

The impact of Free School Meals (FSM) on extending forms of Capital: A small scale case study in one Academy school.

Research report

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1.0 Aims of the project

The project aimed to investigate the notion of 'culinary capital' in the context of the school dining space in one Academy school, based in the West Midlands region of England. Evidence from the past twenty years on pupil attainment and school performance has become central to understanding achievement and this has involved assessing socio-economic status; one of these measures being those pupils who are in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) (Taylor, 2017). Therefore, this particular school was selected based on the revamping of the school dining hall and as the number of pupils in receipt of FSMs was above the national average, it was particularly appealing. Whilst forms of culinary capital have been discussed in public discourse, such as social media and in certain disciplines, largely anthropology, it has not yet been discussed in an educational school-based context. Furthermore, up-take of FSMs is in decline and whilst families are eligible, they are not taking this opportunity and it is important to investigate the factors which influence their decisions. Therefore, this research project aims to highlight how forms of culinary capital can be extended in the school dining hall with reference to ideas such as social learning (Lalli, 2019a; 2019b). It is notions of power that are introduced in terms of the tensions that are said to work against such forms of culinary capital to shape the day to day opportunities for children in school dining spaces.

Research questions

1. To what extent can school meals promote forms of capital?
2. To what extent has the School Food Plan (2013) supported school food provision in bridging gaps of inequality?
3. What do pupils and staff in the school perceive to be the barriers of up-take of FSMs?

2.0 Background

Part of the power of food is that it is everywhere. It creates endless notions of good and bad, including good and bad food, good and bad eating practices and good and bad bodies. Food power is not only constraining and repressive, but also enabling and productive. Links to the work of Bourdieu (1986) are apparent in this case, who defines how 'cultural capital' inflects one's identity and life chances. For instance, unhealthy food choices follow a socioeconomic gradient that explains what is meant by 'culinary capital' (Martschukat and Simon, 2017).

School food in the UK has consistently been associated with controversial decision making through time yet the importance on the health of future generations has gained considerable momentum in both historical accounts (Cook et al, 1975) and in recent years (Taylor, 2017). In 1944, the National Schools Meals Policy was introduced which required school meals to provide a balanced and appropriate level of protein, fat and calories. Nutritional standards were then abolished in 1980 and it was not until 2001 in which these standards were re-introduced. For the first time in almost two decades, childhood poverty had risen in absolute terms as opposed to the growing relative poverty measure (Wickham et al, 2016). It is said that the poor health associated to children limits their development and decreases life chances in and outside of the confines of the school.

The significant increase of childhood obesity has led to a policy response from the government (Obesity Plan, 2016). Following a report in 2012, following a response from 152 Local Authorities (LAs), in England take-up of school lunches was recorded at 61% in the primary schooling sector, down from 78% in 2010-2011 and 38% in the secondary education sector, down from 54% in 2010-2011 (Nelson et al, 2012). Up-take of FSMs for primary school in the year 2017-2018 consisted of 14.1% pupils who are known to be eligible for claiming school meals (DfE, 2017). In secondary schools, for the same year, it was 12.9%. Overall, up-take of FSMs declined compared with previous years. Therefore, up-take of school meals and FSMs has consistently decreased over the last ten years and continues to do so.

3.0 Methodology

In order to carry out this research, an ethnographic approach was used to collect data and moreover, visual aids of the school dining hall were collected alongside conducting interviews with pupils and staff at the school. Moreover, field notes were recorded based on the observations during school mealtime. Ethnography, in this case is a life work and researching school dining halls has been a huge part of previous research projects. The term ethnography means to write about people and to describe the culture of a group of people and learning about what it is like to be a member, from the viewpoint of a particular member in that group (Johnson and Christensen, 2014). Therefore, having a vested interest in a topic, from both the local and global perspective brings about richness to the data collection and more importantly analysis. This part of the report details the research design, sample and recruitment, data analysis techniques and ethics.

Research Design: Visual Ethnographic Case Study

Data was collected from one academy school in the West Midlands region, which helped establish interaction patterns that take place between pupils and staff during the school meal (Lalli, 2017). This supplemented the interviews and field notes. Visual ethnographic methods have not yet been used to a greater extent in the context of school meal study and if any, there is very little research that has been carried out using this form of data capture (Counihan, 2018), especially based on ideas of culinary capital. Whilst structured observations through field notes can lend itself as being a strong tool for data collection in school dining halls, imagery of school food, interaction patterns and the aesthetics of dining halls can help create a visual representation in which meanings can be made (Pink, 2013). In order to carry out visual ethnography, it is important to distinguish between the visual and other forms of experience which include text (Pink, 2013).

Research Sample and Recruitment

An opportunity sampling approach was used to recruit and collate interview responses from 14 pupils and 8 members of staff in one Academy school, during the period January 2019 – October 2019. A large proportion of pupils consisted of those who were in receipt of FSMs across different year groups, although it was ethically challenging to approach this topic. These pupils were selected by the Principal and all names remained anonymous. This data generated questions for the written part

of the research and led to the development of key themes. The themes inform all three research questions. The table below (Fig. 1) presents the research sample:

Fig. 1 – Research sample

Staff interviews

No.	Position
1	Catering Manager
2	Vice Principal
3	Academic and Pastoral Leader for year 11
4	Attendance Leader
5	Food Technology Teacher
6	Principal
7	Head of Year 11
8	Head of PE and Community

Pupil Interviews

No.	Position
1	Year 8 pupils x 4
2	Year 8 pupils x 4
3	Year 7 Pupil
4	Year 7 Pupil
5	Year 7 Pupil
6	Year 8 Pupil
7	Year 10 Pupil
8	Year 10 Pupil

Data Analysis

In essence, a qualitative approach was adopted using grounded theoretical approaches and visual ethnographic techniques in capturing the data (Gerring, 2016). More specifically, a thematic approach was used following the transcription and coding of interviews and analysis of field notes and visuals in one academy school (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Ethics

In terms of ethics, project category A applies based on work with pupils (based on the ethical guidelines at University of Wolverhampton). For this reason, as I will be carrying out interviews and observations, I intend to ensure I keep all files in a locked

filing cabinet. All electronic data will be password protected and destroyed following the data analysis. Furthermore, I will ensure that I adhere to the BERA (2018) guidelines in order to respect cultural, social and religious backgrounds. In addition, I aim to conduct a pilot study in order to ensure that I am able to make participants feel at ease by using effective questioning techniques. In order to ensure a strong case is built for ethical approval, I will ensure I gain informed consent, let participants know that they have the right to withdraw and will also ensure confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms.

Identifying pupils who are enrolled on the FSM register an ethical concern and for this reason, it was not possible to identify or recruit pupils who were in receipt of FSM. However, it is important to note that the school was based in low SES (Socio-Economic Status) region, based on census data and the number of pupils in receipt of FSMs was above the national average, based on an OFSTED report, which for reasons of anonymity I am unable to identify.

4.0 Findings

This part of the report presents the data of the research by drawing on the following research tools including: (1) interviews (2) observations (3) visual aids. Furthermore, key themes are identified, and quotations presented based on the views of staff and pupils. Following the preliminary coding and analysis of the data, common contextual discussions are raised in respect to these topics: (1) traditional mealtime (2) eating choices (3) FSM uptake (4) eating space.

Traditional mealtime

Following on from an interview with the school catering manager, it was interesting to learn about the way in which a traditional style of dining was discussed. For example:

Interviewee: Yeah, it was yeah. That was a massive thing, but I think going back to traditional - so much better. I've got a good load of kids here...

Facilitator: What do you mean by traditional?

Interviewee: Traditional is like home-cooked produce, home-cooked food from scratch, massively. Fresh vegetables, everything cooked from fresh.

Eating space

Eating spaces in schools are highlighted as a common cause for concern and for this reason, it was commonly perceived amongst staff who thought that whilst the dining spaces around the school were designed to facilitate quite a flexible and open approach to eating, the dining hall was not very well suited as it was relatively small. For example:

Interviewee: We also use the outside area to communicate and converse as well as the inside area and that the school lunch... the school canteen is designed in quite a nice way to facilitate that.

Interviewee: Yeah, that's breakfast, because we have the whole of the school in at breakfast time. So, that's used down there that's - that is a lovely area to sit in as well, plus they do put films on, and different educational things on the screens for the kids to see, so it's a bit like a cinema in different sections.

Facilitator: My observation is that they stand up eating [through the] trays. You don't use hot plates or anything like that?

Interviewee: Because of the mass intake, I haven't got a big enough kitchen to actually take the entire cutlery, the plates, the dishes.

Facilitator: So, what do you think...

Interviewee: We've gone down the role of having - but then they throw all the knives and forks away. We did a little tester where we were eating with - we really wanted them...

Facilitator: Disposable.

Interviewee...to sit down and eat a meal, but it was like because of the space we'd got, because it's not a massive area...

Interviewee: Compared with other schools, compared with our old school, which was the old building, we have gone down to half the size of what our old kitchen was to now. It's storage, you know what I mean? At the moment the intake of kids that we've got coming for a meal is massive at the moment. They nearly all come for a dinner.

Eating choices

The price of school food is another area in which schools, caterers and children are said to suffer from not being able to provide or consume a suitable school lunch. Staff in the school were quite open to discussing this issue and it was interesting to learn more about how options for children to try different food were available, but on a budget.

Facilitator: There's around 1,400 kids on the school register?

Interviewee: About yeah. Which is - we take more or less around - about 278 a day will physically come for a meal, whether that is - they might spend some of it at breakfast time, dinner time, you know what I mean? We try and base things around - they've actually got 2.20 to spend, right, of free school meals, right, so what happens then is we'll do meal deals. They can get a full traditional dinner meal and a pudding for 2.20. They can get a jacket potato with three fillings or whatever and a little carton of pop if it's in with a - you know what I mean? We'll try and do lots of different meal deals. They can have as much salad as they want for 35p, you know what I mean? It's...

Free school meals - uptake

School mealtime consists of more than merely consumption of food, it is politically bound, and the socio-economic status of families are said to transcend through school mealtime participation and one of the ways in which this has been evident is through FSMs. For example:

Facilitator: In terms of free school meals then in general, this is based on your experience now, what barriers do pupils face in terms of access to free school meals? What can you tell me about that?

Interviewee: Access wise it's getting the kids to know that they are free school meals. That's getting in touch with the parents, right. We try and - if we've got kids coming that have not got any money, you know what I mean, we - I get involved with them stating - if they come to me and say I haven't got a lot of money or whatever, I'll go, right then. I will then try and say, perhaps you need a little bit more help. They then need to get in touch with the secretary of the school, because that's who passes out the forms for free school meals, right. You know what I mean, so that then goes down to the secretary part, right. Most kids know that they are allowed free school meals. There aren't many that don't, but there are a few.

Interviewee: It might have done. I know most kids now would want to say, oh I'm free, you know what I mean? They'd rather keep their little bit of money in their pocket, right. So, that stigma, I really think that's not the choice. I just think it's down to the individual kid that wants to come through in general.

Visual ethnographic data

Image 1 – Visual displays in the school dining hall



Image 2 – The buffet aisle



Image 3 – Outside dining space



Image 4 – Design of the school dining hall



5.0 Recommendations

This research informs future policy making on school food which includes reference to the School Food Plan (DfE, 2013) and Obesity Plan (2018) in a bid to help prioritise the school meal as a site for supporting public health concerns and whilst investing in the health and wellbeing of future citizens. With regards to practice, this research aims to support school leaders in establishing a new way of looking at school meals and ways in which opportunities for shaping culinary capital can be developed. This research will be of interest to those in the field of Education and Social Policy which also includes Teacher Education, namely newly qualified instructors.

6.0 Conclusions

In conclusion, whilst FSM uptake is largely problematic as an activity, it is important to unpack why some children choose to uptake versus those who choose not to, and this research report highlights this narrative. Whilst the initial findings of this preliminary report begin to shed light on the organisation of school dining spaces in academies housing over 1000 pupils, the complexity of the way in which school lunches are managed nationally have an impact on eating behaviours and food choices. One common theme amongst the data reveals how the school dining space, known as the 'Point' is a relatively small space compared to the previous school, so these centralized and national pressures of managing school spaces requires both exposure and further investigation.

7.0 Appendices

Appendix 1-Research project information sheet – For Pupils

Research Project: This project is about how school food can help pupils to learn about working together.

Dr Gurpinder Lalli, Senior Lecturer, Institute of Education, University of Wolverhampton

- I am a Senior Lecturer based at the University of Wolverhampton and my research project will aim to address the ways in which food impacts on educational life chances.
- If you are not happy with the way I am conducting myself, please contact the school to report this.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Vice Principal Curriculum and Standards

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Appendix 2-Research project information sheet – For Staff

Title of project: The impact of Free School Meals (FSM) on extending forms of Capital: A small scale case study in one Academy school.

Dr Gurbinder Lalli, Senior Lecturer, Institute of Education, University of Wolverhampton

- I am a Senior Lecturer based at the University of Wolverhampton and my research project will aim to address the ways in which food impacts on educational life chances.
- I am a qualified teacher with 8 years of classroom experience, who recently completed a PhD in Education Studies. I have mainly taught disaffected students aged 14 – 18 in further education across the Midlands and more recently taken up a Senior Lectureship at University of Wolverhampton. My research interests are in the teaching and learning area within sociology of education.
- The research project will involve conducting interviews at the school, with staff and pupils and carrying out observations around the school. For the preliminary stage, known as a pilot study, a select few interviews will be carried out with teachers at the school.
- All the interviews will last between 5 – 15 minutes and will be audio recorded and later transcribed. The recordings will be kept confidential and used anonymously in any writing. The recordings will only be available to the researcher, researcher's supervisor and the participant being interviewed. Following the completion of the research, the data will be destroyed.
- Observations will be carried out around the school, including the dining hall. Looking at food as the subject area will help narrow down the research focus and this is also an area in which I have gained teaching experience. More importantly, this subject is part of the core curriculum. The aim of this is to establish the context of the school and engage with the ways in which individuals behave.
- Should you have any concerns during the study, please do not hesitate to discuss them with the researcher who will be happy to help.

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Appendix 3 – Interview questions

Interview questions for staff

Questions:

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. Do you think the school lunch period is a significant part of the school day for pupils?
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 fosters learning? For example, during break and lunch times.
6. To your knowledge, does the way in which the school dining hall is designed affect Free School Meal (FSM) uptake?
7. In terms of uptake of FSMs, what barriers do pupils face?
8. Do you spend much time in the school dining hall?
9. Do you think learning takes place in the school dining hall?
10. Are pupils able to develop life skills during the school lunch period? If so, in what way.
11. Do you know about the School Food Plan (2013)? What can you tell me?

Interview questions for pupils

Questions:

1. What is your favourite school meal?
2. Who do you spend time with during the school lunch period?
3. What do you do during the school lunch period?
4. How long do you spend eating?
5. What do you think of the school dining hall?
6. What would be the perfect school dining hall for you?

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