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Promoting 11 – 13 year old children’s food literacy through a community of practice - case study from an experiential sensory-based theme course on fish in a school setting

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Introduction
32% of the Danes spend less than 15 minutes on cooking the evening meal, 47% use convenience products as a part of the food preparation, and 18% judge themselves lacking cooking competences1. The interest in children’s formal food education has increased as a result of concerns with loss of knowledge of food and nutrition, loss of food competences, and an increase in child obesity 2, 3.

Method
Study population
Students age 11–13 years from 5th - 6th grade. The students came from different public schools on Zealand, Denmark. The students came from different public schools on Zealand, Denmark.

Study design
The case studies were part of an interdisciplinary quasi-experimental intervention with a main group (MG) and a control group (CG). A mixed methods research strategy was applied in the form of baseline and follow up participant observations (3 schools, 3 classes from MG, n = 58), questionnaires from MG and CG total respectively, and teacher interviews at follow up (8 schools, n = 5).

Organization of cooking program in FCS
MG participated in a 5 week cooking program with fish meeting the official curriculum and learning goal requirements for FCS in 5th – 6th grade (5 x 3 lessons of 45 min.).

Themes: the senses, quality of fresh fish, tactics, filleting, cooking, food history, preservation, sustainability, nutrition etc.
• The students were organized in groups of 3-4.
• They worked with 4 species of fresh fish.
• The first 4 blocks were pre- planned with activities, recipes, and picture-based guides.
• The last block was organized as a “cook off”. The recipe for a dish was to be constructed by the students, and the dish would be presented by the groups “Master chef– style”.

Figure 1: Study design

Table 1: Effects of cooking program. Pairwise tests for differences in means at baseline & follow up

Results & Discussion
The school is a social setting and FCS is founded on experiential learning and group activities but this does not automatically lead to the construction of communities of practice (CoP)4.

In MG at follow up a significant increase in cooking skill was found (p < 0.001), no significant difference was found in the ability to talk about sensory properties (p = 0.1), but a significant difference between genders: p = 0.03 (table 2). This finding might be due to a greater difference in self-evaluation of cooking skills from baseline to follow up in the girls group; girls mean jumps from 0.1 to 0.9, where as boys mean only moves from 0.45 to 0.95, indicating a higher self-evaluated cooking skill at baseline than girls, but they are overtaken in follow up by the girls.

Table 1: Gender differences in effect of cooking program. Unpaired t-test for differences in means at baseline & follow up

Conclusions
• Participation in the FCS cooking program increased food literacy through the construction of communities of practice.
• Learning is both social; e.g. peer-to-peer learning situations, and individual; e.g. through increase in skills and self-efficacy.
• Not all development was quantifiably measurable in children’s questionnaire responses. Some were detected through observations and teachers’ statements. This undermines the importance of applying mixed methods strategy to research within the field of food literacy.

References
2. The study was supported by Nordea Fonden under the Taste for Life project and University College Absalon, Centre for Nutrition and Rehabilitation, Nutrition and Health, Soro, Denmark. Neither had any involvement in the work.

Figure 2: Identified elements in the three dimensions of CoP

Table 2: Gender differences in effect of cooking program. Unpaired t-test for differences in means at baseline & follow up

Figure 1: Students during “cook off”, Photo: R. Højer, 2017