

Mapping Influences on School Food Consumption Across Deprivation Levels: Relational Content Analysis of Pupil and School Leadership Perspectives

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Background

- For almost two decades the number of year 6 children living with overweight and obesity has increased to more than one in three by the time children leave primary school. Over the same period, health and diet-related inequalities have widened. Combined, obesity and diet-related inequalities can have substantial impact on individuals, the healthcare system and the economy
- Children consume 30-50% of their total daily energy intake at schools and therefore provide an early opportunity to intervene
- However, preliminary analyses of FixOurFood consumption data (n=5166) reveals a considerable gap between the food mandated by School Food Standards, served by schools and consumed by children
- Reductionist approaches to understand this gap may neglect intangible, difficult to measure, influences on consumption, such as leadership priorities, peer norms and power dynamics
- Consequently, there is a limited understanding of how factors across the whole school system can interact to drive consumption, and whether these factors differ by socioeconomic deprivation

Methods



Qualitative data were collected through focus groups with children (n=21), school leaders (n=21) and data capture forms (n=21).



Schools were categorised by deprivation (based on percentage free school meal eligibility).



Data were (and will continue to be) analysed using relational content analysis.



Preliminary findings

- Individual schools have limited power to change menu options, regardless of catering provider
- Food education can be undermined by the food offered, which can lead children to question the food they are being served
- Government initiatives can have substantial impact on intake of key food groups
- Access to funding in more deprived areas (e.g. pupil premium) can facilitate additional food education and improve consumption
- Small schools can facilitate consumption through reduced queue sizes (and increased eating time) and detailed knowledge of child needs (e.g. those that drink less water or experience stress/anxiety related to lunch time)
- Culture/home food environment can influence the food consumed at school, and openness to new initiatives to improve consumption (e.g. meat-free days)
- Parental encouragement of school meals can stop when free school meals stop

"because we are one small voice within the system it would take all schools, I think, to make those comments [about menu changes]. I've spoken to other school leaders, and they seem to have a similar kind of opinion of the food that's provided." (SL_15)

"[The children] are saying 'Well, we've just been taught about the healthy plate and this isn't quite reflective of that', and the pictures that you show of the meals, the things we try to get children to produce in school... if that looks better than they're getting for their school dinners they have those questions." (SL_15)

"We have... cook outdoors... demonstrating basic skills for life... We run a baking club, that's every Tuesday, pretty much all the year groups through school do that and access that and they learn about baking..."

A lot of that element [additional food education] is funded through our pupil premium funding, because we've got about 40% pupil premium." (SL_13)

"Most of the universal free school meal, parents take it up because it's free. There are a few, what I would say, fussy ones... We've got a lot of Year 5s that have packups." (SL_02)



Interpretation

Caterer influence: External caterers can substantially influence food provision and consumption

Household norms: Initiatives that conflict with food norms outside of school are less likely to succeed

Classroom-canteen dissonance: Children will stop trusting the food served if this differs from the healthy food they are learning about in the classroom

Funding paradox: Children in more deprived areas may access additional education through increased school funding

"[The fruit and vegetable scheme] has made a massive difference because the kids, it's automatic now choosing the fruit... you'll see it today when there's like cake and custard... kids will still choose the melons... the grapes and an apple or a banana out of all those things." (SL_04)

"I'm keeping it [staggering year groups] because then they don't have to queue up for ages in the hall and they all get half an hour outside... it prevents either child just shovelling it [food] in because they want to be first out... Or not eating anything." (SL_02)

"I think because a lot of the kids will have things like dal at home, which is just lentils and chickpeas and they'll have a lot of like cauliflower, you know, aloo gobi and things, and spinach and potato, I don't think they'd miss the meat at all." (SL_04)

Next steps

- Finish content analysis of all focus groups, interviews and capture forms
- Further explore relationships between concepts
- Consider mapping techniques to compare influences between high and low deprivation