

Leila Harris is a Senior Teacher based in North West London.  
For communication, please email: [leilahar@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:leilahar@hotmail.co.uk)

## Leila Harris

### Food for Thought

The British Nutrition Foundation survey highlighted that many children have a worrying lack of knowledge about where their meat and vegetables come from; "Cheese comes from plants and fish fingers are made of chicken" (British Nutrition Foundation, 2013).

The staggering and equally worrying findings behind the headlines were that 18% of primary school children believed fish fingers are made from chicken, while 29% think cheese comes from plants, 34% of five to eight year-olds and 17% of 8 to 11 year-olds believe pasta comes from animals and 10% of secondary school children believe tomatoes grow under the ground.

Would free school meals make a difference? An evaluation of the free school meals pilot project found that it had a significant positive impact on attainment for primary school pupils at Key Stages 1 and 2, with pupils in the pilot areas making between four and eight weeks' more progress than similar pupils in comparison areas (DfE, 2013). More recently, the development of the "School Food Plan", (School Food Plan, 2013), by founders of Leon Restaurant and the Department for Education, led to an announcement that all pupils in Infant Schools in England will receive free school lunches from September 2014. Leon founder, Henry Dimbleby, said, "We do need to make packed lunch the less attractive option", concluding that packed lunches were significantly less nutritious than a cooked meal. The new plan does not ban packed lunches, but the aim is that by providing a free, hot meal, standards will be raised.

Previous research into the National School Fruit Scheme (Wells & Nelson, 2005), found that it produced short-term but not longer-term increases in fruit consumption in primary school children. However, total fruit consumption (including fruit juice) was higher for junior pupils than the infants. There was no

evidence to suggest that the provision of free fruit to infants affected their fruit consumption as junior school pupils. The apparent lack of effect of the scheme on junior pupils' fruit consumption does not necessarily mean that benefits in later life will not be shown.

#### The Topic of Food in Schools

Having worked with young adults and their families over the years, I have come to appreciate that the topic of food can be used for motivational purposes, uniting groups of people and celebrating our diverse community. Eating food satisfies our most basic human need for survival and in many cultures food is used for rituals as well as forming a central part of social occasions.

I have always been very keen to ensure that young children are well educated about food, where it comes from and its nutritional value. Having worked in an Infant School, I have taken it for granted that children in the Foundation Stage and in Key Stage 1 have opportunities to visit farms, grow their own vegetables in 'Growing Patches' and tend the plants to harvesting. This work is often based on stories such as 'Oliver's Vegetables' and children have opportunities to make fruit salads, fruit kebabs and soups. This form of learning in context and exploiting learning opportunities from first-hand experience ensure that the children are fully engaged with their learning by making links and inspiring genuine curiosity.

Involving the children's parents/carers in cooking activities is also useful as this can serve to promote the school's work in an informal way, which the children recognise as being 'special' because it is delivered by a guest.

The children's personal identities may also be celebrated through the sharing of food from their community's culture. In the past, I have done this by exploring 'Bread from Around the

World'. This project involved tasting different breads from various countries (such as baguettes, ciabattas, rotis, corn bread and so on). Working in such a diverse and multicultural school, this project supported all families' cultures to be shared, valued and celebrated and the families were eager to come in to share food from their homeland as part of an International Food Tasting event.

Schools often host after-school clubs for children and cooking clubs and allotment clubs have become increasingly popular. However, I believe that all children should be offered these learning opportunities and it is a practitioner's responsibility to find ways to weave these opportunities into the curriculum. The Five-a-Day Scheme provides a perfect opportunity for class discussions about how and where the fruits/vegetables are grown. All children are praised for trying fruits and vegetables that they may not have encountered before and in the past I have shared recipe ideas as part of family reading activities.

Celebrations at school often lend themselves to the topic of food, such as Harvest Festivals held in the Autumn Term. Children are reminded about how food is grown, harvested and used in cooking, often delivered alongside the story of 'The Little Red Hen', which is a classic tale that can also be used to illustrate the process of baking bread, as well as conveying a moral about teamwork and the value of sharing and collaboration.

I have further extended the idea about 'Harvest Time' by teaching older pupils about the harvest of the seas and exploring the concept of overfishing. Pupils are made aware of environmental/ecological concerns and how they can be 'considerate consumers', for example ensuring that they buy dolphin-safe tuna and fair-trade foods.

Schools strive to support and encourage pupils to lead healthier lifestyles by making informed decisions about their foods. Roy Ballam, the Education Programme Manager at the British Nutrition Foundation, argues that schools require a national framework and guidance for food and nutrition education. As a teacher-practitioner, I am conscious that all lessons have a shared objective which can be differentiated for all pupils. I believe cooking activities can be integrated into the curriculum easily by teaching in a cross curricular style; e.g. writing instructions

for a recipe and linking this with a food-based Design and Technology lesson; teaching weighing and using scales to measure ingredients or calculating the cost of a meal as part of a numeracy lesson so that children's learning is contextualized in a real life, practical situation.

There are several events held through the year for which schools can enrol free of charge. Through participating in National Healthy Eating Week events, children may be re-engaged with the origins of food, nutrition and cooking, so they grow up with a fuller and deeper understanding of food. This provides a way for schools to validate the work they are doing to educate pupils about where their food comes from, the importance of healthy eating and teaching essential life skills within a culinary context.

### Tips for Practitioners

- Arrange for trips to local farms or allotments
- Try to find an area in the school grounds which may be used as an allotment and appoint children as monitors who are responsible for maintaining the area
- Talk to pupils during fruit times about where their fruit/vegetables have come from
- Provide children with gardening magazines, food-based stories and other reading materials with recipes
- Participate in national events and invite children's families to support the work the school does (e.g. through International Food Tasting events, cooking sessions, etc.

### References

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