

Cooking and the Curriculum: Hythe Primary School

Let me introduce Hythe Primary to you – we are sandwiched neatly between the New Forest and Southampton Water and we have 311 children on roll. Hythe is a very inclusive school and the ethos is about lifelong learning. We have children from a wide range of backgrounds and they achieve well compared to similar schools.

I currently have a year 5/6 class and I also do outreach work as an AST at other schools across Hampshire. We have recently introduced cooking as an option during Golden Time (reward time at the end of the week) for my class, and I have been amazed at how successful the learning has been from these sessions!

I came across Jamie Oliver's Kitchen Garden Project in September 2013 while browsing Facebook. The project seemed interesting (I like food) and I had often wondered how we could fit more cooking into the curriculum. We signed up and began Jamie's Learn Your Fruit and Vegetables in September this year.

The resources are bright, fun looking and simple yet they are serious recipes and they work beautifully in our half an hour session. There are normally about four to six main ingredients needed for each recipe along with a range of 'larder essentials' that we invested in. The children have grown to know the different types of oils, vinegars, herbs and spices and can recognise quite a few now. They are confident with how to add and use them as the recipe always explains, and some of the phrases are routine to us now, such as 'squeeze in half a lemon using your hands to catch the pips' and 'drizzle over a table spoon of olive oil'. There are many children who have experienced different foods for the first time through these sessions and they are always a good time to discuss eating habits in a casual environment.

As our lessons are done during Golden Time, children are able to choose if they want to participate in cooking. Over time certain children have become known for their love of these sessions, and are kitchen regulars. These stalwart members have become kitchen helpers and take on the responsibility of setting up and choosing the correct larder essentials for each recipe. They also hand out the right amount of ingredients to each group. While we are talking groups, I'll add that the children work either on their own or in a group of up to three. They understand that if there is a full class (30) then they have to work in a group of three, although I do have two spare 'stations' (comprising of a chopping board, knife block and bowl) where certain children will work as sometimes their needs require individual attention.

At the start of the session I always model the recipe myself (this is always the first time I have made it too!) and after five minutes (that really is how long it takes!) they are ready to go make it themselves. The children take about 15 minutes to make the recipe. Finally, they always take pictures to send to the Jamie Oliver Food Foundation so that the Kitchen Garden Project can share them on their blog. The children always taste what they have made, and it often disappears before our photographer has a chance to take all the pictures! We often put the images up on our own blog too. Parents love seeing them and the pictures help bring healthy eating up as a topic between parent/carer and child.

The children have learnt so much in these sessions. They try new foods because they have made it themselves it is meaningful to them. They know tips like 'feta would go well with this' or 'could we try drizzling honey on this?' They have learned kitchen skills such as chopping, dicing, slicing with a knife and are confident with this. They are absolutely obsessed with presentation and often delight in being creative and thoughtful about this aspect.

Through cooking we have seen that some children enjoy the opportunity to work independently and others enjoy working with others. This project gives children a common ground and opens their eyes to their peers in a new light – some hidden talents are emerging, and children who find other areas of school more difficult are fully involved and thriving during these sessions. Our kitchen helpers in particular are on hand to help their peers find ingredients, guide in new skills (e.g. grating or dicing). These children are becoming 'experts' in the project and are well respected by their peers for this.

There is one boy in the class who chooses to do the project, without fail, every Friday. He has bought a Jamie Oliver book and is making things at home. Cooking something he genuinely looks forward to each week and has begun to think about cheffing as a career. His mum is so proud of him as he has often struggled with school life, so this really positive aspect means an awful lot to him and his family. I would go as far to say it has had a profound influence on him.

There are children who have really excelled through this project and as there is clear structure, routine and obvious purpose to the sessions it's easy for children of all abilities to access and extend themselves. Because the lesson is interactive (being cooking, it's the essence really!) it engages them, and they really feel they have achieved something at the end of lesson, because they really have! In the busy curriculum, cooking is frighteningly rare (worrying when you think eating well is a basic need...) and it is surrounded by enormous amounts of planning and preparation, culminating in a rather frenetic 'making' lesson. The project has totally changed my attitude to cooking in school – and the children's attitudes are changed too. They are taught the importance in eating healthily and we are now able to give them creative ways to do this. They also build on what goes on in the sessions and they want to make a 'feast' of all the recipes that they've done. The next step for us is to start growing some of our own fruit and veg (we have a herb garden on our windowsill which is a start). The project shows how easy it is to include healthy cooking into the curriculum and above all, it's so enjoyable!

At the end of today's session of making 'Simple Chopped Salad', which included avocado – a new food to most of them - one child summed it all up, quietly saying to me as she left "that was lovely!"

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