garden organic

Class teachers:
What are the benefits of growing food in Schools?

Image: Liz Woodward

For those who work with pupils every day, delivering on government priorities around food culture means finding new ways to make policy work in every area of the school. What single activity can class teachers engage with to make sure that food culture delivers real and tangible change? Schools across the country are already telling us the answer: growing food.

Cultivating the curriculum

- Teachers report that children who experience difficulty engaging in most classroom-based activities often excel with growing and developing horticultural skills. This increased confidence then carries over to other subjects, increasing attainment overall.

- Growing in schools has been used to great effect in specifically targeting the vulnerable or disengaged pupils e.g. at **Middleton Primary School in Leeds**, where a peer-mentoring Gardening Inclusion Project for pupils with Individual Education or Behaviour plans was shown to vastly reduced disruptive behaviour and timeouts.[1]

- Treating growing areas like 'outdoor classrooms' and using these as much as possible or as a good behaviour incentive has shown real results. Sample lesson plans are available from the Food Growing Schools website.

- The increased focus on growing in the **curriculum** https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-science-programmes-of-study demonstrates a clear commitment to providing all pupils with the skills and understanding needed to engage with school growing projects. From Key Stage 1, where naming of basic plants has been added, through to growing plants and requirements for life in KS3 and finally understanding the life cycle of a plant by KS6.

- Practical cookery and food education is now compulsory in the new national curriculum for pupils up to the end of Key Stage 3 and demonstrates the importance of understanding where food comes from, including seasonality and characteristics of ingredients.[2]

Start in school, change for good

- Obesity rates for UK schools are now at 11% in reception, rising to 22.5% in school year 6. Building growing and cooking into the curriculum (using formal, informal and hidden links) helps to tackle this in the longer term. Research shows that people involved in food growing from a young age pick up healthy habits and make choices that decrease health and **social care dependency** in the longer term.[3]

- The Department of Health knows that schools are the most important battleground when it comes to a healthy attitude to food for life, so it's no surprise that their **latest obesity strategy** prioritises food growing.[4]

- Positive effects of food growing in schools go beyond just individual pupils, with parents reporting an **increase in demand** for fresh vegetables and other foods proven to prevent obesity at the dinner table at home.[5]

- The transformational power of food growing in schools has long been clear for those taking part, with outcomes ranging from vastly **increased take-up** of school meals, positive effects on the health of pupils over the long term through to higher educational attainment overall, a greener local environment and a boost to local economy.

Image: Lee Valley

Eating smarter

- Data from 2012's **School Meals Pilot** showed that primary school pupils at Key stage 1 and 2 progressed by an average of two months further when eating free school meals, further demonstrating that better food can mean better grades.[6] This was previously highlighted following the **Jamie Oliver 'Feed Me Better'** campaign where attainment also grew.[7]

- Increased take-up in school meals means more full bellies and satisfied pupils who are ready to learn, even factoring in the 'post-lunch slump.' **Children's Food Trust** research[8] from 2009 showed that children in primary school were over three times more likely to concentrate and be alert in the classroom when changes were made to the food and dining room.

- Twice as many primary schools received an Ofsted rating of Outstanding following their participation in the **Soil Association Food For Life (FFL)** programme, which prioritises food growing in schools.[9] Schools that engaged with the Food for Life programme (growing initiatives and improvements to school meals) showed a 13 percentage point increase in primary take-up of school meals, and 20 percentage point increase in secondary, following their participation in FFL.

- Since the launch of School Food Plan[10] there has been a wealth of **resources and case studies** to support the delivery of the national curriculum and the roll out of Universal Infant Free School Meals. The What Works Well website[11] offers a collection of the best examples and ideas for delivering great food and food education in schools.

- As a result of recommendations made in the School Food, from September 2015 **Ofsted Inspectors** are looking for evidence of a culture of healthy eating.[12] This is a very clear reason for schools to ensure they address the quality of the school food experience as part of their **Ofsted assessment**. Engaging with food growing demonstrates a commitment to equip pupils with 'informed choices about healthy eating' as well as supporting a whole school approach to making lunchtimes a positive feature of the school day.[13]

Organic growth

- Our research shows that organic crops and crop-based foods – including fruit, vegetables and cereals – are up to **60% higher** in a number of key antioxidants than their non-organic counterparts.[14] Including organic, school-grown produce in different classes and weaving it through different subject areas promotes this approach to food.

- Teaching pupils practical organic horticultural skills (without the use of pesticides or chemicals) **spreads these nutritional benefits further**. It also passes them on to the local environment, as food growing also reduces landfill through increased composting and encouraging pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours among pupils.[15]

School-grown food in school meals

- Parents spend **£1m a year** on packed lunches, less than 1% of which are nutritionally balanced to the same standards as are now required of school lunches. Working with catering contractors to introduce food grown at school into meals has seen take-up rocket (and deficits plunge) because young people are excited to eat food they have grown.

- When it comes to creating menus, price plans and a welcoming environment, including pupils at every step of the way through the **'whole school' approach** has been shown to be the key to success here, including themed menus and pupil-led lunchtime events.

Image: Schools Marketplace, 2014

Growing job skills

- Taking responsibility, planning ahead, crop management, delegating tasks and even entrepreneurial skills by selling food at school markets are just some of the outcomes of introducing **food enterprise** into the classroom.

- Food growing helps bolster the employability of school leavers through enterprise and horticultural knowledge building. Horticulture is an expanding part of the careers market, with over 300,000 people employed in the sector that contributes £9 billion to the UK economy.[16] Pupils can gain appropriate skills in this area by engaging in a school garden or vegetable patch. This might involve taking responsibility, planning ahead, crop management, delegating tasks and even honing entrepreneurial skills by selling food at school markets. The Soil Association's **London Farm Academy** engages ten schools over three years to fully integrate farming, growing and food careers into the curriculum, and has already delivered over 100 school farm markets.

Taking Action:

- **Nurture** pupil interest in food and growing through outdoor learning

- **Incorporate** food and growing into every aspect of the curriculum

- **Start small, grow big** whether it's a window box or a playing field, its engaging pupils that counts

- **Be an advocate** for the 'whole school' approach by speaking to colleagues and management about the potential for growing either on or off site.

Image: Lee Valley

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2. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-design-and-technology-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-design-and-technology-programmes-of-study

3. The School Food Plan http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/School_Food_Plan_2013.pdf [accessed 12/06/2014]

4. Healthy Lives, Healthy People; a call to action on obesity in England (Department of Health 2011)

5. CG43 NICE Guidelines on Obesity http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG43NICEGuideline.pdf

6. Evaluation of the Free School Meals Pilot https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf [accessed 27/6/14]

7. https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/iser_working_papers/2009-01.pdf (Report on Jamie Oliver 'Feed me better')

8. http://www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/research/behaviourandattainment/primary

9. Good food for All – The Impact of the Food For Life Partnership (2011)

10. The School Food Plan http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/School_Food_Plan_2013.pdf

11. http://whatworkswell.schoolfoodplan.com/

12. Ofsted letter sent to All Party Parliamentary Group in February 2015 http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/APPG-School-Food-Letter.pdf

13. School Inspection Handbook 2015 pp.48-51 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015

14. Organic vs. Non-organic. A new evaluation of nutritional difference (2014) http://www.soilassociation.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=VtYm9fPwlPk%3d&tabid=2301

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