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# The school restaurant: ethnographic reflections in researching children's food space

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a theoretically influenced discussion of methodological issues in carrying out ethnographic work at *Peartree Academy*. Food is central to our sense of identity. It draws on notions of the school *restaurant* and presents an account of the complexities surrounding the disorderliness of fieldwork in researching children's food space. The aim of this paper is to explore how researcher identity needs to be considered within the relationship between discipline and social learning spaces for eating. Foucault's concept of discipline is introduced in conceptualising the study. Key reflections place emphasis on the messiness of researching such spaces and offer recommendations for navigation.

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## Introduction

Educational based case study research has a long tradition in the qualitative paradigm (Dam & Volman, 2001). Qualitative research in educational ethnography appears to be flourishing but the school meal as a site for research has received little international attention until recent times (Earl, 2018a, 2018b; Earl & Lalli, 2020; Lalli, 2019a; 2019b; Leahy & Wright, 2016; Persson-Osowski, Göransson, & Fjellström, 2012; 2013). This paper aims to explore how reflexivity in methodology can serve to enable exploration of the relationship between discipline and social learning spaces for eating. The notion of the *pedagogic* meal, first coined in Sweden in the 1970s is significant to this context as the school meal is said to offer the potential to act as a learning space (Sepp, Abrahamsson, & Fjellstrom, 2006). The concept of social learning is applied to an ethnographic case study which was carried out (Lalli, 2019a) in one school in which the dining hall is referred to as a restaurant. It is this study carried out in a UK school, known as Peartree Academy that forms the basis of the methodological reflections for this paper.

Qualitative studies have largely focussed on perceptions and issues of food choice, food waste, dietary requirements and nutrition in schools in relation to the obesity epidemic (Day, Sahota, Christian, & Cocks, 2015; Falasconi, Vittuari, Politano, & Segrè, 2015; Murimi, Chrisman, McCollum, & McDonald, 2016). Therefore, this paper renews the focus, but introduces the social aspect of mealtime as little work has been carried out on this area. From a policy perspective, the School Food Plan (Dumbleby & Vincent, 2013), highlights the importance of creating a dining hall that is appealing as it allows children to engage more with eating during school mealtime. It has been found that school meal reform can lead to creating opportunities to enhance the

lunchtime experiences, particularly through the removal of 'flight trays', adaptations of aesthetic changes, adding music to create a more relaxed and sociable environment, all whilst ensuring staff and children are able to eat together (Day et al., 2015). Food studies should be more engaged in social theory as this is said to enhance our empirical knowledge of issues and understanding of social-theoretical problems (Neuman, 2019). For purposes of clarity, whilst this paper draws on methodological reflections from an ethnographic study of the school restaurant, such terms including 'canteen' and 'mealtime' are unpacked from this point. In moving forward the *school dining hall* is applied as the broader and modern day term, although reference is made to the *school restaurant* at *Peartree Academy*.

### **The restaurant: Peartree Academy**

The restaurant at the school dominates the school in terms of the space in which it is positioned. Upon entering the main building through the reception area, it is presented as an open plan space, accessible for all and is well-lit by natural lighting some of which appears through the sky lights on the ceiling (Lalli, 2019a). The main teaching staffroom is situated opposite the *restaurant* and a unique feature of the restaurant is that there are always pupils and staff sitting at tables throughout the school day, although it is used for multiple purposes, the space is fixed for dining. School mealtimes at *Peartree Academy* are staggered throughout the school day as over 900 pupils consume lunches each day, which means the lunch period begins at 11.30am and finished at 2.15 pm.

The term *restaurant* carries a number of connotations and has traditionally been referred to as a canteen, which is typically defined as a store that sells food and drink at an institution such as a camp, school or military base (Winchell, 2008). School mealtime is a crucial part of the school day in which lunch is consumed and such rituals are an important means of transmitting and reinforcing normative social behaviour (Rossano, 2013). By definition, the *restaurant* is a noisy place and the design requires paying careful consideration to the climate as this is supposed to be set up for communication (Baraban & Durocher, 2010). So how does a restaurant differ from a canteen and how did schools come to use the term dining hall? A restaurant is described as a space with a particular climate, one which aims to be appealing and used for relaxation and it is said the functioning of a good *restaurant* depends upon the workforce, whilst a canteen has been interpreted as a place for enforcing rules (Winchell, 2008). With these notions in mind, it was particularly interesting to come across how staff were recruited specifically to bring the idea of a restaurant to life, although ensuring this space was being monitored also appeared as a priority. The dining hall is a formal term for such spaces in which food is consumed and it is said the school dining hall should provide a feeling of comfort, reassurance and invitation to caring service while meeting nutritional needs of children (Schweitzer, 2010). The dining hall also acts a place for meeting peers and a place for children to 'hang out' (i.e. socialise).

### **Applying Foucault's concept of discipline to the school food space**

Modern education systems often implement the function of social control, particularly in the form of school discipline. Whilst resistance is an intrinsic aspect of power relations as Foucault (1991) suggests, liberation is said to be the ultimate goal for educational instructors and the school dining space is one way in which instructors can *train* children in extending forms of self-regulation in order to get on with one another in society. Foucault understands the notion of *government* as a way in which the conduct of individuals or groups might be directed; the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick is to govern in this sense and structure of the possible field of action (Foucault, 1991, p. 220). The nature of this form of

surveillance and self-regulation techniques has apparently become a fundamental part of life in western societies and is an attribute of modern society. Institutions include schools and the one described in this paper relates to the power relations at play in researching school food spaces, as it is surrounded by forms of discipline which interrupt mealtime experiences. Moreover, the space in which meals are being governed create yet another disciplinarian in the school, away from the classroom environment, in a space which is supposed to be convivial and an occasion of commensalism, i.e. through eating together should be possible.

## Methods

The data consisted of 80 hours of semi-structured observations and 54 semi-structured interviews which took place in the school restaurant, learning spaces, the main staffroom, classrooms, reception area, principal's office, administration office and the school crèche (Lalli, 2017). Observations were carried out by recording field notes which included written descriptions of events in the school restaurant. A systematic approach was adopted in order to record data using an observation chart. The following interactions were observed, i.e. pupil–pupil, teacher–pupil, pupil–teacher, staff–pupil and pupil–staff. Observations conducted involved positioning myself in an appropriate space so that I able to establish access to the whole restaurant, but this often involved re-positioning which was important in observing who came into the school. One position I took was to sit amongst pupils in the school restaurant.

A total of 8 questions were developed for the school staff, 6 questions for pupils and 4 questions for parents. The selection criteria involved using an opportunity and judgement sample and interviews were conducted with 26 members of staff, 16 pupils and 12 parents. As discussed by Wragg (2002), it is imperative that a researcher has the opportunity to interview those willing to be interviewed rather than gaining a purely random sample. The majority of data was collected through judgement sampling, particularly because I wanted to involve the catering staff as well as leadership team who all played a part in the running of the restaurant.

### *A social constructivist framework for researching the school restaurant*

Having adopted a social constructivist position as the conceptual framework, I decided that an ethnographic case study approach would best suit my research topic and questions. Given the importance of social learning (Lalli, 2019a; 2019b) as a core idea of this research, how does school food link to a constructivist approach? A social constructivist framework is used in conjunction with an interpretive methodology (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016) to study the experienced learning environment in the school restaurant. Therefore, a social constructivist approach in which human development is socially situated and where knowledge is constructed through interaction with peers' offers implications for thinking about reshaping the school dining hall (Au, 1998; Lalli, 2019a; 2019b). Moreover, the work of Vygotsky (1978) was influential in advocating for adopting a social constructivist approach as my work forms the basis that knowledge is the internalisation of social activity and in this context, social interactions during mealtime add weight to such ideas. Although, discipline during mealtime was particularly [un] problematic due to the tensions in which the school faced in creating a restaurant fit for developing social learning opportunities versus this space becoming known as another platform for disciplining children.

The decision to adopt a case study approach was influenced through wanting to identify with ethnographies of eating, although reading previous school-based ethnographies which investigated cultures were significant (Ball, 1981; Burgess, 1983; Nasirian, 2013; Pike, 2010). In order to explore school culture, it is useful to unpack what constitutes *culture* and *society* as concepts, which are commonly traded in everyday discourse. For Wolcott (1999), an individual cannot

belong to a culture but can belong to groups. He uses *language* to elaborate by saying that an individual cannot belong to a culture or language, but can use them to do things. Collecting data from a cultural perspective from a given *society*, in this case the school as a site for research is complex and ethnography is envisaged as much more than merely a method of data collection. Ethnography in this instance is being used to describe what people in a particular place typically do and the reasoning behind their choosing of such behaviour (Wolcott, 1999).

### **Ethnographic case study**

The term *ethnography* means to write about people and to describe the culture of a given group of people and learning about what it is like to be a member, from the viewpoint of a particular member of that group (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Ultimately, it is about the discovery of knowledge from one culture, such as *Peartree Academy* which is studied in-depth. As a qualitative methodology, an ethnographic case study involves the researcher interpreting the real world from the perspective of the subject in the investigation (Dobbert, 1982). Case study can ultimately provide a strong interpretation of reality in the institution but there are a number of problems, some of which include issues of representation (Wellington, 2015). Whilst my case study arguably offers illustration, insight and accessibility, the dangers of this illustration are said to impinge upon being able to [re] produce a true representation of interactions during school mealtime. Furthermore, this type of research tends not to be replicable or repeatable which needs to be recognised from the onset of the writing up of the ethnography (Wellington, 2015).

My study on *Peartree Academy* involved adopting an ethnographic case study which relies heavily upon a full description of the school and everyday lives of people within it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Therefore, recording field notes from the very beginning were crucial in trying to capture life in the school. Ethnography is also a frame of mind and helps to maintain a level of openness to everything unknown, 'a suspension of disbelief' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 160). The uniqueness of ethnography is that the researcher is the primary apparatus for data collection and therefore, designing clear research questions and conceptual frameworks is crucial in strengthening this type of research (LeCompte, Schensul, & Schensul, 1999). Whilst case study research such as ethnography is said not to necessarily be generalisable, I would like to argue otherwise as it is possible for research to be generalisable without it being tied to law-like regularities (Atkinson, 2014). Moreover, the outcomes of ethnographic research encompass the work of scholars who are acquainted with their own field of specialisation, which is commonly said to be characterised by a mass of ethnographic works and papers. Therefore, ethnographic work does not simply generate thick descriptions of local and spatial features of a given society, but also aims to create concepts which can be applied across a number of social situations (Atkinson, 2014). The uncertainty in research with children adds to the complexity in researching this space and for this reason it is important to conscientiously consider the ways in which children are involved in research (Chesworth, 2018). For me, it was imperative that children in the school were made aware of my interests in researching food spaces so they took an interest and I was then able to build rapport.

### **Navigating towards suitable data collection tools**

A number of studies which explore the school meal (Damay, Ezan, Gollety, & Nicolas-Hemar, 2011;; Damsgaard et al., 2012;; Leahy & Wright, 2016; McKee, 2011; Pike, 2010; Rowe, Stewart, & Somerset, 2010; Seaman & Moss, 2006) influenced my decision to adopt a qualitative approach and use ethnographic techniques. Damsgaard et al. (2012) and Damay et al. (2011) both adopted qualitative techniques and produced a case study on food and learning in schooling. Seaman

and Moss (2006) used semi-structured interviews to carry a case study in a UK school in Edinburgh to investigate obesity amongst pupils and they also used small observational studies to explore the wide range of issues related to the nutritional content of school meals. The study found children at the school were very enthusiastic about the eating regime and felt it had a positive long-lasting effect on health and wellbeing. Rowe et al. (2010) conducted a case study in a primary school in Australia using in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations of health promoting activities in collecting their data around nutrition in school. McKee (2011) carried out an ethnographic case study on a number of US high schools, using interviews, observations and documentary evidence to collect data on social inclusion and the social interaction amongst pupils. Finally, Pike (2010) carried out an ethnographic case study on lunchtime experiences across four UK based primary schools whilst addressing UK policy. The work by Pike (2010) on governing food and the role of school food pedagogies had a significant influence on my work, as she also used a Foucauldian lens to contextualise research on school food. More recently through reading the work of Leahy and Wright (2016), I was able to understand the complexities surrounding school food pedagogies as problematic for curriculum writers. These studies were salient in helping me to identify with the key methodological decisions in developing my research, formulating ideas, collecting data, analysing and dissemination my work on *Peartree Academy*.

## **Research questions and methodological decisions**

### **Main research question**

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

### **Subsidiary research questions**

1. How do eating behaviours of staff and pupils impact on social learning?
2. How do teaching staff promote social learning opportunities within a food environment?

Having presented research questions above, I would like to discuss the methodological decisions deployed, which highlights potential pitfalls of using qualitative research as it is crucial to unpack these research questions in trying to interpret what is being investigated. Following an observation at the school, I made a reflective note to question how I was collecting data and thought processes. There were three questions that I wrote, one which involved highlighting the struggle to record observation, second whether I should have some specific scenarios to carry out data collection. The third, involved how I planned to remain objective. The main research question and two subsidiary research questions that followed guided me along the path in navigating towards how empirical work would meet with theoretical underpinnings. To unpack these further, firstly the main research question took the shape of exploring the food environment in connection with social learning within *Peartree Academy* and this represented the primary focus of the study. Although, the research question evolved over time, not so much in the wording but in its interpretation to my conceptual framework as this involved considering notions of discipline and how they impinge upon the data analysis. The following two subsidiary research questions also changed over time and recognising this is part of the research process in enhancing the methodological robustness of the ethnographic study. This reflective account adds weight to giving both recognition to refining, thinking hard about research and developing a robust set of questions in accordingly (Jessor, Colby, & Shweder, 1996). This is not to say that ethnography comes to an end, but more to say this is a starting point in terms of developing methodological

understanding of research processes holding the researchers' epistemological positionality to account.

### **Research instruments**

The study at *Peartree Academy* involved adopting qualitative research methods, namely interviews and observations. Whilst some studies on school food (Ensaff, Crawford, Russell, & Barker, 2016; Waling & Olsson, 2017) rely on quantitative data collection, my epistemological position led me to adopting the interpretative paradigm so I employed this approach in collecting data. The main issue stemmed from trying to establish the nature of a given *truth* and its authentication (Pring, 2004). In the words of the philosopher, Karl Popper, it is not possible to see growth in knowledge without any form of criticism and for me, it was about being critical of examining the *reality* of social situations such as school mealtime as qualitative research is complex and based on tensions, contradistinctions and hesitations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, the messiness of research on school food adds to the benefits of what can be achieved in collecting data in this way (Mosselson, 2010). Essentially, the *messiness* of research can enhance the process of quality.

### **Epistemologies of eating**

Social learning practices that are surrounding by food typically involve *doing food* and to identify with epistemology can be revealing in terms of researcher reflexivity. As a researcher who identifies as being working class, stemming from a background whose parents migrated in the late 1970s and undertook manual labour work, to me, my ethnographic traces resembled my identity throughout my formative school years. Researching the school food space often led me to thinking about my experience and interactions during mealtime, although these consisted of largely packed lunches in primary school and home dinners for secondary given that both the primary and secondary schools were located with half a mile from home.

So, during my ethnographic study on school food (Lalli, 2017), I begun to identify with the research as 'food practice' which involves doing (Whit & Whipps, 2000) and epistemology is described as a theory of how we know what we (think) we know. More notably, I would like to note how social class, migration and gender are at the forefront of researching the food space and this has been a critical component of how I have come to learn about food in a sociological way (Murcott, 2019). Food choices made by people, either as individuals or as a group can reveal an abundant amount about the self, which include assumptions of the world.

The school meal is a site for sharing meals together and its institutional practice, socio-economic advantage and disadvantage along cultural preferences are said to shape the everyday (Morrison, 1996). It was particularly insight to draw on previous ethnographies of eating in which epistemology was apparent and this helps to identify with not just how to conduct ethnographies of eating, which draws attention to being able to conduct *proper ethnography* as coined by Delamont (2007), but to notice the self in the everyday research spaces of food in this context (Fischler, 1988). So what was significant about the school meal as a site for developing sociality and how does my identity as a researcher impinge upon the ethnographic work? This is a question I pondered throughout the project and whilst I did not feel comfortable with my identity construction in relation to this topic for research, it is important for those entering this space to recognise how powerful dealing with epistemological debates can be in enhancing the research findings, particularly in terms of methodological robustness (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

What, then should emerging researchers new to the field of researching the school food space take into consideration with regards to the self? Discussions which offer narratives,

intended to guide others in the ways in which the positioning and reflexivity of the researcher operates, often adopt the view of identity as singular, fixed and stable (Thomson & Gunter, 2011), yet this is not true as identity is multifaceted and the researcher status often called into question. The debate on inside/outside researchers is particularly relevant in researching the food space as one does not have had to have been a canteen supervisor to identify with the school food space or in the catering industry for that matter. Social interactions during school meal time as a once pupil (which I had been), or a qualified teacher (which I am) had played an integral role in my formative years as well as professional career as an educator in schools. My role as a disciplinarian and identity growing up with both family friends and relatives in close proximity to the space in which I grew up contributed to a culture of self-surveillance alongside traits adopted through a teaching training programme had an impact on how I observed social interactions in the school dining hall.

### **Discussion: navigating through pedagogy and discipline**

In light of these methodological discussions, what can be said about researching children school food space and what did the work at Peartree Academy reveal about investigating such spaces? The power relationship at play was particularly interesting due to my epistemological position as an ex-teacher, which meant that I had to take account of my relationship to discipline based on classroom experience. Therefore, the complex relationship between researcher identity and namely through navigating epistemologies of eating in the school food space needs to be highlighted from the onset so that interpretations of data are developed accordingly. Ethnographic tools for data collection also need careful planning and thinking reflectively about such activity is crucial in shaping a robust set of methods. For me, power relationships and more specifically discipline, appeared to dominate my data and another example of this discourse is presented here.

Following several observations and conversations with staff at the school, it came to light how the school had placed a camera in the restaurant which came to my attention. These post-panoptic pedagogies affect the everyday lives of children in school as institutional settings (Nemorin, 2017). This technique refers to actions that enabled public or private agents to manage and control populations (Gandy, 1993). The type of surveillance being referred to here is technological such as monitoring strategies in the form of CCTV (closed-circuit television) and it is through these technologies that modes of discipline and control of school populations is taking place. For example, I noticed a camera in the restaurant, one which captures the whole space and reception area as well as the main school corridor.

This is particularly interesting as it could be tempting to use footage for research on school dining halls although this was not possible due to ethical considerations which are documented in the study (Lalli, 2017). With regards to self-regulation then, whilst the school are not recording footage, which I established early on, the camera was used as a tool for surveillance and what I would like to coin as self-regulation during mealtimes. Just as we experience speed monitoring when driving, this form of self-regulation during mealtimes means both the teachers are said to self-regulate their behaviours alongside the pupils who recognise this space and find themselves quite limited in their participation (Pike, 2008). For this reason, it is imperative that further works look closely at the interaction between teachers and pupils during mealtime and to establish ways in which opportunities for social interaction can be heightened and self-regulatory practices minimalised in which the norms and values are inherent as opposed to being socially engineered. Having discussed notions of discipline in relation to social learning during school meal time, this paper has highlighted how qualitative research allows for researching such spaces and in recognising the importance of epistemology in the interpretation of the data.

## Conclusion

Clearly, the school meal as a site for research deserves careful attention and the way in which research takes shape can be problematic and complex from the standpoint of epistemology and methodological positions. As school mealtime lends itself to interpretations from a number of academic disciplines, it is important to conscientiously think through the methods being employed to effectively develop research in this site. This particular school space has an important position within the school from the perspective of discipline and control. For this reason, researching such spaces requires careful consideration to the context and positionality of both the research site and researcher. In order for this to be achieved, further research which prioritises the school dining hall as a space for social learning is needed but giving recognition to the complex methodological nature in which this research is situated needs to be given equal attention, if methodological robustness is to be exercised. Therefore, reflecting on researching this particular space is crucial for new and emerging food education researchers. Ethnographic work can help understand the culture of such spaces and more methodological insights are much needed in helping to develop a robust methodological framework. This paper offers original contributions to contemporary debates regarding the key challenges in carrying out ethnographic research and how the *messiness* can enhance the process of quality. In support of the discourse in which school meal research is situated concepts such as discipline alongside epistemological discussions need to be considered and perhaps defined in an attempt to interpret a space which is said to be conducive for social learning. Future research projects which consist of researching the school food space need to consider drawing on researcher identity and ethnographic work is particularly relevant here.

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## Disclosure statement

Gurpinder Singh Lalli declares that he has no conflict of interest and that the research follows the University of Leicester's code of ethical practice and meets the requirements of the Human Subject Research (HSR) with children. All research conducted was carried out appropriately in conjunction with the HSR and British Educational Research (BERA, 2018) guidelines.

## Notes on contributor

**Gurpinder Singh Lalli** is a Senior Lecturer in Education and Inclusion Studies, based in the Institute of Education at University of Wolverhampton. Gurpinder has a vested interest in the sociology of education and is interested in food studies and the author of *Schools, Food and Social Learning* published in 2019.

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