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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 as a part of the food preparation, and 18% judge themselves lacking cooking competencies.

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 1, 2.

In Danish public schools Family and consumer sciences (FCS) is mandatory for one year in either 4th, 5th, or 6th grade, which makes the school an unique setting for promoting food literacy.

The aim of this study was to explore the construction of community of practice in a school cooking class setting (FCS) as a way of promoting 11-13 year old children’s food literacy.

Methods

Study population
Students age 11-13 years from 5th - 6th grade. 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 (5 schools, n = 5).

Results & Discussion

The school is a social setting and FCS is founded on experiential learning and group activities, i.e., knowing, doing, sensing, tactility, filleting - interactive, and critical level attributes regarding a functional, interactive, and critical level integration, mapping, wanting and caring, all together as being mental material at a personal level but also regarding food and meals together with others in everyday life.

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 > 0,05), but a significant difference between genders (p = 0,02; table 2) was detected in the ability to talk about food.

Girls rated themselves higher than boys. 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, whereas 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 at follow up by the girls.

Benn (2014) stresses that the learning dimension of food literacy is accomplished by learning through the food.

In the community of practice food literacy and self-efficacy was promoted; in working with the fish peer-to-peer learning occurred; evident in the shared repertoire, e.g., observed language used, and in mutual engagement, e.g. in ‘helping each other’-situations. An increase in self-efficacy, was observed e.g. through joint enterprise, e.g. individual confidence to negotiate practices, but also in shared repertoire, e.g. higher confidence in own cooking skills (p < 0,001; table 1).

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, tactility, 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”.

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 underscores the importance of applying mixed methods strategy to research within the field of food literacy.

References