

Children's subversive interactions in the school mealtime

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Abstract

School mealtimes in England are highly orchestrated practices that have a specific temporal order of when and how the meal should be eaten. At the same time, the social conditions of the mealtime offer children opportunities for emergent interactions. In this study, we examine children's non-legitimate voices and the dynamic conflictual nature of children's interactions that are no longer fully governed by the established school mealtime order. To illustrate these ideas, data are drawn from the 5 years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author in a primary school in South West England. The analyses address how children use the school mealtime chronotope as a resource to experiment and challenge predefined rules. Our findings illustrate how children transcend the edges of acceptability and probe social order to form their own social critique and uncovering what is not easily explainable or changeable. As an implication we underline the potential for researching children's socialisation as part of expanding discussions on the significance of school mealtimes.

Keywords

Carnavalesque, dialogism, children's socialisation, school mealtimes, social order, chronotope

Introduction

School mealtimes in England tend to be communal, formalised, structured and confined activities that have a specific temporal order of when and how the meal should be eaten. At the same time, the social conditions of the mealtime offer children opportunities for

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emergent interactions and experimentations. During school mealtimes, children can seize fleeting moments to liberate themselves from dogma and ‘make playful’ a supervised activity. Masked with humour, children can redefine the purpose of mealtimes by transcending the edges of acceptability and imposed order. It is through dialogically engaging, redefining, developing and differing with the discourses of others that one establishes one’s own voice (Bakhtin, 1984; Duncan and Tarulli, 2003). In this article, we will highlight that children use carnivalesque subversions to explore and objectify the authority of the school mealtime social order. In so doing, they can achieve a critical distance from the mealtime authority to actively distinguish between their own authority and the authority of others (Bakhtin, 1968; 1981). This critical distance is crucial for children’s social development to gain self-understanding in relation to others and explore alternative possibilities in their social situations. Thus, children experience multiple mealtime moments to experiment, question and challenge dominant understandings; distort prevailing truths about social order and create their own understandings, experiences and knowledge of how to monopolise and gain advantage over the school mealtime order.

Children’s school mealtime

School meals in the United Kingdom are typically eaten in purpose-built dining halls or multipurpose halls that have many other functions for school life, such as assemblies, physical exercise, drama or music performances (Pike, 2010). Mealtime rules and expectations are communicated in varying degrees of explicit and lore understandings by the adults in the mealtime practice. It is implicitly communicated that children will sit on chairs at the table, eat with cutlery, eat their food in a particular order and make polite quiet conversation with other table members and within an allotted time (Douglas and Nicod, 1974; Fiese et al., 2006). Dinner ladies¹ support children by providing guidance, for instance, in how to hold and use their knives and forks, whereby ‘children can make connections between what they already know and what they must learn to handle in a new situation’ (Rogoff, 1990, p. 66). Significantly, children are embedded in the processes and practices of a highly orchestrated mealtime structure, which allows a large number of children to be fed under limited time and space pressures. However, school mealtimes are not just about children following the rules and routines and eating a meal. Daniel and Gustafsson (2010) argue that children valued social connection with friends to play and talk together more than the food they were eating. Baines and MacIntyre argue that school mealtimes are opportunities ‘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’ (Baines & MacIntyre, 2019, p. 4).

There are inherent tensions in children’s mealtime socialisation as they relate to different aspects of the adult-controlled mealtime order and the multiplicity of meaning-making in their peer-produced worlds. Children have different ideas and agendas, and it is precisely the interplay between children’s differing perspectives and those of dinner ladies which creates conflicts, struggles and negotiation. We draw upon Bakhtin’s idea that the

social world is characterised by the enduring, inevitable struggle of differing ideological viewpoints and unmerged voices, which complicates the idea of a unified cooperative social order (1981). While we do not deny that children's socialisation involves negotiation and appropriation of common meanings, it seems equally undeniable that children's socialisation is striated by difference and discord that complicates a shared interpretation of the school mealtime scenario (Duncan and Tarulli, 2003). In the dynamic process of interdependence, children's interactions are interwoven with the mealtime context and form the fabric of meaning in which social interactions are embedded (Rogoff, 1990). Our intention is to explore children's subversions of the school mealtime order and to understand how these interactions inform their social development.

Carnavalesque

Bakhtin (1968; 1981) has written extensively about comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Bakhtin (1968) describes a carnival as a special condition that is organised on the basis of laughter and represents a second life for people to enter into some sense of freedom, equality and abundance. Significantly, Bakhtin writes 'no rest period or breathing spell can be rendered festive per se; something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension' (1968, p. 9). To gain a sense of children's interactions that are informed by carnivalesque, we need to explore beyond children's routine action and behaviours in the mealtime.

The underlying idea was that the carnival spirit was the eternally incomplete, unfinished nature of being, the very act of becoming and growth that creates change and renewal (Bakhtin, 1968). Bakhtin distinguishes between two discourses (authoritative and internally persuasive) when he discusses the process of ideological becoming. The officialdom of the school mealtime normative order is given and is similar to the authoritative discourse because 'it demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342), whereas an internally persuasive discourse opens up new possibilities between one's own discourse and the discourse of others (Bakhtin, 1981). In other words, ideological becoming refers to the process of children making discourse initially received by others their own, without necessarily coinciding. In doing so, they actively establish their own voice by redefining, differing and developing the discourse of others (Duncan and Tarulli, 2003). When children are explicitly told and participate in the regime of the mealtime, they are also working out the unspoken social rules and expectations of the adults and their peers to become appropriate social actors in the mealtime. Carnavalesque eruptions can occur when there is a disparity between what the adults are saying and the desires of the children. Children create ideological struggle when they critically examine, poke fun at and comment upon authoritative discourse. It is during the interplay between coexisting and equally valid discourses that children develop their own understandings of moral and social norms and values.

Dinner ladies exert power over children that drives comic behaviour 'underground' and away from the watchful eyes of adults, who represent officialdom (Bakhtin, 1968;

White, 2014). Entering into a carnivalesque space allows children to break in and temporarily subvert official order that is ephemeral and disappears in constant movement. Children's underground peer world is fraught with carnivalesque discourse and embodied interactions, which provide the mechanism for children to experience feelings of empowerment and liberation from the power that adults hold over them in everyday life. One may ask why it is important for children to stop doing what is imposed on them and 'have time and space in which to break away, at least mentally, from the workaday world and enter into contemplation' (Smile, 2013, p. 52). Smile (2013) assists our understanding that the mealtime space allows for reflection, which are often found in a playful form, whereby children can uncover deeper meanings about the mealtime social order and who they are in relation to others. To put it another way, children's carnivalesque disruptions are reflections on social life that can test an idea and provoke social boundaries and conventions in order to stand in opposition to the authoritative discourse. If authority figures turned a blind eye or subtly communicated compliance, then the carnivalesque purpose of the laughter would be lost (White, 2014). As Bakhtin says carnivalesque interactions are a way to turn life upside down and provide an alternative stance to everyday life. Children's unmerged voices enter into free and familiar contact with those from whom they are usually divided to experience temporary liberation from the norms and etiquette imposed in the established order.

Chronotope

Instead of treating the mealtime as just another time in a school routine, we argue the space and time play an important role in the way children socialise. For this reason, we have adopted the concept of the chronotope in order to understand their situated, time-specific socialisation phenomenon. Bakhtin coined the term chronotope to refer to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature (Bakhtin, 1981). He used this literary concept to distinguish between different genres, for example, a Greek romance is a very different literary genre from an adventure; the stylistic aura shapes thought and experience and the possibilities for action in relation to context; all actions occur in relation to time and space. For example, romantic chronotopes generate plots in which fate and chance happen to romantic heroes, agency is downplayed and the successful outcome of their trials is given in advance (Morson, 2010; Marková et al. 2020). In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin forges a connection between the novel and the carnivalesque. In this chronotope, the human body is exaggerated, and the life of the body enters new meanings, 'a new place for human corporeality' (Bakhtin, 1981). It is the body that engages in dialogue, and under medieval circumstances, rebellion was a necessary extreme to confront, degrade, transform and bring creativity back into time and the body (Bakhtin, 1981). Bakhtin viewed literary genres as specific modes of thought that have the power to understand and narrate different realms of experience and create 'specific form-shaping ideology for understanding the nature of events and action' (Morson and Emerson, 1990, p. 366). Bakhtin's analysis of literature highlights an interconnection between individuals and the novel itself, each with its own worldviews or ideologies. Bakhtin did not discuss chronotope in terms of actual social formations; he

metaphorically describes how literary genres provide the grounds for activity and experience, or ‘the meaning that shapes narrative’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250).

Crucial to our understand is the idea that school mealtimes are not neutral or passive backgrounds to action; it has a character that determines the chronotopic form in which children’s social actions and interactions are embedded and embodied. According to Steinby (2014, p. 120), Bakhtin indicates clearly that ‘a chronotope in a novel determines what the persons’ “belonging” to that chronotope can experience and how they can act’. The mealtime chronotope influences possibilities for thought, action and experience. Children act in mealtimes very differently from lesson time (Stone, 2013; 2015; 2020). All individuals contribute to the normative social order, which is neither inherently stable nor randomly changeable. We consider the normative order as social relations that are constantly changing, negotiated, flexible and an outcome of the interaction in the mealtime chronotope that everyone in the mealtime contributes. The mealtime chronotope is a distinctive configuration of space and time in relation to human action, whereby action is judged according to the chronotope in question (Bakhtin, 1981; Steinby, 2014). On the one hand, the purpose of the mealtime according to adults is to feed large numbers of children in a relatively short time frame; official order, rules and expectations must be in place to enable the smooth running of the practice. However, the mealtime chronotope has looser boundaries than other times in the school day because the ratio between adults and children is approximately two dinner ladies supervising approximately one hundred children per sitting. As a result, it is impossible for the dinner ladies to have the same level of control over every individual in the meal hall as teachers in the classroom, and so the mealtime authority and expectations are enforced but with less consistency, which affords different interactive possibilities for children.

In the episode, we analyse, Daniel, pseudonym, a particular character defined by the chronotope; he is the protagonist in the microcosmic society. Children’s micro-interactions are ephemeral, constantly moving and changing as they renegotiate, re-configure and reformulate, which may align and misalign with peer expectations that arise and emerge as they orientate themselves in these plural social landscapes. The school mealtime chronotope is a fertile ground in which adult-controlled structure and peer-produced emergence do battle, all contributing to the narrative of the chronotope. Having taken the Bakhtinian framework discussed above, we will illustrate children’s carnivalesque-embodied interactions that disrupt and subvert the established mealtime order (Stone, 2020). In so doing, we want to explore how children’s carnivalesque episodes contribute to their social development, where they learn about who they are in relation to others and make social critiques of the system in which they are embedded. In the following text, we will give an overview of the research method, followed by an analysis of the episode.

Method

In order to explore children’s carnivalesque underworld as a counterposition to officialdom, we needed to observe children’s school mealtime practice as it happens, in its naturally occurring phenomenon. Ethnographic methods were used to gain an emic

understanding of children's mealtime socialisation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Naturalistic inquiry enabled us to continuously capture, cogitate and analyse children's mealtime socialisation and produce 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) or detailed accounts of field experiences and children's mealtime socialisation from a child's perspective (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2010; Hedegaard et al. 2012; Hundeide, 1989; Sommer et al., 2010). We had no direct access to the inner workings of children's minds nor the capacity to obtain universal truths about their lived experiences (Hedegaard, 2002). This means that our interpretations of children's mealtime interactions are not a direct reflection of their reality, but rather our specific interpretation of their situated school mealtime practices.

Over a 5-year span of data collection, the first author had dual roles: to observe as an ethnographic researcher and to assist dinner ladies with menial tasks. She presented herself to all staff and children as a researcher and was not employed as a dinner lady with associated responsibilities. The researcher positionality was a delicate ongoing balance between an ethnographic researcher and acting in the field as a dinner lady, while avoiding preconceived ideas and practices associated with specific adult roles, such as dinner lady, teacher or parent (Christensen, 2004). To understand how the social world looks from the children's perspective, it was essential to gain trust from children and mealtime staff, which was inevitably negotiated and renegotiated throughout the entire process. We suspended our normative adult judgements about the rightness or wrongness of children's interactions in order to observe the underworld of children's subversive mealtime interactions as they unfold.

Between 2013 and 2017, the first author conducted 25 months of field observations, visiting the school an average of 3 days a week during the school lunchtime, located in the school dining hall, known as an assembly hall (Stone, 2015; Stone, 2020). Prior to the fieldwork began, we ensured to follow the research ethics guidelines by the Economic and Social Research Council and University of Bath. The research access was granted by the school's head teacher. Data were collected using participant observations, field notes, informal interviews and focus group interviews with children, as well as with dinner ladies, on the one hand, and on the other hand, visual methods, such as photographs, and audio and video recordings. For this particular episode, we relied on ethnographic field notes after the first author left the scene. Overall, our focus was on social aspects of peer interaction and pupil-staff interaction during school lunch hours.

The research was situated in a Catholic state primary school in South West England. At the time of the research, the school had approximately 197 pupils (97 boys and 100 girls) on roll aged 4–11 years. The majority of pupils were of white British origin and 20% were from minority ethnic groups. The school catchment feeds into both public and private secondary schools. The mealtime lasts approximately 1 hour between 12.15 and 1.15 with two sittings (NB: infant children enter the hall at 12:05 as they require more assistance initially); both sittings were approximately 30 minutes in duration, containing approximately 100 children. Mealtimes were typically supervised by two or three dinner ladies during infant children's mealtime, and junior children were supervised by one or two dinner ladies. The presented data are selected from junior year group 3; the children are aged between 7 and 8 years.

Findings

To illustrate children's carnivalesque discourse in the mealtime chronotope, we analysed how a small group of children gain critical distance and challenge the established order of the school mealtime. Their spontaneous, playful and powerful interactions may be seen as 'inappropriate in the eyes of some adults precisely because play is not rational and escapes adult control' (Cohen, 2011, p. 177). The analysis will refrain from imposing the values of the researcher and those of the adults in the field, which may interpret children's subversive actions as deviant. The aim of our analysis is to understand the children's perspective and ascertain how children subvert the solemnity of social order and develop self-understanding in relation to others, including peers and dinner ladies, and not to make moral judgements about these interactions.

Children can surreptitiously explore and experiment with social order and develop self-understanding in relation to others as they experience rebellion on the edges of the social order. Their unscripted, flexible and powerful experiences enable children to experiment, think critically and reinterpret the collective values of the normative mealtime order reified as mealtime rules and school policy. To explore these ideas and questions, we present the following episode and analyse a group of boys engaging in dynamic interactions and comic spectacle, which Daniel instigates, navigates and directs himself. The episode was chosen from participant observations and field notes made by the first author. The first-person pronoun, 'I', was used to mark her as the participant-observer in the field notes.

Episode: The episode begins while I am walking between the tables chatting to children and pouring beakers of either milk or water for those who want it.

I am pouring milk in a beaker for Alison when a startling loud noise bellows out from the piano² that creates a sudden shift in the room to near silence. Like meerkats, both dinner ladies immediately react: asking the room 'Who has made this noise?' They walk this way and that, intensely scanning the room to find anyone out of place. I am in close proximity to the piano and look up to where the children are queuing near the piano. The dinner ladies call out names of children: 'Kate, was that you?' 'Mike, did you do that?' Daniel emerges from between the queuing children; eyes fixated on the two dinner ladies, he quickly moves between the tables with a straight back and bent legs. His contorted body position gives the appearance that he is the same height as the seated children that he passes. He scurries past me back to his seat. When he arrives at his seat, he slips into his chair and he and his friends laugh, giving a brief silent cheer, while shaking their fists at a low level. Moments later, the dinner ladies abandon their search because they are unable to detect anything out of place and the mealtime resumes. (Participant observation, observation of five, year group 3, participants, 02/03/2015)

This episode shows Daniel's transgression mocks the school mealtime authority, de-crowning the dinner ladies and subverting the social order. The target of his joke is not a specific person; he challenges the establishment, which is to be enjoyed by everyone.

Daniel searches, provokes and tests an idea about a truth within the official world of the school mealtime. Bakhtin suggests that when someone strives to liberate himself from the authority of another's discourse, 'it is questioned, it is put in a new situation in order to expose its weak sides, to get a feel for its boundaries, to experience it physically as an object' (1981, p. 348). Children's carnivalesque acts in the school mealtime create a distance or otherness from the adult world by experimentally objectifying the dominant discourse (Bakhtin, 1981; Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). It is in this objectification and distancing that children encounter dialogic multivoicedness and hence deprive 'the adult's authoritative word of absolute authority' (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003, p. 283). The episode illustrates that children can understand, evaluate and provoke school mealtime rules by enacting their own agenda to cause disruption, amidst the solemnity of social order to achieve their own voice. As children dialogically engage with the authoritative discourse, which demands to be acknowledged, they enter into temporary liberation to cultivate their internally persuasive discourse, actively distinguishing between one's own authority and the discourses and authorities of others (Bakhtin, 1981).

Daniel escapes punishment and develops social awareness of otherness in the social system in which he is embedded. His individuality, in opposition to official seriousness, is expressed and experienced, where he escapes from the official ways of life, rule-bound, adult-governed mealtime as in the instance when Daniel breaks the rules to bang the piano, challenging and experimenting with the school mealtime authority and amusing his friends. Daniel temporarily disrupts the status quo, his actions being more powerful than the social order of the school mealtime in those fleeting moments, creating a 'world inside out' for all to muse over. The world upside down is achieved through playful mockery of the hierarchal order by people who are oppressed by it (Cohen, 2011). The children push in the direction of freedom and playfulness, while the dinner ladies strive to maintain an adult-controlled sense of order. Daniel creatively experiments with carnivalesque humour, which 'resides underneath solemnity and emerges out of it' (Gabriel, 2016, p. 371), liberating himself from oppression of social order.

Daniel and his peers produced a range of voices that contributed to their worldview perspectives. Daniel orchestrated a very sophisticated manoeuvre that highlights his ability to conceive the dinner ladies gaze and the perspective of his peers, disappearing into the crowd to become 'invisible' to both dinner ladies on duty that day. This explains why footlights would destroy the carnival (Bakhtin, 1968), similar to a shoal of fish, Daniel stayed close to his fellow peers. His initial outburst on the piano created shock, intensified surveillance and momentary silence over the mealtime; he responded to the unfolding sociodrama the way a skilled dancer controls the shape and speed of his body, by maintaining balance and constant poise. We can imagine there was a thrill of excitement for his friends, as they watched him precariously cross the meal hall, teetering on the edge, threatened with punishment should he become visible to the dinner ladies. Daniel's rule-breaking was purposeful; his skilful manoeuvre demonstrates that he knows the dinner ladies are the upholders of the official established order in the mealtime.

Carnivalesque experiences are vividly felt, and Daniel is aware of the risks, which intensifies the experience and creates feelings of thrilling excitement. This delight can be felt in the material body, affirming corporeal vitality, which is not simply imagined but

experienced, leading to refresh and renewal (Bakhtin, 1968). This coheres with Billig (2005, p. 207) when he argues that ‘if the social world is full of codes that restrict what can be said and done, then delight can be taken in breaking the rules that constrain social actors’. Daniel is mock-crowned as the carnival king when he returns to his peers, who join him in triumphant celebration hidden from sight. The significance of Daniel’s symbolic and temporary crowning is that his peers can appreciate how he exercised an element of control, mobilising power by intentionally finding ways to express humour outside of the gaze of adults, and his peers can share in and glorify those triumphs with him. It is in Daniel’s active dialogic engagement with other perspectives and discourses that he is able to redefine, differ, develop and establish his ‘own’ voice (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). In a creative process of interdependence, socialisation requires a conceptual separation between the self and other and is an active process of experimenting with contradiction (James, 1982). It is within contradiction that children acquire skills from the familiarity of what is given and what is shared to create and navigate the unexpected, so that risks and security are in balance.

In real time, the episode was fleeting, causing minimum disruption, but Daniel’s actions turned power inside out, enacting the victory of laughter over fear. To achieve this, Daniel’s timing was crucial as he reacted and adjusted to his interactive mealtime situation. Klemp et al. (2008) researched the rhythmic ebb and flow of jazz musicians to understand how musical performances are organised and adjusted by the changing environments of their own making. When Daniel struck the piano keys, he used his mastery of the dinner hall to skilfully adapt to the silenced—and yet—fast paced, risky and changing environment. Klemp et al. (2008) suggest that improvisation occurs when something is out of pattern and what makes a note good or bad is what happens next. Daniel used the social conditions and busyness of the meal hall to disappear into the crowd; he demonstrated recognition of the adult’s gaze so that he could appear to be the same height as the children sitting down at the tables, and he had some knowledge about how the surrounding children (whom he passed) and the dinner ladies would respond. Daniel demonstrates that like skilled musicians or dancers, children can make rapid transitions between thinking and actions that arise, change and fade away in the process of their interactions with the social situation (Klemp et al., 2008; Sawyer, 2006). Daniel’s piano outburst is a ‘mis-take’, where he intuitively responded to his surroundings, deploying his mastery of blending into the social conditions, carrying forward what had happened to figure out what to do next. Significantly, the performer can recover from several ‘mis-takes’, so that the average listener of jazz would not detect the variation (Sawyer, 2006; Klemp et al., 2008). Likewise, the average observer of the school mealtime would not detect Daniel’s interactive improvisation when he returned to his seat among the medley of other children. Daniel spontaneously responded to an interactive situation of his own making, agentically delivering a second wave of excitement by returning to his seat without detection or punishment.

In sum, during the school mealtime, children encounter a range of voices that contribute to their worldview perspectives (Bakhtin, 1981; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). The social conditions of the mealtime provide opportunities for children to question and provoke the mealtime social order. Daniel thwarted the more powerful others (dinner ladies in this

case), which is a way to break down barriers and temporarily escape from structures that constrain the individual. According to James (1982, p. 83), 'by confusing the adult order, children create for themselves considerable room for movement within the limits imposed upon them by adult society' (James, 1982, p. 83). We have argued that the flexibility and ambiguity of the school mealtime chronotope provide children with opportunities to achieve some critical distance between their own authority and the discourses of others. As a result, carnivalesque experiences contribute to children's feelings of empowerment and control over their own bodies and voices.

Discussion

As shown in the above analysis of the episode, children cannot escape from adult surveillance during school mealtimes, but they can seize opportunities to make fun of the 'official' adult order and thus resist to it and assert freedom from the school rules. Our analysis has shown how children who participate in humorous carnivalesque interactions have some awareness of themselves in relation to others to feel entitled to provoke democratic sensibilities and objectify the school mealtime order. The authoritative discourse of the school is somewhat passively received as information, directions, rules, expectations and so forth (Bakhtin, 1981). The 'official' adult order of the dinner ladies comes infused with social power, and children can understand the demands of the mealtime situation and develop competencies to participate in the fellowship of the mealtime (Hedegaard, 2018; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Conversely, the internally persuasive discourse, of the children in this case, is the differentiation of ideas, tightly interwoven with children's re-telling, assimilation and transmission of others' words, which makes it possible for them to experimentally objectify the authoritative discourse to form their own social critique. This relates to Bakhtin's (1981, p. 341) notion of 'ideological becoming', whereby children establish their own individual voice and authority in a process of dialogically engaging in the discourses of others. As a result, children 'may begin to appreciate that social reality is much more complex and contradictory phenomena than any single authoritative discourse might suggest' (Duncan and Tarulli, 2003, p. 285). Carnivalesque mealtime interactions are sources of development in themselves, whereby children develop self through engagement with others, mediating not just ideological and cognitive struggle but embodied and affective aspects too, which develops their own conceptual separation of voice. School mealtime provides time and space for reflection, whereby ideas can be entertained, considered, reconsidered, compared, forgotten and rejected, which often occurs in a playful form (Smile, 2013).

Children experience multiple discourses and negotiate who they are in relation to others, which validates and informs the social situations of their development (Hedegaard, 2009). Hedegaard (2018) argues that the children's orientation is influenced by all the institutions they attend, in relation to the people and practices they involve in with others. The school mealtime configures new institutional demands and expectations, and 'when the child enters into a new relation to other people in her everyday life crises can arise between the child's own motives and the motives and values of others in the social situation' (Hedegaard, 2009, p. 76). New possibilities for children's mealtime

socialisation emerge as ‘children’s competences change, their capacities are restructured, and new competences are demanded’ (Hedegaard and Fleer, 2010, p. 150). 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. Therefore, children’s localised, nuanced everyday activities change in relation to the expectations of the social situation, based on a diversity of traditions and values of a good life (Hedegaard 2002; 2009).

When children mock the moral and social order, they elicit disapproval, dialogically engaging with social life, comic spectacle and shared merriment, which creates solidarity against the upholder of the normative order. Billig (2005) argues that the less pleasant faces of humour tend to be pushed to one side in order to accentuate the positives of warm-hearted humour. He argues 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. He states that ‘if meaning has to be socially policed, then mockery and laughter are the friendly neighbourhood officers, who cheerily maintain order. And sometimes they wield their truncheons with punishing effect’ (Billig, 2005, p. 238). Ridicule is enmeshed with power, which can be a darker, less admirable side of laughter. The decision about what is funny is a moral one, whereby children develop an understanding of ridicule and laughter so that they can laugh appropriately and understand why others are laughing. Billig (2005, p. 243) asserts that humour and seriousness remain inextricably linked and that there must be continual movement without a final resting place: ‘neither can abolish the other without abolishing itself—or without threatening the social order’. Likewise, the mocking of authority can help sustain, rather than undermine, power relations by validating and confirming who and what is in authority by merit of parody and other mockery.

Our findings bring new insights into how children’s dissident interactions can temporarily destabilise the mealtime social order and reverse social power. We have problematised the tendency to regard school mealtime order and social life as a unified, cooperative, monolithic mechanism that maintains individuals in their subjection to produce docile children (Foucault, 1991; Smart, 1983) because it analytically neglects children’s individualised forms of knowledge and social power. We have deployed the concept of ‘carnavalesque’ to depict the counterpoise, destabilising or reversal of power, albeit temporarily. The theoretical implications are that when various attempts are made to centralise and unify social order, the processes of decentralisation and disunification continue (Bakhtin, 1981) in these diverse sites of constant and intense struggle for dominance between coexisting voices. In doing so, our research brings to the fore children’s agentic and creative capacity not only to contest the authoritative discourse but also to temporarily become the powerful and knowledgeable other. Children gain experience and knowledge of the social world for themselves to resolve and confront their own curiosity, difficulties and mishaps, as opposed to adult-guided moral and social order that is external and imposed (Jenks, 2005). In the mealtime chronotope, children can turn routine experiences into opportunities for rejuvenation and reprieve. Our empirical

evidence has demonstrated during these seemingly innocuous everyday practices, children can surreptitiously explore their own autonomy under the radar of supervising adults.

Finally, our analysis suggests that carnivalesque episodes are transient moments that are irregular, unscripted and spontaneous experienced as moments that should not happen. Daniel's mealtime transgression degrades the authoritative power over him and provides experiences of 'outsiderness', which is a prerequisite for creatively understanding alternative points of view (Bakhtin, 1968). From children's school mealtime socialisation, they acquire skills from the familiarity of what is given and what is shared to create and navigate the unexpected, so that risks and security are in balance. Significantly, these experiences (which are not free from constraints) are critical for children's socialisation because they develop their own understandings of social norms and values, to touch them, to bring them in close and experiment with them, forming their own social critique and uncovering what is not easily explainable or changeable (Bakhtin 1968; 1981). We have observed how children temporarily subvert the school mealtime rules for merriment, conceptualising children as reflexive social actors, a distinctive group in their own right who are able to negotiate, share and create culture with adults and with each other (Corsaro, 1992; James et al., 1998). We place great emphasis on children's active construction and determination of their own lives, not only influenced by but also influencing their social worlds (Hedegaard et al., 2008; Ochs and Shohet, 2006). Children are not passive recipients of adult knowledge, and the mealtime chronotope is a place where they can break free from monolithic, authoritarian and hierarchical patterns of thinking, and find temporary, more egalitarian ways to break down barriers and overcome power inequalities (Cohen, 2011).

Conclusion

In this article, we have revealed that the social conditions of the school mealtime are a special configuration of time and space, chronotope, which is interactionally produced and constitutes children's socialisation. In the interplay of intense struggle between coexisting and equally valid discourses, children develop their own understandings of moral and social norms and values outside of the adult gaze. Children test the boundaries of what is permitted, with relative freedom to think for themselves, discover, experiment, modify and redefine their subjective world views, forming their own social critiques to uncover what is not easily explainable or changeable. Therefore, children's mealtime socialisation carries deep symbolic significance because it is through carnival that the reveller is transported into another place. Carnavalesque discourse creates a critical distance for children's active socialisation to develop self-understanding in relation to the school mealtime social order (e.g., Duncan and Tarulli, 2003). The internally persuasive discourse, of children in the mealtime, is a creative production in which discourse can be further developed and applied in new contexts and conditions that go beyond the intention and purposes that were originally expressed. We have illustrated that children's mealtime socialisation is an open, active and creative process of interdependence and experimentation with contradiction between the self and other. It enables children to develop

sophisticated relational and contextual knowledge, whereby the children use the mealtime as a resource to defy predefined rules. School mealtimes are more than simply eating a meal; they enrich children's social development. Considering it as carnivalesque chronotope from the Bakhtin's framework and the child-centred perspective, we recognise a potential for researching children's socialisation as part of expanding discussions on the significance of school mealtimes.

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Notes

1. Dinner ladies are officially referred to by the school as mealtime assistants, who can hold dual roles, such as, teaching assistants and cleaners, or a single role in which they only come to the school to supervise the mealtime. In this school, the majority of the dinner ladies were appointed as teaching assistants. Children refer to mealtime assistants as dinner ladies, and in this article, we refer to them as dinner ladies for the precise affable relationship that children had with them.
2. The place where children eat their school meals is a multipurpose room. The piano is closed. Children are forbidden to play it, but it exists at the side of the room.

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