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Glyn Owen

Teaching cooking at Ashton Vale Primary

As a Primary School teacher, for the last 15 years, I am very excited about the current high profile of nutrition and health within the school curriculum and the media as a whole.

I started my career in the catering industry, before retraining as a teacher and starting at Ashton Vale Primary School in North Bristol, where I am the Healthy School co-ordinator and head up all the food projects. Over the last five years, I have also been involved with health education across Bristol; first as a speaker at the nutrition training sessions and then as a Healthy School Champion. In my Champion's role, I visit other schools to advise on how to teach about a healthy diet and to help plan projects around healthy lunchboxes and cooking with children.

For too long, teaching about health and other skills for life have been put on the back burner with a bigger emphasis being placed on formal subjects – the idea being that teachers were preparing pupils for vocations rather preparing them for life. With the “School Food Plan”, free school meals for 4-7 year olds and quality cooking/food education back on the curriculum and OFSTED* focussing more on health, things are moving in the right direction and there is a lot to celebrate, but it is not going to be easy. I speak as a classroom teacher, not a dietician or health expert, and I want to give the view from the frontline of getting children cooking and learning about a healthy diet.

Teaching cooking

The new Design and Technology curriculum, (to be implemented in September 2014), is very clear on what children need to be taught about food and cooking.

Key Stage 1

Pupils should explore and develop purposeful, practical skills in design and technology, taking advantage of local opportunities and the expertise of teachers.

Pupils should be taught the basic principles of balanced eating and where food comes from, and should be encouraged to develop an interest in cooking.

Key Stage 2

Pupils should be taught about the major components of a balanced diet and how ingredients can be combined to prepare healthy meals. They should be taught basic cooking techniques and how to cook a variety of savoury dishes. In meeting these requirements, schools without access to a teaching kitchen, nearby kitchen or mobile kitchen may have to adapt the dishes and techniques they teach accordingly to the facilities available.

Key Stage 3

Pupils should be taught about the importance of nutrition, a balanced diet, and about the characteristics of a broad range of ingredients in choosing and preparing food. They should be encouraged to develop a love of cooking. They should be taught to cook a repertoire of savoury meals and become confident in a range of cooking techniques. In meeting these requirements, schools without access to a teaching kitchen, nearby kitchen or mobile kitchen may have to adapt the repertoire and techniques they teach accordingly to the facilities available.

(Design and technology. Programmes of study for Key Stages 1-3. February 2013)

* Paragraph 49 of the School Inspection Handbook, updated for September 2013, says that inspectors will now observe pupils' behaviour during lunchtime, including in the dining hall. They will also consider the food on offer and the atmosphere of the dining area. Ofsted's subsidiary guidance for inspectors (paragraph 47) requires them to:

- Consider how lunch time and the dining space contribute to good behaviour and the culture in the school, including by spending time in the lunch hall
- Ask school leaders how they help to ensure a healthy lifestyle for their children and, specifically, whether their dietary needs have been considered .

This is a far cry from the present curriculum, where teachers who feel passionate about children's health try to shoe-horn nutrition in where they can, but the majority of children aren't taught about it as it isn't prioritised by schools (who can blame them), when OFSTED, at present, won't be focussing on health education.

Teaching all subjects

So, a fantastic new curriculum with clear criteria to be taught! This is all very well, but as a teacher I know that not all Primary School teachers are knowledgeable in nutrition or feel skilled as cooks. Totally understandable. Most Primary School teachers are expected to teach all the subjects from Literacy and Numeracy through to Music, Sex Education and Modern Foreign Languages. I have yet to meet any teacher who feels confident in all the subjects they teach and often there is support given by another expert in the school or through outside agency training. For example, I never feel confident in teaching P.E. and sport. I feel it is a vital lesson and in the past I have often felt guilty about not being able to give the children the knowledge and skills they need in this area. So, one way round this was having whole school training, where we have had experts coming in to train the teachers and give demonstration lessons.

Another approach has been to have experts come in and teach the lesson while the teacher has their PPA release time. Both these approaches have meant the children have had some excellent, quality lessons in P.E. and sport. Wonderful, but it all costs money. Much of our P.E. and sport input in the last couple of years has been funded by direct government (pupil premium) funding and with this money earmarked for P.E. and sport it means this area has been expertly delivered. But we need to do the same for nutrition and food education.

At Ashton Vale Primary, we have been delivering a quality food and nutrition curriculum for many years but that has been because I have been able to train the staff and advise whenever needed and we have also been blessed with some fantastic, unpaid volunteers. We have also been fortunate to work with agencies such as Bristol Healthy Schools and The Food for Life Partnership, but as budgets

throughout the education world become tighter, what were free services now start to come at a cost. I believe that to deliver a quality food and nutrition curriculum funding also needs to be made available to schools, ring-fenced for food and nutrition education (just as it is for sport and ICT).

Many teachers I talk too are also very wary of cooking because of a lack of facilities. They come to see Ashton Vale Primary, where we have a purpose built cooking room, and they feel that, because they don't have such a facility, cooking is not possible in their school. Not so. When I first started teaching cooking in the school the cooking room didn't exist. We used the carpeted (not ideal) support room and had a Baby Belling/2 hob/unreliable oven to work with along with a lucky dip of utensils. It wasn't ideal but the lessons went on and we felt we were changing children's lives.



Cooking room, suitable for eight children, at Ashton Vale Primary



Are you confident cooks?

Although we now have a cooking room, it only holds a group of 8 children and so without parent/volunteer cooks coming in (who must also be CRB-checked) cooking would only happen in afterschool clubs if we didn't make use of the classrooms themselves to cook in.

This is where the real panic can set in for a teacher who is an unconfident cook. Will I have to complete a health and safety analysis? How can I make sure they don't get food poisoning? How can I let them use knives? Without knives how can they cook? The list goes on. But I promise, there are ways around it. With proper, easily followed procedures and correct training so the teachers/adults feel confident it is easy, and great fun, to have the whole class of 30 cooking at the same time. In fact, for our annual food festival it often happens that we have the whole school (200 pupils) cooking at the same time! And if you asked our teachers, "Are you confident cooks?", a few would respond with nervous laughter.

Hygiene

The first hurdle to get through is the concern about hygiene. The typical classroom table is not ideal, hygiene-wise, as it often cracked or has joins where germs can linger. We have safely solved this problem by purchasing some heavy duty table cloths (from a well-known Swedish interior design store) which can be used as a hygienic work surface. These cloths get daily usage as table cloths in our school hall during lunch service, but sprayed with anti-bac spray and given an extra wash down they are fantastic for cooking on. Although the tables themselves are not hygienically ideal the height is normally perfect for that age of children to prepare food on. Table height is an area not often thought about when it comes to organising a cooking room, but cooking in that age group's classroom the tables are perfect.

Next, there is the worry about safety. Using a few simple checks (and common sense), it is easy to run a safe cooking session in a classroom.

Suitable recipes

It is vitally important that teachers consider the age and existing skills of the class who are going to be cooking. If the only food they have prepared before in a classroom has been a

sandwich then there is no point in asking them to create a lasagne - you are planning for disaster!

A good starting point for recipes is the Internet, where lots of organisations have healthy, tried and tested recipes available. These links are a good place to start:

www.foodafactoflife.org.uk

www.letsgetcooking.org.uk

<http://ashtonvaleprimary.weebly.com/healthy-eating.html>

One vital lesson I have learned is that the pupils don't have to cook a complete recipe from scratch each time. Teachers need to consider the skills they would like the children to learn in the lesson and then focus on these skills only. For example - If I wanted a Year 2 Class to make pizzas and I wanted to focus on the bread making element I would have the sauce and the vegetables prepared and cut up beforehand. That being said, if I wanted to make pizzas with a Year 6 Class, who have been cooking in the school throughout their school career, I would be asking them to cook the complete recipe as well as plan and choose the ingredients and equipment beforehand.

When choosing a recipe to cook teachers should also consider the equipment used - as some equipment is obviously more difficult and possibly more dangerous than others. Does the recipe being planned involve cutting? That doesn't have to mean using knives. Herbs can be safely snipped using blunt scissors, many vegetables can be ripped and soft fruits (such as bananas) can be cut using lollipop sticks.

There are some excellent websites that give advice on which equipment is suitable for each age group and also a skills progression so that it is easier to choose the skills the class can focus on. For example:

<http://www.foodafactoflife.org.uk/>

I like to use the classrooms interactive whiteboard to show the recipe. This means that the class are all at about the same stage (helps to check everyone has understood each instruction and gives the teacher a chance to repeat / re demonstrate the instruction / skill). Also with younger pupils using lots of image on the screen help to show what exactly they need to do. Some PowerPoint recipes can be found here: <http://ashtonvaleprimary.weebly.com/cooking-in-schools.html>

Suitable equipment

It is so important that the equipment is correctly chosen for the children and that it is in good working order. Some equipment is actually more dangerous than you would think. In all my years of teaching cooking, I very rarely have seen an accident with a knife but almost every time I use graters with a group someone needs a blue plaster (despite me modelling the correct use and the safety steps). Also the equipment needs to be of a suitable quality and well maintained. A blunt knife is certainly going to be more dangerous than a sharp one as a blunt knife needs a lot of pressure to make it cut, leading to it being more likely to slip.

I have found that it is worthwhile paying a little bit extra for equipment – rather than just the bargain basics lines available in supermarkets. If you have ever tried cooking pancakes in a paper thin, supposedly non-stick, frying pan you will know how frustrating it is. We wouldn't ask children to draw a straight line using a buckled and dented ruler but often I have seen teachers expecting culinary success from children using equipment that even a highly skilled chef would find difficult to use.

Suitable training (for adults and pupils)

When considering the recipe/skills to be taught teachers need to think about what skills need to be explained to make sure equipment is used safely. Most importantly, all of the adults working with the children need to be trained on the skills as well. I have found the easiest way of doing this is making sure all of the adult helpers are present as I teach the skill to the children (sounds obvious, but often adult helpers can disappear at this vital moment to come back in later without being safely trained).

I have learnt that 30 children and 5 adults all trying to see my hands as I demonstrate a chopping technique doesn't work. It is much better to use videos or images from the Internet to demonstrate what you want the children to do. For examples, see the following links:

<http://www.focusonfood.org/cookingtech.html>
<http://www.foodafactoflife.org.uk/Sheet.aspx?siteId=14§ionId=62&contentId=70>

Suitable adult/pupil ratio

To ensure the lesson runs safely teachers need to make sure there are enough adults in the room as well. This obviously depends on the age of the class (with Year 2, I tend to have 1 adult to each table of 4-6 children with me spare to move around and lead the session), and the existing skills of the children. Sometimes too many adults can cause problems as well (too many cooks...)

The future of cooking in schools

The future of cooking in schools is certainly looking very promising and there is a real excitement amongst those working with food in schools. But, the average teacher is going to need support in delivering this curriculum. If cooking skills have not been passed down from parent to child in the last few generations, and cooking has not been consistently taught in schools for a few years, many teachers will be working in schools where no-one has experience of teaching cooking and children are not encouraged to cook at home. However, with support, our schools could be producing a new generation who know what a healthy diet looks like, have an understanding of where food comes from and possess the skills to cook for themselves and their family. That is exciting!

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