



Secondary school pupils' food choices around schools in a London borough: Fast food and walls of crisps



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ABSTRACT

The objective was to observe and document food behaviours of secondary school pupils from schools in a London borough. The research design combined a number of methods which included geographic information system (GIS) mapping of food outlets around three schools, systemised observations of food purchasing in those outlets before, during and after school, and focus groups conducted with pupils of those schools to gather their views in respect to those food choices.

Results are summarised under the five 'A's of Access, Availability, Affordability and Acceptability & Attitudes:

Access in that there were concentrations of food outlets around the schools. The majority of pupil food purchases were from newsagents, small local shops and supermarkets of chocolate, crisps (potato chips), fizzy drinks and energy drinks. Availability of fast food and unhealthy options were a feature of the streets surrounding the schools, with 200 m the optimal distance pupils were prepared to walk from and back to school at lunchtime.

Affordability was ensured by the use of a consumer mentality and pupils sought out value for money offers; group purchasing of 'two for one' type offers encouraged this trend. Pupils reported healthy items on sale in school as expensive, and also that food was often sold in smaller portion sizes than that available from external food outlets.

Acceptability and Attitudes, in that school food was not seen as 'cool', queuing for school food was not acceptable but queuing for food from takeaways was not viewed negatively; for younger pupils energy drinks were 'cool'.

In conclusion, pupils recognised that school food was healthier but provided several reasons for not eating in school related to the five 'A's above.

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1. Introduction

Work from the English National Health Observatory in 2012 displayed a relationship between the density of fast food outlets and deprivation by local authority, and found a strong association, with more deprived areas having more fast food outlets per 100,000 population (Public Health Observatories, 2012). Burgoine, Forouhi, Griffin, Wareham, and Monsivais (2014) showed that

exposure to takeaway food outlets was positively associated with consumption of takeaway food; the domains of 'home, at work, and along commuting routes' combined was associated with marginally higher consumption of takeaway food, greater body mass index, and greater odds of obesity. Forsyth, Wall, Larson, Story, and Neumark-Sztainer (2012) demonstrated that living near fast food outlets has an effect on food choice, and this pattern of effect is further emphasized by work on deprived areas where the number of takeaways can be greater and access easier. Concentrations of outlets in deprived or low-income areas reflect a complicated business model where operational and overhead costs are lower (Smith, 2006). At a community level the impact of concentrations of takeaway and fast food outlets are clear: more chronic disease, poorer diet and increases in obesity (Caraher, Lloyd, & Madelin,

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2014; Dunn, Mohr, Wilson, & Wittert, 2011; Ennis, Holt, & Cheater, 2014; Forsyth et al., 2012; Schlosser & Wilson, 2006; Patterson, Risby, & Chan, 2013; Smith, 2006; Winkler & Sinclair, 2008).

Concentrations and use of these outlets around schools is a more contentious issue, and the use of these outlets by school pupils can be dependent on school policies and the location of such outlets close to the schools. Whilst school pupils are unlikely to be consuming the majority of their calories from fast food outlets, there is emerging research which shows that the contribution of such outlets to calorie and sugar intake can be considerable (Burgoine et al., 2014; Ennis et al., 2014; Forsyth et al. 2012; Winkler & Sinclair, 2008). Schlosser and Wilson (2006) talk about fast food being essentially a 'youngster business' with the primary focus on attracting young people. The area around schools, often called the 'school fringe' or 'school foodshed', can be influenced by local policy on fast food concentration and by school policies, which control access to the streets surrounding schools at key times of the day (Burgoine et al., 2014; Caraher et al., 2014).

In previous work we explored the location of fast food outlets around secondary schools and the influence of food availability on food choice (Caraher et al., 2014). The competitive food environment around schools and its links to child health, particularly weight, is an on-going discussion (Forsyth et al., 2012; Patterson et al., 2013). The competitive food environment refers to any food or drink that can be accessed, purchased and consumed on the way to/from school or in school. This can include energy or sugar sweetened drinks, crisps (potato chips), chocolate and sweets (referred to as cold food takeaway) and it can also include hot takeaway food (Dunn et al., 2011; Ennis et al., 2014; Winkler & Sinclair, 2008). Fast food has also been defined as burgers, chips/French fries, fried chicken and mass-produced pizza; we have used the extended description of both hot and cold food takeaway as a guide for this work (Schlosser & Wilson, 2006; Smith, 2006).

What the existing work on exposure to fast food outlets does not explore is the mindset of pupils using the food outlets or observe *how* the food outlets are used. Young people use food products and brands to project a desired identity, to signal their belonging, reinforce friendship and distinctiveness and to judge others (Adamson, Stead, McDermott, & MacKintosh, 2011; Ludvigsen & Sharma, 2004). There is an assumption among young people that food which is prohibited is better tasting (Glassner, 2007; Ludvigsen & Sharma, 2004). Adamson and colleagues noted that for young people and healthy food choices, making the 'wrong' social food choices when with their peers can expose them to ridicule and ostracism (Adamson et al., 2011). What has not been explored, to our knowledge, are the views and behaviours of young people in situ. The issue of attitudes, locality and exposure of secondary school pupils to takeaway outlets around schools is explored in this article. The decision to focus on post-primary schools was based on the knowledge that secondary school pupils, compared to primary school pupils, have more access to food outside of schools (Forsyth et al., 2012; Patterson et al., 2013; Winkler & Sinclair, 2008). This is related to their spending power and their ability to access food on the way to school, during the school day and after school.

The area in which this research took place is one of the 32 London boroughs, and to provide anonymity for the schools and the borough, the following figures have been rounded off. It has a population of 260,000 and a school-going population of 45,000, with 29,000 attending secondary schools. The annual public

health report showed that there was a proliferation of fast food outlets in the boroughs with the highest levels of deprivation. Like a lot of London boroughs it has a mix of deprivation and areas of affluence. The local public health report indicated that nearly half of the residents and 80% of the school pupils come from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities; 150 plus different languages are spoken in the local schools. An estimated 22,000 (36%) children live in poverty in the borough; 36% of children aged 10–11 years old are also either overweight or obese. The area or borough obesity average was 21% for Year 6 pupils (10–11 year olds) with the higher rates above occurring in the deprived east of the borough. Neither local nor national data is collected within secondary schools on the levels of obesity, with the National Child Measurement Programme only operating in primary schools collecting data on pupils in Reception (aged 4–5 years old) and Year 6 (aged 10–11 years old) (Public Health England, 2015).

2. Methods

Multi-methods were used in this research including mapping of food outlets, in-depth observations of pupil behaviour and focus groups with pupils on their attitudes to fast food. The latter perspective constitutes what is called the *emic* perspective which is the insider's view of reality, while the observations and mapping elements constitute an *etic* or external social scientific perspectives on reality (Williams & Vogt, 2011).

The methods adopted were chosen to allow for collection of data on the multiple dimensions of issues surrounding food availability and choice, but also to ensure the validity of such wide-ranging results to the same subject – known as the triangulation of data (Richards, 2005; Szostak, 2012; Williams & Vogt, 2011).

The objectives of the research were:

- To map the location of fast food outlets around secondary schools.
- To observe and document food behaviours of secondary school pupils on the streets around the schools at three designated time points, morning, lunchtime and after school.
- To gather and explore the views of pupils.
- To assess the impact of lunchtime stay-on-site school policies.

The methods encompassed four approaches:

1. Geographic information system (GIS) mapping of local data to produce maps of food outlets in the borough using 200 m, 400 m and 800 m isochrones around schools relative to indices of multiple deprivation. We also mapped the percentage of Year 6 (10–11 year olds/last year of primary school) pupils who were obese. As noted above the data was not available for secondary school pupils.
2. We used the information from the mapping to identify three schools for more detailed mapping work around the schools. Criteria for selection included:
 - Schools which had a clustering of fast food outlets.
 - Higher than average levels of free school meal (FSM) entitlement (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>) as a proxy indicator for deprivation.
 - Evidence of high prevalence of obesity in the local area based.
3. Observation and recording of pupils' activity in food outlets around the three schools. For this we used an observation sheet, along with a map, which were used at three time points –

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