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'Feeding hungry children': the growth of charitable breakfast clubs and holiday hunger projects in the UK

Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a recent scoping study on the nature, evidence base and policy context of breakfast clubs and school holiday projects in the UK and aims to do three things. Firstly, bring child feeding initiatives firmly into the critical food and poverty debate. Secondly, critically assess the state of evidence on these projects and their perceived role in the lives of children at risk of, or experiencing, poverty. Thirdly, set out the next steps which will be required to build a systematic body of research on child feeding projects within the food and poverty research agenda.

Key words

Child poverty, food insecurity, breakfast clubs, holiday hunger, social policy

Introduction

Food is an important lens through which we can explore lived experiences and their drivers and determinants. Recently, the power of food as a lens for understanding contemporary experiences of poverty has been revealed by the growing body of academic, policy and NGO work on experiences of hunger in the UK (Garthwaite, 2016; Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Perry et al., 2014 and Forsey, 2014).

The financial crisis of the mid 2000s was followed by political economic decisions to reduce state spending with a particular focus on cuts to social security and public services. The ushering in of the so-called 'era of austerity' and the most significant period of welfare reform since the design of the welfare state was, research is beginning to demonstrate, closely linked to the subsequent rise in charitable food provision, particularly in the form of the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network, which grew from distributing 128,697 parcels in 2011-

12 to 1,182,954 in 2016/17 (Trussell Trust, n.d. a; see Loopstra et al., 2015, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015).

Within this broader context, however, there is one dimension which has to date been under-explored in the academic literature on contemporary experiences of food and poverty. Emerging evidence suggests that children and their families are particularly vulnerable to having trouble accessing adequate food and there are trends indicating that provision of food aid to children and their families is increasing. This has not only happened in the context of austerity and welfare reforms which have, and are projected to continue, to hit families with children especially hard (Hood and Waters, 2017; CPAG, 2017). It has also occurred in the related context of a marked shift in policy approaches to child poverty which have moved focus away from children themselves and structural determinants of poverty – especially income – towards a focus on the family unit and behavioural interpretations centred around the notion of individualised dysfunction (Churchill, 2013; Hancock et al., 2012; Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2015).

Recently published data from Unicef found that 19% of UK children under the age of 15 live with a respondent who is moderately or severely food insecure and that 10.4% (the highest proportion anywhere in Europe) live with someone who is severely food insecure (The Food Foundation, 2017). Other research shows that families with children are also increasingly turning to charitable organisations for help with food. Between 2012/13 and 2013/14 Trussell Trust food bank provision to children rose by 252% in absolute terms (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2015). Since then, provision has risen by a further 69% and in 2016/2017 Trussell Trust food banks provided 436, 938 food parcels to children (Trussell Trust, 2017). Recent research by Loopstra and Lalor (2017) into use of Trussell Trust foodbanks found that 38.7% of the respondents of their national survey were from a household with children, and that households with three or more children and lone parent households were particularly vulnerable to needing to use a food bank (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017).

Whilst the rise of food banks and increasingly the rise of food bank provision to children and families has now begun to be discussed in the debate on hunger and social policy in the UK (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017; Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2015), there is another strand of

provision which is also expanding with increasing amounts of support, which has yet to be engaged with critically in the food and poverty literature.

Child feeding initiatives which provide food to children in school or community settings have also grown in the last ten years. In 2014 a survey conducted by the Association of Public Service Excellence estimated that there had been a 45% increase in breakfast club provision since 2008 (Kellogg's, 2014). Today, breakfast clubs run by Magic Breakfast and Greggs report feeding 57,000 children, and clubs run by Kellogg's distribute two million breakfasts each year (Kellogg's, n.d. b; Greggs Foundation, n.d. b; Magic Breakfast n.d. a.). Less is known about holiday hunger initiatives – designed to alleviate out of term time hunger amongst children who are eligible for free school meals – but Forsey (2017) indicates as many as 428 may be in existence.

There is now increasing focus on these kinds of child feeding initiatives and projects have support from parliamentarians engaged with food insecurity and child health issues (Forsey, 2017; APSE, 2015a). Yet, they remain on the periphery of the critical debate on the rise of ad hoc food provision, what it tells us about the adequacy of social protection (in this case for children and their families) and what the best ways forward might be.

This paper aims to do three things. It will be the first to bring child feeding initiatives firmly into the critical food and poverty debate and to highlight the importance of doing so. Amid the calls for expansion and institutionalisation of child feeding provision, the paper will also critically assess the state of evidence on these projects and their perceived role in the lives of children at risk of, or experiencing, poverty. The third and final aim of the paper is to look forward and set out the next steps which will be required to build a systematic body of research on child feeding projects within the food and poverty research agenda.

The study: methodology

The aims of the underpinning scoping study were to come to a better understanding of what these projects set out to achieve, how they do this and the evidence base relating to their outcomes. The research also examined the wider policy framework surrounding these projects. The study involved a literature review; policy document reviews; and website

content analysis of six national networks of breakfast club and holiday hunger providers. For the literature review, key databases were searched in May 2017 for peer reviewed publications published since 1997 (including Proquest, Web of Science, Scopus, Science Direct) and Google was used to identify grey literature and policy documents. The search terms used were: 'Breakfast Clubs + UK'; 'School breakfast schemes + UK'; 'Holiday Food Provision + UK'; 'Summer Feeding Programmes + UK'; 'Food Aid in Schools + UK'; 'Holiday Breakfast clubs + UK'; 'Holiday Hunger + UK'. In order to capture work around current discourses of hunger we also included the following terms: 'Hunger in Schools + UK'; 'Hunger + Schools + UK'; 'Hungry Children + UK'; 'Hungry Children + School + UK'.

Overall, the searches revealed that the body of literature which covers breakfast and holiday hunger provision is patchy, limited and mixed in terms of both findings and the scope of the underpinning research. There appear to be two main waves of peer reviewed publications in this area. The first were papers based on research commissioned as part of evaluations of the Department of Health pilots (Schemilt 2003, 2004; Belderson et al., 2003 was also published at this time but not part of the evaluation) and the Welsh Assembly government pilots (Tapper et al., 2007; Murphy et al., 2011). A second wave of research has come since 2010 (Hoyland et al., 2012; Hannon and Learner, 2016; Defeyter et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2015a and 2015b; Defeyter et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2015).

Online searches were conducted (in May 2017) to identify projects for inclusion in the website content analysis. Six national schemes were identified: Magic Breakfast; Greggs and Kellogg's (who donate some of their food products as well as funding to breakfast clubs); the Make Lunch holiday project initiative; The Trussell Trust's Holiday Club pilot scheme; and FareShare (food redistribution to both breakfast clubs and holiday hunger clubs). Since the total number and variety of breakfast and holiday club providers is unknown, the six selected websites cannot be understood as representative of all breakfast and holiday club provision, but they have been selected to provide a snapshot of this kind of provision in 2017.

From the websites of the six identified case study projects, specific webpages were selected for coding and used in the analysis. Inclusion criteria were for webpages which described or publicised the workings of the project or provision (how it was funded, how it worked in practice) but excluded other information (members of staff, contact pages). The number of

webpages coded was 42. Qualitative Content Analysis was the method adopted to analyse the webpages of the projects, and by using an inductive reasoning approach we allowed conclusions about the projects to develop throughout the analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). A coding frame was developed by both researchers, directed by the research aims and objectives. All webpages were analysed in NVivo. Both researchers coded the data and an inter-coder comparison query was run which showed broad agreement. Where there was dissonance we discussed as a team and came to an agreement.

Findings

Framing the problem and solution: from promoting social inclusion to feeding hungry children

In the first instance, the research revealed how the framing of the problem that child feeding initiatives are responding to and the ways in which they are situated as part of solutions has changed over time (Hawkins and Holden, 2013). Breakfast clubs have moved from being seen as part of structural, state-driven approaches to poverty and social inclusion to feeding initiatives plugging gaps in increasingly lean state provision.

Breakfast club provision developed originally in the 1990s and was described in earlier literature as 'a form of before school provision serving breakfast to children who arrive early' (Shemilt et al., 2003, 2004). Whilst perceptions of family poverty and child food insecurity have been key motivations for setting up breakfast clubs for much of their history (see for example Street and Kenway, 1999, p.21 through to Harvey-Golding et al., 2015), exactly how this is framed has mirrored broader policy shifts in attitudes towards poverty.

Early peer reviewed research from the era of the New Labour governments framed breakfast clubs in terms of the policy concepts of the time, notably in terms of health and social inequalities (Shemilt et al., 2003, 2004; Tapper et al., 2007) and social exclusion (Shemilt et al., 2003). The policy analysis and policy-focused literature revealed that initially, the expansion of breakfast clubs was part of an increase in school-based childcare in the late 1990s followed by funding from Education Action Zones (Shemilt et al., 2003; Street and Kenway, 1999, p.25) and breakfast clubs were later identified as a key part of the government's extended schools policy in the Every Child Matters White Paper (Treasury,

2003). A series of pilots followed the early development, funded by the Department of Health in 1999 (Shemilt et al., 2003) and the Welsh Assembly Government in 2004. The latter pilot ultimately resulted in free breakfast provision being put into legislation via the School Standards & Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 which established free breakfasts as an entitlement to pupils in local authority run schools, where requests for provision have been made by or on behalf of the pupil (Welsh Government, 2014).

Since 2010 and the election of the Conservative (and Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition) governments, breakfast club funding has occurred in the context of more individualised and behavioural interpretations of poverty, realised through a more restricted policy framework which principally aims to drive down living costs rather than raise low incomes (DWP, 2014). So far in the current decade, just under £15m has been spent on breakfast club provision by the UK government and only a small proportion of this has come out of poverty-related spending. £1 million was set aside in the Child Poverty Strategy (DWP, 2014, p.31) and the government used the UK's £3.1m share of the EU European Aid to the Most Deprived to support breakfast club provision, allocating the money to schools in areas of high disadvantage (Laws, 2014). The majority of the funding since 2010 has been through part of the government's Childhood Obesity Strategy (HM government, 2017) with £10 million from the soft drinks industry levy set aside for breakfast clubs.

In contrast, holiday food provision has not been mentioned in policy documents, outside of the context of childcare. Interest has been much more recent, particularly the last two years in the context of the shifting emphasis on breakfast clubs as well as rise of food banks and public debates on hunger. Calls for more emphasis on holiday provision have been driven in particular by the All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) on School Food and on Hunger in the UK (see APSE, 2015a, 2015b; Forsey, 2017). Whilst there has been discussion of the role of statutory providers (APSE, 2014) and government funding for provision (Elgot, 2017) to date the provision remains charitable and voluntary.

Reflecting this changing policy context, the exact framings of these initiatives has moved from being situated within a broader understanding of low income and deprivation to a more specific discourse of neediness, 'hunger' and 'food insecurity'. Whilst food insecurity (or food poverty) concepts have long been used in grey and peer reviewed literatures in the

UK (see for example Dowler et al., 2001) they have become more prominent since 2010 and this is mirrored in the literature reviewed here. Touched on in relation to 'food poverty' in Shemilt et al., (2003, p105), in contrast, food insecurity plays a prominent role in the analyses of Harvey-Golding et al., (2015) and Defeyter et al., (2015). But, even where food insecurity is discussed explicitly, so far no research links to or uses recognised, robust measures of food security.

Our analysis of providers' websites also finds that the 'hunger' framing for the work of contemporary breakfast and holiday club charities is used prominently by the projects themselves as well as by policy makers and other stakeholders. The provision of breakfast before school was framed by all three providers (Kellogg's, Greggs and Magic Breakfast) explicitly in relation to helping children who come from families who struggle to access food, or children in schools where deprivation and poverty levels are high (Magic Breakfast, n.d. a; Greggs Foundation, n.d. a; Kellogg's, n.d. d). Whilst other motivations such as educational attainment and health were cited, across the case studies references were made to reaching 'malnourished and vulnerable children' and 'hunger-hit schools' (Magic Breakfast n.d. a and 2015); providing for 'disadvantaged young people' (Greggs Foundation n.d. a); and providing to 'those in need' (Kelloggs n.d. c and FareShare n.d. a). Holiday hunger provision is often linked by providers to free school meal entitlement and need for lunches to continue in order for children to be properly fed; but it is also inferred from levels of child poverty more generally (see Forsey, 2017; APSE, 2014; FareShare, n.d. b; Kellogg's, 2015; Make Lunch, n.d. Trussell Trust, n.d. b).

What we know: the efficacy of breakfast and holiday clubs

The scoping study also revealed a stark lack of robust and systematic evidence on these projects, despite their popularity. This is in terms of both operational aspects (how they work and where they are) and in terms of outcomes of these projects and levels of baseline need.

In terms of operational characteristics, it is very unclear from the peer reviewed and grey literature or the case studies examined exactly what the extent of provision really is in the

UK – what proportion of children can access it and how individual clubs operate. The existing peer-reviewed evidence base provides a snapshot of some of these factors. Defeyter et al (2010) highlight the diversity of breakfast club provision, and attempt to characterise them broadly in terms of providing: breakfast (at a minimum cereal, toast, fruit and juice), supervision, support and activities. Published research indicates that there are areas of significant variability. Projects can offer free provision or charge; with reports of costs to parents from between 30p up to £2.50 (Harrop and Palmer, 2002; Graham et al., 2015a). They begin anytime between 7.30am and 8.50am (Graham et al., 2015a) although the survey reported in Kellogg's (2014) suggests that 48% of clubs start at 8am, with another third starting earlier. Evidence on holiday hunger provision is even more limited but it appears that these projects also vary considerably. Projects are reported to run for one or a few hours, for various numbers of days per week and often only in some weeks of some holidays, with many only operating in the summer holiday (Defeyter et al., 2015; McConnon et al., 2017, p.3; Forsey, 2017, p.44).

The evidence on the outcomes of these projects is far from conclusive. The findings from peer reviewed research on outcomes of breakfast club provision surrounding education, health, social inclusion and family life are highly mixed, with several studies finding improvements in some areas and none in others, whilst some indicators got worse (see for example Shemilt et al., 2004; Murphy et al., 2011; Graham et al., 2015b). Two studies provided conclusions relating to the impact of breakfast provision on experiences of child food insecurity (Harvey-Golding et al., 2015; Shemilt et al., 2003, p.105) but neither incorporated direct measures of food security or food security outcomes.

Importantly, however, researchers involved in pilot evaluations of breakfast clubs have been very open about the difficulties involved in assessing the success of these projects. For example, in randomised trials the relatively limited control researchers have over recruitment, eligibility checking and implementation is challenging (Shemilt et al., 2004). Furthermore, evaluation budgets may not be sufficient for randomised control trials and implementation and roll out of provision may not provide enough opportunity to build in randomisation (Tapper et al., 2007). Significant methodological developments and research investment will therefore be required in the field to overcome these challenges in future research, potentially building on international examples (Mhurchu et al. 2013).

The grey literature included two reviews of holiday hunger provision (Forsey, 2017 and McConnon et al., 2017) which again provided mixed findings. McConnon et al (2017) identified benefits for children and parents in terms of relieving stress and pressure and encouraging physical activity and healthy eating. But Forsey (2017) highlights that the sporadic and piecemeal provision; scarcity of funding, lack of co-ordination; and reliance on donations were significant issues facing holiday hunger provision. The websites provide many case studies and testimonials (Kellogg's, FareShare and Magic Breakfast). But in terms of robust evaluation or primary data relating to project outcomes, only a few organisations involved in delivery have published reports based on empirical research or evaluations. These include a randomised controlled trial involving around 8,600 pupils (Education Endowment Foundation, 2016) and surveys of schools (Kellogg's, 2014) and parents (Kellogg's, n.d. d). The reports identify educational attainment and improved behaviour as the chief outcomes of breakfast clubs (Education Endowment Foundation, 2016; Kellogg's, 2014).

By situating analysis of child feeding initiatives within the context of food and poverty research, it is possible to take account of the well-established critiques from within this field which apply to all ad hoc food provision and raise bigger questions around the extent to which these projects can achieve their aims in practice. Our review of the research literature and analysis of websites suggests that breakfast clubs and holiday hunger projects are susceptible to four particular challenges: they can be inaccessible, unreliable, unaccountable and socially unacceptable (see Riches, 1997; Poppendieck, 1998).

In relation to the inaccessibility of projects, the published literature suggests that availability (Hoyland et al., 2012), capacity (Graham et al., 2015a) and opening hours can all vary (Defeyter et al., 2010; McConnon et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2016; Defetyer et al., 2015) and costs of breakfast clubs can be a barrier for the poorest children (Graham el at 2015a, 2015b; Shemilt et al 2003). The evidence reviewed also questions the reliability of breakfast and holiday hunger club provision where clubs do not run continuously over time (Shemilt et al., 2004). The accountability of breakfast and holiday hunger provision is also questionable, given that it is provided on a voluntary basis by communities and schools and not all overseen nationally. Urgent questions are also raised about the social acceptability of

this provision to children. Particularly if they are targeted at 'hungry' young people, there are significant implications for children's experiences of social exclusion, embarrassment and stigma all of which are acutely felt by children (Ridge, 2013).

Key conceptual and empirical gaps

The scoping study also identified a number of conceptual and empirical gaps that will need to be overcome in order establish what role – if any – child feeding initiatives may have to play in addressing children's experiences of food insecurity. Empirically, more critical policy and academic work is required in this area. In particular there is a need for comprehensive, representative national operational data, including what the projects all provide and how, when they open, how many children can access them, how many children do access them, and which children attend. Also, a more definitive body of knowledge is urgently required on the outcomes of these initiatives as they currently operate.

Conceptually, research on child feeding programmes will also need to avoid a number of limitations. First, it will be important that research does not focus exclusively on child characteristics and outcomes at an individual level. Instead, it will need to reflect how children's experiences of food insecurity are related to the experiences of their family; and sociological research on poor families (Daly and Kelly, 2015) and the interdependence of children and their adult caregivers (Martens et al.,2004). It will be crucial that future research doesn't lose sight of the importance of wider family circumstances, especially as Canadian literature has already established that a key limitation of child feeding initiatives like breakfast and holiday clubs is that they take children out of their family setting and do not address 'the root cause of the problem of family food insecurity' (Dayle et al., 2000, p.1791).

Second, within the context of the increasing 'hunger' framing of child feeding initiatives there is a danger of concepts such as 'food insecurity' being used narrowly, for example focused only on compromises in food quantity or nutrient intake. As 'food insecurity' is increasingly invoked in research in this field, two considerations will be particularly important. In the first instance, research will need to adopt detailed and broad

understandings of food insecurity which are clear about the importance of the social acceptability of food experiences (see Anderson's 1990 definition) and the role of socio-economic and policy determinants (informed by work such as De Marco and Thorburn, 2009; Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2011). This will be essential for avoiding research which overly individualises experiences or places them within a food silo where the problem is seen as one of a lack of food, solved by the provision of food (Tarasuk, 2001). This will be essential for providing research which is able to identify upstream policy responses.

Furthermore, if the concept of 'food insecurity' is going to be used in this research field it needs to be operationalised robustly, to provide reliable evidence on baseline food insecurity and the food insecurity outcomes of particular policy or voluntary initiatives. Established measures can be used such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) measure used by the Food Standards Agency (Bates et al., 2017). Without adequate measures it is impossible to evaluate whether child feeding initiatives meet their own aims, or address the growing problem of child food insecurity.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to bring research on child feeding initiatives into the food and poverty debate; to critically assess evidence on these projects, their role and outcomes; and to set out the next steps for building a systematic body of research. Situating research on child feeding initiatives into the context of work which uses food as a lens for understanding contemporary experiences of poverty sheds important light on the more systemic determinants and political-economic drivers which shape both the nature of provision and the need it is setting out to meet. This approach also facilitates a critical assessment of the existing evidence base which reveals a lack of systematic data and convincing evidence with regards to both operational and outcomes-related aspects. The immediate next steps for a research agenda on the links between child feeding initiatives, children's food experiences and poverty must focus on plugging these empirical gaps. This is particularly urgent given the policy debate surrounding the expansion of such initiatives. In addition to using robust definitions and measures of children's experiences of food and poverty, it will also be

important for researchers studying child feeding programmes not to lose sight of the fact that children's experiences are intimately connected to the circumstances of their family and household. Empirical work focused solely on feeding projects and their immediate impact on individual children runs the significant danger of rendering the drivers of children's food insecurity invisible to future research and policy makers.

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