

SCHOOL FOOD EDUCATION: A HYMN TO HOMEWORK

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1. White paper

December 2020 saw the publication of the [FAO White Paper on School Nutrition and Food Education](#) (SFNE) in lower and middle-income countries. I want to give it three cheers for giving new life and purpose to school homework for food education, and to show how “food homework” can turn what may be a lonely chore into interest, understanding, action and effect. If we get it right.

2. What is food homework?

To start, so we know what we are talking about, in the box below is one small example of food homework. It’s about food groups, a topic which turns up in most SFNE curricula and is a building block of curricula, dietary guidelines, specific behaviour programs, and general food talk and vocabulary development).¹ The approaches A to C are all within conventional classroom practice² and familiar to teachers. A is information delivery; B activates the information more and encourages personal application; C bases the classwork on homework outside the school. Any of them might be supported (in different ways) by healthy school meals.

You can see the differences. I am of course rooting for Model C as a simple, acceptable, economical and non-intrusive way to extend school learning outside the classroom.

Box Three classroom approaches

Model A Information delivery	Model B In-class explanations & activities	Model C Classwork structured on homework
<p><i>In class.</i> The teacher presents the main food groups (with examples and visuals if possible) and explains that we should consume all the food groups every day. The FBDG* poster is displayed in the classroom to illustrate the message.</p> <p>*FBDG = food-based dietary guidelines</p>	<p><i>In class.</i> The teacher explains the main food groups, gives a little whole-class practice in food classification (if possible with a national FBDG* visual). Children in groups sort a list of foods and report back.</p> <p>The teacher explains the need to eat foods from all groups; children say if they do this.</p> <p><i>Homework</i> Children tell families about food groups.</p>	<p><i>Pre-class homework.</i> Children each choose a different food they know. At home they make a card to represent it (picture or name), and ask family and friends to say what kind of food it is.</p> <p><i>In-class activity.</i> Children form “food groups” of fruit/ cereals etc. in different parts of the room, then present their groups and invite the class to name other foods in these groups. The teacher monitors and adjusts contributions. Children assemble cards for future use and (if possible), identify the groups in a FBDG* visual & show where their own cards fit in.</p> <p><i>Post-class homework and preparatory homework for next class.</i> Children observe one main home meal, list or remember all the foods in it, count the food groups, and check with the family that they have got it right. The next class starts with feedback on this homework. <i>Mnemonic</i></p>

3. What is so great about food homework?

¹ There seems to be no universal agreement on how to divide up the food groups, at least at popular messaging level.

² Many approaches which aim for specific food behaviours are far more experiential and motivational.

Food homework can be miraculous if it does what successful food education requires, that is, stimulate interactions between people and their environments, social and physical.³ It can engender real-life experiences; make the most of food environments; build on children's and families' experience and knowledge; create dialogue; structure lessons, turn teachers into guides, managers and learners rather than mouthpieces; and lend itself amply to self-congratulation and self-investment. Moreover it does not overcrowd school timetables, lay burdens on students or parents, or offend them. It is also of course in line with current trends in SFNE and has plenty of theoretical backing.⁴

(Box) **Broccoli and the President** Unsuccessful food education in the real world

President Bush's mother tried to make him eat up his veg as a child and left him with a life-long loathing of broccoli. [See Youtube clip](#) (End box).

People and their interactions with their environments are the heart of food education.

- *For all human beings*, food is a field of real-life learning (like languages, life skills, gardening, housework, health care, management or politics). It is embedded in experience and context; builds on people's practices and perceptions; develops through observation and imitation, experience and practice; and succeeds by developing how people actually think and behave in their daily lives. Natural food education starts from birth - or before - and grows irresistibly. Whether it produces flowers or weeds, you can't stop it.
- Everybody's food learning is locked into *physical and social settings* where real people do real things. In his famous TED talk [Teach Every Child about Food](#), Jamie Oliver proposes three main theatres of food education: Home, School and Main Street (which covers much of the food system). Particular settings are home meals, home kitchens and school meals; shops and markets, bars, restaurants, street food and the people in them: families, friends, relatives, peers and all adult models (good and bad).
- These settings serve as are object lessons, live laboratories and training grounds, where children observe, *react, act and interact*: eat and drink, cook and wash up; help with shopping, storing food, and maybe preserving; feed infants, buy snacks; see what others choose, respond to advertising and talk about food.

In this way, children's expectations, tastes, perceptions, practices and food status are conditioned, confirmed and reinforced several times a day, 365 days a year. They arrive at school with this baggage and wardrobe of perceptions, practices and preferences they have picked up - good and bad, right and wrong. While they are at school, and also when they leave, the influences of the outside environment *continue to be reinforced every day*. It is an ideal learning environment.

4. What is needed?

So as far as food is concerned, no school is an island. How can SFNE work with this pre-existing culture?

Some of the big questions about SFNE are *What would schools like to achieve? What are they achieving? What can they achieve? Should they be able to make an impact?* These are discussed in several invaluable

³ "Pupil capability is formed through the interaction of resources, social, economic and environmental contexts and pupils' knowledge, skills and dispositions." (FELL Report 2015)

⁴ *The theory*. For those who want the theory, the principles underlying this kind of food homework are supported by Dewey's active learning philosophy (Dewey 1938), social learning theory, constructivism, learner-centred education, skills learning, situated learning and other bodies of theory and research.

Teachers sometimes justify hands-on learning on the empirical grounds that children "seem to enjoy it", as if enjoyment was an unexpected bonus which could if necessary be sacrificed to make way for the real thing (presumably scholastic learning and exams). But learning to do things by doing them IS the real thing. Of course children enjoy it, it comes naturally to them (see [TED talk by Ken Robinson](#)).

dossiers from different horses' mouths: for example, the [FELL Report \(2015\)](#) on the UK food education learning landscape; a FAO survey (2017) of school-based food and nutrition education in 30 low- and middle-income countries (FAO forthcoming), some of whose findings are reported in [the FAO White Paper on school food and nutrition education](#) 2020; and [surveys](#) of the extent and [difficulties](#) of parental engagement in the US. They broadly picture SFNE as a Cinderella school subject suffering from a general lack of support, capacity and interest, a landscape (so to speak) of educational undernourishment and hidden hunger, with some hopeful green shoots in the areas of experiential learning (e.g. cooking, gardening), healthier school food and a whole-school food culture.

These surveys do not make much mention of how SFNE engages with Home and Main Street, except to note that few links are normally made. But the specific needs they report bring out very clearly, implicitly or explicitly, *the essential links with life outside the school*. For example, some conspicuous needs flagged in these papers are:

- For children
 - applying the principles of healthy diet in practice
 - dealing with social and commercial influences, making decisions
 - more hands-on, experiential learning, opportunities for developing practical skills
 - good examples to follow and models of healthy eating
 - building habits and practices
- For schools and teachers
 - more time, facilities and funding
 - more experience and interest in food education
 - healthier food environments
- For parents and families
 - recognition as children's de facto food educators
 - passing on food skills and food knowledge
 - being involved in school food education
- For everyone
 - knowing what the aims are, what is going on, what can be achieved and how
 - more food talk and dialogue e.g. between teachers, schools and children; parents and schools; food vendors and children/schools/parents.

5. A different role for schools

All these relate to homework. If SFNE wants to make a difference, it has to be *excursive* and become children's invisible companion in homes, streets and shops. It cannot make a real dent if it confines itself to its own backyard. If the world outside is unsupportive, unaware or indifferent, SFNE is likely to be in the business of building a counter-culture and looking for some kind of leverage to wield against the sheer weight and heft of outside food influences.

The good news is that there is plenty of scope for easy and effective action, if schools recognize that:

- their best bet is to take on the role of framing, informing and guiding children's observations, enquiries, discoveries and activities *beyond the classroom*;
- to manage this, teachers do not need to set foot outside the classroom or bring foods into it - it's the children who act;
- all food practices and perceptions, right or wrong, are grist to the education mill;
- parents, the most immediate and powerful influence, need to collaborate: their roles should be regular but undemanding, an extension of normal life;
- teachers and parents don't need to meet often, but they do need to know in advance what the other half is doing, discuss what is possible and support each other;

- homes are natural settings for enhancing food behaviour. They also have all the resources and equipment (kitchens, store cupboards, cutlery, food samples) and much of the skills and knowledge that children need for observation, enquiry, imitation or hands-on practice.

6. What homework can do

Homework can play a big part in a quiet, painless, cost-free revolution by extending existing curricula, activities, learning materials and lessons into outside spheres of action. The table below shows some of what children can do, what they can learn, and where.

<i>What children can do</i>	<i>What children can learn</i>	<i>Where</i>
Look at/observe/count/ draw/ record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • food processing & preserving • shopping, food prices, value for money • storing and conserving 	FROM all environments existing knowledge existing expertise models and examples
Watch how it's done	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preparing food/making meals • healthy snacking 	IN THE COMMUNITY
Find out /ask about	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • following healthy sustainable diets • avoiding dietary risks 	AT HOME
Discuss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making choices (all children have some room for choice) 	IN SHOPS/MARKETS
Share experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • practising living and managing changes 	AT BARS/TAKEAWAYS/ SHOPS
Describe/report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meeting specific family food needs • getting to know foods (in every way) 	IN SCHOOLS & FROM TEACHERS
Display/demonstrate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting to know food groups, functions • getting to know new dishes/snacks 	IN FOOD GARDENS
Try it out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting to know popular food products • talking about food, what, why etc. 	IN YOUTH CLUBS/ SPORTS GROUPS
Make small changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • growing food and selling it • tracking the food system 	
Keep them up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeing the effects of climate change 	
Talk about food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • food career possibilities • other people's diets 	

7. Two lessons and homework Here is one example.⁵

PREPARING THE GROUND:

Teacher briefings. For each sequence of lessons, teachers have a briefing sheet with information on the subject, an outline of how to handle the class, some preliminary questions about student and teacher knowledge and experience, and some suggestions about conceptual or practical challenges for all.

⁵ More examples of "excursive" homework are described in the White Paper.

Engaging parents. Parents and teachers should talk about the forthcoming learning program (summed up on a one-page handout) and discuss if parents can support homework for specific lessons (e.g. answering questions, asking children about the lesson, allowing use of kitchen and small quantities of food, demonstrating, supervising if necessary, taking a photo or signing a comment).

NB It's recommended to have alternative homeworks in case parents can't help.

Box TWO LESSONS ON RICE

Pre-homework (to prepare for Lesson 1)

"For the next lesson, find out ONE of these things: (a) how to cook rice, (b) how many kinds of rice there are, (c) the differences between brown rice and white rice, (d) what kind of food rice is and what it gives you, (e) how rice grows, when and where."

Children choose their own questions. For homework they ask around outside school, including at home.

Lesson 1

- Children bring their outside observations, experience and knowledge to the class.
- Taking the questions one by one, children report what they have found out, checking facts with the teacher and with each other. There is praise and encouragement for interesting contributions. Major doubts or disagreements are recorded as questions to follow-up.
- Depending on age, they can read or write up some of the facts.
- Children discuss who they will tell about this lesson and what they will tell them.
- Children repeat and sum up how to cook rice in preparation for the follow-up homework.

Post-homework (for follow-up and practice)

"Prepare a small rice dish, get family's reactions (could be written & signed), make a photo or draw a picture, list ingredients OR write the recipe OR remember it. You can do this singly or in a pair. Afterwards, ask your family how to do it better, and whether you can do it again sometime."

Lesson 2

- Children report on who they talked to about Lesson 1 and on any follow-ups to questions.
- In groups, children report on their cooking experience, including what went wrong. Anything visible (pictures, photos, written comments, recipes) is displayed on the wall with the child's name. If there is time, the class can ask members for demonstrations or descriptions.
- The class produces 3 key points of advice on cooking rice to take home and show the family.
- Children plan their homework for the next lesson.

8. A final hymn of praise "Excursive" homework can:

- double the time on the subject<;
- make sure that learning is repeated several times in different roles and contexts;
- empower children and give them choices;
- raise the level of talk and discussion;
- utilize home facilities and resources (no cooking in school);
- make the most of existing family and community expertise;
- bridge theory and practice and ensure that nothing is purely theoretical;
- prioritise firsthand experience and practice;
- engage parents and show them what their children are learning;
- visibly hit nails on the head (i.e. children are seen to be learning something useful)
- adjust easily to age, capacity and resources;
- free up teachers, since lessons are mainly feedback from homework;

- place no burden on children or families – it is simply an extension of normal daily behaviour;
- train teachers in the course of their normal work, inform them about their pupils' needs and difficulties, and show them that their work has impact.

It works for me!

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