Hunger in the primary school setting: Evidence, impacts and solutions according to school staff in the North East of England, UK

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Abstract

The issue of 'holiday hunger' (i.e. food insecurity during school holidays) has received increased attention in recent years, though research in this area is limited. Through qualitative, semi-structured interviews, the current study investigated the views of 12 primary school staff on the existence, impacts and potential solutions to holiday hunger. Thematic analysis revealed holiday hunger forms part of a broader, year-round experience of deprivation and poor nutritional habits. Staff proposed a need for a multi-agency approach to address a range of complex, inter-related needs. Additionally, the findings highlighted a need to address poverty stigma in the development of familial support.

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Introduction

A child's school engagement and academic success is thought to impact on their subsequent adult life outcomes, including their educational and career prospects and future income (Abbott-Chapman et al., 2014; Field, 2010). For this reason, school improvement advocates consistently focus on the promotion of high quality teaching to encourage children to excel (Wenglinsky, 2002), but research has revealed that a child's nutritional status might also be important to their academic outcomes (Adolphus, Lawton & Dye, 2013; Ani & Grantham-McGregor, 1999).

Despite the association between good nutrition, cognition and learning, half a million children in the UK are reported to consume inadequate diets, lacking in fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and fish as a result of a lack of household income (Gordon et al., 2013). This has prompted an increase in nutritional support for children through the provision of free school meals, including breakfast and lunch, during term time and more recently school holiday food provision through holiday clubs (Lucas et al., 2017; Lambie-Mumford & Sims, 2018).

Whilst holiday club provision and the issue of 'holiday hunger' has received increased attention, particularly across charity, industry and policy, research into the issue of holiday hunger in the UK remains scarce. The overarching aim of the current study was to investigate the views of school staff on the issue of holiday hunger, its impacts in school and potential ways it might be addressed.

Expectations on schools have increased beyond the provision of teaching to include much more pastoral care (Edmond & Price, 2009). Thus, it is important that the views of school staff on pastoral issues, such as holiday hunger, are represented within the research literature to ensure that policy and practice are not developed without some input from staff who may be involved in the delivery of pastoral support programmes. Moreover, given the link between childhood nutrition and academic and behavioural outcomes (Adolphus, Lawton & Dye, 2013; Ani & Grantham-McGregor, 1999), the effects of holiday hunger are likely to be evident within the school setting. School staff are therefore well placed to reflect on these effects given that they will see children before and after school holidays and are likely to recognise patterns of behaviour consistent with hunger and poor nutritional habits.

Literature Review

It was recently reported that 10% of children in the UK live in households experiencing severe food insecurity, meaning that their access to food is compromised to the extent that they are skipping meals and going hungry (Pereira, Handa & Holmqvist, 2017). This is concerning as food is considered to be a basic human right (General Assembly of the United Nations, 1948; United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999), required for healthy childhood growth and development (Aldermand & Fernald, 2017; Nord & Parker, 2010).

Regular consumption of healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables and wholegrains can reduce the risk of detrimental health outcomes, including cardiovascular diseases, overweight and some forms of cancer (Crowe et al., 2011; Matthews, Wein & Sabate, 2011; Boeing et al., 2012). On the contrary, hunger in childhood has been associated with chronic health conditions and internalising problems such as anxiety and depression (Ke & Ford-Jones, 2015; Weinreb et al., 2002). Moreover, poor nutritional habits can have a detrimental effect on cognition, particularly memory and attention (Bellisle, 2004; Adolphus et al., 2016), which are fundamental to learning (Fougnie, 2008). Thus, repeated, poor cognitive performance in class, resulting from poor nutritional status, could have a cumulative effect on children's learning (Pollitt, 1996).

In an effort to counteract the potentially detrimental influence of poor dietary habits on academic and cognitive performance, children from low income families are entitled to access free school lunches; a scheme which ensures they are able to access a nutritious lunch on the school premises free of charge (Oostindjer et al., 2017; Stevens & Nelson, 2011).

Research has shown that school lunches make a significant contribution to the nutritional status of children (Spence et al., 2013) and can lead to improvements in academic attainment (Kitchen et al., 2012; Belot & James, 2011). However, it is noteworthy that free school meals are generally only accessible during school term time, which equates to approximately 39 weeks of the year.

At the current time, there is no UK legislation requiring Local Authorities to provide meals to children during school holidays. This has led to recent concerns that many children, particularly those who access free school meals, could be experiencing increased food insecurity during the school holidays; an issue termed 'holiday hunger' (Long et al., 2018). Although the evidence base surrounding holiday hunger is limited, research with parents has shown that some face more financial difficulties and struggle to provide additional food and activities for their children during the school holidays compared to term time (Defeyter, Graham & Prince, 2015; Gill & Wellington, 2003). Furthermore, Shinwell and Defeyter (2017) recently reported that children's spelling performance declines significantly during the six-week summer break from school; a decline that might be attributable to a lack of nutritious food and enrichment activities during the school holidays. This loss in learning leaves teachers needing to set time aside to support children to catch up academically on their return to school after the holidays.

In response to the lack of food and activity provision for families during the school holidays, there has been a dramatic increase in the availability of holiday clubs providing meals and activities through school and community venues across the UK during the school holidays (Mann et al., 2018). Moreover, the School Holiday (Meals and Activities) Bill was recently presented to UK Parliament calling for Government intervention to ensure that meals and activities are made available to children and families during the school holidays when free school meals are not available. In response to this Bill, the Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Education, Nadhim Zahawi, called for research evidence to be used to inform any further development of holiday provision to ensure best practice is recognised and developed (House of Commons Hansard, 2018).

The Current Study

Whilst there is some existing research evidence surrounding the issue of 'holiday hunger', peer reviewed research is still quite limited (Long et al., 2018). Furthermore, no peer-reviewed studies to date have sought the views of school staff to specifically investigate the

issue of holiday hunger and how it might impact upon children's experiences in school. This is surprising given that school staff deal with children potentially encountering hunger on a daily basis and are well placed to offer suggestions on what could be implemented in practical terms to help address the problem. Drawing on the in-depth views of school staff, the current study aimed to address some of the limitations of the current literature by answering the research questions: 'What evidence is there of children experiencing holiday hunger?' 'What is the impact of hunger on children's experiences in school?' and 'What could be done to overcome the issue of holiday hunger?'

Method

Approach:

Qualitative research methods allow new and unique ideas to be explored and for further understanding of a topic to be developed (Sofaer, 1999). Given the dearth of available research surrounding the issue of holiday hunger, adoption of a qualitative methodology was deemed necessary to gain detailed insight into the views and experiences of school staff regarding holiday hunger. Furthermore, due to the sensitivity of the topic under investigation, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were undertaken to allow staff to speak openly about their views and experiences whilst upholding their anonymity.

Participants:

The current study used a purposive method of sampling to recruit participants; a process which allows participants to be recruited according to a specific characteristic of interest (Tongco, 2007). As the current study sought to investigate the potential issue of holiday hunger in school, school staff were invited to participate. Moreover, the issue of holiday hunger is thought to be particularly prevalent in low income areas (Butcher, 2015). Therefore, using free school meal entitlement as a proxy indicator for deprivation, staff were recruited from two schools in the North East of England where the percentage of children eligible for free school meals was higher than the national average of 15.6% at the time the interviews took place (Department for Education, 2015). The characteristics of the participating schools are presented in Table 1. In order to uphold anonymity, schools are referred to by number only.

[Table 1 here]

Twelve school staff (11 females and one male) opted to be interviewed: one deputy head teacher; five class teachers; four teaching assistants; and one inclusion officer (responsible for pastoral care within the school). Eleven of the 12 participants provided demographic information detailing their age and number of years spent working in the education sector. Based on these data, the age of the sample ranged from 30-60 years (Mean=42 years) and the number of years staff had spent working in the education sector ranged from 3-22 years (Mean=10 years).

Materials:

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to guide discussions with staff. The schedule consisted of 9 open-ended questions that required staff to reflect on their understanding and experiences of holiday hunger within their school; their views on the impact of holiday hunger on children in their school; and ideas about what could be done to overcome the issue. A brief demographic questionnaire was also designed to determine participant age, gender and number of years spent working in the education sector.

Procedure:

Ethical approval was obtained from Northumbria University Ethics Committee before head teachers were provided with research information and invited to give consent to allow staff in their school to participate. Opt-in consent was then obtained for all school staff who wished to take part in the study. All interviews were conducted between January and March 2016 in a quiet area of each participating school at a pre-arranged time to suit each staff member and their individual school. Interviews were carried out by one member of the research team following the semi-structured interview schedule and using prompts to encourage staff to clarify or expand upon their responses when necessary. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to provide brief demographic information and were provided with verbal and written debrief information.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before being subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each transcript was read in its entirety numerous times to ensure familiarity. Pertinent points relating to the research questions were then highlighted and given initial codes to summarise the topic of the quote. Quotes referring to similar topics were grouped together then each group was checked for consistency with similarity between groups also being considered. Main themes were developed from the initial groups and each theme was given a heading that summarised the topic of the theme

overall. The process of transcription and analysis was carried out in parallel with data collection, which continued until no new themes were becoming evident from the data.

In order to confirm the accuracy of the analysis, around 10% of the transcripts were coded by a second coder. The level of agreement between the first and second coder was found to be almost perfect (Cohen's Kappa=.088) according to Landis and Koch's (1977) Kappa statistic interpretation criteria.

Findings

Consideration of staff views on evidence of holiday hunger led to the development of two key themes: 'Families facing hardship' and 'Poor food choices'. Interestingly, while the first research question set out to investigate the existence of holiday hunger, it became apparent that it is just one part of a broader issue of deprivation experienced by families year-round. Therefore, when discussing the impacts of holiday hunger, school staff tended to refer to the impacts of hunger in the school setting in general. Three key themes encompassed staff views on the effects of hunger: 'Physical effects;' 'Social, emotional and behavioural effects;' and 'Cognition and learning'. Finally, four themes reflected staff views on what could be done to tackle the issues of hunger and holiday hunger: Year-round multi-agency approach; Education; Financial Considerations; and Difficult to address. Consistent with the issue of year-round hunger and poor nutrition raised by staff, the themes surrounding potential ways of addressing holiday hunger presented a holistic approach to tackling the broader issues of hunger and poverty rather than just focussing specifically on holiday hunger. Each theme is subsequently discussed in detail with example quotes from school staff to illustrate each theme.

1. *What evidence is there of children experiencing holiday hunger?*

Through staff recollections of their experiences, it was evident that some children might be experiencing holiday hunger. While the interview schedule focussed on the issue of holiday hunger, staff consistently emphasised that holiday hunger is not an issue that exists in isolation but is one part of a wider societal problem of general hardship and poor nutritional habits that is exhibited throughout the year.

1.1.Families facing hardship

Discussions with school staff uncovered various examples of families facing general hardship. Staff talked about children arriving at school hungry throughout the school year, particularly as a result of skipping breakfast, and not just following school holidays. However, some staff were aware of children who were possibly in a situation where their only meal was the lunch provided by school, which would imply that there are children potentially going without a regular meal on a weekend and during the school holidays:

> *'In some cases it might be the only meal at all that children are getting'* (Staff 1; School 1)

Staff had observed various indicators of hunger in school. Some children openly admitted that they were hungry and had not eaten. For other children, hunger was inferred as a result of their preoccupation with meal and snack times in school and their subsequent behaviour, with children grabbing for food and asking for more after they had eaten. In an extreme case, one staff member was aware of hungry children searching lunchboxes for food:

> *'The first thing they want to do is eat or know when the next meal is, when lunchtime is or straight for a snack. Sometimes they might look in people's lunchboxes to see what's there'* (Staff 8; School 2)

In order to alleviate hunger in school, staff provided children with food beyond designated meal and snack times and some had even sent food and care resources (e.g. cleaning materials, toiletries) home to help families during the school holidays and throughout term time. However, staff were keen to emphasise that hunger did not exist in isolation but was part of a broader experience of deprivation that a minority of families were embroiled in. Alongside food insecurity, some children were believed to be experiencing a lack of enrichment as a result of few holidays and activities; a lack of parental involvement; and a lack of resources; all of which were thought to contribute towards poor health, low self-esteem and poor academic outcomes:

> *'You can't really isolate holiday hunger from a package of general- unfortunately, a general kind of negative life for that child'* (Staff 9; School 2)

Staff accounts of the hardship faced by some families demonstrate that there is a need for support to be made available to children and families that extends beyond the school term. However, staff views further suggest that the hardship faced by families exists year-round

and extends beyond hunger, with children lacking in support and enrichment opportunities as well as food during term time and during school holidays.

1.2. Poor food choices

Whilst staff were aware of children who arrived at school hungry and were at risk of experiencing hunger during the school holidays, the types of foods children are provided with outside of school also raised concern amongst staff. Staff were aware of poor food habits amongst children as a result of witnessing them consume foods of low nutrient value, such as confectionary, for breakfast and in their packed lunches:

> *'It's not always a case of skipping their meals; it's what they're getting given as a replacement for a school meal'* (Staff 7; School 1)

Staff outlined various issues that might lead to parents making poor food choices when planning meals for their families. First, a lack of money was suggested to be a significant barrier to some families accessing a reliable and healthy source of food. There was a clear perception that healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, are more expensive than unhealthy, convenience foods. However, poor money management was also thought to contribute as some families were believed to prioritise the purchasing of material items such as toys and designer clothes over the need to buy food. Yet, it was further suggested that, in some cases, poor food choices might be a reflection of a lack of parental responsibility and neglect:

> *'Lots of our families try to buy things for their families using* [high interest lenders], *which leaves no money for food'* (Staff 1; School 1)

Staff believed that for some families, a lack of routine and disorganisation fuelled issues regarding poor nutrition. Staff sympathised with parents who they felt were so busy that they struggled to find the time to prepare regular family meals but this lack of time and routine tended to result in parents favouring convenience over good nutrition when choosing what to feed their children. In some cases, meal times were reported to be chaotic with everyone eating different foods, and traditional family meals, such as Sunday lunch and Christmas dinner, thought to be missing from many family routines:

> *'I think people just need to be a little bit more organised, I mean I know from my own experience, having three boys, working full time, you would tend to just give them*

pizzas for tea and things like that, instead of cooking a healthy meal with vegetables' (Staff 11; School 2)

In addition, many parents were believed to be lacking in knowledge and experiences of how to plan and prepare nutritious meals for their families on a budget. It was suggested that cooking skills are no longer passed on through families and some parents do not have a good understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet for children.

In sum, staff shared concerns that poor dietary habits are potentially more widespread amongst families than meal skipping. Various factors were thought to contribute to such poor diets including a lack of money and poor money management; a lack of knowledge; and poor parenting skills, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the problems faced by families.

2. *What is the impact of hunger on children's experiences in school?*

Hunger was thought to be linked to a range of issues for children that were deemed to be detrimental to their school work, social relationships and ability to engage positively in school life.

2.1. *Physical Effects*

Staff frequently referred to hunger and poor nutritional habits leading children to appear tired and lacking in energy, as well as suffering minor ailments such as cold sores and a pale complexion:

> *'Some of them come in and they look really pale and lethargic, and if you ask them if they've had breakfast, they haven't'* (Staff 7; School 1)

One member of staff talked about their experience of witnessing a child displaying physical spasms, which were alleviated by food being provided in school. Moreover, it was a suggested that poor nutrition in childhood could have detrimental effects on children's longer term physical growth and development:

> *'You can see that they're just not flourishing, they're not growing'* (Staff 9; School 2)

2.2. *Social, Emotional and Behavioural Effects*

Staff associated hunger with children becoming irritable, frustrated and upset in school, though it was evident that children acted upon these feelings in different ways with some reported to cause disruption in the classroom and others becoming more withdrawn. Staff

suggested that the frustrated and withdrawn behaviours that resulted from hunger could be particularly detrimental to children's social relationships in school. Hungry children were reported to be short tempered and grumpy, which led to poor social interaction and difficulties with group work participation. Moreover, the negative effects of hunger and subsequent poor behaviour were suggested to cumulate, leading children to become more withdrawn from their peer group and to lack self-esteem:

> *'They're in trouble on the yard, or if they've not like listened in assembly 'cause they're not focussed they'll have to have a bit of time out so then that affects like their friendship as well'* (Staff 4; School 1)

The link between hunger and children's behaviour in school was highlighted by staff as some suggested that they can tell when a child is hungry as their behaviour deteriorates and providing food can make an obvious positive change to their behaviour:

> *'The first question you'll ask a child who's having a meltdown is have you had any breakfast…most of the time that will help hugely having something to eat'* (Staff 9; School 2)

2.3. Cognition and Learning

The main issue highlighted by the majority of staff in relation to cognition and learning was their observation that hungry children are unable to focus adequately on their school work, which impacts negatively on their learning and attainment. This was believed to be the case regardless of children's age and level of ability:

> *'They come and they're tired, they're hungry and they can't focus or concentrate, they can't get on'* (Staff 3, School 1)

It is noteworthy that poor concentration was recognised by two staff members from School 2 as a problem for children generally in school, particularly following school holidays, though they could not be certain that this issue occurred because of hunger or poor nutritional habits outside of school. However, there were suggestions that the alleviation of hunger through the inclusion of healthy snacks and school meals throughout the day led to a recognisable improvement in children's attention in class:

> *'When I last worked in key stage one and they reintroduced healthy snacks for kids at break time…I think it helped with alertness'* (Staff 10, School 2)

3. What could be done to overcome holiday hunger?

Staff shared a range of practical ideas that could be put in place at school, community and policy levels to alleviate hunger. They also highlighted some challenges that might arise in dealing with the issue of hunger.

3.1. Year-round multi-agency approach

Staff believed that there was a need to address hunger throughout the year, across term time and school holidays, though they felt that the responsibility should not be placed solely on schools to deliver such provision. Staff suggested that schools could play a role in monitoring children but believed that this should take place alongside further support offered through multiple agencies:

> *'I think we could work with social services, the local authority maybe'* (Staff 10; School 2)

Staff were complimentary about current school food provision, suggesting that school breakfast, lunch and snacks ensured that children had a reliable supply of nutritious food, which was particularly beneficial when food at home was limited. However, staff felt that existing schemes could be extended and should not be limited to particular year groups or to those who can afford to pay a fee to access the provision. Moreover, staff felt that there should be food provision in place during the school holidays, especially for those who would usually access a free school meal during term time, to reduce the risk of children encountering hunger:

> *'I think kids should have access to free school meals and free healthy snacks at lunchtime… And those children that want access to clubs during the school holidays should get free access to those, with free food provided'* (Staff 10; School 2)

3.2. Education

Following on from staff perceptions that a lack of parental knowledge about healthy eating contributes to holiday hunger and children's poor dietary habits in general, it was suggested that there is a need for more education around budgeting, cooking skills and healthy eating. As well as offering classes to upskill parents, it was suggested that cooking needs to be prioritised throughout the school curriculum to ensure that positive food habits become the norm and children leave school with the necessary skills to be able to cook and eat healthily.

However, it is also important to highlight that some staff had reservations about the effectiveness of parental education and suggested that giving parents the skills and knowledge needed to prepare food for their children does not guarantee that they will implement changes thus interventions need to take a multi-faceted stance to address routines and budgeting as well as cooking:

> *'You can tell the parents what's allowed in meals, in packed lunches, but they don't always follow guidelines and the things that they put in aren't always appropriate'* (Staff 3, School 1)

> *3.3. Financial considerations*

As mentioned previously, staff felt that a lack of money and poor money management contributed to children's inadequate diets. It was therefore proposed that financial considerations should be made in addressing holiday hunger. Staff suggested that low income families are at greatest risk of encountering holiday hunger, thus efforts should be made to reduce benefit cuts and encourage financial stability for families. Additionally, it was argued that healthy foods are more costly than convenience foods, so schemes should be put in place to make healthy options more affordable and accessible to all members of society:

> *'There needs to be maybe something done by government that means healthy food is cheaper, or- do you tax unhealthy food…something around the finances that make healthy eating the financial sensible option'* (Staff 9; School 2)

Moreover, staff believed that providing families with food parcels and vouchers that can only be used to purchase certain items might help to reduce the number of children encountering hunger and poor diets at all times of the year:

> *'Instead of giving the money, I think they should get a parcel of food… And then give them a key, or a card where your gas and your leccy goes on so they can't spend it and the children are going to get fed properly'* (Staff 6; School 1)

> *3.4. Difficult to address*

Through discussions with staff it became clear that holiday hunger is not a straightforward issue to address due to its multifaceted nature and the perceived stigma associated with hunger. It was proposed that the focus of interventions to overcome holiday hunger would need to be wide reaching to address a range of reasons behind family food insecurity (e.g.

lack of money, lack of routine) whilst encouraging families to recognise that it is acceptable to ask for help when it is needed. Staff identified hunger as being a sensitive topic that cannot be raised easily with many parents and something that children are encouraged not to discuss:

> *'People won't ask for help… it's filtered through, you don't need help you just get on with it'* (Staff 2; School 1)

Furthermore, the element of shame surrounding hunger was thought to be particularly problematic in efforts to provide support for older children, who are possibly more aware of the stigma associated with hunger and consequently less likely to disclose when issues of family food insecurity arise.

Finally, one member of staff highlighted the practical difficulties associated with setting up holiday food provision. The staff member described the case of a local organisation that tried to set up a holiday club but felt that demand for the provision would go above and beyond what they would be able to offer on a local level with their limited staff base. It was argued that processes need to be made "Easier for groups who want to do something" to alleviate holiday hunger and poor nutrition.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to investigate the views of school staff on the issue of holiday hunger in terms of its existence; the impact it has on children's experiences in school; and what might be done to address the issue. It was deemed appropriate to gage staff views on this issue for a number of reasons. Firstly, staff have close contact with children and are likely to have some understanding of the home lives of children in their care. Second, staff see foods that children bring to school from home and are faced with children who skip breakfast so will have an idea of children's food habits outside of school, Thirdly, schools often implement schemes to support families and will therefore have an understanding of the kinds of schemes that parents are willing and able to adhere to. Finally, in relation to the development of appropriate schemes to tackle holiday hunger, there is a possibility that schools could play a role, therefore it is important that school staff views are represented.

Overall, the findings of the study highlighted that holiday hunger is not a problem that exists in isolation; it is instead one part of a complex and multifaceted lifestyle of deprivation encountered by some families. Staff were aware of a minority of children who might have

been relying on school meals as their main source of food each day, but they expressed greater concern about children's poor dietary habits. Staff believed that there were multiple factors associated with hunger and poor food intake including a lack of money, poor money management, a lack of routine and poor parenting practices. The multidimensional nature of the issue was further reflected in staff views on what could be done to address holiday hunger. Staff acknowledged that the stigma surrounding hunger and the range of complex situations that lead to food insecurity make the issue difficult to address. It was therefore proposed that interventions to address hunger would need to be implemented with multiple agencies working together to address educational, financial and practical (e.g. food supply, routine) challenges.

The findings of the current study lend support to recent calls for food provision to be made available to families during the school holidays in order to reduce the potential for children to encounter hunger (Forsey, 2017; Holiday Hunger Task Group, 2015). However, the findings highlight a need for family support that exists year-round and focuses on the promotion of stable family routines, good money management and cooking skills in addition to food provision.

In 2013, Gordon et al. proposed that many children fail to consume a healthy, balanced diet as a result of a lack of family income. Moreover, research drawing on the views of parents on holiday food provision found that whilst they do everything they can to make sure their children are fed, the nutritional content of family meals is often compromised as parents place precedence on making sure their children have enough to eat to feel full above the nutritional content of the meals served (Defeyter, Graham & Prince, 2015). This is supported by the views of staff in the current investigation who suggested that low family income is a factor that contributes greatly to the eating habits of children in their schools and poor eating habits amongst children are common.

However, staff in the current study also suggested that poor money management might be an issue for families in cases where the purchasing of material items takes precedence over nutritious food. Whilst it was suggested that such issues might be addressed through parental education, it was argued that educational intervention is unlikely to work for all parents and in some cases a more direct approach, involving the provision of food parcels and food vouchers, might be necessary. Staff felt that this approach would increase the likelihood of

food being available to children in their households and eliminate the option for parents to spend the household food budget on other items.

On the contrary, giving food to families removes their right to obtain food in a socially acceptable manner (Lambie-Mumford, 2015). It takes away the element of choice and responsibility and highlights certain individuals as being in need, which could serve to exacerbate the stigma that surrounds the issue of hunger and food insecurity. Furthermore, staff perceptions of irresponsible money management amongst some parents reflect the findings of Garthwaite (2016) who reported that people living in poverty are sometimes perceived as being underserving of support and somewhat to blame for their circumstances. Such views can exacerbate stigma, which consequently reduces the likelihood that people will attempt to access appropriate support (Garthwaite, 2016). Therefore, any intervention to support parents to prioritise food and ensure that their children are provided with a healthy, balanced diet would need to be carefully considered in relation to their rights to obtain food in a fair way. In addition, it has previously been recognised that parents have difficulty actively seeking support (Offer, Sambol & Benjamin, 2010) so it is essential that efforts are made to reduce discriminatory attitudes towards parents within school and community settings to reduce the stigma associated with help seeking and acceptance of support.

In terms of the impact that hunger has on children's experience in school, staff suggested that hunger can lead to children displaying a range of physical, social, emotional and cognitive deficits that could potentially be detrimental to their educational attainment. Hungry children were described as being lethargic, unable to concentrate, withdrawn and temperamental thus supporting previous research demonstrating that poor dietary intake in children can have a detrimental impact on their cognitive performance and mood (Adolphus et al., 2016; Micha, Rogers & Nelson, 2011). Further to this, staff suggested that hunger also negatively impacts upon children's behaviour, with some children becoming disruptive. According to OFSTED (2014) disruptive behaviour, such as calling out unnecessarily and not following instructions, within the classroom can result in 38 days of lost teaching time across the school year. Therefore, hunger in the classroom has the potential to have a negative impact that extends beyond those children who are directly experiencing hunger by disrupting the learning of other children within the same classroom. Moreover, staff in the current study suggested that hungry children display a range of physical ailments; the consequences of which could be an increase in pupil absence. A report by Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk (2003) suggested that absence leads to a discontinuity in learning and subsequent underachievement thus

speculatively, it may be the case that hunger can lead to an increase in absence from school, which could negatively impact children's longer-term attainment.

While this study provides a useful insight into the views of school staff on the issue of holiday hunger and highlights the need for greater consideration of family food intake year-round, the research is not without its limitations. Firstly, the findings are based on a small sample from two schools based in the North East of England and may not be representative of the views of school staff in other areas of the country. Future research should seek to determine the views of school staff sampled from different geographic areas to investigate whether the same issues are evident across different areas of the country and whether there are any challenges that are unique to particular areas. Secondly, the findings are based on the reflections of school staff based on their interpretations of what they observe within the school setting, which could be subject to bias. In order to develop an extensive portrayal of hunger and associated problems experienced by children and families throughout the year, it is imperative that more research is conducted to directly represent the views and experiences of children and parents throughout the UK. Furthermore, adoption of a purely qualitative methodology, though useful, provides a subjective view of the existence and impact of holiday hunger in schools without any objective measures to support the observations of school staff. The findings from this study therefore offer some useful, evidence-based directions for further quantitative study in this area including the investigation of family food habits during the school holidays compared to term time and the potential relationship between parenting styles and family food habits. Additionally, the current study provides some areas for consideration by policymakers by highlighting a need for consistent, year-round family support that is not just directed to those in crisis but helps before families reach that point. Moreover, while school staff feel that they have a place in providing support to families, it was proposed that help should be multi-disciplinary and multi-factorial in order to address the various issues that lead to families facing food insecurity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current findings highlight the need for further investigation into year-round family food habits and the physical, social, psychological and educational consequences of poor dietary intake for children. The findings also show that there is a need for more collaborative working between policy makers, school, community and local authority

representatives to ensure that support for families is consistent, accessible and delivered without prejudice.

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Table 1: Characteristics of participating schools

	School Type	% Entitled to Free School Meals	Number of Staff Interviewed
School 1	Community	33.8%	8
School 2	Voluntary Aided	19.4%	4