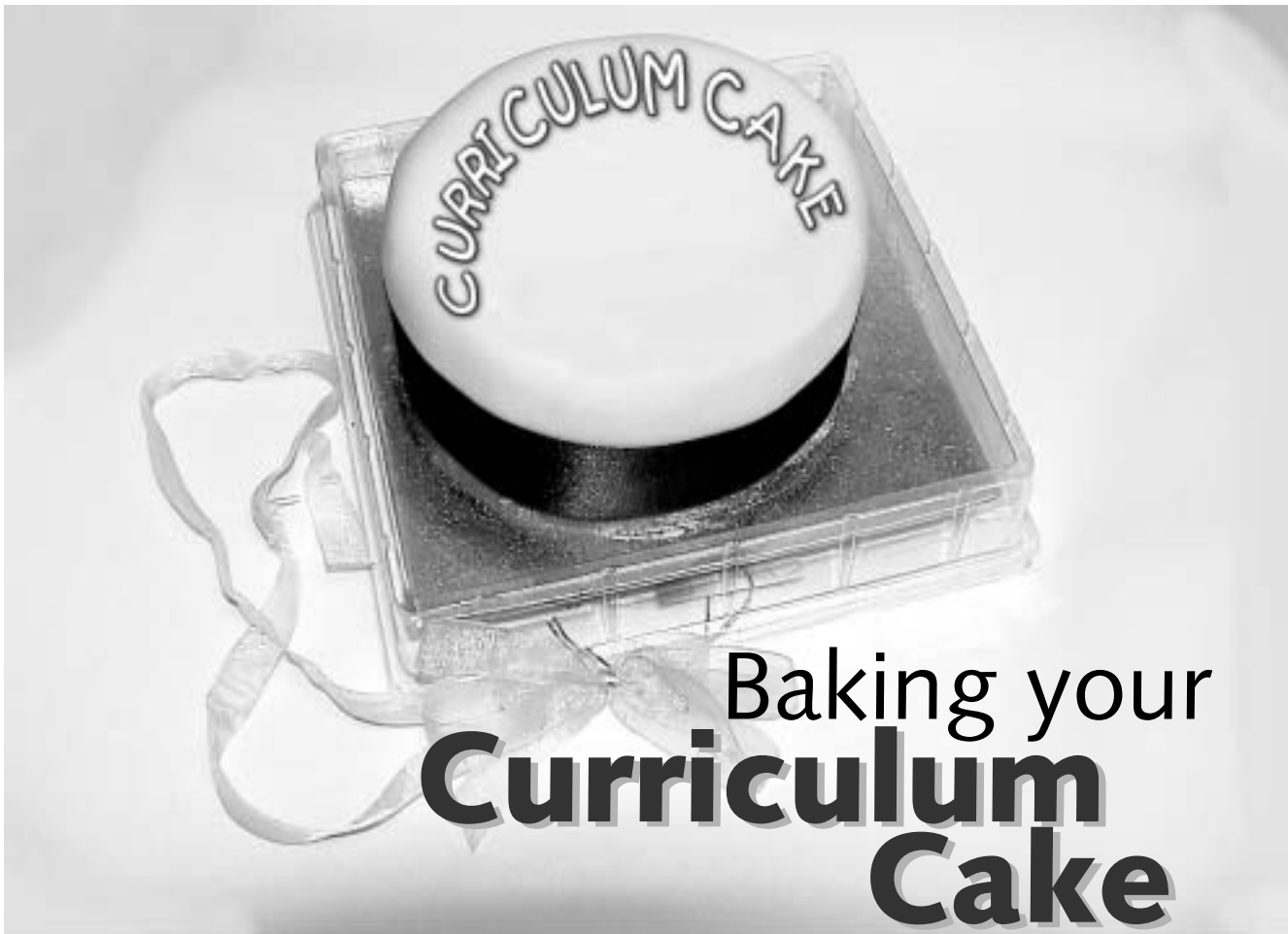




HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE WAY WE TEACH ABOUT HEALTHY EATING IN SCHOOL? FOOD CONSULTANT **ROB REES** IS ON THE CASE



Baking your Curriculum Cake



Rob Rees

At the beginning of this school year, the education secretary for England, Charles Clarke, made clear his intention to make school meals healthier. So can changing the menu make a difference to what children actually eat, or do we also need to teach children about healthy eating? What does your school do? We asked an authority on school meals for his point of view. Here, we have assembled points of view and questions from Rob, to help teachers and children think about the food they eat, both in school and at home.

Food is talked about endlessly in the media, at local, regional, national and indeed global levels. We are always wondering, therefore, about what is 'good' or 'right' to eat. To look for answers without giving enough consideration to trends and fashions, without thinking of the bigger picture, the implications of what we eat and how we shop, would only mislead us. Teaching about a single food issue such as genetic manipulation, local food procurement or food poisoning in isolation is impossible. The politics of food policy is also uncertain: do

teaching about healthy eating



■ In putting an increased emphasis on good food, do you have the support of your head teacher, governors, parents and especially, the children themselves?

■ Have you agreed a whole-school approach to healthy eating and drinking? (Ofsted apparently see this as a bonus point during inspections!)

■ Do you already have topics or lesson plans in place that other teachers can use?

■ Do these activities have a

strong element of fun in them to motivate the children?

■ Have you brought in a local chef to do cooking demonstrations or to provide information on seasonal products, basic nutrition, food safety, the importance of recognising foods by taste, touch and smell?

■ Do you help children to know more about careers in the food industry? Not just as chefs, but as environmental health officers, hygiene

workers, packers, brewers, dairy workers, gardeners ... the list is long. Do any of your children's parents work in these industries? Would they be willing to contribute to your lessons?

■ Do you grow food in school, even in a small way, such as herbs in boxes? This is an excellent way of engaging children in physical activity, as well as in cultivating, cooking and eating. (PSR 82 had an interesting article on school gardens in Amsterdam, which

governments rely on scientific research, or do they listen mainly to the big producers and retailers? For example, how do we know whether sausages or poultry meat are 'safe' to eat, and does the UK government's Food Standards Agency protect the interests of the consumers?

So how do we go about changing our culture, making 'good food' a concern for everyone? How do we make this an integral part of everyone's lifelong learning programme? Food matters to all generations: it acts as a leveller to bring about debate, understanding, and

change. So as you take ownership of your curriculum, in line with the new primary strategy of 'excellence and enjoyment', how do you prevent children being confused about what is good to eat, in order to enhance their lives and help them enjoy healthy food?

A few questions to help you consider what you as a teacher might do are given in the panel. Some are about people, some about science and some about how you teach. Think them through and consider whether you are maximising your opportunities to make a difference.

If you are in doubt about the importance of all this, let me end with some evidence. Nearly 4.5 million people a year suffer from food poisoning in the UK (so remember to promote food hygiene when using food in your lessons). Obesity costs the UK National Health Service £4 billion pounds a year. Sixteen per cent of all 11–25 year-olds are obese. A third of all deaths are caused by poor diet. Nearly 80 per cent of all meals prepared at home are done so within eight minutes, using a microwave. Is this acceptable? The earlier we tackle food and dietary issues with

reinforced this idea).

■ If you have a large enough school garden, could you sell things at the local farmers market in summer? (A good project for year 6 after SATs?)

■ Could you carry out scientific trials by making one part of your class garden organic and the other not? Children can compare yields, weight, colour, smell and taste, as well as preferences and implications for the environment.

■ Can children study the range of fruit and vegetables available locally, their prices and where they come from? This will open up a debate on why we eat what we eat, and what we throw away.

■ Do you ask children to think about why food deteriorates, how we can prevent it, and the meaning of 'sell by', 'best by' and 'use by'?

■ Do they understand how canning, smoking, pickling, freezing, etc., actually work to preserve foods?

■ Does your class (and your staff room) compost its food waste for use in your school garden? Many schools are introducing this to raise

awareness. Children can then 'research' their fish and chips, to plot the journey or 'cycle' of a potato and a fish from plough or sea to plate, and back.

■ Do you encourage children to think about food and nature: wild berries and fruits, wild creatures, herbs? How much 'food for free' is there around your school?

■ Could your school link with one in a different environment, e.g. a rural school with an urban school? Children on Exmoor, for instance, often eat lamb reared and killed by their parents, whilst children in cities might have no idea where their meat comes from (although, city farms in urban areas allow children to come into contact with real live food, both animal and plant – see Website).

■ Could you run your own 'social experiments'? Children can keep food diaries, manage a promotion trial or a blind tasting, watch TV adverts and programmes on food, even do a simulation of TV's 'You are what you eat'! Children can then devise and film their own advert for fruit or vegetables – a good way to incorporate ICT skills.

■ Do you organise and run activities in school such as healthy lunches, waste-free packed lunches, smoothie clubs, breakfast clubs, fruit tuck shops? Achieving a 'critical mass' of children involved in such promotions is often the main way of motivating others.

■ Can you investigate things that may puzzle children, such as why does a Yorkshire pudding rise? Or why can recipes with the same ingredients (flour, milk, eggs) turn into pancakes, scones, cakes, and many other different things to eat?

■ Can you explore the science of yeast and how it works? For example, why is it OK to eat yeast in bread, but not in beer until you are 18?

■ Could you investigate the science of salt: How much is too much? How much is too little? Why? How does brine (salt water) preserve foods? Can you test it to see if it works?

■ Have you thought about the way food is tied up with art, maths, geography, history, D&T, citizenship, religion, even music and PE, as well as science? Every food project you do will complement another part of the curriculum.

children, the more likely they are to establish good habits.

Food is a wonderful resource for teaching and learning, which touches us all. Within the classroom teachers have the chance to lead and inspire the culture in which we develop. Teaching about food has its challenges, but there are plenty of people who can help by working in partnership and complementing work already being undertaken in the classroom. Bake your curriculum cake with the right ingredients, with care, with thought and planning. It will be worth it.

Websites

For information about city farms see:
<http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/index.html>

For further information on issues raised here see:
www.foodvision.gov.uk
www.health4schools.org

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awards for 'best educator'. Rob has contact with around 9000 school children each year, and is a self-confessed 'food champion', who believes in providing balanced information that can help consumers of all ages to make better choices about what they eat.
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