

The influence of the secondary school setting on the food practices of young teenagers from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the secondary school environment as an important context for understanding young teenagers' eating habits and food practices. We draw on data collected during semi-structured interviews with 36 young teenagers (aged 13/14 years) living in disadvantaged circumstances in Scotland. We found that the systems inherent in school had an impact on what, where and when participants ate their lunch. Each school had rules governing use of the school dining hall and participants sometimes chose to leave this environment to buy food outside school premises. Our interviews showed that parents determined how much money young people took to school and therefore had some control over their food choices. Participants rarely spoke of giving priority to food and eating during the non-curriculum parts of the school day, preferring to spend time 'hanging out' with friends. Eating with friends was sometimes reported as a cause of anxiety, particularly when participants had concerns about body image, appetite or appearance. We suggest that young teenagers' dislike for queuing for food, their ability to budget for food at school and their desire to maximise time spent with friends influence food choices and therefore these are issues which have implications for health education and will be of interest to those responsible for school meal provision.

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Introduction

It is recognised that eating habits and food practices play an important role in young people's current and future health and well-being (Department of Health 1999; Scottish Office 1996) and that habits which begin in adolescence may be long lasting and difficult to alter in adulthood (Wills 2002; Warde 1997). The proportion of teenagers in the UK who are overweight is increasing (McCarthy et al. 2003), which may, in part, be due to sedentary behaviours and poor diet, in particular, an increased intake of high energy, fatty foods (Decklebaum & Williams 2001, Maffeis 2000). It is now well established that the consumption of 'unhealthy' foods is greater among adults and children in lower socio-economic groups (Shaw et al. 2000; Prescott-Clarke and Primatesta 1998) and that there are higher rates of childhood obesity in disadvantaged areas (Maffeis 2000; Parsons et al. 1999). Several studies have sought to investigate the role of social context in relation to young people's health-relevant behaviours (Pavis et al. 1998; Denscombe 2001), but there has been little qualitative research in the UK that has explored the context in which the eating habits and food practices of young teenagers are situated. School is a central part of young teenagers' lives and therefore one of the challenges for health educators is to understand how the school environment impacts on diet and health. Young teenagers eat one of their main meals during the school day and policy makers increasingly view secondary schools as sites where 'healthier' eating can be encouraged (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2004; Department of Health 1999). Currently, 16% of secondary school pupils are eligible to receive free school meals because of low parental income (Scottish Executive 2004), yet many pupils dislike being identified with receiving a free meal (Storey and Chamberlin 2001).

This may, therefore, act as a barrier to the implementation of healthy eating initiatives within schools.

Young people enjoy unstructured, unsupervised time and space (Pavis and Cunningham-Burley 1999), yet the social and organisational structures inherent in schools (James et al. 1998) may override any autonomy that young people may have. For example, in their ethnographic study of primary school children's eating habits, Burgess and Morrison (1998) found that children's food choices were constrained by adult expectations regarding acceptable behaviour in the dining hall and by the inequalities created by having, or not having money (including being in receipt of free school meals – which marked children out from their peers). Teenagers at secondary school are thought to be subjected to fewer spatial and social restrictions within school (Valentine 2003) but they may still be constrained by organisational structures and social expectations, just as Burgess and Morrison's primary school participants were. For example, secondary school may be seen not as one social sphere, but as a number of socially constructed spaces created by the peer groups who inhabit them, each with distinct rules of inclusion and exclusion (Tucker 2003). These micro-environments may also, however, be governed, to some extent, by adult authority.

The influence of peers on health-relevant behaviours is the subject of much debate. Whilst some commentators suggest there has been a rise in individualised behaviour (Furlong and Cartmel 1997), that is, behaviour that is constrained less by social structures than by personal agency (Giddens 1991), considerable evidence remains that young teenagers' health-relevant behaviours are still influenced by peer group identities (Johnson et al. 2003; Pavis et al. 1998; West and Michell 1998). Young teenagers come into contact with large numbers of friends and also more distant peers whilst at school, therefore this social environment is a setting

where young people can both have an influence on, and be influenced by, their contemporaries (Holloway and Valentine 2000).

This paper draws on data collected during interviews with 13 and 14 year olds living in socio-economically disadvantaged families in Eastern Scotland. In this study, we explored young teenagers' dietary worlds, looking at a range of social and cultural influences on food and eating practices, within and outside the family. In this paper, we explore the secondary school environment as a context for understanding young teenagers' food and eating practices. We look at whether young teenagers' food and eating practices are constrained by the adult expectations and organisational systems within schools, the food and eating practices reported as occurring during non-curriculum parts of the school day and the influence of school-based peer group interactions on food 'choices'.

Method

Given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as this would allow themes and hypotheses to be identified and tested during the data collection period, rather than simply assessing those formulated at the study's outset (Britten et al. 1995). Such an approach also allows the analysis and interpretation of the data to be guided by the experiences of study participants.

The sample was drawn from families living in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances because it is known that such families eat a worse diet than those living in more affluent circumstances in Scotland (Shaw et al. 2000). We contacted several schools and youth groups situated in areas classified as socio-economically disadvantaged as these were expected to contain a high proportion of young people who would fit our criteria of

disadvantage. These areas were identified using the Breadline Britain Index (Gordon and Forrest 1995), a measure based on multiple measures of deprivation.

After receiving ethical approval from each relevant education authority, members of the research team visited three schools. A short screening questionnaire was administered to 8 classes of Secondary 2 pupils (the majority of whom were aged 13) and 4 classes of Secondary 3 pupils (the majority of whom were aged 14). The screening questionnaire was used to collect socio-demographic information (household composition; car use; occupation/s of parent/s; home postcode), physical activities undertaken regularly and details of favourite, and regularly consumed, foods. Double consent was sought: parents were asked to 'opt out' if they did not wish their child to take part in the study and each young person was asked to give their own written consent before the study commenced. We also recruited via three youth groups. Ethical issues were discussed with each of these groups before the study commenced.

We selected 36 young people based on their agreement to be contacted about an interview, their gender (18 girls and 18 boys) and their socio-demographic details (we chose young people living in the most deprived postcode sectors within the area and account was also taken of household composition; parental occupation/s and car use). Each young person was interviewed at home for between 45 and 90 minutes. Although interviews were arranged when a parent or guardian was at home, they were not present during the interview. A topic guide was used covering the following themes: everyday life at school; leisure time and home life; what food participants ate; where food was eaten and with whom. The questionnaire data were used as prompts within the interview. Interviews, which took place between February 2003 and January 2004, were tape-recorded with each respondent's consent.

All interviews were transcribed in full. Transcripts were read repeatedly and cross-compared both during and after data collection. Regular team meetings were held to identify recurrent themes; to explore young peoples' underlying reasoning; to discuss data on young people who were dissimilar from their peers in some way; and to identify new research questions. Data were organised into initial and higher codes once consensus regarding themes had been achieved. Each theme was explored further by more detailed analysis, looking for similarities and differences within and between research participants (Boyatzis 1998; Richardson 1996). NUD.IST, a qualitative data-indexing package, facilitated data coding and retrieval. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms and the data have been decontextualised where appropriate to ensure individuals cannot be identified.

FINDINGS

In the course of discussing their everyday food and eating practices, participants often talking about what they ate during the school day; with whom and where, exactly, these events took place. These data form the focus of this paper. Other findings from the study will be reported in due course.

The influence of organisational systems and dining facilities

It was apparent from the interviews and fieldwork that each school attended by the participants had its own micro-culture and this appeared to have an impact on the food experiences of the young teenagers concerned. For example, all participants said they were constrained when deciding what to eat, where to eat and when to eat their lunch, partly because of decisions made at school level (or above). Each school had more than one dining hall and more than one session for lunch and students' entry to the dining halls was staggered

by year group, whether they wanted to eat hot or cold food and, in one school, whether they were wearing the correct school uniform. Many participants described these constraints as frustrating because they could not eat lunch with friends from other year groups and could not always access the foods they preferred to eat. In some cases, participants deemed these constraints unacceptable and opted to leave school at lunchtime to purchase food elsewhere (this was, however, somewhat dependent on the opportunities that existed for buying food at local outlets). For those participants who reported taking up their entitlement to a free school lunch because of low family income (a third of the sample), leaving school to buy food at local food outlets was not normally a feasible option. The young people affected by this said they had little choice but to accept the lunchtime conditions of the dining hall, or to go without lunch (which a minority of teenagers reported doing).

Within school, the young people in this study often said their decisions about which food to purchase was dependent on the length of the queue at each counter. This often meant lack of real choice, when, for example, bottled water was only available at the hot food counter but this had the longest queue. Avoiding the lunchtime queues meant arriving promptly at the dining hall, as the following quotation illustrates:

Craig: "I run to the dinner hall and get a tuna salad sandwich"

Interviewer: "Right. Do you do that all the time, (silence) yeah?"

Craig: "And then talk to my friends outside the dinner hall"

Interviewer: "So you stay in the dinner hall to eat your sandwich? Yeah? And you said you have to run to the dinner hall. Why do you have to run to the dinner hall?"

Craig: "'Cause they are all taken"

Interviewer: "Because?"

Craig: “There’s a big line and they’re usually all taken”

The participants who bought their lunch or break time snack at local shops also complained of having to queue, and described a need to get to these shops quickly to avoid spending their breaks in line to purchase food. This also meant that food purchases were often based on choosing outlets with the shortest or fastest moving queues; invariably these were fast food outlets and a high street bakery chain.

All young people were asked how much money they were given each day by their parents or guardians (this ranged from nothing to £4) and to explain how this was spent. The participants knew whether their lunch allowance would be enough to allow for the purchase of snacks for break time, whether they could make their money go further by buying food at local shops rather than in the school refectory or by bringing food in from home. Some participants reported buying bottled water because canned carbonated drinks were more expensive. The price of food at school was often described as representing poor value for money.

Interviewer: “Do you have anything to eat or drink at break time?”

Iain: “Not at break time, never, I just don’t have the money (laughter)”

Interviewer: “Yeah, right, OK. Do you take any money to school?”

Iain: “No, I sometimes [buy] a [?] bar and a couple of cans of juice down in the shop and then I’ll drink that on my way to school. School prices are really expensive so I just can’t afford anything at break”

The importance of non-food activities and ‘escaping’ the school environment

The secondary school day was structured around the morning and afternoon teaching periods when the curriculum was delivered. Young people often expressed clearly defined ideas about how they wanted to use the non-curriculum times at school – namely, the morning break and lunch period. In our participants’ accounts, food and eating were rarely given precedence over other activities. Most participants reported wanting to eat quickly in order to spend time playing football and other games, to attend lunchtime clubs and practice sessions and generally to spend time with their friends and peers. Gender also appeared to be salient in this regard. Boys were more likely to report being involved in physical activity at break and at lunchtime, playing football (or just ‘kicking a ball about’) or running around with their friends – activities which were not possible whilst eating. Food was therefore purchased and eaten as quickly as possible so that these other activities could begin. Girls in the study were more likely to describe spending their non-curriculum time at school talking and ‘hanging out’ with other girls, activities which could be undertaken whilst eating snacks or meals. Girls in the study reported spending longer over their lunchtime meal or snack and were more likely than boys to leave the school at lunchtime, to walk to local shops to buy food. This was then eaten on the walk back to school, or in local spaces that young people claimed as their own:

Interviewer: “And tell me what you normally do at lunch time?”

Lorna: “Just usually run to try and beat all the queues for the food [down the high street] and then like we go down to the wee pigeon bit [an area frequented by pigeons just outside the school’s grounds], sit, eat our lunch and then probably have about two fags and then go back up to school”

Some young people said they went home for lunch. For them, this acted as a way of breaking up the school day and was perceived as making best use of their time. Occasionally, however, going home was also reported as a way of temporarily escaping from an environment that was not considered enjoyable or fulfilling:

Interviewer: “Is there any particular reason why you prefer to come home for lunch rather than eat at school?”

Jeremy: “Usually your lunch only takes about ten, fifteen minutes to eat and there’s usually nothing to do in the school so it’s just we manage the time better when we just come home”

Interviewer: “Yeah? And have you done that since first year?”

Jeremy: “No I used to em stay in the school in first year, eh I’ve..it’s just nothing to do there, all the other folk had the astroturf... they pretty much skip lunch every day just to get a game of football so I didn’t really do that”

Going home was also motivated by financial considerations: if participants did not have money for food and they were not entitled (or did not wish to take up their entitlement) to a free meal, then they often had little choice but to eat at home.

From our interviews, it was apparent that, far from being an autonomous, unsupervised part of the school day, break time and lunch time periods were constrained, to some extent, by the systems inherent within each school. Decisions about what, where and when to eat seemed to be affected by this. Food and eating practices were further constrained by the non-food activities in which young people wished to participate during the morning break and lunch periods.

Peer group inclusion, exclusion and commensality

Teenagers are likely to interact with many young people during the course of the school day but close friends are thought to exert more influence on health-relevant behaviours than peers (West and Michell 1998). The interview data seem to concur with this argument. The reports of young people who struggled to make or maintain friendships indicated that they were often excluded from lunchtime group decisions about what and where to eat. This appeared to affect boys more than girls and can be illustrated by referring to specific cases.

Nick had changed schools a few months before he was interviewed. When he initially joined his new school, he ‘hung out’ with the new friends he had made and they decided as a group where they were going to eat lunch. These friendships were not sustained, however, and, when interviewed, Nick frequently referred to what the group did at lunchtime, in comparison to how he now spent his lunch break – catching the bus, buying something from a bakery to eat at home and then returning to school. Similarly, Liam used to ‘hang out’ with a group with whom he ate at lunchtime. Since becoming excluded from this group he had asked his grandmother to collect him at lunchtime so he could eat with her and his young cousins whom she also looked after. Liam commented on how much he disliked people at school and how he would now rather make his own decisions about what to eat.

Young people who had friends at school with whom they spent time during the lunch break could often give detailed accounts of what each friend ate and articulate their perception of why this was. Despite some specific differences, it was usual for groups of friends to say they joined the same queue (either within the dining hall or at local food outlets) and then ate their meals or snacks together. The interviews suggested that eating with a crowd caused some

participants distress or anxiety, though they often remained keen to fit in with the group. This seemed to affect girls more than boys. Lorna, for example, felt she had put on weight since leaving primary school, something which she said made her feel anxious. She described herself as part of the popular crowd and belonging to this group often meant missing meals, resulting in further negative feelings, as the following quotations show:

Lorna: “I was in a hurry...I had detention, came home and got changed, and my friends..I had to cycle round and get [them all] and I didnae have time for tea, and I didnae have time for my homework. I had to do it all when I came in and I ate three Bounties”

[...]

Interviewer: “What sort of things in particular do you [talk to your friends about]?”

Lorna: “Like, ‘cause all my friends and everybody else talks [about their weight], I wear big sizes and that to hide it, I dinnae want anybody to see my fat”

In our study it was notable that some young people stood out from their friends by asserting the need not to fit in with group eating habits. In these cases, talk about appearance, appetite or body image was interspersed with talk about taste and food preferences. These young people spoke of their unease at the thought of eating ‘greasy’, ‘fattening’ or ‘disgusting’ foods, and used these feelings to justify to their friends why they chose sandwiches and fruit, rather than more popular foods, like chips and burgers.

Those participants who attended music practice (or other lunchtime clubs) often did so several times each week and, as a result, had to eat quickly so that practice could begin. These young people opted to fit in with the norms of the group and many said they brought in a packed

lunch from home which was eaten with the group in the classroom where the activity was held. If young people bought a sandwich from the school refectory, this was still eaten with their peers attending music practice and therefore commensality was still evident for the group as a whole.

Discussion

Much has been written about young people's increasing autonomy during the teenage years and the way this is manifested in the adoption of 'risky' health-relevant behaviours (see for example, Denscombe 2001; Miles et al. 1998). However, when constrained by the school environment, and adult authority and supervision, it seems that young people are not able to be completely autonomous outside the confines of the classroom. Adults exercise some control over when, where and what young people can eat within secondary school, through the use of established school rules, and this control is further maintained by the queues reported by participants and the money provided by parents for purchasing food.

Recommendations have been made to increase the availability of 'healthier' foods and to reduce the stigma attached to the uptake of free school meals (Scottish Consumer Council 2001; Storey and Chamberlin 2001). Whilst these may be worthwhile endeavours, our findings suggest that, unless the problems associated with queuing for school meals are addressed and better understood, it is likely that young people will not consider the 'healthier' options even if they become available. The young people in this study had a clear knowledge of budgeting for and financing their preferred foods and the ways in which the food provided in school represented good, or bad, value for money. It could be argued, therefore, that those responsible for meal provision need to consult with young people in order to ensure that supply is in line with demand. It was clear that young people's desire to maximise free time between classes meant that food and eating were not assigned a high priority. This is an

important consideration when deciding how food in schools is delivered. It may also mean that young people will continue to give precedence to their non-food activities, whatever changes are made to the school meals system.

Our study suggests that, far from being a result of individualised behaviour, young teenagers' eating habits, at least within school, are deeply embedded in the context in which they occur. Young people who are part of a group have to take into account what their peers 'choose' to eat and decide whether to fit in with the group norm. This represents a challenge for health promotion practitioners because young people may not make healthier choices at school if this does not fit in with a group's food norms. Young people who find it difficult to make or maintain friendships are perhaps outside peer constraints on their eating habits, yet these teenagers' feelings of exclusion may contribute to poorer well-being.

The data presented here are drawn from interviews with young teenagers attending schools in one part of Scotland. Thus, the findings may not, necessarily, be generalisable to populations outside this area. However, the findings highlight particular issues which could be followed up in further research exploring the influences on the eating practices of young teenagers. Our analyses were perhaps limited by focusing only on young people's perspectives. For example, had we interviewed teachers and catering staff, we would have been able to ascertain whether these adults collude with the low priority given to food and eating. Future studies would benefit from collecting more information about the systems in place within each school (for example, whether nutritional information is provided in the school dining hall and whether pupils who bring in a packed lunch are able to eat with their friends who buy food from the dining hall).

Conclusion

This study adds to our knowledge about young teenagers' food and eating practices during the school day. By locating and understanding food 'choices' in the secondary school contexts within which they occur, we were able to go beyond other studies (Scottish Consumer Council 2001; Storey and Chamberlin 2001) that have noted, for example, that young people do not like queuing for food, or that receiving a free school meal leads to stigmatisation, by exploring some of the reasons for these findings. By looking at the school context from young people's own perspectives, we were able to explore the ways in which organisational structures within schools impact on teenagers' decisions about what, where and when to eat; how young people prioritise activities other than food and eating; and the ways in which peer group interactions might influence food and eating practices.

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