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The lived experiences of school lunch: an empathy-based study with children in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

School lunch is in general regulated through policies and agendas constituted by the perspectives of adults. In this article, we focus on children's lived experiences of school lunch with a special emphasis on emotions and how they relate to social and physical dimensions. This study draws on empathy-based stories written by 10–11 year olds ($n = 171$) from schools in Sweden. We identified three themes: *Interaction and exposure*, *Routines and restrictions* and *Food and eating*. The children's lived experiences of school lunch and the emotions attached to them are closely associated and intertwined with the socio-spatial dimension of school lunch. A pleasant meal experience seems to require harmonization between the physical and social space whilst negative experiences contain tensions between them, something that actors working with school lunch and school lunch environments should take in consideration when resourcing, planning and scheduling school lunch, and also when designing new school restaurants.

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School lunch; lived experiences; empathy-based stories; emotions; children's spaces; Henri Lefebvre

Introduction

Children's lived experiences of everyday practices in different places and situated phenomena is a central theme in children's geographies and childhood studies, not least children's experiences and processing of social identity in relation to school (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Valentine 2000; Ellis 2005; Horton and Kraftl 2006; Collins and Coleman 2008). Researchers who have studied school from a socio-spatial perspective have highlighted both formal and informal spaces within school, for example, the classroom (McGregor 2004; Höijer, Fjellström, and Hjalmskog 2013) and the outdoor spaces (Thomson 2005; Gustafsson 2009; Rönnlund 2015). Studies that have directed interest towards the socio-spatial relations of the school lunch have highlighted the interconnectedness between people, environment and food (see e.g. Moss and Petrie 2002; Pike 2008, 2010; Johansson et al. 2009; Brembeck et al. 2013). Exploring the socio-spatial dimension of school lunch is of interest as school meals in pleasant surroundings, including both social and physical aspects, provides good conditions for a pleasurable meal experience and an overall positive attitude towards food and meals, which in turn can have many positive effects on children's health and well-being.

In this study, we examine how school children make sense of and construct meaning associated with school lunch with a special focus on emotions as they are an important part of the lived experiences and meaning-making in everyday life. By drawing on empathy-based stories (see method

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section) we aimed to explore children's lived experiences and how they relate to social and physical dimensions of the school lunch. Such knowledge is important when discussing children's well-being in school, and the activities and spaces that children come across on a daily basis, and give potentially valuable insights to people working with school lunch and school lunch environments.

Traditionally there has been a strong nutritional and health-oriented focus on food in western society, including school lunch (Andersen, Baarts, and Holm 2017). Children's meals have been regarded as something that can be improved, not only with a health focus but also when it comes to children's social development (Pike 2008) and transmission of social values (Hansen 2016). Meals have also been used for pedagogical purposes (see e.g. Weaver-Hightower 2011; Waling and Olsson 2017). Many studies around school meals have recognized that sociality and friendship is an essential part of children's experiences of school lunch (Ludvigsen and Scott 2009; Bruselius-Jensen 2014; Andersen, Holm, and Baarts 2015) and that children view school lunch as a chance for them to create their own space, a children's space, in the otherwise adult-controlled day (Moss and Petrie 2002; Rasmussen 2004; Pike 2008; Daniel and Gustafsson 2010). At the same time, school lunches have been identified as controlled and governed by adults, mostly teachers (Metcalf et al. 2008; Pike 2008), which can influence how children experience the school lunch situation. Pike (2008), Daniel and Gustafsson (2010) and Welch, McMahan and Wright (2012) point out that a strong focus on dietary health can hinder consideration of the social aspects of eating, as well as the wide pedagogical meanings of food in school.

Although school lunch is a feature of many societies, its context differs between societies. School eating is contextually and socially entrenched in everyday life (Delormier, Frohlich, and Potvin 2009). The present study was undertaken in Sweden where school lunch is deeply embedded in Swedish culture and something that is frequently discussed (Persson Osowski, Göransson, and Fjellström 2010). Sweden is one of few countries in the world with a long tradition of serving free school meals to all, and for many it has become a taken for granted part of the school day. Free meals mean, by law, they are fully funded by the government and thereby free of charge to all pupils in compulsory school (grade one to nine) (Swedish Education Act 2010, 800), and this is independent of their guardian's income. This legislation also requires that the lunch should be appropriately nutritious.

Concerning their administration, the Swedish school lunch is a scheduled and partly controlled activity with respect to, for example, timing and duration. School meals are generally eaten in a room that is designed for eating and sharing meals together. This room is often, as in this study, referred to as the school restaurant. School restaurants differ in size but they are generally built to enable many children to eat at the same time. The children usually stand in line together with their class and provide themselves with food and then go to their places which are often designated by teachers. After lunch it is common that the children go out to play on the schoolyard.

A typical Swedish school lunch includes a hot meal with vegetables, bread and milk or water. The Swedish National Food Agency (NFA 2013) provides guidelines regarding school lunch and highlights important factors for improving food intake and well-being among the children; such as the meal should be tasty and pleasant as well as socially and environmentally sustainable. Children should have at least 20 min to eat according to the guidelines. Furthermore, it is advised that school lunches should be integrated and utilized as a resource in educational activities. Many schools in Sweden have implemented the so-called 'pedagogical meal' where teachers, during scheduled work hours eat an often subsidized school meal together with the children (Waling and Olsson 2017). This often comprises regulatory obligations, and is expected to contribute to a calm and peaceful environment, and give children a positive attitude towards meals (NFA 2013; Persson Osowski, Göransson, and Fjellström 2013).

Conceptual and theoretical framework

Lived experiences of everyday practices are well explored in social and educational studies (see e.g. Thomson 2005; Horton and Kraftl 2006; Kostenius 2011). Within this area of research, the

sociologist Henri Lefebvre's theories on social space have received a lot of attention (see e.g. Gulson and Symes 2007; Middleton 2014, 2016) and have been widely used. For example, Matthews and Tucker (2007) draw on Lefebvre's notions of 'everyday life' and 'lived space' in order to highlight teenagers' lived experiences in rural communities, and to challenge representations of 'the rural idyll'. Kellock and Sexton (2018), used Lefebvre's triad the perceived, conceived and lived space and the concept of time to allow understanding of primary school classroom space from children's perspectives. Furthermore, Kullman and Palludan (2011) employed Lefebvre's writings on rhythm-analysis when exploring different temporalities of children's everyday agencies.

In this study, we start from the idea that various spatial dimensions interact in the production of social space (Lefebvre 1991). According to Lefebvre, social space is produced by physical, social and mental dimensions, and is in constant change – continuously created and transformed via the interaction between these spatial dimensions. This then has an effect on the individual's lived experiences. For instance, everyday rhythms, routines and social practices including the physical environment and conceived space of planners and politicians stated in institutional policy documents have an effect on how the individual experience a certain place in a certain time.

Within this theoretical framework, we understand the school lunch as a social and physical space incorporating the food, the practices (serving, eating, etc.) as well as the school restaurant, the physical setting where all this takes place. Furthermore, we understand it as a space where meaning-making and emotions are created and practiced through everyday life – individuals live space by attributing meaning and emotions to them. Thus, emotions are an important part of the lived experiences in everyday life and the meaning-making that takes place in school spaces (Lefebvre 1991; Hackett, Seymour, and Procter 2015; Blazek 2018). With Lefebvre and researchers in the field of emotional geographies (see e.g. Davidson, Smith, and Bondi 2012), we regard emotions as more than the subjective state; emotions are regarded as having socio-spatial mediation and articulation. This also means that emotions can only be understood within a context of space. Meaningful senses, such as emotions, emerge via movements between people and places. In this study, i.e. the atmosphere of a place, and the interplay between people, affects the emotions that emerge, and vice versa. Previous studies highlighting children's meaning-making in relation to school space have explored their emotions in relation to, for example, institutional power (Procter 2013) and social identities (Kustatscher 2017). Within the context of food and eating in school, emotions have understood as being produced in and affect food and eating practices at school (Dolphijn 2004). Tørslev, Nørredam, and Vitus (2017) explored Danish children's feelings about eating lunch at school and found that children experienced lunch at school as noisy and hectic. They also noted their negative feelings (e.g. guilt) about themselves, or their bodies, in relation to food and eating – something also recognized by Welch, McMahon and Wright (2012).

In the light of this research tradition, we wanted to broaden the perspectives by bringing social, physical *and* emotional aspects into the same analysis, and also elaborate on how they interact in the lived experiences of the school lunch. We start from the premise that various spatial dimensions, and the interplay between people, affect the emotions that emerge in relation to a place. In the present study, we explore children's emotions in relation to school lunch and we are interested in how their emotions relate to both physical and social dimensions of the school lunch. This means that we are interested in the interplay between the children and the physical space, and between the children themselves. Concerning the school lunch as physical space, we focus on time, the food, sound, seating arrangements and interior. Concerning social space we focus on social interaction, communication and relations. We also intend to examine how emotions associated with the physical and social school lunch space relate to each other.

Method

Empathy-based stories were chosen as a device to explore children's experiences of school lunch. This method has been reported as being effective in capturing meanings people assign to a

phenomenon and that it helps to focus on issues that are relevant and critical for the people studied (Wallin, Koro-Ljungberg, and Eskola 2018), which are closely related to the emotions associated with a phenomenon. The method is furthermore used to capture experiences, which are a central part of the lived dimension (Lefebvre 1991). However, to the best of our knowledge, it has not previously been used exploring children's experiences of school lunch.

In practice, participants receive a short introductory story, a frame story, which is intended to inspire their writing (Wallin, Koro-Ljungberg, and Eskola 2018). There are usually two to four different frame stories, which differ regarding one thing or phenomenon. This variation is essential as it gives researchers the possibility of observing differences in participants' stories as they relate to the difference in frame stories. The frame stories should be short but include the essential features relevant to the aim of the research being undertaken. For the present study, participating children were asked to write, and draw, a story about an imaginary, but possible school lunch experience. The term 'empathy' in this context indicates that participants imagine themselves in a situation described through the frame story and write a short story either about what had just happened, or what would happen next or in the future. In other words, the stories did not have to be 100% 'true' representations of a real-life experience, although the children were encouraged to use their own experiences when writing the story. Also, the children were not necessarily expected to imagine themselves in someone else's situation or role, which is common to the method as well as within the concept of empathy (Wallin, Koro-Ljungberg, and Eskola 2018). The children were randomized to one out of two different frame stories: positive (P) or negative (N). Approximately equal number of frame stories were used (86 P, 85 N). The variation in frame stories was created by changing the nature of the empathized school lunch experience.

Imagine that today's school lunch is just over and you are leaving the school restaurant. *You feel satisfied and happy (P)/It does not feel good (N)*. Write a short story about what happened during the lunch to make you feel like this. You can also draw a picture/pictures/cartoon about your story after finishing the writing.

Their stories were written in the classroom during a regular lesson. Each child was given a paper with a short frame story and instructions were either given by the teacher or a researcher. Teachers had been provided with detailed guidance on how to introduce the assignment and it was made clear that prompting was not to be given to the children.

Data analysis

The stories were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis was initially inductive with the intention to look for both semantic (descriptive) and latent (interpretative) content within the data and followed by a theory-informed synthesizing analysis of the themes that emerged. In choosing thematic analysis, the intention was to eliminate the risk of losing the 'big picture' to abstract categorizations (Bleakley 2005) and to provide 'true' images of the children's stories (including the drawings). A comprehensive analysis approach to the data was chosen, meaning that the data were not differentiated by school, class, frame story and gender and no attempt was made to categorize specific individuals. The results reported here were based on researcher interpretations of the children's stories and drawings.

First, transcribed stories were read through several times and discussed by all contributing authors. During this process, preliminary key areas (potential themes) emerged: the emotions and associations that arose were clearly linked both to the social and the physical dimensions of school lunch. This, as well as the goal of paying attention to children's lived experiences of school lunch and to broaden the perspectives of school lunch, motivated the use of spatial theory (Lefebvre 1991). Second, all stories were coded, i.e. extracting meaningful words or sentences that manifested the core content and stayed close to the original text. These codes were used to sort the data. In some cases, new codes were formulated based on the drawings but most often the drawings confirmed or supported the codes already written. Thereafter, all codes were reviewed, discussed and in

some cases reformulated, separated and/or merged into new codes. To reduce the risk of losing the overview of the stories, the analysis has been based on the codes as well as on the whole stories and the drawings. Third, the process was followed by a theory-informed review of the codes, searching for relationships between the codes and identifying themes. The synthesizing of the themes was done with the intention of understanding and discussing the themes in relation to emotions by using the concepts of social and physical space. The themes were discussed in relation to each other, searching for patterns and differences with special attention to the way that emotions related to the physical and social space of school lunch.

Study participants

The current research was based on the Swedish part of an interdisciplinary Nordic project called 'Prospects for promoting health and performance by school meals in Nordic countries' (ProMeal) (see Waling et al. 2016). Data were collected from 171 (93 girls, 78 boys), aged 10–11 years, and belonging to fourteen classes from nine Swedish compulsory schools situated in a county in northern Sweden. To begin with, 193 stories were collected between October 2013 and May 2014. Of these, 22 stories were removed from the analysis because of children dropping out of the ProMeal study as a whole ($n = 3$), or difficulties in linking the stories to the correct individuals ($n = 19$). The schools represented different socioeconomic profiles but the majority of parents were educated and employed.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted according to the guidelines laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki and all procedures involving human subjects were approved by The Regional Research Ethics Review Board, the Faculty of Medicine, Umeå University, Sweden (2013-212-31Ö). Written informed consent was a requirement for participating. The study was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw at any time. To minimize the impact on the physical, mental and social integrity, personal information and results related to individual participants have been kept confidential. All names stated in the result section are pseudonyms.

Findings

The data consist of many examples of how the empathy-based stories brought out emotions related to school lunch. Children often used the first-person in their narratives and wrote stories that included themselves and people close to them. It seemed like they easily could imagine themselves in the situation. Based on our informal observations, the writing task was perceived as a regular school assignment since it was mostly handed out by the children's own teachers, and the assignment itself was similar to their regular school work. There were some cases where the child had trouble starting to write and in some cases needed help from the teacher.

The children's stories, although of varying length, were generally rich and colorful, imbued with emotions, sensations, expectations and visions. The data ranged from one line stories to longer stories with more detailed descriptions. Most stories had a clear beginning, middle and end, while some stories were more incoherent. The two frame stories gave a two-sided view of most of the features observed in the analysis, although stories based on the negative frame story were often more intense and emotional. The emotions and associations that emerged were connected to either the physical space, social space or both, and contributed to the overall lived experiences of school lunch. Since the stories included the time from before, during and after lunch, children's associations and feelings were also related to places other than the school restaurant. The analysis resulted in three themes regarding school lunch: *Interaction and exposure*, *Routines and restrictions* and *Food and eating*.

Interaction and exposure

School lunch was often described as a joyful time and an opportunity to socialize with other children. Meeting and socializing with others constituted an omnipresent part in children's constructions of a good as well as a bad meal experience. The interaction described in the children's stories caused the most intense and descriptive emotions, mostly positive, but some stories also portrayed how interaction with others could constitute a risk, such as being exposed to undesirable behavior and consequently giving rise to emotions like fear and loneliness.

The data material contained many examples of the pleasure of sharing a meal with someone they knew and felt safe, confident and happy with. Not being able to sit with a friend gave rise to feelings like envy, anger, sadness and disappointment. In Norway, where children bring a packed lunch-box for their school lunch, similar results were seen and also among the Norwegian children one of the main issues was with whom they could sit and share a meal (Fossgard et al. 2018). In the present study, many stories indicated that the children were used to fixed seating arrangements and the possibility of choosing who to sit with was seen as something extraordinary and desirable. Some stories included descriptions of sitting alone and having no one to talk to, which was a cause for feeling stared at and talked about. This was sometimes described also as a reason for not finishing the meal, leaving the school restaurant with stomach ache and feeling sad. In their stories, children addressed the importance of including and involving everyone so that nobody was lonely.

I am sitting in my seat and observing what the people sitting next to me are talking about. We are talking about fun things we have been doing, and everyone is laughing and having fun. Everybody is talking and nobody is left out. (Jenny, positive frame story)

Social meetings described in the children's stories were mostly associated with other children. When adults, teachers and school meal staff were mentioned, they were often described as strict, disobliging and commanding. In some cases, the children described how this made them feel distrusted and not listened to. However, some stories did contain descriptions of school meal staff being friendly and accommodating. In general, an absence of adults, and teachers in particular, were distinct features of the children's stories. Similar results have been seen in a previous study by Persson Osowski, Göransson, and Fjellström (2013), when exploring teachers' interaction with children during school lunch.

One crucial part of social interaction with others was conversation: chatting, telling jokes and riddles. This was described as something that contributed to having a good time. Conversation could also be about the weather outside or what to do during lunch break, e.g. playing, doing different sporting activities and socializing. Conversations about unpleasant things like, e.g. disgusting food and unfriendly behavior among others were associated with negative feelings like discomfort and poor appetite.

The joy of sharing a meal with others was sometimes disturbed by physical constraints, one of these was the noise level. Conversation as a cause of loud noises and high sound levels were frequently mentioned, seeming to be a perennial issue for these children. The children described that when the room became more and more crowded, the noise level increased, making it harder to concentrate, enjoy the meal and chat with friends. It was, further, associated with both physical and emotional consequences like headache, ear pain, not being able to hear properly, as well as feeling sad. Measurements of sound in Swedish school restaurants have shown that in some school restaurants the noise level could be compared with eating in the middle of traffic (Sveriges Radio 2015). As with Hart's (2016) study, who explored the social context of food practices in primary schools in England, the noise level was an annoyance factor, associated with shouting and being chatty and noisy. Indeed, the noise level was described as something caused by the children themselves, but also something that they could take control over by using different strategies such as speaking with 'small letters' and 'talking about nice things quietly', or fantasizing about playing calm and soothing music in the school restaurant. This was described as having a calming effect on the overall atmosphere.

The joy of sharing a meal with others was also disturbed by the lack of cleanliness of the school restaurant. A 'nice and clean' restaurant, i.e. having clean tables and no food laying around by the salad buffet, nor on the waste station or on the floors were viewed as important factors with a positive influence on the overall atmosphere and enjoyment of the meal. As with the noise level, the children wrote that the cleanliness of the school restaurant (or lack of it) was caused by themselves and it was often associated with other children's unpleasant behavior, e.g. throwing food at others.

I'm sitting on my seat in the school restaurant, it was disgusting food, people screamed and threw peas and other disgusting things. I'm not sitting next to the one I want to sit with. I was very unhappy with everything in the school restaurant that day. It's really dirty on the tables. (Robin, negative frame story)

Closely related to sociability, in this study, the space of school lunch was sometimes characterized as an environment where you might feel exposed and vulnerable. Many stories dealt with offensive behavior, conflicts and arguments. This was directly linked to the children's well-being and whether they felt safe or not. This included also other spaces such as the hallway and the queue. The hallway has previously been recognized as a site where status is contested and hierarchies established (Banks 2005). In this study, the hallway and the queue were pointed out as two critical spaces for conflict, e.g. being teased, bullied, pushed against the wall or even being hit. For example, some stories were about overhearing friends talking badly about them when standing in line, which induced emotions like anxiety and worry when eating. In one story, the child described being in a locked restroom crying after such an incident. The fear of embarrassment was present in individual stories about incidents that called for undesirable attention, such as having water poured at you, dropping a plate on the floor and getting laughed at. The behavior and treatment of others were sometimes also associated with feeling stressed, having stomach ache and headache. It has previously been recognized that spaces outside the classroom, including the school restaurant, can be experienced as insecure (Valentine 2000) as well as hectic and unpleasant (Tørslev, Nørredam, and Vitus 2017).

The omnipresent value of social interaction in these stories confirms previous research noting that the social aspects are at the top of the children's agenda during school lunch (see e.g. Daniel and Gustafsson 2010; Bruselius-Jensen 2014), and that the overall lived experiences and emotional connotations of school lunch typically involve social interaction. The theme presented here also indicates that the lived experiences of school lunch often deal with exposure. In a study by Kellock and Sexton (2018), the lived experiences of classroom space dealt with ownership, having a sense of belonging and feeling safe which has a great social and emotional attachment, similar to results in the present study.

Routines and restrictions

School lunch was highlighted as a routinized event where the children followed the time, rhythms and routines set by people other than themselves. Stories were often built on the different stages of school lunch. For instance, in some cases, stories began with a description of what happened in the classroom or in the hallway before lunch and how that made them feel, such as anticipation, joy, stress, anxiety. This was often followed with a narrative about providing oneself with food and drink, crossing the room of the school restaurant, sitting down and eating and then leaving the restaurant to go out to the school yard. Here is one example of how the stories were built on the different stages of school lunch, from queuing to leaving afterwards.

When I come to lunch there is a huge queue that leads all the way outside. I am really hungry and people are screaming and there is loud noise in the queue. When I get to the plates, many put back a plate and take a new one from the pile of plates. I take one from the bottom of the pile. I am really hungry and they are serving fish. I think fish is pretty good and now that I am so hungry I could eat anything! The salad buffet does not feel so fresh because there are other vegetables mixed in with the carrots. I take fish and potatoes and go and sit down. But when I sit down, my friends don't like to talk much, and when they talk, it feels like it's just flying food and saliva over my plate. I lose my appetite and do not eat much and I don't have a good feeling when I leave the lunch restaurant. (Alma, negative frame story)

One aspect that educed a lot of emotions and a clear sense of restriction was the (limited) time that was set aside for school lunch, including the time before and after the actual eating. Time appeared in many stories: time to eat and chat with friends and socialize during the rest of the lunch break. Actually, many of the routine-based stages of school lunch were portrayed as time-consuming, in particular queuing and providing oneself with food and drink. The children addressed the importance of having enough time to eat in peace and quiet, and also having enough time for the remaining break in the outdoor spaces. This was not always the case and the children wrote about feeling stressed and having to rush through the different stages of school lunch. The eating duration was also affected if the meal environment was not pleasant 'I only sit for about 1–4 min because I don't like it there'. Further, in some cases, if you were a 'slow eater', in the end of the meal, you had to sit with children from other classes. There were examples of incidents that made them come in late to lunch and, in turn, forced them to sit with other classes, which was sometimes a stressful and difficult moment for the children. The stories emphasized children's desire to choose where to sit and for how long. In some stories coming late to lunch meant that children had to stand in line for a long time to get food.

The results showed that time is an important factor to take in consideration when trying to understand the flow of a school lunch situation. Time, which is closely related to, and conceptualized in space, has a continual influence on the overall experience and defines a series of boundaries (Kellock and Sexton 2018). It has been stated that the rhythms in the lived space sometimes clash with the rhythms of the conceived space, i.e. an abstract bureaucratic space constructed by the professionals (Lefebvre 1991; Mathieson 2015; Middleton 2016), and that school activities are regulated and governed by the daily rhythms of timetables (Holloway and Valentine 2003). This includes also the school lunch, an activity that has previously been noted as strictly timetabled (Brembeck et al. 2013). In Brembeck's study, the routine-based stages of school lunch, e.g. queuing, meant that the children had little time to socialize during school lunch and for playing in the schoolyard. Hart (2016) has observed a trade-off between eating and playing caused by the schools' need to get many children in and out of the school restaurant in a short period of time. This made the children in Hart's study eat quickly, or not finish their meal, as well as not having time to play. Hart suggested expanding children's opportunities for play with friends in the playground during the lunch break, and to eat at a more leisurely pace.

In the present study, scheduled times competed with the need for social encounters with other children so, besides the time for eating, this impacted interaction during lunch and the time available for socializing in what remained of the lunch break. The routines and lack of time often caused feelings of stress and aggravation which sometimes affected the intake of food as well as overall well-being. To deal with this and other tensions, the children described taking, or trying to take, possession of the room, so-called *appropriation* (Middleton 2016). That is, using different strategies to cope with issues that hindered them from having a pleasant school lunch experience. For example, they reduced the noise level, talked about nice things or tried to eat at their own pace. The results revealed how the timetabled routines of school lunch planned by the adults were not always in line with the children's lived rhythms and how the daily routine of school lunch clearly permeated the children's lived experiences of school lunch and also, in turn, to their relationship to food and eating at school.

Food and eating

Food and eating was also a theme in the children's stories that educed emotions like satisfaction, disappointment, joy and longing. Food and food-related issues, and their significance, were mentioned in a majority of the stories, but it still seemed subordinate to the social aspects of school lunch. Within the theme of food and eating, stories were associated with the ability to choose what to eat, as well as sharing and enjoying meals with a friend, and eating as much and as long as you like. The satisfying feeling of being full was often mentioned, as well as being offered varied dishes and having a lot to choose from. It was not unusual that the somewhat shorter stories stated that a

good school lunch experience equated tasty food and feeling full. Although, it was also said that, if they could sit with a friend, it did not really matter if the food itself was perceived as satisfactory. Children wrote about the properties of food and meals, preparation, serving, cooking, preferences and availability. Some of the negative stories contained descriptions of children feeling disappointed about the food served (or not served), disappointment that was directly linked to the way it was prepared, cooked or presented. For example, it was written that ‘The food is not warm/cold enough’, ‘The food is not tasty’, ‘The food is sticky, smelly and has lumps in it’, ‘The potato has a plastic membrane on it’ and ‘There’s hair in the food’. There were also some examples of skepticism about the content of the food, and fear of not tolerating it (e.g. lactose, gluten intolerance).

Sensations, mainly smells and tastes, but also the appearance and texture of foods were described. The taste of different foods and meals was often associated with the feeling of pleasure or disgust. Sensations such as taste have been identified as a crucial factor for the meal experience among children (Brembeck et al. 2013; Bruselius-Jensen 2014), although, in the present study, sensations such as smell and taste of the food was not necessarily highlighted as vital for the overall meal experience. Nevertheless, as Lefebvre (1991) argues, we use the body and the sensory organs when we ‘live’ a specific space. Thus, the lived experiences of school lunch deal with both bodily and emotional needs. In this study, this was shown already before school lunch and when entering the school restaurant. For example, the smell in the restaurant evoked certain emotions and in some cases was also described as having an effect on the body. Many stories contained descriptions of how food and eating, or in most cases, the lack of food eaten, affected the child at once. Stories included descriptions of, for example, getting tired, not having the stamina needed for the rest of the day, feeling sick and vomiting because the food was not liked, being served ‘disgusting’ food or because of being forced to eat up all the food. Not liking the food or not eating enough was described as having an effect on the rest of the school day making the child feel hungry, sad, irritated, tired and angry.

Today, when I went from the school restaurant I was sad. I had not eaten much. It was fish for lunch and I wanted meat sauce. When I walked away, I was very hungry and tired. I went to the classroom and went out on the break, I was so angry that I hit Noah and he started to bleed and so I hit him again and he started to cry. (Edward, negative frame story)

The images and emotions described in relation to food and eating encompassed children being served their favorite dish and pancakes, taco, pizza and hamburgers were frequently mentioned, most often in a positive sense. This is interesting since pupils from the same study population, when being interviewed in focus groups about what they felt was important regarding school lunch (Berggren et al. 2017), had a clear emphasis on the healthiness of the meal where those dishes were usually labeled as bad and unhealthy food – acceptable only if eaten seldom. In that study, the food and eating-related emotions that emerged in the discussions were only in relation to unhealthy eating – such as feelings of joy and disgust. In the present study, food and eating were not explicitly mentioned in relation to health or nutrition, although when food was labeled as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, there is a possibility that health aspects were included beside the taste. One explanation as to why the results from the two studies differ could be that interviews are more likely to give socially desirable answers (Wallin, Koro-Ljungberg, and Eskola 2018).

Concluding remarks

This study provides insight into children’s everyday lived experiences of school lunch. The method of empathy-based stories with emotions as a stimulus in the frame stories has been successful in accessing a deeper understanding of children’s lived experiences and how they make sense of school lunch. In the ProMeal study, where both empathy-based stories and focus group discussions were used among the same group of children, it became clear that including emotional aspects in the method, opened up to new dimensions and perspectives. The emotions evoked through the frame stories related to *Interaction and exposure*, *Routines and restrictions* and *Food and eating*, closely associated and intertwined with the socio-spatial dimension of school lunch. The stories included

examples where the experience of social and physical space of school lunch harmonized as well as contained tensions. How the children experienced the harmonization between physical and social space had implications for their experiences of the school lunch and for the emotions they associated with it. Our interpretation is that harmony between the two seemed to evoke positive emotions among the children. For example, the physical atmosphere (sounds, time) and being able to share a meal with a friend. Perceived disharmony, i.e. tensions between the physical and the social space, seemed to evoke negative emotions. Tensions revealed in children's stories were, along with the social aspects, associated and intertwined with physical aspects, e.g. noise level, the food, seating arrangements, time pressures and stress, where the last mentioned were the most prominent. These tensions were more obviously determined and controlled by others and often at expense of the will to interact with schoolmates. This study confirms how the children's previously noted social agenda with school lunch can be closely related to exposure, and elude a lot of emotions among children. The notion of school lunch as an exposed and vulnerable time and space could give some explanation why inclusive social interaction with peers is so essential and emotional for the children during the meal. Further, the study provides a sense of how the physical aspects contribute to the overall meal experience, something that in previous studies has been given less attention.

To conclude, this study shows that the overall meal experience and the socio-spatial dimensions go beyond the actual food on the plate, which is important to address in relation to children's well-being in school. How children made sense of and constructed meaning associated with school lunch primarily dealt with social aspects and the value of sharing a meal with a friend. However, this was often intertwined, and disturbed by, different physical aspects of school lunch. The results indicate that school lunch situation, including also spaces and time over and above the actual eating situation, was not always planned and designed with children's perspectives taken into consideration, and that schools do not always live up to their responsibilities for the physical and psychosocial environment in the school restaurant. This is valuable knowledge that actors working with school lunch and school lunch environments should take in consideration when resourcing, planning and scheduling school lunch, and also when designing new school restaurants. The results also indicated that there are, in addition to the children's social agenda, less favorable conditions for the implementation of different purposes of school lunch stated by adults. If the aim is to use school lunch for pedagogical and/or for health promoting purposes, the social and physical aspects of school lunch and the tensions revealed (time pressures in particular) need to be taken in consideration. This is important, not least within in the Swedish context where the purposes of school lunch stated in different policies focus on social interaction during the meal and where teachers share meals with the children.

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