Food and nutrition in the twenty-first century curriculum

Stephanie Valentine

Background

The Health of the Nation (Department of Health, 1992), published under the Conservative government, set in place for the first time in England a comprehensive strategy for promoting public health across the whole community, “not just by adding years to life but also by adding life to years”. There were similar initiatives in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This thrust is carried forward by the current administration in its Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation report (Department of Health, 1998a). The introduction to the Department of Health’s Guidance on Food and Nutrition in Primary Teacher Training (Department of Health, 1998b), published under the current Labour government, states:

Education in food and nutrition should start in childhood and continue through life to enable the whole population to enjoy as healthy and disease-free lives as possible. Crucial in this area of education is the knowledge and understanding of why food is required and how nutrient intakes and health status are linked. Accurate and appropriate application of this knowledge enables informed choices to be made which foster both enjoyment of food and sound dietary practices that help to reduce or eliminate risks to health.

Diet is a major risk factor in the development of coronary heart disease and stroke. Much of the ill health associated with these conditions could be influenced by improvements in dietary habits, and many premature deaths might be prevented.

Here is a statement, in the clearest possible terms, of government commitment to nutrition education in schools. Food and nutrition may not appear as a discrete subject in the newly-revised national curriculum, but anyone with a will to look will find ample opportunities for pupils to learn about and work with food.

Science

Nutrition has been retained in science, at all four key stages in England. Science is one of the core subjects, and so compulsory. This means that boys and girls of all abilities have a statutory entitlement to study basic nutrition. Here is an ideal opportunity to ensure a sound theoretical grounding for all pupils. Success, however, is reliant on an ample supply of teachers who have up-to-date knowledge and are competent and confident to teach about...
the range and types of foods, their nutritional composition, digestion and human dietary and nutritional needs. These teachers play a pivotal role in providing opportunities for pupils to learn about why people choose different types and combinations of food and the links between food intake and good health. Children need clear, consistent messages about how to choose a healthy balanced diet. A key resource, which helps pupils to understand this concept, is *The Balance of Good Health* (Health Education Authority, 1996), a pictorial representation of the types and proportions of foods that make up a healthy balanced diet.

Likewise, if, during their primary school years, every child understood the key messages on the poster *Eight Guidelines for a Healthy Diet* (Health Education Authority, 1997), they would have established a sound foundation of knowledge on which to build. This simple, clear advice may be taken at face value (and a poster is ideal for reinforcing these essential points) or explored more deeply, to examine the scientific basis on which each guideline has been established. In addition to providing some sound dietary advice, this would foster the children’s development of skills needed to assess the validity of any nutritional information. They would begin to develop an understanding of the scientific principles upon which current issues in nutrition are based, and so become equipped to make judgements about the validity of (sometimes sensational) news reports and evaluate advertising claims. A valuable lesson for life.

**Design and technology**

It is excellent that food is compulsory for all pupils in design and technology at key stages 1 and 2. This contributes to an inclusive curriculum that promotes equal opportunities. There are four food-based activities outlined in the *A Scheme of Work for Design and Technology at Key Stages 1 and 2* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998). In November 1999, the British Nutrition Foundation launched colourful posters to support these four activities on designing and making:

1. fruit salad;
2. sandwiches;
3. biscuits; and
4. bread.

The Foundation’s Web site address (www.nutrition.org.uk/primary), which is included on each poster, gives access to further support materials for teachers and pupils.

It is not sufficient for children to know about food, where it comes from and how it is made. They must actually carry out food-based practical activities. Done well, this should be both creative and motivating. Designing with food involves applying a range of skills, including sensory evaluation techniques, considering the needs and preferences of consumers and taking account of aesthetic and ethical issues. Making includes using appropriate ingredients, equipment and processes to achieve a desired outcome. And pupils are required to assess risk and adopt health and safety practices in their work.

But food is not compulsory at key stage 3 in design and technology. It was not compulsory before the recent review of the national curriculum. It is not compulsory now. Does this really matter? The evidence shows that:

- food technology is taught in approximately 95 per cent of secondary schools in England;
- food technology is growing in popularity;
- GCSE results in design and technology show an upward trend in both food quality and quantity; and
- OFSTED report that examples of excellent work are to be found in food rooms around the UK.

So, perhaps it is no big deal. What is important is that every encouragement is given to schools to develop exciting courses which continue to move the boundaries of the subject forward. And schools which do not currently teach food technology are given the support they need to do so.

Successful GCSE students are now asking “What next?” One examination group is currently running a pilot A-level food technology course, and three new A-level specifications have gone through the approval process at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. So, the gap between year 11 and higher education is being filled. This is particularly encouraging since food technology graduates are virtually guaranteed employment. The food industry is, after all, the UK’s major employer.
Home economics

Although it is not part of the national curriculum, and so not statutory, schools still have the option to teach home economics. Of course, it has to compete for time in an already overcrowded curriculum. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority recently reviewed the criteria for GCSE, AS- and A-level home economics, so examination groups will be offering these courses as long as there is sufficient demand to make them commercially viable. In Scotland, home economics has achieved new heights by having a Higher Still course of study approved. Home economics is particularly strong in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where it seems to be embracing some of the new aspects of food technology whilst retaining the established strengths of home economics. Although the two subjects are complementary, and there is some degree of overlap, the emphasis is different. Whereas home economics is principally set in a domestic context, the focus of food technology is industrial. It enables pupils to become informed consumers, provides a realistic context for the work-related curriculum, enhances opportunities for future employment at all levels of educational attainment and can contribute to the future competitive UK economy. So, a move in this direction seems a sound and forward-looking approach.

There are some schools, and even whole areas of the country, where specialist facilities have been run down or removed. There is a shortage of suitably qualified food-specialist teachers nationally. Perhaps it is understandable that some head teachers (hard pressed to balance their budgets) have decided this is a cut they are forced to make.

But the message is not all bad. Individual enthusiasts around the country are doing some great work with food. There have been many initiatives to encourage practical cookery in schools. The Royal Society of Arts’ “Focus on food” project is currently offering opportunities for teachers and pupils throughout the UK to take part in sessions on the cooking bus or run special events in schools. During 2000, the RSA plans to focus on a celebration of cultural diversity.

Personal, social and health education

David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education, has a personal agenda to see citizenship and personal, social and health education (PSHE) become established in the school curriculum. Non-statutory guidelines for PSHE are included in the review of the national curriculum. At key stages 1 and 2, PSHE is merged with citizenship, and includes aspects of exercise and healthy eating. However, at key stage 3, food references are reduced to the simple statement, “to keep healthy”. At key stage 4 pupils are urged to study “the link between eating patterns and self-image, including eating disorders” and to review “health risks and different food choice”.

Clearly, this offers interesting and challenging avenues for developing teaching of food and nutrition, but has implications for both teacher training and provision of resources in schools. A sensitive topic like eating disorders calls for delicate handling in order to ensure that more good is done than harm.

The Healthy Schools Standard, launched jointly by Ministers from Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment in Autumn 1999, demonstrated the strength of “joined-up government” support for investment in the health and welfare of the citizens of the future. The Healthy Schools Programme offers an opportunity to ensure that healthy eating is firmly embedded in schools’ ethos.

Personal, social and health education and citizenship are prime areas where food and nutrition have something unique to offer and are definitely worth keeping a close eye on in the future.

Whole-school approach

Many schools express in their overall aims concern to develop “the whole child”. Parents, governors and OFSTED inspectors
alike cannot fail to be impressed by establishments where the reality matches the rhetoric. The formal curriculum needs to be viewed within the context of a whole school approach to food and nutrition. What is taught in lessons is easily undermined or reinforced by what happens elsewhere in school – at meal times or breaks and in the staffroom, for example.

The Education Act of 1980 removed the obligation from LEAs to provide meals (except to those who were entitled to a free school meal). In addition it removed the obligation for school meals to be sold at a set price and to meet any nutritional standard. Since then, much concern has been raised about the nutritional adequacy of school meals and about the diets of schoolchildren in general. The White Paper Excellence in Schools, published in July 1997, proposed reintroduction of compulsory national nutritional standards for school lunches by May 2002. Ingredients for Success: Consultation Paper on Nutritional Standards for School Lunches (Department for Education and Employment, 1998) was launched in England, while a separate paper was issued in Wales. Organisations and individuals with an interest in school meals, such as the British Nutrition Foundation, sent a response in January 1999. Since then, Draft Regulations and Guidance for Nutritional Standards for School Lunches (Department for Education and Employment, 1999) has been issued for consultation. Separate draft regulations are available for pupils under the age of five, pupils aged five and over in primary schools and pupils in secondary schools.

Clearly, the reintroduction of compulsory nutritional standards to school lunches needs to be set within a whole school approach to food and nutrition. Guidance to help schools develop and implement a school food policy needs to be produced which will address not only the teaching of food and nutrition in the curriculum but also food and beverage provision in tuck shops, vending machines and via breakfast and after school clubs.

**Conclusion**

Some concern has been expressed that children nowadays can use computers, but do not know how to cook. If this is true, does it matter? Why does someone not do something about it? The British Nutrition Foundation is currently undertaking small scale school-based research to identify how much practical food handling activity is taking place, and plans to publish its findings on its Web site within the next few months.

If we are seeking to set in place a curriculum which will be relevant to the twenty-first century, encourage creativity and innovation, develop informed consumers and promote good health, food and nutrition unquestionably have a valuable contribution to make. There has never been such an opportunity, nor such a need, for stimulating, forward-looking courses which will actually help the citizens of the next millennium to live life to the full and leave the world a better place. We have much to gain if we grasp the challenge, and so much more to lose if we do not.

**References and further reading**


Department of Health (1992), The Health of the Nation, HMSO, London.


Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and Department for Education and Employment (1998), A Scheme of Work for Design and Technology at Key Stages 1 and 2, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, London.