A literature review on an ethnographic case study in a UK school, exploring the sociology of the food environment

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Abstract

This literature review provides an insight into some of the key findings from an investigation carried out for a PhD thesis, to explore the impact of the food environment and the potential of the school dining hall (known as the "restaurant") as a place which may support learning opportunities, specifically learning how to behave appropriately and exercise etiquette in sharing food, at a school that was called the Peartree Academy. A broader focus of the study involved exploring the social and cultural practices that shape the interactions in the school dining hall. This paper is divided into two sections: the 'History of English School Meal' and 'Social Skills Development'. After an introduction to the overall study, the historical context of school meals in the UK is developed, followed by a synthesis of findings from a broad range of literature discussing the school food environment in the context of the school dining hall and highlighting the importance of staff presence and parental participation.

Keywords: School Restaurant; Food Environment; Role Models; Social Skills; Ethnography

Introduction

This literature review relates to a study that explored life at the Peartree Academy, involving observations of the interactions in the school restaurant, adopting an ethnographic lens. The study used a social constructivist framework (Vygotsky, 1978) in an attempt to explore the culture and social context of the school restaurant. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with pupils, parents and staff at the school alongside observations which were carried out in the school restaurant. The main and subsidiary research questions allowed for exploration of the social anthropology of food; an area in which there has been little research to date (Murcott, 2011):

> *Main research question*
>
> What is the impact of the food environment upon learning?
>
> *Subsidiary research questions*
>
> 1. To what extent have food environments challenged learning in schools?
> 2. Do children's eating habits affect their attitudes towards learning in school life?
> 3. How do eating behaviours impact on social skills development in schools?
> 4. How do teachers promote social skills within a food environment?

This literature review is concerned with research relating to the third subsidiary research question, highlighting social interactions in the school restaurant and the notion of the "pedagogic meal" (Sepp *et al.*, 2006). This research question aimed to connect to the literature which related predominantly to studies carried out in a Nordic context, as there is still little research connecting social skills to school food in the UK.

The History of English School Meals and the Decline of the "Family Meal"

Contextual information specific to the UK has particular relevance to my study, so this section aims to provide a short discussion about this in building the context for this review. The time period in question begins in the mid-nineteenth century, looking at the introduction of legislation and policy reform surrounding school meals. An historical perspective may support an understanding of current contexts and practices enacted in connection with the provision of school meals in the UK. 1904 is the year that UK school food was formally introduced to the school menu, so to speak (Murcott *et al.*, 2013, p. 7). The introduction of the 1870 Elementary Education Act set the framework for all children between the ages of 5 and 12 to start attending school. In 1880, this was made compulsory for children up to the age of 12. There was a drive to produce citizens who could make an enhanced contribution to the country's economy (Cross & MacDonald, 2009). In the nineteenth century, owing to concerns about the terrible conditions of poverty in which many people lived, the government enforced new regulations to ensure better housing, education and clean water for all (Gillard, 2003). School meals were introduced in all state schools during the Second World War. The 1944 Education Act made it compulsory for every Local Education Authority (LEA) to provide a school meal, which became a significant feature of the welfare state (Baker, 2005).

Over time, it is interesting to note how the introduction of school meals was heavily influenced by war and more recently, by the performative education era (Wilkins *et al.*, 2012; Jeffrey, 2002) of achievement rates and pressures on teachers and management to meet national standards. It was identified that this agenda has seen pupils who receive Free School Meals (FSMs) separated on the assumption that they are not reaching national standards (Dimbleby, 2013). The Thatcher era saw the introduction of the 1980 Education Act, the abolition of minimum nutritional standards for school meals and the exclusion of the statutory obligation on LEAs to provide a meals service, requiring them only to provide for children from families eligible for FSMs.

Nutritional standards were re-introduced in 2001, which saw a new change towards the 'Junk Food' culture. It is only in the last eight years that consideration has been refocused on health issues, in particular, issues of obesity and quality of school dinners (Children's Food Trust, 2014). These issues were pressed into political focus in February 2005 by food chef Jamie Oliver, in the television series "Jamie's School Dinners" (2005). This may have contributed to a general consensus amongst the three main government parties (Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats). The renewed manifestos leading up to the general election all promised to improve school meals whilst policing junk food advertising aimed at children, and to regulate the content of school vending machine sales (Baker, 2005). This led the then Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, to promise an additional £280m to improve school meals.

There is an association between the "family meal" and the school restaurant at the Peartree Academy, as it shares its values with a family approach, encouraging everyone to sit and eat together, including parents, more specifically during the breakfast and after school periods. There is also room for community members, including police officers and care workers to join in. From the discussion of the historical perspective, heavily politicised through constant reform, it is evident that school meals were almost taken for granted up until the 1980s (Baker, 2005). Thompson (2006) identified that sixty percent of families did not eat together on Sunday and that one in four families did not have a dining table. It is said that "the family who eats together, stays together" and that further emphasis should be placed on sitting around the table with families for a proper meal at least once a week (Homrich, 2000, p. 132).

Social Skills Development in the School Dining Hall

The third research question in my study addresses eating behaviours and the impact they have on social skills development. A number of scholars have explored social skills in connection with

diet, behaviour and food (Osowski *et al.*, 2013; Bellisle, 2004; Burke, 2002). Furthermore, a number of studies introduce the "pedagogic meal": a way in which the dining situation can be used as a tool to promote informal education (Sepp *et al.*, 2006; Fjellstrom, 2004).

Sepp *et al.* (2006) carried out a qualitative study by conducting 34 interviews across 12 pre-schools in Sweden. The staff provided strong views on how food and meals should be incorporated into their daily work and pedagogic activities, a concept developed in Sweden in the 1970s (Sepp *et al.*, 2006). The teachers identified their doubts around the "meal situation" as they lacked knowledge and understanding around food and nutrition. During some of the interviews conducted, respondents confirmed that they did not eat with the children at the dinner table in the past. They also identified difficulties in acting as role models. Upon reflection and participation in the study, they have taken a whole new approach. They have started to socialise with the children at the dinner table regardless of a lack of the training that was previously requested. This was due to a lack of confidence in their abilities to behave in the most "appropriate" manner. While most staff had a good understanding of how to practise a pedagogic meal, they remained unclear about how to present themselves in the meal situation.

Sepp *et al.* (2006) identified how food education occurs early in life for children as they develop preferences for taste, table manners and attitudes towards food. It is these behaviours that are communicated through the food and meal situation. There appears to be certain behaviour which may be seen as acceptable food-related behaviour. Sepp *et al.* (2006) noted how part of this socialisation takes place at pre-school tables. Overall, it may be important to address early childhood and the school meal, as this may help to build the foundation of practising a pedagogic meal. As identified in the findings, the staff had a good understanding of how to encourage the children to help themselves, as well as acting as adult role models at the table

(Sepp *et al.*, 2006, p. 227). For example, showing the children how to handle cutlery, pass each other food and sit on a chair appropriately. Moreover, emphasising the importance of conversation for brain and language development for young children (Levine & Munsch, 2013). Sepp *et al.* (2006) pointed out how the task of sitting and eating with children and teaching them skills to interact was a task in itself. As the study at the Peartree Academy is based in a socially deprived area of a UK city, it is important to note that three quarters of pupils are in receipt of FSMs. From the pilot study, which was carried out to trial observations in the school restaurant, it was found that many of the pupils did not have access to a hot meal at home.

Fjellstrom (2004) identified the complexities involved in studying the "meal situation" in schooling from previous research carried out in Sweden. She documented how different dimensions of the meal situation can be observed through looking at time, space and social aspects. She also argued that universal definitions of the 'meal' lacked any idea of 'social dimensions'. By this she meant discussing the meal order, meal patterns and meal situations, which include practices and rituals at the dining table (Fjellstrom, 2004, p. 161). Ashley *et al.* (2004) discuss the notion of a "proper meal" by making the link to the common association to nutrition and highlight how questions of symbolic and cultural meanings can also be inferred. Fjellstrom discusses how the definition of a "proper meal" differs amongst Nordic countries, from the structure, daily rhythm and social context of eating. This ties in closely with the study at Peartree Academy, as it aims to address the social and cultural interactions taking place in the school restaurant. Fjellstrom (2004) discusses the relationship between pedagogy and food in a food situation. The social interaction between parents and children in a supermarket has an impact on food purchases and choices in everyday life. For her this is an example of a pedagogic real-life situation, which works as a tool for informal education (Fjellstrom, 2004).

Interactions During the Pedagogic Meal

Osowski *et al.* (2013) carried out observations, interviews and focus group interviews in three schools in central Sweden to explore how the pedagogic meal is practiced with a focus on teachers' interactions with the children. Osowski *et al.* (2013) identified three types of teacher who adopted different personalities: the sociable teacher, the educating teacher, and the evasive teacher. The sociable teacher developed a social occasion during school lunchtime, which encompassed having a high level of interaction with children. The only difference between the teacher-sociable role and child-sociable role was that the teacher took an interest in the child, giving them attention. The educating teacher took the role of providing educational information during lunchtime, which was more of a one-way teacher to pupil approach, applying rules and procedures. The evasive teacher took more of a passive approach, only keeping a low level of interaction with children and not fully applying rules and procedures. According to the National Food Administration (NFA) in Sweden, the aims of pedagogic meals are to give children and teachers a chance to interact and speak with each other while eating together, and to educate children about food and healthy eating (NFA, 2013; Osowski, 2013). Teachers are seen as role models and the NFA suggests that teachers speak positively about the school meal whilst teaching children about the importance of eating school meals. The NFA guidelines state that having an adult presence brings calm to the school meal environment. This study has both literature and research method connections with my case study at Pear Tree Academy, which will involve observations and interviews to be carried out in and around the dining hall. Osowski *et al.* (2013) were certainly able to identify how there was a shortage of literature around the school meal situation and that previous research had merely focused on pre-school children.

Overall, it is evident that there are further variables and complexities that need to be explored in order to address social skills in the restaurant at the Peartree Academy. Sepp *et al.* (2006) and

Fjellstrom (2004) draw on a pedagogical angle in bringing learning to the table, so to speak. The work of Osowski *et al.* (2013) is directly related to the study at Peartree Academy and will need to be explored further. My literature search revealed a whole host of work that investigates the connection between cognitive development, academic performance and parental involvement (Goodman *et al.*, 2010; Bellisle, 2004; Desforges, 2003). The aim of my own research study is to explore these themes further in order to uncover how the processes and complexities that surround the food environment in a school setting, impact on learning opportunities – with a specific aim of addressing social skills development. My doctoral study is currently in the writing up stages and will be submitted in 2015.

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