



Contested Interactions: School Shops, Children and Food in Warsaw

ZOFIA BONI

[Paper first received, 3 May 2014; in final form, 28 October 2014]

Abstract. Children's relationships and experiences with food are becoming increasingly of interest to many social actors in Poland. This is best illustrated by the ongoing debates around *sklepiki szkolne* (school tuck shops), which are small, food-selling retailers located on school premises. Based on 12 months of field-work conducted in Warsaw in 2012–2013, which included ethnographic research in primary schools, I argue that school shops are contested spaces. This is because varied interactions occurring in them – between children, adults, food and money – are increasingly perceived as problematic. School shops are entangled in multiple relations with multiple actors (state, family, business) who each have their own view of what a school shop and interactions within it should be. I show that while school shops are at the centre of both political and nutritional debates, for children they are the sites of important everyday social and economic relations, and provide them with a rare situation of autonomy.

Introduction

It's 9.30 am. The bell rings and the break starts. The classroom doors open and children run out of them. Within seconds the silence and peace of the school corridor turns into chaos. There is running, playing, screaming. I am standing near the school shop and the whole area is immediately filled with children. A queue forms within seconds. Everyone in turn talks to Mrs Teresa, a school shop seller, and buys something from her. One older boy is surrounded by others who suggest to him what he could buy – he has the money and the rest are hoping to benefit from this... A group of younger girls walk around the school shop looking at the display to find out what is for sale. They don't shop there yet, they are not allowed, but are preparing themselves for the future... The bell rings, denoting the end of the break, but there are still several children standing in line in front of the school shop, some of them spent the whole 10 minutes break standing in that line. They may be late for class. And if they end up not buying anything, they will probably be back on the next break' (extracts from my field notes, March–June 2013).¹

Zofia Boni is a Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1H 0XG, United Kingdom; email: <zofia_boni@soas.ac.uk>. I would like to thank all the reviewers for their insightful comments.

Children's relationships and experiences with food, and their eating practices are becoming increasingly of interest to many social actors. In Poland, as in other cultural contexts (see Jing, 2000; James et al., 2009), there is a growing anxiety related to what children eat and in what way. Parents want their children to eat in a proper way and develop good food habits. The government wants them to eat in a certain way so that they can become healthy citizens. Food producers and marketers are interested in children's consumption patterns. Various NGOs and activists focus on children's food habits as an alarming social problem. Schools look closely at what their pupils eat as part of taking care of them. And finally, different media perceive this issue as an important and controversial topic and devote an increasing amount of attention to this matter. School shops – small, food-selling retailers located on school premises – are at the centre of these diverse concerns and thus offer a good lens through which to analyse the broader issues related to children and food in Poland.

The ethnographic vignette placed at the beginning shows the everyday life of many school shops in primary schools in Warsaw. Many children bring food from home to eat as a second breakfast;² they can also eat a meal in the school canteen. The school shop gives them the opportunity to choose and buy food and drinks throughout their school day. However, what might seem like simple interactions among customer-children and between a child and a school shop seller, are in fact complicated, morally contested exchanges. During these interactions, in each individual situation, as Goffman (1974, p. 9) explains, 'many different things are happening simultaneously – things that are likely to have begun at different moments and may terminate dissynchronously'. Being in the school shop is the result of a decision that is often carefully planned and negotiated before and might be discussed afterwards by children. And eating food bought there often lasts for much longer than the interactions taking place in the school shop. The fact that children have money is connected to negotiations with their parents. Moreover, the existence of the school shop is dependent on the school's principal. School shop sellers have to coordinate their work with their employers. And food products sold there – which similarly to money mediate and participate in the school shop interactions – are supplied by food producers and retailers.

The exchange between a buyer and a seller is one of the most common and ritualized interactions. And yet because it involves children – and also money and food – it is increasingly problematized in Poland, and school shops become contested spaces. It is not only that the interactions taking place in the school shop stretch over time and space, there are also multiple social actors engaged in them. The principals, teachers, parents, politicians, activists and journalists, food producers and marketers and state officials, all are interested in children's food choices and entangled in school shop interactions. As Bourdieu (2005, p. 148) puts it: 'the truth of the interaction [between purchaser and vendor] is not to be found in the interaction itself', the two agents do not only engage with each other, they also engage with the social space within which they are located. Bourdieu shows this through his analysis of the relations between buyers and sellers in the house market in France. In this article, I discuss what kind of social space the school shops, and interactions occurring in them, occupy in Warsaw. To understand these interactions, we have to look much beyond the transactions taking place, beyond the premises of the school shop, or even of the school institution.

In what follows I discuss the multiplicity of perspectives, frames – the ways of perceiving and organizing experiences and guiding the actions of individuals,

groups and societies (Goffman, 1974) – and practices related to school shops. I analyse the social space school shops inhabit in Warsaw, and discuss diverse (social, cultural, moral, economic and political) aspects of relations occurring there. I start by analysing the context of these interactions; then I turn to the rules of the interactions established by diverse social actors – the interaction order, as Goffman (1983) would say – and in the end I discuss the perspectives of the agents directly involved and the interactions themselves.

Methods

This article is based on research for my Ph.D. dissertation at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.³ I conducted 12 months of fieldwork in Warsaw, from September 2012 until August 2013. My research is based on the combination of various methods and field sites. Most of all – in relation to this article – I carried out ethnographic research in three public primary schools in Warsaw. In each of the schools I have observed the organization of feeding and eating, and diverse food practices. I have talked to the principals, teachers, school shop workers and owners, cooks and children (see Corsaro and Molinari, 2000; Pike, 2010). Although initially I focused on school shops in the most direct way – I included them in my ethnographic study of primary schools⁴ – with time I found out that they reoccur in many other contexts. School shops appeared as an issue when I was conducting other parts of my research: among families, state institutions, NGOs, food producers and marketers and when studying media; and as a result this article is informed by these different field sites.

I have worked with 15 diverse families from lower and middle classes, living in Warsaw. I participated in their daily food life and conducted interviews with mothers, fathers and grandparents, and with children who I treat as separate agents (see Mayall, 1994; James et al., 1998). While working with children I also used other methods, such as drawing, filling vignettes, doing photographs, which facilitated the process of the interview (see e.g. Christensen and James, 2000; O'Connell, 2013). Furthermore I focused on children's food markets: I studied the main companies producing food addressed to and intended for children, and conducted interviews with the representatives of these companies and with food marketers. Another part of my research was devoted to the state. I analysed laws and other official documents related to children and food, and I conducted interviews with the representatives of the state working in the Warsaw City Council, and in diverse other institutions, for example the National Food and Nutrition Institute and the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate. I have also done research among NGOs focused on children and food based in Warsaw, conducted expert interviews and followed media debates. The subject of school shops emerged in all these different contexts. The fact that I have encountered this issue so often when doing my research already shows how important a topic it has become.

The Context of the Interactions: Is the School Shop a Business or an Educational Institution?

The name 'school shop' in Polish is the diminutive version of the word shop (*sklep*): *sklepik*, meaning a tiny shop. This term is immediately recognized in the Polish con-

text – even if it is used without the suffix *szkolny* referring to the school – and signifies a shop run on school premises. School shops often take the form of rather small cubicles, square or rectangular, between three and four square metres in size. Walls are built from wood or cardboard construction, and there are glass windows where the items for sale are displayed. There is also a counter where transactions take place. Inside there are shelves filled with products: foods, beverages and stationery. Most often only one person can fit into this space (Figure 1).

School shops emerged in some schools during the Polish People's Republic and they were usually implemented by pupils, with the help of teachers. A student body organized the sales of food products: sandwiches, buns, rolls, which they prepared themselves or bought in the nearest bakery. The small profits were usually used by the school towards student-related expenses. This was one of the ways to keep children on school premises and prevent them from going outside during breaks, which they used to be able to do in Poland. The scale of these initiatives was very small. In the 1990s – in conjunction with the transition from socialism to capitalism – the number of shops organized on school premises increased and they have been commercialized and gradually outsourced. A school shop can be organized by the school, by teachers, pupils or parents; however, the most popular form since the 1990s is subletting the space to an outside entrepreneur who opens a small shop.

School shops are first and foremost business ventures. Subletting the space to an outside entrepreneur provides one of the rare occasions for the school to earn money. The contract between the school and the tenant is signed yearly. The principal of the school can dictate the terms of the contract and, for example, forbid the sales of certain products. The owner pays a monthly fee for renting the space and if either side is no longer satisfied the contract can be terminated by giving one or two months' notice. The next shop owner will be chosen on the basis of a tender, the rules of which are described by the principal, often in collaboration with parents. Owners either work in the shop themselves or employ other people, who are usually women



Figure 1. School shop.
Source: Photo by the author.

on retirement, hired on the basis of the interim contract: they are paid only for a certain amount of time, and they are not offered pension, health insurance or any other benefits with their contract.

In 2011, school shops existed in 107 primary schools out of 168 participating in a study conducted in Warsaw (Czarnecka-Skubina, 2011).⁵ One of the Polish magazines roughly estimates the market of school shops in Poland at zł200 million (€48 million) (Węgrzyn, 2014). Revenues from school shops vary significantly, depending on what kind of school they are in (primary, secondary or high school) and how many pupils are in it. During my fieldwork, I found out that the daily revenue from one shop run in a primary school with around 400 pupils varies between 200 złoty and 300 złoty (between 47 euro and 72 euro). This – if we count that there are 180 days of school per year, so school shops operate for 180 days – makes on average 45000 złoty (~10700 euro) per year from that one shop. And with that amount the owner has to invest in a school shop, take care of the rented space and hire employees. It might become a marginally profitable business – I have heard from the school shop owners – only if one opens more businesses. Still, most of the school shop owners in Warsaw – I was told – own either only one or a couple of school shops. Even though the name *sklepik* sounds fairly cute and childlike, its activity is grounded in a basic economic exchange: a customer buys certain things from a seller. Though it is not a simple economic interaction, the business side of that institution cannot simply be erased.

School shops became a problem in Poland largely due to what is sold in many of them: various beverages, chocolate bars, crisps, chips, buns, rolls, mini pizzas and a diverse range of confectionary, what James (1979) calls ‘kets’: cheap, unbranded and usually unwrapped, small products, in various shapes and colours, often inducing surprising sensations in a mouth, and with different textures and tastes, including lollipops, gummy candies, sweetmeats, sweet drops, chewing gums, etc. All of these can be considered children’s food: it is produced especially for them and for many reasons preferred by them, but at the same time it is considered unhealthy and thus especially harmful to them. What is sold in school shops has not changed much within the last 15 years, what has changed, however, is the growing problem of obesity among children and youth in Poland.⁶ The blame for the ‘obesity problem’, and subsequently the responsibility for it, is placed on diverse social actors, be it the state, the family, the market and its advertisements, and – similarly to the situation described by Tingstad (2009) in Norway – everyone shifts the blame on somebody else. It seems that recently the scapegoat has been found in the form of school shops and their owners, who in media presentations and public debates are framed as obstacles to children’s health, responsible for their weight problems.

Food producers and marketers, and school shop owners want the school shops to create ‘good consumers’ – at least they are often framed in that way. In fact, food producers have diversified opinions about school shops, and many of them told me that they are not trying to sell their products to children in schools; ‘if they found their way there’, one of them told me, ‘it is because the school shop owners decided to supply them’. The state officials, on the other hand, see the role of the school shops in creating ‘good citizens’ – that is, healthy citizens. In their opinion school shops have two main roles: educating children about proper foods and supplementing their diets during the school day. In a publication issued by the Warsaw City Council it is explained that decisions about opening a shop on school premises should not be dictated by commercial and financial motives (Widz, 2011). Every activity that is hap-

pening in schools has to be judged by the needs of the students and by what is good for them, which is not necessarily what they want. The role of the school shop is to provide consumer and nutrition education for children. 'A well run shop, which is used for food education', we read, 'may become a prime example of preventive care through preventive nutrition' (Widz, 2011, p. 20). As educational institutions, school shops should teach children about proper foods and support parents and teachers in their attempts to raise good and healthy citizens (see Gullberg, 2006). School shops have rarely fulfilled that role, and yet they became a problem only recently.

'Is the school shop a business or an educational institution?', was often the question asked at the conference closing one of the projects devoted to reducing the problem of obesity among children. The state officials present at that conference explained that they want the school shop to be an educational institution, which would teach children about proper eating and help in creating healthy citizens. Whereas the food producers and marketers – not invited to the conference – were depicted as treating school shops only as business institutions, which need to make money. School shops and their owners were problematized by diverse participants of the conference as main obstacles to children's proper eating habits, and consequently their health. It seems that according to many social actors, such as state officials, NGO activists or journalists, there are only two, mutually exclusive options for school shops: focusing either on the educational or on the business activity. And while the former option is clearly defined as the good (healthy) one, the latter is perceived as the bad and harmful (unhealthy) one.

School shops can in fact fulfil both of these roles, but its educational role might concern something else than what many adults would like, as I will show later in the text. Moreover, the morality behind this logic is based on the dominating health discourse, which simplifies the issue of school shops. Following Brembeck et al. (2013), I agree that bringing this whole matter only to a problem of healthy as opposed to unhealthy foods and dietetic principles reduces the topic of children and food to a question of nutrition. 'This also means', the authors explain, 'a perception of children as "victims" to be protected and guided by adults and forced to change lifestyles and eating habits, disregarding children's own agency and capabilities' (Brembeck et al., 2013, p. 85). This is a too limited and reductionist view of children and food.

Furthermore, the discussion highly visible in media and public debates concerning what is sold in school shops is only part of the problem. Another issue occurs somewhat implicitly in the ongoing debates and concerns about children's role as consumers. Buckingham and Tingstad (2010, p. 2) show that there are two main perspectives on positioning children as consumers: one perceives children as victims of powerful and manipulative consumer culture, which robs them of their childhood; the other constructs children as having power and even authority, competence that many adults may be lacking. In Poland children are mostly seen as innocent and naïve and because of the manipulation by the market, or because of being not knowledgeable – which is not necessarily true – they are perceived as poor decision makers, as their choices might be damaging to their health. That is why so many different social actors want to influence children's choices: they perceive themselves as better decision makers on behalf of children. The power struggles and tensions, shifting the blame and responsibility on each other, diverse discursive frames and ideas of what school shops are and what they should do, create a specific context for and at the same time influence the interactions taking place in school shops.

Changing the Rules of the Interactions: The Parental and the Governmental Influences on School Shops

The interactions occurring in school shops are guided by a certain interaction order (Goffman, 1983). It does not mean that the interaction is orderly, just that it is based on shared presuppositions – for example, that there is a queue or that money is exchanged for diverse products. Even though it is mostly pupils of primary schools and school shop sellers who are directly engaged in the interactions in school shops, the interaction order is influenced by various other social actors: principals, teachers, parents, state and government officials. As Goffman (1983, p. 5) explains: ‘what is desirable order from the perspective of some can be sensed as exclusion and repression from the point of view of others’. In this case the interaction order is to a large extent defined by adults and imposed on children.

The principals decide whether to open and how to organize a school shop on school premises. In a contract they can define the rules of the school shop’s existence: what can be sold, when it is open, etc. And they can decide to close it. This has happened in one of the schools I have studied. The conflict between the school shop owner and parents became so serious that when a current principal was appointed to her position, she decided to close that school shop. Its role was partly taken over by the vending machine. On the other hand, the principals often appreciate the additional money they can raise for the school from renting the space; and the possibility for children to buy something to eat and drink during their stay in school. In fact one of the school shop owners, Mr. Kowalski,⁷ told me that the principals are on their side and often defend the school shop owners from parents’ accusations. As he explained, it is mostly parents who have some problems with school shops. ‘Especially the fat ones!’, he added, ‘one time there was this mother, quite obese, and she had a can of coke in her hand, and her child was eating a bag of crisps, and she was complaining that we sell such horrible things!’ He argued implicitly that not all parents should be allowed to criticize him. Indeed, some parents are concerned about their children buying unhealthy foods in the school shop. For example, 36-year-old Ela told me about her 6-years-old son who is in preschool:

‘It worries me a lot! He doesn’t go to the school shop yet, he is not allowed, but he already knows what’s there and what he will buy. Crisps and these type of things, for example. I just hope that I can get it in his head that this is not healthy... But I’m really worried about this!’

And 40-year-old Natalia told me: ‘I’m really anxious about this school shop! I try to ask her, control what she buys there, but I don’t really know what’s going on there, do I?’ One way is to not give children money and prepare food and beverages for them to take to school. But that strategy only works when children are very young, the older ones always get some money. So parents establish various rules concerning what and how often can be bought in the school shop. For example, 9-year-old Kasia can buy sweet snacks in the school shop only on Wednesdays, because that is her ‘sweet day’; and 10-year-old Monika should rather buy sandwiches than crisps. These rules are often renegotiated on an everyday basis. Another way of trying to control what children buy, besides setting up the rules, is to ask them every day what they did in school, what they ate, whether they went to the school shop, and so forth. One mother asked a person working in a school shop to observe what her daughter buys and whether she obeys the rules her parents set for her. Still, chil-

dren often break these rules. I have seen Kasia buying sweets almost every day, and Monika rarely spent her money on sandwiches.

Attempting to control what kind of decisions children make is one of the ways to influence interactions in school shops. Another way is to monitor what is sold in school shops. Parents, in cooperation with schools, can influence the school shops to a great extent: they can cease to sublet the space to the outside entrepreneurs and close the shop, or run it themselves. There is always a lot of tension and struggle between all social agents involved. That is why quite often parents' influence is limited to affecting the principals in order to prohibit the sales of certain products. For example, in one school parents opposed the sales of ice cream, but they did not oppose the sale of crisps. In another school, gummy candies were generally accepted, but a kind of gummy candy that can be stuck to one's arm and eaten through licking was removed. What parents found especially disturbing was that children were licking each other's hands.

Not all parents find school shops problematic and attempt to change and influence the rules of the interactions taking place there. In general, parents want their children to be able to buy something to eat or drink during their school day, because not all of the students bring food from home or eat a meal in a school canteen, and sometimes these are not enough. Parents also want their children to have little treats and pleasures, to have fun with food, though many of them want to control what exactly their children eat.

Teachers are also in many ways entangled in these interactions. Some of them are very critical of school shops and, for example, prohibit children from coming to their classes with products bought there. In younger grades, some main teachers have taken upon themselves the roles of guardians and educators and confiscate certain snacks. They often perceive the school shop owners as evil and harmful: 'he is impossible and doesn't want to change his ways and what he's selling!', one of the teachers told me when we talked about Mr. Kowalski. At the same time teachers also often complain about parents: they criticize what they give their children to eat and sometimes confiscate it, which in one case resulted in the mother coming to school and blaming the teacher for breaking her parental and her child's consumer rights. They also comment on how parents harm their children through giving them a lot of money and allowing them to buy unhealthy foods in the school shop – which is not necessarily true, children can be breaking parental rules when doing that. On the other hand, many teachers do not have such strong opinions about school shops, and a lot of them shop there themselves during their working day in school.

Furthermore, the relations between parents and schools, and their influences on school shops, are deeply embedded in class politics: only certain (lower class) parents are perceived by actors in schools as engaging in bad parenting practices; at the same time, those parents who are interested in what is going on in school shops – and perceive them as obstacles to good parenting – are usually middle class (see Rawlins, 2009). Even though parents, and to some extent teachers as well, try to establish certain interaction orders within school shops, these spaces give children the opportunity to break the rules set up for them. Through that, they challenge parental control and authority, which is one of the reasons why they are perceived as problematic.

Another authority figure interested in children's choices in school shops is the government. The only way in which the government controls school shops at the moment is through sanitary inspections. However, in October 2012 the project of

changes in the Law on Food and Nutrition Safety was submitted to the Polish parliament by the Polish People's Party (a centrist, agrarian, and Christian democratic political party) (<<http://www.klub.psl.pl/projekty-ustaw-2012.html>>). It was aimed at school shops and the proposed changes concerned the prohibition of sales, administration, advertising or presentation of certain foods in kindergartens and primary and secondary schools in Poland.⁸ The principals of these institutions could terminate the contract with the shop owner or vending-machine distributor without giving notice, should they do not adhere to these rules. The implementation of these rules would be monitored and controlled by the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate. In the justification following the list of the new rules, the authors of this bill explained that the reason for it is the growing overweight and obesity among children and youth in Poland. They emphasized how important proper nutrition is for the present and future health of children. Furthermore, the future financial benefits for the state, resulting from the reduction of health problems, were emphasized.

High schools were omitted from the original proposal⁹ because teenagers were perceived as being able to make proper food choices. The decision of who knows and who does not know how to make proper decisions concerning food has been made, albeit arbitrarily, and children below 16 years old have been defined as being unable to decide on their own what is good for them. As Gibson and Dempsey (2013, p. 1) explain: 'because children are subjects who are socially constructed as both "future citizens" and "at risk", they are thereby seen as valid sites of biopolitical intervention in the name of the public good'. This bill is an example of such a biopolitical attempt to intervene in children's health: its disciplinary power is not directed at the individual child, but at the population of school children and it is dealing with a problem that is extremely political, at once scientific and biological, and at the same time an issue of power relations (Foucault, 1997, pp. 245). This intervention, designed to discipline children's bodies, is doing that through changing the order of the interaction in school shops.

This project was criticized by various nutritional experts, because according to these rules, for example, a banana could not be sold, presented or advertised in schools because it contains more than 10g of sugar in 100g of the product – this has been changed in a new version of the bill. Also the idea of solving obesity problems through national policies has been perceived by some as controversial. For example, Marta Widz – an official from the Warsaw City Council who coordinates the food education programme for children – has criticized this bill. In her opinion, food producers would quickly learn how to omit these rules. Also, it would be difficult to recognize which products are good and which are not for people who choose them – that is the school shop owners – while all the responsibility would be put on them. In her view, school shops should be transformed through showing good practices and examples, thereby encouraging change. Many people working in the non-governmental sector share this opinion. One of them told me: 'the education itself can be more valuable, than prohibitions and laws. If the school really wants to change something, it can be much more effective by itself than controls from the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate and sanctions.'

The proposed law has been criticized also by food producers who described it as inconsistent and factually wrong, and accused the authors of lack of consultations and cooperation with the market. One of them told me:

'We're open for the discussion, but nobody wants to talk with us, and this becomes a problem. I agree that the XXL chocolate bars should not be placed

in the school shops, but they have done this off the wall. Not only sweets, but also milk, yoghurts and bananas are prohibited... It starts with the family, there should be a long-term educational project that would change people's food practices, but nobody will do that now, because the elections are coming up and they want to show that they have done something.'

Food producers explained that their aim is not to make society fat, and that the responsibility for children's health should not be shed on them, as the greatest responsibility lies with parents (Koper, 2012). Others argue that it is a violation of consumer and trade rights. Mrs. Stepniak, a school shop owner, commented, for example, that the state cannot forbid something to which parents agree: 'surely this must be a violation of parents and children's rights!', she told me outraged.

This bill has been named the 'anti-junk food' law: through listing the unhealthy junk foods and limiting their consumption it is supposed to promote healthy foods. At the same time, the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate argues that we cannot talk about healthy and unhealthy foods, because all products released for consumption are safe. It would be better to talk about 'recommended' and 'not recommended' food products (Koper, 2012). Currently in Poland there is a struggle between state officials, nutritionists, activists and food producers over what healthy foods are, what should be recommended and what should be put on the "blacklist" and how to define these. However, this discussion is not only about healthy, not healthy and unhealthy foods, but also about personal rights and freedoms and the tensions between individual and collective responsibility. The school shops interactions have been intertwined in the politics of (un)healthy foods, the biopolitical interventions and power struggles; and diverse social actors are attempting to change and influence the rules and the order of these interactions.

Social and Economic Encounters in School Shops

I have shown the context of the interactions occurring in school shops in Warsaw, and diverse attempts made by different social actors to change the rules and redefine the interaction order; now it is time to discuss the perspectives of the agents directly involved and look at the interactions themselves.

The aim of a school shop is to earn money; however, it is deeply embedded within moral economy, described by Sayer (2000, p. 80) as 'the ways in which economic activities are influenced by moral-political norms and sentiments, and how conversely those norms are compromised by economic forces'. Every interaction in the school shop is embedded within broader political discourses concerning good and bad foods, making good or bad choices, proper parenting and healthy citizens. Moreover, the school shop owners and workers are often parents and grandparents. They think and talk about what is good and bad for children, both in a sense of being healthy and not healthy for them, and what they prefer and want. For the owners and people working there, school shops are often more than just businesses, and selling foods to children has more than just an economic meaning. They do feel a certain mission – or at least those whom I interviewed presented themselves in that way. For example, Mr. Kowalski, a 60-year-old owner of school shops, in this business for more than 20 years, now owns 11 shops (four in primary schools, six in secondary schools, and one in a high school) and employs 12 people. We talked about his business, how on his own he built many of the shops from scratch. He had 18

school shops when he started, and they were very popular: the schools were bigger, so there were more customers. ‘The 1990s were crazy’, he told me, ‘everyone was doing what they wanted. Everyone ate everything. Nobody heard about healthy foods, nobody cared.’ Healthy foods were a reoccurring issue in my discussions with the school shop owners, brought up every time by my interviewees. They felt they were under attack and before I have even asked about it, they defended themselves:

‘School shops became the scapegoat’, Mr. Kowalski explained to me, ‘they are perceived as evil and blamed for making children fat! But someone allowed these foods for consumption. And even if you control the school shops, the kids can always buy these products on their way to or from school. The school shops are needed, because small children have to eat and drink [during the school day]. I do not buy any of these “Chinese foods”.¹⁰ These shops are much safer than the corner shops, because you think of children when you buy the products, you select what’s good... They are not looking in the right place for the guilty party. It is the parental responsibility, a child should learn how and what to eat at home.’

He argues that he is taking care of children, because he makes sure that they have something to eat and drink during their school day, and he takes special care to buy good products. And because of the pressure on healthy foods – which, according to him, is coming both from the school and the government – he provides healthy foods in his shops. In a shop I have seen there was a special shelf with the sign ‘healthy foods’, where the small packages of cereals, crisp breads, grain bars and flavoured milk were placed. These products were, however, not popular among children and often went to waste. The rest of his food assortment included chocolate bars, crisps (a special line designed to sell in schools), confectionary and various beverages: water, flavoured drinks, and juices. ‘I would be happy selling only healthy food’, Mr. Kowalski told me, ‘I can start tomorrow, if anyone would buy it!’ One of his associates participated in part of our interview, and she commented by asking: ‘What does ‘healthy foods’ really mean?’ She explained that there is no clear definition of what healthy foods mean, and nobody wants to face it: ‘Maybe the chocolate bars that everyone gets so worked up about are actually not that bad?’ In her opinion, if things are allowed for sale then they cannot be unhealthy; otherwise it is the fault and the responsibility of the state.

Similar points were raised by another school shop owner with whom I talked, 45-year-old Mrs. Stępnia. She opened her first school shops six years ago and now owns a number of them (she was reluctant to tell me how many exactly). She also emphasized that she does not sell ‘Chinese products’; and that she cares about children, that it is important for her that they eat healthy snacks, so she provides them in her shop: veggie crisps, apples, crisp bread sandwiches, grain and dried fruit nibbles. The rest of her assortment included sandwiches, mini pizzas, diverse beverages, crisps, chocolate bars, and confectionary. Mrs. Stępnia explained to me that it is a myth that children eat bad and unhealthy things bought in school shops: ‘it was like that once, that only Coca-Cola and fatty crisps were sold, but it was twenty years ago, come on, it’s changed now!’ She has also raised the issue of healthy foods by asking: ‘If it’s unhealthy then why is it permitted to be sold? Why are parents exposed to the potential loss of their children’s health? If cola is harmful, then it shouldn’t be sold. There should be a ban on producing foods damaging to health!’

A recurring answer to that question – which I asked to many representatives of various food companies – is that no food or drink is harmful if it is consumed in proper amounts, as recommended by food producers. For example – as it was explained to me – a regular pack of gummy candies contains on average six food portions and it is not supposed to be eaten all at once.

The perception of school shops and their owners as evil and harmful to children, which I have discussed above, can be contradicted by their practices. Mrs. Stepniak, for example, thinks of economically deprived children, when on an everyday basis she brings all the sandwiches that were not sold to the day room, where a teacher distributes them among children who are hungry, but do not have money to buy anything. Moreover, women who work in school shops – at least those I was in contact with – care a lot about what children buy and eat. They often know children's names and establish certain relationships with them, either based on friendship and familiarity, or sometimes on dislike and animosity. They take upon themselves a peculiar role of gatekeepers and often control what children buy, even if that means smaller profits. Mrs Barbara, a 67-year-old school shop seller, told me this story for example: 'One boy wanted to buy so many Mr. Snacks [crisps], that I asked him if he thinks that his mom would agree with that, and he reluctantly admitted that probably she would not, and bought less.' This was not the only time Mrs Barbara was worried about what children eat. Another time, when she asked a girl who wanted to buy 15 gummy candies whether she will not get a bellyache, the girl responded that she is accumulating the sweets for the coming holiday period. Mrs Barbara never denies children anything, but often asks or suggests that what they want is not such a good idea, and reflects on what their parents would say. Many of them comply with her suggestions. Mrs. Stepniak told me another story:

'There were these two boys, who bought a lot of sweets, crazy amounts. So I asked them to bring me the information from their parents, that they allow it, and their mother signed a paper in which she explained that she allows her children to eat as many sweets as they want. So I always had it in the school shop, just in case.'

It is not clear in case of what, but probably she refers to teachers or a principal worrying that she might sell too many sweets to these children, and as long as parents agree this has to be accepted, even if is not perceived as acceptable practice.

The school shop provides one of the most important food occasions for children during their school day, besides eating food brought from home or eating a meal in the school canteen. But it is also the site of some of the most important social and economic encounters children engage in. These small shops are centres of social life in schools.

"'What would you like to buy?'," asks Mrs Barbara to two second-grade girls when it is their turn to approach the counter. They have climbed the stairs to the top floor of the school and have stood in the queue for most of the 10 minutes break. They've counted how much money they have together and tried to decide what to buy. When it is their turn, they put all the coins they have on the counter and ask Mrs Barbara what they can buy for that amount. Mrs Barbara counts how much money they have given her and says that they can buy either three bigger chewing gums, or one lollipop, two spiders, three warms [gummy candies], six lemons [chewing gums]. The girls discuss with each other what to buy – I cannot hear what

they are saying – and then tell their decision to Mrs Barbara. She gives them one warm wrapped in a napkin and four lemons in a small plastic bag. The girls grab it and move away with smiles on their faces. Right away they split the gummy candy and while one of them eats her half, the other one reaches for the chewing gum' (field notes, 13 March 2013).

For younger children – aged between 6 and 9 – going to the school shop is usually forbidden or limited by either their main teachers or by parents. In one of the schools they can go there only on Fridays. Additionally, school shops are often located on the highest floor, where older pupils have classes, and where younger children are in general not allowed to come. Going to the school shop is an important rite of passage; it signifies an important age-related transition and is awaited with impatience. Many children cannot wait for that moment to come, they plan exactly what they will buy once they have their own money and can spend it in the school shop. Six-year-old Janek told me: 'I can't wait when I'll be able to go to the school shop! I've seen that my favourite crisps are there, so I'll buy them!', while others break or bend the rules set up for them. For some children this may be the first economic transaction they make independently, without their parents watching.

Life around the school shop is very dynamic, as many children engage in the decision-making process and in diverse purchase and consumption strategies. The beginning of the week is usually busier because many children receive money during weekends, and then spend it on Monday in school. Similarly, the first couple of breaks are the fullest ones, partly because some children buy their breakfast there if they did not eat it at home, or they buy their second breakfast there if their parents gave them money, rather than preparing it. Some children buy snacks for the whole day, others come on every break for something small. The basic rule of the interactions in a school shop is that there should be a queue, and everyone should do their shopping in turn. However, there is a certain hierarchy in accessing the school shop, so the older children sometimes crowd in in front of the younger ones and adults can access the school shop without standing in line, they simply skip the queue and go straight to the counter.

Children usually come in pairs or small groups, and they either share the expenses: they count how much money they have altogether and decide what to buy and then share it; or they reciprocate gifts: 'so you will buy something for me today, and I will buy something for you tomorrow', as one of the young girls explained to her friend. It is often more about 'going to the school shop', than about eating itself. For example, children who do not buy anything, because for various reasons they choose not to or they do not have money, often accompany their friends when they do their shopping. Twelve-year-old Hania, for example, complained to me: 'there is nothing I can buy there, only unhealthy things! But I still go there sometimes, with my friends, when they want to buy something.'

Children usually share with others what they bought. And – similar to the situation among children in Beijing described by Chee (2000) – what a person buys and with whom it is shared influences the social positioning of a child. Children who have more money are often accompanied by others, who suggest what they should buy and hope to participate in eating it. The economic division is very visible in that practice: there are clearly children who often have more money, and others who can rarely afford to buy anything – even though very cheap products are supplied. It is also reflected in what they buy: the cheaper, unbranded, 'worse' foodstuffs or the more expensive, branded ones. What children buy is not only influenced by their

economic situation, but also differs with age and gender. The older ones usually know what they want, they have their favourites. They also have larger sums of money. The younger children often come to the counter, put all the coins they have there and ask women working in the school shops what they can buy with these amounts of money. It is often just 20 groszy or 50 groszy, up to 1 zloty (0.05 euro, 0.12 euro, 0.24 euro), so they usually buy the smallest and the cheapest foodstuffs, as in the above ethnographic vignette. The most evident gender dimension concerns older girls who often start watching their weight and what they eat, so they buy water or 'healthy foods'; except for some of the teachers, they are the only ones doing that.

'A boy is standing by the counter, asking every person in the line if they could lend him some money. And a couple of teenage girls are engaged in such an intense conversation about their plans for the weekend, that they cannot stop talking, so they all wait in line even though only one of them wants to buy a bottle of water. By the counter, Mrs Teresa is helping two young boys first count how much money they have, and then to count five chewing gums they asked for' (field notes, 29 May 2013).

When doing their shopping, children interact in diverse ways with the sellers and these relationships are never reduced only to their economic dimension. The sellers help younger children count the money, decide what to buy, ask what they want, and – as I mentioned – also discourage some children from buying too much. Above all, they often simply chat with one another. Children also interact with each other: they compromise, fight, share foods, make deals and learn from each other. Children's perspectives on school shops vary, some of them enjoy shopping there as they can buy and eat foods they are not allowed to eat and cannot buy elsewhere; others complain that there are no healthy foods, so they do not buy anything in school shops. Nevertheless, from children's point of view school shops are the sites of and mediate in important social relations and economic exchanges.

'Going to the school shop' is a deeply social occasion, one of the main entertainment activities in which children can engage during the break, which provides the opportunity for diverse interactions: among themselves, with adults, but also with food and money. In different parts of the school, children negotiate with each other when and with whom they are going to the school shop. They spend a lot of their time and attention on deciding what to buy. And later, once they purchased certain foods, they often share it. They eat it right away or take it back to class, sometimes they eat it throughout the whole day, and other times they take it back home, forgotten in their backpacks or pockets. From the children's perspective, school shops are very important places that allow them to bend adults' rules and fight with imposed ideas of what is good, proper and healthy, and what is bad and unhealthy. School shops make children the most active participants out of all food occasions in schools: they decide what they want and buy it (see Mauthner et al., 1993). Although these decisions and children's interactions in school shops are influenced by their financial resources, by their personal tastes and preferences, by their age and gender, and by the existing snack fashions (see Chee, 2000), they are also influenced by parental rules, by teachers' opinions and of course by what is available in school shops.

Conclusion

The social space school shops inhabit in Warsaw is very problematic. Their role stays ambiguous, while diverse social actors frame it in an increasingly dubious way. But

they were not always perceived as such. When school shops opened in many primary schools in Warsaw in the 1990s, they were an exciting novelty, not only for children, but for their parents as well. They were not perceived as problematic, but rather as a good solution to the food problem in schools.

But now they have become a problem. They are contested because interactions happening in them are increasingly perceived as problematic: the interactions between children and school shop sellers, but even more so between children and (bad) foods and money. Diverse actors are so anxious about it because it is one of the rare occasions when children can make independent and, additionally, economic choices; and children in general are not perceived as economic agents (see Levison, 2000; Zelizer, 2002). Moreover, it is assumed that their choices will be bad for their health. In fact, many children know what is supposed to be healthy for them, and some of them choose it, while others prefer not to. What is more, going to the school shop for children is not only about buying 'bad' foods, it is also – or even more so – about sharing it, about the social aspect of that occasion, about making choices and spending their own money. I cannot count how many times I have seen a child extremely happy and proud of herself because she is taking money out of her own small wallet. These are *their* spaces.

In school shops children interact with each other and with adults working there, but also with food and money. And these interactions are seen as obstacles to proper parenting and good care of children, and as interfering with creating healthy citizens. That is why diverse groups of adults want to influence children's decisions concerning food, and school shops are increasingly scrutinized. They have their own ideas of what is best for children and what is the best strategy to obtain it: through giving good examples, setting up rules, or controlling policies and biopolitical interventions. All of these debates focus on what is good for children; however, their perspectives are rarely taken into account. What is more, everyone wants to influence children's food choices in school shops, but no one takes the responsibility for their decisions – that is always blamed on somebody else.

The interactions in school shops, though in their basis economic, cannot be reduced only to their economic dimension. These are deeply social, moral and political relations. Many broader debates, concerns and issues are hidden behind the discussions about school shops. What does 'healthy' mean and how does it relate to what is good and bad for children? Who is supposed to decide about that? Is it a liberal right of children to choose what they want to eat, or their parents' right to choose how to feed their children? Or do the government, the principals and teachers, the journalists and activists have the right to limit these choices because of the broader social responsibility for the health of the future generation? The contested everyday interactions of school shops, children and food are at the centre of these broader debates.

Notes

1. The research, partly funded by the Polish National Science Centre (DEC-2012/07/N/HS3/04137), was conducted in Polish. All the translations are mine.
2. In Polish schools children do not eat lunch, but rather second breakfast brought from home.
3. In my dissertation I am interested in the discourses, practices and negotiations concerning the interrelated processes of feeding and eating in Warsaw, with a focus on children aged between 6 and 12 – this constitutes the age of primary school children in Poland.
4. School shops operated in two of the schools I have studied.

5. At that time there were 172 public primary schools in Warsaw and 33 private ones, which were not included in the study.
6. According to WHO, obesity and overweight among children and youth in Poland is increasing at an alarming rate (Currie et al., 2012). Twenty per cent of children between the ages of 7 and 18 have problems with overweight or obesity; it concerns 22% of boys and 18% of girls in primary schools (Kułaga et al., 2011). At the same time 162 000 children, which makes 7.4% of children in primary schools, are undernourished (Millward Brown, 2013).
7. The names of all my interlocutors, besides the official state representatives, were changed.
8. The prohibited foodstuffs were those that contain: more than 1.25g of salt in 100g of the product; more than 0.5g of sodium in 100g of the product; flavour enhancers, such as E621, E627, E631; artificial sweeteners and sweetening preparations containing fructose; more than 1g of trans fat acids in 100g of the product; more than 10g of simple sugars in 100g of the product.
9. When this article was submitted for publication, a new version of that bill was awaiting the vote in the parliament.
10. 'Chinese foods' is a Polish expression used to describe the foodstuffs with unknown origins and unknown content, generally not safe and not trustworthy.

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