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To cite this article: Paul Horton & Camilla Forsberg (2020): Safe spaces? A social-ecological perspective on student perceptions of safety in the environment of the school canteen, Educational Research, DOI: [10.1080/00131881.2020.1715235](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2020.1715235)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2020.1715235>



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Published online: 17 Jan 2020.



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Safe spaces? A social-ecological perspective on student perceptions of safety in the environment of the school canteen

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ABSTRACT

Background Research suggests that negative peer interactions that compromise student safety and wellbeing often occur in spaces at school that are not easily visible, not adequately monitored, overcrowded and/or relatively unstructured. In a large online survey conducted in Swedish schools by the anti-bullying organisation, Friends, a small proportion of students indicated that they felt unsafe in the school canteen and responded to a question about why they felt unsafe there. As the canteen is often reported to be a space where negative peer interactions, such as harassment, bullying and other forms of school violence, occur, but little is known about why negative peer interactions occur there, we were particularly interested in exploring why some students perceived their school canteen to be an unsafe space.

Purpose Taking a social-ecological perspective, our aim was to investigate why students reported feeling unsafe in the environment of the school canteen.

Method In order to investigate this question, we analysed 1,547 responses from students in Swedish schools in grades 3–6 (ages 9–12). The responses were from the anti-bullying organisation Friends' online questionnaires from 2011 to 2016. In the responses, students who indicated that they felt unsafe in the school canteen explained why they felt this way. Data were analysed qualitatively, using a six-step thematic approach.

Findings The analysis identified four key themes: *Space constraints*, *Time restrictions*, *The risk of social blunders* and *The negative actions of others*. We discuss the findings in terms of the macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem and microsystem.

Conclusions In matters of student safety and wellbeing, we argue that it is not only important to consider the social context, but also how that context is interconnected with environmental and structural elements.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 June 2019

Accepted 9 January 2020

KEYWORDS

School canteen or cafeteria; student wellbeing; school; student safety; bullying; social-ecology

Introduction

During the period 2011–2016, the anti-bullying organisation, Friends, conducted online questionnaires with more than 100,000 school students from grades 3–9 (ages 9–15) throughout Sweden. The findings from these questionnaires have contributed important

information regarding school bullying and students' feelings of insecurity in schools and have provided the basis for Friends' annual reports. In their 2017 report, for example, Friends reported that 11 per cent of girls and 9 per cent of boys in grades 3–6 had been subjected to bullying by another student during the past year. They also reported that large numbers of students felt unsafe in particular spaces of their schools. For grades 3–6, 19 per cent reported feeling unsafe in the toilets, 14 per cent in the changing rooms and 6 per cent on the playground (Friends 2017). These findings are reflective of research that has found that negative peer interactions, such as harassment, bullying and other forms of school violence, most commonly occur in those areas that are not easily visible, not adequately monitored, overcrowded and/or relatively unstructured, such as particular areas of playgrounds, toilets, hallways, locker rooms, changing rooms and school cafeterias or canteens (Astor and Meyer 2001; Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Behre, Astor, and Meyer 2001; Leff et al. 2003; Matusova 1997; Smith 2014; Vaillancourt et al. 2010; Zumbrunn et al. 2013).

Although the school canteen was not presented in the Friends annual report as one of the areas considered most unsafe by students, it is one of the areas referred to in the questionnaire. Specifically, students were asked whether they felt safe or unsafe in a number of different areas, including the toilets, changing rooms, playgrounds, cloak-rooms, common rooms, sports halls, entrances, corridors or locker areas, the internet, classrooms and canteens. Those who answered that they felt unsafe in a particular area were then asked why they felt unsafe there. While the vast majority of students in grades 3–6 (93.3 per cent) responded that they felt safe in the canteen, a small proportion (3.2 per cent of students) responded that they felt unsafe in the school canteen, whilst a similarly small proportion (3.5 per cent) responded that they did not know. Despite the relatively small proportion of students who responded that they felt unsafe in the school canteen, we believe that it is important to analyse these students' responses, not only in order to better understand why these particular students felt unsafe but also to shed more light on why students more generally often perceive the school canteen to be an unsafe space. As we are interested in considering the environmental and structural aspects of perceived unsafe space, school canteens are also particularly interesting in that they are spaces that are often characterised by large numbers of students in relation to the number of supervising adults, high noise levels, a coming-together of students from different age groups, limited space and seating possibilities and restrictions on the amount of time that students can spend there. We were thus particularly interested in exploring *why* those students in grades 3–6 who stated that they felt unsafe in the school canteen perceived their school canteen to be an unsafe space. In this article, we analyse students' open-ended answers to the follow up question about why they felt unsafe in the school canteen and do so by utilising a social-ecological perspective.

Background

The social-ecological context

The social-ecological perspective draws on Bronfenbrenner's work on the ecology of human development, and positions interactions within a number of systems, which can be understood like a set of nested shapes, moving inwards from the outermost

macrosystem to the *exosystem*, *mesosystem* and *microsystem*, with the individual in the centre (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979; Horton 2016; Kumar, O'Malley, and Johnston 2008; Patton et al. 2013; Rodkin and Hodges 2003; Swearer et al. 2010). While this perspective has helped to broaden the focus of research from the behaviour of particular individuals to the social-ecological environment and the various systems that constitute it, the perspective has a number of shortcomings. Firstly, studies utilising this perspective have tended to focus overwhelmingly on the microsystem level (Horton 2016; Thornberg 2015). Secondly, they have tended to overlook 'the non-social aspects of the environment' (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 18). While a number of researchers investigating school bullying have pointed to the theoretical importance of 'environmental-structural aspects of school life' when discussing the microsystem (Nickerson et al. 2014, 160), research has not tended to focus on the environmental-structural aspects of the microsystem to the same degree as the interactions between the individuals or groups of individuals within it (Barboza et al. 2009; Hong and Espelage 2012; Kumar, O'Malley, and Johnston 2008).

In discussing students' feelings of safety in their school canteens, we adopt a social-ecological perspective and approach the school canteen as a particular 'arena', which is located within the broader institutional arena of the school (Eriksson et al. 2002). In doing so, we consider the macro-, exo-, meso- and microsystem. The macrosystem refers to the broader sociocultural, political and economic context that influences the other systems culturally, socially, politically and economically (Bronfenbrenner 1977). As Bronfenbrenner states:

The *macrosystem* refers to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 26).

The macrosystem thus refers to dominant sociocultural norms related to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability and the body, for example, in terms of how people are supposed to look, dress, speak and act in that particular context. It also refers to sociocultural, political and economic norms regarding the role of the school canteen and the provision of school meals. When investigating feelings of safety in Swedish school canteens, it is thus important to consider the consistencies in the form and content of the Swedish school canteen, which are particular for the specific Swedish school canteen context.

Sweden is one of the few countries in the world that provides free school meals to children during their compulsory school years (up to grade 9 or roughly age 15) (Persson Osowski, Göranson, and Fjellström 2010; Stockholmskällan 2018). The notion of providing free school meals stems from the middle of the nineteenth century, when a connection was made between hunger and academic performance, with food provided primarily to the poorest children in society (Stockholmskällan 2018). In 1946, state-funded school meals were introduced as a part of the Swedish welfare state's attempts to counteract the negative consequences of social class distinctions, whereby some children would otherwise not have received a cooked meal (Kringstad and Nyberg 2002; Persson Osowski, Göranson, and Fjellström 2010). In 1997, a new law was passed that legislated that all municipalities must serve free school meals to all students at comprehensive schools,

while in 2011 a law was passed that legislated that school meals should not only be free, but also nutritious (Livsmedelsverket 2013; Stockholmskällan 2018).

In their recommendations for schools, the Swedish National Food Agency (*Livsmedelsverket*) point not only to the importance of good food, but also to the importance of the environment of the school canteen in terms of adequate space, reasonable eating schedules, acceptable noise levels and the promotion of positive social interactions (Livsmedelsverket 2013). They recommend that canteens should be clean and tidy, should have good lighting, not be too noisy, and students should have at least 20 min to sit and eat their lunch (not including the time needed to collect their food and return their plates) (Livsmedelsverket 2013). However, while the Swedish National Food Agency provides the recommendations, it is up to each municipality to decide the extent to which they meet these recommendations (Kringstad and Nyberg 2002). Thus, it is also important to consider the role of the exosystem.

Bronfenbrenner defined the exosystem in the following way:

An *exosystem* refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 25).

In discussing the exosystem, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 25) provided the example of 'the activities of the local school board'. Decisions taken at the municipal or school level may impact the way in which the school canteen is experienced. Indeed, as Kringstad and Nyberg (2002) have noted, some school canteens do not meet the recommendations put forward by the Swedish National Food Agency, but have instead been described as cramped, untidy, noisy and stressful spaces where students have to hurry in order to eat their food in time.

The next layer of the model is the mesosystem, which 'comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates' (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 25). Such interrelations may be either direct, through 'multisetting participation', or indirect, through the participation of third parties or through communication and knowledge about those settings (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 209). While Bronfenbrenner provided the examples of the school, home and peer group, when considering the setting of the canteen, it may be equally relevant to consider the interrelations between the canteen and the classroom or playground settings. An example of the mesosystem relevant to the school canteen would thus be the interactions between students in the classroom and playground settings and how they impact upon the lived experiences of students within the canteen.

The final layer of the model is the microsystem, which Bronfenbrenner defined in the following way:

A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 22).

The physical and material characteristics of the canteen setting are important for understanding the pattern of activities, roles and relations that takes shape there. As Zumbrunn and others have pointed out, the microsystem comprises not only social elements, but also environmental elements in terms of how the space is experienced (i.e. variously as

fun, chaotic, peaceful or noisy) and structural elements in terms of the enforcement of rules, task management and the presence or absence of adults (Zumbrunn et al. 2013).

Purpose of the current study

In this qualitative study, we aimed to explore and investigate the reasons why some students perceived that they felt unsafe in the environment of the school canteen.

Method

Data collection

Our data were written responses provided by students to the anti-bullying organisation Friends' annual questionnaires during the years 2011–2016. In particular, we focus on the 1,547 responses provided by students from grades 3–6 (ages 9–12) who stated that they felt unsafe in their school canteen and then provided answers to the open-ended question, 'Why do you feel unsafe in the canteen?' The language of the questionnaire was Swedish and the majority of the student responses were also in Swedish. The student responses used in this article were translated into English by the first author and subsequently checked by the second author.

Ethical considerations

We were provided with permission to use the questionnaire responses for research purposes by Friends. Prior to administering the questionnaires, Friends received informed consent from principals, teachers, students and their primary caregivers, who were ensured that participation was voluntary and that the responses would be treated anonymously. Anonymity was facilitated by the fact that the questionnaires were filled in by a large number of students at schools around Sweden. The answers were also aggregated, meaning that we did not know which school the student was attending, their ethnic background, their gender identity or their specific age (beyond that they were in grades 3–6). Prior to beginning the analysis, ethical approval was obtained from the local ethical review board and no responses have been used in the article that refer to a specific person, school or geographical location.

Data analysis

The student responses were printed out and then analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006; Clarke and Braun 2013). In conducting the thematic analysis, we utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. The answers were first read through a number of times to aid familiarity. Secondly, initial codes were generated by the first author, such as *food*, *hygiene*, *seating*, *older students* and *queueing*. Thirdly, the initial codes were then sorted by the first author in order to create five potential themes. Fourthly, the themes were reviewed by both authors and reduced in number, with some of the coded responses being moved and/or removed, depending on their relevance. This stage of the analysis was also facilitated by feedback from colleagues on a draft version of the text at

a departmental text seminar. The themes were then reviewed and refined until four key themes were defined.

Findings

The themes that were identified by the analysis were: *Space constraints*, *Time restrictions*, *The risk of social blunders* and *The negative actions of others*. In presenting our findings below, we have arranged the themes by subsections in such a way as to facilitate readability, while, nonetheless, acknowledging that there is significant overlap between the themes. Taken together, we believe that these themes, and the student responses that have generated them, allow for a particularly nuanced understanding of the ways in which students' experiences of safety may be influenced by the environmental and structural characteristics of the school canteen. Through our qualitative reading and analysis of the responses, we aim to present an in-depth, thick description of the data as a contribution to exploring and illuminating the research question of why some students felt that they felt unsafe in the school canteen. In the subsections that follow, anonymised and translated quotations from the student responses are used, where necessary, to illustrate and exemplify points and themes in the description.

Theme 1: space constraints

A number of students pointed to the issue of large numbers of people in the school canteen when explaining why they felt unsafe. One student wrote, 'yeah, there are a lot of different people in the canteen', while others suggested that the canteen was a 'disorderly' and 'noisy' place, where 'there's always a hell of a noise' and 'it sounds like a bomb has gone off'. Some students pointed to the small space in relation to the number of students, highlighting that 'it's small and cramped in the canteen'. For some students, this led to feelings of confinement. A couple of students stated that they felt unsafe in the canteen because they 'feel closed in'.

For many students, however, their major concern was related to seating. Some students explained that there was a lack of space, seats and tables, and that this meant that they might have to spend time looking for a spare seat. As one student explained, 'there is almost never space. You always have to go around and look for a seat and sometimes it takes a very long time'. Sometimes, students may be forced to stand and wait for a seat to be vacated. As one student put it, 'there are too few places and sometimes I can't sit anywhere and have to stand and wait'. In some canteens, students squeezed together, with lots of students around one small table: 'It's cramped because there aren't any places and then some people are forced to sit with seven people around a little table'. The sheer number of students in the canteen may mean that there is insecurity in sitting at the end of a table, as suggested by a student who explained they felt unsafe in the canteen 'because I sit at the end of a table where lots of people walk past'. In some canteens, rules against moving furniture may mean that some students sit on the floor near their friends. As a couple of students pointed out, 'there is a lack of space, stools and tables. Added to that, you're not allowed to move seats. Sometimes we have to sit on the floor' and 'there are too many people there at the same time and it is difficult to find a place so many people sit on the floor'.

Space constraints meant that some students could not sit with their friends at lunchtime, and a number of students expressed their desire to be able to choose who to sit with. As one student argued, 'I think we should be able to sit where we want'. Indeed, for some students, feelings of unsafety appeared to stem from the possibility of being separated from their friends in the canteen. As one student noted, 'because I don't get to sit next to my friends!!!' For others, it more appeared to stem from a fear of being isolated in the canteen. As one student put it, 'sometimes there is no place for me'. As another student pointed out, being forced to sit alone at lunchtime is simply not fun: 'because I don't always have someone to sit with and it's not fun to see myself like that'. For some students, feelings of a lack of safety appeared to originate from the uncertainty of not knowing whom they might be forced to sit beside. As one student put it, 'because everyone eats at the same time as us and you never know who you will sit beside'. Students may also feel unsure about whether or not they are welcome to sit next to someone or whether that person will get annoyed: 'because you don't know whether you're allowed to sit where you want because that might annoy someone'.

Students suggested that uncertainty about seating meant that students ran and pushed to get a seat. One student stated that they felt unsafe 'because there are lots of people running around', while another stated that they felt unsafe 'because there are a lot of people who push'. Highlighting why this might be an issue of concern, one student wrote that they felt unsafe in the canteen because 'there are lots of people pushing in the canteen and you can get an elbow in the head'. Having a large number of students rushing about and pushing to get seats in a relatively small confined space alludes to the chaotic nature of the space. As one student succinctly put it, 'it's chaos, bro'.

Somewhat ironically, the queueing system used, presumably to make the canteen a less chaotic place, appeared to merely add to the perceived disorder described by students, with some students feeling unsafe about the queue system. As one student noted, 'when we enter, we're crammed into a line and I don't think that's good'. The combination of a large number of students and the necessity of queueing for food led to students cramming into the long queue and jostling for position. As one student pointed out, the canteen was perceived as unsafe 'because it's chaos there and everyone crams in and pushes and it's about a 5-metre queue to get food!' Issues of seating and pushing point to the ways in which students' use of the canteen was governed by institutionalised time restrictions. In this sense, then, their use of space was directly connected to their use of time.

Theme 2: time restrictions

Highlighting the importance of the interactional relation between space and time, one student suggested that the reason there were a lack of good places to sit was because some students got to the canteen early. As they put it, 'some people go earlier and the places available can be quite bad'. The answers provided by students suggest that they would prefer more time to sit and eat. As one student put it, 'because we have so little time'. Indeed, one student said that they felt unsafe in the canteen 'because we only have 20 min to eat food', while another stated that their sense of a lack of safety was because 'you have to leave your plates within a certain time'.

The reported disorderly nature of the canteen, and the associated running and pushing of students, meant that some students did not feel that they had enough time to eat their lunch. As one student wrote, 'I don't feel that I can eat at my own pace'. For some students, this meant that they were forced to sit alone if they wished to finish their lunch 'because everyone runs around and you don't have time to eat, and when everyone leaves you have to sit there all alone'. The risk of being left to eat alone meant that some students did not feel able to sit and finish their lunch. As one student explained, 'I like to sit and eat for quite a long time but there aren't so many left who can wait when I want to'. Being left by friends was a stress factor for some students, one of whom wrote that 'I feel stressed when my friends leave'.

Illustrating why students might feel the need to eat their food quickly, many students pointed to a fear of older students, who were supposed to use the canteen at a later time but often turned up earlier. As one student put it, 'because the high school kids come just 10 min after us and they are much bigger'. Numerous students wrote that they were unnerved by the presence of the older students, with one student stating, 'I don't feel safe when the high school students arrive'. Indeed, some students indicated that they perceived the high school students to be a bit 'scary'. As one student put it, 'I'm scared of the older students'.

For those students who take a while to eat their lunch, this can mean that they have to sit with older students from higher grades. This was pointed out by a student who wrote as follows: 'the high school students have to eat later than us but they don't care, so twice I've had to sit with them by myself'. This was also suggested by another student, who answered that they felt unsafe because 'I eat quite slowly and the older kids come after we have eaten. I'm often the last one sitting there'. Being left to eat alone with the older high school students could be an intimidating experience for some students, with one student suggesting that it stopped them going to the canteen at all.

The fear experienced by students can partially be explained by the uncertainty of what the older students might do. As one student explained, 'because when you're still eating, the big kids come and you don't know what they might do'. Some students explained that they did not feel it was possible to continue eating because the bigger students would make them leave. This was highlighted by one student, who commented, 'we have about 5 min to eat, because then the big students turn up. When I want to take more food, I'm pushed out by them'. One student suggested that they found it embarrassing to still be eating when the older students turned up: 'when I eat so much, it feels like the big students will come and it's embarrassing if you're sitting by yourself among the big kids'. In attempting to understand this student's feelings of embarrassment, it is important to consider the social context and the perceived risk of committing social blunders, which lurks just beneath the interactional surface.

Theme 3: the risk of social blunders

When explaining why they felt unsafe in the school canteen, some students had difficulty pointing out exactly what they feared, but suggested that there was the risk of making some kind of mistake. As one student noted, 'I don't really know why but you don't want to make a mistake'. One student stated that it was 'because you can say something stupid', while another suggested that they were 'afraid that someone will think that I eat

disgustingly'. Another student wrote that they felt unsafe 'because I eat too much and look weird', suggesting not only that they had a negative self-perception but also that the school canteen was a space where perceived difference could be illuminated and pointed out.

A number of students pointed out that spatial constraints and time restrictions increase the risk of accidentally stumbling or pushing into someone in the canteen. As one student explained, 'there are a lot of people there so you might stumble or happen to push someone'. As another student pointed out, the large numbers of students meant that 'you're always bumping into people in the small canteen'. As a number of students suggested, this also increased the risk of someone else bumping into them and causing them to drop something. For example, one student explained, 'because lots of people push so that you can spill your drink, for example'. This possibility appeared to cause anxiety in some students, who stated, 'I'm afraid that I will bump into someone and spill my milk' and 'I'm afraid that someone will push me and I will drop food, which would be embarrassing'. This highlights the students' awareness that a seemingly small incident can have serious repercussions within the social space and may lead to uncomfortable social situations where the person who has spilt their drink or dropped something else, receives unwanted attention from other students, thus magnifying the situation. One student explained that 'people tend to jump the queue and push so you spill food and everyone stares'. Another student pointed out that it might not only be people they know who stare but also strangers: 'because I don't know some of the people there and everyone stares if you happen to drop something'.

Highlighting the importance of the material characteristics of the setting, some students pointed to the fact that there was often food on the floor and explained that this meant that there was a risk of stepping on this discarded food. Hence, they had to be careful where they stepped: 'It is so dirty I'm afraid that I will accidentally step on something disgusting, so I always have to be careful'. It was not only the thought of stepping on something that appeared to worry students. As one student noted, for example, there was also the risk of slipping: 'There is usually always food on the floor so that you slip, it has happened to me a few times'. Some students suggested that the risk of slipping and dropping something was made all the worse by the associated risk of becoming the focus of other people's attention. This may not only involve other students staring at them, but may also involve the social ridicule of being subjected to the laughter of others. As one student put it, 'because there are so many kids close by and if I do something embarrassing, then everyone will laugh'. The risk of being laughed at was highlighted by a number of students who wrote, 'if you drop food, lots of people can look at you and maybe laugh' and 'they laugh when you drop a glass or something'. Students may laugh or even clap at another student's misfortune, as highlighted by a student who stated that 'everyone claps if someone drops a plate!!!'

Some students pointed out that bumping into other students could also potentially lead to direct conflicts with those students into whom they had collided, who may blame them for any spillage caused. As one student stated, 'sometimes I accidentally bump into someone and they spill their food, soup or milk and then they blame me'. Bumping into someone may not only lead to blaming but may also cause the other person to get angry. One student wrote, 'if you bump into someone so that all the food falls on the floor so we

have to pick it up, maybe the other person gets really angry', while another suggested that they felt unsafe because 'if you bump into someone, they might get a bit angry'.

Theme 4: the negative actions of others

As illustrated in the answers above, students' feelings of insecurity appeared to be exacerbated by the fact that there were lots of students in the canteen at the same time. As students did not know everyone in the canteen, they were unable to judge how they might act or react. Some students pointed to the risk of being excluded in the canteen. One student pointed out that the canteen is a space where 'there is a big risk of being left out', while another student simply stated, 'I am excluded'. One student pointed out that they lacked friends and thus tended to sit alone in the school canteen: 'I always sit alone at a table. I don't have many friends'. Some students pointed out that other students did not want to sit next to them, while some students stated that other students did not talk to them. As one student pointed out, this led to a sense of insecurity: 'the students at my table never talk to me, so I'm alone and feel unsafe'. One student highlighted the negative repercussions sitting alone could have, in that other students may then look and point: 'sometimes if you sit alone some students tend to look and point'. Indeed, some students stated that they felt unsafe because of the way that other students looked or stared at them. One student, for example, wrote that 'it feels like everyone is looking at you and thinks that you look ugly and disgusting'. One student suggested that the way that students stare at them made them feel unwelcome at the school: 'It feels like many people stare at me as if I'm not welcome at the school'. For some, the feeling that others were looking or staring at them appeared to reinforce their own negative perceptions of themselves, as highlighted by a student who wrote, 'I feel fat when I eat and don't want everyone looking at me'.

In explaining why they felt unsafe in the school canteen, some students also referred to the possibility that other students might whisper and laugh about them. This was noted by a student who wrote, 'I usually feel safe but I have experienced that some girls look at me and whisper and giggle'. Another student pointed to a similar experience, noting that 'once some friends sat and whispered and giggled when I sat beside them'. Some students explained that they felt that other students laughed at them because they perceived them to be overweight and repulsive. As one student put it, 'it feels as if everyone thinks I'm fat, and then it feels like everyone is laughing at me and just thinks that I'm disgusting'. Some students pointed out that the school canteen was a place where there are a lot of people and a high risk of being called negative things. One student wrote, 'there are too many people in the canteen at the same time!!! So, you don't know if people will say stupid things to you', while another stated, 'there are so many people there who can say bad things'. While numerous students more generally suggested that they had been teased or verbally abused in the school canteen, some referred more specifically to comments related to food, in terms of their food choices, the amount they ate or even the speed at which they ate. One student, for example, stated they felt unsafe 'because many can comment how much you take and how little you take and what you take'. Likewise, another student stated that their sense of insecurity was 'because everyone at my table comments on what I eat and how much'. While these students referred to 'comments' they received because of their meal choices, others more explicitly

referred to being teased and/or called names. One student, for example, stated that ‘they tease me about taking too much food and call me nasty things’. In a similar vein, another student answered that ‘some people call me fatty or slow because I eat too much or too slowly’.

Some students also suggested that the negative actions that they feared were more physical in character. For instance, a number of students pointed to the risk of having something taken while in the school canteen, with one student suggesting that this could be one of many things to happen: ‘pushing, comments and people who take my hat’. Some students stated that other students threw food at them, poured water on them or spat in their food. One student stated that the canteen is a place where ‘people fight and verbally abuse others’, while another pointed out that ‘there was a punch-up in the canteen not so long ago.’ Other students referred more specifically to their own negative experiences. For example, one student stated that they felt unsafe ‘because everyone kicks me’, while another answered that they felt unsafe because ‘my “friends” want to hit me and pour milk on me’. A few students also made reference to sexual harassment and assault.

Some students referred explicitly to the issue of school bullying and ‘bullies’, suggesting that many of the negative actions raised within this theme were pervasive and that some students were repeatedly targeted. As one student put it, they felt unsafe in the canteen ‘because you can be teased, hit or bullied’. A number of students suggested that older students bully younger students, with one student writing that they felt unsafe ‘because there are older kids who bully others when there is no teacher around’, while another stated that ‘I feel unsafe because a bigger student might bully me’. The perceived risk of being bullied in the school canteen was linked by one student to the large number of students present in the canteen and to their understanding that there were many bullies at their particular school: ‘because there are so many people there and I’ve heard that there are a lot of bullies at this school’. The large number of students, the restricted space and the loud noise levels meant that it may not be possible to always be aware if someone was coming, and this could contribute to feelings of insecurity and fear. This was highlighted by a student who stated they felt unsafe ‘because I am so scared that someone will come without me seeing them’. Some students referred more explicitly to their own experiences of being bullied in the school canteen, with students writing ‘because the older students bully me’, ‘a boy bullies me’ and ‘I sit with someone who has bullied me’, and sometimes connecting their fear of bullying to a particular person.

Discussion

In this study, we explored the ways in which the school canteen was experienced as unsafe through the analysis of student questionnaire responses. The students’ explanations of why they felt unsafe in the school canteen highlight conflictual themes and draw attention not only to social aspects of their experiences but also environmental and structural aspects (Zumbrunn et al. 2013). In doing so, then, the students’ explanations illustrate the need for consideration of the ‘environmental-structural aspects of school life’ when discussing the social-ecological model in relation to safety and negative peer interactions in the school canteen (Nickerson et al. 2014, 160).

Our consideration of students' perceptions of safety in the school canteen highlights the importance of sociocultural norms related to gender, sexuality and the body at the macrosystem level, which circulate in the canteen and undoubtedly in the broader school context, and are experienced in terms of being perceived as 'fat' or 'disgusting' or of being sexually harassed, for example. Consideration of the macrosystem level also highlights the 'consistencies, in the form and content' of the school canteen setting in terms of being a space where large numbers of students are provided with school meals on a daily basis (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 26). While recommendations provided by the Swedish National Food Agency point to the importance of environmental and structural aspects related to space and time, decisions taken at the exosystem level regarding the allocation of space and the scheduling of lunchtimes, for example, mean that school canteens may not always live up to expectations. Students' responses regarding why they felt unsafe in the school canteen suggest that the school canteen setting is sometimes experienced as a disorderly space, characterised by large numbers of people, high noise levels, lack of adequate seating and stress-inducing time constraints.

Such environmental and structural aspects have implications at the mesosystem level, as the large numbers of students gathered in the canteen may mean that students are not familiar with everyone. Rather, time constraints contribute to a mixing of age groupings, meaning that younger students are forced to interact with older students, of whom they may be wary or fearful. As some students highlighted, they may also feel unsafe precisely because of the interrelations between the canteen and other settings such as the classroom and school playground: they may fear that particular students might turn up (e.g., those who have previously been bullying them). The large numbers of students and the poor acoustics of the canteen may also mean that students cannot see or hear when those students arrive. Students also voiced the risk of making a mistake or doing or saying something perceived as stupid. In terms of the mesosystem level, this can be understood as a fear not only of what might happen in the school canteen, but also an awareness that what happens in the canteen may carry over into other settings such as the classroom or playground.

While students in this study often do not explicitly refer to obvious bullying situations, it is important to consider their explanations in light of recent discussions of the social context of bullying. Student concerns about making a mistake, saying or doing something stupid, eating in what was deemed to be a disgusting way, eating the wrong things, eating too much or too little, dropping something, slipping over or bumping into someone are important in terms of social hierarchies and ordering and processes of inclusion and exclusion. All of the above concerns resonate with the complexity of peer relations and the inherent risk of being singled out or deemed as not fitting in (Søndergaard 2012; Thornberg 2018).

People generally tend to want to avoid embarrassment and shame and, thus, constantly seek to interpret how others judge them in social situations (Cooley 1964). In the context of the school canteen, students referred to social situations that evoked a fear of being embarrassed and losing face in front of their peers (Goffman 1967). Fears about being stared at, laughed at, clapped or whispered about, point to relational forms of bullying and can be linked to the risk of being socially stigmatised and perceived as a misfit, and hence to the risk of being socially excluded from or within the peer group and subjected to more sustained bullying (Goffman 1963; Søndergaard 2012; Thornberg 2018).

Numerous students in this study more explicitly suggested that they were or had been subjected to a range of direct negative actions that are characteristic of relational (e.g. excluding and not talking), verbal (e.g. teasing, insulting and name-calling) and physical (e.g. stealing, throwing, pouring, spitting, groping, hitting and kicking) forms of bullying (Låftman, Östberg, and Modin 2017; Ma 2002). Some students referred more broadly to their experiences of being bullied and their fear of being bullied by particular students in the school canteen. These findings suggest that the school canteen is experienced, by some students at least, as a potential arena for school bullying. Taking a social-ecological perspective has a number of implications regarding how best to address the issue of student safety and negative peer interactions in the school canteen.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the study is based on already-collected data, and the data are aggregated in such a way that restricts our ability to conduct a more detailed analysis of the importance of demographic factors, such as gender, ethnicity or age. Secondly, the data are written responses, which may have made some students reluctant to share their experiences and/or may have restricted the extent to which they were willing or able to elaborate their responses to the question asked. Thirdly, the study is based on data collected through questionnaires and does not provide the possibility for further follow-up questions. While this study offers rich insights from an in-depth qualitative analysis of questionnaire data, it is not possible to generalise from these somewhat limited findings. Further qualitative research is needed to explore the specific environment of school canteens in order to gain a more thorough understanding of why some students perceive their school canteen to be an unsafe space. Ethnographic research may be particularly fruitful in this regard, as it would not only allow for follow-up questions to be asked during more in-depth qualitative interviews, but would also allow for observational experience of the specific school canteen environment.

Implications and conclusions

As mentioned previously, it was only a small proportion of surveyed students who responded that they felt unsafe in the school canteen. Nonetheless, as the canteen is often reported to be perceived as an unsafe space, it is important to understand more about why some students reported that they did not feel safe. The students' explanations as to why they felt unsafe in their school canteen highlight the extent to which the canteen may be perceived as a conflictual space, not simply because of the negative behaviour of certain students, but also because of the ways in which the particular setting of the canteen is constituted, understood and enacted. Rather than simply understanding the school canteen as a setting where negative peer interactions such as harassment and bullying occur, our findings suggest that the canteen is a setting where peer interactions are enacted in relation to environmental and structural factors whose importance have been hitherto neglected. Rather than simply focusing on the negative behaviour of particular individuals, our findings suggest that more focus needs to be placed on the environmental and structural aspects of school canteens. We suggest that shifting the focus could involve addressing a number of aspects.

Firstly, it may entail addressing the physical canteen space, in order to reduce the number of students present at any one time and to increase the seating possibilities for students. One way in which this could be done is by seating students in class groupings, potentially even together with a teacher or mentor. Secondly, the acoustics of the canteen could be addressed, in order to reduce the amount of noise. Rather than telling students to be quiet, which closes down social interaction, it could be achieved by utilising insulating materials in the walls and flooring and spatially designing canteens in such a way as to reduce unnecessary noise as much as possible. Thirdly, rescheduling meal times could help to ensure that students have adequate time to eat their food without the stress of being forced to move or being left to eat alone. In short, taking a social-ecological perspective highlights the need for a serious reconsideration of the environmental and structural aspects of the school canteen setting and a better understanding of how they impact upon the social interactions of students.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the non-profit organisation Friends in Sweden for providing us with access to their questionnaire findings. We would also like to acknowledge the helpful feedback we received from colleagues on an earlier version of this text and the helpful comments provided by the reviewers and editors of *Educational Research*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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