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Tackling food poverty: The role and importance of food education in UK schools.

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INTRODUCTION

- This paper is developed from the chapter *Food poverty and how it affects United Kingdom (UK) children in the long term* (Seabrook, Rutland) in *Food Futures in Education and Society* (Sing Lalli, Turner, Rutland 2024)
- It explored issues related to *child food poverty in UK* and concluded that it has a significant impact on *social mobility, educational attainment and long-term health issues. This paper is also qualitative methodology desktop research* drawn from experience rather than theory and belief, from *journal articles, report findings and expert opinion from charitable bodies.*
- So why food education in schools? It creates *communities and social cohesion and goes beyond nutritional value, as it brings people together, combats poor mental health, fights loneliness and increases self-worth and esteem* (Fareshare, 2022).
- Issues of food poverty and food education are very relevant today in the UK because of *a rising cost of living e.g., food and energy prices* (Office for National Statistics, 2023), *COVID and conflict in Ukraine.*

WHAT IS FOOD EDUCATION?

- Food education, internationally sometimes known as *food literacy* (Food Literacy Center, 2023) and *food technology* may be taught in *science, home economics, physical education, personal, health social and economical education (PSHEE)* and as in England, *Design and Technology (D&T)*.
- Food education has a robust theoretical framework and includes *socio-cultural, scientific theory (food science), technological understanding, environmental issues, product design, nutritional knowledge and cooking skills* all taught in *an experimental, sequential and integrated approach*.
- In D&T pupils' food preparation (*practical capability*) is enriched when they develop *technical knowledge and skills* related to *nutrition, food science* and *food product development* through *decision making using analytical and evaluative skills*.
- When taught in this way it provides a *pathway and progression* through the school curriculum and beyond into *tertiary and higher education, research, the food industry and other food related employment* (Rutland, Turner, 2021)

THE IMPACT OF HEAVILY PROCESSED FOODS

- In the UK not all children will learn to cook at home *due to changes in lifestyle and roles* and there is a *growing consumption of ultra-processed (UPF) foods* produced by an expanding food industry.
- These food take *less preparation time* and are *cheaper and less nutritious* due to the *increased use of food additives, preservatives, emulsifiers, sweeteners and artificial colours and flavours*
e.g., ice-cream, ham, sausages, crisps, mass-produced bread, breakfast cereals, biscuits, carbonated drinks, fruit flavoured yogurts, instant soups and some alcoholic drinks (BHF, 2023).
- Two recent landmark studies have revealed that *UPF foods significantly increase the risk of high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes* (European Society of Cardiology Congress, 2023)
- Though, the UK's *soft drinks industry levy has led to a 29% reduction in the average sugar content of soft drinks within 3 years (DEFRA, 2021).*

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOOD EDUCATION

- People in the UK are increasingly relying on *food banks and other charity-based organisations to feed their families*. Food education in the classroom is very important, and it is dependent on the *expectations* and *requirements of a society, the local environment and culture of the people* that live there.
- Food education is *much broader than just 'teaching children to cook', they need to know and understand how, why and what they are doing*. This includes the *designing and making of creative food products, combining all the skills and knowledge related to food preparation and nutrition*. It is not just based on following a recipe and should not be left to out-of-school clubs or less important elements of the school curriculum.
- It provides a *pathway, progression as health adults in a multicultural world* considering where *foods come from, food availability, the environment and sustainability*.
- Courses in *higher and further education* lead to a range of careers in, for example the *food industry, hospitality, teaching*. They expand and broaden the *basic scientific and technological aspects of food education* taught in schools, so children become fully prepared for their future lives in the 21st Century

KEY ISSUES AND A WAY FORWARD.

- Since the late 1990 there have been fundamental changes to the teaching of D&T. Initially it was *compulsory to follow a technology subject with food technology a popular examination course*. There was a *GCSE Food Technology (16 years)* and an *Advanced level Food Technology (18 years)*
- These provided a *pathway to food related courses in higher education* with entry to the *food industry and other food related careers, including teaching*.
- A new *National Curriculum for D&T (DfE, 2014)* resulted in reforms to GCSE and A Level D&T subjects with new *GCSE Food Preparation and Nutrition (DfE, 2015)*. This focused on *a good understanding of food and nutrition together with excellent cooking skills*. No new A level Food was developed as there were *already several high-quality vocational qualification available, such as confectionary and butchery (DfEa, 2014)*
- Further influences included Academies, *groups of schools adopting their own food curriculum; new teaching standards, National Food Strategies (DEFRA, 2021) and School Food Standards Guide (DfE, 2023)*. The FELL report (Oliver 2017); commenting that there was *little focus on pupils' values, aspirations and motivation to make health choices*

Continued: *KEY ISSUES AND A WAY FORWARD*

- A *government move for 90% of 16-year-old pupils to follow core academic subjects by 2025 (DFE, 2019)*, also *impacted on the teaching of food*
- There has been a steady decline of *33.31%* of pupils studying *food technology since 2013 (DATA, 2017)*.
- Only *23% of school food teachers*, responding to a survey *offered any post 16 course*. Out of the *306 respondents 93%* felt that there were *insufficient post 16 level choices* (Davies, Ballam, 2023). Some of these courses included *food science and nutrition* but others offered *professional cookery courses and home cooking skills* indicating a *lack of academically recognised options for pupils at post 16 level*.
- In addition, in schools, *lesson time allocation, lack of facilities, resources and well-trained food specialist food teachers* are all issues *with 22% of schools no longer having food in their curriculum (Seabrook, 2018 a) & b)*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- School food education is varied in both quality and quantity depending how it is viewed by the school. Concerns are *pupils' knowledge of healthy eating is incomplete, delivery of all aspects is patchy*. Many children *are unable to develop cooking skills and apply principles of health eating in their food choices*. Teachers are held back *by lack of time, resources and facilities with insufficient professional development to improve these skills* (Oliver, 2017)
- There is evidence that curriculum-based food education should be *embedded in wider school culture* Food education should be *prioritised with opportunities for teachers to enhance their knowledge and understanding* of topics such as *food poverty, security, production methods and sustainability*. (DATA, 2017).
- There is an urgent need to *revise current GCSE Food and Nutrition (16 years)* to enable *progression to a new food A Level (18 Years)* leading to *higher and further education food related courses*.
- These courses will provide *suitably skilled and qualified people* able to enter the food industry *to ensure that food products have the qualities to ensure protection against poor health and food poverty*
- In England food courses for *11- 18 years olds within D&T* will not only develop their cooking skills but have a wider impact on *pupils' food related knowledge, understanding and skills alongside their future health and ability to follow a wide range of food related career opportunities*.

Thank you for listening