

Chapter 1

Introduction

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the study by drawing on the first impressions of the school in the form of a narrative of the school, known as Peartree Academy. A background of key literature brings the notion of the family meal to the forefront in shaping the discourse surrounding the importance of taking the school dining hall as a space seriously. Furthermore, policy implications are introduced which is followed by a historical review of the school meal. This part of the book then begins to unravel the complexities surrounding the interpretation and links to academic performance, behaviour, health promotion and finally concludes with a contextual account of the school alongside key research questions used in amplifying the research. The school dining hall is a space largely neglected in research and one of significant importance as illustrated in this opening chapter. Therefore, the social processes of the school meal are heightened in paving the way for thinking differently about school meal time.

Word count: 5,976

Chapter Text

Peartree Academy

It was a frosty winter's morning, at 8 o'clock on 16th January 2012 as I approached with some trepidation the school I later called Peartree Academy. The entrance was unusual. On the left and built as part of the school, was a church. I discovered later that the church was regularly used by the local community and ceremonies such as baptisms and marriages as well as funerals took place during the week even when the school was open. On the right, was the school reception where all visitors were asked to sign in before proceeding. Walking straight ahead and through the doors into the school, I was faced with a surprise. The area that lay in front of me was a wide open space filled with tables attractively grouped to provide seating from small to large numbers of people. On each table stood a small vase of fresh flowers and the whole eating area shone with cleanliness and care. Even though this was before the start of the school day, I saw children eating breakfast, parents talking to one another, a few adults who I assumed to be the teachers chatting in groups, stood around the edge of the dining area. Later in the day, after I talked with the principal, I returned to the dining area, when children were coming in for lunch. This area was known as 'the restaurant' and it became my main research site for collecting data.

Background

It is often said that a 'family that eats together, stays together' (Stone, 2002: 270) and this

book brings school food to the forefront as it leads to developing a new and refreshing way of thinking about school dining halls. The social glue in which this notion is based suggests that schools and families can be brought closer together in helping children to succeed in society and education, which influences their life chances. So what can be said about the ideal school dining space and what type of functions would it have? Is there any point in school dining hall reform or is it just a redundant part of the school? Whilst space for eating is accounted for in developed countries, it has not been so accessible for the developing countries (McEwan, 2013; Jyoti et al, 2005; Ahmed, 2004) and as important as the calorific content of school lunch may be, the space in which it is being consumed is also salient and concentrated upon in this book. In addition, what type of learning opportunities can or could be presented in the school dining hall? In considering these questions, the book follows a narrative on how one particular school dining hall is operating and examples of the type of social learning that is taking place versus the tensions of whether forms of surveillance measures hinder this learning from occurring.

I have a vested interest and passion for school meals, in particular but not necessarily to the extent of the calorific state of food but more so how food is being consumed and the social actors who take part in this activity. As a sociologist of education, I quickly became acquainted with the societal influences of inequality yet my research has led me to research all things school food. Inevitably, this has involved speaking far and wide in conferences based in a number of subject disciplines including Anthropology, Education, Geography, Sociology and Social Policy. This multifaceted approach to school food has shaped me into a versatile thinker as one cannot ignore the multidisciplinary nature in which food exists, so this has connected me to a number of foodies both locally and internationally. Therefore, this book is particularly useful for sociologists, educators and leaders who have an interest in school dining spaces.

The sociology of food is a growing discipline which is yet to become cemented as a course programme in higher education, yet a number of programmes focus on food policy and the anthropology of food. Murcott (1983) discussed this emergence and highlighted how it would typically appear in newspaper articles. Whilst some literature is beginning to surface on this area, it is recent (Lalli, 2019; Earl, 2018; Wills et al., 2016; Andersen et al, 2015; Osowski et al, 2013) and Beardsworth and Keil (1996) also recognised the importance of the sociology of food and noted how the social sciences was just as important as the natural sciences in the study of human nutrition (Yudkin and McKenzie, 1964). Weaver-Hightower (2011) promotes the idea of placing a further emphasis on food related research in an educational setting and recognises how food plays a vital role in the daily aspects of life in schools.

Policy

School meals are considered as being a popular area for policy reform and the work of restaurant chain owners of LEON, Dimbleby and Vincent (DfE, 2013) introduced the *School Food Plan* (DfE, 2013) with the backing of the secretary of state for education at that time Michael Gove, by devising a plan to support head teachers in school meal reform across UK schools. More recently, Henry Dimbleby was commissioned to lead on an independent review to consider the food chain from field to fork, which will lead to the development of a

National Food Strategy for England (DEFRA, 2019), which is reflective of a joint-up approach between government and industry experts. Dimpleby and Vincent (DfE, 2013) identify sustenance and the hidden benefits associated with food and how pupils, peers and teachers are able to sit and eat together, whilst developing positive and lasting relationships in a civil environment. It was clear from the work of Dimpleby and Vincent (2013) that pupils cared about the food environment and like the idea of a clean and well-lit space, with friendly cooks and midday supervisors. It was also noted how pupils enjoyed socialising in the dining environment with peers, whether friends had packed lunches or school dinners and the idea of a shorter queue was preferred. In a study by Hart (2016) close links to the School Food Plan (DfE, 2013) are discussed, placing a focus on the social context of the school meal, which highlights issues of public health and the school meal, which is quickly becoming an area for public debate.

Historical perspective

The school meal is a symbolic and universal occasion, one which typically occurs at a similar time around the globe and this universal connection leads one to thinking about the influences upon meals which ultimately shape how they take place. For this reason, it is quite important to highlight a historical view of the English school meal in particular as there appears to be little work done on this area (Evans and Harper, 2009; Welshman, 1997) and the discussions to follow suggest that political agendas often feed into policy making. Three key periods in time have shaped the school meal to date which include, i) 1870 – 1879 ii) 1980 – 2000 iii) 2001 to the present day.

1870-1979

The introduction of the Elementary Education Act (1870) 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. The driving force behind this was an apparent need for a more competitive Britain (Cross and MacDonald, 2009). Following the introduction of the Elementary Education Act (1870) in 1879, Manchester began to provide FSM to poorly nourished children, which saw the introduction of a similar scheme in Bradford, initially set up by Fred Jowett and Margaret McMillan, who pushed for government legislation to encourage education authorities to provide school meals (Gillard, 2003). In a survey carried out between 1889 and 1903, it was found that a quarter of the population living in London did not have enough money to survive (Gillard, 2003). Moreover, the Seebohm Rowntree's survey of working class families in York in 1901 found almost half of those earning could not afford enough food to maintain physical efficiency (Gillard, 2003: 2). Consequently, due to levels of poverty at that time, children did not have access to appropriate nutrition and many parents did not understand nutrition due to the level of poverty (Gillard, 2003).

Following WWI, the introduction of the Education Act (1921) raised the school leaving age to 14 and also empowered LEAs to provide FSM, for those children who were eligible. However, due to the miners' strike of that year, attention was diverted, but eventually, the introduction of FSM led to an increase in the cost of providing meals, to almost £1m (Gillard, 2003). The Board of Education introduced a rationing system in order to limit the cost to

central government, down to £300,000 (Welshman, 1997). Consequently, the rationing system affected the poor areas of the country, with less than half of those considered malnourished receiving meals (Webster, 1985: 216). Overall, a survey of 26 LEAs, carried out in 1936, showed where unemployment was above 25 per cent, in a population of half a million, less than 15,000 children were receiving free meals, with 8 of the LEAs having no service at all. By 1939, less than half of all local authorities were providing school meals, with 130,000 meals being served each day, totalling only 3 per cent of the school population, although 50 per cent were receiving milk (Smith, 1996: 191).

World War II saw a further emphasis placed on the nation's health, with food rationing being introduced in 1940 as part of the war effort in an attempt to ensure a healthy nation. The school lunch had to be suitable as the main meal of the day and had to meet the nutritional standards (covering energy, protein and fat) introduced in 1941 (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010: 91). Eventually, school meals were introduced in all state schools during WWII. The Education Act (1944) made it compulsory for every LEA to provide a school meal, which became a significant feature of the welfare state (Gillard, 2003). LEAs were informed that the price of meals could not exceed the cost of food. During the Labour government (1945 – 1951), a proposal to provide all school meals free of charge was planned but eventually this was deemed unrealistic (Gillard, 2003). By 1951, 84 per cent of the population drank school milk. The typical daily diet of a child in 1951 included cereal or eggs with bread and butter for breakfast; meat, potatoes, a vegetable and a pudding for lunch; bread, butter, biscuits and jam for tea; with milk being the last thing at night (Gillard, 2003).

Up until the 1970s, the UK had a comprehensive school meals service, which was relatively cheap and also provided children from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to access FSM. However, the introduction of the conservative government in 1979 meant the school meal had to adjust to the new consumer culture of the 1970s, which saw a change in attitude towards school meals. In her response to spending cuts, to meet their election pledges on tax, Margaret Thatcher demanded cuts in four areas, two of which included school meal charges and free school milk. As she became Prime Minister in 1979, during her first year, astonishingly for most, she brought an end to the provision of school milk for children over the age of seven (Smith, 2010). However, although she was known for abolishing free school milk, it was Harold Wilson's Labour government that stopped free milk for secondary pupils in 1968. In 1971, Thatcher, who was education secretary under Sir Edward Heath, brought an end to free school milk for children over the age of seven, although recent documents released suggest she had fought to save the grants but was overruled by Sir Edward Heath (Smith, 2010).

1980-2000

The Education Act (1980) also saw a move away from meeting nutritional standards; which involved an end to free school milk whilst removing any obligation for meals to be sold at a fixed price. This enabled LEAs to provide free milk as the scheme enabled them to claim additional funding for primary and secondary milk sales. In 1988, many children lost their eligibility for FSM and some school meal payments made by the government were replaced

by direct cash sums to families. However, there was no way of establishing whether this cash incentive was spent on food. By 1990, the criteria for FSM changed as Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were only required to provide meals for children entitled to free dinners and also to provide a place for children to eat packed lunches (Dare and O'Donovan, 2002: 90). This saw the introduction of a privatised culture of school meals, where the priority shifted from providing a nutritional meal, with in-house school control to a 'value for money' meal culture.

By the time New Labour took power in 1997, there was a mass of evidence pointing to the nation's health concerns, particularly children's diets, which had become less healthy over time, with concerns about excessive levels of sugar, salt and fat (Gillard, 2003). The government announced that it would introduce nutritional guidelines which encouraged school canteens to provide a choice of four main categories of food – fruit and vegetables, meat and protein, starchy foods and milk and dairy products. The main agenda was to ensure fruit and vegetables were accessible and affordable for all, as the Public Health Minister, Yvette Cooper in 2000, argued that children who grew up in low income households ate less fruit and vegetables than children who grew up in high income households.

2001-present day

In 2001, over 1.8 million children in the UK were eligible for FSM, but it was reported that only one in five pupils claimed this entitlement (Storey and Chamberlain, 2001). Nutritional standards were reintroduced in 2001. It was during the period, 2001 – 2011, that attention was refocused on health matters, and in particular, issues of obesity and quality of school dinners. These concerns were pushed into political focus in February 2005, by food chef Jamie Oliver, in the television series 'Jamie's School Dinners'. For once, this brought a general consensus amongst the three main government parties (Labour, Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats). Their manifestos leading up to the general election all promised to improve school meals, police junk food advertising aimed at children and to control the content of school vending machine sales (Gillard, 2003). Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly promised an additional £280m to improve school meals, and as of March 2005 the government was required to allocate 50 pence a day on ingredients per primary pupil and 60 pence per day per secondary pupil (Branigan et al, 2005).

In 2005, food revolutionary Jamie Oliver created a series on Channel 4 called 'Jamie's School Dinners' (Conlan, 2005) which caused uproar because evidence identified pupils consuming a quarter of a ton of chips every week at Kidbrooke School in Greenwich (BBC News, 2007). The food budget was 37p per meal and the dinner ladies at the school had become demotivated. As a result, the Children's Food Trust (CFT) was set up in 2005 in order to help schools introduce and maintain the national standards for school food, as well as helping children enjoy their lunchtime experience. Junk food was banned in schools in 2006 (BBC News, 2006).

In 2007, OfSTED introduced new interim standards for food in schools in 2006. A survey evaluated the progress schools were making in meeting the new standards, which would

ensure that school lunches provide pupils with a healthy diet (OfSTED, 2007: 7). However, the report identified that school lunch take-up had fallen in 19 of the 27 schools visited for the survey (Curtis, 2007). The reasons for the decline included a lack of consultation with pupils and parents about the new arrangements in school, poor marketing of new menus, high costs for low income families who were not eligible for FSM and also a lack of meal choice (OfSTED, 2007: 5). In addition, dining areas played a part in the take-up of school meals as they varied in quality, with primary school generally being better than secondary school dining spaces. Overall, pupils wanted shorter queuing times in order to allow time for extra-curricular activities and the opportunity to eat with friends who brought packed lunches.

In April 2012, as mentioned earlier, former education secretary Michael Gove requested the services of John Vincent and Henry Dimbleby (founder of Leon restaurants) to carry out an independent review of school food (Long, 2018). This led to the publication of the School Food Plan (DfE, 2013). Recommendations from the School Food Plan (DfE, 2013: 10) were targeted at head teachers, as those who could influence the vision of schools in adopting a more forward-thinking mentality. Littlecott et al., (2015) provided evidence to suggest that children who eat a healthy breakfast before starting the school day achieve higher academic results than pupils who do not. This study was carried out using a sample of 5000, 9-11 year-olds from more than 100 primary schools in England. Ten years on from the exposure of 'Jamie's School Dinners', he admitted that his campaign was far from a success based on the notion that eating well is still viewed as an indulgence of the middle class (Furness, 2015).

School Food Programmes

It was particularly interesting to review School Food Programmes (SFPs) across the globe as I was able to discover key issues specifically relating to participation and the influence of food on pupil engagement in school. SFPs were introduced in developing countries to provide nutritional meals to reduce short-term hunger in the classroom and increase the attention span of pupils (Ahmed, 2004). Furthermore, Kleinman et al., (2002) carried out a study to investigate academic performance in the United States and found that thirty-three per cent of children who were classed as being at nutritional risk had significantly poorer test scores, attendance and punctuality, compared with their counterparts who were not at risk.

Academic performance

There are a multitude of variables involved in the academic development of a child (Lerner and Jovanovic, 1999). Such variables could include the social space in which a child learns how to behave and develop the relevant skills to perfect the social rules that govern a particular site. Jyoti et al (2005) explored the links between food insecurity, academic development and social skills for both male and female pupils. This study used longitudinal data, which highlighted financial barriers leading to poor nutrition and the consequences for academic performance and social skills for pupils. Overall, the study found strong evidence arguing food insecurity is linked to non-nutritional issues such as weak academic performance for boys and girls. Girls, in particular were identified as suffering from poor social skills and low reading abilities. This led me to question the difficulty in trying to develop a discussion between school and academic performance, and by academic

performance I am referring to the potential informal learning opportunities presented in the school dining hall, later introduced as social learning. Moreover, the type of learning that is explored is one which takes place away from the classroom environment.

The links to nutritional status in developing countries are inevitable as the nourishment and participation of children in consuming school food is a key issue. For instance, a number of past studies were identified through the works of Ahmed (2004), conducted in Chile and Jamaica (Pollit, 1990; Simeon and Grantham-McGregor, 1989), that addressed nutritional status and academic performance in relation to SFP's. It is said that children who do not perform academically are often subject to poor nutritional status (Pollit, 1990). According to findings from the Food Research and Action Centre (FRAC, 2011) missing breakfast impaired a child's ability to learn, whilst consuming breakfast improved their academic performance and behaviour. FRAC (2011) noted that those who missed breakfast were less able to differentiate between visual images with a slower memory recall resulting in errors. FRAC (2011) and Murphy (2007) also reported that children who ate a complete breakfast made fewer mistakes and worked much quicker in the classroom arithmetic assessments. Moreover, Murphy (2007) who conducted a study in the United States, found that in the short term, breakfast skippers had less energy available and were undernourished over sustained periods. For Murphy (2007) these children were more likely to feel hungry and less likely to be active.

Whilst there is no clear evidence to suggest that school food has a direct link to academic performance, numerous studies based in developing countries explore this field of inquiry, but the concluding ideas point to the notion that food alone is not the answer to improving nutritional status. For this reason, the emphasis on the social aspect of school food is heightened. For example, the findings from a study carried out in Bangladesh to investigate the outcomes of the SFP's pointed to the lack of participation, academic achievement in primary education in developing countries and identified how there were two causes for this problem (Ahmed, 2004). These causes included a lack of health and nutrition, which ultimately affected the pupils' ability to learn. A number of studies conducted in Ethiopia and a number of other developing countries (Clay and Stokke, 2000; Pelletier et al, 1995) highlight how food alone does not guarantee improved nutritional status (Ahmed, 2004). Furthermore, if nutritional status is not guaranteed, this has an impact on the pupils learning and attention span in the classroom (Ahmed, 2004). The study carried out in Ethiopia (Pelletier et al, 1995) highlighted other reasons apart from access to food that had an impact on children's nutritional status. The other reasons addressed child caring, feeding practices and household variables such as income and parental education. In developing countries poor health facilities and services were also barriers in a child's nutritional wellbeing (Pelletier et al, 1995).

Whilst the research in developing countries focuses on the nourishment of children in participating and consuming school food whilst trying to inform academic performance, the discussion in developed countries also holds a firm grip on linking food to academic performance and nutrition, but works on the assumption that there is already an established

level of nourishment. This means that other aspects to include the 'social' can also be considered to improve the meal time experiences of children.

Behaviour, socialisation and promoting health

Similar to the issues discussed in the developing countries, it is evident that the issues are alike in developed countries in terms of pupil participation in school meal up-take. For example, data from a research project carried out in four Finnish schools on school diet preferences and behaviour, found that pupils receive one quarter of their daily energy from school meals, which highlights the potential influences of those who are served meals to their on-going diet and attitude towards eating (Tikkanen, 2009). One of the reported issues in this project is that pupils were not always keen on eating at school, whether meals were free or run on a commercial basis (Tikkanen, 2009). Although school meals are free of charge in Finland and Sweden, some pupils still choose not to eat certain parts of the meal. Meal choices certainly appear to be an important factor with regards to the school meal experience that pupils have when consuming food in the dining area. Whilst the issue of school meal participation can be comparable to the one discussed in developing countries, this appears to be about the selection and options available in terms of food consumption.

Overall, the shortage of research carried out on SFPs suffice to say, there are multiple conclusions to be taken away from this for my future research. The majority of studies based in developing countries pays close attention to health and wellbeing and make an attempt to demonstrate a link between school food and academic performance. The same can be said for developed countries, although whilst access to nourishment is not comparable to the lack of access to food available in developing countries, the focus on health and academic performance is also evident. Although, the provision of the way in which food can help children in other ways away from the classroom environment are only partially discussed in the developing world, compared to the developed nations which seem to have a growing trend towards highlighting the opportunities of how school food can help to foster social learning.

Context

Peartree Academy is an all through 3 – 16 urban school which was rebuilt in 2007. The school replaces what was a deteriorating school, in a deprived area of a UK City. According to the latest figures (DfE, 2019) it holds a capacity for 1046 pupils with 933 currently enrolled and 272 staff. The school specialises in Business and Enterprise with a focus on food. Local businesses also have involvement within the school, by supplying the ingredients for the school breakfast club as well as sending in their own chefs to teach cookery skills.

It is a mixed sex school with a large proportion of pupils of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils supported by the pupil premium is above average. The pupil premium is an initiative which allows access to additional government funding in order to support disadvantaged pupils, who are identified as being eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). A total of 51 per cent of pupils at Peartree Academy have access to FSM. In addition to this, 49 per cent of pupils have Special Educational Needs (SEN) which is above average for a

school. According to the 2011 census, income, employment, health and education deprivation was recorded as high, in comparison to the rest of the UK. The unemployment rate was measured at 13.3 per cent, which was 7.8 per cent across the UK. It is useful to bear these figures in mind when interpreting the contextual demographics of the school.

The school curriculum is made up of 3 phases. Phase 1 includes the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) which runs through to Year 4, with a particular focus on literacy, numeracy, personal and social skills in preparation for the wider curriculum. Phase 2 includes Years 5 – 8 which continues to develop literacy and numeracy skills in preparation for the GCSE stage. The school's curriculum in Phase 3 supports Years 9 – 11 in making subject choices alongside the schools core curriculum of English, Maths, Science, RE (Religious Education), PE (Physical Education) and Enterprise. The school is innovative in its role in supporting the local community, through raising standards for pupils as well as providing a strong support network for parents and the wider community, in giving them access to developing their skills further to aid local regeneration. For example, unpaid and paid employment is available, which has seen some parents working as teaching assistants in the classroom and others in the canteen as assistant chefs and lunchtime supervisors.

The Principal's philosophy of the school rests on trying to exceed set expectations each year in order to support children in becoming successful adults. For the Principal, the restaurant acts as the focal point of the school. Staff members at the school are able to use the restaurant to build positive relationships with parents whilst discussing children's progression. In addition, parents and community members are able to take up opportunities to volunteer as support staff in the school, both in and outside of the classroom.

The board of governors within the school play an influential role in the day to day running of the school. They include two parent governors, one of whom is responsible for the extended school activities. This is an opportunity for the local community to develop a wide range of skills in sports, arts and gain further prospects towards achieving additional GCSEs. A local businessman who funded the school has been involved in the food manufacturing business and is very passionate about the importance of having a strong team of governors, which include education professionals to be able to drive the ethos of the school forward.

Peartree Academy is a Church of England (CoE) school and there is a strong impetus towards helping the pupils to achieve their full potential throughout their early and adolescent years. The school is designed with the church positioned on the left as a key feature so that everyone that enters the school will pass the church. The Church at the school is closely linked to the community which enables pupils to understand the meaning of belonging in a community. The Christian values of the school are represented through the schools core values, which include, loving, caring and respecting, forgiveness and new beginnings, trust and honesty, nurturing, faith and prayer and 'doing our best'.

Research Questions

In January 2012, I remember reading about childhood obesity and school lunches in a newspaper which was obtained on route to a connecting flight from the airport during a family vacation to Edmonton, Canada. This was my initial connection to my research and I had been given the opportunity to begin developing a research proposal in October 2011. Prior to starting the writing up of this research project, I noticed how most studies were carried out in an international context (McEwan, 2013; Jyoti et al., 2005; Ahmed, 2004) and which led to using certain search criteria and formulating a set of research aims which appeared in the form of three questions, with one over-arching question following by two subsidiary questions. These questions are presented below and formed the basis of my research investigation.

1. What is the impact of the food environment upon social learning?
2. How do eating behaviours of staff and pupils impact on social learning?
3. How do teaching staff promote social learning within a food environment?

In terms of collecting the data for this work, I used an ethnographic (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) approach which involved embracing myself as a participant in the everyday life of the school in which interviews were recorded, field notes and observations were noted in exploring the interactions that take place in one school dining hall.

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