Cooking in crises: Lessons from the UK

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Abstract

The concern with low levels of cooking skills among the British population can be traced back to the 1780s coinciding with the start of urbanisation of the English rural classes. Modern concerns with the lack of cooking skills, since the 1980s, have focused on the links to healthy food choice and preparation. This has resulted in a number of initiatives but little policy development to support cooking in any structured way. Cooking was de-facto removed from the educational experience in schools in England and Wales. After much intensive lobbying the Labour government promised to introduce practical cooking classes for all 11-14 year olds. The current Coalition government are currently reviewing the school curriculum and the commitment to cooking has been withdrawn.

This article documents some of the activity since the 1980s, the approaches used by campaigners to get practical cooking back into schools and/or on the curriculum. Parallel to these developments were activities to teach cooking to adults in community settings. A key argument to be presented will be that the growth of activity by civic society organisations and celebrity chefs has allowed the state to pull back from doing much as there is apparently no problem!

Introduction

The state of cooking has long been a topic of discussion and concern among the ruling elite, the modern discussions began in the 1780s with the Times of London calling for young women to be educated in the skill of domestic economy, likewise public health has long had a relationship, albeit uneasy, with cooking seeing it as a way to influence healthy eating, in fact Edwin Chadwick, the great public health reformer, called for cooking education among the labouring classes as he claimed in 1842 that:

'ignorance of domestic economy leads to ill health by the purchase of unsuitable and at the same time expensive food'. (Chadwick 1842, p 140)

A plea recently reiterated in the Journal of the American Medical Association (Lichtenstein and Ludwig 2010). The Obama administration has heavily endorsed cooking, mainly through the First Lady and Cooking Matters, as a means of addressing

the US obesity problem (http://cookingmatters.org/). Despite this long history of concern, the situation has not stimulated serious policy debate or discussion over the role of cooking in the population. This is what is discussed in this article, the background to school and community adult interventions in the UK are set out for scrutiny. The focus is on the last 30 years of activity. This article will not deal with the myriad influences on cooking such as the food industry, new technologies etc, these arguments can be found in other work (see for example: Short, 2006; Lang and Caraher, 2001; Vileisis, 2008; Wrangham, 2009).

Since the 1980s there has been much promotion of cooking projects and initiatives in the UK (National Food Alliance, 1993; The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (RSA), 1997; Caraher and Cowburn, 2004; Caraher and Dowler, 2007). This occurred alongside the removal of cooking from the national curriculum by the Department of education and the almost simultaneous funding of cooking programmes in schools by the Department of Health (Caraher and Lang, 1999). A case of the left hand not knowing what the right is doing!

Our research in 1999 showed a population with low levels of skills with the rich having higher levels of a skills deficit (Caraher, Lang, Dixon and Carr-Hill, 1999; Lang and Caraher, 2001). The most important source for learning about cooking and the handing-on of skills was the family, specifically mothers; but schools were also identified as important sources of learning about cooking - especially for men. In 2010 commercial research from the BBC Food Magazine and the French magazine Madame Figaro showed 72 per cent of the British cook at home daily, compared with 59 per cent of the French and that 50 per cent of British cooks spends more than 30 minutes preparing a meal while only a quarter of the French respondents reported spending that long. Perhaps it takes more time to open the packages! The French however, were more likely to cook from basics and to sit down to consume the meal in a group. Also more detailed examination of the findings suggests that the UK 'cook' prepares two or three meals for different members of the family, whereas the French prepare one family or household meal.

The current situation with respect to cooking interventions

The 1990s and early 2000s saw campaigns to introduce cooking back into schools. By the late 1990s, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food set up a research programme based on the premise that low income families could benefit from acquiring

cooking skills (Lang and Caraher, 2001). Rises in diseases such as heart disease, cancers and obesity have thrown attention onto cooking as a means to improve diets and nutritional intakes. Yet this has remained a minor concern among policy makers (Lichtenstein and Ludwig 2010). Below the issues are examined from the perspective of schools and community adult based classes.

Schools

In the UK the teaching of cooking skills fell out of favour in the 1980/90s as a number of industry dominated reports called for the teaching of a different set of skills for those who might go to work in the food and catering industries (ACARD, 1982). These latter skills were not deemed to be hands-on cooking skills but much more around management of food preparation processes, and the marketing and promotion of foods. The home economics curriculum was subsumed under the mantle of Design and Technology. So what remained of cooking (in the curriculum sense) was an industrial model of food preparation and marketing (Stitt, Jepson, Paulson-Box and Prisk, 1997), committed teachers still could do hands on cooking but did not have to. As Stitt (1996) said it managed to take the cooking out of food.

Caraher, Dixon, Lang and Carr-Hill, (1999) questioned the basis of what constitutes cooking skills and the importance of possessing skills to deal with new foods and the necessity of learning new skills for new technology and processed foods. All this represents a change to the concept of what constitutes cooking and food preparation. Short (2003 and 2006) argues that what is occurring is a restructuring of skills and not a demise in skills per se. The view from the industry, in the 1980s, was one informed by technology where with new equipment what were needed were technicians who followed instructions, so flipping the burger became dependent on the technology telling you when as opposed to a skill or learned knowledge. Whatever the arguments over what constitutes cooking, the general view as espoused by Stitt and others was that some core cooking skills are necessary as the base of this pyramid of skills (Stitt, Jepson, Paulson-Box and Prisk, 1997; Caraher, Dixon, Lang and Carr-Hill, 1999).

The promotion of cooking and campaigns to reinstate it in the curriculum were often based on a suppositional relationship between cooking and health outcomes such as reductions obesity or chronic disease prevention through changes in healthy eating due to cooking (Rubin, Rye & Rabinovich, 2008, Seeley, Wu and Caraher, 2010). A fact not yet proven or shown to be true (Seeley, Wu and Caraher, 2010).

Below follows some examples of calls for action on cooking in schools from key policy documents and reports. The Acheson report on inequalities in 1998 included, among its recommendations, the extension of health promoting schools and specifically:

> *…further measures to improve the nutrition provided at school, including: the promotion of school food policies; the development of budgeting and cooking skills; the preservation of free school meals entitlement; the provision of free school fruit, and the restriction of less healthy food.* (Acheson, 1998, page 44).

Similarly in 2005, the School Meals Review Panel, set up to advise on the revision of school meals standards, stated in its report:

> *The Panel is convinced that cooking is an essential life-skill and that no child should leave school unable to cook for themselves. It is also desirable for children to have a practical understanding of where food comes from, and how it is produced and treated. Whilst a purely academic knowledge of food may also be valuable, the focus at primary and Key Stages 2 and 3 should be on practical cooking skills.* (School Meals Review Panel, 2005, page 40).

The same panel said food education should be compulsory:

> *All children should be taught food preparation and practical cooking skills in school in the context of healthy eating. Far more emphasis should be placed on practical cooking skills within the curriculum space currently devoted to Food Technology* (Page 12).

Following closely on this call the 'Healthy Weight Healthy Lives'—an anti-obesity-strategy document (HM Government, 2008)—gave prominence to cooking with the promise to introduce compulsory cooking for 11–14 year old students (Key Stage 3). It stated there are plans to *'Invest to ensure all schools are healthy schools, including making cooking a compulsory part of the curriculum by 2011 for all 11–14 year-olds*' (Page XII). The UK coalition government has reneged on this commitment and show no inclination to expose children to cooking in the school. What is notable about all the above is that all are essentially public health documents and reports calling for action mirroring the earlier calls by the Times of London in the 1780s and Chadwick in the 1840s.

A key player emerged at this stage in the figure of Jamie Oliver, who became focussed on school dinners and later on cooking among the general population- his School Dinners and Ministry of Food campaigns respectively. His school dinners campaign identified a need for 'dinner ladies' to be trained in cooking as the industrial process of catering used in schools had deskilled them (see www.jamieoliver.com).

Furthermore there were many community and civic society supported initiatives in schools among these were:

- The cooking buses run by the Focus on Food campaign (now defunct, The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (RSA), 1997).
- '*Licence to Cook*' (see www.licencetocook.org.uk/ for more details; Elms 2008). A national programme from 2008-2011 funded by Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- Out-of-school cookery clubs under the 'Let's get cooking' program which was allocated £20m of lottery money in 2010 and is led by the School Food Trust (Carter, 2010).
- The Chefs adopt a School programme delivered by the Academy of Culinary Arts.[1] (Seeley, Wu and Caraher 2009).
- Various cooking initiatives run by the Soil Association under its schools programme (see www.soilassociation.org/schoolfood).
- Numerous local cooking programmes supported by health agencies and delivered by local groups.
- Industry-funded initiatives such as those funded by Sainsbury's supermarkets and Flora margarine.

All the above were competing for space on the curriculum or in out-of-school settings against one another but also against other specific interest groups such as sex education, environmental awareness etc.

Many argue that cooking is compulsory in primary schools (Key Stages 1 & 2) but the curriculum documents specify food education as opposed to preparing, handling or cooking food (Seeley and Caraher, 2009). This is a distinction that many authors fail to address, for example Ballam (2010) when talking about food and nutrition, uses the terms interchangeably, talking in one paragraph about cooking food and then morphing into using the term 'food education', which on a quick read suggests cooking is compulsory in primary schools, whereas it is food education that is specified in the curriculum documents. Indeed, this confusion extends as far as the UK Government Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), which stated in a press release announcing the introduction of compulsory cooking for 11–14 year olds that *'cooking is*

[1] Academy of Culinary Arts website: www.academyofculinaryarts.org.uk

already compulsory in primary schools' (DCSF, 11 September 2008, page 1). This highlights the need to be specific in what we are talking about.

So for schools we can see multiple projects and groups competing for limited resources as well as seeking space (physical and temporal) in the school. The various initiatives became focussed on delivering services as well as identifying resources to do this. An overall campaign for cooking skills failed to materialise. There was also some confusion over what was being taught or delivered was it cooking or food education?

Community cooking for adults

At another level '*home cooking'* classes for adults in the community are popular food initiatives (Caraher and Dowler, 2007; Caraher and Cowburn, 2004; Rees et al 2012). Various charities and local community groups have run and supported cooking for groups in community settings (Caraher and Cowburn, 2004). These remain popular if unproven ways of delivering skills (Rees et al, 2012). There are many similar programmes run by charities and community interest companies all over the UK, again all competing for the same space and a diminishing pot of resources. We recently evaluated one such programme in Liverpool (Caraher et al, 2011). The programme in Liverpool is social enterprise which was located and grounded in the community, it used its commercial activities to fund and subsidise locally based community cooking classes. It had developed links with schools and set up a mobile kitchen to take the skills to the community. It shared many of its ideas and methods of working with similar projects across the country, although its scale of operation is bigger than most.

As in the school setting, Jamie Oliver entered the fray and highlighted the poor diets of families, his Ministry of Food pursues a model of community cooking classes in area of high deprivation. This is supported under the auspices of his foundation and operates in the UK and Australia. The key activities are set out in table 1.

Table 1 Activities of Jamie Olivier's Ministry of Food established in 2008

Emphasis	Location and spread	Funded by?
A focus on teaching people to cook, and 'pass it on' to encourage people to share their cooking	UK (5 locations in the North of England) and now in Australia (2012)	Largely health bodies and local authorities. Jamie's Ministry of Food Australia State governments and

skills This was run on the back of his TV programme and book.		philanthropy (Aus $ 2.8m and $2.5m respectively).

Under his Ministry of Food banner there are currently five outlets in the UK or rather England, three from fixed premises, one mobile and one using various venues in a region, one in the south of London all the others in the north of England. This seems like a small output for such a large brand name. The reality is that the Ministry of Food relies on funding from local authorities and health agencies and at a time of recession these are not as readily available as they were in 2008. The way the Ministry of Food operates is not that different from the Liverpool project described above, the differences are in branding and location and relationships with the community served.

The Rees et al (2012) systematic review of teaching adults '*home cooking'* is not clear of the benefits they found only one initiative had been properly evaluated, they said:

> The courses that have been looked at in evaluation studies appear broadly similar to one another. They all introduce participants to practical cooking skills, with some courses 7emphasizing food safety and hygiene, and others shopping on a budget. They tend to be offered to existing community groups, rather than to individuals, and are usually run in community settings, which range from all purpose centres to purpose built community kitchens (page, 2).

They conclude that the available evidence is inconclusive for community based adult interventions, largely due to poor quality evaluations. What is taught in these classes varies from those which teach basic skills to those with an emphasis on healthy eating.

So again, mirroring the situation in schools, there is multiple activity among communities, civic society groups (eg the Academy of Culinary Arts) and individuals, (eg Jamie Oliver), but little coordinated activity and no clear sense of a campaign to promote this area of activity. As some high profile players have entered the arena the focus of any campaigning can be said to be dissipated.

Discussion

So what can be learned from the above, as one interested in policy I suggest a number of things. Firstly, the activity to reintroduce cooking back into schools and communities never resolved the dilemma over tensions where to intervene and concentrate resources. Even in the economic boom years there were resource decisions to be made and yet these were avoided. So should we on balance intervene in schools or

community; should we get them young or at key stages in the lifecycle? On balance the policy logic points towards schools as pupils are 'captive audiences'. This of course needs to be reinforced at key stages in the life cycle such as leaving home, parenthood etc. So it is not an either/or scenario but does involve questions of resource allocation and effectiveness of outcomes. A lack of clarity over this issue, has also resulted in campaigns being dissipated and lacking focus.

Secondly the energy of the '*cooking movement'* was dissipated and became focussed on delivering a series of projects as opposed to ensuring that they were built into educational and health policies. This also resulted in the various groups ending up being competitors for the delivery of services as government at national and local levels contracted out many of the services. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a series of reinvigorated campaigns as opposed to a umbrella campaign which brought the key payers together. The Focus on Food campaign (The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce, 1997) originally offered such potential to act as an umbrella for these diverse views and interests, but soon became just another, albeit high quality, deliverer of a service with its cooking buses, training kitchen in Halifax and resources for teachers.

The tensions over why we should teach people to cook have still not been resolved. The main drives have come from the health sector who believe this is a way forward to deliver healthy eating (Lang and Caraher, 2001). Many celebrity chefs have linked to this, the most obvious being Jamie Oliver (others are Stephanie Alexander in Australia and Alice Waters in the USA). Yet the agendas while overlapping are not always in perfect alignment. Cooking can be fun and deliver on taste and social agendas as well as health but it can also encourage unhealthy eating, so what happens when a chef or instructor promotes butter over lower fat spreads? Of course there are ways of resolving these dilemmas by encouraging smaller portions and amounts, but nonetheless they remain problematic. One of the problems has been that many promoting cooking see it as a panacea for nutrition, family life, obesity and longevity. What Jamie Oliver calls a '*food revolution'*, such a revolution will not happen because of cooking in isolation. There are many reasons to teach cooking to people, at its simplest this is a necessary citizenship skill which helps in many areas, food choice, sociability etc, even if an individual decides not to cook. Jamie's other programme was the school dinners which was successful because of the campaigning and the subsequent changes in policy and regulation. He used his TV programme to gain direct access to the PM and

government ministers and to secure extra funding for school meals and training of staff in schools. This was all done not on its own but as a result of building on the work of others which ensured regulations were introduced and resources identified to change kitchens and provide training (Rubin, Rye and Rabinovich, 2008). There was also a long established scientific base on which to turn the general good advice of Jamie Oliver into guidance for schools, so for example food based guidance was informed by nutrition science.

There has been insufficient focus on food culture and the role of cooking within it, this has partially happened as the health sector has funded much of the work and even celebrity chefs have promised to deliver better health outcomes. Our evaluation of a programme run by the Academy of Culinary Arts (Seeley, Wu and Caraher 2009) found that an important element of the intervention was the novelty value of an outsider and of the joy in tasting and preparing food. Key elements reported as being enjoyed by the pupils included tasting new foods (76%), making the dish (66%), learning about new foods (55%) learning new cutting skills (48%) and meeting the chef (48%). These are important considerations and show the value of novelty and fun in the process of teaching skills. A narrow focus on health runs the danger of being too utilitarian and joyless. There is a parallel danger in the various programmes making commitments to deliver on health outcomes in order to obtain short-term funding. As noted earlier cooking can be a powerful tool to help improve health status but it cannot deliver in isolation.

For academics the Rees et al (2012) report highlights the need to develop a robust evidence base on the effects of cooking on health and wellbeing. As noted earlier this should not preclude research on wider impacts such as inclusion within a food culture and cooking as a means of social engagement.

The filling of a gap, vacated by the State, has allowed the State to claim there is provision and that it can be best delivered in a way that involves local providers. In effect the gaze is shifted from governance and who is responsible for delivery to the process of delivery itself (Coveney 2006; Foucault, 1972). In this lies a danger, it assumes money will be there to support the developments and the current coalition government sees the model as one of 'Big Society' where philanthropy supports such developments. So doing good and filling a gap in provision can have serious long term policy implication.

Conclusions

All the above has resulted in what can be called '*project-itis'* or too many initiatives and not enough campaigning, policy development or legislation. An opportunity has been lost to locate cooking in a secure policy environment, there are many ways to do this, cooking in the curriculum, identified and guaranteed funding for cooking eg a a cooking week/fortnight. We now need to begin the campaign again but first of all decide what we want???

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