



A qualitative study of a food intervention in a primary school: Pupils as agents of change



H. Ensaff*, C. Canavon, R. Crawford, M.E. Barker

Human Nutrition Unit, Department of Oncology, The Medical School, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2RX, UK

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of a school-based kitchen project at a large inner London school. Timetabled kitchen classroom sessions (90 min every fortnight) were held with all 7–9 year old pupils. Semi-structured focus group discussions (with 76 pupils, 16 parents) and interviews (with headteachers, catering managers and specialist staff) were conducted at the intervention school and a matched control school. Categories and concepts were derived using a grounded theory approach. Data analysis provided three main categories each with their related concepts: Pupil factors (enthusiasm and enjoyment of cooking, trying new foods, food knowledge and awareness, producing something tangible); School factors (learning and curriculum links, resource implications and external pressures) and Home factors (take home effects, confidence in cooking and self-esteem, parents' difficulties cooking at home with children). Children's engagement and the opportunity to cook supported increased food awareness, skills and food confidence. In the grounded theory that emerged, take home effects beyond the school gate dominate, as children act as agents of change and influence cooking and food choice at home. These short term outcomes have the potential to lead to longer term outcomes including changing eating behaviour and diet.

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1. Introduction

The place of food within schools is changing in England. The School Food Review and resultant School Food Plan (Dimbleby & Vincent, 2013) has prompted a series of changes including the new school food standards (Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014) (statutory from January 2015) as well as a renewed focus on cooking and nutrition in the new National Curriculum. (DfE, 2014).

Against a backdrop of rising obesity rates as children move through primary school (9.5% at age 4–5 years to 19.1% at age 10–11 years) (Department of Health, 2014), the urgent need to improve children's diets, typically marred by excessive sugar and fat intake, and low fruit and vegetable consumption (Bates et al., 2014) is evident.

In improving children's dietary behaviour, there has been a number of initiatives that have sought to do this through school-based food activities, e.g. Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden

Program (Australia), Edible Schoolyard (USA), Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Campaign for School Gardening, Royal Academy of Culinary Arts Chefs Adopt a School and Children's Food Trust's Let's Get Cooking. A literature base on the value of such programmes in improving children's food skills and knowledge, with possible follow on effects in the home, is developing. (Block et al., 2012) In particular, the value of these programmes in developing children's relationship with food is relevant. Interactive food activities can positively impact children's food awareness, eating and cooking enjoyment, and fruit and vegetable preferences. (Chu et al., 2013), (Caraher, Seeley, Wu, & Lloyd, 2013), (Van der Horst, Ferrage, & Rytz, 2014), (Cunningham-Sabo and Lohse, 2014) As well as valuable food skills, children develop a closer connection to and ownership of food. A recent systematic review of cooking programmes reported the positive influence these activities may exert on children's food preferences, attitudes and behaviours. (Hersch, Perdue, Ambroz, & Boucher, 2014).

Jamie Oliver's Kitchen Garden Project (JOKGP) is a school-based programme developed by the Jamie Oliver Food Foundation (JOFF). With overarching aims of promoting children's cooking skills, willingness to try new foods and better understanding of where food comes from (farm to table), the programme involves primary

* Corresponding author. Nutrition & Dietetics, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, LS1 3HE, UK.

E-mail address: hensaff@gmail.com (H. Ensaff).

school pupils growing, preparing and sharing fresh seasonal produce. At the time of this study the programme involved the establishment of a purpose built kitchen classroom, with time-tabled sessions delivered by school staff themselves trained by JOFF.

The study presented is the qualitative element of a mixed methods study funded by the Jamie Oliver Foundation. The complementary quantitative analysis revealed that pupils at the intervention school scored significantly higher on scores related to using kitchen equipment and also to cooking experience. (Ensaff, Crawford, Russell, & Barker, 2014) Significant increases in the scores related to pupils' taste description, liking for cooking and helping with cooking at home were also observed, as was a statistically borderline time by intervention interaction on food neophobia (rejection of unfamiliar foods) and fussiness (rejection of a large amount of familiar as well as unfamiliar foods). (Ensaff et al., 2014).

This qualitative study's overall aim was to gain an understanding of the impact of the intervention on pupils, in particular children's food enjoyment, experience and food neophobia and fussiness, as well as an understanding of the practical implementation of the intervention. An understanding of the impact of projects of this kind is vital to their successful realisation. In evaluating the qualitative data, a grounded theory methodology was adopted in order to develop a model of pupils' relationship with food, within the context of a school kitchen project.

2. Materials and methods

The University of Sheffield's Medical School's Ethics Review Panel granted ethical approval for the study protocol.

The study involved one intervention school (IS) – the school previously selected and recruited by JOFF to implement JOKGP, and a control school (CS) recruited by the research team and matched to the intervention school on key school characteristics including school size, basic socioeconomic profile (% Free School Meals, FSM), catering provision and geographic location. Both schools were large community primary schools (IS: 345 pupils; CS: 380 pupils) in the same inner London borough, with above average FSM (IS: 59%; CS: 54%), and having the same catering provision. As is standard in UK primary schools, there were no timetabled cooking and gardening activities at the control school, and teachers incorporated cooking and gardening activities into their lessons to varying degrees depending upon preference. The control school did have a gardening area made up of raised beds, which again were utilised according to individual teachers' preferences.

2.1. Jamie Oliver's Kitchen Garden Project intervention

The intervention, JOKGP, consisted of kitchen classroom sessions (90 min duration, timetabled and delivered every two weeks). During the sessions, pupils (Years 3 & 4, Age 7–9 years) in small groups, prepared and cooked food, which they then ate together. The sessions were interactive, and had an emphasis on savoury cooking with children preparing dishes such as tomato salad with tuna, homemade mini burgers, roasted stuffed peppers, homemade fish fingers, garlic and rosemary focaccia, butternut squash muffins, apple and blackberry crumble. Each kitchen classroom session was led by two adults, and JOFF trained one teacher and several teaching assistants to be able to deliver the sessions. One parent also volunteered to support a session every week.

The intervention was delivered during the academic year 2012–13; fieldwork was conducted on two occasions – once at baseline (IS, July 2012; CS, November 2012), and then again at follow-up at the end of the academic year 2012–13 (IS, June 2013;

CS, July 2013). Whilst the intention was for JOKGP to incorporate dedicated gardening time for pupils, the intervention did not include timetabled gardening sessions at the IS and instead pupils' gardening activities were according to individual teachers' preferences (in a similar way to the CS).

2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited using information sheets and introductory letters via the schools. All pupils in Key Stage 2 (Years 3–6, Age 7–11 years) at the intervention and control schools, and their parents were invited to participate in the study. Whilst the interactive cooking sessions were only delivered to pupils in Years 3 and 4, the study sought to examine the impact on all Key Stage 2 children and so did not restrict the evaluation to pupils directly receiving the sessions. Out of all pupils invited to participate (IS: baseline 178 pupils, follow-up 183 pupils; CS: baseline 187 pupils, follow-up 195 pupils) and consenting to take part, the school selected a representative sample of students (IS: baseline 19 pupils, follow-up 15 pupils; CS: baseline 24 pupils, follow-up 18 pupils) using school held data and on the basis of three contextual factors (FSM, gender and academic achievement). Parents with children in Key Stage 2 (Years 3–6, Age 7–11 years) and willing to participate, attended focus group discussions (IS: baseline 4 parents, follow-up 5 parents; CS: baseline 1 parent, follow-up 6 parents). All KS2 teachers (7 teachers at each school) were invited to participate in focus groups or individual interviews depending upon availability and preference. Focus group discussions and interviews were held with teachers at both schools at baseline and again at follow-up (IS: baseline 5 teachers, follow-up 3 teachers; CS: baseline 7 teachers, follow-up 2 teachers). The headteachers, catering managers and specialist staff¹ were also interviewed at baseline and follow-up. These were the same individuals – with the addition of one specialist staff at IS at follow-up. Pupils, parents and teachers however were not the same individuals at baseline as at follow-up (with the exception of 4 pupils and 2 teachers).

2.3. Interviews and focus groups

Focus group discussions (with pupils and parents, separately) and face-to-face interviews (with headteachers, catering managers and specialist staff) were designed for the study. All interviews and focus groups were semi-structured to encourage free discussion and to provide the flexibility for participants to explore relevant issues. Prepared schedules of topics were used; these centred on food activities both in school and at home, food awareness, food knowledge and pupils' food choice (see [Appendix](#)). The pupil focus groups were designed with a drawing activity at the start, where pupils were asked to draw their favourite meal. This was to encourage engagement, 'set the scene' and form the basis of the subsequent discussion. The headteacher interview focused on how the project fitted within the school, the resourcing implications, the project content's links with the curriculum, and the project's impact on the school learning environment. The interviews with specialist staff delivering the kitchen activities included opportunities to discuss how the project operated, practical implications, and the experience of conducting the sessions with the pupils. Whilst there was a focus on key topics to be explored, the interviews were not constrained to a particular format and questions were adjusted as and when specific issues arose. At the end of all interviews/focus groups, participants were asked if there was any additional information not already discussed that they thought was

¹ school staff delivering food or cooking activities to pupils.

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