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Eating Abroad Together (EAT): The impact of a European language and intercultural intervention on stakeholders' knowledge and attitudes

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Background

The Independent Curriculum Review (DCSF 2008) recommends that languages become a statutory subject in the primary curriculum in 2011. As a result schools are introducing languages or enhancing their existing provision (Driscoll et al., 2004; Muijs et al, 2005; Edelenbos et al., 2006; Wade and Marshall, 2009). The predominant language taught is French (Cable et al., 2010) however some schools promote a language and intercultural awareness programme by selecting more than one language across Key Stage 2 rather than teaching one language for four years. Schools are also experimenting with innovative teaching methods and staffing models: one such method, which is gaining momentum in some schools, is integrating languages into other subject areas. This paper reports on a combined language, intercultural and healthy eating intervention. Healthy eating as languages is high on the government agenda. Healthy eating habits learnt in childhood can have a positive effect on attitudes to eating later in life and can help prevent a number of conditions and diseases (www.food.gov.uk). Teachers are developing a whole school approach to health both within planned lessons as well as in the wider curriculum activities.

Research Questions

The EAT investigation was commissioned by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EAC) and conducted by Canterbury Christ Church University. It was a two year project funded by the Life Long Learning (transversal programme) of the European Commission. The EAT project aimed to develop children's knowledge and awareness of languages and interest in other cultural as well as promote positive attitudes towards the partner country through a focus on healthy eating. The partner countries comprised of the UK, Romania, Germany, Bulgaria Italy and Holland - and Dutch speaking schools situated in Belgium. One class from each of the 28 schools was paired with another class from another country. The children undertook a range of activities which encouraged them to learn a language and about the culture through the topic of healthy eating. They were encouraged to communicate and share their work with children in their partner school. Much of the children's work together with the teacher's and trainee teacher's and nurse's resources contributed towards a web site (<http://www.eatingabroadtogether.eu/eat/en/index>) containing information about foods and customs in different languages.

The aims of the study were to examine changes in children's knowledge about healthy eating and to investigate the perceptions of teachers, student nurses, student teachers and children in England and collaborative partners in mainland Europe who were involved in the project. The main objectives were to evaluate:

- the impact of EAT on children's knowledge and perceptions of healthy eating
- teachers' experiences of the intervention
- the extent to which the intervention raised awareness of language learning and intercultural awareness

Methods

The study draws on a mixed-methods research design, which includes questionnaires and systematically conducting interviews and focus group discussions with small groups of student teachers and nurses, teachers and health professionals and children. Children also engaged in a pre and post intervention 'write-and-draw' in order to evaluate any changes in their knowledge of healthy

eating. This information will provide an informed, empirical knowledge base for practitioners as well as policymakers about the impact of the intervention on learner's attitudes, their engagement, achievement and enjoyment, and their views on the relevance of the intervention.

Frame

All questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions were documented and analysed thematically. Key themes were analysed by individual respondent type (i.e. class teacher, student nurse, student teacher, children); emerging themes were identified and explored by looking across the data from different respondent types.

Research findings

The paper presents the evaluation of children's, teachers' and student teachers' and nurses' experiences of the EAT project. The majority of participants reported that the EAT project had enhanced and extended their own knowledge and skills. Teachers reported an enhanced positive engagement with their children, local communities, other professions and/or teaching colleagues working elsewhere. We present therefore the different ways in which student teachers and nurses, teachers, and health professionals worked together and the barriers and facilitators of this type of collaboration. All participants noted that through the EAT project they had learnt about their own and other countries' cultures, language and food. The paper also considers therefore the different ways the EAT intervention contributed to the physical, emotional and intercultural aspects of health and language learning in the case study schools.

References

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