

## **An investigation into Commensality in the 'School Restaurant'**

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### **Abstract**

*This article questions whether we need to reconsider school meals as social events, communal gatherings and an educative space rather than just as a space to provide pupils with health and nutrition. Therefore, this article does not consider the nutritional elements of the school meal but commensality and the notion of eating together. The primary aim of the paper is to make an attempt to theorise the school meal situation drawing specifically on the notion of commensality; the practice of eating together, which is said to signify unity and sharing in a given cultural context (Tuomainen, 2014). A focus is placed on the interaction between pupils and staff in the school restaurant. This paper reports on a case study from a Midlands School in the UK and investigates the significance of commensality during school meals. It draws on reflections from narratives taken from the case study and employs ethnographic techniques in the school dining hall to argue that the school restaurant has developed as a space for fostering social skills development. Moreover, it was also a forum for acquiring appropriate etiquette and decorum. A detailed discussion on the act of commensality is interwoven throughout this article and Lave and Wenger (1991) and their notion of Communities of Practice (COP) is used to support the discussion of the influence of the restaurant on social practices.*

### **Keywords**

School food, commensality, community, social interactions

## Introduction

This article brings together findings and reflections from an ethnographic case study which investigated how potential learning opportunities are created in the school 'restaurant' (Lalli, 2017). Some research has been conducted on the social and learning effects of the school meal, including discussions on teacher interaction with children (Osowski, Goranzon and Fjellstrom, 2012), pupil partiality to school meals (Andersen et al, 2016) and the link between healthy school meals and educational outcomes (Belot and James, 2011). Whilst these are all important areas of concern, this article introduces 'commensality', the practice of eating together which signifies unity and sharing in a given cultural context (Tuomainen, 2014) as a key concept. It uses Lave and Wengers' (1991) model of a community of practice to conceptually underpin the social and learning importance of the school meal and Andersen, Holm & Baarts' (2015) ideas on commensality and the social impact of school meals to question the need to view school meals as social events and communal gatherings rather than just in terms of health and nutrition.

Murcott (2011) provides a personal view on the need for further research into the social aspect of the school meal but the emergence of this topic is commonly associated with the works of Yudkin and Mckenzie (1964). They gave recognition to the sociology of food and considered it as important as the natural sciences. Other scholars (Beardsworth and Keil, 1996) also recognise the importance of this area of inquiry, which emphasises the need to study and explore the everyday occurrence of sharing food with broader cultural contexts. Beardsworth and Keil (1996) argue it is important to note how psychologists dedicate more attention than social scientists to the wide range of research activity on food and eating, which commonly includes cognition, emotional linkages and processes of nutritional socialisation as well as causes of eating disorders (Beardsworth and Keil, 1996).

This article therefore takes a sociological stance in considering key ideas on the school meal. It introduces the context of the school and an outline of the overall study carried out, explains the research design and methodology employed, analyses and interprets the research questions (See Appendix 1). As an ethnographic study the methods and findings were on-going and involved unpacking a number of complexities to produce a considered conclusion (Lalli, 2015).

## Context

This article is based on a PhD study that was carried out over a period of 5 years, starting in 2012. In terms of an overall conceptual framework, a social constructivist position was adopted in carrying out the thesis. The significance of this particular theoretical position was that it enabled me to look closely at interaction. The case study was carried out in order to investigate the impact of the school restaurant environment on social skills development at one school (Lalli, 2017). Ethnographic techniques were used for this research to capture the culture of the school restaurant, with the study itself being qualitative in nature where narratives, observations and interviews were used to collect data. The purpose of ethnography is to describe the culture and social interactions of a particular group or subgroup (Lichtman, 2010). This involves immersion in a setting and in this case, I immersed myself into the school restaurant by taking meals there and sitting with the diners. This is an all through school, which holds children aged 3 – 16. The current number of pupils registered at the school is 933. The school specialises in Business and Enterprise with a focus on food and is located in a socially deprived City in the UK. The school restaurant was the focus of the investigation. The data set consisted of 54 semi-structured interviews (26 school staff; 16 pupils; 12 parents) and 10 days of structured observations, with no particular cultural context as this was an opportunity sample, meaning participants were selected based on availability and accessibility at the time of the investigation (See Appendix 2). The article is divided into three sections which include (1) The notion of the school 'restaurant'? (2) Eating together and commensality (3) Social interactions in the restaurant.

This research was approved by the University of Leicester as well as the school involved, which for reasons of anonymity has not been named. Furthermore, the principal investigator had a full DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check and provided the school with the relevant consent forms, to ensure participants were aware of the research being carried out. In order to further establish good ethical practice in education, the ethical frameworks as developed by BERA (2011) were adopted which meant that consent had been gained from staff, parents and children at the school.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was done by symbolic interactionist techniques to look at situations and carry out emergent thematic analysis. According to Boyatzis, 'Thematic analysis is not another qualitative method but a process that can be used in systematic reviews' (1998: 4). The data was analysed using a coding system (See Appendix 3 and 4). To provide a structured view of the process of inquiry, there were nine coding techniques used to analyse the data: (1) Coded transcribed interviews. (2) A table of open codes, labelled to each interview by group (i.e. staff, parents and pupils). (3) Refinement of grouped codes into conceptual ideas. (4) Listed conceptual codes. (5) Highlighting of most dominant conceptual codes. (6) Development of an overall set of themes. (7) Created chapters. (8) A Venn diagram to link main research question and sub questions. (9) Creation of chapter titles aligned to the process. For the observations, four coding techniques were used in order to carry out analysis: (1) Open coded table for observations (2) Refined codes (3) Refined codes and major themes (4) Refined themes (See Appendix 4). Overall, one of the major themes that emerged from the data was 'commensality', which is the focus for this article. The next section introduces a definition of 'commensality' and 'the restaurant'.

## Commensality – a definition

There are other definitions of commensality. For Warde (1995), commensality involves eating at the same table while a broader definition is given by Sobal and Nelson, (2003) who suggest that commensality is eating with other people. Consequently, in the past decade, commensality has been called upon by a number of scholars (Newman, 2014; Grevet et al, 2012) to help provide a platform of how things should appear in such settings including schools.

## The notion of the school restaurant

What connotations are attached to the term restaurant? The term restaurant came about in 2007 when the school was first rebuilt. The Principal described the influence behind this. For example:

...a key part of the vision that was set by the sponsors before I even started, and it was my job if you like to take that and make it a reality, that was my job. Right, so everything from what was put in the restaurant, in other words the centre, do we give people enough time to have their lunch? Do we have all children stay in school? (Principal: Interview 25)

In comparison to the term canteen, the restaurant is interpreted in a different way at the school. A canteen is a store that sells food and drink at an institution like a camp, school or military base (Winchell, 2008). The term canteen has also been interpreted as a place for enforcing rules (Winchell, 2008). A restaurant is a space with a particular climate; a space which has to aim to come across appealing, whether it is for a quick lunch or a get together with peers. One of the most important functions in running a restaurant is the selection and training of employees. Turiace (2015) argues good staff make a good restaurant) which leads to questioning the significance of the school restaurant at the school and how it is perceived. The catering manager shares her view. For example:

I think pupils are able to develop social skills through the restaurant and through the opportunity to converse whilst sharing food. (Staff: Interview 1)

The catering manager identifies how the school restaurant is a platform for interacting, whilst developing an ability to be able to converse together. This is about extending opportunities for pupils during lunch in particular where they are able to potentially be able to develop communities of practice. This is about learning in a collective way and the connection with communities of practice stems from the structural decisions put in place by the school leadership team in developing the school restaurant in this way (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2013).

## **Research Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the PhD study emphasised the tensions and challenges between the aim of the school; to create an eating space that would promote social interaction and encourage the development of social skills, and the activities of teachers and catering assistants; to manage the restaurant and provide food for a large volume of pupils on a daily basis. The focus of this study, while not excluding these two factors,

concentrates on the concept of social interaction through eating together and commensality and in the restaurant.

This section highlights two key discussions which emerged from the investigation. Firstly, the importance of eating together and commensality and secondly social interaction in the restaurant

### *1. Eating together and commensality*

The notion of commensality seems to begin the process of understanding the interconnected approaches involved in interactions during the school meal. The theoretical lens used to establish this research was social constructivism, which begins the process of interpreting interactions during the school meal. Therefore, to place these interactions into context it is important to ask: How is commensality defined in this context? Also as commensality is also discussed as an avenue for defining relationships in the school meal situation (Tuomainen, 2014; Mikkelsen, 2011), it is also necessary to ask: What is the significance of commensality in the practice of the school meal?

The role of food at mealtimes can be downplayed against the people it is eaten with and as the phrase in this article suggests, it is the pleasure of good company that is most appetising. When humans eat and drink, it is the most self-centred, individual thing they can do and under no circumstances can what one consumes be consumed by another, this can be likened to communication with words (Almerico, 2014). It is in this situation where the common meal operates as a habit of being gathered together where those with no common interests break bread together, and it is in this situation where the sociological significance of the meal becomes infinite (Fischler, 2011). Fischler therefore highlights the importance of the social aspects of eating together which are in turn worthy of deeper exploration.

In order to conceptualise, an explicit definition of commensality needs to be put in place if theoretical associations and interpretations from the study are to be made. The definition chosen therefore is institutional commensality, where the physical, organisational, and socio-cultural spaces, combine with meals, food, the eating environment and participants combine to create a socio-cultural environment in

which learning can take place. In the case of a school perhaps an emphasis needs to be placed on learning.

This links to the works of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2013) who highlight the influence of creating a community of practice and for the purposes described here, the restaurant is identified as the central community hub of the school. This definition is presented partly through the works of Mikkelsen (2011) who places more of an emphasis on public health messages yet draws on socio-cultural issues related to food. Tuomainen (2014) highlights the notion set in the western world that family meals have been seen to be central in sustaining the cohesiveness for the family and this cohesiveness may also be important in the context of the school.

School policies are essentially developed through local, regional, national and international interventions upon the decision-making processes taking place. However, over the last decade, institutional commensality has become topical as an approach for sense making towards school food (Parsons, 2016). One aspect of school meals that is neglected in studies, is the way daily food practices take place in public institutions, and in this context schools should be on the agenda as it is educational institutions that are viewed as key carriers of cultural values in the provision of school meals (Hansen and Kristensen, 2013).

A traditional image of a commensal meal can often involve a family sitting around a table and sharing a home cooked meal (Mestdag and Glorieux, 2009), Andersen et al., (2015) note children are spending more and more of their daytime hours in institutional settings such as the school. Therefore, it is important that these institutional settings such as schools ensure pupils are able to take up opportunities for social time to interact with one another so meal time can be an important social part of the day.

While conceptual debates have helped to shed light on a holistic view of the meal situation, one of the key phrases that emerged from research at the school studied was that 'a family that eats together stays together' (Stone, 2002: 270). The role of meals in social life has been an ongoing theme within social science investigations and it is said that sharing meals is instrumental for creating groups and promoting togetherness, bonding and building intimate relationships (Fischler, 2011). One

example from an interview with the English Teacher at the school describes the opportunity for building relationships in the school restaurant. For example:

...sociable conversations, nothing to do with work, so that's an opportunity to see people and that building up relationships really helps.  
(Teacher 2: Interview 19)

Family meals are also seen as important platforms for maintaining social cohesion amongst the family unit as evidenced through a number of qualitative studies (DeVault, 1991; Charles and Kerr, 1988). This was also noticeable in a quote from the Head of English, who described her view of the aim of the school restaurant:

...they learn the social skills of eating together, sitting at a table, using the cutlery, that kind of thing, eating proper food, eating a rounded meal, which many children in lots of walks of life, particularly those who don't have access to a hot meal at home, don't necessarily sit at the table and eat as a family.  
(Staff 3: Interview 16)

which many children in lots of walks of life, particularly for those who didn't have access to a hot meal at home, they don't necessarily sit at the table, eat as a family

As the family meal is in decline, this has sparked questions of whether the tradition of sharing family meals on a daily basis ever really existed and if it did, how far reaching is it (Jackson, Olive & Smith 2009). As the school is located in a socially deprived city based in the Midlands, UK an association might be made is that children at the school do not have access to hot meals on a regular basis, nor do they regularly sit and eat around the table as a family. This is clearly an area in need of exploration and enquiry and although studies on the family meal seem to be emerging in a third and developing world context, there is little work conducted on whether the family meal exists in the context of the studied population here.

The Nordic region of the western world has seen considerable contributions to commensality studies which include the one by Osowski et al (2003) and Newman (2014). Through analysing the school meal situation, it has become apparent that not only is it about food and meal options but it is about the idea of abstract food and meal realities that are communicated to children during the school day (Johansson et

al, 2009). Other commentators (Young, 1993) share similar views arguing that the notion of commensality involves capturing the place and context upon which children eat, where they come into contact with food, and the meanings they associate with them. An example of this was captured in the restaurant:

...There are 2 students who have met in the middle of the restaurant, both holding trays, smiling as they greet one another, with one student commenting on the others food... (Field Notes 1)

There is a danger that the benefits of commensality are being eroded by modern lifestyles. Mennell et al, (1992) argue it is highly likely that the sociality of meals is in danger of disappearing as society moves more towards a tendency of individualisation. It is industrial life which is partly held accountable for explanations on meal time reduction and a reduction in the number of meals consumed during the typical day (Mennell et al, 1992). The re-organisation of industrial life could also be accountable for the increase in solo eating and a further likelihood for this to continue increasing. This reduction in opportunities for commensality places even more emphasis on the school meal as a time and place for social interaction.

The sharing of food involves social organisation and the application of moral behaviours. These seem to be central to the ethos of the school restaurant. In the study described here, the layout of the restaurant itself attaches meaning to the priority of integration with a variety of table colours and shapes, all placed in what may commonly seem 'approachable' positions. In terms of integration, the school is multi-cultural with over 900 pupils in attendance. There were behavioural issues at the school during the school lunch period, which were mentioned as one of the reasons for the changes to the school dining hall. The school had adopted a buffet style which helped improve behaviour, thus alleviating queues and waiting times. This was evident from a response by one of the teachers at the school:

The staggered lunch breaks were introduced to reduce the lunch hour and minimise behavioural disruption which previously had a negative impact.  
(Teacher 2: Interview 19)

Overall, this section argues for the development of prioritising and organising the school meal to take advantage of the opportunities for commensality created as a

result of designing the restaurant in a more social way. Good organisation of the restaurant to help the process of commensality gives an indication of the way design might help facilitate commensality and interactivity.

## *2. Social interaction in the restaurant*

Further information from the interviews and observational data helped to explore the interactions which shape commensality and the interactions in the school restaurant. Following an interview with the attendance leader on breakfast clubs, the idea of social interaction emerged. The examples below illustrate how social interactions were a common topic for discussion amongst the school staff in particular. Staff spoke about interactions frequently.

...there is a lot of interaction between all the age groups as well in the restaurant. (Staff: Interview 2)

...the restaurant helps build that social interaction between pupils, parents and staff. (Teacher 1: Interview 15)

...having toast, so it allows interaction, and also the after-school food that they have available, I see again interactions... (Teacher 2: Interview 19)

In these examples staff show how the school restaurant acts as a platform for social interaction which differs from playtime as pupils can sit, eat and converse with one another with a common theme and purpose, the consumption of food. It shows food brings people in the school together in a social way.

The initial participation in a culture of practice can take form through observation from the periphery or legitimate peripheral participation in order to instigate social conversation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This socio-cultural view means that beginners (new entrants to a group) are genuinely involved in the work of a particular group regardless of the fact that their abilities may be undeveloped and their contributions comparatively small. This particular lens explores participation in a set community from both the expert (as in the teacher or member of staff) and beginner (as in pupil participating in the restaurant) in that particular situation. This view has been particularly useful in helping to theorise certain aspects of the study, particularly in trying to establish a conceptual framework for developing an argument for interactions between staff and pupils at the school restaurant.

As school food becomes more of a topic for public health through issues such as obesity, attention has quickly seen scholars focusing on the academic literature surrounding school food, which is connected to health. This links closely to the importance of prioritising commensality and eating together in order to support the idea of the whole school approach. The idea of the 'whole school approach' (Lipsky and Gartner, 2012) has been particularly useful in an educative context. The whole school approach involves strengthening the overall educational experience outside the classroom (Lipsky and Gartner, 2012: 22). Another example from the field notes highlights the impact of health which is presented using visual aids in the restaurant:

<b>Visual messages posted above the restaurant</b>
'5 a day' – Important to eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day
Meal time – I'm eating 3 meals a day including a healthy school lunch
Me size meals – I'm eating meals that are the right size for my age, not as big as grown-ups.
Cut back fat – My family are changing how we cook to make our meals healthier.
Snack check – Lots of snacks are full of fat, sugar and salt so I'm eating healthy snacks!
Up and about – After I've been sitting still for a while, I'm jumping up and doing something more active
Sugar swaps – I'm swapping sugary drinks for water, milk or unsweetened fruit juice.
'60 interactive minutes' – I'm spending at least 60 minutes walking, playing sport, running around or playing outside everyday'

The notion of a whole-school approach is about educating the pupils to develop social skills in order to improve themselves by helping to develop better life skills. It is important to establish here that in order to become 'good' members of society, we become regulated (Bratich, 2003). So what does it mean to be a good pupil? Is it important to make comparisons of the school restaurant to the home environment? There may be some relevance to establishing the link between meal time

participation and interaction, both in the home and school environment. The modes of behaviour differ in different homes based on the context. Whilst it may be useful to make comparisons with the home, pupils do not necessarily spend time eating together as some parents have to work multiple shifts, finishing at different times of the day meaning that children often eat in front of the television (Bauer et al, 2012). Additionally, it is reasonable to expect there would be few comparative experiences between meals eaten at home by the pupils to make significant conclusions. The school restaurant acts as a space for fostering opportunities for interaction. Community development is about sharing, discussing and inclusivity. It is about how people learn to live together from all walks of life. Another visual display on the wall describes the ethos at the school:

Within the Academy we recognize that pupils who feel happy, safe and are valued and given opportunities to contribute to school life not only make more progress academically but also develop into more rounded and confident adults, ready to access a successful adult life. (The School Principal)

To return to the notion of communities of practice then, it is important to recognise the school meal creates an opportunity for fostering social cohesion through the practice of eating together, provides a reasonable similar environment and experience for all students and it is reasonable to expect social interaction there to create informal communities of practice.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this paper posed the question; What is the significance of commensality in the practice of the school meal? By theorising the social learning benefits of the school meal using commensality to frame the overall discussion facilitated a number of hypothesis. The practice of eating together acts as a stimulus for interacting together. The concept of a school restaurant as opposed to a canteen promotes commensal acts leading to a higher level of social interaction amongst the actors. Food is described as a basic aspect of life, tied to survival and it has been identified as playing a huge role in this particularly school and this is evident as the school have invested heavily in terms of resources into the restaurant. The way in which the

school restaurant has been designed allows for pupils to congregate together, which brings a community feel to the school, and the layout helps to facilitate a community of social practice which features understanding, respect and aids integration.

Taking this research forward, it is important to recognize the multidisciplinary works that surround the topic of school meals, such as health, nutrition and life and the notion of social interaction through eating together. Therefore, in order to theorise using certain perspectives, the ideas and discussions in related subject disciplines also need to be carefully considered for future investigations. It is important to return to the key question set out in the beginning of this article, "Do we need to reconsider and plan school meals as social events and communal gatherings rather than just in terms of health and nutrition?" This is the area in which new knowledge needs to be found and investigated.

This paper reinforces the view that further research needs to be conducted in this area to ensure the benefits of commensality are maximised. The evidence presented here does not confirm that the restaurant promotes learning opportunities in itself and future qualitative investigations, perhaps into the study of food types on social learning would involve adopting a sociological view in order to help unpack the complexities surrounding societal structures and the order of things. This study has taken form through the lens of an education framework. Furthermore, Weaver-Hightower (2011) recognises the need for further research to be carried out on school meals, especially from scholars in the fields of education and sociology. A call for educationalists to investigate the school meal situation could help further pave the way for theorising social learning in the school meal situation.

## Notes

This paper falls in line with the University of Leicester's code of ethical practice and meets the requirements of the Human Subject Research (HSR) with children. All research conducted was carried out appropriately in line with the HSR and BERA (British Educational Research Association, 2011) guidelines.

Coding for staff, teachers and pupils (Staff – S; Teachers; T; Pupils; P)

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## **Appendix 1: Research Questions**

### **Main research question**

What is the impact of the food environment upon learning social skills?

### **Subsidiary research questions**

1. How do eating behaviours for staff and pupils impact on social skills development?
2. How do academic staff promote social skills and learning opportunities within a food environment?

## **Appendix 2: Interview questions for Participants:**

### **School staff**

1. What influenced your decision to join the school and how long have you been teaching or working at the school?
2. Outside of the classroom, how are pupils' able to develop their social skills?
3. What's your experience of dining halls in schools? What makes this different?
4. What's the school regulation on school food in the classroom? Do they eat in your lessons? Do you think that helps them concentrate on what they're doing? What do you allow? Is this a rule?
5. What extra activities does the school provide that have a positive impact on learning? For example, during break and lunch times.
6. How does the breakfast club help pupils?
7. In what ways do children continue to learn during the time in the restaurant? What sort of things are they learning? How is that happening?
8. Do you spend much time in the restaurant? If Yes, what do you do?

### **Pupils**

1. What is your favourite school meal?
2. What is your favourite school drink?
3. What do you think about the school restaurant?
4. Where do you eat dinner at home?
5. Do you have school breakfast?
6. Apart from eating food, what do you do like/dislike in the restaurant?

## Parents

1. What influenced your decision to send your child/children to the school?
2. What do you think about the school restaurant?
3. Do you make use of the school restaurant? If yes, how?
4. Do you think it matters what your children eat in the restaurant? Why?

## Appendix 3: Interview Coding

Int. No.	Open Codes	Grouping Codes
1	Creating the restaurant	1.1 Creating the restaurant
	Past employment	
	Social skills use in the restaurant	1.2 Social skills use in the restaurant
	Basic skills	
	Other school canteens	1.3 Other school canteens
	Flight trays	
	Learning basic skills in the restaurant	1.4 Learning basic skills in the restaurant
	School food	
	Catering industry	
	Healthy food	1.5 Healthy food
	Institutionalization	
	Sitting together in the restaurant	1.6 Eating together (Commensality)
	Eating together	
	Community	
	Staff watching pupils	1.7 Staff watching pupils
	Parents busy with working life	
	Pupils learn about catering staff	
	Food production	
	Cooking	
	Goldilocks and the 3 bears story	
	Food technology teachers Learning about food	1.8 Learning about food
	Type of food being served	
	Change of menus	
	Food taste	

## Appendix 4: Observation Coding

No.	Open Codes	Refined Codes
1.0	Parent recognising child hungry School breakfast	School breakfast
1.2	Familiarisation with staff Seating position in the school Meetings between staff. Staff sitting and chatting in one space	Meetings in the school restaurant Interaction Socialisation
1.3	Pupils walking alongside sports hall in restaurant	
1.4	Chat with the principal	
1.5	Principal talks about reason for coming to the school Two key words used – 'Food and behaviour'	Food and behaviour Eating together (Commensality)
1.6	Staff keeping on top of behavioural issues Staff facilitating pupils movements Fresh flowers on the table	Managing behaviour
1.6	Staff modelling food choices	Modelling behaviour Food choice Eating together (Commensality)
1.8	Increase in noise level Staff members sat next to pupils having their lunch Staff making regular eye contact with other staff. Like they're being watched. Table positioning	School lunch Table manners Restaurant aesthetics
1.9	Member of police force present. Staff seated on circular tables in the middle of the restaurant. Brings about a level of presence. Catering staff wiping tables ready for next batch of pupils.	Power relationships
2.0	Younger year group staff supervisors very animated	Modelling behaviour
2.1	Wall display description	Restaurant aesthetics