

# Children's humour and the grotesque pleasures in school mealtime socialisation

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## Funding information

This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) granted to the Department of Education, University of Bath, as the ESRC PhD studentship.

## Abstract

In this paper, we argue for two propositions: children are socialised and guided to become competent members of school mealtime community, and children have the capacity to modify and challenge existing practices. We draw on Bakhtin's concepts of the carnivalesque laughter and grotesque realism to illustrate how children use humour to test the boundaries of what is permitted. Children's mealtime interactions foster the development of social skills to subvert and negotiate adult authority and manage unfolding interactions between children and adults. We present findings from a child-centred perspective in a primary school in the United Kingdom.

## KEYWORDS

laughter, primary school, school mealtimes, socialisation, subversion

## INTRODUCTION

Almost every primary school in the United Kingdom has some form of compulsory mealtime, which has not enjoyed the attention it warrants within educational research. In this paper, we emphasise the social nature of school mealtimes from a child-centred view. Arguably, children are socialised into more than the mechanics of eating together; they learn interactional skills and how to communicate, collaborate and navigate noisy multifarious social contexts in a relatively safe way, gaining social experience that extends well beyond the meal hall (Stone, 2020). We focus on the underworld of children's collective laughter in the school mealtime, during which children wield, develop, adapt and play with identities to cope with shifting power relations to manage unfolding events. The decision about what is funny is a moral one, enmeshed in power and not individual and not always good-natured. We explore the significance of grotesque humour as opportunities for children to make strange the world

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of convention and explore contradiction, ambiguity and paradoxes in the adult order. In specific episodes, we analyse children's subversive play and their distortion of adult order with non-verbal communication to escape punishment. In doing so, they release themselves from the dogma of institutional life and examine the world in new ways. We conclude that children experience multiple temporary moments during the school mealtime as they experiment, question, challenge and distort prevailing truths about the adult order and create their own subjective understandings.

## Children and school mealtimes

School mealtimes are less frequently considered outside a healthy eating agenda, but we have argued elsewhere that they are distinctive social contexts where children learn a lot about who they are in relation to the other (Stone, 2020; Stone et al., under review). Baines and MacIntyre (2019) illustrate that school mealtimes are important sites for children's social, emotional and moral development because they afford children different opportunities for peer relation processes and the co-construction of peer culture. The social and educational value of school mealtimes, which relates to how children's socialisation, is performed through the organisation of spaces, as opposed to health education (Metcalf et al., 2011; Pike, 2008, 2010; Ross, 1995; Valentine, 2000). Valentine (2000) and Pike's (2008, 2010) studies have both been valuable in understanding how children are highly regulated, both temporally and spatially within the school mealtime. Pike's (2008, 2010) research considers how the institutional school mealtime carries meanings well beyond the food intake and its nutritional value, influencing children's fields of action, which encourages conformity to convention. Daniel and Gustafsson's (2010) research is significant in conceptualising how children perceive school mealtimes as their limited and precious opportunities for interaction with their friends, amidst adult intrusions, restrictions and constraints. Furthermore, Metcalfe et al., (2011) research considers how school mealtimes govern what children eat as a way of civilising them, but even more significantly, they provide a more nuanced account of how children actively manage identities and social relationships, valuing children as competent social actors.

Family mealtime research offers important insights on social interaction as an arena for food morality (Aronsson & Gottzén, 2011; Ochs et al., 1996; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). According to Ochs and Shohet (2006), family mealtime socialisation dictates cultural expectations, norms, values and feelings about the way practices should be carried out, which highlights how understandings and practices are handed down through generations. On the other hand, children accommodate and reorient to mealtime rules and norms based on their own perceptions, feelings and experiences, creatively making choices about their mealtime interactions. Children negotiate both separateness and belonging as they come to understand, modify and challenge existing mealtime practices, which contributes to their own their own and others' socialisation processes (Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999). In a similar study, Aronsson and Gottzén (2011) used a carnivalesque lens to illustrate the ways in which a sibling can take an adult perspective on food or adopt a child perspective, positioning himself as a young child and playmate for his brother, when negotiating norms on food morality in everyday life. Family mealtime research illustrates how children are competent negotiators and agentic participants, which is relevant to the school mealtime context as children develop and affirm relationships with peers and co-construct a shared scenario.

## The active role of children's participation

Accounts surrounding the research on children have the power to mute children, rendering them silent and invisible (e.g. Lee, 2001). Challenges to adult decisions can be 'seen as nothing but examples

of the incompetent, irrational or ignorant child' (Lee, 2001, p. 46). This presents a dilemma: should children be socialised in relation to existing values or given room to become people in their own right? Focusing on the conflicts that children experience may reveal a disparity between the institutional demands of mealtime and what is important for the child. Moreover, a child may become multiply motivated, that is, whilst they engage in the institutional demands of eating, they contribute to mealtime practice in a variety of ways and have the potential to fulfil their own motives, which may be different from that of adults (Leont'ev, 1978). To support this view, Elkonin (1999, p. 27) argues that 'when a new activity becomes dominant, it does not cancel all previously existing activities: it merely alters their status within the overall system of relations between the child and his surroundings, which thereby become increasingly richer'. Children's relationships with each other and the materiality of the school mealtime may be experienced differently by individual children and thus afford different opportunities for their socialisation (Hedegaard, 2009; Hedegaard et al., 2008).

Children's changing participation in everyday life is a process of altering understandings relative to their situated activity (Hedegaard, 2009), whereby children learn to belong, to do, to become and to experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). New possibilities for children's mealtime socialisation emerge as 'children's competences change, their capacities are restructured and new competences are demanded' (Hedegaard & Fleeer, 2010, p. 150). Institutional practices influence, initiate and restrict children's social relations and become the conditions for their development. The underlying assumption is that children's socialisation takes place in relation to social and material conditions, as well as their changing relationship to everyday settings and institutional collectives. Children's mealtime socialisation is a process that develops as they engage in everyday practices with different institutional expectations and demands. Exploring children's mealtime socialisation from the child's perspective enables an investigation of subversive behaviours or crises, which may be directed towards the mealtime assistants or school rules.

## CARNIVALESQUE LAUGHTER

Carnival is organised based on laughter, which is alien to monolithic seriousness because laughter belongs to the collective body of all the people. Carnavalesque laughter is directed at everyone and is 'directed towards something higher – towards a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 127). When children mock the moral and social mealtime order they elicit non-approval, dialogically engaging with social life, comic spectacle and shared merriment, which creates solidarity against the upholder(s) of the adult order. '[I]n this plane (plane of laughter) one can disrespectfully walk around whole objects; therefore, the back and rear portions of an object (and also its innards, not normally accessible for viewing) assume a special importance' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 23). Humour is the language of the carnival that has the 'power to divide, unite and undermine the normative order, where laughter does not reproduce fear but conveys feelings of strength' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 95). Carnavalesque laughter can be vividly felt as an escape from official ways of living, essentially related to freedom, amusement and a form of renewal.

The carnival and the school mealtime represent a plurality of worlds, where social life converge and cause ambivalence through disruption. Laughter is not an individual reaction or directed at an isolated comic event, but it is laughing at themselves, at the situation and at those who laugh. Bakhtin (1968) writes that 'the carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators' (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 7). If footlights were shone on children's mealtime subversive interactions in the mealtime, the carnival would be destroyed and the double-voiced aspect of children's social development would be lost. Double-voice discourse occurs when

diverse voices interact and struggle against each other and enter a hybrid of constructions. Bakhtin (1981) refers to double-voiced discourse in which two discourses or two responses are fused into one. This means that two intentions are present (official discourse and unofficial discourse), developing a sense of self and depriving adults or officialdom of absolute authority, in a dual form that passes from praise to abuse and back. Bakhtin (1968, p. 426) argues, 'it was, so to speak, the carnivalization of speech, which freed it from the gloomy seriousness of official philosophy as well as from truisms and common place ideas'. These ideas relate to breaking up the hierarchical world to construct new concepts and revise old words, meanings and ideas. Children's carnivalesque mealtime subversions are not a spectacle simply to be seen by people. Children belong to the carnival; they actively live in it (Øksnes, 2008). Belly-shaking laughter is a vital bodily aspect of carnivalesque interactions.

Billig (2005) argues that the less pleasant faces of humour tend to be pushed to one side to accentuate the positives of warm-hearted humour. He asserts that the emergence of this ideological viewpoint stems from people being conceived of as 'autonomous individuals, possessing enduring characteristics of individuality' (Billig, 2005, p. 12). For Billig (2005), ridicule lies at the heart of social life, it is not good-natured, and it is more important than social theorists have assumed. Ridicule is enmeshed with power and the decision about what is funny is a moral one, which can be a darker, less admirable side of laughter. Children develop an understanding of ridicule and laughter so that they can laugh appropriately and understand why others are laughing. Humour and seriousness remain inextricably linked amidst continual movement without a final resting place: 'neither can abolish the other without abolishing itself – or without threatening the social order' (Billig, 2005, p. 243). Likewise, the mocking of authority can help to sustain rather than undermine power relations by validating and confirming who and what is in authority by merit of parody and other mockery.

## GROTESQUE REALISM

In grotesque realism, everything is exaggerated; its principles are degradation, debasement, bringing down to earth, but this has a regenerating force as well as a destructive one. In inverting the normal functioning of order, the 'grotesque creates a different type of humour, one that is designed to shock the sensibilities, to dare the viewer to laugh at vulgar and crass representations of political issues' (Thorogood, 2016, p. 225). Grotesque realism encourages carnivalesque ambivalence that dialogically reconstitutes new ways of thinking and understanding. Laughter unveils the material body and 'liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man over thousands of years; fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power' (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 95).

Grotesque realism captures the ambivalent duplicity of carnivalesque transgressions, not only in vulgar corporeal vitality but also in moral terms. According to Stirling (1997), moral vulgarity was vital to carnivalesque degradation not merely to survive but to thrive upon it. He gives an example of Bakhtinian folk who 'not only picked their nose and farted, but enjoyed doing so' (Stirling, 1997, p. 48). Grotesque realism brings to the fore the importance of corporeal vitality in children's embodied dialogic interactions, where they can enjoy the functions and conditions of the material body. The body is 'thus not limited to individual, atomistic "selves", but is found in the excess and shared grotesqueness of many bodies participating in similar acts' (Thorogood, 2016, p. 222). Grotesque realism holds apparent opposites in unity; if taken literally or seriously, the humour will be destroyed.

Douglas (1966) explores purity and danger to understand the concept of pollution, which she argues is a reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction. She states that what is unclean, disordered or offensive is contingent and socially determined on a shared idea and

not on individual psychology. Something could be considered profane if it is out of place, which symbolically relates to a system of classification in which it does not fit (Douglas, 1966). Defilement offends against order, and 'eliminating it is not a negative movement but a positive effort to organise the environment' (Douglas, 1966, p. 2). School mealtime order positively conforms to a symbolic system of moral norms and values that are upheld by certain social norms and values, which reject ambiguity (Douglas, 1966). However, 'disorder spoils patterns, it also provides the material of pattern', which provides the means to recognise when a person should be praised and when they should be scorned. James (1982, p. 295) argues that children's cultures frequently remain hidden from adults and 'by confusing adult order children create for themselves considerable room for movement within the limits imposed upon them by adult society'. What is perceived as sacred and profane, moral or immoral is context dependent and embodies socially instilled pleasures and fears. Grotesque humour provides children with the means to make strange the world of convention and explore ambiguity within their social worlds.

As shown above, carnivalesque laughter and grotesque realism illustrate that during children's school mealtime interactions, children can gain distance or otherness from the adult world by experimentally objectifying the dominant discourse. Carnavalesque laughter provides the means to unite with others and undermine the school mealtime order, where laughter does not reproduce fear but conveys feelings of strength that can be vividly felt as an escape from official ways of living (Øksnes, 2008). Grotesque realism captures the ambivalent duplicity of transgressive carnivalesque interactions, allowing children to critique social and moral norms and values that are made for them. Jenks (2005, p. 127) asserts that 'it is not a romantic and outmoded plea for us to be led by the "innocent creativity" of children but perhaps a recommendation that we might employ their disruption as a source of critical examination of our dominant means of control'. In the ensuing sections, we illustrate how children exploit carnivalesque laughter for collective unity and subvert the adult authority.

## THE CONTEXT

To illustrate this argument, we turn to empirical material taken from the first author's ethnographic research, situated in a Catholic state primary school in South West England (Stone, 2020). The first author conducted participant observations in a dinner lady role and assisted in menial tasks. The first author observed first-hand everyday life of the school mealtime to become competent in the mealtime practices and pass a threshold of acceptance (Davies, 1999). Our approach allowed close contact with the children to examine their everyday lived experiences, observing emerging interactions from a child-centred perspective. Twenty-five months of field observations were conducted between 2013 and 2017, visiting the school on average 3 days a week. At the time of the research, approximately 197 children attended the school, between ages 4 and 11 years. The mealtime lasts approximately one hour between 12.15 and 13.15 with two sittings. Mealtimes were typically supervised by one or three dinner ladies. The presented data are selected from Year Three; the children are aged between 7 and 8. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the research to replace the names of the school and all participants.

### Subverting the school mealtime order with carnivalesque laughter

Focusing on children's collective laughter, we analyse how a small group of children gain critical distance and negotiate adult mealtime order to manage unfolding events. Bakhtin (1968) recognised

carnival as an act of rebellion and belly-shaking laughter that unites people; laughter is not an individual reaction but is the laughter of all the people and is directed at themselves and those who laugh. Cohen (2011, p. 120) argues, 'laughter can arise in a mock crowning of a symbolic and temporary ruler', which illustrates whose power individuals are taking an oath to uphold and support. The following episode will explore the significance of laughter for children's embodied socialising experiences in the school mealtime. The first author was the participant observer.

**Episode 1:** The boys involved had already rejoiced once in successfully undermining the authorities (Stone et al., under review), which perhaps conveyed a feeling of strength and encouraged the hilarity that ensued.

I am pouring a beaker of water for Leah, when I hear an almighty crash at the next table. All the boys are uncontrollably belly laughing because a whole jug of water has been tipped over and the table and floor are flooded. Immediately, Tom, one of the boys at the end of the table, stands up and puts his hand up, saying to the approaching dinner lady, 'it was my fault'. The seven boys around the table are laughing frantically. Mrs Perkins says nothing to Tom [the boy who took the blame for the incident] and shouts with a shrill tone at Harry, who is laughing hysterically, 'you think it's funny, do you? If you think it's so funny, then you can clean it up'. Harry and Daniel continue to laugh uncontrollably. Tom looks remorseful to Mrs Perkins, but when his head is down, he is laughing with his friends. Mrs Perkins tells Tom and Harry that they can both clear up the table. The other four children leave the flooded table. Daniel moves to an adjacent table to finish his lunch, and the other three boys sit together elsewhere. Tom and Harry mop up the mess, and Mrs Perkins stands with her arms folded and watches, prompting the boys where they have missed bits. Tom and Harry seem to have quite a nice time cleaning up the water, occasionally remarking to each other about how funny it was. When they have finished, Mrs Perkins asks them to find somewhere to sit to finish their meal. Some children in the surrounding area are still intermittently watching and laughing. Harry and Tom go to a table slightly further away, towards someone they know, who greets them, saying how funny it was. The boy on the next table leans over and agrees it was hilarious.

(Participant observation, observation of seven Year Group Three participants, 02/03/2015)

In this episode, there is an uncontrollable aspect of the boys' laughter that temporarily liberates the children from external and internal censorship of the adult order; the liberating effects are the source of its humour (Bakhtin, 1984). It is the laughter itself that liberates, revives, renews and degrades power; it is laughter for laughter's sake, and in this episode, there are moments that could not be contained by the children (Øksnes, 2008). We have interpreted the non-legitimate laughter of the boys as double-voiced, partly speaking to emancipation and partly to oppression. According to Tam (2010, p. 177), 'the spontaneous and elemental nature of laughter is capable of defeating routine and doctrine, as well as the seriousness and abstractness of an oppressive social world'. Designed to elicit non-approval from authority figures, the unofficial laughter emerges in opposition to and because of the positioning of authority. If the mealtime assistant turned a blind eye or subtly communicated compliance, then the carnivalesque purpose of the laughter would be lost (White, 2014).

Tom seriously confesses and then descends into hysteria again, which has a doubling element that is the 'mirror of comedy', reflecting two aspects of one world (Bakhtin, 1968). Tom is the joker who is very much part of the joke, yet his apology seemed to temper Mrs Perkins' response to the situation,

because potentially she interpreted the incident as not being an outright rebellion. Our interpretation is that Tom could appreciate the point of view of Mrs Perkins and navigate the power struggle so that neither of the parties would lose respect in the exchange (Aronsson & Gottzén, 2011). Cohen (2011, p. 121) argues that one strength of carnivalesque laughter is its ability to 'hold multiple and contradictory elements in tension'. Tom's admission of guilt placated Mrs Perkins and facilitated the continuation of the laughter, identifying himself as the carnival king by taking responsibility for the merrymaking. As a result, the boys' playful atmosphere continued as they merrily cleaned up the water, and Mrs Perkins contained the situation, monitoring their every move until relative order was resumed.

It was the boys' laughter and amusement that was out of control, and Mrs Perkins reduced and somewhat stopped it from escalating further but did not extinguish the vitality of laughter (Bakhtin, 1968). In another sense, if Mrs Perkins had attempted to extinguish the laughter, she might have risked losing respect, power and the appearance of being in control if she had not been able to completely stop all the children from laughing. Communal laughter ensued in the area surrounding the table of focus, making it very difficult for Mrs Perkins to identify exactly who was laughing or to punish each and every child. During carnival, all were considered equal, and children participate in much the same way during the school mealtimes as it brings together different year groups for free and familiar contact. Bakhtin (1968, p. 7) argues that 'carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.' The amused children in the surrounding area who are laughing belong to the laughter, creating social community between themselves. Laughter can be used to form and maintain solidarity, at the same time as excluding others who are not in the group (e.g. the dinner ladies), demonstrating that laughter has the power to revive and deny. However, Mrs Perkins' initial interaction with Harry communicates to all the observing children that if they think the incident is funny, there is potential for them to be held accountable, when she says, 'You think it's funny, do you? If you think it's so funny, then you can clean it up'. We have interpreted her statement as an attempt to end the vicarious laughter of the onlookers.

Collective school mealtime laughter creates a temporary comic spectacle to be enjoyed by both interactive participants and spectators, who in some sense swear their allegiance to the laughter in those fleeting moments. This could be seen when not all children heeded Mrs Perkins' warning that laughing could be punishable, as with Harry. At this point, some children curtailed their outbursts, but mutual outspokenness remains as other children continued to laugh and comment to each other and the boys about the hilarity of the incident. These transient moments of carnivalesque humour embrace everyone; children respond to the visceral sociodramatic event and the weakened resolve of the adult order of seriousness. Moreover, when ridiculers are told that their humour is not funny, it redoubles and intensifies their mocking laughter (Billig, 2005). This captures the ambivalence of laughter, which, Bakhtin (1968, p. 12) argues, '...is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding'. Carnivalesque laughter invokes a number of heterogeneous emotions where social and moral norms and values of adult order become permeable and ambivalent. According to Billig (2005, p. 196), 'it is reasonable to assume that, in common with other aspects of language, children will learn through interacting with and intimidating older speakers, particularly adult care-takers'. Mocking laughter is a powerful means to make playful what is officially serious from the adult point of view, which temporarily disrupts the hierarchical distance, fearlessly and freely creating a new orientation to explore and expose the world and lay it bare (Bakhtin, 1981). It also defines solidarity within the group of those who are laughing, which, in this case, is against the upholder of proper order.

Children's carnivalesque mealtime laughter provides an opportunity to stand out from the crowd or to form solidarity with others. The main actors in the initial event can understand and evaluate the adult order. In doing so, they can wield their own power, which is shrouded with laughter, and to 'try on' different identities to cope with the shifting power relations, manage the unfolding event

and facilitate the continuation of laughter. Significantly, laughter is a vital bodily aspect of collective carnivalesque interactions because laughter has the power to demolish hierarchical distance and temporarily free children from those in power. From these outspoken, humorous, embodied socialising experiences children can critique the mealtime authority and expose its weaknesses. In this episode, children expose knowledge that dinner ladies are not as powerful as other adults within this school system and acquire understandings for themselves about social organisation and who they are in relation to others.

Children on the periphery who are less bold or do not want to involve themselves in such risk-taking behaviour have a less intense carnivalesque experience and develop an understanding about shifting power relations from their observation and felt corporeal vitality. The onlookers can take social pleasure in the follies of others and form solidarity by interacting together to subtly mock the mealtime rules and upholders of the official order (dinner ladies). These collective moments are irregular, unforeseen and spontaneous events that are experienced as moments that should not happen. School mealtimes are 'pervaded by talk oriented toward reinforcing what is right and wrong' (Ochs & Shohet, 2006, p. 42), which aims to socialise children into mealtime conventions and moral perspectives through their everyday interactions and through observation of their peers. Hence, children's socialisation occurs in a close interaction between order and chaos, where laughter is a means for children to relate to the world, to touch it, to bring it in close and to experiment with it, forming their own social critique and uncovering what is not easily explainable or changeable.

## School mealtimes and the grotesque body

Children's grotesque humour during school mealtimes distorts, exaggerates and transgresses social boundaries. We interpret the grotesque as a fusion between what is funny and what is frightening: apparent opposites united and held together in the world of ambivalence (Douglas, 1966). Bakhtin's (1968) concept of the grotesque celebrates the functions of the material conditions of the body that contradicts the idea of perfection in its overeating, defecation, belching and farting. Children make natural what is often seen as undesirable, exercising freedom from societal constraints (Cohen, 2011). The carnivalesque reverses the order of the world; in the grotesque, the concept of reversal is applied to the body; the inside becomes the outside, and the outside becomes the inside (Thorogood, 2016). The body is dialogic and symbolic, found in excess and shared because the functions of the body are an integral part of everyday life. School mealtimes signify a contrast with the 'mental' time of classroom lessons because the body can spill over well-defined boundaries with all its grotesque imperfections. For Bakhtin, 'the grotesque life of the body is not a pure negativity but a warning about any system of thought that renders the body either abstract or easily perfectible' (Hitchcock, 1998, p. 85). During class time, children's bodies are constrained in terms of bodily functions, but the mealtime is a whole-body experience where expectations for the body are more tolerant, accepting and even celebrated. The following episode is an interaction around the lunch table between both boys and girls and their use of grotesque humour.

**Episode 2:** Six Year Group Three children are having a game around the table with food. My attention was initially drawn to this table because of their short loud outbursts of laughter, but I had no idea what was causing their laughter, so I hung around to find out. When these children noticed me watching their interactions, they stopped until I looked away again; therefore, I captured this incident by looking busy around the neighbouring tables.



Six children were throwing a piece of pasta to each other around the table today. The pasta was hurled in random directions, falling on the children's food, the table and the floor. Ella picked the pasta up off the floor again and immediately flung it across the table to continue the game. There was a lot of giggling between the children, especially when the pasta landed on their own plate of food. When Mrs Roberts walked close to the table, all the children resumed eating, stopping the game and the laughter. Once she had walked past, Ben squeezed mousse out of his mouth, and the whole table laughed wildly. Ella, who was sitting at the opposite end of the table, squeezed yogurt out of her mouth, causing all the children to laugh again. This continued a couple of times in short intervals between Ella and Ben, and all the children seem very amused.

(Non-participant observation, observation of six Year Group Three participants, 08/04/2013)

In this episode, the children's laughter increases when the pasta landed on someone's plate of food. We have interpreted the children as laughing because the act provokes social and moral values of adult order, which is funny because it infringes on basic adult prohibitions. This is an example of children turning the seriousness of eating into an opportunity for gaiety, where they are aware that throwing food or eating food that has touched the floor is considered unsanitary and unsavoury. Douglas (1966) suggests that polite conventions are an attempt to guard against the dangers of dirt (and disorder), which are not necessarily dangerous. Throwing food around the table and eating possibly contaminated food is an idea that is social and culturally constructed. The interaction shocks normative sensibilities and is grotesque because it threatens the school mealtime conventions of children's expected mealtime comportment.

Children's double-voiced discourse is demonstrated by understanding the sacred seriousness of the social world (shown by their reluctance to be seen by the mealtime assistant or myself) and how it can be entwined with the profane and with comedy (throwing food and eating food that has touched pasta that has been on the floor). The 'carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 123). Grotesque humour invites children to question and challenge the meanings that are made for them and encourages their capacity to make meaning for themselves.

The children's mealtime interactions are a way to temporarily re-create the boundaries and work out the tensions and paradoxes of the official adult world. Children make new meanings using grotesque humour to overcome fear and distaste and renew the ritual of eating together. These carnivalesque experiences and freedoms are not just thoughts about the interrelatedness or the unity of opposites (Bakhtin, 1984); they are concrete sensual experiences of expressing themselves, experimenting with and challenging normative conventions of eating and socialising together. This chimes with Bakhtin's belief that 'new ways of being help people to see alternatives of possibility and justice' (Shield, 2007, p. 104). Children experience multiple temporary moments during the school mealtime to experiment, question and challenge dominant understandings and distort prevailing truths about the adult order to create their own.

For example, Ben and Ella can be seen mocking the normal ritual of eating when they squeeze food out of their mouths, as opposed to ingesting the mousse or yogurt. We have interpreted this as the children's grotesque and ambivalent humour, squeezing excrement out of the mouths. In a field observation between Jack and Oliver, Jack tells Oliver to 'eat that pooh', referring to his lunch (field-note, two participants from Reception, 28/02/2013). Both incidents are examples of what would be commonly rejected as grotesque and undesirable parodies and profanities of carnival humour, which violates societal constraints. The significance of their laughter is that it revives the children from the seriousness of dogma in institutionalised school life. Bakhtin (1968, 1981) wrote about the importance

of incorporating the grotesque into carnival because it can teach us not to take ourselves too seriously, reforming and renewing both personal and institutional relationships. This sentiment is echoed in Shield's (2007, p. 109) research when he argues the grotesque is particularly significant to children's education because it gives them 'permission to bring all of their life experiences to the learning situation'. The school may perceive mealtimes as opportunities for the children to learn the sensibilities, values and orientations of healthy eating habits. However, Hedegaard (2009) argues that the children's orientation is influenced by all the institutions they attend; in relation to the people and practices they participate in with others, a new developmental world can emerge. This means that children can creatively and innovatively use their knowledge and experiences in relation with others to explore alternative possibilities, which may be contradictory to adult desired school mealtime comportment.

The subversive nature of children's interactions illustrates how they can collaborate to observe their surroundings and communicate with each other, whilst playing, to avoid punishments and sanctions. This was seen in the episode when the interacting children used subtle non-verbal communication to warn each other, initially about the researcher's gaze and then about the presence of Mrs Roberts. For example, when children are bound together on a joint enterprise, it unifies the goal and coherence of their actions, where a flick of the eyes in the direction of potential danger can be understood as a warning against an intruding eye (Wenger, 1998). Children are sophisticated social actors who can understand the gaze of others and collaboratively enact a smokescreen, temporarily demonstrating socially appropriate behaviours when the official spotlight of attention is on them. This was seen in the episode when the dinner lady was near their table and all the children quietly ate their lunch and had conversations at low level, until she had passed. This behaviour signifies the children's awareness of breaking moral and social rules about acceptable and appropriate ways of eating together, where they avoid being seen squeezing food out of their mouths and on to their plates. The subtle change in their behaviour illustrates their awareness that they are distorting the adult order of the mealtime ritual. Arguably, this illustrates that children need to be able to understand official school mealtime rules and non-verbal communication before they can collaboratively subvert and avoid punishment. The multimodal nature of children's communication and interactions relates to how children socialise and develop multiple discrete skills to be able to read the abundantly changing mealtime situation and avoid punishment.

Grotesque humour is essential to children's socialisation because it provides opportunities to explore contradiction and ambiguity within the adult world. In doing so, children's grotesque humour threatens polite convention that encodes respect and children's expected mealtime comportment within the normative order (Douglas, 1966). However, the selection of what is inappropriate during the school mealtime is socially dependent and thus relative. In drawing on Bakhtin's (1968) concepts, we have illustrated how the grotesque exaggerates to uncrown the adult order and remove it from untouchable-ness so that social order can be explored and renewed. In uncrowning school mealtime conventions of adult order, children can touch the forbidden, shock each other's sensibilities, thwart the authorities and codes of conduct.

The investigation into children's embodied experiences of grotesque humour brings to the fore the less glamorous aspects of children's endeavours and the regenerative power of their laughter, which might otherwise go unrealised. When using grotesque humour, children do not 'speak or act in guarded, artificial ways that preserve the identities they have carefully constructed – or that have been constructed by others and imposed on them' (Shield, 2007, p. 105). The episode illustrated children-initiated interactions, where it can be speculated that the children did not negotiate the rules of the interaction beforehand or decide who would do what or how they would handle the situation if they were interrupted. This illustrates that children can be sophisticated, reflexive, active agents and a distinctive group in their own right, negotiating, sharing and creating culture with adults and each other (James et al., 1998). Moreover, the grotesque in children's interactions is transient and ambivalent;

children are socialised into these understandings during their ongoing participation in the mealtime (Bakhtin, 1968; Ochs & Shohet, 2006).

## DISCUSSION

In the analyses, we have argued for two propositions that children are socialised and guided to become competent members of school mealtime community and that children have the capacity to modify and challenge existing practices (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). In doing so, children may intentionally or unintentionally contribute to their own and others' socialisation processes. However, these viewpoints are not a dichotomy, and tensions have been recognised as children act in relation to their social situation of development, between the institutional and social demands of the situation (Hedegaard, 2009; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). The composition of alternative perspectives during school mealtimes contributes to children's social construction of knowledge and moral perspectives (Aronsson & Gottzén, 2011; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). Children are socialised into moral and social sensibilities about food and the body and highlight children's competency to use grotesque humour to challenge the meanings that are made for them.

We have revealed that children's carnivalesque laughter has a protective factor that diffuses risk because it is shared and allows children to not understand, to confuse and to not be taken literally, which bypasses straightforward serious engagement (Bakhtin, 1968). The funny aspect of their laughter is that it is not funny (in a normative sense) because it defiles the unassailable normative conventions, creating ambivalent heterogeneous emotions and thrilling laughter. Bakhtin (1968, p.94) asserts that 'laughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth; it cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth which it unveils'. In other words, the grotesque cannot be understood in the logical relational realm, as the humour would be destroyed if it were taken literally or seriously. The grotesque brings to the fore the importance of embodied dialogic interactions, revealing how children can temporarily embody many powerful fleeting moments that violate societal constraints. These socialising experiences of joyful relativity shift and renew social power, which expands children's sense of their own subjectivity (Cohen, 2011).

Interestingly, in her seminal work, *Purity and Danger*, Douglas (1966) argues that polite convention is an attempt to coerce against the dangers of dirt as 'matter out of place'. For example, we analysed an episode where the children were throwing a piece of pasta around the table. It is not the pasta that is dirty, nor the table, but the pasta being somewhere other than on the plate, where it is supposed to be. The game is unhygienic and inappropriate in the eyes of others because mealtime comportment is out of place. Tossing the pasta around the table is a danger to social and moral order, and not because it is dangerous in a bacterial sense. Children can resist adult authority in complex and highly effective ways and interpreted the children as laughing because the act provokes social conventions of the adult order (White, 2014). Within these tensions, children demonstrated double-voiced discourse both by understanding the sacred seriousness of the school mealtime in front of adults and by engaging in profanity for the sake of humour in the children's world (when no one is looking). In doing so, children are combining the lofty with the low to distort prevailing truths about adult comportment, experimenting with the adult world for themselves (Cohen, 2011; White, 2014). Transgressions such as these could be thought of as benign. However, we have argued that grotesque transgressions are significant to children's socialisation because they come to understand that adult or normative social and moral rules are not finite. When children combine the lofty with the low, social and moral rules move away from the normative centralisation of power, the legitimacy of adult knowledge and the understanding of civility as value neutral.

We contribute knowledge of the ways in which children are competent social actors and can transgress the school mealtime discourse with sophistication—not from a position of weakness but from a position of power and for their own humorous grotesque pleasure. This implies that children's mealtime socialisation is an open, active and creative process of interdependence and experimentation with contradiction between the self and other. In consequence, children's socialisation can be double-edged: learning the authoritative discourse of the adults as well as covert ways to disrupt and subvert the established order. Significantly, the capacity to improvise within the adult order and understand how to subvert the solemnity of the official discourse is important in knowing how to interact with others in everyday life. Children push the boundaries, learning how to negotiate power relations and to duck under the radar, when experimenting with local understandings in relation to the social and moral school mealtime order. These findings build upon Metcalfe et al., (2011) school mealtime research, where they explore closely the food discourse that underpin the school meal system and how 'the more powerful have sought to impose ideas of civility upon the less powerful' (Metcalfe et al., 2011, p.387). Similarly, this research supports and contributes to an understanding of how children's peer interactions and socialisation agendas shape the mealtime, which are often independent from those of adults and frequently hidden.

## IN CLOSING

In this article, we have demonstrated that as children respond to each other and the mealtime around them, collective carnivalesque subversions emerge, which are not pre-discussed or planned. Individuals contribute to the emergence of social practice that relates to the social experience of creating frames for thinking and interacting, where perspectives meet and agendas are created together. The spatial configuration and social dynamics around a table vary, which can create safe havens for children to experience the fullness of life, to make imperfect contributions to the polyphonic school mealtime composition. Children's socialisation is a process of thinking and doing, learning through discovery, where children actively acquire problem-solving skills as they interact with the world around them (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These findings reveal how carnivalesque episodes are transient moments that are irregular, unscripted and spontaneous, experienced as moments that should not happen. Grotesque realism transgresses its own limits and is inappropriate in the eyes of some adults precisely because it is not rational, and it escapes adult control (Cohen, 2011). These findings illustrate that children are competent social actors, who have the capacity to demonstrate conformity with the purpose of avoiding attention, so that they can subvert the school mealtime moral and social rules without detection or punishment. The school mealtime setting is an important context in which to learn something new about children's socialisation and employ children's disruptions as a source of critical examination of our normative understandings.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

The research was approved by ESRC and University of Bath's research ethics committee.

## PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Not applicable.

## PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

Not applicable.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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**How to cite this article:** Stone S, Murakami K. Children's humour and the grotesque pleasures in school mealtime socialisation. *Child Soc.* 2021;35:799–812. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12451>