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School dinner halls:
Too noisy to participate?

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Introduction

All children should have equal access to participate within school.

Participation is affected by contextual factors; the physical environment and people. One important aspect is the daily school meal.

Little is known about UK school dinner environments and there is limited formal guidance.

Purpose

Pilot study of one English primary school to:
- explore a dinner hall environment
- identify suitable parameters to audit the physical and social environment
- determine if the environment supports communication and, if not, can improvement recommendations be made

Methods

One multicultural inner city primary school participant.

Two one hour lunchtime sessions observed:

- Children, aged 5-11 years, (703)
- Mealtime staff (30).

Observations and information gathered through:
- Use of adapted published classroom environment audit tools:
  - How acoustically friendly is your listening environment?[1]
  - Sensory Audit for schools & classrooms[2]

- Sound pressure level measurements

References

1. Worcestershire County Council & Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust (2015) How acoustically friendly is your listening environment?: http://www.hacw.nhs.uk/EasySiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=96865&servicetype=Attachment
2. Attfield, Fowler & Jones Sensory audit for schools and classrooms Autism Education Trust :
3. http://www.aettraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/37.1-Sensory-audit-tool-for-environments.pdf
4. Department for Education (2015) Acoustic design for schools: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/400784/BB93_February_2015.pdf
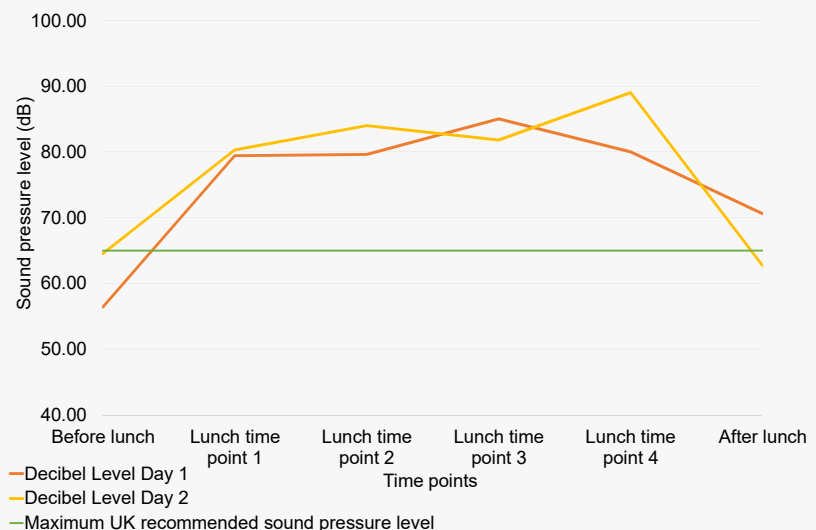
Results

Suitable parameters for audit?

Current tools suitable parameters with **minimal adaptation**:

- How acoustically friendly is your listening environment: 4 changes made e.g.
  Drapes on display tables -> Wipeable tablecloths on tables
- Sensory audit – all sections relevant except one
  'Writing' – could be adapted to reflect on cutlery use

Communicatively supportive environment?

Dinner Hall Equivalent Sound Pressure Levels

Time points axis: Before lunch, Lunch time point 1, Lunch time point 2, Lunch time point 3, Lunch time point 4, After lunch

— Decibel Level Day 1
— Decibel Level Day 2
— Maximum UK recommended sound pressure level

Improvement recommendations possible?

Acoustically friendly audit score:
Positive factors = **5**
Negative factors = **9**

e.g. no blinds or curtains on windows
     hard floor surface with worn rubber chair leg tips

The school was a **willing participant**. School staff were keen to hear the **findings** in order to **improve** this **environment**.

Tools led to **improvement recommendations**.

Conclusions

This exploratory study in one English school demonstrates that the dinner hall is noisy breaching UK government standards[3].

This is not conducive to participation and communication for all children, and particularly impacts children with disabilities related to hearing impairment or auditory sensitivity.

The tools guided recommendations to reduce noise levels.

The acceptability of this study and the usefulness of these adapted tools supports planned further research with a larger sample of school participants.

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