Title: Children's social experiences with peers and friends during primary school meal times

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Abstract:
Mealtimes have rarely been considered outside a healthy eating agenda yet may be important social contexts for children's social, emotional and moral development. Little research has examined the social value of time spent in the school lunch room. This study examined the nature of children's interactions, activities and experiences of mealtimes and their perceptions of the value of social experiences during these times. A total of 316 9-10-year-old pupils (53% girls) from 11 classes in 4 schools completed closed response questionnaires and 16 children were subsequently interviewed to provide detailed information about the nature of their mealtime experiences, interactions and activities with peers and how these relate to feelings about school. Findings indicate that most children enjoy mealtimes because of the opportunity it provides to be with and converse with friends and other peers about the issues that are significant to them. These social occasions overlap with playground life but are uniquely different and afford children different social opportunities and activities. The relative freedom offered in these settings are important as a site for peer relations processes and co-construction of peer culture. Findings are discussed in the light of suggestions that mealtimes be managed for social and educational purposes.

Keywords: school mealtimes; peer relations; friendships; school liking

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Introduction

Children's social experiences in school have been a focus of substantial research (Blatchford, Pellegrini & Baines, 2016; Pollard, 1985). Some of this work has concentrated on 'open settings' (times when children get to interact with peers relatively independently of adult direction and control) usually in relation to the playground context (Baines & Blatchford, 2011; Pellegrini, 2005). However little research has examined the social value of time spent in the school lunchroom. Mealtimes have rarely been considered outside a healthy eating agenda yet may be distinctive and powerful social contexts for children's social, emotional and moral development. The simple act of sitting down to eat a meal offers many opportunities for shared social engagement and these times may be particularly important in providing straightforward opportunities to interact and develop relationships with friends and peers. The impact of these opportunities may extend beyond the mealtime itself and contribute to children's wider social development and the development of positive feelings towards school. This paper reports on unique research that aimed to improve understanding of the social experiences of 9 to 10-year old children during school mealtimes.

The social experience of school mealtimes

There has been a high level of interest and debate in the UK about the nature and quality of school mealtimes. However, policy and research in this area has been dominated by issues of nutrition and health. Concerns about poor nutritional quality of school meals following de-regulation of school food provision in the 1980s and about children's nutritional health in general have (Gustafsson, 2002; Pike, 2010) led to the reintroduction of statutory school food standards (Evans & Harper, 2009; Standards for School Food in England, 2014). These have been accompanied by substantial advice for schools about how to improve food quality and the mealtime environment to increase the uptake of healthy school dinners and to reduce consumption of unhealthy packed lunches bought from home(School Food Trust, 2009; All Party Parliamentary Group on School Food, 2016). The introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSMs) for 4 to 7-year olds in 2014 was also primarily intended to serve this aim (Sellen, et al., 2018).

At the same time, research has identified the school dining room as a significant social space (Lalli, 2017) and highlighted the importance of a positive student social 'experience' of the dining room to encourage enjoyment and so the take up of school dinners (Kaklamanou, 2012; Nelson, et al., 2014). Politicians, commentators and practitioners have suggested that school mealtimes may have transformative power by enhancing relationships and school culture beyond as well as within the school dining room. However, they assume a particular idealised form of school mealtimes (Elliott & Hore, 2016) where interactions are guided by adults (Dimbleby & Vincent, 2013; Gove & Laws, 2015) or where children benefit from informal pastoral support from teachers who sit to eat with them (Baker, 2017). Several studies have identified the tensions that often exist between children's priority of spending time with friends during eating times and adult objectives – at school and policy level - to organise healthy, 'well-mannered' eating of a large amount of children in a short amount of time (Daniel & Gustafsson, 2010; Pike 2010; Hart, 2016). Ethnographic studies undertaken in the US (Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995; Thorne, 2005) demonstrate the richness and complexity of the social mealtime experience and focus on explanation of this experience in terms of cultural and structural issues such as the production of gender and ethnic identity and status through mealtime organisation and interaction. But few have sought to understand school mealtimes as daily social events that provide opportunities for children to meet and socialise with friends and to engage in conversations about topics of inherent interest to them or their role in supporting complex social and developmental processes.

Research on family mealtimes

The lack of research on the social implications of school mealtimes contrasts with that on family mealtimes which has highlighted the importance of these occasions for social interaction and social and moral development (Larson, Wiley & Branscomb, 2006). In these settings family members witness and participate in conversations around day-to-day personal, social, moral and emotional issues. Mealtimes regularly involve the recounting of stories; discussion, conflict about and resolution of personal and social problems, moral issues and relationships (Larson, Branscomb, & Wiley, 2006). It is during these mealtimes that ideals, meanings, values, cultural identities are communicated and affirmed, and that social hierarchies and control are enacted. Family mealtimes have been described by Ochs and Shohet (2006) as cultural sites for the 'production of sociality, morality, and local understanding of the world' (p.35) and by Fiese et al. (2006) as 'densely packed' (p.87) and 'multi-layered' (p.87). Studies have identified a relationship between features of mealtime such as communication, affective climate and handling of the discussion of sensitive topics to outcomes such as child well-being and an inclusive or alienated family identity (Bohanek et al., 2009; Fiese et al., 2006). It may be the case that in school, pupils engage in similar types of interactions and activities which may function to enable children to develop and affirm relationships with peers and friends, to establish social structure and as sites for important social activity such as sharing and co-construction of peer culture.

School mealtimes as a distinctive social context?

In line with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) mealtimes can be conceived as a distinct social context nested within the school but qualitatively different from classrooms and playgrounds. These contexts have their own physical constraints, social rules and roles. While mealtimes may share features with the playground context, they may also afford unique opportunities for socialising with peers.

First, mealtimes may contribute to peer relations by bringing children into contact with peers they will not meet on the playground or by preventing them from socialising with others. On the playground children may have different play preferences and so choose not to socialise together in this context but do so during mealtimes. Some primary schools separate out those children that receive a school meal from those that bring a packed lunch and other factors, such as seating plans, mealtime roles for promoting cohesion (Hart, 2016) or behaviour management may also function to constrain children's choice of mealtime partners. This can mean that only certain pupils are 'available' for socialising. Seating arrangements have already been found by others to constrain children's freedom to socialise (Daniel & Gustafsson, 2010; Hart, 2016) but questions remain regarding the extent of overlap in the peers that a child socialises with in the dining room and the playground and how far eating companions are determined by physical and organisational constraints in the lunch room.

Second, as on the playground, school dining environments may be settings where children can find out about each other, where status, reputation and social structure are formed and/or communicated by children during conversation and through informal observation of one another. We know that engaging in playful activity on the playground contributes to the development of friendships and relationships with peers (Blatchford, Baines & Pellegrini, 2003; Blatchford et al., 2016). However, as an environment more likely to promote talk-based interaction than active play, mealtimes may uniquely contribute to friendships and other peer relationships. Mealtimes may afford more substantial opportunities than the playground, for children to swap stories, joke and have fun together, to share attitudes, to provide and receive social support, to manage conflict, and for discussing activities and social and moral issues of importance to them – in short, the sharing and development of child culture.

On the other hand, interactions during mealtimes may be limited by social and physical constraints. Adult regulation of time, interaction and eating may mean that these are rushed affairs offering little more than time for short intermittent conversations. Current concerns about health, obesity and food education has meant that school staff may see mealtimes as opportunities for reinforcing 'positive' eating messages, encouraging table etiquette (Lalli, 2017) and monitoring food intake. But attempts to engineer mealtimes in service of further 'educational' lessons may have the consequence of diminishing the social experience between children (Pike, 2008). This may also be an effect of rushed meals (Turner et al.,1995), an issue which may have recently been exacerbated in some schools by the UIFSMs requirement to provide many more children with cooked dinners in a short amount of time (Sellen et al., 2018).

Thirdly, there may be gender differences in preferences for social partners, activities engaged in, interactions and feelings about the mealtime context. Research on playgrounds indicates that girls tend to prefer to participate in conversation and sedentary activity and often prefer to have an indoor play time (Blatchford, 1998; Pellegrini, 2004). It may be that girls enjoy mealtimes more than boys since it caters to these preferences. Boys on the other hand might prefer to get out onto the playground to engage in their preferred physical activities. On the playground boys appear to socialise with different sections of their peer group depending on the types of games being played (Baines & Blatchford, 2011). A similar pattern may be expected in the dining room and boys may choose to converse with peers that they do not usually play with. On the other hand, on the playground girls tend to form social groups on the basis of friendship and stick with those groups when playing different games (Baines & Blatchford, 2009; George & Browne, 2000). Girls may be more likely to socialise with the same people in the lunchroom and the playground.

The implications of mealtimes beyond the lunchroom
School mealtime social experience may be considered important for its own sake but may also have implications for adjustment to school more generally. One longitudinal study suggested that offering universal free school meals (as opposed to extended entitlement to free school meals) led to increases in attainment compared to matched controls (Kitchen et al., 2013). Similarly, two controlled trials found that changes to food and eating environment led to greater engagement in class after lunchtime (Golley et al., 2010; Storey et al., 2011). These findings may be as much about greater social enjoyment of mealtimes with peers as the meal or the improved mealtime environment. If eating times, like breaktimes, do play an important role in children's relationships and social learning they may also contribute to children's wider feelings about and engagement with school. Indeed, a body of evidence has found positive associations between peer relationships and different measures of school adjustment (e.g. liking for school, sense of belonging) which in turn predict achievement outcomes (Howe, 2010; Libbey, 2004; Ryan & Ladd, 2012). The research presented here therefore also aimed to examine whether enjoyment and experiences of mealtimes are related to feelings about school and learning.

Children's opportunities for social life outside the classroom
The potential importance of the social context of children's mealtimes is magnified by recent concerns about the quality of children's social life and wellbeing (Gray, 2015; Layard & Dunn, 2009; UNICEF, 2007; UNICEF & Ipsos-Mori, 2011). There are indications that opportunities are declining for children to engage in enjoyable face-to-face interaction with peers in 'open settings' both in school and outside of school (Baines & Blatchford, 2019; Blatchford & Baines, 2006; Gill, 2007). These reduced freedoms may have an impact on friendships and relations with peers, on mental health and social development (Guldberg, 2009; Ramstetter, Murray & Garner, 2010; Shaw et al., 2013). As a regular feature of children's school lives, mealtimes may then be one of a few remaining opportunities that children have to engage in sustained conversations with peers about the topics that they value. Given this, the likely

contribution of these times to peer relationships and the development of social skills is all the more significant.

This study

This study examined the nature of children's interactions, activities and experiences of mealtimes and their perceptions of the value of social experiences that take place during these times. The research also examined whether children's conversations and enjoyment of mealtimes are related to feelings about school and learning. We examined whether experiences and preferences varied for children identifying themselves as boys or girls and, since mealtime arrangements may be different relative to the meal type that children opt for, we report on the nature of mealtimes and social experiences across meal type (packed lunch or school dinner).

Method

This cross-sectional descriptive study was carried out with children in Year 5 of primary school. This is an age at which children's social life with peers becomes more central to their lives and important for their social development (Rubin et al., 2010). The study involved children completing questionnaires about their experiences and views on school lunchtimes and a subsample participated in interviews enabling a combination of broad and more detailed insights into children's feelings about, and experiences with peers during, mealtimes.

Participants

Eight primary schools in the south east of England were contacted with a view to involvement in the study. Four schools agreed to participate in the pupil survey and two schools also agreed for us to undertake subsequent interviews with pairs of pupils.

Permission was sought and received from the University Ethics committee to undertake the research and consent letters were sent to parents for the involvement of their children in the study. Pupils were also informed about the research and those interested in taking part completed the questionnaire.

A total of 316 Year 5 pupils (9-10-year-olds) from 11 classes completed questionnaires. 168 (53%) were girls and 148 (47%) were boys. Schools came from varied areas as indicated by the English Indices of Deprivation (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2015): one was an outer London school with local area in the second decile for deprivation (first decile indicates most deprivation); the three others were in another city in the south of England with areas in the third, seventh and eighth deciles for deprivation.

Schools ranged in size with the smallest having 364 pupils on roll and the largest 515 with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. The mean level of free school meals by school (10.24%, SD=5.4) was lower than the national average of 14.5% for primary schools in 2016 (DFE, 2016). Schools had approximately similar proportions of pupils with Special Educational Needs (Mean = 7.2, SD-1.9) and ethnically mixed intakes. The school in outer London had a high level of children with English as an Additional Language (82%) compared to the other schools (<10%).

Eight interviews were undertaken with 16 children (8 boys and 8 girls) in two of the schools. Children were interviewed in same gender friendship pairs because these predominate at this age (Blatchford & Baines, 2010). Two pairs (one male, one female) per school were selected for interview on the basis that they usually ate school dinners together and another two pairs (one male, one female) because they usually ate packed lunches together.

Research tools and procedure

On the day of the research the second author attended the school and spoke to the class about the aims of the research, outlined and distributed the questionnaire for completion.

Questionnaires
Pupil lunchtime questionnaires consisted of 30 questions and aimed to collect information about children's views and experiences of break and mealtimes. The questionnaire asked children to indicate their gender and whether they normally receive a packed lunch or a school dinner, how much children liked break, lunch and eating times and the types of activity they typically engaged in whilst on the playground. They were asked about the type of meal that they had the previous day (packed lunch or school meal); their feelings and social experiences of queuing for food, sitting and eating their food; impressions of others who eat in the same setting; and impressions of their lunch room. Children were also asked about their peer relationships; and liking for school and lessons. Response options included categorical response sets and Likert scales.

Interviews
Prior to undertaking interviews about school lunch eating time, the second author collected information on the nature of meal time organisation, physical arrangements and rules and procedures through informal conversations with school staff. Mealtimes were also informally observed to enhance this understanding. Interviews took place the day after the children had completed the questionnaire. Children were interviewed in friendship pairs to make them more comfortable and so that, having shared eating times, they might spark both recall and reflection on those events and so add richness to data which might not be present in a one-on-one interview. Each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. Children were asked to describe and then reflect on their eating time 'journey' from the end of their lesson through the mealtime experience to the point when they exited the lunchroom and went outside to play. This approach was piloted and further developed to elicit interviewee's recollection of particular events on a specific day and so to provide a concrete basis for more general questioning about the nature of their eating time experiences (MacIntyre & Baines, 2014). To help them express this 'journey' children were asked to use a map of their lunch room to show where they were at various points during the mealtime, who they were with and what had happened, including reports on the topics of conversation they could recall at each stage. The 'journey' was broken down into 1. Entry into the dining room and food collection 2. Journey to seating; seating of self and others; who they sat with 3. Seated time: eating and social interaction 4. Leaving the table; food clearing; exiting the dining room and what they did next. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis
Results from the questionnaire were examined in relation to the explanatory variables of gender (male, female) and meal type (school provided meal, packed lunch). Chi Square tests were used to analyse categorical data and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for continuous data across explanatory variables.

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically (Boyatzis, 1998) by both authors working in collaboration. Codes and themes identified were based on the main issues raised and discussed by participants. Transcripts were shared between the two authors, scrutinised and codes noted in the margin. Coding and themes were then examined by the other author and when differences were encountered these were discussed to build up a more informed perspective of children's experiences and views. Subsequently codes were amalgamated and more substantive overall themes were agreed.

Results
Results from the questionnaire are presented along with analyses by gender and meal type. These findings are combined with interview data to provide a more enriched understanding of children's social experiences of mealtimes.

Mealtime arrangements and type of meals eaten
In two of the schools, children ate packed lunches and school dinners together in the school hall which doubled as a dining room. In the other two they ate in separate rooms. In one of these schools packed lunch eaters ate in their own classrooms while school dinner eaters ate in a large hall with other classes and year groups. In the other, children from different classes ate packed lunches together in a separate hall and had some discretion about arrangement of furniture (benches and chairs) or whether to sit on the floor. As in the other schools, school dinner eaters ate in a hall with other classes and year groups.

Overall only a third of children reported that they usually ate a school meal and majority of children opted to take a packed lunch to school (see Table 1). Girls were more likely to have a packed lunch than boys (73% vs 61% respectively) and boys were significantly more likely than girls to have a school lunch, $\chi^2(316, 1)=4.97, p<.05, \varphi_c.=.03$.

******* Insert Table 1 here*****************

Liking for queuing and eating time
Children reported on their experiences of queuing up to receive their food. Just over 61% of pupils indicated that they had to queue up for their lunch and invariably those children that received packed lunches did not have to queue. The majority of pupils (84%) that queued for their lunch indicated that they felt that the queue was 'too long' and not surprisingly, therefore, a large proportion of students reported that they disliked queuing (64%). Surprisingly over a third of children indicated that they did not mind or even quite liked queuing (36%). This may reflect the fact that most children reported 'queuing with their friends' for the most recent meal time (56%) thus making it a less frustrating and more enjoyable experience.

There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the question about how much children enjoyed the time they 'sit with others to eat their lunch' with more than 80% of children indicating that they liked it or liked it a lot and only 4% indicating that they did not like it (16% remaining neutral). This response did not vary by gender (see Table 2) or meal type. Interestingly, the positive response to enjoyment of sitting with others to eat their lunch, was on average greater than for enjoyment of morning breaktime and nearly as positive as for enjoyment of lunch time play (see Table 2).

Eating time companions
Most children (89%) reported that they had 'sat with' at least one friend to eat their lunch during their last mealtime. Nearly 30% of pupils said they also sat with others from their class that they did not classify as friends. Over a third sat with children from other classes and year groups. Few children reported that they had sat eating their lunch alone and only one child (.3%) indicated that they had sat with an adult. This pattern did not vary according to gender or meal type and children were thus no more likely to sit with their friends if they received a school dinner or packed lunch (see Table 3).

******* Insert Table 3 here*****************

The importance of sitting to eat with friends

Almost all children (91%) reported that they 'liked best to sit with' friends and this did not vary across meal type or gender. Despite the prevalence of sitting with friends, when asked about how *important* it was for them to 'sit with friends', 64% felt that it was 'quite' or 'very important', though nearly 16% felt that it was not very important. The patterns were the same for both boys and girls but different across the two meal contexts (see Table 4). Children in the school meals context in comparison to the packed lunch setting said that it was more important to be with friends, *F(1,314)=8.00, p<.01, η^2=.025)*.

******* Insert Table 4 here*****************

Interview data also highlighted the importance of the lunchtime social experience with friends and peers. The enjoyment of sitting with and talking to friends during eating time was expressed during all the paired interviews by both packed lunch (PL) and school meal (SD) eaters. (Note that the gender and meal type of children interviewed is referred to in brackets at the end of the quote – the researcher is referred to as R: and pupils with pseudonyms).

R: What do you like about the school dinner room?
Gemma: … The space and time we get to talk together. Sometimes we like to talk and eat for a bit longer. (Sch1, Girl, SD)

Joe: It's time to have fun and talk to your friends and relax….
R: Would you like to be able to go out to play earlier?
Joe: Sometimes I would. Sometimes I don't mind 'cause I like staying there with my friends and I like talking a bit without my lunchbox. (Schl1, Boy, PL)

This second quote illustrates the social and conversational nature of school mealtimes. Children also talked about the various tactics they employed to ensure that they can sit with their friends.

R: Is it usually easy to get seated where you want to be?
Ravi: No 'cause we really, really want to be altogether - the boys.

They talk about strategies they use to get from sitting in class to ensure that they are at the front of the lunch queue, allowing them a choice of seats in the dining room:

Sam: ….what we do is get out of our seats like that [demonstrates hovering above seat ready to rush to the front of the queue]. (Schl1, Boys, SD)

Mila: I went here [show walking towards the door] and my friend mimed to me, 'Go and get the packed lunches.' My friend's there [indicates place in corner furthest from the door] and I have to get her lunch too 'cause then we can sit next to each other. She saves the spaces. (Schl 2, Girl, PL)

Some expressed disgruntlement when they were prevented from sitting with their friends.

R: What don't you like about the lunch hall?
Gemma: When you want to sit with your friends and there's hardly any spaces. Sometimes there are two spaces on one table but the dinner staff say you have to split up...
Fia: Sometimes all the tables are full of my friends and a teacher tells me to sit at another table. (Schl 1, Girls, SD)

However, in the following case, the exclusivity of the seating arrangement limited possibilities for interaction with the wider peer group:

R: Were you happy with the places you ended up sitting in yesterday?
Mila: Not really. I would rather have been on the larger table with the others 'cause there's more people and you get to talk about more 'random stuff.'
R: You said earlier you didn't like this little table.
Mila: No. Poppy does though – it's private. (Schl 2, Girls, PL)

An example from these girls demonstrated the possible negative experience of children who do not have access to friends to sit with during eating time which serves to reinforce their sense of exclusion from their wider peer group:

Mila: And yesterday Bella got egg on her apple and everyone was like shouting 'You got egg on your apple' (in a sing-song voice) and she got really cry-y. And she wiped it on her skirt…
R: Where was she sitting?
Mila: Over here [on a table alone].
Poppy: She doesn't really have a lot of friends.
Mila: But everyone was shouting over that; everyone was laughing...
Poppy: And she just got really upset.
Mila: I think someone should actually be friends with Bella because she doesn't actually make friends when she sits [alone]. She doesn't bond with them. Because all her friends have been split up. Like Davey and Eve - they were like her best friends and they're all in different classes. (Note: in this school children ate packed lunches in their classrooms) *(Schl 2, Girls, PL)*

Eating speed: rushing out or waiting for friends
Nearly 70% of children reported that they sometimes or always ate their food quickly in order to get out and play (see Table 5). Boys were more likely than girls to indicate that they ate their food quickly to get outside to play early, $F(1,310)=12.23, p<.01, \eta^2=.04$.

Over 80% of children suggested that they rarely or never ate their food slowly to avoid going outside but girls were more likely than boys to admit to eating slowly so that they did not have to go outside, $F(1,308)=10.65, p<.01, \eta^2=.04$.

******* Insert Table 5 here*****************

Some children also emphasised the need to finish eating to get outside quickly but the majority of interviewees referred to routine behaviour which involved waiting for friends in order to socialise, to keep friends company or to ensure they accompanied each other to shared playground activities.

R: Did you all leave together or at different times?
Tai: We all leave together.
Liam: We normally wait for each other - if someone finishes first we normally wait for the others. (Schl 2, Boys, PL)

Lauren: And Layla and Tammy are already waiting outside [the dining room door].
Sara: And we go and join them and then...
Lauren: And then we would just go and stand there for a minute and say, 'What you doing? Where're you going?' So once we know where they're going – we'd split up and go our separate ways. (Schl 2, Girls, SD)

Mealtime topics of conversation between friends
Topics of conversation between peers during mealtimes were something we only asked about during the interviews. Children were animated in their re-counting of their conversations. Their accounts indicated that talk and interaction covered a range of topics and activities including: interests and popular culture such as discussion of current TV shows; football matches; current console games; the food and exchanging of food, playful food fighting; personal issues or concerns; school related activities, planning and coordinating of subsequent joint activity in the playground or out of school; playful activities (e.g. a race to finish eating; word association games).

The shared mealtime also sometimes seemed to provide a powerful immediate shared experience because of the strong sensory reactions it elicited. Interviewees often spoke about the nature and quality of the food.

Stevie: *We were talking about the food yesterday. About the mashed potato.*
Tom: *Oh yeah. It's lumpy – not very eatable.*
Stevie: *I found a lump on my fork about that big [indicates large lump]. And I had a weird shaped sausage as well.*
Tom: *Yeah the sausages are like really squidgy.*
Stevie: *Mine looked like it had exploded. (Schl 2, Boys, SD)*

Other conversations involved the exchange of information about, or organization of, their involvement in shared experience and culture outside the lunchroom, in school and in the world beyond.

Poppy: *... We talked about the 'X-Factor' and 'Britain's Got Talent.' Samira was saying, 'Do you think Em should have gone out?' And I said, 'Yeah.' And I told Ava that Samira had won the bet because she put in the 4 finalists and she was right. (Schl 1, Girls, PL)*

Lauren: *Lily said, 'What can we play this playtime?' Dina says, 'I don't know.' I join in and say, 'Why don't we play something adventurous like 'It' or 'Run Away'?'*
Sara: *I think I remember then saying, 'No. Let's not play 'It'.' I think that's the sort of things that we talk about. (Schl 1, Girls, SD)*

Peer group conversation was likely to be based on shared interests but this contained the possibility of excluding as well as including individuals. For example, full participation in the following console game discussion depended on experience and possible personal ownership of expensive equipment (not to mention that the game identified is classified as for players over 18 years).

Ravi: *We were talking about X-Box games like 'Call of Duty: Black Ops.' Jamie started it saying, 'Black Ops is cool.' Harrison said he's got it. And then I said, 'I'm getting it' cause I am, for Christmas.' That's it…..*
Sam: *...Harrison was saying, 'Black Ops is amazing. You should get it' [to everyone]. I've played it at his house. (Schl 1, Boys, SD)*

Conversations also incorporated affective elements and demonstrated a degree of closeness between friends, for example where they shared problems, reminisced, engaged in humorous exchanges or swapped food.

Ellie: I was saying a bit about the Christmas play. I was saying some dances need a lot of work. That we might not be ready yet. The teachers are still having to say 'Louder!' and stuff. Because we're doing our performance tonight….
Marnie: I was saying I'm a bit scared because I have a speaking part. (Schl 1, Girls, PL)

Conversations amongst the boys often focused on sporting activities and/or console games but also contained references to humour. Participation in these jokes and funny games may function to build a sense of affiliation and cohesion within the group.

Joe: [After the football talk the conversation] kind of changed to – not our class – but our class football team. Like what positions we play and like who's done the most but we were having a good laugh and making out that it was really good fun and then [in the playground] we played clown football where we were being really silly.
George: …..[During eating time] somebody said, 'Ah George. Do you remember that time that I went to your house and we played clown football on the trampoline?' So I said, 'Oh yeah. Shall we play it at lunch?' And everybody agreed with me so we played it at lunch [playtime]. (Schl1, Boys, PL)

Interactions with other peers
Some of the children expressed a general awareness of the possibilities presented by eating times for interaction with peers outside of their close friendship group.

Mila: (Indicates a two-person table in the classroom.) I think this table is a bit too small. I think you should join it to that one (another larger table). Cause then everyone can interact with everyone. Cause sometimes you'll make new friends on tables. Just sometimes. Like Jess. We weren't fighting but we just didn't interact – Then one day we sat next to each other and we were like friends…. You sort of bond to people. (Schl 2, Girls, PL)

However, there were relatively few examples of children seated and interacting with peers of different gender, age or other children outside their immediate friendship group. This is partly explained by the preference described above for sitting with friends. Other factors such as a gender divide also seemed to be at work. A number of Packed Lunch interviewees (who had a large degree of control over where they sat) explained how boys and girls mainly sat separately in the lunchrooms. Their quotes implied that sitting apart was an unwritten rule and that if they did sit together it was generally because they had to:

R: Do you ever sit with kids who are not in your immediate group of friends?
Liam: Sometimes they just come and sit down [with us] cause they haven't got anywhere to sit.
R: Would that be other boys?
Both: Yeah.
Liam: We don't have girls sitting on our table – cause no one really wants to.
Tai: We split up [into boys and girls]. (Schl 2, Boys, PL)

Available seating in the school dining room sometimes dictated that interviewees sat next to peers of the opposite sex. Interview data highlighted the controversy about having to sit with the opposite sex. In the following example one girl expressed her reservations but was challenged by her friend.

Fia: And we had to sit with the boys from our class – Eeergh! [Because the only free space was on a table with them.]

Gemma: ... They're only human beings! (Spoken as a contradiction to Fia's 'Eeergh!')... I only played with the boys [in the playground after lunch] because they were playing football. (Schl1, Girls, SD)

Instances of cross gender interaction with children outside of seated groups were also described by both school dinner and packed lunch eaters. That is, as children passed each other in the lunchroom, in the queue and between children seated at different tables. Some of the reported interactions appeared positive, some mildly antagonistic and some took a more openly negative style.

Overlap of eating and playground companions

A specific section of the questionnaire was devoted to finding out more about children's friendships. The majority of children (85%) indicated that they felt it was true or probably true that they had lots of friends. Only 5% indicated that it was probably not true. Boys were more likely (Mean=1.42, SD=.84) than girls (Mean=1.74, SD=1.07) to express the view that they had lots of friends, $F(1, 311)= 10.08, p<0.01; \eta^2=.03$.

In completing the questionnaire, children identified up to three people that they often played with on the playground and three people that they often sat with during their mealtime. These questions were asked at the start and end of the questionnaire to discourage repetition of answers. When answers were compared, there was complete non-overlap for 15% of children indicating that they eat with and play with different friends and for 57% of children there was an overlap of one or two children. There was complete overlap for 29% of children (see Table 6). This overlap in mealtime friends and play time friends appears slightly greater for girls than boys with girls more likely to overlap with 2 or more of the children they spent time with at mealtimes.

******* Insert Table 6 here*****************

This pattern was also reflected in the interviews. Most interviewees reported sitting to eat with some friends they later played with and some they did not. Similarity or differences in playground play preferences may influence the extent to which children played with the same friends that they had their mealtime with.

Tom: Normally – we don't play together outside – we play with separate friends.
Stevie: I play with N, someone else called A, L, K, O – people like that who play football all the time.
Tom: I usually play with someone called J, T and T – in same class as us as well. We don't play football - there's basketball over there, there's the adventure [playground].
Stevie: There's the alley to go over to the other playground.
Tom: I'm usually in the adventure [playground] or the basketball pitch.
R: Is it always those groups of friends you play with?
Both: Yeah. (Schl 2, Boys,SD)

Friendship and liking for breaktime and school

In order to examine the possible connections between meal time experiences, friendship and measures of liking of lessons and school, we undertook a number of correlations. Findings indicated that confidence in having lots of friends in school was positively related to enjoyment of break and lunch time play times and eating time (see Table 7). Surprisingly, confidence in having lots of friends was not related to liking of lessons in school or liking of school. However,

enjoyment of sitting with others to eat a meal was positively related (albeit weakly) to greater liking of lessons in school and school liking.

******* Insert Table 7 here*****************

Discussion

This study examined children's views on and experiences of school mealtimes and how these varied by child gender, type of meal received and how these might be related to liking for school. In contrast to previous UK research on social aspects of mealtimes, which focuses more on concerns about organisation, broad context of mealtimes and adult valued outcomes (Daniel & Gustafsson, 2010; Pike, 2010; Elliott & Hore, 2016), this research is original in the extent to which it elicits pupil perspectives on social experience of mealtimes and its perceived importance for relationships with peers. The use of a mixed method approach combines broad findings from the survey of pupils' views with the detailed accounts from the paired mapping interviews to provide a fuller understanding of pupils' views and experiences of mealtimes as time to spend with peers.

Our findings show that these are highly social times which are meaningful for and enjoyed by children and provide important opportunities for pupil interaction and time to discuss the issues that matter to them. These largely conversational opportunities allow for the sharing of children's culture, values, norms and important opportunities to discuss social lessons and to resolve social problems. As such, in addition to offering a period of respite from the intensity of lessons and learning, mealtimes potentially make an important contribution to the development of social skills that can only be learned when engaging with peers as well as to positive feelings about school.

Mealtimes as time to spend with friends and peers

School lunchtime research has highlighted the tension between adult organisation and control of the lunchroom and children's strongly held wish to spend time with their friends while eating (Daniel & Gustafsson, 2010). This study reinforces this suggestion. Children valued mealtimes and in particular the opportunity it provided to spend time with friends. This was highlighted by the lengths that children went to in order to coordinate with each other. This was both in terms of the use of strategies to ensure that they got to stand together in the queue and/or sit with all of their friends and also the coordination or taking leave of each other once they had finished their meal and left the dining room. The frustration expressed when they were prevented from coordinating due to lack of space or adult intervention further speaks to the meaningfulness of this time for children. Our findings show that, although children enjoyed mealtimes and often the food they ate, for them it was the social time that they particularly valued. The experience of eating good food potentially added to an overall positive experience with their friends, whilst food that was less enjoyable became the focus of conversation and joint amusement. Similarly, the fact that an unexpectedly large minority of those who queued for lunch said that they 'did not mind' or even 'quite liked' queuing might be explained by the fact that they were often doing so with friends.

The finding that those who ate school meals were more likely than those who ate packed lunches to say it was important for them to eat with friends may be due to differences in context. In two participating schools the two groups ate separately and children eating packed lunches had more control over where they sat. For example, in one school packed lunch eaters could re-arrange furniture or sit on the floor so that more children could join a group whereas school dinner eaters had to fit into available spaces at tables in a busy hall and so often were required to sit with unknown children. This added challenge made sitting with friends a more salient concern for the school dinner eaters.

As well as offering time to be with friends, mealtimes provided opportunities to develop new relationships and widen social circles and experience. On their previous lunchtime, nearly a third of children in this study had sat to eat with others from their class who they did not count as friends and many sat with children from other classes and year groups. In addition, for a majority of children there was only a partial overlap between those they chose to eat with and those they often played with on the playground. For 15% there was no overlap at all.

Interview data suggested that different playground activity preferences and associated friendship groups might lead children who ate together to then play separately outside. This may be particularly the case for boys for whom there was less overlap between key eating and playground companions. This is consistent with playground research which suggests that boys tend to be part of larger, looser social networks than girls and that playground companions are more likely to vary in relation to games being played. Girls, on the other hand, tend to remain with the same group of friends across games (Baines & Blatchford, 2009). As such, mealtimes may be particularly important for boys in maintaining relationships with friends and others they do not play with on the playground.

However, for many children the possibility to mix with others beyond their existing social circle did not translate into reality. Girls and some boys stuck with the same well-known peers across the two settings. There was a complete overlap of key eating and playground companions for a third of all children and the majority (70%) did not report sitting with classmates other than friends during their previous lunchtime.

School mealtimes, appeared to be important times for nurturing relationships with current friends and less commonly for networking and developing relationships with acquaintances. They were also times when potentially important information about peers is discussed, for example when judgements were formed about who was liked and disliked (see MacIntyre, in preparation).

Mealtimes as contexts for peer relations and peer culture

These Year 5 children's desire to spend this time with friends in the lunchroom is in line with peer relations research and theory which states that friendships assume increased significance in children's lives during later childhood (Rubin et al., 2010; Sullivan, 1953). This significance lies not only in the fact that children seek out the company of their friends and peers more often but that, as on the playground (Blatchford & Baines, 2010; Sluckin, 1981), informal peer contexts can act as engaging and powerful sites for social learning.

Interview data were particularly revealing about the nature of social interactions during mealtimes and children who were interviewed became animated when asked about their interactions in their lunchrooms, reflecting the value they seemed to afford this time. Their reported eating time talk and interaction with friends covered a range of topics and activities. The children's accounts suggest that mealtime conversations were likely to be rich with the kind of relationship and cultural processes identified in ethnographic studies of US school mealtimes (Eder et al., 1995; Thorne, 2005), research on children's peer cultures more generally (Corsaro, 2018) and by family mealtime researchers (Fiese, 2006; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). For example, children may affiliate through exchanging of food, joking, sharing of memories, worries or other intimacies and planning of joint activities; group identities and attitudes may be developed through discussion of specific cultural activities such as console games, current 'trends' like 'Pokémon' or valued TV programmes; status may be established and children excluded through instances of ridicule or teasing. Taken collectively and with repetition over time these types of exchanges are unlikely to be trivial but rather to involve socialisation into and production of the norms and culture of the peer group and wider society (Adler & Adler, 1998; Eder et al., 1995; George & Browne, 2000). And through participation in these interactions, children may learn particular social skills. That is, children may learn how

to endear themselves to friends, how to improve their standing, or not, within their friendship group and the wider peer group through their participation and engagement in activities and conversations during mealtimes. It is also possible that success in this regard will have implications for children's current feelings about school and engagement in the classroom (George & Browne, 2000; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2002) and potentially their broader well-being (Howe, 2010; Parker et al., 2015).

The mealtime may also be an important context for the reinforcement of gender identity and gender stereotypical schema and behaviour (Martin et al., 2018). Some tense interactions seemed to reflect a gender divide of a kind portrayed by Thorne's (1992) notion of 'border work' whereby interactions are used to affirm gender boundaries. In two of the girls' interviews they recounted instances of boys making disparaging comments towards them and children also described an unwritten rule that they should be separate. This separation may mean that conversational socialising during mealtimes leads to exposure to and reinforcement of interests and styles of interaction which Martin et al. note are likely to vary by (although also within) gender.

Mealtime liking and school liking

Our finding that enjoyment of eating with others correlated to a small to moderate extent with measures of break and lunch time liking and self confidence in friendships reflects the social nature of this time. Nevertheless, the finding that eating with others also correlates albeit weakly with liking for lessons and school (more so than confidence in having lots of friends) accords with (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2002) suggestion that social efficacy may generalise to positive feelings about school in general. It may be the enjoyable daily mealtime social experience of interacting with friends (i.e. social processes) rather than simply having friendships at school that is significant for children's attitudes beyond the lunchroom. Although boys were more likely than girls to say that they ate quickly in order to go out to play there was little to suggest that they liked mealtimes any less than girls. However, for the many children, more often boys, who spend little time 'just talking' in the playground (Blatchford et al., 2003; Baines & Blatchford, 2011), mealtimes may offer a particularly conversational environment and so play a distinctive role in their social lives at school. As was evident from the interviews, boys as well as girls, enjoyed engaging in sustained conversations involving humour and fun about topics of common interest and importance to them.

Study implications

While this study has taken an exploratory-descriptive approach to understanding children's lives during mealtimes there are limitations. One limitation is that the social benefits of these informal mealtimes are inferred from children's self-reports. Detailed observations of children's interactions and a systematic study of the link between particular kinds of interactions and children's relationships with one another are needed to better understand this social experience. However, use of children's self-reports via the questionnaire and in-depth interviews fore-fronted children's perspectives and should give pause for thought to those involved in organising school mealtimes and, indeed, other aspects of children's social lives.

Hart (2016) has noted that school mealtime arrangements can be very free or very controlled. The orchestration of seating to support particular social outcomes such as social cohesion across year groups (Hart, 2016) and genders or well-mannered, unrushed, adult-guided conversation (Gove & Laws, 2015) is a tempting approach for dispensing with the negative interactions which can take place during eating times. Indeed, in this study not everyone liked eating times. Nearly 4% of children did not like sitting to eat with others and 16% were neutral about it and perhaps organisational changes might have improved their experience. In our distressing example of children laughing at a girl who dropped food on

herself, our interviewees explained that she had no friends to sit with and so often sat alone. Others felt constrained by furniture and supervisory pressure to maintain throughput of the dining room. There may also be a need to address issues of insufficient time to eat and of noisy and chaotic lunchrooms where children do not want to spend time eating (see Pike & Colquhoun, 2009, for an example).

School staff will want to address these kinds of problems but there are likely to be costs associated with doing this by limiting children's freedom to decide how to socialise and with whom. In the current study, the value of an informal mealtime was reflected in the children's majority enjoyment of this time, particularly as time to spend with friends; in the possible contribution of mealtime conversations to peer culture and relationships; and in children's negotiation of queuing and seating systems to protect this social experience. Given this, rather than eliminating social problems by imposing very formal adult structures on school mealtimes, it may be more appropriate to address them in relatively informal ways which maximise children's freedom and their opportunity 'to understand society and how to live in it' (Babad, 2009).

Conclusion

Although ensuring large numbers of children can eat in a relatively short space of time and often in a limited space can make mealtimes highly pressurised, they appear to be important social times. Findings highlight the complexity and potential importance of school mealtimes for children's social lives: they are similar to family mealtimes in their complexity and in social terms can be rich sites for social processes amongst peers and friends, social and moral problem solving, and potentially, cultural appropriation and construction. Arguably the importance of these occasions is increasing. Evidence that children are spending less time with peers and engaged in play outside of school (Baines & Blatchford, 2019; Gray, 2015) makes these times one of a small handful of contexts where children can meet face to face with friends in an open context where they have control over the topics of conversation and the direction these take. Like school playgrounds (Blatchford et al., 2016), they can therefore be considered sites for special scientific interest as they provide potentially important opportunities for insights into children's behaviour and interactions and the issues that are of central importance to them.

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Table 1. Percentages and number (in brackets) of children reporting the type of meal they normally receive at lunchtime

		Boys	Girls	Total
School dinner		39% (58)	27% (46)	33% (104)
Packed lunch		61% (90)	73% (122)	67% (212)
	Total	47% (148)	53% (168)	100% (316)

Table 2. Children's preferences for break and lunch times whilst on the playground and whilst eating a meal

	Gender					
	Female		Male		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Liking of morning breaktime	3.67	.79	3.80	.87	3.73	.83
Liking of time on the playground at lunchtime	4.21	.79	4.46	.81	4.33	.81
Liking of time spent queuing for lunch	3.98	1.16	3.90	1.23	3.94	1.19
Liking of time spent sitting with others to eat lunch	4.26	.77	4.12	.99	4.19	.88

Note. Responses to these items were on a 1-5 Likert scale, with higher scores indicating more positive preference.

Table 3. Who children reported sitting with relative to meal type

	Meal type		
	School Dinner	**Packed Lunch**	**Total**
With friends	88% (88)	90% (189)	89% (277)
With classmates	25% (25)	32% (67)	30% (92)
With peers from other classes	38% (38)	31% (66)	34% (104)
Alone	5% (5)	3% (7)	4% (12)
Other	2% (2)	.5% (1)	1% (3)
Total	32% (100)	68% (210)	310

Note. Data in this table are based on multiple responses and thus will equal more than 100%.

Table 4. Ratings of the importance of sitting with friends whilst eating lunch in relation to gender and meal type

	Girls		Boys		Total	
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
School Dinner	3.52	1.07	3.48	1.37	3.50_a	1.24
Packed Lunch	3.95	1.07	3.81	1.16	3.89_b	1.11
Total	3.83	1.09	3.68	1.25	3.76	1.17

Note. Responses to this item were on a 1-5 Likert scale. Higher scores indicate more importance. Differing subscripts across lunch type indicate $p<.01$

Table 5. Eating speed relative to child gender

	Gender					
	Female		Male		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I eat quickly so I can go out to play	2.61$_a$	.71	2.95$_b$	.80	2.77	.77
I eat quickly because the food is tasty	2.52	.83	2.58	.90	2.54	.86
I eat slowly so that I don't have to go outside	1.73$_a$	.91	1.40$_b$	.74	1.58	.85
I eat slowly because I don't like the food	1.76	.90	1.70	.88	1.73	.89

Note. Responses to this item were on a 1-4 Likert scale. Higher scores indicate a preference in favour of the activity. Differing subscripts across gender indicate $p<.01$.

Table 6. Percentage and pupil numbers (in brackets) of overlap between eating time friends and playing time friends for both boys and girls

	Overlap between eating and play partners				Total
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**number**
Female	12% (20)	20% (34)	35% (58)	33% (56)	168
Male	18% (26)	28% (42)	31% (46)	23% (34)	148
Total	15% (46)	24% (76)	33% (104)	29% (90)	316

Table 7: Pearson correlations between liking of breaks, lunch play and meal times, friendship confidence and lesson and school liking

	Lunch play liking	Like to sit with others to eat	I feel I have lots of friends	Like all lessons at school	Like school
Breaktime liking	.288**	.273**	.267**	.14*	.14*
Lunch play liking		.235**	.292**	-.02	.02
Like to sit with others to eat			.235**	.20**	.11*
I feel I have lots of friends				.06	.07
I like lessons at school					.55**
I like school?					

Note. *=p<.05; **= p<.01