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Taste and the test: School food and the extension of performativity

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Background

Many school-based interventions which aim to promote 'healthy living' and reduce obesity among children have been based on a deficit model of health. It is often simplistically held that giving parents and children the knowledge and capacity they lack to improve their health will somehow overcome the deficit and 'cure' them. However, there is little evidence that interventions founded on such assumptions are effective or that any changes they bring about are sustainable. At the same time, Evans et al. (2008) have described how schools are being increasingly caught up in a culture of judgement and performativity (Ball, 2004) which is being extended to discourses and interventions around obesity and health in which health education, which is also often simplistically 'taken for granted as being good practice' (Gastaldo, 1997), becomes an additional area for schools to address. In order to interrogate some of the emerging discourse and practice around school-based interventions focused on promoting health and reducing obesity, this paper focuses on one ongoing, multi-stranded intervention programme in a city in the North of England.

The programme aims to transform attitudes to health and eating among children and young people in the city through a range of measures focusing on school food over a three year period from 2008. This paper outlines the approach to evaluating the strategy and some of the early findings from the baselining phase of the evaluation.

Research Questions

Research questions addressed by the research include the following:

- To what extent has the programme had a positive impact on children and young people's attitudes to food and healthy living?
- What impact has the programme had on school food in the city?
- What are the mediating and moderating factors affecting the implementation of the programme?

Methods

The evaluation has adopted a mixed methods approach, employing questionnaire surveys of children and young people in primary and secondary schools and online school self-evaluations, as well as face to face and phone interviews with children and young people, school staff and other stakeholders, to monitor progress. Findings from the first year of the project were based on a survey of 376 primary school children and 972 young people in secondary schools; 59 school self-evaluations; and interviews with 169 children and young people and 35 stakeholders.

Frame

The evaluation has used and extended the Kirkpatrick evaluation framework as a generic impact framework to monitor and interrogate the data collected, in combination with Thorburn et al's (1995) ladder of participation model which has been used to address and analyse the involvement of stakeholders, including children and young people, in the programme.

Research findings

The baseline work for the evaluation has produced detailed data around children and young people's attitudes and perspectives to food and health. Early findings include the following:

- Eating environments in some schools improved, although this was restricted by broader school environment in some cases
- Access to, and partnership working with, external services and agencies was enhanced
- Food and healthy school activity appeared to have been integrated into curriculum planning more effectively in many schools
- There remained evidence of considerable variation among schools in terms of their engagement in the promotion of health in general and healthy food in particular
- There was often a mismatch between students' and schools' perceptions of the changes that have been made

Finally, the paper takes this emerging empirical evidence to begin to examine the extent to which knowledge of food and health represent 'new' forms of performance monitoring and whether introducing healthy living discourses into schools is an effective health initiative or an additional form of performativity.

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