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"Food is not a Subject, it is Every Subject": A Critical Reflection on a Scoping Consultation With Key Stakeholders on Developing Food Education in Irish Primary Schools

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Abstract

This article offers a critical reflection on a scoping consultation held in 2019 to examine the opinions of key stakeholders in relation to the place of food education in the Irish primary-school curriculum. The 46 attendees included representatives from four government departments and several health- and food-related organisations. The event marked the coming together of a diverse and high-level group to consider how food education can be delivered in primary schools. Stakeholders' views were collated in the form of audio recordings, feedback postcards, spectrum questions, and feedback sheets. Thematic analysis was applied to the data collected to generate six themes: policy change, aspects of food-education classes, role of teachers' confidence, agency and assessment, health discourse, age of engagement, and engaging family. The article also offers insights into the process of conducting a qualitative research study. A broader aim of the event and research described is to encourage continued conversation between researchers, educators, policymakers, and food and health organisations on issues associated with drawing up a roadmap for embedded food education.

Keywords: food education, food pedagogy, hands-on education, food in Irish primary schools, school food

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While food education continues to attract increased attention internationally (Andersen et al., 2017; DeCosta et al., 2017; Olsen, 2019; Sandell et al., 2016; Smith et al, 2022), there is a lack of literature focusing on food education within Irish schools (Darmody, 2021; McGowan, 2021; Mooney et al., 2023). Schools are in a unique position to influence and promote food education for young people and can play an important role in developing and reinforcing lifelong positive food choices (Murimi et al., 2018; Nicklaus et al., 2004). Moreover, schools are one of the few near-universal public services, which means that using schools as a vehicle for food education allows for the targeting of the population as a whole. Food education in Irish primary schools is located mainly within the subject of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 1999). It promotes a health perspective so that students from infant to sixth-class grades learn about the nutritional value of food in terms of their own growth and development needs. Evidence suggests, however, that telling someone what is, or is not, healthy is insufficient to change behaviour (Atkins & Michie, 2015; Marty et al., 2018; Murimi et al., 2018). Guidelines for primary schools to aid development of a whole-school approach to healthy eating were issued in 2018 (Healthy Ireland, 2018).

A scoping consultation with key stakeholders (SCKS) was initiated by the researcher in 2019 as part of a wider doctoral research project on the development of a food pedagogy for primary-school children in Ireland. Purposive sampling was conducted in conjunction with Michael Kelly from Grow it Yourself (GIY) to reduce the possibility of researcher bias. GIY is a non-profit social enterprise which is focused on food growing, and which runs nationwide "food in schools" initiatives (GIY, 2020; 2022). The SCKS was used as an exploratory method to access the most up-to-date opinions on embedding food education in Irish primary-school classrooms. More specifically, the SCKS was designed to address the following research questions:

- Is there a need for food education to be more embedded in the Irish primary-school curriculum?
- If yes, how might this be achieved?

A constructivist ontology underpinned the research project, accepting that knowledge is built through action and hands-on learning. An action-research methodology was used throughout as this approach "brings together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern" (Bradbury, 2015, p.1).

Method

Data Collection

Purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) was used when selecting participants to attend the SCKS. The final number of attendees totalled 46, representing 34 organisations (Table 1). In addition to academics, it was considered important to include practitioners as well as chef advocates and policymakers who have the capacity to influence food education in schools.

TABLE 1

List of Invited Attendees to the Scoping Consultation With Key Stakeholders

2 x Agri Aware (Incredible Edibles) : Dublin	3 x Health Service Executive : Dublin
AkiDwa[1] : Dublin	1 x Healthy Ireland : Dublin
1 x Airfield Trust : Dublin	2 x Irish Food Writers Guild : Nationwide
1 x Ballymaloe Cookery School : Cork	2 x Irish Heart Foundation : Dublin
2 x Bord Bia (Food Dudes, Incredible Edibles) : Dublin	1 x Institute for Global Food Security - Queens University : Belfast
1 x Creative Schools (Creative Ireland Programme) : Dublin	1 x MSc Agri-Food Business Development – University College Cork : Cork
1 x DAIRE project : Belfast	1 x National Council for Curriculum Assessment : Dublin
1 x Department. of Agriculture, Food and the Marine : Dublin	1 x National Dietetic Advisor Health and Wellbeing Division : Dublin
1 x Department of Education and Skills : Dublin	1 x Principal Secondary School : Dublin
1 x Department of Health : Dublin	1 x PhD Researcher on Food Literacy : Dublin
1 x Department of Social Protection and Employment Affairs : Dublin	1 x Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST) : Nationwide
Early Childhood Education : Dublin City University[1]	1 x Safefood : Cork

Educate Together: Nationwide[1]	1 x Slow Food : Nationwide
1 x Education is Lacking Let's Get Cracking : Galway	1 x St Angela's College : Sligo
1 x egg and chicken (Chef Network) : Galway	TASTE Council: Nationwide[1]
1 x Euro-Toques : Dublin	1 x Teagasc : Carlow
1 x Food on the Edge : Galway	2 x Technological University Dublin : Dublin
1 x Friends of the Earth Education : Dublin	2 x The Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute: Dublin
2 x Green-Schools (An Taisce) : Dublin	2 x Warrenmount School Canteen : Dublin
2 x Grow It Yourself (GIY) : Waterford	

Note. The event was facilitated by a management consultancy firm.

[1]Organisations that were unable to attend but received subsequent email communication.

Ethics approval was granted by Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) and all experts attending the SCKS signed consent forms allowing any data obtained to be used for academic purposes and/or publications. During the event (from 10.30am to 3.30pm), which was divided into three parts or sessions, attendees were seated in groups of six or seven, at seven round tables. Catering was supplied by a scratch-cooking school canteen from an inner-city Dublin school.

The sessions began with a short presentation, after which the attendees at each table focussed on a topic together. For the first session, "Framing the Opportunities", the researcher presented findings on food-education initiatives nationally and internationally; the attendees then addressed two questions with a view to understanding what the group as a whole wanted to achieve: What are we all talking about? What does it mean and look like to put food on the curriculum? For the second session, "Harnessing What Works Well", a secondary-school student presented her vision for the future of food education. The student focussed on her desire for increased learning about the environmental impact of food and the reasons this should be addressed in detail within the school curriculum. The attendees were subsequently tasked with imagining a school year with food on the curriculum (tables were assigned different grade levels). For the third session, "How can This Work in Practice?", the NCCA representative gave a presentation on the current state of play in relation to food within primary education, including the changing nature of the curriculum and the move towards learning outcomes and project-based work. The subsequent roundtable discussion focussed on developing a roadmap to achievement in which attendees identified priorities, next steps, and potential barriers and enablers. The topics were decided by the researcher prior to the event and were informed by a literature review.

The sessions were interspersed with spectrum questions (an example of which is shown in Figure 1) designed to help the attendees think about the reasons for their attendance and to gain an understanding of the extent of agreement in the group for possible next steps. Listening to the student voice was considered important when planning the SCKS and was additionally reflected in the work displayed by sixth-class pupils from a local primary school who created large diagrams showing their opinions and desires for food education, as well as essays and pictures of food-related projects (Figure 2).

FIGURE 1

Example Spectrum Question

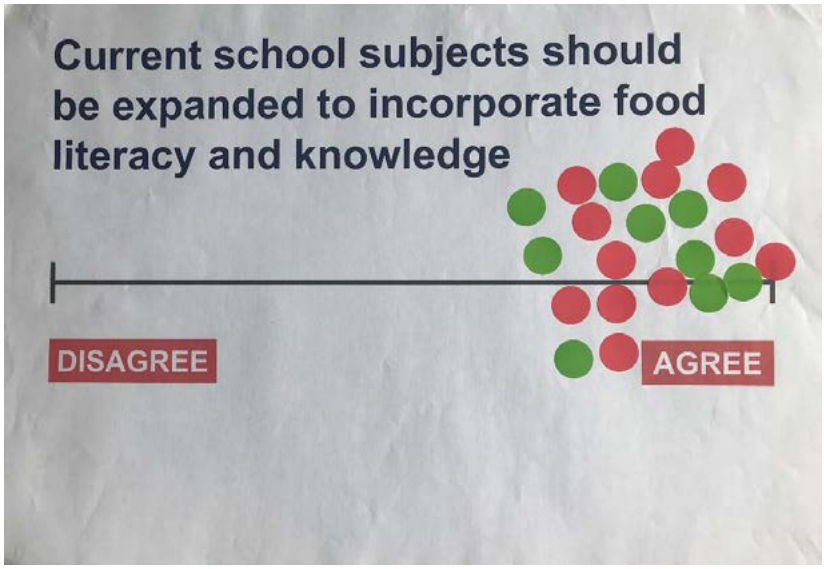
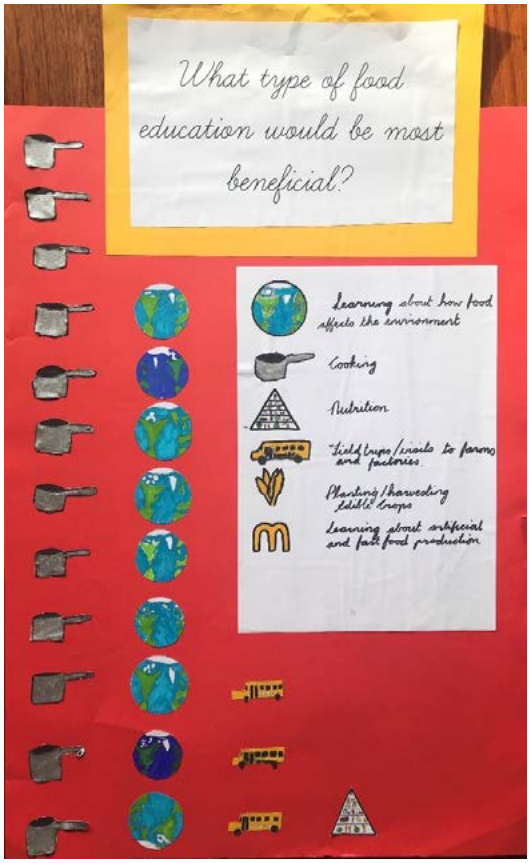


FIGURE 2

Primary-School Pupils' Opinions on Food Education



Rudimentary diagramming of the data was conducted from the outset, with the aid of facilitators from a management consultancy firm engaged by the researcher. A designated person recorded the observations, findings, and/or ideas from the attendees at each table, from which diagrams were created by the facilitators to group the main ideas from each session. When discussing "Framing the Opportunities", for example, potential opportunities associated with improving food education were highlighted: personal growth, multi-sensory experiences, harnessing existing initiatives, subjects and interests, learning outdoors, and physical and mental benefits, as well as connection with home life (Figure 3). The diagrams were then displayed, and feedback taken from the group as a whole.

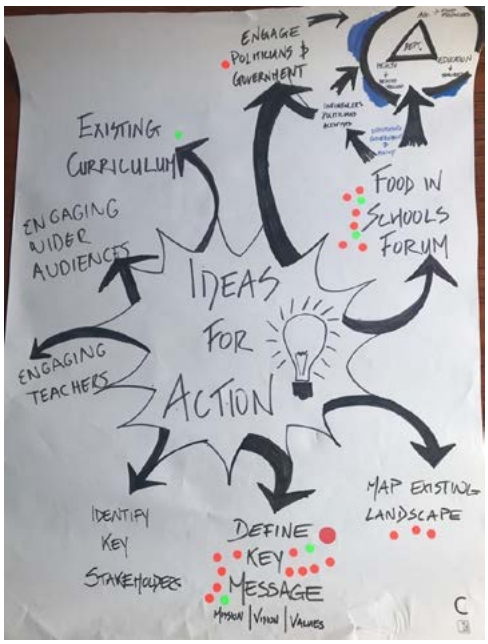
FIGURE 3

Framing the Opportunities – SCKS Diagram

Before concluding, a final drawing to summarise "Ideas for Action" was created by the facilitators and the researcher. Eight key actions (Figure 4) were distilled and presented on a poster. Attendees were asked to highlight the idea/action of most importance to them before discussing their choice with other attendees.

FIGURE 4

Ideas for Action – SCKS Feedback Sheet



The data corpus included three audio recordings (one per session) and 21 feedback sheets, which were used by attendees at each round table. An additional 30 feedback sheets were collected at the end of the event along with a summary audio recording. Fourteen stakeholders, representative of those present, provided individual feedback recordings: two chefs, three people working on different food-education initiatives, one school principal, one primary-school teacher, one official from the Department of Education and Skills (DES), three academics, one HSE representative, and two others working in policy. All of the recorded feedback was subsequently transcribed by the researcher. Responses to eight spectrum questions were also available for analysis and 28 attendees returned workshop postcards indicating what they would like for the future of food education. An online survey provided details of food-education initiatives in Ireland from the attendees and from other non-participant providers known to the attendees.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was applied to the data corpus. TA was chosen as it fits well with the multi-methods action-research methodology of the overall research project, and its theoretical flexibility made it more suitable than other approaches that hold embedded theoretical assumptions. A reflexive approach to TA was taken as it allowed for the researcher's active role in knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive TA centres the researcher's interpretative analysis of the dataset, explicitly acknowledging that their theoretical assumptions and analytical skills have a bearing on the patterns of meaning generated.

TA requires the researcher to make "a selection of compelling examples that provide evidence of the theme and relate to the research question" (Sharp & Sanders, 2019, p. 118). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of TA was used to guide the selection of examples in this study and to ensure that a rigorous and methodical approach was applied to the analysis. The six steps involve: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up. All data created from TA should be transferrable, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), yet "researcher judgement is necessary to determine what a theme is...the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Being familiar with the landscape of food education in Ireland allowed the researcher to note when innovative ideas were presented, and to explore these in more detail. At the same time, there was a need to be conscious of bias and act sensitively towards this, as noted by Creswell (2007). Consistent with Creswell's recommendations, opinions raised were situated in relation to other attendees' comments. For example, three attendees stated

that there is already enough food education on the curriculum; this being the minority sentiment, data referring to this topic were examined in more detail.

Codes reduce the data into chunks of meaning (Straus & Corbin, 1998), i.e., patterns, or themes, are developed from the codes through interpretation and systematic organising (Sharp & Sanders, 2019; Tracy, 2013). A theme captures something in the data related to the research question, showing "some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). "The process of coding (and theme development) is flexible and organic, and very often will evolve throughout the analytical process" (Byrne, 2021, p. 3).

To apply the process of thematic analysis in the current study, notes were taken on the transcribed audio-recorded data. All text-based and visual data were read and inspected to gain an overall picture of the data corpus. Affinity diagrams were created to aid the researcher to dig "deeper" into the data. Affinity diagramming is a qualitative analysis method that works well in conjunction with TA; it helps to sort related facts into distinct clusters and is particularly useful when organising large sets of ideas. It was adapted from the KJ diagramming method (Kawakita, 1991), and allows for a synthesis of findings and a distillation of overarching patterns. In this instance, the printed data were literally cut up and arranged into clusters to explore codes and themes. The codes were analysed to identify statements or categories that were similar, and to extract patterns that were noticeable. These were then grouped together to generate initial themes. Themes were created by clustering similar codes to show patterns of shared meaning across the data, which represented insights underpinning the central research questions.

The themes were created inductively initially; then a deductive step was taken, looking at the themes in relation to different educational philosophies and governmental policies relating to food in schools. During analysis, the researcher noted that at times the experts' views were similar, though expressed in diverse ways. For example, one important theme concerning change, and more specifically policy change, reoccurred in different guises (as a stated need for governmental change, but also as an argument for a shift in policy within schools and in initial teacher education to facilitate an increased emphasis on food education). These different strands were combined under the theme "Changing Policy" to better fit the research questions, and help identify the steps that may be needed to embed a more sustained approach to food education in schools. Another theme, relating to the age at which engagement with food education should start, though not frequently referenced, is of importance to the research questions as it helps to capture stakeholders' views on an aspect of best practice in food education.

Study Themes and Findings

Six themes relevant to the research questions were identified: policy development, food-education classes, teachers' confidence and agency, the prevalence of a health discourse, the appropriate age to engage children in food education, and engagement with family.

Changing Policy

A need for policy change at school level was strongly highlighted by the stakeholders, even by those who believed that food already featured sufficiently within the curriculum:

> *I came here with the view that, well, we do already have food education within the curriculum, but what I have learnt here today is that what we have within the curriculum is good but there is plenty of scope to add to that, to link this to other subjects* (Attendee R, DES).

Changes to initial teacher education were considered important for the future development of food education in schools. A need for change in schools' policies was also indicated. Statements such as, "there needs to be mind set change throughout the school", "there is not enough time allocated in the school day to eat" and "school environments are not supportive" were expressed throughout the day. There was also a perceived need for a whole-school approach to create change. The idea of simply providing a food-education module, to be inserted into an already busy schedule, was unanimously deemed insufficient. It is worth noting that, while government guidelines are in place in relation to a whole-school policy for healthy eating (Healthy Ireland, 2018), feedback at the SCKS suggests a lack of awareness about the guidelines among attendees.

Food-Education Classes

The content of food education in schools featured heavily in the data, and there were related discussions about how food education might be taught, with implicit references to education philosophies. There was a focus on hands-on education, multi-sensory experience, and critical thinking. For some, food was seen as a tool to teach existing subjects, not as a separate topic, but most stakeholders partook in a deep discussion about what food education is, or what a pedagogy based on food should or could entail. This theme captures the essence of the phenomenon under investigation as it provides an expansive look at future possibilities for the realisation and implementation of food education in classrooms. The theme consists of five subthemes or building blocks, which address the main components arising from the

data: media awareness/critical thinking, hands-on skills, enjoyment of food, links with existing food education, and environmental education.

Media Awareness/Critical Thinking

Some SCKS attendees emphasised the importance of making children aware of advertising and of how big businesses market food products to young people. Increasing media literacy in relation to food advertising within the curriculum is in accordance with EU recommendations (European Audio-Visual Observatory, 2016).

Hands-On Skills

The data provide multiple examples of experts advocating for a hands-on approach to food education, including the development of cooking and growing skills and incorporating multi-sensory experiences. This is in line with Dewey's conception of education, which engages the learner in an active and sensorial process:

> *We need to have a really joined-up approach to food that reflects health, sustainability, enterprise, community development, and education. And, [one where] food skills are really, really valued and rewarded* (Attendee K, education and food background).

> *There is a consensus that we need to embed practical cooking skills into the curriculum right from early learning to third level so that no child leaves school without being able to cook for themselves, or without the life skills to look after themselves properly. Cooking and food can be integrated into every subject, into geography, into history* (Attendee D, education and food background).

While there may be provision for cooking within post-primary schools that offer Home Economics, the majority of primary schools do not have cooking facilities. Nevertheless, attendees seldom indicated that lack of funding for food-education classes is likely to be a major barrier in primary-school settings.

Enjoyment of Food

SCKS attendees referred to the importance of instilling a "passion for food" and focusing on "the pleasurable aspects of food creation". These statements lean towards a child-centred approach to education, whereby encouraging children to learn through seeking enjoyment and guiding children on the experiential continuum can encourage the child's natural eagerness for knowledge (Dewey, 1997, p. 27). One health professional added:

> *What I would love generally is that people would embrace more an enjoyment of food, so that food isn't something that you are giving up this, giving up that, because you are worried about this or that, it's actually embracing it and really getting back that pleasure of sitting around a table having prepared a meal and enjoying it with people ... that children would get that concept and embrace it too* (Attendee S, Health Service Executive).

Links With Existing Food Education

Mapping of food-education initiatives available to schools in Ireland was suggested by attendees to capture current practice and aid future planning. To facilitate this, an online survey was distributed and a mapping exercise completed by the researcher after the event. In the survey, the stakeholders were asked to provide details of food-education projects they were aware of, or had worked on, and to share the survey link with other project organisers. The researcher also contacted other personnel involved in food-education initiatives to invite them to submit their project details. In all, 37 projects were catalogued, ranging from small local initiatives to those with nationwide reach[1]. The exercise highlighted the breadth of food education available, and the different funding sources, but also showed a fragmented sector.

Environmental Education

Food, and its effect on the environment, have sparked research and debate (Mason & Lang, 2017; Willet et al., 2019) as well as galvanising youth environmental activism (Bite Back 2023, 2020). The fact that food and sustainability education are intrinsically linked (Darmody, 2022) was a common pattern in the SCKS data, reflected in codes that identified a need to "respect the environment", "tackle food waste", and "connect with agriculture". The experts recognised that the current curriculum fails to address ways in which the modern food system impacts the environment.

A call to action, based on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030, was adopted in 2015, by all member states of the United Nations after a global consultation process (United Nations, 2020). As a direct response, the Irish Government developed an SDGs implementation plan that extends to schools. As part of the mapping exercise described above to identify existing food-education projects, the survey respondents were asked to specify which of the SDGs (if any) were targeted by each project. Analysis of the feedback suggests that respondents support the view that food-education initiatives can help schools work towards several SDGs, including those relating to quality education, good health, and responsible consumption.

1 Further information on the results of the mapping exercise is available from the author at D17128783@mytudublin.ie

The Role of Teachers: Confidence, Agency, and Assessment

A lack of teacher confidence and of teacher agency was identified in the SCKS data as inhibiting successful implementation of food education. There were also indications that the teaching day is overloaded, and that this would need to be taken into account in any discussion about increased food education. One attendee remarked:

> *What I have learnt is really [the importance of] listening to people who work in different sectors. So for me, today, when [the NCCA representative] was talking about the curriculum and how the principles of teaching are changing, that really helps me understand more and more the world that teachers are working in. And I think we need to get the content right and we need to measure it right, but we also need to deliver it right, whatever we choose to do in schools* (Attendee M, third-level background).

Assessment also featured in the data, with consideration given to the ways in which food education could be marked, graded, or included in examinations. Physical Education (PE) has recently become a Leaving Certificate examination subject in Irish post-primary schools, and it was mooted as a partially parallel exemplar. The topic of assessment raised interesting questions about the reasons for increased food education. It is difficult to know whether those who commented were focussed on exams and the type of education that is directed towards, "becoming qualified to perform a certain task or job"; or were referring to the idea that, "education qualifies children, young people, and adults to live a successful and meaningful life in modern, complex societies" (Biesta, 2016, p. 5). It is not clear, therefore, to what extent assessment of food education was perceived in terms of skills development for vocational purposes or as preparation for life.

Health Discourse

A health discourse currently takes precedence within food education in the primary curriculum that assumes nutritional knowledge will drive healthier food choices (Marty et al., 2018; Rekhy & McConchie, 2014). This assumption was critiqued by some stakeholders who argued for a changed approach. The theme captures something important, or raises issues, regarding where and how to successfully combine existing health education with other aspects of food education. Other stakeholders, health-sector attendees, in particular, believed that food education is sufficiently included in the existing curriculum with one (Attendee O) elaborating that: "it is already on the curriculum – but knowledge needs to be translated into practice".

Age of Children's Engagement With Food Education

At what age should food education begin? What should the focus be at different times throughout a child's education? These were some of the questions raised by the experts, all of whom agreed that food education should start at a young age. While food nutrition is introduced at infant level in the SPHE curriculum, SCKS attendees considered it should start in preschool, as younger children "are more open to new tastes". This is in line with educational policies in countries such as Finland (National Nutrition Council of Finland, 2017), where food education begins in preschool settings, using the Sapere method developed by Jacques Puisais in the 1970s. Research also highlights the importance of learning cooking skills "at an early age for skill retention, confidence, cooking practices, cooking attitude and diet quality" (Lavelle et al., 2016, p. 1).

Engaging Family

SCKS attendees acknowledged the importance of linking food education to children's homes and families, a view that is endorsed in the literature (Genannt Bonsmann et al., 2014; Lavelle et al., 2016). As this study is primarily focussed on education within schools, this theme was noted but not discussed in detail. If delivered well, however, evidence suggests that food-education projects in schools can impact on children's families (Maher et al., 2019; Segrott et al., 2017).

Discussion

Changing Food Policy in Schools

The need for policy change within schools and the wider educational field was highlighted by the stakeholders. Within schools, change can happen at both classroom and school level. At classroom level, teachers are no longer seen as curriculum implementers, but as curriculum developers and co-constructors (NCCA, 2012; 2020). They are considered agentic within their own classrooms: "an agentic teacher is reflective, competent and capable of exercising professional judgement in response to individual learning needs in a variety of contexts" (NCCA, 2020, p. 5). There is a national and international call for continued professional development for teaching staff in relation to food (Genannt Bonsmann et al., 2014; Healthy Ireland, 2018; Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland, 2012). The inclusion of food education in initial teacher education, and within NCCA research, could help to provide teachers with opportunities to acquire the skills and confidence needed to instigate food education within classrooms and to connect this with the prescribed learning

outcomes of the curriculum (NCCA, 2020). Recommendations to overcome barriers to implementation and to support interventions (Hayes et al., 2019) include the need to find capacity to deliver within, what is sometimes referred to as, an overcrowded curriculum. Developing teacher agency in relation to using food education within the context of existing curricular demands is a practical solution.

"A whole-school approach recognises that all aspects of a school community can impact upon students' health and wellbeing" (Schools for Health in Europe, 2021, para. 1). This approach is seen as a successful way to create lasting change (Buijs et al., 2014; Healthy Ireland, 2018). Research highlights that only 59% of post-primary schools (Education Training Boards Ireland, 2019) had implemented the proposed healthy-eating policies advocated by official guidelines (Healthy Ireland, 2018), while earlier information on the promotion of healthy lifestyles in primary schools suggests 40% participation (DES, 2016). Consistent messaging about healthy eating is emphasised in the guidelines, as well as the importance of consistency between curriculum content and the kind of food that is available in a school. The absence of reference to the guidelines in the data gathered at the SCKS is worth noting. It may be that participants were not familiar with the guidelines or that they did not readily perceive their relevance to the discussion at the event. In any case, reasons for the omission could be explored in a follow-up food-education forum with policymakers that has since been established.

Freirean models of education provide a template for engaging students in a form of thinking that "perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity" (Freire, 2017/1972, p. 65). Building an ability to be selective about marketing information is akin to building a critical awareness that will provide students with the "required knowledge, understanding and skills to navigate the myriad of food environments" (McCloat & Caraher, 2020, p. 6). Every student will interact with food advertising numerous times each day (Bite Back 2030, 2020). As one attendee stated:

> *It is really about bringing in that critical thinking, looking at food in a really holistic way, understanding the impact of food choices. But, also the social and cultural aspects of food, the environmental impact, as well as health and nutrition* (Attendee H, food organisation).

Media literacy education is being addressed by Safefood, which has produced elective resources that aim to engage children in developing an awareness of food advertising (Safefood, 2020). The experts attending the scoping consultation suggested that the marketing of ultra-processed food to children should be addressed, not only within classrooms, but, at a national policy level. Another line of action could involve making the food industry accountable not only for advertising but also for the promotion of "junk" foods (Bite Back 2030, 2020). This is echoed by Tull (2014) who states a need for a collaborative group of people "to make improvements to the style of messaging

about food – to develop creative messaging and engage different disciplines [in the curriculum] in the process" (p. 154).

Some of the SCKS attendees considered that food education is adequately covered in primary schools. In a unit of the SPHE curriculum entitled, "Taking Care of my Body"[2], food is considered from a health and nutrition standpoint (Healthy Ireland, 2016). When health and diet issues were addressed in the SCKS, a number of contributors called for "more than a nutritional perspective", a move away from "good food/bad food", and a "binary view of healthy/unhealthy". Attendees who worked directly with food in hands-on ways, such as chefs, were most vocal in this regard. Suggestions for a more rounded approach to food education included cooking skills, growing skills, understanding marketing, enjoyment in food, and building awareness of environmental issues. Research also highlights the benefits of approaches with multiple components (Genannt Bonsmann et al., 2014). Additionally, it was acknowledged that policy development needs to happen outside of schools. The term, "circular food education" was coined by this researcher following the SCKS event. Circular food education encompasses experiential learning, sustainability, and pleasure. It is a solution to tackling an array of social issues, building knowledge about climate change, biodiversity loss and food waste, and teaching practical food skills, as well as instilling the potential for children to become active citizens.

Circular food education and SCKS recommendations may be linked to Dewey's philosophy of education. Dewey saw education as a means to encourage goal-directed social activities, which can influence life outside of school. Within his Lab School, designed to exhibit and conduct child-centred educational research, the children cooked and served lunch once a week. Other subjects were incorporated into the practicalities of making lunch: maths (weighing and measuring), science (understanding the different processes involved in cooking), biology (learning about diet and digestion), and geography (exploring the natural environment) (Duster & Waters, 2006). Dewey also articulated the pedagogical, political, and communal benefits of gardening within his writing. He saw the school garden as a place to bring children into closer contact with nature, as well as a place of learning which mirrored the wider community (Ralston, 2014). More recently, too, research findings show that using the garden as a pedagogical space can provide mental as well as physical benefits (Soga et al., 2017). Cooking interventions have been highlighted as a promising method for changing children's food-related attitudes, preferences, and behaviours (Dean et al., 2020). Aspects of food education such as gardening and cooking require an experiential, hands-on approach. According to McCoy et al. (2012), there is variation in the extent to which teachers in Ireland adopt such approaches, with recent graduates choosing more constructivist classroom strategies and increasingly using active teaching methods, such as group work and hands-on activities.

2 https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/462570f8-27cc-4f5b-a13e-d1e2de8c18d2/PSEC06_SPHE_curriculum.pdf

Next Steps Towards Policy Change

Cullerton (2017, p. vii) explains that for policy change to occur there needs to be political will, and preferably public will. She identified a suite of enablers for influencing political, as well as public will:

- investing in relationships and intelligence gathering
- framing problems based on values and emotion and using real stories to gain traction
- ensuring the issue is top-of-mind for decision-makers and the general public
- ensuring there is a skilled policy entrepreneur and a policy champion to take the issue forward.

Cullerton also highlights the importance of unity of voice. "Defining the Key Message" by creating a forum, as suggested by the SCKS, could help to solidify this voice. Approaching the topic in a collective manner could help to frame the problem, ensure that the issue is a focus for policymakers and address many of the "Ideas for Action" that emerged from the contributions of attendees. A *Food in Schools* forum has now been established by Healthy Ireland (a cross-government initiative that aims to improve the health and wellbeing of people living in Ireland):

> *to take forward the work in Healthy Ireland's strategic action plan (2021–2025). The aim of the forum is to bring together all partners working in school settings to help maximise the wide range of initiatives underway and identify the gaps. We are exploring developing a Food in Schools policy* (T. James, personal communication, September 10, 2021).

Hayes et al. (2019) stress that good working relationships are important "within and across government departments, intermediaries and schools [and these] were critical for intervention adoption, successful implementation and sustainability" (p. 1). According to Genannt Bonsmann et al. (2014), 42% of EU countries (along with Norway and Switzerland) had combined ministries working together to create school-food policies in 2014, whereas health, education, and agriculture ministries had sole responsibility respectively in only 29%, 18%, and 3% of these countries.

The potential contribution of schools to developing and reinforcing positive food choices has been acknowledged elsewhere, and previously in this article (Murimi et al., 2018; Nicklaus et al., 2004). It is further contended that schools and classrooms are key to the development and implementation of a food-education policy, as "education systems reflect the societal context in which they operate and consequently our [primary] schools are microcosms of this kaleidoscopic societal tapestry" (Ring

et al., 2018, p. 4). A curriculum should be a social construction that holds true the philosophical and political views of a nation "where the purposes of education are no longer articulated in terms of what students should learn but in terms of what they should become" (Walsh, 2018, p. 11). In 2020, the NCCA embarked on a review of the primary-school curriculum framework as a whole. At the 2019 SCKS event, the prospect of this review was recognised as an opportunity to shape food education, and there was a suggestion that SCKS proposals could inform NCCA recommendations.

A meeting was granted to this researcher, and to Michael Kelly of GIY, with the then Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, and other DES representatives, on foot of the SCKS event. The Minister acknowledged that embedding food education into schools was important and that it was the "right thing to do" to enable children to learn essential life skills and improve their wellbeing. He affirmed his openness to facilitating the process of developing a shared understanding of why food education matters, and what it means in policy and practice in schools. Information about the meeting was shared with the SCKS attendees. Further communication with the DES (now known as the Department of Education) is on hold, however, following COVID-19 school closures and a change of government.

Conclusion

Key findings from the SCKS show an appetite for a changed approach to food education in Ireland, but also indicate that there is currently no clear roadmap for this change. The experts who attended the event felt that a cross-government forum should be the next step. Such a forum is now being hosted by Healthy Ireland since May 2021. SCKS attendees also concluded that a whole-school approach would be necessary to broaden the scope of food education, one that benefits from enhanced initial teacher education and that makes full use of existing guidelines for primary schools on healthy eating (Healthy Ireland, 2018).

There was uncertainty about whether the present health focus on food in the SPHE curriculum is sufficient to address how food impacts pupils in today's society. Both the SCKS event and the subsequent completion of the mapping exercise facilitated a detailed look at the scope for increased food education in primary schools. A form of pedagogy was sketched out (by the attendees and further developed by the researcher) with the aims of providing an education that teaches children to better navigate the food system, to dig the soil, to protect biodiversity, and to learn to cook. All of this could be designed to promote greater awareness of climate change and an enjoyment of food. There are challenges, not addressed in the SCKS, to hosting hands-on classes in primary schools, such as large class size and lack of cooking facilities. The reported benefits of using experiential learning in classroom settings, however, strongly suggest the need to determine ways to develop and implement such activities

(Dewey, 1997; Nelson et al, 2013). The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills (2018) recommended that children "are taught cookery skills, nutrition etc. from a young age as part of the core curriculum" (2018, p. 16); this would suggest support for prioritising funding. The SCKS findings point towards a recommendation for a systemic policy change to food education in primary schools. In addition to increased emphasis on teacher training and on developing teacher agency as important first steps towards implementing such change, circular food education offers a model that might provide children in primary schools with the possibility to lead a life in which both they, and the natural world, could flourish.

A possible limitation of the research undertaken at the SCKS event relates to the extent to which the findings can be generalised. While a broad range of expert and stakeholder groups was invited and represented at the scoping consultation, the sample size is nevertheless relatively small. Another relates to restrictions arising from COVID-19. These prevented the researcher from organising follow-up consultations to obtain additional information and clarification of initial responses, which would perhaps have provided a more conclusive or prescriptive collection of viewpoints. Notwithstanding these concerns, the SCKS analysis contributes to the literature about food education in Ireland. The event afforded key stakeholders an opportunity to voice their opinions on how to find a place for sustained and embedded food education in the primary-school setting. Further study, that considers best practice elsewhere, and is mindful of the needs and views of teachers and school managers, would help to provide a roadmap. One SCKS attendee summed up the possibilities for an expansive approach to food education by concluding, "food is not a subject; it is every subject".

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