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ABSTRACT

The UK school meals service has a distinctive history shaped by early welfare policies, austerity measures, and the introduction of universal free school meals, thus making it a useful case study for examining how state interventions and socioeconomic factors impact disabled and neurodivergent individuals and their families. Understanding these experiences can provide valuable insights into how national policies and cultural contexts influence inclusivity and how neurodivergent students can be better supported both in the telling of their stories and in school settings. In this article, we strive to bring into focus the perspectives of neurodivergent adults who experienced the UK meals service growing up. By doing so, we also endeavor to bridge the gap between the history of school meals and dining spaces and the history of education, which have often been treated separately. Children's experiences of school meals—particularly neurodivergent children's experiences—are largely absent from the history of education; yet, as we argue here, children's experiences of food in school are integral to an understanding of the workings of pedagogy and education policy, and growing up disabled.

KEYWORDS
discipline; experience; neurodivergent; sensory; UK meals service

This article focuses on oral history interviews with four neurodivergent individuals who participated in the research project, The School Meals Service: Past, Present—and Future?, which explores the lived experience of the UK meals service from its inception in 1906 to the present day alongside historical and current developments in policy.[1] The project, which runs from 2023 to 2025, is funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and comprises three teams across three institutions: the University of Sheffield, University of Wolverhampton, and University College London. At the University of Sheffield, we primarily used oral history to understand historical experiences of the service as told by former pupils, parents, teachers, and caterers. We took a mixed-methods approach to recruiting narrators by building links with communities local to our institution in Sheffield and connected to our partner schools in London, Bradford, Cardiff, and Glasgow, as well as with community-anchor organizations across the UK. Finally, we also shared a nationwide call for participants from the project's account on Twitter (now X).

For this article, we follow two interrelated lines of inquiry that mirror our respective research interests and experiences as an oral historian and a historian of education. But as authors, we write from neurodivergent and neurotypical perspectives, respectively. Isabelle is an oral historian with an interest in histories of inequalities in relation to the welfare state in post-1945 Britain, while Heather's research interests lie in the fields of the history of education and the history of childhood and the lived experience of the welfare state. This article stems from our interest in the ways in which neurodivergent perspectives enriched our understanding of the lived experience of school meals over the course of a particular project and encouraged us to reflect more deeply on how to conduct research that endeavors to be inclusive of—even if not solely focused upon—oral histories and disabilities. We understand the importance of ensuring that our neurodivergent narrators' perspectives are represented accurately and that the publication of their words must be a collaborative process (we discuss this further below). Here, we use oral history interviews as textual and documentary sources that can be examined both for their narrative construction and for their contribution to the historical record.[2] We explore how we adapted our methodological approach in response to information about our narrators' neurodiversity at different stages of the interview process and reflect on the ways the narrators retrospectively composed narratives of their school meals experiences after receiving formal diagnoses as adults. We then consider interactions between neurodivergent narrators and the institutional structures of the school meals service, focusing on the sensory and disciplinary regimes of the narrators' schools between the 1960s and the 2000s. While lunchtimes are typically viewed as structures for exercising control over children's experiences of education, our narrators' testimonies reveal the ways in which they also became spaces of contestation and resistance.

Project Background

Since the project's scope was national, we endeavored to support the participation of individuals in places and at times that best suited them by offering narrators the option of either a virtual or in-person interview. Two of the four interviews highlighted in this article took place via video call, while the other two were in person. We used a Zoom H5 audio recording device to record all interviews, which will be made permanently available with participants' consent once the project is complete in July 2025. Of the seventy individuals with whom we conducted interviews, four identified as neurodivergent, and we refer to the narrators here by the qualifiers they themselves use to describe their neurodivergence. Lauren describes themself as autistic, and Joanne describes herself as autistic and neurodivergent. Ella and Lisa both refer to themselves as people who "have" ADHD, but Ella also referred to herself as someone “with neurodiversity.”[3] We understand that this is not the only way of referring to ADHD narrators, with terms like “ADHD’er” and “ADHD person” often preferred by people in the UK.[4]

We also acknowledge that while our narrators referred to medical diagnoses in their discussion of neurodivergence, self-diagnosis is important and valid. Our analysis follows the “neurodiversity approach” outlined by psychologist Patrick Dwyer, which occupies a “middle ground” between medical and social models of disability, understanding neurodiversity as something shaped by the interplay of individual characteristics and the environments in which they were experienced.[5] In this article, we therefore focus on the neurodivergent experiences of our narrators as individuals, also noting how their particular experiences then interacted with sensory and disciplinary elements of the wider UK school meals service. We do not seek to contrast particular elements of experience according to diagnoses, nor to suggest that neurodivergent experiences of school food are homogeneous. Instead, we concentrate on a small number of oral history narrators to explore how individuals recount their experiences of school meals in relation to autism or ADHD.

In our examples, we draw on experiences that our narrators specifically related to neurodivergence rather than attempting to retrospectively infer the influence of neurodivergence in narrators’ stories. While we reflect on the experience of conducting these interviews from a research perspective, these observations stem from an attempt to consider our positionalities and the history of the school meals service more broadly rather than an imposition of our interpretation upon the words of our narrators. We are wary of the tendency of more diagnostic and cognitively focused literature to consider the experiences of autistic narrators primarily as “manifestations of symptoms.”[6] The stories we recount do not fully encompass the experiences shared with us, and our narrators’ perspectives will feature in further written work about varied aspects of the school meals service.

Our Narrators

Three of the project narrators identify as women and one as nonbinary. They all attended public (government-funded) schools in England from the early 1960s to the early 1990s. Joanne attended two schools—one in Dorking in Surrey (southeast England, near London) and one in Cottingham in East Yorkshire (northeast England)—from 1967 to 1980, and she later worked as an advisory teacher to support disabled pupils in the 2010s. Joanne reflected on both her personal experiences of consuming school meals as a pupil and her experience of teaching food education (particularly cooking) in classrooms as an advisory teacher. Lisa attended school in Leicester, a city in the East Midlands, from 1974 to 1987. In the late 2000s, she returned to the city’s schools as an elementary school teacher, where she occasionally ate with and supervised children during lunchtimes. Ella and Lauren are close in age. Born in 1992, Ella went to school in Rotherham in South Yorkshire from 1996 to 2010, while Lauren, born two years later in 1994, attended schools in small towns in Northumbria and Merseyside (all in northern England) until they left for college in 2012. Both Ella and Lauren spoke from the perspective of former pupils who had consumed school meals, but they also expressed a strong interest in cooking and food culture and used the interview to reflect on the role of school meals in shaping their preferences as adults.

To ensure our process was collaborative, we shared initial transcripts with our narrators (inviting them to offer corrections or comments) and consulted them via email to confirm their consent to include their testimonies in this article. We also took this opportunity to ask a follow-up question regarding the extent to which they felt that their school meal experiences had been shaped by structural ableism. We reflect on their responses in a later section in this article. Our narrators contributed to this article's development by reading and commenting on earlier drafts. For ease of reference, we highlighted the specific sections where each narrator's testimony had been used and provided a brief, accessible summary of our argument.

We focus on the period before, during, and after the interviews to explore how the ongoing dialogue between narrators and interviewers has informed our understanding of working with (these) neurodivergent people. We highlight the importance of making adaptations according to individual needs in order to cocreate oral histories in ways that support narrators, empowering them to share their memories in the ways that best suit them. Our approach also reflects on how these adaptations can sometimes challenge oral historians and their interviewing practices. We then discuss the effects of the narrators' diagnoses as adults on their narratives of childhood, the interviews having provided them with the opportunity to consider how neurodivergence shaped their earlier experiences. Our focus then shifts to consider the lived experience of our four narrators in relation to the context of school meals, with particular emphasis on the sensory and disciplinary aspects of the service.

The UK School Meals Service

School meals and the dining spaces used for their consumption have traditionally been treated separately in the historiography from the history of formal schooling and pedagogy, which has tended to focus on the classroom. Yet sociologists and ethnographers have shown dining halls, cafeterias, and canteens to be integral to the pedagogical aims of schools as well as vital opportunities for social learning and for building and negotiating relationships.[7] While the British state has expressed a range of motivations behind the gradual introduction and expansion of school meal provision (including humanitarian and educational goals), eugenics and the so-called "improvement of the [White] race" were significant factors right from the start. The potential of state-provided school meals to reduce the incidence of illness and disability in the population was particularly stressed. As Mildred E. Bulkley, who wrote *The Feeding of School Children* in 1914, observed, "To the old motives of sentiment and educational need was added a new motive, a motive specially characteristic of the present century … This was the desire for 'race regeneration,' the conviction of the supreme importance of securing a physically efficient people." She noticed an important shift in the rhetorical positioning of children at this time—increasingly, they were removed from the traditional (and private) sphere of the family to become "regarded primarily as the raw material for a nation of healthy citizens."[8]

Indeed, the school meals service as introduced in the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act can only be understood when viewed against the background of the 1904 Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. This committee was established following the discovery that conscripts for the Second Boer War (1899–1902) who had attended public (government-funded) elementary schools as children were on average five and a half inches shorter than those attending private schools. There was also "a concern to instruct, through feeding, 'correct' modes of behavior in relation to food and drink consumption"; for example, British historian Catherine Burke has argued that "the imposition of discipline and control around the school meal was regarded as one important means of challenging working-class habits and replacing them with middle-class norms."[9]

From its inception, the school meals service sought to shape children in accordance with a population-level vision of public health and racial fitness. There was an assumption that the majority of children entering the education system could indeed be successfully shaped into "healthy" citizens on the model of the middle classes. Poverty, for example, was not viewed as an inherent barrier against such socialization. However, there were always a number of children—in particular, those considered physically and mentally "handicapped," in the language of the time—who were viewed as beyond the "civilizing" reach of the school. While the scope and legal basis of the school meals service changed over time, this population-level public health approach remained the underpinning framework within which the rationale for the service was understood well into the late twentieth century and beyond. It remained a collectivist, national, and above all, normative enterprise, designed not to accommodate difference or "divergence." To date, the majority of research on the history of the service has focused on the state's intentions, policies, and implementation strategy. This focus has been dictated chiefly by the much greater availability of "official" sources: central and local government records, as well as legislation and Hansard (the UK Parliament's official report of all parliamentary debates). Research into the impact of the service on the lives of those who experienced it—namely, teachers, caterers, lunchtime supervisors, parents, and students—is much rarer, and what exists is almost entirely based on printed memoirs and autobiographies. Without making use of other methods such as oral history, historians can do little more than hint at the complex and multifaceted impact the school meals service had on the lives of those it touched and can only hope in vain for responses to it other than grudging conformity. Catherine Burke called this “one of the curious silences in the history of education” and looks forward to the possibility of a history that is able to show the school dining space as “a territory of contested desires and intentions, a battleground between the perceived needs of the adult and the child.”[10]

Reflecting on Our Interview Technique

Our narrators shared information with us about their neurodivergence at different points in the interview process. Lauren, who attended public schools in Northumbria and Merseyside from 1998 to 2012, contacted the project via a form on our website that invites people to share brief written memories of school meals. In their response, they spoke about their autism diagnosis: “School dinners [lunches in American English] made me a picky eater. This all came out while being assessed for autism as an adult.”[11] We then contacted Lauren to request an interview, as we have done with everyone who shares memories through the project website, which led to an online video interview taking place over Google Meet a few weeks later. In the period between our first email and the interview, we shared the project information sheet, which outlined the project’s rationale, criteria for participation in terms of the narrator’s involvement with school meals in a personal or professional capacity, and the anticipated interview format. The project information sheet stated that questions would be semistructured, with some common questions asked of all narrators, and that the remainder of the interview would be directed by the flow of the conversation between interviewer and narrator. While we have provided some narrators with an outline of key interview questions ahead of time, this has not been common practice within the project unless requested specifically by the narrator, as it is generally not considered best practice to do so. As such, while Lauren did not specifically ask for additional information before our conversation, we also did not offer to share any. Instead, a discussion between Isabelle and Lauren about what the interview might look like occurred in the time between the start of our meeting and when the recorded conversation began. It was during this initial discussion that Lauren shared again that they are autistic and stated that sometimes their facial expressions did not match how a person might expect them to react.[12] Our conversation immediately prior to the interview therefore functioned as an important space for setting expectations about what the interview would look like from both of our perspectives and how focusing on what Lauren said as opposed to how they said it could make them feel more comfortable.

In the writing of this article, we have recognized that, for autistic narrators, traditional oral history methods are not always the most appropriate. As The Autistic Voices project team have advised based on their own participatory research, it is important to provide autistic narrators with interview questions in advance and to establish if they would be comfortable with follow-up questions. Before the interview, it is also useful to discuss their preferences for the interview environment, both in terms of location and expectations for levels of eye contact and stimming.[13] On reflection, this outside guidance made us question the level of support our project provided at the recruitment stage.

This is not to say that we had not anticipated participation from neurodivergent and disabled narrators. Before conducting our own interviews, we listened to archived oral histories from the "How Was School?" project, which focused on disabled people's experiences of education in Britain and is archived in the British Library.[14] The issue of school meals recurred across many narrators' accounts, often highlighting approaches to discipline and the sensory aspects of their experience that we discuss later in this article. During recruitment, we used the discussions that occurred via email and video call before the interview took place as spaces where needs could be outlined by narrators individually rather than attempting to deploy a one-size-fits-all approach to sharing information with people who identified themselves as disabled and/or neurodivergent. While it was the first time that Isabelle had knowingly interviewed neurodivergent narrators, as a neurodivergent oral historian herself, she had anticipated that some narrators would speak from this perspective.

Lisa, who attended public schools in Leicester from 1974 to 1987, spoke about her experience with ADHD before her recorded interview. This conversation initially did not relate to the interview. Already known to one another, Lisa and Isabelle took the opportunity to catch up before recording began, and it was in this context that Lisa shared confirmation of her formal ADHD diagnosis. Lisa stated that she did not want to share this news with her family, as she anticipated an unsupportive response. Interested in how far Lisa might connect ADHD with her experience of school meals but mindful of her need for confidentiality, Isabelle asked if Lisa would be happy to discuss her ADHD during the interview. While Lisa agreed beforehand, she avoided identifying her ADHD outright during the recording, instead referring more obliquely to issues with her attention and concentration, as is evident in this discussion of how she spent her break times.

> Lisa: As a rule, I always went into the hall and practiced on the xylophone or the glockenspiel, depending on which was free. [*Isabelle laughing*] Occasionally the tambourine. But erm, yeah. [The teachers] would not let me play the violin. So, I had to—I was only allowed to bash things! [*Lisa laughing*] I don't know—I see why now—but back then. But I loved it!
>
> Isabelle: What makes you say you "see why now"? [*Laughing*]

> Lisa: Erm [*pause*] because I—my attention span was, erm, not brilliant. So, learning to read music and play a violin was not really an option for me.
>
> Isabelle: Yeah.
>
> Lisa: But bashing pieces of wood really was an option for me! [*Lisa laughing*] And I got into that. I really enjoyed it because I could sort of focus, could hyperfocus on that sort of thing.[15]

The recording does not document the pointed look offered by Lisa when asked the question "What makes you say you 'see why now'?," which Isabelle interpreted at the time as a request not to push this line of questioning. While the audio recorder did not capture this exchange beyond Lisa's momentary silence, the decision not to question her further demonstrates the importance of accepting her need for her ADHD diagnosis to go unspoken during the interview. We contacted Lisa after the interview about writing this article, revisiting her reasons for her silence in the recording and asking if this was something we could reflect on in published work. Lisa agreed that we could refer to her ADHD in our analysis provided we took care to anonymize her account. In this, we sought to follow a tenet of oral historian Alexander Freund's "ethics of silence," in which he stated that "[accepting] silences may be the most beneficial way forward after we have collaboratively, with our narrators, probed the deeper meanings of such silences. Only then will we find a balance between protecting the well-being of our narrators and 'truth in publication.'"[16]

These negotiations on and off the record, before and after the interview, are vital to understanding the narrative Lisa offered during the recorded conversation. While we as oral historians might feel it is important to empower narrators to share their experiences of neurodivergence and enhance their representation in the historical record, this did not align with Lisa's needs. Instead, her empowerment came from her silence on this subject. It is also worth noting that Lisa did not see neurodivergence as particularly instrumental in her school meals experiences. She instead sought to emphasize her creativity as a teacher and how her passion for the sciences helped her to develop new approaches to teaching children about the food they consumed in the school canteen (or cafeteria). As Kirstie Stage has argued in relation to deaf and disability histories more broadly, oral history can be a valuable tool for highlighting the ways in which disabled people are not solely defined by medical characterizations but rather have diverse interests and experiences that shape their identities.[17]

Receiving different levels of information about the narrators at different points in the interview process meant that we had to be responsive in our interview approach to meet the needs of each individual. Ella—a pupil at public schools in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, from 1996 to 2010—identified herself as someone who "has ADHD" within the first few minutes of the interview, after recording had started.[18] Joanne, who attended public schools in Surrey and East Yorkshire from the late 1960s to 1980, used the time immediately before the recording to outline her needs for the interview. She explained that she was incredibly tired and did not want to talk for very long. She struggles with chronic fatigue and had had a particularly difficult night's sleep. She agreed to go ahead with the interview, so after establishing her name, birth date, and place of birth on the recording, Isabelle asked,

> Now, you mentioned you're a bit pushed for time today, so what are the main things that you would like to tell me about in relation to your experience of school meals? And then I can kind of structure some questions around that.[19]

This dismantled the typical structure of the interviews we had conducted so far and meant that the conversation became almost entirely dependent on where Joanne wanted to take it. While typically we had attempted to direct interviews chronologically, from early educational experiences to leaving school as a teenager, we instead opted for a much more fluid structure in Joanne's interview. What followed was a rich and wide-ranging conversation, but one that challenged our approach to interviewing. The chronological anchors we had previously used to contextualize and trace the development of a narrator's narrative were largely lost, leading to some tensions between our anticipated interview style and structure and our ethical responsibilities toward Joanne's needs. Some oral historians, such as Holly Werner-Thomas and Daniel Kerr, have developed methods that eschew the chronological approach in order to creatively engage narrators with a range of needs.[20] Werner-Thomas's use of the sensory, in particular, may have proven useful for our project, as our line of questioning did encourage narrators to draw on sensory memories. However, due to the wider project's attempt to understand the UK school meals service in the past and present, as well as possibilities for its future, a chronological approach to the interviews seemed most appropriate to facilitate comparisons and contrasts across the three cross-institutional strands of our research.

Nevertheless, there remained space for adaptations in our approach. While it was generally semistructured, with a series of questions asked of every narrator but the direction of the interview otherwise dependent upon the narrator's responses, we found it necessary to change our order of questions—particularly those aiming to set the scene chronologically at the start of an interview—and the ways in which we framed them. For Lauren, we established relatively early on that the typically open-ended format of questioning most widely accepted in oral history as best practice for avoiding leading responses could sometimes engender a sense of uncertainty, even discomfort. This extract is taken from the start of Lauren's interview:

> Isabelle: What would a typical day be like at primary school? So, starting from the start of the day, what do you remember about how that day would pan out?
>
> Lauren: Oh, gosh, erm. [*Laughs*] This is a while ago, and I don't remember a lot before the age of about 15. Erm [*pause*], so. Yeah, it would mostly just be, you know, primary school, sat in one room, go to your lessons, go to break, go to lunch. I don't know, it's hard to describe the experience of being a small child in school! [*Laughs*][21]

Lauren's uncertainty led us to reassure them about their responses and attempt to rephrase questions in ways that sought more specific examples, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

> Isabelle: That's okay. Does anything spring to mind when you think about a typical day, is there a particular portion of the day that you think about, maybe the lessons or the breaktime, or arriving at school or going home?
>
> Lauren: Erm. I mean mostly breaktime, but that's mostly because I was bullied a lot, like I didn't really have friends until sixth form [the final two years of secondary education in the UK after the age of 16].
>
> Isabelle: Mmhmm. I'm really sorry to hear about that, are you comfortable talking about that at all?
>
> Lauren: Yeah!
>
> Isabelle: Yeah. So, was that something that happened at break times and presumably lunchtimes at school?
>
> Lauren: [*Nods in response*]
>
> Isabelle: Yeah? Yeah. So, to what extent would you say that that influenced your break and lunchtimes in terms of how you were in the space of the playground or perhaps the dining hall?
>
> Lauren: [*Pause*] I mean, because it was primary school obviously it was quite heavily supervised. So, it would be kind of a case of, you know, finish my food. Wait until we were allowed to go outside and then go hang out down the bottom of the field.
>
> Isabelle: Mm, yeah, yeah. So, if you were to describe to me, for example, where you would be at lunchtime say, you'd move from a classroom to a space where you would eat food?
>
> Lauren: Yeah, it was the same space that was used for PE [physical education], which was, they just called it the hall, because it was just the big hall. And there were these really long, you know the kind of plastic tables with like that weird stuff on top that is meant to make it look like stone except it's really horrid and plasticky? With like the metal bits? And then the long benches matching.[22]

The flow of Lauren's speech changed throughout the interview. By the final response in the extract above, they spoke much more fluidly and confidently, contrasting with the earlier hesitations, pauses, and qualifiers that halted the pattern of their speech at the beginning of their interview when asked a more open-ended question about their experience of bullying. Our last question around the dining space in particular was much more direct and concentrated and led to a more detailed response. Unlike Joanne, who found that open questions and a less structured interview approach facilitated her in sharing her experiences, Lauren preferred to respond to more direct questions.

Nevertheless, notes that we wrote immediately after the interview indicate a sense of unpreparedness and dissatisfaction with our approach. It is tempting in hindsight to reflect that the change from more open to direct questions had been spurred only by the nature of Lauren's responses, but Isabelle's notes from the time reveal that this was motivated also in part by our own discomfort with the conduct of the interview.

> From the start, I struggled to set the pace . . . I got the sense that [they] were trying to figure out what I wanted to know from some of the more open questions, as opposed to thinking about what [they] might want to tell me. Plus, sticking to open questions became increasingly difficult when [Lauren] began to talk about distressing experiences with primary and secondary school bullies, including violent incidents that went unchallenged by teachers. At these points in the interview, I felt caught between my desire to comfort [Lauren] and empathize with [them] based on my own experiences . . . and the oral historian I feel that I "should" be, who is a largely silent presence in the recording and doesn't lead the narrator. In the end, I think I fell somewhere between the two, leaving me satisfied with neither.[23]

The structure of the interview therefore changed based on the needs of both narrator and interviewer, as we placed clearer parameters around questions to minimize our own and Lauren's discomfort. That Lauren's interview took place early on in our collection phase was also a contributing factor to the level of discomfort. By the time we interviewed Joanne six weeks later, we felt more comfortable adapting our interview style, more readily deconstructing the anticipated structure of her interview. What followed was an instructive experience for Isabelle as the interviewer, demonstrating the difficulties—and necessity—of adapting our typical interview techniques based on the needs of an individual narrator.

We interviewed Lisa and Ella in person, in places chosen by them. Lisa chose to be interviewed at home, while Ella chose to be interviewed in the café connected to her workplace. While Lisa's interview at home meant that we spoke to her in a relatively quiet environment, the café interview with Ella meant that our conversation was accompanied by the clattering of cutlery and hum of chatter as she recalled her school meals experiences. A quieter environment may have helped to minimize the number of distractions, but we followed Ella's preference for the interview setting. In both interviews, we took several breaks at the narrators' requests. This enabled them to do other things during our time together, such as making phone calls, standing up and walking around, or making a drink, thus breaking up the interviews into shorter bursts of conversation, which also supported Isabelle as the interviewer. As we received information about Lisa's and Ella's ADHD (just before starting the recording for the former and in the opening minutes of the interview for the latter), these adaptations to the interviews' structures occurred organically rather than due to prior planning. These adaptations and collaborative reworkings of the interview structure have helped us to work toward a more flexible, inclusive practice that better meets the needs of each narrator and interviewer.

Composing Narratives of Childhood Following Diagnosis in Adulthood

In the interviews themselves, the retrospective diagnoses that the narrators received as adults had ramifications for the structure of the stories they told—none of the four narrators were aware of their neurodivergence during their schooling. Like all narrators, they accessed their childhood memories to recount their past experiences, but unlike most, they also mapped onto their childhood the senses and behaviors they now associate with autism and ADHD as adults. In the interviews, these temporal dynamics sparked mixed reflections about their experiences of school meals. For Ella, it "all makes sense" when examined through the lens of ADHD.[24] Her understanding of ADHD bears similarities to the process of "biological illumination" coined by sociologist Catherine D. Tan, whereby autistic participants found themselves better able to identify and explain certain aspects of their childhood experiences following their adult diagnosis.[25] From being late every morning to forgetting whether she needed to bring a packed lunch or dinner money each day, Ella remarked that the points in her school day that offered the clearest indications of the influence of ADHD were "all kind of around food."[26] Ella continually expressed surprise at the centrality of food to her childhood experiences, and the interview was the first time that she had reflected to such an extent on how ADHD—for which she had only received a diagnosis four years prior to the interview in 2019—shaped her experience of food at school and at home as a child in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In this sense, the interview facilitated what Lynn Abrams has described as the "epiphanic moment," as Ella reconstructed her sense of self in the past according to her understanding of herself in the present.[27] Yet Ella still hesitated to view certain aspects of her experiences through the lens of neurodivergence, both in the interview and in reflections offered afterward. During her interview, Ella remarked,

> Like now I eat absolutely anything, but I think being vegetarian has made that happen, and I think, like, from like early twenties onwards I would, like, eat anything. But at the time, no. I remember being pickier. But I don't know if that is like a neurodiverse thing because it's not so much like I don't like certain things, it's that I like them in the way that I like them.[28]

The uncertainty that Ella expresses could come from a variety of factors, such as her relatively recent diagnosis or an internalized sense of "diagnostic self-doubt" that leads some individuals to question their own experiences in the face of heterogeneous accounts of neurodivergence.[29] Regardless of the exact reasons for Ella's uncertainty, her reflections hint at the tension between reconstructing experience at the level of the individual and extrapolating how far those experiences might speak to a wider community. This tension is present not only in Ella's articulation of her own experiences but also in how we interpret this collection of interviews as historians. In analyzing our findings and preparing this article, we were wary of ascribing meaning to the narrators' experiences in ways that they might not have done themselves. We ultimately wanted to understand the relationship between the personal experiences of school meals, which they spoke about with reference to neurodivergence, and their treatment by educational institutions, which they did not necessarily discuss in similar terms.

In order to dig into this new research question, we invited Ella, Joanne, Lisa, and Lauren to respond by email to a question that explored how far they felt that structural ableism had shaped their experiences of school meals. Our email read as follows: "We're exploring how far this is something that underscores the experiences of people with disabilities and neurodivergence, but are wary of describing people's experiences in ways that they might not be comfortable with or simply disagree with. So as someone who identified as neurodivergent, I just wanted to ask, do you think ableism is an issue that you see as having shaped your experience of school feeding?"[30] All narrators replied except Lisa. Their written responses emphasize the need for caution in interpreting the past through the present, as well as the differing extents to which they reconstruct personal and institutional experiences in relation to neurodivergence. Joanne, though confident in talking about how being neurodivergent shaped her reactions to school meals and the lunchtime environment, wrote an email response indicating that she did not see ableism per se as having structured her experiences.

> I was educated in an era of no understanding of difference. Children were told to be quiet unless spoken to and always finish all the food on your plate. This was endemic … I don't think it can be called ableism then as such was the era of the 1960s and '70s. I was not comfortable with eating or using public areas for many years anyway as a teenager. In this era [today], I think it might be different as there is so much choice, sandwiches or cooked lunches, menus of what food there would be and no punishment for not eating it all up. I think it is important to help children structure their day eating and drinking. I don't know if this is what you want me to say but it's hard to go back as in those days there was not even a word or conception of being different other than ill or the old *h* word ["handicapped"]. I hope I am understanding your question?[31]

Lauren displayed a similar hesitancy to ascribe what they saw as a modern-day understanding of institutional ableism onto their past experiences.

> Looking back, I think it's likely the way I was treated by other children may have been related to ableism, in the way that people who are generally odd or different tend to be ostracized or worse, but as I wasn't diagnosed, the way ableism in staff affected me is harder to quantify. It's possible that the reactions to bullying along the lines of me having it coming due to my reactions (I'm sure you've heard the truism that if you stop reacting to bullying they'll get bored and move on—somewhat difficult when you can barely control your emotions/reactions in the best of circumstances), but I think it would be more the lack of knowledge meaning my autism wasn't noticed rather than what you might call active ableism. I hope that makes sense? It's a difficult thought to express.[32]

Ella took longer to respond to the email following an initial reply to state that she needed some time to think about our question. When she did respond, it seemed that this period of reflection had led her to reconsider aspects of her educational experience.

> Just taking some time to properly consider this, and it's fascinating. I think it is fair to say ableism definitely plays a part in school meals, and actually is fair to say it shaped my experiences of school more broadly. However, I was very lucky to be at school pre-academization—particularly in very nurturing and localized infant and primary schools. I felt that despite not having a diagnosis or any specific access requests at the time (because I/my parents didn't know!), the relaxed nature of the school environment and the kindness of the staff helped . . . This most definitely changed at secondary school as things got more strict . . . It was horrible, I'm sure for a lot of young people, but especially those with any mental health concerns or neurodiversity. I don't think I understood why I found it so hard at the time, but looking back I do think it's because I had a lot of undiagnosed neurodiverse/mental health stuff going on. In hindsight it's really not an accessible environment.[33]

There is an interesting contextualization of experience at play in these responses that draws out the tensions between the individual, the collective, and the temporal. While retrospectively understanding their individual experiences as related to autism, Joanne and Lauren are wary of conducting a similar retrospective mapping onto the wider context of their school days. Moreover, despite having no understanding of autism as children, Joanne and Lauren both refer to being autistic as a way of explaining their personal experiences of childhood from their adult perspectives in their interviews. Yet their written responses show that this does not extend to their consideration of the institutional, both showing a reluctance to see their schools and teachers as ableist due to the lack of understanding about autism more broadly in the 1960s, 1970s, and 2000s. While their understanding of themselves as neurodivergent is developing over time and helps Joanne and Lauren to reconstruct their past selves through the lens of the present, their perspectives of their schools are fixed at a certain point in history. Both write about the challenges they faced in receiving support at school, with Joanne describing the lack of consideration of children's needs as "endemic" and Lauren identifying how their own behavior in response to bullying made staff dismissive of their experiences. Rather than framing this within the context of disability and ableism, they both ascribe their difficulties to a lack of knowledge and understanding of "difference."[34] Lauren argues that they cannot use the language and logic of ableism to describe the staff given that they did not yet have a diagnosis, although they are more open to viewing their interactions with peers through this lens. This contrasts with Ella's retrospective understanding of the support she received at school, which she more readily attributed to an ableist environment. Her assertion that "actually [it] is fair to say [ableism] shaped my experiences of school more broadly" conjures again what Abrams has referred to as the role of the "epiphanic" in oral histories, as the narrator reaches a new understanding of their experiences and sense of self.[35]

Sensory Responses and Sensory Regimes

In light of our narrators' perspectives, we think an examination of the broader aims of the UK school meals service is warranted. Tracing the aims of the service from its beginnings in the early twentieth century provides strong evidence of structural discrimination against disabled people. Many of these aims have remained important drivers of the school meals service to this day and arguably still shape the experiences of students, teachers, parents, and catering staff. The provision of school meals across the UK should be viewed as an important part of the welfare state that developed over the twentieth century, particularly in the postwar years. Foucauldian scholarship is important here as it has placed the history of schools (including the provision of school meals) alongside other "institutions that 'contain' persons over time, such as . . . hospitals and prisons."[36] As such, one of the primary functions of the school meals service has been "disciplinary" in a Foucauldian sense—it has sought to shape individuals, their bodies, behaviors, habits, and attitudes in particular ways considered desirable by the state. As part of a wider constellation of state institutions, the school meals service played its part in defining what the desired "norm" should be for children and young people growing up in the UK. The school meals service ascribed norms not just regarding *what, when*, and *how much* they should be eating but also *how*—in what circumstances, in whose company, and in demonstrating which behaviors are acceptable. Drawing on the work of French historian Alain Corbin, we refer to this effort by school authorities to control the ways in which children responded to the sensory environment—in terms of keeping noise levels low, sitting still, and ensuring all food was eaten—as the "sensory regime" of the school.[37] We now consider this discipline in relation to neurodivergent narrators' interactions with both sensory regimes and supervisory approaches in school dining spaces.

Neurodivergent people frequently report experiencing heightened sensory responses to everyday stimuli. In accounts of school meals in the past, sensory aspects are often given prominence, even by individuals who do not identify as neurodivergent. From the early days of the service, it was observed that school meals were often consumed within "a perfect pandemonium of noise."[38] In our new interviews with self-identifying neurodivergent narrators, the sensory impact of school meals emerged even more sharply as a focus of their memories. Joanne described her experiences of lunchtime at secondary school in the mid-1970s thus:

> Joanne: It was very rushed. It was a huge school in those days, so there'd be a lot of noise. I wouldn't be able to talk. Erm, and, you wouldn't get seconds or anything . . . you just took it on a plate and that was it, and what you eat, it doesn't matter. You're just in a rush to get out, basically. So, it was all very rushed . . .
>
> Isabelle: Yeah. I can see you're kind of hunching in even just at the memory of it.[39]

Joanne continued to have similar experiences in adulthood when she worked as a special educational needs adviser and would visit different schools. At lunchtime, she would have to eat in the school canteen and recalled "the noise, the clattering, the wooden . . . chairs on the floor screeching."[40] She went on to develop misophonia, a chronic condition where someone experiences a heightened response (sometimes likened to an involuntary fight-or-flight response) to certain repetitive sounds, and she drew a direct connection between this and her neurodivergence.

> Joanne: And I've got misophonia to crisp [chip] packets now, but the—misophonia, I don't know if you know? But—
>
> Isabelle: The kind of sound of them, is it?
>
> Joanne: Yeah, some people get it when they're chewing food. I don't have that, but when people are crackling crisp packets or sweet packets, it's very intense. And there's—you're meant to be eating and then I can tolerate it, it's when it's on a train or something else . . . But that's a neurodivergent thing. Erm, yes, it was horrendous that noise, erm, and—but I wasn't aware of it then. But I just know I would leave early, so I obviously didn't eat.[41]

Ella recalled experiencing a similar "sensory overload" in her primary school dining hall in the late 1990s and early 2000s that she attributed to ADHD.[42] For Ella, this experience at lunchtime resulted in general feelings of fear and anxiety around school food, in addition to what she described as a "phobia of other people being sick"—something that she still has today.

> I remember one incident in . . . year two [second grade] that really sticks with me, and I remember it happening in the dining hall every now and again, someone would puke and I would freak out. Like absolutely freak out. Like have to leave. I can't be in here! And I remember that being a bit of an anxiety about that might happen, because it's a space where there's food and there's lots of kids and there's choking and there's, yeah. And it being a bit of a like, "Oh my god this might happen."[43]

When reflecting on these experiences, Ella highlighted the significance of what she called "the psychology of the dining hall." In sociological literature, the school dining hall has been viewed positively as a space of "social learning" where students learn to build relationships and negotiate conflicts with their peers.[44] These characteristics can present challenges for neurodivergent people, however, when the social and emotional aspect of the dining space is combined with extreme sensory stimulation.

> Ella: I had quite a tumultuous time with that friendship group, and I think maybe that's why dinner [lunch] time felt particularly—like as a source of anxiety or as something that had a real place in the day because of that, like the friendship thing. So, it ended up being a space of conflict and resolution and tears. Because if you'd fallen out at playtime then dinnertime was the next time you'd see each other, or the next time you'd actually speak about what happened. And I feel like I do have some memories of reconciling over a packed lunch. Like, there being conversations with people, and you end up sat next to someone and you would say sorry to each other, and it was very much that space to do that. So, in some ways like reconciling and in other ways continuing a feud.
>
> Isabelle: Yes, yeah. It sounds like quite an emotive space.
>
> Ella: Yeah! I think it was. And then couple that with the fact that it's loud and there's a lot going on and it's like a sensory overload in the space, and then you have to make a decision as to what you eat and then you had to carry your tray, you're all quite like "oh god," a bit at sixes and sevens [feeling confused].[45]

Often, the distress experienced by neurodivergent narrators went beyond their own sensory responses and feelings of "overload." On a number of occasions, narrators recalled their consumption of school meals (and the attendant unpleasant sensory experiences) being enforced by authority figures. Teachers in particular sought to ensure students' conformity with normative behaviors in ways that exacerbated feelings of discomfort and dislocation. Thinking about her early experiences of school meals in 1966 when she was four years old, Joanne recounted,

> And I remember erm, a very—it's stayed with me for years—er, in those days school dinners were, you know, cooked to death. And I remember these horrible—I think they were meant to be green beans. Mush. Cold. And you were meant to eat them before you got your dessert, pudding. And I went to get the pudding because I was hungry, because I couldn't eat them. And this, I still remember, this awful woman—I've got a very good memory—sort of almost, you know, marching me back saying I was being naughty and "you can't have that unless you eat your beans," which were cold and sitting there on the dish. [*Sense of dread in tone.*] I'm also neurodivergent, by the way, so, erm, there was no way I could go there. Erm, and, it put me off for life eating school dinners basically [*laughs*] and particularly green beans! Absolutely.[46]

Joanne reflected more broadly on the impact that this kind of hierarchical system of discipline in school dining spaces could have on neurodivergent people. There was such a stark difference in power and authority between the catering staff serving the food and the children receiving it, as well as the requirement to remain seated and eat different types of food in a particular order. "A lot of neurodivergent people say it's the awful thing making us sit down and eat," she declared. "You must not force people because the fear is there."[47]

Lauren reported similar experiences of school meals at their primary school in the early 2000s. They described being "insulted or possibly kicked" if they attempted to interact with other children at dinnertime and remembered that rather than receiving support, the teachers would punish them, not the students responsible for the bullying. Looking back, Lauren connected this situation with being "undiagnosed autistic" (as well as a difficult home life) and presented a picture of a disciplinary system that did not support neurodivergent children.

> Isabelle: And did you receive any support for any of the bullying that you've described that happened at break times and lunchtimes from any staff members or other students?
>
> Lauren: Not, not really, because the way that I tended to react—'cause again, we're talking undiagnosed autistic with like, just, to put it kindly, a dad with some anger issues as well. Erm. So, my sort of automatic uncontrollable reaction to this kind of thing was largely to scream and hit. So, I ended up getting in all of the trouble instead. [*Laughs wryly.*]
>
> Isabelle: Mm. So, it was quite a one-sided experience of discipline? Or would the other students be disciplined, as well?
>
> Lauren: Not generally, no.[48]

As we saw in the case of Ella, this distressing experience of school discipline during lunchtimes was coupled for Lauren with an unpleasant sensory response to the food itself. When asked what their strongest memories of food at school were, they replied,

> The smell. My primary school really liked just like really lank vegetables. And that, you know that, it's kind of this mashed potato that one hundred percent was instant. Where you can press a fork into it and pick up the fork and the little ice cream scoop of potato would just stick to the fork? [*Laughing*] It's a very vivid memory, that mashed potato.[49]

Indeed, Lauren, drawing on conversations with their mother, attributed the fact they are a "picky eater" to their negative experiences during school meals.

> Yeah, so basically before starting school—this is all my mum's report now—before starting school, I was a really adventurous eater. Like, you know, three-year-olds just eating whatever is presented at like Chinese restaurants and things.
>
> And then after starting school I very quickly became a picky eater, which—what she says, because again, I don't really remember this much—is that, I really, really hated the school dinners, and it kind of flicked something in my brain that was like "this is what all mashed potato is like," "this is what all cabbage is like," where it was just like, "okay, I don't like this food now." And that's it, forever. According to, you know, small child's logic [*laughs*].[50]

Similar sensory regimes were present in home economics classes in secondary school, centering around food and designed to remove control from students in the name of ensuring conformity. The impact of these regimes for neurodivergent students—including the possibility of shaping their relationships with food into adulthood—is clear in the account Joanne gave of a 1970s home economics class.

> Sorry, this just brings a memory. I remember what we called Home Economics. It put me off cooking for life, then. Because it took all the joy away from cooking. You had to measure your pastry [*laughs*] which was, mine was dead by then, you know. Like, twelve—in those [days], we had inches—twelve inches by twelve. "You've got fourteen inches!" [*Mimicking teacher's voice*] I mean, it was like, oh my god, it was like so—it was just a nightmare. It took all the joy away from it![51]

Lauren recalled similar experiences more than thirty years later during "Food Tech" lessons in secondary school, where the teacher required students to calculate their BMI (body mass index) and listed which foods they should and should not eat to maintain an "ideal" weight. For Lauren, these experiences provoked a similar sense of judgment, shame, isolation, and loss of control, particularly because they were unable to put the various rules given by the teacher into effect, as they had no real say in the food they ate at home.

> And yeah, we did BMI calculations, which is a whole thing, like BMI is bad anyway and then applying it to people who are still growing is just ridiculous. Erm, but I kind of got it in my head that like, if I lost weight people would stop picking on me . . . it's kind of hard being told "this is how you need to eat," "this is what is correct," while also not really having much control over what you eat. It's like, it's all very well telling me "oh yeah don't eat too much meat" and things like that, and then going home and being presented with "here is a large amount of meat" . . . And kind of, I don't know, comparing what I was being told about food to the experience of food I think kind of exacerbated a lot of stuff.[52]

There is also evidence of these harmful sensory regimes being reinforced (often unwittingly) by parents of neurodivergent children—even parents who were neurodivergent themselves. This is something that generated considerable feelings of guilt and responsibility later in life for some narrators, such as Joanne. Joanne received an autism diagnosis as an adult, and her eldest child has avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID). They attended primary school in the 1990s, and, as Joanne recalled of their experience,

> Oh my god. So, my eldest in primary school [*pauses*] obviously couldn't eat. Now you're—I just feel still guilty, er, what I put them through. And [*pause*] yeah. [*Sighs*] Erm, [they] just didn't really eat. But of course, they did more chicken nuggets then, in the '90s, erm, it—they didn't allow packed lunches then. I did try. Later on they did. Erm, but at first they didn't. And, yeah, I feel really bad about that [*tone of voice has changed to reflect how Joanne feels*]. So, basically, [they] didn't eat much.[53]

These feelings of parental guilt can be considerably exacerbated by intersectional pressures. For example, neurodivergent children's distressing experiences of school dining spaces were sometimes compounded by the social stigma of free school meals—a service provided to students from low-income families. Joanne provided the following account of her youngest child attending secondary school in the early 2000s and abstaining from eating at lunchtime because of feelings of embarrassment.

> And then my youngest, who always ate a lot, very active, in secondary didn't—wouldn't—eat lunch. And I was quite poor, although I was working, I was on the poverty line, so we got free school meals, but they had to give in the token and stand out. And of course they wouldn't do that. So, they went without. [*Pause*] Yeah, I don't feel good about that at all.[54]

Possibilities for Resistance

For Ella, the feeling that she was fully in control of what she was eating only came in adulthood, once the disciplinary regime of school had been left behind.

> Isabelle: Would you connect that [the feeling that no one understood exactly what she wanted to eat when Ella was at school]—I'm probably leading you here—to your cooking [in later life]?
>
> Ella: One hundred percent. No, one hundred percent. Because if I'm in control and I can produce what I want then it's fine.
>
> Isabelle: Yeah.
>
> Ella: Even my boyfriend now says to me, he's like, if we're going to have a Bolognese—he can make Bolognese and I can make Bolognese, but I make Bolognese in a very specific way, and so if we're having a Bolognese, I want to make it. And he's like "I'll make Bolognese tonight!" and I'm like "I'll do it, I'll do it."
>
> Isabelle: Because you know how you want to do it?
>
> Ella: Yeah, and my sister's the same, and this is not the best phrase probably to use in your research, but she called herself a "Food Nazi" at one point. She was like "I know I am, I'm like a fascist, a food fascist, because I'm very"—well, she's worse than me—"I'm very controlling in the kitchen, very easily stressed, very high maintenance, very like high drama," but enjoys it in a weird way.[55]

Joanne and Lauren both made similar comments in their interviews, stressing that it has only been later in life that they have been able to find pleasure in food because this is when they have had control over ingredients and preparation. Moreover, Lauren linked this directly to their experience of being autistic and "getting into trouble" at school for "not finishing this thing if I don't like it," underscoring once again the ways in which neurodivergent people can find the disciplinary regimes around food at school particularly challenging.

> Joanne: Oh! For me, I don't like it too prescriptive. So, menus, cooking, I like, I like to be creative. So, if I want to put a splash of this in, a splash of that, and see what comes out. Sometimes not good, sometimes—*usually* quite good, I have to say—and creating something different or if I'm in—when I was working of course it was more difficult—and making the effort to do it and seeing people enjoy it is really nice.[56]

> Lauren: Versus, yeah, starting to, deciding I need to make food that tastes good rather than just thinking about "am I getting enough of these various nutrients?" was just a lot more *fun*. And also, just that control as well, 'cause, I don't know—'cause I think autism plays into this as well. The idea of having full control over what you're eating makes food a lot less stressful [*laughing*]. It's like "oh I can't get in trouble for not finishing this thing if I don't like it, I can just put it back in the pan and do something else with it." Or even just chuck it out and start again.[57]

Earlier in this article, we asked whether resistance within school itself might be possible too. Such resistance may have proven especially challenging for neurodivergent students who seem to have been particularly targeted by disciplinary regimes relating to the consumption of food. Yet there are indications from our narrators' interviews that, with the support of sympathetic teachers, they were sometimes able to avoid the distress and feelings of isolation associated with the school dining hall. Ella, for example, recalled a greater degree of flexibility from teachers at primary school in the late 1990s compared with those at secondary. Some teachers were prepared to adapt meals to accommodate her individual needs, such as when she would accidentally leave her lunchbox at home.

> Ella: I've also just remembered there would be weeks when I would say "sandwiches" [in response to being asked by a teacher if she had brought a packed lunch to school or would be eating a school meal] and then I would forget my lunchbox and I'd have to have dinners, but there was space for them to do that. So it was so fluid that actually even though at the time there was less understanding of neurodiversity and if you didn't have a diagnosis there was no kind of—because I kind of slipped under the radar, and as did my sister, because I was academically able, because I was bright and I did well and they knew my family and we had like a nice family situation, and there was never any consideration of maybe this child is anxious or maybe … But as I got older and things got harder and more structured, it definitely showed up more. Primary school was a bit more fluid and a bit easier …

> Isabelle: Could you just leave as well, like when you're done?

> Ella: I think so. Yeah. I think you could. Oh, that's what I was kind of thinking, like even though neurodiversity was less on the radar, the flexibility of school and the kind of the warmth of the school environment and it being very nurturing, I actually found worked with my brain in a way that now I don't think would be the same. Even though teachers are still very nice and kind, the regiment of routines and the—maybe less so in primary actually, but definitely in secondary school, it was just starting to get that way in secondary school when I was at school and I think that's why I found it so much harder when I went up to year seven [sixth grade], I found it so much harder than primary. And yeah. It's just like, even though there was no recognition of the fact that I might have

> ADHD, the certain, there were already like access requirements in place, like just because.[58]

Although Joanne recounted experiencing very harsh responses from teachers in the UK during her time in reception (kindergarten) in 1966–67, she encountered a more flexible, laid-back approach from teachers after moving to the US at the age of five.

> But again, whether it was sensory or food-related, it was a slightly different system in that you were meant to pay a quarter—like 25 cents—for your meal each day, but if you forgot they gave you an emergency packed lunch, which was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich—jam. I *loved* peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I seemed to forget my dinner money a lot [*Isabelle and Joanne laugh*]. I still eat peanut butter. I don't eat the jam so much, but I eat peanut butter every day.[59]

As noted previously, Lisa's experience of being given a xylophone to "bash" at lunchtime when attending primary school in the 1970s instead of being allowed to socialize with her peers can also be understood in this sense. Reflecting back on this experience, Lisa interpreted being given the opportunity to play the xylophone, glockenspiel, or tambourine alone in the hall as an adaptation to her particular sensory needs, and, in hindsight, was something she actually enjoyed.

> I was only allowed to bash things! [*Laughs*] I don't know—I see why now—but back then. But I loved it! . . . I really enjoyed it because I could sort of focus, could hyperfocus on that sort of thing.[60]

In her own professional practice as a teacher of children with additional needs in the 1990s, Joanne developed a range of adaptive techniques to try to make the experience of eating in school more comfortable for neurodivergent students. Having appreciated the difference that a more flexible approach could make, both in her own experience and with her neurodivergent children, Joanne explains,

> I've worked with loads of students and sometimes it's just with ARFID, it's playing with the food, and sensing it and smelling it. And even drawing with it or making pizzas and patterns with it. I've done that with my students in school who couldn't eat. They said they were never going to eat cheese, never going to eat that. "Okay, shall we do a rocket?" And we made a rocket pizza. And they wouldn't eat it then, but they took it home, and the mums said they ate it. You know, it was only, it's—and this was years ago before we had specialists doing it.[61]

Conclusion

Insofar as historians have considered the history of school meals, they have tended to rely on documentary sources that privilege the perspective of the state, school authorities, and teachers. The impact of the school meals service on individuals and groups—particularly marginalized communities such as neurodivergent people—are rarely engaged with in such research. If any conclusions are drawn about the impact of school meals, the service is shown as having been broadly successful in imposing a system of control over the eating and drinking habits of schoolchildren. Responses other than quiet conformity are rarely considered; resistance seems an impossibility.

Oral history offers the potential to provide some insight into the lived experience of those receiving, preparing, and supervising school meals in the past and is particularly important for understanding the experiences of marginalized groups. As we have seen from the four interviews with neurodivergent narrators discussed here, school meals could elicit feelings of fear, anxiety, discomfort and "sensory overload." In some cases, experiences in the school dining hall have profoundly influenced narrators' relationships with food well into adulthood and have played a significant role in their understandings of their own neurodivergence. There were also stories of resentment and resistance—of teachers and peers providing support and understanding, as well as adaptation and alternative spaces for the consumption of food at school, away from the rigidity, noise, and smells of the formal dining hall.

Supporting the telling of these stories required a similar flexibility and preparedness to adapt our established oral history practices as interviewers. We came to the project with the intention of following a semistructured, chronological approach, but soon realized that this did not meet the needs of some of our neurodivergent narrators. Just as the stories shared by our narrators reveal the need for greater fluidity and flexibility in the operation of state-run services like school meals, they also demonstrated the need for greater care and reflection on the structure and conduct of oral history interviews when researchers are working with neurodivergent narrators.

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Notes

1. This project has been ethically approved by the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure as administered by the School of Education. The university's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the university's Ethics Review Procedure across the university. All narrators received an information sheet to provide informed consent. Pseudonyms are used per narrators' requests.
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