't just four bums to seat but 125. Bearing in mind that a good proportion of these were under 6 years old and I'm seriously impressed.

Admittedly, there were a lot of staff. All dressed in uniform (two dinner men amongst them) the atmosphere was chatty and informal



and the smell was nothing like my recollections of boiled cabbage and unwashed dishcloths.

This was catering on a gigantic level and everything was running smoothly. And it was immaculate. Cati explains that since the threat of swine flu they have employed an extra midday supervisor just to help keep everything clean. The result puts my kitchen to shame.

At 2.30 pupils start to get ready to go back to class. This doesn't involve sorting out lunchtime fights and patching up knees. Instead the children clean their teeth. This is one practice in Spanish schools

that took me a little by surprise. You take your own toothpaste and toothbrush for a daily dental hygiene lesson.

What impresses me too is how the children move around between activities. They don't run. In all my years of teaching I would never have thought it possible to get 30, 12-year-olds to cross an open playground without at least one of them breaking into a run. Perhaps it's the heat, or perhaps as Cati points out, "our children know what's expected of them. We don't have problems at lunchtime, they know the routine and they follow it."

I am converted. I want this

lunchtime to stay. I want Joseph to be part of it. It's not a holding activity between lessons but a learning opportunity that includes important skills the curriculum can't cover. Lunchtimes shouldn't be lost.

But what does Cati think? Should lunchtimes stay or should they go?

"Ideally, it's about families sitting down and eating together. But that's not possible for many. Instead we are doing as much as we can to fill the gap. We make it worthwhile."

Jamie Oliver would certainly approve and I do too.