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The School Food Plan and the social context of food in schools

Caroline Sarojini Hart 

School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the social context of food practices in primary schools in England based on research conducted in 2013–2014 as part of the Sheffield School Food Project. Drawing on the capability approach, and social quality theory, the theoretical framework informed a research methodology enabling exploration of ways in which food practices are related to developing pupil well-being and building school communities. It was found that complex social processes influence the roles of food in primary schools in England. These processes enhance and diminish the likelihood of pupils consuming balanced meals, drinks and snacks across the school day. Moreover it was found that, in addition to nutritional outcomes, food practices are related to wider aspects of individual well-being and the social culture of schools. A key outcome of the research was the development of the School Food Self-Evaluation Toolbox (SET). The School Food SET and related resources aim to empower children and their school communities by providing a set of tools to support the self-evaluation and development of food practices in schools.

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Introduction

James et al. note, ‘there is a rapidly growing global and public interest in children and food consumption’ (2009, p. 2) and this interest is often linked to health debates and increased concerns about an obesity epidemic. For example, it is now widely recognised that there is a social gradient in health outcomes as a whole with individuals from lower socioeconomic groups being more likely to be adversely affected by malnutrition as well as obesity (Marmot et al., 2010). Indeed, according to Brown et al. (2013, p. 23), ‘child obesity has reached epidemic levels’ and it has been reported that ‘25% of children starting school in the UK are overweight or obese’ (Willis, Potrata, Hunt, & Rudolf, 2012, p. 1). Less attention has been paid to the role of food-related activities in education settings as social practices. On this point, Daniel and Gustafsson remark, ‘the focus remains firmly centred upon what children put into their mouths as opposed to the social context of food and eating’ (2010, p. 268).

In terms of understanding food practices it has been argued that, ‘there is a gap in our knowledge about children’s activities as food consumers in public spaces, and hardly any

CONTACT Caroline Sarojini Hart  c.hart@sheffield.ac.uk

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work explores children's own experiences and perspectives' (James, Kjørholt, & Tingstad, 2009, p. 4). Pike observes, 'it is the discourse of nutrition which legitimises spatial practices within the dining room so that it becomes impossible to think about school dining without thinking of ways in which children might be encouraged to eat more healthily' (2008, pp. 419–420). It was thus important within the research presented here to deepen understandings of pupil experiences of food practices in school spaces including, but not limited to, health and nutrition concerns.

Policy context

There have been changing policy narratives around food in the UK over the last century ranging from health, to financial, democratic and educational discourses on food practices. Policies linking food, education and health raise questions of how responsibility between the individual, family and state is shared regarding food availability, accessibility and choice. There are multiple perspectives on the optimum approach to children and their food choices with some constructing free choice as a necessary part of being a citizen in a socially just democracy. Choices might relate to what is consumed, when, how and with whom, whether a three-course meal served by peers or fast food eaten in the playground. Alternate views emphasise the social role of food manifested by eating together and developing a sense of belonging and fellowship. The most recent policy narrative for school food in England has been driven by the launch of the School Food Plan (Dumbleby & Vincent, 2013; School Food Plan, 2014).

The School Food Plan

In July 2013, in England, the School Food Plan (SFP) was published driven by a focus on health concerns, improving pupils' academic performance in schools and their readiness to learn. The SFP highlights the growing obesity epidemic but also notes:

... this is not just about bodily well-being. A balanced and nutritious diet feeds the mind as well as the body. Many studies have shown that children who eat well perform better at school. There is also evidence that practical cooking and gardening lessons help to develop children's scientific and environmental understanding. (Dumbleby & Vincent, 2013, p. 30)

In light of a significant downward trend in school meal uptake from around 70% in the 1970s to a little over 40% in 2013, and closer to 30% in secondary schools, a key recommendation in the SFP is to increase uptake of school meals nationally (OC&C, 2013). Although most of those children eligible for a means-tested free school meal are registered for the benefit, far fewer actually take a school meal on most days of the week.¹ The main alternative to school meals is home-prepared packed lunches² or purchases from vendors outside of schools. It is difficult to regulate food options for pupils who bring their lunch to school but it is significant that the majority of pupils fall into this sector, namely, choosing not to have a school meal.³ The SFP recommended that, 'free school meals should be extended to all primary school children, starting with the most deprived areas' (Dumbleby & Vincent, 2013, p. 8). In response, since September 2014, primary schools in England have been offering all Foundation, Year 1 and Year 2 (aged 4–7 years) pupils a free school meal, known as Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM), irrespective of family income.⁴

There has been political dissonance in terms of the support for the provision of UIFSM, which effectively constitutes a universal social benefit for all families with children of

4–7 years of age. However, the 2013 commissioned SFP had cross-party support from the major political parties, and the plan extends beyond UIFSM to the development of a whole-school approach to food. This approach entails, for instance, the introduction of new School Food Standards, setting up sustainable breakfast clubs, improving training for the school catering workforce and a recommendation that pupils aged 5–14 years learn about preparing and cooking food as part of the new national curriculum.⁵

The SFP called for the introduction of cooking and learning about food as a statutory part of the new national curriculum from September 2014.⁶ One of the SFP's long-term goals is to enable, 'children to leave school with an appreciation of good food, and the skills they need to feed themselves affordably and well' (Dimbleby & Vincent, 2013, p. 30).⁷

Research aims

The Sheffield School Food Project aimed to develop understanding of the social and institutional context of food practices in primary school settings in England. It also aimed to explore the factors influencing the *capabilities* of primary-aged pupils, parents and staff in relation to school-based eating contexts, policies and practices. The research paradigm remained open with regard to the debates raised in the introduction around the degrees of autonomy and conformity that might be encouraged among pupils regarding food practices. This is due to overriding concerns with Amartya Sen's notion of capability, which at times might necessitate pupil conformity whilst at others may require varying degrees of pupil autonomy. The principal goals of the research were to inform the development of pupil well-being and the social quality of school communities. The work is based on the premise that the conditions which might favour pupil well-being and school development are dynamic and can be enhanced or constrained through individual dispositions, knowledge and skills, social action and environmental settings.

The term 'food practice' is used in this paper to encompass not only school eating habits, but also food policies, attitudes, behaviours, culture and physical environments. Individual practices evolve in a social context and therefore, in seeking to support positive school food practices, it is important to understand established staff, pupil and community-wide food-related behaviours as well as the structures, values, customs and habits that frame them.

The term 'well-being' is used to encompass not only the well-being that individuals achieve, but also the freedom they have to achieve well-being. The latter is framed in terms of an individual's capability, or freedom, to transform resources into ways of living that have value for them. This interpretation of well-being is drawn from Sen's capability approach (CA) (Hart, 2012; Sen, 1992). In the context of school food practices, well-being is thought of in relation to individual, social and learner-related goals.

Methodology

A mixed-methods case study approach was adopted, aiming to capture the subtleties of diverse school contexts. The research method involved a multiple-case design with multiple embedded units of analysis framed within an interpretive paradigm (Yin, 2003).

The ethos behind the research focused on a multi-faceted view of pupil well-being together with the importance of building strong school communities. Thus the research has a value-bias in this respect. Foregrounding enhanced *social quality* and pupil *capability*,

the research was framed by two conceptual strands. Both of these strands were perceived to be significant in developing schools that promote individual flourishing, but which also prepare pupils to participate fully in the social life of their communities. Therefore it was seen as important to think about the ways that school food practices could contribute towards social quality, operationalised in terms of *social cohesion, inclusion, (active) participation* and the overall *social and economic security* of pupils and their families. It was also seen as equally important to think about pupil capability and empowering young people to have the freedom to engage in food practices in ways that support their opportunities for well-being.

Pupil capability refers to an individual's capabilities to act in ways that he/she has reason to value. It is based on Sen's capability approach (Hart, 2012; Sen, 1992). This is different from simply having access to resources or the right to behave in a particular way. It involves the combined impact of resources, pupils' own attributes and their interactions with the social and physical environment. The capability approach highlights the need for supportive individual, social and environmental factors to transform potential resource benefits, such as UIFSM, into tangible individual advantage (Hart, 2012, 2014; Robeyns, 2005).

Sen comments that, 'my work on the capability approach was initiated by my search for a better perspective on individual advantage than can be found in the Rawlsian focus on primary goods' (2009, p. 231). So the capability approach was originally developed to enhance understanding of advantage beyond solely resource-based approaches. Over the last decade or so, the capability approach has been applied in different areas of education, following widespread application of Sen's capability approach in development, welfare economics, philosophy and other disciplines since its inception over 30 years ago. The CA has been further developed in different directions by many scholars, notably Nussbaum (2003, 2005) and advocates and critics of the multiple capability approaches have emerged over the years. Sen notes, 'different aspects of the capability approach have been discussed, extended, used, or criticised by several authors, and as a result the advantages and difficulties of the approach have become more transparent' (Sen, 2006, p. 31).

It cannot be assumed that all individuals will derive the same level of benefit from the equal distribution of resources, for instance, in the form of a free school meal. This is particularly pertinent to note in light of the introduction of UIFSM in England since September 2014. Humans are heterogeneous with different dispositions, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, Bourdieuan concepts of *capital, habitus* and *field* help to illustrate the complex interplay of the individual with his/her environment and concomitant social relations (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). 'The focus on capabilities does not deny the important contribution that resources can make to people's well-being' but it underscores the need to look beyond resources to understand advantage and social justice (Robeyns, 2005, p. 66). Thus in the research, rather than assuming that availability of food resources will lead to well-being achievement among pupils, careful attention is paid to the capability of pupils to make use of the resources on offer.

The CA offers an evaluative space to examine the valued opportunities individuals have to develop their well-being (Gasper & Staveren, 2003; Hart, 2007). There are four components to the evaluative framework developed by Sen including well-being freedom, well-being achievement, agency freedom and agency achievement. Well-being freedom refers to the opportunities an individual has to achieve ways of being and doing they have reason to value, whereas well-being achievement refers to the functionings they actually achieve. Similarly, agency freedom refers to the real opportunities an individual has to achieve goals

that influence other individuals and the wider society, whereas agency achievement refers to the agency actually achieved by an individual as a result of his/her actions (as compared with his/her possibilities for action). So, when thinking about school food practices within Sen's CA framework we have the possibility of considering the *opportunities* individuals have to achieve well-being as well as the actual well-being achieved. This conceptual framework also supports the creation of a methodology for examining the agency that individuals may have in influencing the lives of others, whether, for example, as pupil peers, teachers, parents or catering professionals. This involves examining what individuals are free to do in respect of their well-being and agency but also requires scrutiny of the factors that may constrain an individual's freedoms.

Focus will be given to two criticisms of the CA central to the research presented here, although there is not scope here to delve into detail regarding other criticisms.⁸ The first criticism is the concern that it is difficult to operationalise the CA in practice, particularly in terms of measuring capabilities as compared with the actual ways of being and doing individuals achieve (Kuklys, 2005; Sugden, 1993). The second relevant criticism of Sen's CA is that it is viewed by some as too individualistic without enough regard for wider social concerns, relations and commitments. Although Sen (1999, p. xii) acknowledges that, 'there is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements', this social aspect of the capability approach has been arguably under-theorised to date. Thus in order to develop the conceptualisation of social dimensions of food practices in schools the research also drew upon Social Quality Theory (SQT). Social quality 'requires the empowerment of individuals, the provision of economic security and other resources, the ability to participate in social life, and a shared set of norms and values' (Wallace & Abbott, 2009, p. 117). Gasper, Maesen, Truong, and Walker (2008) have explored theoretically some of the connections between the capability approach (framed as human development) and SQT with a particular emphasis on the human security aspect of development. Here they note the emergence of SQT in the late 1990s as an attempt to reposition social policy on a more even footing with economic, or neo-liberal policy, which was seen to overshadow the significant role of 'the social' in securing the holistic development of society. SQT offered a framework for conceiving social relations and a focus on the contribution of social systems to enhancing well-being. The research presented here draws on SQT in order to operationalise core elements of 'social quality' for the purposes of the empirical investigation and to complement the emphasis on individual capability within the capability approach.

SQT foregrounds the way that individual lives are lived within a 'societal fabric', offering a framework to, 'identify and measure key elements of that fabric, and to develop a correspondingly grounded public policy approach' (Gasper et al. 2008, p. 1). By bringing together the ideas of 'social quality' and 'capability', the Social Quality and Pupil Capability (SQPC) framework was created as part of the conceptualisation of the methodology for this research. The eight key dimensions are summarised in Tables 1 and 2. The SQPC framework informed the research and the School Food Self-Evaluation Toolbox (SET) that was developed as an output from the research (Hart, 2014).

Methods

The study took place in Sheffield, England in a large city with a population of around 550,000 and just over 150 maintained primary schools and academies. At the time of

Table 1. Social quality dimensions of the Social Quality and Pupil Capability Framework.

Social quality dimensions	Description
SQ1: Social cohesion	The extent to which individuals in a school bond as a community. This may include the whole school workforce, parents, governors and other stakeholders. Sharing meals together, whole-school events, celebrations and team science projects can all help to bring the school community together
SQ2: Social participation	The extent to which members of a school community actively engage themselves with others in undertaking particular practices. In relation to food practices, this is not only about eating school meals but extends to, for example, growing and preparing food, designing menus, discussing arrangements for tuck shops, helping in the dining room and learning to cook
SQ3: Social inclusion	The extent to which all individuals feel included in different aspects of school life. Regarding school food, social inclusivity is influenced, for example by seating arrangements and types of food on offer. It also relates to whether practices are socially inclusive, both for pupils having school and home-provided lunches, and across cultural and social groups
SQ4: Socioeconomic security	Socioeconomic security, particularly with reference to pupils and their families or carers. For example, practices that may help include a booking system which enables pupils to book lunches daily rather than weekly, accepting meal payments in cash, as well online, and subsidising lunch where necessary

Source: Hart (2014).

Table 2. Pupil capability dimensions of the Social Quality & Pupil Capability Framework.

Pupil capability dimensions	Description
PC1: Resources	The presence or absence of resources that support pupil capability (agency, empowerment and well-being). This includes, for example, affordable food and drink, staffing levels, seating and equipment such as cutlery and serving implements
PC2: Individual knowledge, skills & dispositions	The individual knowledge, skills and dispositions that may support or hinder pupils' flourishing. For example, this may relate to knowledge about the nutritional value of different foods, experience of trying different foods, skills of reasoning, judgement and skills to use cutlery
PC3: Social context	The kind of social context that may support or hinder pupil capability in contributing to their well-being and agency achievement. This includes, for example, the cultural ethos of the school, the social quality of the school setting (in terms of SQ1–4 listed in Table 1)
PC4: Environmental features	The environmental features that may support or hinder a pupil's capability. For example, whether the physical environment is noisy/quiet, spacious/crowded, warm/cold, whether the school is in an affluent or deprived geographical area

Source: Hart (2014).

the research (2013–2014), average school meal uptake in Sheffield was estimated at around 40.5% for primary and 33% for secondary pupils (Sheffield City Council, 2013, personal communication). It is estimated that around a quarter of those pupils eligible for means-tested free school meals (FSM) in the city were not claiming their entitlement (Taylor Shaw, 2013, personal communication). Sheffield's school meal take-up among paying pupils over the same period reflected the national average, at less than 1 in 3 (OC&C, 2013) with a slight upward trend in the last two years. In consultation with local authority personnel responsible for the local school meals service, and the central catering contract holder, a range of schools was identified for participation in this study. The purposive sample included schools with different socioeconomic intakes, of varying size and offering different types of meal service by a mix of catering providers (in-house caterer, local authority catering contract, independent catering contract). In total 22 primary schools in Sheffield were invited to participate in the research. Two schools

declined to participate due to timing and pressure on other school priorities, creating a total of 20 participating schools across the city. Over 6000 pupils were observed over school lunchtimes in the 20 schools; 90 pupils took part in food-tasting activities and 24 pupils were engaged as pupil researchers during the project.

There were three strands of data collection for the Sheffield Food Project. In this paper data are reported for the first strand of data collection and further findings are reported elsewhere (Hart, 2014). The first strand centred on the lunchtime food service and setting, responding to concerns expressed in the literature that there is ‘a danger of under-estimating the social significance of lunchtimes as “children’s spaces” within the adult-controlled day’ (Daniel & Gustafsson, 2010, p. 265). The second strand involved working with pupils as researchers using a range of participatory techniques to understand their perspectives on school food practices. The third strand of the research involved working with pupils to understand more about how pupils experience food and to explore the ways that different senses can influence individuals’ perceptions of food.

Fieldwork design and operation drew on good practice for research with young children (Biggeri, Ballet, & Comim, 2011; Christensen & James, 2008; Hart, 2012; Hart et al., 2014). Information concerning the research project was sent in writing to prospective schools to discuss with staff, parents, governors, caterers and pupils as appropriate. Voluntary informed written consent was sought from each participating school in advance of fieldwork and informed voluntary verbal consent was also sought from all interview participants (Alderson, 2001). Ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the study with no photographs being taken that identified individual pupils and all schools and individuals remaining anonymous (BERA, 2011; BSA, 2002; ESRC, 2012).⁹

Data-collection methods for the first strand included observation of food preparation in the school kitchens prior to commencement of lunch service, set-up of food service and dining venues, eating and waste disposal areas and lunchtime service itself. Informal semi-structured and unstructured interviews were undertaken with pupils at lunchtime before, during and after dining. Catering staff, lunch supervisors, teaching staff, administrators and senior leaders were also informally interviewed, mainly while undertaking lunchtime duties; visual data collection took place in the form of sketches and photographs and field notes were recorded in notebooks either during or immediately following the interview process. Secondary data were collected from schools, the local authority and the main catering providers (eg menus, booking forms, meal take-up and learning materials). The observations in the school dining areas aimed to deepen understanding beyond the basic school meal-uptake figures collected by local authorities and caterers. They aimed to illuminate the complexity and nuances of the social context and to identify and understand the factors that influence pupils’ food choices, informed by Sen’s notions of well-being and agency.

Findings

There were many ways in which food practices enhanced and constrained social quality and pupil capability. Findings were analysed in relation to each of the eight dimensions of the SQPC Framework and selected examples are given to illustrate. Many practices reflected two or more SQPC dimensions but for clarity just one principal dimension is used in each example presented. Although all participating schools exhibited practices related to the

SQPC framework, at times the activities served to hinder as well as to promote social quality and pupil capabilities. For example, noisy and busy dining environments that constrained relaxed social interactions would fall within the PC4 dimension of the SQPC framework related to the environment. In this case the noise may be an environmental feature that impacts negatively and thus each SQPC dimension captures the full breadth of possible impacts. No school seemed to have achieved both high levels of social quality and high levels of pupil capability across all SQPC framework dimensions, although there were examples of good practice related to one or more dimensions in all of the participating schools.¹⁰

Overview of the school lunch period

A specific lunch break, usually with more than one sitting, was the norm. The lunch break was universally split into playing time and eating time. Pupils generally ate their lunch in year groups organised into sittings. Year groups were regularly rotated, usually with two or three year groups eating at a sitting, but always with younger pupils dining first. Virtually all pupils in the Sheffield School Food Project schools either had a school-prepared lunch or a packed lunch from home with very few going off-site.

There were some school variations in lunchtime food offers with, for example, not all offering more than one main meal choice, only some offering a school packed lunch or extras such as salad, milk or fruit-based drinks. Many pupils were observed, and described ‘navigating’ menus and optional extras (eg bread, salad, drinks) according to their preferences. This behaviour led to diversity in individual pupil food *uptake*. For example, many pupils indicated that they were not keen on fruit and so they tended to opt for the cooked pudding of the day rather than the fruit or yoghurt alternatives (Figure 1). Pupils’ consumption of the different meal components was observed to vary, leading to an imbalance and variety



Figure 1. Example of selective *uptake* of school lunch components.

of food *intake* as well as uptake. For example a pupil might eat all of his/her chips, but none of the peas (Figure 2).

It was observed that serving sizes for extras were often unmonitored leading, for example, to some children taking several pieces of bread. Most schools offered a self-serve salad area but the positioning of the salad trolleys and the items provided varied significantly (Figure 3). Popular items, such as grapes and cucumber, often ran out and were not replenished. Dessert choices were not monitored by schools, local authorities or schools in relation to individual pupils or meal combinations, so it is not known whether there are patterns in choices that individuals or groups make. It was not possible to know whether some individuals, for example, never or always have fruit. Against this complex, nuanced set of food practices, certain behaviours, interactions and resources evidenced the different dimensions of the SQPC framework. Selected examples follow.

SQ1: social cohesion

One example of food practices supporting social cohesion in relation to lunchtime service was associated with the ‘family-style service’ where 6–8 pupils from different year groups shared a lunch table and older pupils were responsible for serving lunch at the table to their peers. It was notable that there was more opportunity for pupil-to-pupil, and adult–pupil conversation about the food options and the choices that individual pupils made in the family-style service. For example, pupils were observed discussing whether to try vegetables and whether they liked the food on offer. Staff circulating the tables, with salad in serving bowls, interacted with pupils encouraging them to try the salad. By comparison the hatch-style service prevalent in many schools consisted of adults questioning pupils about whether they wished to have food items such as ‘jacket or roast’, ‘peas or beans’, ‘pudding or fruit’



Figure 2. Example of discarded lunch illustrating variable food *intake*.

with pupil brief responses consisting of ‘yes’, ‘no’ or nodding and shaking their heads as they moved along the serving hatch.

Another example of food practices supporting social cohesion related to school staff sitting at the same tables as pupils to eat their lunch. This tended to occur most often with the youngest children or on a designated ‘reward’ table rather than throughout the dining room. Pupils overwhelmingly expressed their appreciation of teachers having lunch with them, indicative of the teachers’ contributions to pupil well-being.

Sahota et al. found that, ‘the dining environment emerged as a significant factor in shaping all pupils’ experiences of, and attitudes towards, school dining’ (2013, p. 1277). This finding was echoed in the Sheffield School Food Project. One of the barriers to building social cohesion during school lunch was the design of the long banquet-style tables commonly used, coupled with the tendency for many pupils to bring packed lunches in zipped boxes. The pupils were seated relatively far apart due to the fixed nature of the ‘button’ seating and the zipped lids of the lunch boxes were often propped up, making it impossible for young children to see one another across the table. The physical setting made it difficult to have a conversation and many pupils were observed eating with little interaction with others. Chairs with backs appeared more comfortable and relaxing for children. There were notable differences in quality, appearance and comfort of seating. One school placed laminated ‘animal’ cards on tables to indicate where pupils could find friends from the same class and this helped younger pupils to navigate a large busy dining hall and avoid feeling isolated.

SQ2: social participation

Moss and Petrie (2002) argue for a shift from public service provision that exerts controls and operates through the surveillance of children to one where children’s ‘spaces’ are created



Figure 3. Example of large well-stocked self-service salad trolley.

in partnership with children. There is arguably a thin line between a surveillance culture and one that is built in partnership with pupils. Notwithstanding this point, there are potentially numerous opportunities to support pupils' capabilities for social participation in relation to school lunch, aside from socialising with peers as they eat. There were examples of good practice that offer significant scope for further sharing and developing ideas across schools. In particular, older pupils were observed helping to monitor salad serving and replenishment, monitoring the lunch waste disposal areas, giving out stickers for example for 'healthy eating', 'trying vegetables', 'having a clean plate'.

Pupils also helped to serve food where there was a 'family service'. Some pupils also had roles related to designing the menu displays or providing illustrations for picture menus that were sent home to families in advance of meal bookings. Some pupils were involved in taking the dinner registers to the school office in the morning. Where salad was provided on a self-serve basis, having serving utensils that were not too big made it easier for children to serve by themselves, reducing waste and facilitating active pupil participation.

Regarding parent participation in school food practices, the food in home-prepared lunches was often seen as a potential area of conflict, or at least tension, between schools and their parent community. Some school staff expressed concern that making food 'a battleground' could damage home-school relationships that were important in pursuing other aspects of school policy and practice. There was a sense that schools needed parents to be 'on board' and one individual commented, 'we don't want to dictate to parents'. This illustrates that parent participation in school food practices is inextricably linked to participation in other areas of school life. The challenge of building a school community that promotes a positive food culture may be greater in some areas than others dependent on home-school partnerships more generally.

SQ3: social inclusion

Many schools enable children having packed lunches from home and those having a school lunch to sit together but there were also schools where there were separate tables, and even separate rooms, for pupils dependent on whether or not they had a school lunch. In one school, pupils having lunch were not allowed to have water using the school canteen water jugs and beakers. The reason given was that as they had not paid for a meal they had not contributed toward the staff costs of collecting and washing up their beakers. This exclusive practice potentially diminishes pupils' capabilities and well-being.

Where pupils self-served salad, utensils ranged in size, type and ease of use. Medium to large spoons tended to be easier for younger children to use with springy over-sized tongs, or a lack of utensils, making it hard for children to serve themselves salad. Water was generally provided in plastic jugs with smaller jugs proving easier for young children to use. Many pupils were observed struggling to use the cutlery provided. Only one school offered different sizes of cutlery for children to choose which suited them best.

Some younger pupils noted that whole apples are hard to eat when you have got 'wobbly teeth'. Foods that are 'hard to bite' do not support the inclusion of all pupils since losing teeth is typical in the primary age range. Similarly, whole oranges were perceived by many children to be hard to start off peeling, taking a long time and requiring motor skills which many young children found challenging. Figure 4 shows an example of fruit prepared in a way that makes it more accessible to children (PC1, SQ3), supporting social inclusion.



Figure 4. Individual servings of prepared fruit.

SQ4: socioeconomic security

Pupils gave different reasons for not choosing to have a school lunch but it was common for pupils to say their parents could not afford it. One pupil said, 'I don't have school lunch 'cos there's two of us and me mum can't afford it'. Another said, 'I can have lunch once a week and I have it on a Friday 'cos it's fish 'n chips, but I can't have it all the time 'cos it costs too much'. Many pupils reported that it was cheaper for their parents to make a packed lunch than to pay for school lunches. The other key reason for pupils choosing a packed lunch over a school meal was because they preferred what they had in a packed lunch compared with school meals.

In one school the Bursar reported that she had some parents that were in arrears for payments for school dinners for hundreds of pounds but the school continued to offer school meals to ensure the children did not go hungry. Schools had various systems for recouping outstanding payments for school meals but it was an emotive issue with widespread recognition that many families were struggling. Another school offered free fruit by leaving fruit bowls in the school foyer, offices and outside the lunchroom. They noted that some parents would pick up fruit at the end of the day and put it in their pockets. Staff said they did not mind as long as someone in the family was eating it. One school used the Pupil Premium to top-up the costs of providing school meals using an in-house caterer and to, 'keep the price low but the food quality high'.¹¹

PC1: resources

Resources refer to the goods, services and spaces that have the potential to contribute to pupil capabilities and well-being. Whether resource potential is realised depends on a range of conversion factors. For example, if a pupil is given the resource of a whole orange but cannot peel it (or get help to do so) then he/she will be unable to convert this resource in a way that supports his/her capability and the functioning of being well-nourished.

Pupils in all schools had access to the 'resource' of school meals at lunchtime, although at a cost for those not eligible for free school meals. Lunch service in most schools generally consisted of a choice of hot meals, including a vegetarian choice, with a choice of vegetables and a choice of cooked pudding, fruit or yoghurt. Many schools also offered a cold meal option, called a 'grab bag' or 'cold school lunch'.

Time was a key resource that was limited in all schools. Pupils had limited time for eating and playing at lunchtime and many children preferred to eat quickly, or not eat the whole meal, in order to have more time to play. Time to eat was limited by the need to get many children in and out of dining spaces that could not cater to all pupils at once. The number of sittings was generally two or three and the overall lunch break usually lasted 50–70 min. This trade-off between eating and playing means that the combination of capabilities a child can enjoy is constrained. In other words, by expanding their capability to eat at a leisurely pace they may have to forego the capability of spending time with friends in the playground.

Another set of key resources that impacts on pupil capability relates to the physical setting and furniture. Most schools converted a hall and sometimes classrooms into a dining area for the lunchtime period. A few schools had a dedicated dining room or café. The amount of physical space varied significantly between schools and the spaces between tables varied. Some dining halls were very cramped with little space for adults to circulate between tables and others were more spaced out with plenty of room. Most schools had rows of long tables with integral 'button' seats for six to eight pupils (Figure 5). Two tables were often placed end to end in a banquet-style for 12–16 pupils. Some schools had smaller square, rectangular, hexagonal or octagonal tables for 4–8 pupils. Some schools had a café-style layout with tables for 4–6 pupils and layouts variously supported or constrained pupils' opportunities for relaxing and for social interaction with peers (Figure 6).

In many schools the majority of pupils brought their meals from outside school, mostly prepared at home, but for some they were purchased en route. Meals that were bought on the way to school tended to be sausage rolls, pre-made sandwiches and bread rolls. A wide variety of home-packed lunch items was observed. Parents often influenced the food purchased and the make-up of the lunchbox. Parents usually prepared pupils' packed lunches from home. Crisps, sugary drinks, sweets, cakes, biscuits and chocolate bars were commonplace in many packed lunches from home. Sandwiches and fruit, cucumber, tomatoes and carrot sticks were also common but amounts and combinations appeared to vary within and across schools. There were many examples of packed lunches containing items with 'red traffic light' food labels in terms of high fat, sugar, and salt.¹² There was often little or no fruit or vegetable component in packed lunches although this varied in different schools. Portion sizes varied hugely with, for example, one five-year old having six slices of bread in his packed lunch. On the whole this echoes previous research, which had argued that packed lunches are less nutritionally balanced than school dinners and more likely to contain processed, high salt, high fat items. Indeed, in a study of 1294 children in 89 primary schools



Figure 5. Folding tables and button seating in multi-purpose space.

Evans et al. found that only around 1% of packed lunches met the standards required for school food (2010, p. 977).

Staff resources made a difference to the level of support children received in terms of accessing food, understanding menu choices, food types and trying new dishes. Some staff helped to replenish the salad trolleys and to serve pupils and where this resource did not exist children were less likely to take salad or to eat food that was difficult to cut.

Most schools had specific waste-disposal points situated around the dining room where pupils took their plates or flight trays once they finished eating. Where waste areas were occasionally staffed, the role related mainly to driving efficiency, with supervisors taking the plates and trays from pupils to speed up the process. However, occasionally supervisors were observed talking to pupils about what they were leaving and in some cases encouraging individuals to eat more. Pupil monitors also helped to clear plates and in one school they were observed issuing stickers when pupils had eaten well, tried new foods and show good manners. Coloured tokens were used for a similar purpose. In many schools pupils were observed discarding vast amounts of food and this process was largely unsupervised. In particular, fish fingers, vegetables, whole apples and baked potatoes were often thrown away. Pupils often commented on the texture of food they tried as part of a school meal. Overcooked vegetables, particularly broccoli, were mentioned as being unpalatable. The findings on food resources and waste illustrate the limitations of using school meal uptake as an indicator of pupil well-being and health.

The presentation of food was also significant and it was noted that the position of food and its presentation varied across settings. For example, in many schools fruit was served in whole pieces whereas in others it was chopped into bite-sized pieces and arranged attractively in portion-sized dishes. Importantly, many schools operated menu systems with a



Figure 6. Café-style small tables and chairs with backs.

range of choices of main course and dessert and in order to meet nutritional standards these were generally prepared in two- or three-week cycles. However, there was dissonance with the meal booking systems as these were daily, weekly or half-termly. When meals were booked daily or weekly pupils missed out on the full range of nutritional content recommended by national guidelines (School Food Plan, 2014). Thus infrastructure and administrative resources may impact on pupils' capabilities and well-being potential.

PC2: individual knowledge, skills and dispositions

Pupils' knowledge, skills and dispositions may be viewed as resources. Some children were more knowledgeable than others regarding the food on offer at lunchtime in their school. When asked why they did not have any vegetables on their plate, one child commented, 'because I don't like hot lettuce'. The vegetable they were referring to was cabbage with which that child was not familiar. Another child said quite simply, 'I don't like veg and that's why I don't eat it'. One school lunch manager, in a very multicultural area, described how common foods were not necessarily familiar to all of their parents. They commented how one parent had asked, 'I know what a roast dinner is, but what is a roast chicken sandwich?' indicating that this person was not familiar with this food item. There were numerous occasions during the research when children asked the researcher what an item on their plate was, showing that although children had chosen a main course, or dessert, they did not necessarily know what was in it (for example, cottage or shepherd's pie; lasagne; shortbread). Staff in some schools explained that when they took the lunch register in the morning they would describe the dishes to help children understand what was on offer and some schools had pictures on their menu choices to assist as well.

PC3: social context

The social context of food practices varied between different schools although many schools had a fairly rushed service with low levels of interaction between pupils and school staff (other than caterers and dinner supervisors). Some schools had clear food policies regarding items allowed in packed lunches and well-designated areas for eating. Other schools lacked a clear policy and staff had different perspectives on what was acceptable in terms of food that could be brought in or what their roles entailed in relation to pupils' eating practices. The social context seemed to have an impact on pupils' eating behaviours. For example, some pupils reported that they chose to have packed lunches from home rather than a school meal so they could sit with friends since their school has separate dining areas for school dinners and packed lunches. Although the resource of school meals was available the pupils lacked the capability to convert the resource into a valued functioning, ie a mealtime with friends.

PC4: environmental features

Lunch queues tended to be organised to attempt to minimise the time taken to complete service. Generally, whole year groups were moved into the queue at once and in some schools pupils were summoned in from the playground using a whistle and hand-held cards. Once pupils came in from the playground they often did not remove coats or wash hands before eating. Some schools had coat hooks en route to the lunch area where coats could be hung up and in other cases pupils put their coats on their seats and sat on them. Meals were generally served via a hatch or counter with pupils waiting their turn in a lunch queue, which varied in length from 10–12 pupils to a whole year group or more. Most lunch services had a feeling of a 'fast-food service'. For example, on timing pupils moving across the hatched areas where food was served, it generally averaged 12–20 seconds per pupil for the time taken for staff to pick up a plate at the start of the hatch and to deliver the food-filled plate to the pupil's tray. There was generally little time for options, for example, regarding vegetable choices, to be discussed with pupils.

Cakes, biscuits, tray bakes and similar items were mostly the first dessert option presented and served by caterers. Yoghurt and fruit options tended to be placed at the end of the hatch on a self-serve basis. It may be that choice can be positively influenced by repositioning food options (eg offering fruit before hot dessert), pre-choosing in a less pressured context or offering a half portion of cooked dessert with a half or full portion of fruit. Some schools did offer fruit in addition to cooked dessert but this was rare.

It was found that the provision and physical arrangement of tools and equipment impacted on the flow of pupils in the dining areas and the focus of their attention on food practices. In some schools tables were pre-set with cutlery and water, which meant that pupils could concentrate more on meal choices. Some schools monitored salad replenishment and offered feedback to pupils on packed lunches and at waste-disposal areas, supporting pupil learning. Making space on flight trays by putting cups on tables, for example, makes it possible to serve pupils individual salad pots or soup bowls, helping to boost uptake of vegetables. The positioning of salad trolleys influenced the flow of pupils moving from the main food service area and whether pupils stopped to self-serve salad items.

One of the features that many pupils complained about regarding their dining environment was the noise levels. It was invariably noisy in the large halls often used for lunches

and several staff commented on this feature. Some lunch areas were more crowded than others. In one large school the long banquet-style tables were positioned so close together that pupils' backs were almost touching. This meant that lunchtime supervisors were unable to circulate around the tables. Many pupils asked for help with cutting up food, pouring water, opening packed lunch packets, asking if they could leave the table and so on. The difficulties arising from a crowded environment made it hard for pupils to communicate and to get help. By contrast, one school had its own dedicated dining area with a spacious layout of furniture, tablecloths on each table, small water jugs that children could use easily and variable cutlery sizes to match the pupils' needs. Pupils were able to be much more self-sufficient and in this school parents were able to book to join their children for lunch, again facilitated by the spacious environment.

Research output

The publication *Creating Tools for Practice: Food and the Self-Evaluating School* (Hart, 2014) was devised in light of the research findings. The aim of this free downloadable resource is to offer school communities a set of tools to help evaluate their current food practices, celebrating and sharing their strengths, as well as planning and aspiring to improve food practices as a community.¹³ The School Food Self-Evaluation Toolbox (SET), presented within this resource, is made up of four core areas of practice related to 'People, Preparation, Settings and Service'. These areas of practice were common to all 20 schools in the Sheffield School Food Project. The core area of 'People' refers to all those involved in school food practices. 'Preparation' refers to all the activities and resources that go into preparing for food practices, such as menu planning, budgeting, conversion of a multi-purpose hall into a dining facility and so on. 'Settings' refers to the places and spaces where food practices occur, whether in the dining room, playing field, converted classroom or outdoor picnic benches. Finally, 'Service' refers to all the activities to do with the provision of food and beverages. This might include, for example, serving food from a hatch, self-service areas, staffed waste areas or help with opening packets and cutting up food.

Each of the four core areas is sub-divided into four further sub-sections to help focus attention on 'details that make a difference' (Hart, 2014, p. 26). For each area schools are guided through the eight dimensions of the SQPC Framework with a range of tools to record current achievements and school aspirations around food practices. A summary tool enables schools to plan which of the four core areas to focus upon. Within a chosen core area, schools can highlight particular SQPC dimensions as a focus for school development over a set period of time. A range of tools was developed to support schools with this activity. For example, the School Food Salad Tool offers a checklist of questions to help school communities to enhance pupil capability regarding the salad on offer. The tools show how each question is linked to one or more of the eight SQPC dimensions. Sample questions on the Salad Tool include, 'Do pupils assist peers in serving salad?' (SQ1-3, PC2-3), 'Are salad pieces easy for children to handle and eat?' (SQ3, PC1) and, 'Are salads replenished throughout the lunchtime service?' (PC1).

Discussion and final remarks

Sen describes rationality as ‘the discipline of subjecting one’s choices – of actions as well as objectives, values and priorities – to reasoned scrutiny’ (Sen, 2002, p. 4). If pupils have freedom to choose what they eat then it would seem that the social arrangements of schooling benefit them where they make provision for the development of the discipline of rationality. Sen acknowledges the diversity of reasoning among humans and suggests, ‘it would be a mistake to eliminate that diversity...’ (2002, p. 4). In this sense it is not necessary to create a system where pupils are ‘educated’ to be rational in the same way and to make choices that are deemed to be ‘best’ by others such as nutritionists, government departments or parents. What the capability approach argues for is the opportunity for individuals to develop the capability to be able to exercise rationality, or, in Nussbaum’s terms, ‘practical reason’ (2010). Thereafter the individual is free to make choices that he/she has reason to value. Notwithstanding this, schools and key stakeholders can help to develop social and environmental conditions that support the development of individual aspirations and goals. The conditions may range from being highly restrictive and even coercive to a more laissez-faire approach with significant room for choice and diversity. The latter is often seen to be indicative of a democratic and just society but the question of degrees of freedom is complex where young children are concerned. One of the challenges of working with children is determining which decisions they should be left to make independently and which should be guided or enforced by parents, guardians or the state. At one extreme children would have little or no autonomy and at the other extreme they have substantial autonomy. Available resources may restrict the latter, such that if, for example, there is no endless supply of caramel popcorn then it cannot be eaten. This is where schools have a vital role to play in terms of the policies and practices governing the provision of food and drink in school, its availability and the flexibility for pupils to choose what and how they eat, whether from school, home or off-site vendors.

The School Food SET takes schools through three levels of development, beginning with highlighting good practice across the four core areas and leading to sharing good practice with neighbouring schools. The tool recognises the idiosyncrasies and complexities of school food practices, positioning school communities as the evaluators of current practice and the architects of future development. The concepts of social quality and pupil capability may thus contribute to the longstanding discourses and policies related to school food in England.

Limitations

The findings are limited to a particular time period, one urban geographical area and only included state primary schools. The sample of primary schools is representative of the local authority in which the study was conducted but it cannot be assumed to be representative nationally. Thus the study cannot be said to have statistical generalisability. The focus of the work was to develop and operationalise a theoretical framework, drawing on social quality theory and the capability approach, to explore food practices, pupil well-being and school community development. Further research is needed to evaluate the efficacy and impact of the School Food SET.

Notes

1. Data from OC&C (2013) have been drawn from figures presented in graphical form, p. 3 and p. 8.
2. 'Packed lunch' is a commonly used term in England to refer to a lunch that has been prepared in advance and packaged for transportation.
3. The introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) has changed the statistic on school meal uptake for pupils in this age group (4–7 years) significantly, with early government reports on uptake at around 85% at December 2014.
4. The Children's and Families Act 2014 places a legal duty on all state-funded schools in England, including academies and free schools, to offer a free school lunch to all pupils in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 (4–7 years of age) and to meet new Food Standards where they apply. See <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted>).
5. The fieldwork for the Sheffield School Food Project occurred in the year following the launch of the School Food Plan and in the academic year leading up to the introduction of UIFSM in September 2014. Since September 2014 uptake of school meals in the infant age range (4–7 years) has increased significantly.
6. Further details about the national curriculum in England can be found at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4
7. For further details on the School Food Plan, see <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com>.
8. For more detailed discussion see for example, Hart (2012); Hart, Biggeri, and Babic (2014).
9. Sheffield Hallam University granted ethical approval for this research project.
10. More research is needed to establish an evaluation framework for 'high' social quality or pupil capability in light of the findings. Some observed practices were clearly not supportive of the SQPC dimensions and ultimately each school can identify areas of practice where they aspire to improve. The aim of the School Food SET is to support continuously improved practice in particular contexts without the need to specify an endpoint or specific threshold.
11. The introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals for 4- to 7-year-olds since September 2014 has supported the economic security of families not only with infant-aged children but also potentially in terms of the knock-on effect to older siblings who may be able to have a school lunch more often due to this financial benefit to their parents. This policy was not in place at the time of the research and so it was not possible to evaluate the impact.
12. The Food Standards Agency in England developed food labels with green, amber and red 'traffic light' colours to indicate to consumers at a glance which foods were low, medium or high in certain ingredients such as fat, sugar, saturates and salt (Food Standards Agency, 2007). See <http://www.food.gov.uk>.
13. Available at <http://whatworkswell.schoolfoodplan.com/site/article-files/a97894dd-6ade-475f-9510-ddf2d95cfe57.pdf>

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ORCID

Caroline Sarojini Hart  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3732-5947>

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