

Sugar, A Morally Ambiguous Substance

Responsibility, social class and pleasure in Scotland's state primary schools

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Abstract

Children's sugar consumption has been marked out as an important area of public health policymaking in the UK, due to connections between sugar consumption, obesity, type 2 diabetes and dental decay. Yet unlike other regulated substances (alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarettes), 'moderate' or 'responsible' sugar consumption, rather than abstinence, is the desired policy outcome. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Edinburgh in 2018–19 in two demographically mixed Scottish state primary schools, I examine how school staff navigate this space of lenience written into state health policy—whereby some sugar can be consumed, sometimes. The public health dangers of sugar consumption, coupled with its relational pleasures (through associations with kinship, nurture and celebration) help illuminate how schools—as responsible agents—attempt to care for and govern children. It is sugar's ambiguity, I argue, that enables it to become a crucial tool for children's socialisation. Where and how sugar can be consumed responsibly, and which pleasures are deemed permissible or excessive, vary contextually: they are shaped through social class, and depend on the school policy being enacted. Beyond being an object to regulate, children's pleasures in sugar are central to affective, social and class-informed practices of creating morally responsible persons.

Keywords

Food, Pleasure, Children, Responsibility, School.

Introduction

Gary, aged ten, was incredulous. 'Is Hot Chocolate Friday, basically you come in here, and get a whole load of sugar put into your body?'

Mrs Glenn, the headteacher, laughed. 'Yes, I guess so! Sugar is not very good for you, is it? But sugar isn't the devil—as long as you're not having it every day.' Gary accepted the marshmallow-topped cup of hot chocolate and took a seat at the plastic dining table along with nine other children. Like Gary, they had been excused from class by their teachers to claim a Hot Chocolate reward for especially outstanding behaviour (either in terms of learning, or school citizenship more broadly) in select company. Behind Gary, a large poster entitled 'Sugar Smart!', made during a different school activity, warned children how many cubes of sugar were contained in different foods, and urged caution.

In primary schools across Scotland, as in other United Kingdom (UK) nations, sugar is marked out as problematic, detrimental to health, and to children's health in particular. Concerns revolve around sugar's connection with the onset of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and dental health problems, and their problematic chronicity—lasting from childhood across the life course. School-provisioned sugar has come under scrutiny, with some schools trialling interventions discouraging children from bringing in high-sugar snacks and drinks from home. Yet sugar consumption continues to appear within school structures, for example, as in the case described above, as a reward for excellent behaviour—based on the shared knowledge that sugar is a source of pleasure for children. In this article, I examine the ways in which the school staff I observed negotiated children's consumption of a morally ambiguous substance, neither completely safe to consume, nor, as Mrs Glenn put it, quite 'the devil', and how Scottish primary schools, as institutions of the state,¹ try to socialise children into the dangers and pleasures of sugar consumption.

Very specific forms of sugar consumption brought from home were identified in school management and parent council meetings as problematic, excessive, or a risk to health: the 'family bag' or 'sharing bag' of Haribo sweets² (to discourage?), diluted squash (to prohibit?), or sodas (prohibited). In a nation infamous for its unhealthy diet, often symbolised by the deep-fried Mars bar—an object which binds together ideas about taste, nation and social class (Knight 2016)—food bans

¹ Responsibility for health and education in Scotland is devolved to the Scottish government.

² In the UK, larger bags of sweets are commonly marketed in this way, implying that they are not individual portions.

were an awkward topic for the school staff. Questions around pupil inequalities, the affordability of healthier foods, and potential stigma defied simple solutions. Yet alongside this, hot chocolate and homemade cakes went unchallenged. Presented as inherently raceless and ‘classless’ (Johnston and Baumann 2009, 180; see also Gibson 2023), some manifestations of sugar were considered a positive and integral part of school life.

The school’s constructions of sugar’s meanings, and its oscillations between dangerous and innocuous, positive and negative, varied not only according to the social positioning of its educators, but on the setting, policy, and type of relationships being enacted—a reward in the context of Hot Chocolate Friday, a problem in the context of a classroom-based activity on health and sugar awareness. Sugary foods were viewed by school staff as both a symptom of inadequate parental care (the large bag of sweets), and part of its solution (baking cakes in school), to compensate for experiences lacking at home. These swings between sugar consumption as morally desirable and as deeply problematic, as classless and ‘classful’, reflect the ways in which sugar can be constructed as a public health issue but also, within the same schools, as something that brings a sense of enjoyment, care and homeliness to school places and relationships. It is precisely this ambiguity which renders sugar useful as a tool for children’s socialisation, and provides insight to the production of ‘responsible’ persons: those capable of navigating context-specific moralities and able to moderate their relationship to pleasure.

Class, Responsibility and Pleasure

Foods are important signifiers of class within the UK (Gibson 2023; Warde 1997), and media depictions of diet often play out ‘within a wider discourse of class pathologization’ (Hollows and Jones 2010, 308). This is particularly the case in Scotland, where food discourses and practices are central to class politics, identities and processes of othering (Backett-Milburn et al. 2010; Knight 2016; Wills et al. 2011). Social class in Scotland has been ‘erased’ from policy discourses and become a ‘social condition that dare not it speak its name’ (Law and Mooney 2006, 253). This erasure, amid ongoing class divisions and structural inequalities, enables the public denigration of some foods and the celebration of others. In the following sections, I explore how homemade sugary foods like cakes become intertwined with unspoken white middle-class values of consumption, through associations with domestic labour and care (Casey 2019; Wesser 2021)—opening up their positioning as a school site for learning about responsibility and morality.

Responsibilisation, the process through which responsibilities are allocated to, and embodied by, individuals, has long been coupled with concepts of governance

which explore how persons are governed ‘at a distance’ (Rose and Miller 1992) by a range of state and non-state actors (Rose 1996; Rose 1999; Rose 2001). Food, diet and body weight are key sites where adults and children experience pressures to become responsible, self-disciplining, risk-managing citizens (Guthman and Dupuis 2006; Heyes 2006; LeBesco 2011; Pike and Leahy 2012; Rail 2012; Rich and Evans 2015). Often implicit to these analyses is a Foucauldian understanding of discipline and self-governance as a ‘ceaseless, powerful process of subject formation’ (Mayblin 2017, 506). Such approaches do not tend to have pleasure at their core, beyond its presence as something problematic to be governed (Foucault 1978; Rich and Evans 2015).

In attending to sugar as a morally ambiguous substance, I open up space for theoretical attention to governance through moderate pleasure. I explore how the enjoyments of sugar become a key site for responsabilisation—where moral persons are produced through experiences of consumption, including spaces for immoderation and indiscipline (Mayblin 2017). Critical drug research has critiqued the absence of pleasure in research and policymaking (e.g., Holt and Treloar 2008; Moore 2008; O’Malley and Valverde 2004). This literature positions the formation of substance-based pleasures spatially, and through relations with others, in social gatherings, parties, and community groups (e.g., Becker 1953; Bevan 2016; Cañedo and Moral 2017; Duff 2008)—yet directs little attention towards pleasure in state institutions.³ Despite the stark inequalities in people’s experiences of substance use, the class-based nature of such pleasures also remains undertheorised. My approach emphasises both the teaching of permissible ‘classed’ pleasures (Ahmed 2010) and their ‘caring potential’ (Dennis and Farrugia 2017, 89). I do so by examining consumption in school, an institution often characterised by an implicit—yet ambiguous and shifting, I suggest—middle-class ethos (Reay 2005, 2017; Evans 2006).

As sites that combine formal learning, moral education, and compensation for parental obligations of care, schools offer a varied context and sets of relationships through which to explore consumption, morality and class. Through this ethnographic material, I examine how adults in school, as both recipients and actors of policy (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012), carve out spaces for permissible consumption in three ways: through responsabilisation, care, and celebration. I focus first on sugar as an ambiguous object of health education. I then turn to sugar’s role in creating sites and relations of nurture as part of the school’s responsibility to provide targeted care to its most ‘deprived’ pupils, and end with an examination of sugar’s celebratory potential.

³ For an examination of drug consumption rooms run by NGOs, see Duncan et al. 2017.

Fieldsite and methods

This paper is based on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2018 and 2019, with families in a demographically mixed Edinburgh neighbourhood, and with schools across the city. While Edinburgh is often associated with elites and internationalism, due to its universities, financial centres, tourism, and its symbolism both as the ‘cultural centre’ and seat of power of the Scottish nation, this wealth is uneven, and pockets of deprivation remain. I selected two schools for participant observation based on their wide catchment areas and mixed demographics, and combined this with observations in after-school clubs, visits to other schools and pre-school nurseries, and interviews with headteachers, health professionals, and parents. Parents were informed via school newsletters that a PhD student would be observing everyday life at school to learn about children’s practices and perspectives on food. For observations with classes, pupil committees, and nurture groups, parents received an information sheet and opt-out consent form at the suggestion of teachers and in line with UK classroom research (Kustatscher 2014).

I assembled a partial picture of school life through weekly observations in the first school, Oakfield Primary,⁴ on different days, attending school assemblies, gardening groups, breakfast clubs, staff training days, and social events. I learnt about approaches to health and nurture by shadowing my senior staff contact, as she went about multiple projects targeting the wellbeing and opportunities of pupils classified as most deprived. In the second school, Greenside Primary, my presence was narrowly structured and dependent on the interest and generosity of two class teachers. I observed children in both classes one day per week over a five-week learning period dedicated to health, food, and the body, continuing my observations in the lunch hall and playground on these visits, and participating in parent council meetings and social events throughout the school year. My different role and status in each establishment (standing behind school management, or sitting alongside the children in the classroom and dining hall), as well as informal visits to other schools, provided me with several complementary perspectives. I observed how schools were permeated by multiple policy frameworks: those focused on illness prevention through healthy eating and healthy lifestyles (Scottish Government 2018), and others promoting positive behaviour approaches, and holistic nurturing approach to support children’s learning, wellbeing, behaviour and educational attainment (Education Scotland 2016a).

While the demographic of children attending these two schools was mixed, those working in teaching and management roles were predominantly white, holding

⁴ The names of all persons and institutions mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

degrees in higher education, and more often than not women. As a PhD student and white middle-class woman, my presence in school went unchallenged and often unnoticed; teaching staff and management assumed that I shared their frames of reference. I was assigned a range of unspoken responsibilities—an experience shared by other adults working in this setting. For example, many employees felt driven to model by eating ‘good’ (i.e., healthy, low-sugar) snacks, and were expected by school management to conceal themselves at some distance from school grounds should they wish to smoke during the school day.

My presence was often seen by teachers and management as pertaining to state logics of sugar as a public health issue. I was invited to contribute to, and/or design health education interventions to sensitise parents (both of which I refused to do). Meanwhile, parents took me aside at the school gate to request my assistance in encouraging their child to finish lunch. In trying to embody the methodological figure of the ‘unusual’ adult (Christensen 2004, 174), I took to eating generous helping of ‘high-sugar’ foods with school staff in appropriate social instances (e.g., at the school bake sale, or staff Friday cake mornings, including bringing in cakes myself) in order to reject this assigned responsibility to educate and responsabilise others, and to dispel the notion that I was ‘against’ sugar, or ‘with’ public health. Complicity is one face of responsibility, as others have noted (White 2023). This was less straightforward to navigate with the schoolchildren. Children sometimes requested things from me—extra pudding in the dining hall, permission to discard their lunch, or to share their sweets with others. Like those I interviewed and observed, I often became entangled in the tricky question of managing children’s consumption.

Governing an ambiguous substance: public health and school policies

Public health framings of sugar such as those made in the opening vignette—harmless and pleasurable in small quantities, yet dangerous when consumed too often or in larger amounts (‘sugar isn’t the devil—as long as you’re not having it every day’, as Mrs Glenn opined, in line with the National Health Service’s guidelines (2023)⁵—can be read as a legacy of sugar’s deeper histories. In Scotland, sugar has journeyed between different categories of consumption, modes of exploitative labour, moral considerations and regulatory environments, alongside and in opposition to a range of other substances, often as a subject of political contention and education. As a substance extracted from colonised

⁵ The National Health Service (2023) guidance warns that ‘eating too much sugar can make you gain weight and can also cause tooth decay,’ but that rather than abstaining from sugar, people in a given age range should observe the appropriate maximum level of sugar consumption. For example, ‘Children aged 4 to 6 should have *no more than* 19g of free sugars a day (5 sugar cubes)’ (my emphasis).

territories through processes of slavery and violence (Mintz 1986), sugar spread rapidly through Scottish and British economies alongside—and often dissolved within—imperial commodities like tea, coffee and chocolate. Initially reserved for the aristocracy as a spice or delicacy, sugar only become widely available as a ‘food’ or source of calories in the mid-19th century, when it was mass-produced and fed in copious amounts to the working classes (Mintz 1986). Public outcry against sugar’s links to slavery and systemic violence made sugar a highly political substance (Mintz 1997; Huzzey 2010)—and one with long links to questions of consumer responsibility.

Desires to govern and control the sugar consumption practices of the masses have a long history. Early social reformers expressed concern about the extravagance of the English working poor in their mounting desires for tea and sugar (Mintz 1997, 7), and condemned sugar on the grounds of its manifest link to excess, vice, and wasted time (Mintz 1997, 176). Sugar has long been framed in terms of a dichotomy between responsible and irresponsible consumption, with the figure of the problem-consumer, or ‘flawed consumer’ (Reith 2019, 8), unable to control their intake, and effectually exposing themselves to weight gain, vice, and chronic disease. It is always particular social groups—the working classes—that are most regularly framed as out of control with their consumption and pleasures (Ahmed 2010), and in need of interventions. Sugar was always already an ambiguous substance, and its consumption style a matter of power and class positioning (Mintz 1986).

For example, in Scotland’s temperance years, some forms of sugar signalled responsibility and control, while others indicated vice. Local authorities in 1900s Glasgow targeted ice cream, and more particularly its consumption in shops held by Italian migrants, as a crucial public harm (McKee 1997). Alongside this, a burgeoning soda industry promoted sugary beverages as a safe and respectable alternative to alcohol, newly cast as dangerous and addicting (Levine 1978), and sugared tea-drinking in tearooms was promoted as a suitable middle-class female leisure pursuit (Burnett 1991). Since the 20th century, concerns about sugar have coalesced around sugar’s medical value in a way that preserves such class divisions, with sugar framed in British media as a ‘public health enemy’ in a ‘war’ on obesity (Throsby 2020, 11). This deeply rooted Protestant mistrust in pleasure (Coveney and Bunton 2003), and more specifically, working-class pleasure, continues to permeate contemporary public health discourses in Scotland.

In 21st century Scotland, public health interventions to tackle the ‘problem’ of sugar consumption are widespread and multipronged, including pervasive ‘anti-obesity pedagog[ies]’ (Evans, Colls and Hörschelmann 2011, 336) and wide-ranging restrictions. Unlike tobacco regulation, which features future ‘tobacco-free’

generations (Scottish Government 2023, 15), the question of a sugar-free generation has not been seriously posed. Rather than abstinence, public health messaging emphasises that sugar should be consumed responsibly or ‘in moderation’, framing this as a matter of informed choice and individual responsibility (with campaigns like ‘Change4Life’,⁶ and within this, ‘SugarSmart’, for example). Measures to produce responsible consumption range from nutritional warnings on products, to health education for families, social marketing campaigns, and restrictions on advertisements targeting children. In 2018, a UK-wide levy on soft drinks was introduced, which operated with a two-level threshold depending on sugar content per volume (5 g or 8 g per 100 ml)—a model reminiscent of taxes on alcohol whereby spirits are more heavily taxed per unit of alcohol than beer or wine.

Schools have been key sites for governing working-class lives since at least the 1900s, when education and feeding coalesced in a new ‘drive to produce the disciplined workforce required for future industrial production’ (Gustafsson 2002, 670). At the time of fieldwork in 2018, the mantra ‘Healthy at school, healthy for life’ (Scottish Government 2007) marked a shift towards the need for educational institutions to take increased responsibility for children’s diets beyond the school meal, their traditional site of intervention. Scotland’s 2016 *Curriculum for Excellence* advises that, from the ages of 3 to 18, the promotion of health and wellbeing ‘should be a continuous focus’ (Education Scotland 2016b, 5) and a responsibility of all teachers and practitioners. A second area of concern was children’s access to emotional wellbeing and nurturing relationships (Education Scotland 2016a). Teachers in the UK—a predominantly female profession—have been increasingly encouraged to take on social justice-informed roles and to provide pastoral care (Done and Murphy 2018), amid a growing ‘repertoire’ of affective responsibilities (McLeod 2017, 47).

Such policies frame dietary education and emotional care as seeping throughout school life—redistributing to school staff some of the responsibility usually attributed to the nuclear home and to mothers (Beagan et al. 2008; Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991), and seen as pertaining to the domain of the private.⁷ This policy shift offers new possibilities for rethinking the overlap between the state and kinship (Thelen, Thiemann and Roth 2014). Secondly, it challenges theorisations of responsabilisation as a unilinear trajectory towards individualisation and the privatisation of risk management (Beck 1992; Burchell 1996; Rose and Miller 2008). Primary school policies offer a different story about the people involved in what critical public health scholars have famously termed the ‘lifestyle

⁶ Change4Life was an England-based state public health campaign, sometimes drawn on in Scottish schools.

⁷ Classic feminist research has denaturalised the boundary between the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ (see for example, Yanagisako and Collier 1987; Berlant 2000; McKinnon and Cannell 2013; Bridges 2017).

drift’—where public health policies persist in focusing on individual behaviours as the locus for change (see Williams and Fullager 2018).

This section has explored the construction of sugar as a morally ambiguous public health object, and the complex role of the school as an agent responsible for children’s socialisation, care and governance. In the following sections, I address school staff’s engagements with sugar’s ambiguity and its tricky class associations, and their varied interpretations and enactments of policies (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012). I examine how the ambiguities of sugar fit with the varied duties attributed to the school as a responsible agent: those of educational attainment, prevention of chronic illness, discipline and behaviour, wellbeing, and holistic and targeted nurture, for which the school can also be held accountable (Education Scotland 2016a). I start by exploring the use of sugar as a ‘pedagogical tool’ (Vaghi 2023)—and a wider tool of socialisation—to inculcate values of personal responsibility and context-specific forms of morality.

Learning to avoid sugar in context

In some settings, sugar’s dangers initially appear clear-cut. Formal health education could be read as a straightforward example of the state’s responsibility for children’s consumption, played out through processes of responsabilisation to mould a disciplined child. Yet this picture is much more complex, not least due to the fact that this process is mediated by teachers, who cannot simply be reduced to agents of the state. One November afternoon, I observed Mrs Reid’s classroom session on ‘Healthy Eating’ at Greenside Primary.

A group of six- and seven-year-olds sat on the carpet, sipping school-provisioned milk from cartons, waiting for the lesson to start. Mrs Reid had shown me the slides from the previous week: images of a cartoon figure running, a carton of chips, and the message, ‘Foods high in fat and sugar can lead to obesity’. She had explained, ‘We were thinking about taking care of your body—whose responsibility is that? Getting them to think, “My body, my responsibility”.’ Who can tell our visitor what we learnt last week?’ The children were describing the functioning of various organs, when Mrs Crawford—a pupil support assistant for Tom, a child with special needs—put her head around the door. Tom had been taken out of class earlier that day for hitting another child and throwing classroom furniture. Mrs Crawford whispered to the class, ‘We’ve got a surprise for you! It’s cake.’ Once the door closed, Mrs Reid projected an empty version of the Scottish Eatwell Guide (Fig. 1) onto the smart board, and asked the children to guess the different food groups.

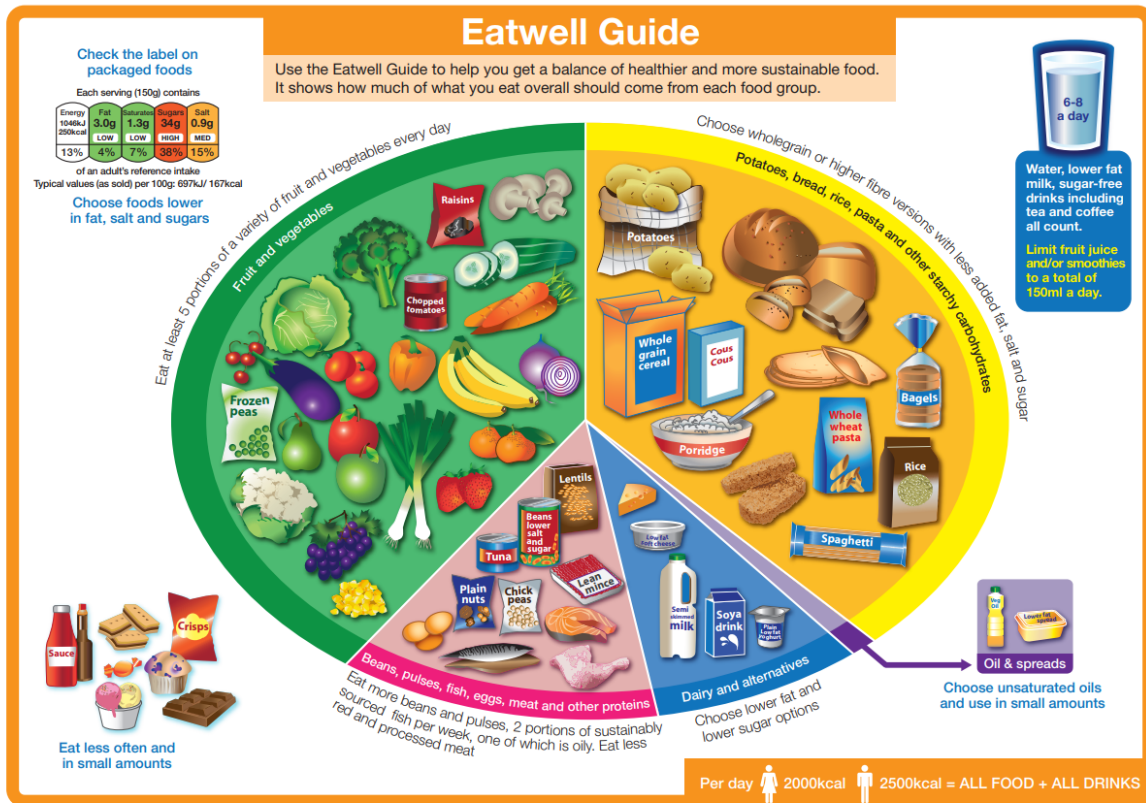


Figure 1: Eatwell Guide (Food Standards Scotland 2016) developed by Public Health England in association with Food Standards Scotland, the Welsh government, and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland.

As the children made suggestions (‘Fruit?’ ‘Nuts?’ ‘Salad?’ ‘Water?’) Mrs Reid corrected them, progressively revealing each slice of the coloured plate (Fig. 1). The group had started running low on ideas, when one pupil, Harry, suggested, ‘Sugar? A little bit of sugar gives you lots of energy.’ A last animation revealed ketchup, biscuits, ice cream, sweets, muffins, chocolate and crisps, to excited reactions from the children.

‘So we’ve got our sweeties, our fizzy drinks . . . But these are not very good for you,’ Mrs Reid warned.

‘That’s why we can’t eat them,’ Harry sighed, translating for the other pupils. In the context of this formal lesson, ingesting sugary things—which no longer featured on the plate at all—was subtly equated with not taking responsibility and care for one’s body, through the careless absorption of excess energy. Yet while these foods were banished from the plate, they continued to float in limbo alongside it; the caption ‘Eat less often’ (Fig. 1), suggested ambiguity, negotiability and lenience.

The healthy eating lesson made for a good fit with lessons in child responsabilisation I observed elsewhere in school, which often focused on teaching children to make their own personalised ‘good choices’ and demonstrate morality, rather than simply obeying adult instructions. In learning that the body was ‘their responsibility’, children were framed and addressed as active agents of their own health—a responsibility they might reclaim from their parents (Boni 2022; Earl 2018). Yet sugar also pinpoints the changing role of the primary school as a responsible agent, I suggest, in terms of providing nurture to children and to compensate for inadequate parenting (or what teachers perceived to be such) in more complex ways.

Mrs Reid now needed to work to squeeze cake and icing into the space of lenience provided by health policies—when her carefully constructed lesson on optimal eating was interrupted by a colleague enacting an adjacent policy aiming to improve an individual child’s behaviour and reconfigure the school as a site for holistic nurture (Education Scotland 2016a). When the food groups were duly guessed and noted, Mrs Crawford and Tom reappeared in the doorway carrying a plate of sponge cake baked during a school ‘nurture group’ activity targeted at children with behavioural difficulties (nurture groups are discussed in more detail later). Under instruction from the teacher and the support assistant, the children arranged themselves in a circle, and Tom handed each child a small piece of iced cake to apologise for his unruly actions of the morning. Amid shouts of ‘yummy!’, the class teacher thanked Tom for his ‘kindness’ and encouraged the pupils to do the same. As the children spontaneously commented on the cake’s deliciousness and sponginess, licking sticky icing from their fingers, Mrs Reid encouraged their discussions of the cake’s texture. She then noted, ‘What a good opportunity! What food groups do we think are in this cake you’re eating just now?’

Sugar is good to think with for social scientists, as it illuminates how seemingly contradictory values—negative/positive, dangerous/caring—can coexist in practice, and how this dual narrative is not stable but mobile, relational, and contextual. Sugar consumption emerges as an important area for navigating moral life, precisely because it is an uncertain moral reference point. Children in Scottish schools are taught that sugar, in its schematic curriculum form, should be avoided as a health risk, yet also that sugar enables positive forms of intimacy when consumed within a relational activity centred on apologising. In Duff’s (2008) account of people’s use of party drugs in Australia, his participants described a ‘rush of difference’ (387) that shapes relations and encounters through consumption. In this example of school commensality, we can also observe relational change. Tom’s cake provoked shared expressions of sensory pleasure in the other children, validated by the class teacher as generating a special occasion for social bonding.

In becoming integral to a school ritual demonstrating regret, kindness and togetherness, school staff highlighted sugar's potential to repair damaged relationships. They also made visible the school's multiple 'mechanisms for leniency and compromise' (Mayblin 2017, 503). The apology could only work because of sugar's status as social connector through pleasure. Slices of apple, or bread, would not have offered the same possibilities. Sugar becomes central to demonstrations of mutual care, and useful as a tool for socialisation, not merely because it is nutritionally 'inessential' (Charles and Kerr 1988, 103) but because its dangerous public health aspects make it desirable.

In practice, UK school food pedagogies do not necessarily nurture bleak views that 'the pleasure of eating is to be disciplined, controlled and overcome' (Rich and Evans 2015, 45), nor do they consistently encourage pupils to 'act upon themselves as healthy subjects' (Pike and Leahy 2012). Rather, they move between multiple framings as they encounter other policies and practices. 'Responsible' sugar consumption in Scottish state schools includes the unquestioning collective ingestion of cakes like Tom's, and the underlying lesson that in school, this specific form of sugar (made through one's own efforts, cut into pieces for sharing, and exceptional rather than routine—unlike cheap and ready-made like sodas, which are banned) is good for social relationships.

Responsible consumption also takes a second face, that of conscious and reflexive consumption: remembering, identifying and considering the (sometimes risky) food groups inherent to the object being consumed. The schoolchildren guessed enthusiastically, in response to Mrs Reid's question, through mouthfuls of cake. 'Sugar?' 'Fat?' 'Grains?' The experience of pleasure is placed at the centre of this learning opportunity—a lesson about responsibilities as careful (rather than careless) absorption of excess energy, and as primarily relational and interpersonal (Bevan, Bauld and Street 2024; Rose and Lenzos 2017).

While state policies uncomplicatedly designate primary schools as responsible agents for addressing rates of childhood obesity through sugar reduction policies, what this looks like in practice is negotiations between persons like Mrs Reid and Mrs Crawford, and their decisions as to whether, and how, to feed children cake within flexible frameworks of responsible consumption. This de-privatisation of parental duties and obligations, through their sharing with teachers and support assistants in school, takes a different face in the next section. I go on to discuss how sugar becomes an important tool for care and socialisation through activities glossed by the school as 'nurture'—illustrating the class-informed connotations of home-baking.

Home-baking and nurture at school

'Some of these children have never ever had honey, or jam, before,' Lydia (who had set up the school's 'nurture' space) told me, as she served up a mid-morning toast snack with a selection of condiments for the three children attending that morning. The 'nurture' space at Oakfield was a room furnished with cosiness in mind: a large space featuring a sofa, beanbags, a sandpit and various toys, a toaster, a table and adult and child chairs for sharing food. It is not only 'Healthy Eating' lessons that are on the rise in Scotland, but also dedicated spaces, relationships and groups for 'nurture', such as Greenside's, during which Tom's apology cake was made. Both Oakfield and Greenside primary schools' positive behaviour policies favoured restorative approaches in cases of disruptive behaviour, where punishment and sanctions were sidelined in favour of positive action to restore relationships.

The rise of restorative approaches in Scottish state schools, since initial trials in 2004, follows from an influential report, *Better Behaviour, Better Learning*, undertaken by the Discipline Task Group (Scottish Executive Education Department 2001, cited in Kane et al. 2006) in response to concerns from teachers' trade unions and others about worsening behaviour in Scottish schools (Kane et al. 2006). These approaches promote 'upstream' action to create learning environments and adult-child relations in which children feel safe, and where they comply due to shared values rather than fear of punishment. The ways in which policy was enacted varied between schools and individuals. Headteachers and teachers I spoke to often drew inspiration from Paul Dix's (2017) *When the Adults Change, Everything Changes*, which had just been published at the time of my fieldwork. Hot Chocolate Friday is one of Dix's proposed interventions to heighten expectations of behaviour and educational attainment. Sugar's ambiguity, through its negative public health value and its positive associations with the home, as we shall see, renders it useful for creating 'positive' and caring environments in which children feel safe and able to learn.

'Nurture' spaces are moulded not only with domesticity in mind as an aesthetic (Colley 2009), but with the explicit intention of providing spaces between 'home' and 'school'. These are catered towards the most challenging children, those often understood to be living in contexts of financial and/or emotional deprivation, and seen by teachers to struggle with the rules and codes of the school environment. At the time, funds were provided by the government through programmes to promote pupil equity, and made available to the school to use as they saw fit. In the nurture spaces I visited, baking, eating snacks or meals together at the table, high levels of adult attention, polite conversation, the encouragement of self-control, and a wide variety of play options to stimulate children creatively and

intellectually, were understood as ways to help socialise and care for the most challenging children. It is notable that the above activities—child-centric, individualised, requiring personal time and energy, informed by scientific expertise—subtly incorporate ideals of intensive mothering (Faircloth 2013; Hays 1996). The contemporary state school, I suggest, strives to take on new and labour-intensive 21st century ideals surrounding parental obligations.

In her comments about honey and jam, Lydia was alluding to wider fears of these children missing out on important experiences imagined to take place at home, casting these kinds of permissible sugar as a legitimate connector through adult labour and children's pleasure and enjoyment. As the three children ate, Lydia asked whether they liked the toast toppings, and encouraged discussion. As with hot chocolate, the provision of sugary condiments and activities like baking become integral to the work of constructing more intimate spaces, characterised by restricted access. Once out in the playground, Lydia shook her head in disapproval as she gestured discreetly towards the sugar-coated sweets one child with additional needs had brought as a morning snack, revealing senior staff conceptions of the nurturing home. For Lydia, care through permissible forms of sugar meant individual choice-making, reflexivity and commensality. A large bag of shop-bought sweets—a 'classful' snack, from a different kind of home—was not read as a caring and optimal fulfilment of parental responsibilities.

This homely care was not necessarily limited to challenging children; rather, it was seen as an extra form of caring the school could provide when there was a higher adult-to-child ratio, and enthusiastic (usually female) volunteers. One such volunteer was Shona, who worked in an after-school sports club, and practised baking as a hobby. Now that her children had moved on from the school, she found she missed it, and organised activities to help teachers with challenging classroom conditions due to understaffing. One session of Shona's I observed centred around a sticky traybake activity for five- and six-year-olds, designed to fit with the class topic of 'Fairyland'. This took place in the school's 'Conversation Space', a small but versatile school room with cooking facilities, dedicated to a range of wellbeing activities.

Shona addressed the four children who had just been taken out of class: 'We got a letter from the dragon. He needs your help. He has asked the children to make some Fairyland treats.' She placed the children around the table, pouring Rice Krispies cereal into each bowl, and explained, 'The dragon needs the children to learn about counting. Each take five pink marshmallows and five white marshmallows.' Ladling spoons of golden syrup onto the mixture, Shona continued, 'Dragons usually have banana and honey, but this is for their treat.' Each child cut their mixture into a star shape, discarded the excess, and placed it

on a tray next to their name. Five-year-old Sean lingered by the tray, asking if he might eat his immediately. ‘No darling, you need to be patient and save it for when you go home.’

Sugar’s ambiguous and flexible character enables seemingly opposed school activities, those of out-of-class nurturing (where sugar is linked to its caring potential of pleasure) and formal health education (where sugar is a danger) to overlap once more. Shona and the class teacher saw sticky traybakes as beneficial, since their preparation could disguise maths (through measuring with a spoon, counting marshmallows), enhance motor skills (using the dough cutters), and provide valuable one-to-one time with adults—which some children might lack at home. The blurriness between school and home achieved through ‘home-baking’ was heightened by the fact that Shona herself belonged to the world beyond school. Sugar recentred children’s enjoyment, transformed school spaces by ushering in a sense of informality and homeliness, and offered a valuable opportunity to disguise formal learning. According to the same logic, Tom’s cake enabled a demonstration of care and morality through an informal physical apology, rather than a more formal verbal one.

Importantly, these activities also provided lessons about when sugar is permissible and innocuous in school—when exceptional, when involving labour, and through processes of slowness—as opposed to as an instantly gratifying, quick-fix pleasure (Ahmed 2010). Responsible consumption is taught as the work of moderating pleasure: learning to enjoy jam eaten politely at the table, careful craft, and conscious practices of withholding. Like Mrs Reid and Mrs Crawford, Lydia and Shona are not straightforward agents of the state, but persons entangled in relational projects, drawing on sugar as a tool of education and socialisation. It is sugar’s ambiguity, I have shown, as both a homely substance and a public health object, with slippery class connotations, that makes it useful for teachers. Sugar thus serves both to create moral persons, and to compensate children for what is imagined as inadequate parental care.

Excess in moderation

I started this article with the observation that within the state’s non-abstinence focused sugar policy, there is space written in for lenience, indulgence and general ambiguity. The previous sections examined how sugar becomes permissible in school, through processes of responsabilisation, and nurture, where sugar is part of everyday lessons about relationships. The schoolchildren have learnt to navigate context-specific morality—when a cake should be eaten immediately, when it should be saved for later, and what kinds of relations are at stake in each scenario. They have learnt how to become responsible persons in different

settings, according to particular values and policy frameworks. This section continues to explore school sugar consumption, this time focusing on the trope of excess. Can space be carved out for self-indulgence, decadence and overconsumption within 'responsible' consumption?

Critical accounts of drinking policy show that the pursuit of intoxication, as a bodily experience valued by consumers, is unrecognised in health policies and frameworks (see Keane 2009). This can be linked to the legacies of protestant aversions to pleasure which continue to shape public health discourse (Coveney and Bunton 2003). School hot chocolate, overtly a reward and treat, offers an example of an instance in which sugar consumption is explicitly uncoupled from nutrition—and thus at its most dangerous. Hot chocolate celebrations were not made to coincide with dedicated times for breakfast or snacks, as in the 'nurture' context described previously. In this morally ambiguous setup, I suggest, hot chocolate drinking serves to teach children about 'safe' transgressions, and the acceptable limits of abandon and indiscipline, and thus about permissible classed pleasures in Scottish society.

At Oakfield, the concept of Hot Chocolate Friday, drawn from Paul Dix's book (2017), aimed to acknowledge pupils whose outstanding school behaviour had previously gone 'unnoticed'. This lack of acknowledgment and recognition was seen in part as due to behavioural disruptions from other pupils—those most likely to be invited to attend nurture groups. At the first Hot Chocolate Friday I attended, headteacher Mrs Glenn filled and distributed the cups to the group of seated pupils, and addressed the group:

Normally I would never give something disgusting like this to children, but this is because you've gone above and beyond. You're the first children to get this. Take as much cream and marshmallows as you like! I won't think you're being greedy. You're allowed to be as greedy as you like today because it's your special day. Imogen, can you give them a top-up? [. . .]
You've deserved it.

The children were also given a brown envelope to take home, containing an official letter of congratulations with a hot chocolate stamp, in line with Dix's suggestion. Mrs Glenn proceeded to take photographs on an iPad, of the children with their hot chocolates topped with whipped cream, marshmallows and sprinkles, to broadcast via the school's social media accounts. The headteacher's presentation of this pop-up ceremony offered an explicit invitation to embody immoderation—'take as much as you like!'—and a setting-aside of the classroom's formal injunctions to express personal responsibility through self-imposed limits on sugar. The potential 'disgustingness' of Cadbury's Hot Chocolate, and the documented record of it, signalled moral danger, hence ten-year-old Gary's surprise in the opening vignette.

And while children's responsibility for their health and accountability in terms of 'greed' or 'disgustingness' was apparently suspended, what of the responsibility of the school as a collective agent?

Unlike the puritan ethic inherent to many health policies (Coveney and Bunton 2003), when enacted in school, heightened pleasures and occasional excess can form a key face of school concepts of moderation and responsible consumption. In Foucault's terms, it is the carving out of stringent rules and policies that creates the potential for pleasures, although Foucault was specifically referring to sexual pleasures (Foucault 1978). In the same way, sugar restriction guidelines and messages create spaces for indiscipline, and in doing so grow the possibilities for pleasure in sugar consumption. In a context of celebration with senior management, mild transgressions are legitimised—by some people, for some people, in some ways. Yet this proposed excess had definite limits, in institutional practices of the state school. Following Mrs Glenn's instructions, I circled the table, but found myself quietly leaning over for additional instructions on how many times to top up the drinks, marshmallows, cream and biscuits. 'They can have as much as they want, within limits of the reasonable,' the headteacher replied, with one eyebrow raised.

The responsibility for managing children's tricky consumption, their enjoyments and pleasures, was always shifting and bounced between adults in any given moment—including their possible delegation to an anthropologist. The paradox of excess within the reasonable encapsulates the complex and multifaceted messaging about indulgence and moderation, control and pleasure, which form an important aspect of children's socialisation in school. To illustrate the safe limits of excess, Mrs Glenn continued her conversation with Gary: 'But sugar isn't the devil. As long as you're not having it every day. You wouldn't want it every day, would you?'

'I would!' Gary countered.

'Would you really? If I have too much sugar, I find I feel quite sick. It feels good while I'm putting it into my mouth, then afterwards, I feel horrible.'

'Me too!', eight-year-old Graham chipped in. He bent in half, miming stomach pain. 'Oh no, I regret!'

More than merely a lesson on the celebratory values of sugar, schoolchildren were instructed on how to engage with dangerous and potent substances more generally. Within these spaces of proposed lenience, Mrs Glenn was careful to model the harmful public health consequences of too much sugary enjoyment, communicating classed understandings of what excess should look like in practice.

But while stereotyped class associations have gelled with particular foods through media discourses (the deep-fried Mars bar, for example), in reality, eating practices are not so neatly demarcated, in the same way that social class identities themselves are not clear-cut or mutually exclusive (Gibson 2023). A Cadbury's Hot Chocolate may, or may not, be acceptable to all of these children's parents, even those with a similar class positioning to Mrs Glenn. 'I don't even know if I even like hot chocolate, I never get it!', a seven-year-old girl exclaimed gleefully to me the following week. Teachers were likely to be aware of the multiplicity of moral ideas and expectations around sugar consumption, and of the need to manage these.

On the way out, I conversed with the deputy headteacher, who perceived the session to have been a success. 'I think they really enjoyed it, they'll go back to class and talk about how amazing it was, and then the others will want to get it too', she told me. 'But maybe it is best to keep it to every other week to make it more special.' It is through state institutional processes and relationships that sugar acquires its special, polarised, and flexible meanings—legitimately decadent and disgusting in one instance, unjustifiably risky and damaging, the next.

At Hot Chocolate Fridays, sugar's celebratory value is linked to the ceremony's explicit focus on foregrounding and nourishing specific social relationships. It is not only an unusual setting, where the headteacher prepares individual drink orders, and connections are forged across multiple age groups. In other school settings, Gary's behaviour of 'speaking out', addressing the headteacher with accusations of filling children's bodies with sugar, could have been read as inappropriate. Yet this sugary occasion enabled the dining hall, with its sober sugar awareness posters, to become a site of informality and private one-to-one conversations with the school's most senior figures. And while sodas were banned from school, as a public health problem to resolve, the pleasures of a hot sugary drink made in person were deemed desirable by school management.

Conclusion

Focusing on both the public health values and the more intimate relational values ascribed to substances, and the intersections between the two, is key to understanding how substances are consumed, and how their meanings and potency are made. Beyond illustrating that the meaning of a substance is flexible and its pleasures learnt (Becker 1953), I have shown what the swing between the negative face of sugar (linked to its dangers for health) and sugar's more positive qualities (as a social connector through pleasure, associated with (often white middle-class) homeliness, kinship, care and celebration) enables in building school life and relationships. It is the tension between the two, I have argued, that makes sugar such a useful tool for adults trying to socialise, educate, and care for children.

I have positioned sugar as a potent substance to be studied alongside alcohol, tobacco, khat and other substances which have become the object of health messaging, societal concern, and ideas about classed and racialised forms of consumption. This positioning reveals not merely similarities, but porosity between categories of foods and drugs that are often imagined as bounded. Furthermore, I have revealed sugar as a category requiring its own attention—apart from substances perceived as wholly harmful to children—and which draws attention to the importance of pleasure as something to be governed, rather than prohibited. While this research is situated in Scotland, it has implications for other national settings where particular consumption practices have become morally ambiguous.

A key contribution of this article is to bring a stronger attention to pleasure to theorisations of governance, and the workings of policy (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012; Shore and Wright 1997)—where pleasure is analysed as a site of responsabilisation, a set of affective and relational experiences through which socialisation occurs, and a matter of class positioning and power relations. Rather than configure pleasure as undermining responsibility, I have explored the intersections between responsibility and pleasure, and their co-construction. Responsibility in school life emerges as multifaceted, both pertaining to individual bodies, diets and health, and as a relational quality focused on kindness, consideration, and respect.

School life, and the texture of the relationships that form it, are a lynchpin for understanding consumption practices. While school meals and lunch boxes are well-studied (Allison 1991; Gustafsson 2002; Harman and Cappellini 2015; Metcalfe et al. 2011; Pike and Leahy 2012), there is less understanding of how foods and substances feature across the rest of school life or what these might enable in terms of governance and care (Earl 2018). An ethnographic focus on sugar reveals the state school as a complex agent who embodies its responsibilities by trying to align multiple ideas about ‘responsible’ or ‘moderate’ consumption. Rather than a smooth process, responsabilisation is irregular, inconsistent, and relational—because it is done through the affective labour and class values of school staff who undertake the ‘care work’ of responsibility (Tronto 2013). These women with differing social positionings and competing obligations (Trnka and Trundle 2014) towards children use sugar to work at multiple scales: to provide pastoral care, compensation and behavioural solutions at an individual level; to improve attainment and discipline across the whole school; and to improve dietary practices and health outcomes on a national level.

In unpacking the common-sense ‘badness’ of sugar, I have shown that concerns around sugar are not only nutritionally-based, but moral, and part of a deeper history—one of Empire, social class divides, fears about pleasure, irresponsibility,

and abilities to govern. On a micro level, I have shown how sugar consumption is framed by the school as contextually safe when state school teachers give children sugary drinks (hot chocolate, as a reward), but dangerous and lacking in care when working-class parents do so (soda or squash, to drink during the day). Whether, where, and how, pleasure is included within conceptualisations of responsible consumption in school, is informed by the messiness of class relations.

Authorship statement

I am the sole author of this work.

Ethics statement

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