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The Politics of Food: Inside and outside of school

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Abstract

Two questions drive this discussion. First, what should young people know and understand about food that will enable them to choose and use food wisely? And second, what are the influences both inside and outside school that will inform this knowledge? The paper begins with a narrative describing how young people develop some of this knowledge and understanding at home and through attending school. The paper then considers four stakeholders in food in the world outside school: a) the food industry, b) the government, c) a range of food-concerned independent organisations and d) the consumer; and current concerns involving these stakeholders. The paper will then discuss how the concerns might be addressed through the secondary school curriculum with particular regard to the recently revised Key Stage 3 curriculum in England. The paper will conclude by suggesting how a collaborative approach across existing subject disciplines might be used to help young people acquire the knowledge and understanding needed to appreciate the complex nature of food in our society.

Key words

food, curriculum, design & technology, stakeholders

Introduction

In this discussion paper we ask two questions. First, what should young people know and understand about food that will enable them to choose and use food wisely? And second, what are the influences both inside and outside school that will inform this knowledge? The approach taken was to research selected literature for secondary data relevant to the issue. It is essentially evaluative research, in that 'is open-ended, exploratory, contributes something original to the substantive field and extends the frontiers of knowledge and theory' (Cohen et al, 2001, p38). It is argued that evaluations are designed to provide useful data to inform decision-making and should have some impact on policy-making (Burgess, 1993). The paper begins with a narrative describing how young

people develop some of this knowledge and understanding at home and through attending school. It identifies stakeholders in food in the world outside school and the current concerns involving these stakeholders. The paper discusses how the concerns might be addressed through the secondary school curriculum with particular regard to the recently revised Key Stage 3 curriculum in England. Underpinning this discussion is the concept of empowerment through which young people can develop an understanding of the implications of current concerns and take responsibility for the way they choose and use food and become pro-active in developing a critical discourse concerning food in our society. The paper concludes by suggesting areas in a modernised secondary school curriculum in which particular aspects of food in our society identified in the discussion might be located.

Learning about food at home

In Victorian Britain major infectious disease epidemics destroyed many lives but modern medical practices and living conditions have transformed our life expectations. However, recently there has been a growing problem of so called 'lifestyle diseases', pointing to a future based on rising chronic disease and long term ill-health. Heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and obesity have replaced the nineteenth century diseases and are currently the threat to people's health and quality of life (DH and DCFS, 2008). Learning about food, where it comes from, what we should eat and how we can prepare it is a crucial aspect of combating these growing threats. Young people begin to learn about food in the home. Initially they have little control, as it is adults, parents and carers who decided what is available to them and the way it is prepared and eaten. A family of two parents, with a baby and toddler eat what was described (Singer and Mason, 2006) as the Standard American diet (SAD) or basic meat and potato diet. The foods eaten by the children are wholly dependent on the choice and decisions of the parents. One parent commented that in her formative years her mother 'cooked a lot from scratch, not liking pre-packaged food' (ibid, p19). However, her shopping is now done at Wal-Mart Supercenter

where the key factors are 'great value' or cost, favourite foods to feed the family, locally availability and convenience of preparation. So the children do have some influence on what they eat depending on their favourite foods, but when asked what drives their food choices, the parents response was 'price and convenience are way up there, especially now with the children' (ibid, p18).

Of course, children develop likes and dislikes as they grow older and in most families the adults try to accommodate these to some extent. Also, as they grow older they may become involved in helping to prepare meals but this is not always the case. The patterns of eating are also governed by behaviour at home. In the 1960s and 1970s poverty and hunger were the big problems regarding food in the USA and around the world (Popkin, 2009). In the 1980s obesity began to replace hunger as the main nutritional problem in the USA but hunger remained the big problem across the developing world. Today, in countries such as England and the USA, people who are not in tune with the needs of their body's needs eat unwisely and suffer from poor nutrition or malnutrition rather than under nutrition or a lack of food.

The lifestyle of families around the Western World has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Factors that have contributed to this include a large decline in the amount of kinds of housework performed by women, including rarely cooking from basic ingredients, the use of prepared foods and increasing numbers of women working outside the home (Popkin, 2009). Food preparation has changed dramatically during this time from when 'the average woman spent about two hours a day in preparing meals, whereas today we use only twenty to forty minutes in food preparation. This has been in addition to the use of technological, energy- saving equipment in home, travelling by car instead of walking, sedentary jobs and less active leisure time with more time spent watching television' (ibid, p69-70). In recent times all these changes have made it less common for families to sit down and eat together and the emerging patterns seems to be one of food being available at different times for different family members depending on arrival time at home from work or school and leisure activities. This has made it more difficult for young people to be involved in cooking at home and led to an increased use of highly processed convenience foods which require little preparation time. These changes have resulted in what is described as 'MacDonaldisation', where 'the principles fast-food restaurants are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society, as well as the rest of the world' (Ritzer, p1). Increasingly in England the large supermarket is where food is bought and small shops have in many towns and cities have ceased to exist. The influence of large

supermarkets on our eating patterns through the production of inexpensive highly processed foods has become similar to the situation in America.

Learning about food at school

Personal development is seen as a vital element of the Key Stage 3 (11-14 years) curriculum in England. The intention is to promote young people's wellbeing and enable them to develop their potential as healthy, enterprising and responsible citizens in society as derived from the Every Child Matters (ECM) policy (www.everychildmatters.gov.uk). The broad aims of ECM ensure the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19 years, through achieving five outcomes. They are to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. An effective school curriculum will include a planned and coherent approach to personal development.

The White Paper 'Choosing Health: Making healthy choices easier' (DH, 2004) set out the key principles for supporting the public to make healthier and more informed choices in regards to their health (www.dh.gov.uk). Schools are expected to encourage healthy eating and can achieve 'healthy school' status through the Healthy Schools Programme which is run and jointly funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), and the Department of Health (DH). The overall aim is to help schools become healthier environments that are conducive to learning and encourage pupils to achieve. The local healthy schools programme is managed by a partnership between the Local Education Authority (LEA) and the local Primary Care Trust (PCT). (www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk).

There is a range of enhancement and enrichment activities in which schools can participate to encourage children to eat healthy foods and become involved in cooking. For example there is the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme that is part of the 'five a day' programme to increase fruit and vegetable consumption. Under this scheme, all four to six year old children in local authority maintained infant, primary and special schools are entitled to a free piece of fruit or vegetable each school day. www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/HealthAndSocialCareTopics/FiveADay).

After school club provision is found within the Extended Schools agenda and the Government's target that schools aim to offer "wrap around care" between 8am and 6pm. Where pupils are staying at school until 6pm, schools will need to provide food and drink and this gives opportunities to promote healthy eating and to provide nutrition education and related

activities. Let's Get Cooking is a national network of cooking clubs for children, families and their communities across England. It is funded by the BIG Lottery Fund and led by the School Food Trust in partnership with the Prince's Trust, Business in the Community and Magic Outcomes. The British Nutrition Foundation and the Royal Society for Public Health are also involved in an advisory capacity (www.letsgetcooking.org.uk).

A fundamental aim of the government has been the development of whole school food policies to ensure that the entire school community and the wider public understand the ethos of the school in relation to food and drink, both within the curriculum and in food and drink provision. They include initiatives such as healthier breakfast clubs, healthier tuck shops, water provision, healthier vending and healthier lunch boxes. (www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/foodpolicygoverning.pdf).

Through Food in Schools the DCSF and DH encourage schools to look at all aspects of food during the day and to develop whole school food policies. They can set up local food partnerships, where secondary food specialists train and support their primary colleagues, helping them to work towards the National Healthy Schools Standard. (www.foodinschools.org). Other bodies, including the School Food Trust, play a key advisory role and bring together industry, education and the voluntary and community sectors to encourage schools to trial new approaches to improving school food (www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk).

The celebrity chef Jamie Oliver caused much controversy when he publicly criticised school meals. His attempts to provide alternatives led to only limited success with some parents actively rejecting the healthy options in favour of so called 'junk food' alternatives high in sugar, salt and unsaturated fat which they claimed their children preferred (www.feedmebetter.com). Recently, the Government has announced new standards for school food in all local authority maintained primary, secondary, special and boarding schools, and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in England. The new standards cover all food sold or served in schools, including breakfast, lunch and after-school meals, tuck shops, vending machines, mid-morning break and after-school clubs (www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk).

The Food Standards Agency (FSA), as an independent Government department set up under the Food Standards Act in 2000 to protect the public's health and consumer interests in relation to food, plays an important role. The FSA works with education and health departments, and other partners, to encourage schools to adopt a whole school approach to food

and nutrition and to improve children's dietary health. The Agency's websites (www.food.gov.uk) and (www.eatwell.gov.uk) provide a wealth of information covering all aspects of food and drink both within schools, and also at different life-stages.

Within the English National Curriculum itself at Key stage 3 (where pupils are aged 11-14 years) there are specific subject based opportunities for young people to acquire knowledge and understanding that will support them in choosing and using food wisely. These occur in personal well being, science, physical education, and design & technology. Note also that healthy lifestyle is one of the seven cross curricular dimensions introduced in March 2009 (www.curriculum.qca.or.uk).

Stakeholders and concerns

This article discusses the influences on the means by which young people gain knowledge and understanding that will enable them to choose and use food wisely. We have identified four stakeholders that have such influences a) the food industry, b) the government, c) a range of food-concerned independent organisations and d) the consumer.

The production of food is a complex technological activity involving a range of participants generally described as the food industry. This is made up of a complex global network including farmers who grow the food, food manufacturers who buy from farmers and process the food into a very wide range of food products, including staple foods, which have had little processing to highly complex food products such as ready meals, and food retail outlets which range in size from multinational chains such as Tesco to corner shops and market stalls. The journey from farm to table for many food products can be an extremely complex one. In England bodies such as the IGD, with more than 700 corporate members from across the food and grocery industry, are important in that they provide research, information and education about the food and grocery industry. Such organisations also maintain that they are also committed to the needs of its consumers (www.igd.com). Similarly, Leatherhead Food International (LFI) provides guidance on developing new markets, improving products or innovation in food related issues from technical analysis and research through to market data and regulatory guidance for the government (www.leatherheadfood.com). The food industry is a major stakeholder in food but its diverse nature and multiple participants make it impossible for it to speak with one voice. However, the overriding purpose of the food industry is clear and that is to provide goods and services to a variety of customers at a profit. It is clear that one way in which young people learn about food is through the availability of food in our shops and the marketing of this food, coupled

with the way their family, as consumers, chooses to buy and use food.

The government is a stakeholder from two main perspectives. It has a legal responsibility to ensure that the food the consumer can buy and eat is safe. It meets these responsibilities through organisations such as the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the FSA. More recently the government has become particularly concerned with the nation's diet i.e. the food that people choose to buy and eat. Hence the report *'Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: A Cross-Government Strategy for England'* (DH and DCSF, 2008) which comments 'that two thirds of adults are either overweight or obese, and without action this could rise to almost nine in ten adults and two-thirds of children by 2050' (pvii).).

There are many independent organisations that are concerned with food. Most have charitable status. Here are two examples. The British Nutrition Foundation (www.nutrition.org.uk) includes in its mission statement the promotion of the wellbeing of society through the impartial interpretation and effective dissemination of scientifically based knowledge and advice on the relationship between diet, physical activity and health. It is widely involved in the production of educational materials. The All Saints Educational Trust (www.aset.org.uk) is committed to increase the number of new teachers with Qualified Teacher Status and improve the skills and qualifications of experienced teachers. The Trust encourages teacher based research, supports the teaching of Religious Studies and Home Economics and related areas and promotes public health and nutrition, both at home and in the Commonwealth. Some independent organisations such as the Science and Technology Foundation, whilst not solely concerned with food do on occasions make pronouncements that are extremely relevant to food in our society (www.foundation.org.uk).

Consumers are clearly stakeholders in food and will want safety, choice and value for money with regard to the food they choose to buy and use. They have an influence on the range and type of food products produced by the food industry as the industry responds to some extent to the preferences, spending power and convenience requirements of the consumer. However, industry in its turn does influence consumer choice through complex advertising strategies. Similarly, the government independent organisations influence the consumer through the regulations and advice to industry. An interesting question is to what extent the learning about food in school informs consumer choice rather than the range of influences present in everyday life.

The interplay of stakeholder influence can be seen in the following concerns with regard to food in our society.

Obesity

Government concern over the rising level of obesity in our society has already been noted (DH and DCSF, 2008). This is further compounded in the Foresight Report commissioned to examine the question 'How can we deliver a sustainable response to obesity over the next 40 years?' (Government Office for Science, 2007, p1). It concludes that in recent years we have become 'a nation where being overweight has become usual, rather than unusual' (ibid, p17). It sees tackling obesity as a complex issue about healthy and sustainable living for the current and future generation. In practice consumers have taken advantage of the availability of highly processed, inexpensive, energy intensive foods produced by the food industry. This coupled with a less energetic lifestyle has led to a trend of increasing Body Mass Index across the population despite considerable government efforts to encourage alternative eating habits and life style. A current initiative of the FSA is the 'Healthy Food Code of Good Practice' that challenges all sectors of the food industry to promote healthy eating (www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2008/jul/healthyfoodcode). However, the response to this initiative is not simple. The FSA has set new salt levels and food companies are challenging this directive as they argued that consumers will not accept the taste of many products. The food industry considers that the new salt levels may compromise food safety, especially for cheese and ham, and that will shorten the shelf life of products and create more food waste (Elliott, 19.05.09, p17).

Food safety

A food may be safe in the sense that eating it in small quantities as part of a healthy balanced diet will not be harmful but if eaten in too great a proportion it will distort the overall diet such that it becomes unhealthy and harmful. Much of the FSA's current work on labeling is to help make sure that people get the information on ingredients and nutrition they need in an understandable form and that the rules on the safety of materials that come into contact with food are enforced (www.food.gov.uk). Legislation enforces food producers to take certain action e.g. with regard to labelling about composition and nutritional values on food packaging and food labels are a useful source of information, primarily to inform and protect consumers. Self regulation, in which the food industry voluntarily takes action without legal requirement, also plays a part. The recent introduction of 'enjoy responsibly' in advertisements for alcoholic drinks is an example. There is a complex relationship between attempts to ensure food safety,

giving consumers choice and providing guidance with regard to healthy eating.

Consumer understanding and awareness

In the last ten years there has been a growth in organic markets and the profile of celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver promoting such ingredients. At the same time there has been a consolidation in the positions of supermarkets and the use of ready processed foods, an increase in the consumption of ready meals and ready to cook components that can easily be assembled into a meal. This is seen as one of the root causes of an overweight society despite government efforts to remedy this. Coupled with this is, according to the Foundation for Science and Technology (2008), a widespread anti-science bias in the public mind and in the media has led to antagonism to new food technologies, including genetically modified crops and food. This lack of understanding has resulted in reduced development and slow take up of such technologies and a nostalgic view of traditional and inefficient practices.

Food availability

At the moment in England, we take the ready availability of food for granted. This is not the case in many parts of the world and may not remain the case in England. In 2008 the Foundation for Science and Technology held a discussion at the Royal Society that considered food security – the global balance of supply and demand for food. The discussion summary makes grim reading with regard to Africa and Asia. Climate change, water shortage, population increase, urbanisation, changes in diet and increased energy demand combine to make it more difficult to produce enough food for the billions of people suffering rural poverty and hunger. Abandoning traditional methods of food production and utilising the developed worlds' technology was seen as a crucial way forward and that this will require evidence that such technology works and "that those who cling to belief systems which discount changes are forced to look at the evidence" (The Foundation for Science and Technology, 2008).

Although consideration of the world food problem outside the UK may appear to be of little immediate concern to the consumer, shortages in the medium term may well affect availability of food in this country. Consumer understanding, with regard to the benefits and risks associated with potentially beneficial food technologies, will be important with regard to government policy.

Discussion

One answer to the question "What should young people know and understand about food that will enable them to choose

and use food wisely?" is that their knowledge and understanding should enable them to deal competently with the concerns identified above. With regard to concern over obesity their knowledge and understanding should enable them to adopt a lifestyle in which, through a combination of exercise and diet, they do not become overweight. The government sees teaching young people to cook as an important element of this knowledge and understanding and has included an 'entitlement to cook' in the secondary curriculum. This has manifested itself in the 'licence to cook' scheme in which pupils learn basic cooking skills by following a range of recipes through dedicated lessons in food preparation techniques and the related theory of a knowledge of diet, nutrition, hygiene and safety and wise shopping (www.licencetocook.org.uk).

With regard to knowledge and understanding about food safety at the individual level young people need to know how to protect themselves from infection and illness in their personal hygiene, handling of foods and in their choice of foods to make a balanced healthy diet. They need to learn how to understand the information on food labels and how foods can be packaged to protect them from contamination. At a political level they need to understand the nature of statutory regulation and self-regulation concerning the safety of food and the extent to which they as consumers can have a voice in influencing these.

The young person, as an emerging consumer, will have considerable power over the way the food industry is able to develop in exploiting new and emerging technologies. It is becoming increasingly obvious that it is not possible to appreciate and respond to the developments in food technology without a significant amount of scientific knowledge and understanding. It is important that young people are well informed about the journey from farm to table for the food they buy and use. As consumers they are part of a complex global system of food production/consumption which is suffering from the effects of global warming and resultant political instability. It is important that they understand the way this system operates, the environmental, economic and political forces involved and the moral dimension of a world where there is much hunger.

Given the complex nature, outlined above, of what is to be learned about food the question becomes where should such learning be positioned in the curriculum? The description of the curriculum at Key Stage 3 painted by QCA in the BIG Picture provides an interesting terrain in which there are many opportunities (QCA 2008). The whole curriculum dimensions of Healthy lifestyles, Community participation, Global dimension and sustainable development provide relevant

learning contexts for the individual subjects through which programmes of study are described. To adopt this approach would require considerable collaboration across subject boundaries and this is known to be problematic (Barlex and Pitt, 2000). This will almost certainly involve schools in adopting innovative approaches to using time.

We suggest that it is through personal well being that pupils should be taught to cook so that they are able to feed themselves and ultimately their families. Clearly those with expertise in cooking should lead the team of teachers responsible for this (Rutland, 2008). Developing an appreciation of the journey from farm to table in the current global situation will require the expertise of the science teacher, the food technology teacher and probably the citizenship teacher. Developing an understanding of the nature of food as a material, and the way it needs to be handled in food product development and in food processing and manufacture, will require the expertise of the science teacher and the food technology teacher. Developing an understanding of the new and emerging technologies that will influence food production will require the expertise of the science teacher and the food technology teacher.

The challenge facing secondary schools engaging with the politics of food is organising the interaction of the learning that takes place through these programmes into a coherent, comprehensible and empowering experience for young people. Lang (2004) when writing about food policy has identified five key elements of the world of food that he considers crucial. These are health, business, consumer culture, the environment and food governance. These key elements mirror the features identified in this paper. In terms of developing an overall policy for food in our society Lang has argued that '...the scale of the pressures and challenges in the context of the global food supply now suggests that this compartmentalised approach is no longer a viable way of handling food policy making' (ibid p3). One subject or curriculum area cannot cover in sufficient depth all aspects of food that should be in the school curriculum. It would be inevitably trivialise significant and important aspects. To avoid the compartmentalised approach within schools that is inappropriate for sound policy development, collaboration between different subjects will be required. Teachers and senior leadership teams will need to think creatively, work together, be open-minded and be willing to develop and implement curriculum opportunities.

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