

Airfield Food Series

September 7th, 2017

Practical Food Education Should Be Compulsory in Irish Schools

By Joe McNamee

We have a crisis in Ireland, a particular crisis of health that has been killing the population in increasing numbers over the last two decades. Hitherto, it had been almost solely an adult problem. That too is changing. Our children are now also becoming increasingly affected. Amongst the adult population, this crisis is the leading cause of mortality. With the first signs and symptoms now becoming evident in childhood, the prognosis is a hugely compromised and, eventually, greatly shortened adulthood. In other words, we may have reached a peak point in human longevity.

The crisis I speak of is, of course, diet-related. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes, are the leading cause of mortality in the world and Ireland is no different. This invisible epidemic has a colossal impact on the social fabric and economic welfare of this country, affecting individuals, families, communities and the workplace. And the worst thing is, we are killing ourselves with the 'food' we put into our bodies.

Leaving the contributory impacts of tobacco consumption and a lack of physical exercise for another forum, poor diet is a primary culprit, causing excessive weight and, more and more, full-blown obesity, raised blood pressure, raised blood sugar and raised cholesterol. This is largely preventable yet, over the past two decades, figures for those who are overweight or even obese in

Ireland have doubled. Now only 40% of us are at a healthy weight. What's more, experts predict Ireland has the potential to become the most obese nation in Europe. What a journey we have made as a nation: from famine to feast to fatality.

Once upon a time, we had a far greater connection with the food we ate. When we shopped for food, we went to a series of specialist shops rather than one single large supermarket. In each shop, we knew exactly what we were after and could tell the difference between good and bad. We often grew or raised our own food, produce and livestock. And we cooked.

Once upon a time, roughly 60 years ago, we devoted an hour and a half per day to cooking. These days, the figure is under 30 minutes and falling, with many dedicating less than ten minutes a day to the preparation and cooking of the very stuff we put into our bodies.

Why did we do this? Because we bought into the idea of convenience. And why wouldn't we? Why would we begrudge those housewives of yore, those largely left to the never-ending drudgery of housework, when they saw an opportunity for some brief respite. And it was a good thing. We embraced the concept of labour saving and ordinary working people discovered 'leisure' time. But what happens when the balance swings too far to the other side? Convenience and the avoidance of labour whenever possible has now become the Holy Grail, a fundamental ethos of the first world, not just for 'housewives', but for all of us. We all want to save on our labour time and capitalise on our leisure time. But this trade comes at a very high cost.

In exchange for convenience, we have bartered away our repository of food knowledge, acquired over thousands of years

and lost in mere decades, roughly the same period in which this diet-related health began to emerge. This is no coincidence.

Our new-found ignorance means we, the consumer, can be gulled by every player in the food chain. Food scandals such as the horsemeat affair a couple of years ago have a far greater chance of occurring when you have an overwhelming body of modern consumers who can barely tell you what type of animal the meat they eat comes from. Once upon a time, our grandparents could go to a butchers and pretty much reassemble an entire carcass from the display laid out before them.

But, we say, look at the supermarket shelves: all year-round, we have choice on a scale our grandparents could only dream of and all in one convenient location. But do we?

Do 20 or more different types of over-salted and over-sugared breakfast cereals, so nutritionally inferior they require fortification, constitute a greater level of choice than a single bag of oats for porridge? Having to buy a whole bag of carrots when you only want one? Does that equate to greater choice, especially when there's every chance the rest of the bag will go to waste? Speaking of fresh produce, do you view out-of-season, nutritionally-inferior fruit and vegetables (irradiated to preserve them as they travel halfway around the world to your local supermarket) as a superior option to locally grown, seasonal produce? Have you ever tasted an Egyptian strawberry in January and considered it the equivalent of a Wexford strawberry in June? Row after row of freezers full of oven-ready pizzas and a whole host of other processed readymade meal options—is that 'choice'?

For every sound option available in a supermarket, there are many more items that are much less so. If you believe that cooking nutritionally sound, tasty food involves doing as little as possible

to the finest and freshest local, seasonal primary produce, ideally subjected to little or no process at all, then you'll find supermarkets don't offer 'choice', they offer the illusion of choice. Real choice is simply not cost effective.

SOLUTIONS?

There is no silver bullet to the problems of diet-related ill health but there are solutions. It has taken us an enormous effort to get here and will take an even bigger effort to retrace our steps and that is providing the will exists on ALL sides to so do.

Resolving this crisis requires a multi-pronged approach and what's more, it will take some decades to reveal whether or not it has been truly effective, which puts it further down the list of political priorities, politicians, existing in their own uniquely truncated temporal zone, rarely thinking much beyond the next election. We are left, though, with no option but to try, and one of the most critical elements of any such multi-pronged strategy must be food education in schools.

WHAT IS FOOD EDUCATION?

What is 'food education'? What is 'food education in schools'? Fundamentally, it should be about regaining all that mislaid knowledge I spoke of earlier. It should be about regaining control and choice. It should be about empowering the individual and opening up the route to healthy, nutritious food through acquired knowledge, providing the ability to make informed changes to existing poor diets.

Some would argue that we already have food education for children and we do: it usually begins with the downright appalling; the 1000 plus ads per year for junk food that each child

will watch ever before they attend school and right through their school years.

There are already well-meaning initiatives in existence. Initiatives are always born with good intentions but the reality is that so much of it is also random, ill-informed, non-compulsory and too often half-baked, prone to foundering on the opposition of vested interests and the indifference and ignorance of society at large.

That's why the launch of the Department of Health's (DoH) action plan, *A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016 - 2025* seems such a positive step. At last, one of the major players with the power to genuinely effect change is taking positive action. The State, which in the past has done much to facilitate the downward slide to the current crisis by its prioritising of the industrial food sector's interests over those of its own citizens is now finally peering over the other side of the fence, aware that past policies, or lack thereof have bequeathed us with this huge health crisis.

The report states:

"The NCD threat can be overcome using existing knowledge. The solutions are highly cost-effective. Comprehensive and integrated action at country level, led by governments, is the means to achieve success."

The report also acknowledges, based on multiple global studies, the past effectiveness of food education in schools, as an essential part of a multi-pronged joined-up strategy spanning all, government, industry and many other players, stating that in an education setting, multi-focal intervention was required, on curriculum, policies and environment and services.

The World Health Organization, quoted in their document, *Ending Childhood Obesity*, calls on the governments of Member States to “take ownership, provide leadership and engage political commitment to tackle childhood obesity”.

It considers the education setting, particularly schools, as one of the most important sectors for addressing obesity and goes on to ask governments to “implement comprehensive programmes that promote healthy school environments, health and nutrition literacy and physical activity among school-age children and adolescents”.

An integral part of the Irish DoH plan is the ‘healthy school’ concept, to develop and implement a ‘whole of school’ healthy lifestyle programme (including, but not limited to the curriculum, nutrition, physical activity, smoking, alcohol and mental wellbeing), incorporating knowledge, skills and greater understanding of environmental factors that influence children and young people. National food standards for primary schools will be developed. It is also planned, to develop and implement training programmes, including brief interventions, and courses on tackling the problems of being overweight and obese, including anti-stigmatisation, for and by teachers.

All the above would suggest we need proceed no further, that the State has all in hand. But before we go, let’s take one last look.

I did a check. The word, “food”, is mentioned 74 times. The word, “education”, crops up 18 times, “obesity”, 304 times. “Cooking”? Zero, nada, zilch, nought, nothing. Neither, by the way, is there any evidence of the phrase, “food education”.

Perhaps you are content to leave your progeny graze in a nearby pasture but, for most of us, our daily diet invariably involves some

form of cooking. The most accepted route to a healthy nutritious diet is eating food we have prepared ourselves with little or no external processed intervention. How, it has to be asked, is it possible to have 'food education' without a single mention of 'cooking'?

After a certain age, you can ask a classroom of children for their understanding of what constitutes 'healthy, nutritious food' and you should be able to assemble a reasonable diet from amongst the answers. But asking them how they might set about sourcing and cooking healthy nutritious food is liable to elicit a far less reliable response.

Access to healthy and affordable food does not solely mean, the opportunity to purchase. It also encompasses having the knowledge and ability to locate and source the healthiest options and, most of all, the ability to turn this sourced produce into tasty, nutritious meals; in other words, the ability to cook.

But don't we already have the option to learn to cook, in home economics? Home Economics is a voluntary option that only becomes available in some secondary schools. (I don't have figures to hand but I would imagine the number of boys-only secondary schools that offer the option, if any, must be very small.)

And there is also the question as to whether waiting until secondary school is too late to begin teaching children to cook after an age when many prejudicial attitudes towards cooking will have begun to set in. After all, you don't wait until secondary school to beginning teaching children to read and to count and surely cooking must be considered an equally fundamental life skill for all that the 'purveyors of convenience' might persuade us otherwise.

Under the current system, just 11% of boys do home economics and those that do invariably receive weaker grades. Boys, every bit as much as girls, need to learn to cook. I would fervently argue that the woman's place is in the kitchen—right alongside the man. Though, apparently not a consideration of importance to the Department of Health in this report, cooking as part of food education needs to become a compulsory part of the curriculum for every student and it needs to begin in primary school. The fundamental benefit of teaching children to cook is that it offers them an essential life skill, preparing them for leaving home and eventually looking after their own dietary welfare and, maybe some day, that of their own children.

SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS ON A PROPER FOOD EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

What Sort of Things Would They Learn?

- They would learn about equipment and techniques, how to follow a recipe.
- They would truly comprehend the difference between good food and bad food.
- They would appreciate the health benefits of specific foods, nutrients and additives
- They would learn to decipher the gobbledygook of labels, coming to realise that the more ingredients a label lists, the less healthy it is likely to be.
- They would learn culinary hygiene, how to cook and store food safely.

- They would learn how to source and buy the very finest of local, seasonal produce, not to simply follow a trolley around the local supermarket.

All learning outcomes also include secondary benefits that are applicable to other subjects and to life outside the school.

Secondary Benefits

- Cooking is often likened to an art form, in that a recipe on its own is no guarantee of a successful outcome; in other words, cooking also requires independent thinking.
- Cooking teaches students analytical skills, especially at a senior level. (The ability to cook helps them to decipher the vast trove of available information, good and bad, on the internet and in the media, and to sort the wheat from the chaff, and to not even bother with the downright bullshit.)
- Cooking helps them to appreciate concepts such as trans- or inter-disciplinarity, ie the effect of their immediate choices and actions on other spheres, for example, on the environment.
- It teaches them how to assume responsibility. (e.g. undertaking potentially hazardous tasks such as boiling fluids or using sharp knives.)

Addressing Arguments Against Food Education and Cooking in Schools

The purpose of education in general is multi-faceted, not just to equip us for the workplace. Certainly, you can and should learn skills and gain knowledge in school that will help to maximise your future earning potential but, equally, learning should be

about personal fulfillment and I'm not just talking about dozing through a civics (CSPE) class.

One of the fundamental roles of the school is to build rounded, fulfilled citizens who will make positive contributions, not just to business and enterprise but, more importantly, to society.

For example, you don't study English solely because you'll need at some later date to be able to read a multinational company's code of conduct. Literature enriches and broadens the mind, a love of literature offers a lifetime of fulfillment.

History? If you neglect history, you will fail to learn history's valuable lessons and end up with foolish orange fingers fluttering over the nuclear trigger.

Geography? As Putin was wont to tell us recently, things always go better when your presidents can tell their 'Austrias from their Australias'. (He was referring to George W. Bush).

Renowned Berkeley linguist Robin Lakoff, speaks of education's "less practical (but equally vital) functions." She says: "education is invaluable not only in its ability to help people and societies get ahead, but equally in helping them develop the perspectives that make them fully human."

Should we not be prioritising STEM subjects?

The argument about STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths)—that we need to be prioritising its teaching because these are the skills required for the future—is an intriguing one, especially in a small, very open economy, sited at the fringes of Europe. We DO need to continue to develop our tech sector as well as increasing our autonomous hold over that sector and that requires people with suitable knowledge and skills but that should come EQUALLY and not at the EXPENSE of other subjects, and I

include food education in the latter. A STEM-heavy education system might create perfect employees but does it create perfect citizens?

Invariably, those who primarily drive this argument are not educators but those in industry and those who operate at the behest of industry, such as State trade missions, IBEC and the IDA. In the heel of the hunt, whether you are a proponent of STEM-based education or a liberal arts education or no education at all, you won't learn much of anything without food—it is scientifically proven that diet has a profound impact on cognitive ability.

Then there is the argument that food education is something best learned at home? I have a simple and very damning answer to that: I know too many parents who can't cook or know little or nothing about how to really shop for food as opposed to accepting what turns up on the supermarket shelves—and these are all educated, middle class people. (Too often, certain commentators patronise or even condescend to the 'working classes' on dietary matters; believe me, the 'dietary problem' is not solely a working class problem.) And the clue to the problem with this particular cohort is 'educated'. They come from generations where 'education' was a trade-off against practical 'food education'.

My mother is now in her 80s. For her and her siblings, education, eventually leading to third-level, came at the expense of time spent cooking/learning in the kitchen, which, in turn, meant I only 'discovered food' when I left home. Any food education I have received in my life most certainly never happened began at home. My wife followed the same route as my mother, both talented, wonderful women who should be tried for war crimes in the kitchen. We have now reared several generations of parents who have a no more than fair ability, if that, in the kitchen and are not

remotely able for the task of teaching their own children how to cook, if they even could find the time to do so in the first place.

But isn't the curriculum all ready too crowded?

Then there is the question of finding time in an already crowded curriculum for a new subject that can't simply be shoehorned into the current catch-all, SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education). Of course, it's a challenge but nothing that a little creative thinking couldn't address. For starters, how much time each week do we spend teaching our children religion? I firmly believe that if parents want their child to have religious instruction, it should occur outside school hours. I appreciate my opinion is one others may disagree with but it is just one example of how time might be found in the curriculum for a subject that impacts on ALL pupils, no matter their religious affiliations.

Cost?

Education, like many other essential services in the State, has suffered enormously from underfunding in recent times and continues to do so. To then turn around and seek funding for yet another module, one many citizens won't even perceive a requirement for, would no doubt provoke public uproar.

The following statistics provide the beginnings of an excellent counterargument: according to a study conducted at the University College Cork under Professor Ivan Perry, the estimated annual cost of obesity is €1.13 billion, which is over a third of the overall direct health care costs. Diabetes, an NCD closely associated with obesity, and the treatment cost of diabetes is estimated to be €600 million a year.

It is not in the nature of recent Irish governments to 'speculate to accumulate', in other words, to invest substantially lower sums in preventative measures rather than footing the infinitely larger bill for treating NCDs, most especially when these same NCDs so often end as the primary cause of death. That approach really needs to change.

How do you teach 'food education/cooking'?

I have no doubt were we to adopt the principle, that food education/cooking should be taught in our schools, the automatic assumption would be, we should entrust its delivery to those educators currently charged with delivering the existing home economics programme. I believe that we need to begin from an entirely different perspective.

Food education/cooking in schools is not simply a matter of somehow jemmying another couple of classes onto an already overloaded curriculum. I believe it will require an entirely different and altogether more creative approach and that, crucially, it is not delivered in the usual 'top-down' format.

To begin with, we need a food policy on healthy nutritious eating to be designed and implemented in each and every school, to lay the groundwork for a new and very sorely needed sea change in thinking around food and education.

So how might it work, well first we'd need to begin with the teachers. For every enlightened and informed teacher such as those here today, there are many more fumbling around in the dark. Teachers need to be trained to deliver food education as part of the curriculum. They need that training very, very urgently.

I have heard, anecdotally, of many teachers of the children of friends and even of my own children, commencing a class

discussion on nutritional matters with the bald statement, 'fat is bad', so many in fact that I have to ask, is this false information being delivered in a teacher training module? Either way, it is a shocking display of nutritional ignorance.

While I have encountered some excellent home economic teachers, the reason for their excellence is as much to do with their personally knowledge acquired outside of teacher training. Several of those other teachers I mention earlier, implementing that shockingly ignorant 'fatwa on fat' were actually home economics teachers; one of them subsequently took the class on a field trip to the Pepsi Cola bottling factory.

According to a Department of Education & Skills follow-up report, from July 2017, on their own Lifeskills Survey, 92% of Irish schools have a healthy eating policy. From my own anecdotal research, of my own children's schools and the schools of relatives and friends, I believe that statement requires serious unpicking to find the underlying truth. They speak of schools supposedly operating a healthy eating policy but barely, if at all, policing it or, worse still, being too afraid of parental reaction to police it. My own younger children complain on a regular basis that many of their peers are consuming confectionery (ranging from 'healthy' chocolate coated rice cakes to actual bars of chocolate) and soft fizzy drinks on a daily basis rather than just on Friday, 'treat day'. (An undefined 'Treat day' itself offers an extremely mixed message to children around the area of healthy eating.)

One of my nephews attended a primary school with a much-trumpeted healthy eating policy, especially on lunch boxes, with no sweets or sugary drinks allowed. Said nephew, is a keen (read, fanatical!) sportsman and—though just ten at the time, already deeply interested in the impact of diet on his sporting

endeavours—and won a school-wide competition for best lunchbox, an impromptu and unannounced inspection, judged by a local dentist. His prize, handed to him by the dentist was, I kid you not, a bag of jellies. By the way, winning that prize subsequently led to much mockery and teasing from fellow pupils.

DELIVERING A COOKING MODULE IN STAGES

There is currently a primary school programme that the Dept of Health claims in the report is very successful, Food Dudes. It may well be on a broader scale but my personal experience through my children is less so,

My second son is named Hector, after my grandfather. He, like all my children, a good grubber, so much so we call him Hannibal Hector. However, an encounter with a food dudes offering of out of season bland tasting courgettes and peppers from some polytunnel in southern Spain has left him with a distinct antipathy to courgettes, a complete mental block.

Perhaps better is the Incredible Edibles, which gives the children hands on experience of growing, a UK study recently showed that 90% of children who get actively involved in growing food, alter their eating habits. Again, from anecdotal reports, it appears that, in practice, its implementation has been piecemeal, its impact, spotty.

The best of all is The Big Grow, an initiative developed by one of the most progressive non-profit food organisations in the country, GIY (Grow-It-Yourself). A free Big Grow pack is delivered to any class in any primary school throughout Ireland that applies for it. Each pack contains enough soil, growing pots and seeds (this year, cress, peas and spinach) for a class of 30, as well as an 'expert' kit devised by GIY that includes details on cooking and eating the

eventual harvest. GIY have also worked in tandem with teachers and education specialists to develop in-class teaching materials, including fun, educational activities to complement the school curriculum. GIY report that children who grow their own food are more likely to eat fruit and vegetables and display higher levels of nutritional knowledge. Not only do the children acquire the 'science', they also develop what GIY term, 'food empathy', whereby the pleasure of growing and eating their own food leads to a deeper connection with food, which is proven to lead to a healthier life, in the long term.

Though the initiative is now entering its seventh year and has to date been utilised by over 125,000 Irish primary school children—so successfully, in fact, that it is going to be launched in a quarter of UK primary schools with the help of GIY's commercial partner, *innocent*—yet I see no mention of whatsoever of this exceptional programme in the Department of Health's, A Healthy Weight action plan. It may well be an oversight but, in the context of food education in Ireland, it is a glaring one and detracts from the document's overall authority. It would be nice to imagine the Department, should they eventually learn of The Big Grow, would attempt to incorporate it into their plans and not just rely on the par-baked initiatives from semi-State bodies attempting to tick various boxes.

EVEN COURGETTES

While some may dismiss a return to home-growing as mere middle-class whimsy, a re-run of *The Good Life*, the 70s urban self-sufficiency sitcom, I profoundly disagree. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, daily routine for all those without the means to pay someone else to do it for them, often included

growing and harvesting their own food. But heavy industry's insatiable demand for labour saw food provision become a specialist endeavour left to 'professionals' and each subsequent generation has lessened its involvement to the point where we have largely ceded all responsibility for the sourcing of an essential daily requirement to large corporations and our collective food ignorance means we have no real oversight over quality despite all the rules and regulations purportedly there for our benefit and protection.

Furthermore, while most of us will probably never grow anything remotely sufficient to meet our needs, the earth connection is every bit as important as harvest quantity. As any gardener will tell you, getting hands mucky in the soil is a fine way to heal the soul. We come from earth, we return to earth; to pass a life without the slightest engagement with that earth is at least a sadly missed opportunity.

(Incidentally, Hector learned to very much embrace the courgette—after he planted the seed, then grew and, eventually, helped to cook his own.)

The last time I addressed this Airfield Food Series, I concluded with the following statement: Healthy, nutritious food, along with clean air, clean water, sleep, clothing and shelter are fundamental human rights and, therefore, should be equally viewed as inalienable human rights. I believe food education is a fundamental component of any access to the first item in that list.