

**Eat your words:  
An investigation into food literacy as a means of stimulating an  
appetite for learning and engagement**

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**Abstract**

This paper is based upon a research project investigating whether a broader understanding of food -food literacy- helps to foster not only an increased interest in what is grown, cooked and eaten, but stimulates a wider interest in learning and engagement in their lives.

The literature review examines the effect when food centred spaces such as kitchen gardens, school canteens and cookery programs are used as educational backdrops, and the effect this has on student learning and development. Current research suggests that academic, health and social issues are potentially simultaneously addressed.

The field research aimed to ascertain whether practitioners had observed a causal relationship in student's performance when food literacy was incorporated into the curriculum, environs and philosophy of the school. Using a qualitative approach, interested staff from the participating sites were interviewed to ascertain whether they observed an overall increased interest in food, learning and the wider world in their students, as a consequence of exposure to food rich programs.

The implication for this research is that if an increase in personal food literacy is shown to have the potential to improve engagement in any of these areas, then such programs within curricula may be one positive way to address the current health crisis of poor nutrition in children and the prevalence of disengaged youth.

**Introduction**

Food is more than just fuel for the human body to function, indeed, 'our attitudes, practices and rituals around food are a window onto our most basic beliefs about the world and ourselves' (Harris et al., 2005, p. viii) with 'our very identities and our life possibilities rooted in what we eat or drink' (Albritton, 2009, p.6).

In the western world since industrialization, food has become an abstract idea conceptually separated from nature. The effect of this is a loss of knowledge of place and a sense of personal disconnect, leading to negative and destructive consequences for the health and well being of individuals, society and the natural world (Albritton, 2009, Smith, 2009, Vileisis, 2008).

This 'lost consciousness of the connection between food and the land' (Smith, 2009, p.54) can be regained by a 'cultivation of an appreciation of the intimate connection between our human lives and the natural world' (Smith, 2009, p.57). Thus 'knowing food isn't solely the means to a meal, it provides a fundamental means for making sense of our place in the world' (Vileisis, 2008, p.52).

## **Literature review**

The review attempts to firstly define "food literacy" with the understanding that literacy is tied to our identity and has become 'a cultural and social practice involving the development of a broad range of abilities with the context of learning for life' (Crilly, 2003, p.36). A broad and applicable interpretation, which cultivates the notion of food literacy as 'the ability to understand where food comes from and how it is produced, appreciate the cultural significance of food, make healthy decisions, and recognize the implications – social, environmental, political, cultural and economic – of the food we eat' (Yamashita, 2008, p.5) is chosen as it is 'an understanding of literacy that is appropriate for our time' (Crilly, 2003, p.36).

The literature review then locates academic research that examines what the effect is when spaces such as kitchen gardens, school canteens and cookery programs are used as educational backdrops with food as the focus, and the impact this can have on student learning and development. The findings suggest that there is not only an improvement in personal issues such as nutrition (Gibbs, 2009) and scholastic involvement (Miller, 2007), but with increased self esteem and efficacy that come from a personal hands on involvement with real food, social issues are simultaneously addressed (Gibbs, 2009, Ozer, 2007). Further to these outcomes, concern for and an increased interest in the wider ecological environment is apparent (Green, 2007).

John Dewey's advocacy for holistic, experiential hands on education is applicable to food literacy (Yamashita, 2008, Faddegon, 2005). Of particular relevance to this paper is Dewey's enthusiasm for food education through vegetable gardening and cookery to enable students to transform themselves and help equip them for life (Dewey and Dewey, 1915, Dewey, 1902). Hence, the connection between food, its importance in our identity, the effect of food in our lives and the ability to be critical in our attitude to food is made, with the conclusion that there is potential for food literacy to be a powerful tool with which to navigate the world (Smith, 2009).

## **Research method**

The field research was undertaken to ascertain whether practitioners observed a causal relationship in students' performance and outcomes when food literacy is incorporated into the curriculum, environs and philosophy of the educational institution. In designing the research, a qualitative approach was adopted, as it is useful when 'meanings and perspectives of individuals are important' (Pintrich and Schunk, 2002, p.11). One on one semi structured interviews were used as a means to 'find out what is happening, seek new insights, (and) identify general patterns' (Altinay and Paraskevas, 2008, p.113).

Likely settings were identified from state government websites - with the final participating sites being 2 primary schools that promoted kitchen gardening as part of the curriculum, and 3 technical institutions that offer a cookery component as part of a

certificate qualification. Of note is the 3 TAFE based locations all had “youth programs” in place, funding for courses being contingent on meeting subsequent employment quotas.

Given the limited scope of the minor thesis, I was attempting to gauge if practitioners noted any attributable changes in students who were involved in aspects of food literacy as part of their studies. The eventual nine participating interviewees, whose roles varied from youth worker to literacy teachers, were from five different locations. Table 1 shows the range of food related programs on offer at the respective locations, and gives an indication of the role of the respondents, each respectively identified by a pseudonym.

**Table1: Summary of food spaces and activities at participating educational sites**

| <b>Site details</b>           | <b>Kitchen garden</b> | <b>Healthy food ethos</b> | <b>Cooking program</b> | <b>Cafe or shop onsite selling resultant produce</b> | <b>Other activities</b>  | <b>Interviewees role and identifying pseudonym</b>                                     |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|--|--|--|
| Primary 1 (P1)                | yes                   | yes                       | yes                    | yes  | Guest speakers<br>Recipe book<br>DVD production of food competitions | Principal (P)<br>and Canteen Manager (N)   |
| Primary 2 (P2)                | yes                   | no                        | limited                | no   | Farmers market   | Garden Program Co-ordinator (D)  |
| TAFE 1 (T1)                   | no                    | no                        | yes                    | yes  | Excursions to food market, animal farm, 5 star hotel and restaurant. | Program Manager (S)<br>Literacy Teachers (L) & (J)<br>Personal Development Teacher (B) |
| TAFE 2 (T2)                   | yes                   | yes                       | yes                    | yes  | Excursions to food market produce farms, and hospitality venues.     | Senior Educator-Youth Programs (C)   |
| Youth program affiliated with | yes                   | yes                       | yes                    | yes  | Recipe book<br>Excursions to markets, supermarket                    | Youth Worker (K)   |

|                |  |  |  |  |                     |  |
|----------------|--|--|--|--|---------------------|--|
| TAFE 3<br>(T3) |  |  |  |  | and<br>restaurants. |  |
|----------------|--|--|--|--|---------------------|--|

The research questions were:

- What are the facilities and the interviewees role/involvement at the location?
- What are the food related programs at your site?
- In your view, what is the impact of the food related programs on student engagement?

### **Findings and discussion**

On analysis, three prominent themes emerged from the interviews. These were identified as a developing sense of connectedness, the relevance of applied learning and the transformations in students that were observed to take place as the engagement with gardening, cooking and food programs took place. Due to the length constraints in this paper, it is this last perspective of student transformation in terms of social impact that is considered in the following discussion.

Several of the interviewees commented on the food experience affording an opportunity to inadvertently develop manners and other normative behaviours in the students. The kitchen gardening program at P2 involves learning basic cookery, using the produce from the vegetable patch as part of the lesson. The students then consume the resultant food as a group in their outdoor classroom:

A lot of it is just learning to cook and learning to use knives correctly and sitting down and sharing a meal. *D, Garden program co-ordinator, P2.*

This effect of enjoying a meal is echoed by the youth worker of the teenage trainees, when the students sit down to share the food they have just learnt to cook:

It brings people together, we talk, and we've got kids that have never sat at a table together. They sit at a table and they use a knife and fork. *K, Youth worker, T3.*

The flow on effects of the act of sharing food is being recognised by the canteen manager at P1. She describes the activities and behaviour of the primary aged children as they prepare to feed and serve the customers attending the school's cafe, which is run from the canteen site:

And the kids do everything, its waiting on tables, its decoration of tables, it's how to put the knives and forks down, it's how to serve someone, how to be hygienic, how to have manners, how to be respectful'. *N, Canteen manager, P1.*

The instances above suggest that the ceremony of cooking and eating a meal help in developing positive social skills. The increasing confidence in cooking and food in general translated to flow on beneficial behaviours elsewhere, across all age groups. The effect of exposure to food within a more formal training program is seen to affect older children in similar ways. For instance one particular commercial cookery program has been observed to have a profound effect on the dispositions, circumstances and presentation of the teenage trainees who are able to complete the course.

The transformation is quite amazing. From the 10 week program when they come to us they can be homeless, they can be on drugs, they can be foul mouthed etc and then 12 months down the track the few that are still hanging around go into their

2nd year - they are quite refined. Their confidence increases in other ways - the increases in food knowledge and being comfortable in a kitchen and being respectful to their chef de partie, they learn to be part of the team. *C, Senior educator, youth programs, T2.*

With the burgeoning knowledge and skills, some of the teenagers are then more interested in what they are eating:

Hearing them talk about what they've cooked or what they are eating...all of a sudden they are interested in what their mum is cooking them. *B, Personal development teacher, T1.*

Similarly, the commercial cookery group at T2 were soon observed to become more discerning in terms of fast food consumption:

It's really funny, you'll watch them they'll all nick up to KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken] initially and then kind of realise it's not that great and it just makes me feel sick-how about we just ask chef if we can whip up a pasta carbonara. *Senior educator, youth programs, T2.*

C notes a further confidence, which grows as the skills and palate develops:

A group were doing prepare and serve meat and it was just amazing to see them whip up a hollandaise sauce to go on a sirloin because they felt like it when they were cooking their steak. It's really nice to watch them really try to think like a chef. *C, Senior educator, youth programs, T2.*

The youth worker enthuses about the flow on benefits she has observed as some of the teenage relish utilizing their new skills:

They go home and they present meals to their mothers. They cook for their families, they have friends over, they want to cook. Like its all personal development. It's like within it all if you're not the next head chef that's fine with me, but you're going home and now you're cooking better things for yourself. You're making better choices and you're also educating the people in your family about it. *K, Youth worker, T3.*

As alluded to, ultimately, the purpose of the TAFE programs is to impart employability skills so the trainees are in a position to get jobs. The programs are designed to support and foster a sense of purpose and motivation, by simulating a real time hospitality environment in which the trainees can develop competence and confidence in the type of work they are training for. As a lead up to this, a lot of preparation is done in complementary classes at all TAFES to ensure the students are in the best position for future employability. Despite this type of preparation, sometimes the students' expectation is not realistic. Here a literacy teacher describes the pre-existing idealistic notions of some of the students from T1:

They just get these pictures in their head of these beautiful things and it's just not what the reality is. Hospitality isn't all sexy fantastic, Master Chef, immaculate kitchen kind of stuff, it's a lot of hard work, its grind. It's absolutely grinding kind of business – I know I've done it too. Yeah so it's good to disabuse students of those notions that this will be lots of fun and fantastic. I mean there are elements of that of course; it's a great industry to be involved in, lots of fun if you are working with the right people and what have you. But you need to

develop some sense of the reality of it all and this is the role of the College in hospitality and other industries as well. ...*J, Literacy teacher, T1.*

As described, hospitality comes with its own challenges in regard to the impost on lifestyle. The following goes on to describe some students' resistance to the difficulties of the early operating hours associated with staffing a breakfast restaurant:

Quarter to seven start, so some of them were up at 5 o'clock and some were very resistant to it and they'll argue about it and I don't think that's so much the fault of the program as the attitude of the individual and their understanding of the compromises individuals have to make when they do enter the workforce. *J, Literacy teacher, T1.*

This outlook was shared by the other literacy teacher at the same location:

I know that even though its hard work and they've got to get up early and so on that gives them an idea that it is a tough industry too, umm, so it gives them a realistic understanding of the demands of hospitality in this case, so I think it was a really valuable experience with the difficulties as well as a really practical insight into the industry. *L Literacy teacher, T1.*

Apart from the sometimes anti-social hours, hospitality can also be challenging in terms of its stressful environment, which is in part caused by the immediacy of the nature of the work. The same teacher felt that the realism and pressure of running the breakfast restaurant helped the cohesion of the group, with their developing teamwork being an outcome of the cooking program:

The kids have social aspects too because its teamwork, it's working together, dealing with the public, absolutely. Working under pressure so I think all those things are really beneficial socially as well as academically, and I think it helps the cohesion of that group that was also evident in their attitude to one another and in my literacy class and what they're doing there. *L, Literacy teacher, T1.*

This amity is apparent in the description by the same teacher of an activity in one such literacy class, where the students were asked to maintain a food diary over a week:

And that was great - it was a social thing and they could compare and they could laugh about the appalling diets that many of them have, but it was done in a non-threatening way. *L, Literacy teacher, T1.*

The development of social improvement between hospitality group members was evident to a teacher of another subject associated with the culinary cohort at T1:

Socially they are definitely close. Those that were in hospitality, even though they have a different elective this semester, they still hang out together, so from that perspective their relationships have obviously worked well with an opportunity to bond and form friendships. *B, Personal development teacher, T1.*

An example of social transformation comes from the relationships that can develop with authority figures, in this case, the police. The potential of a positive interaction is described when a student, who is known to the officer, steels himself to come out of the kitchen and greet the policeman who has just dined in the training restaurant. The youth worker explains the situation in detail:

One of the kids was very negative against the police officers. He had quite a mouthful to say within our own group on what he thought of them and what he was going to do and at the end of the function I said to him, why don't you – because we get the kids sometimes to come out with and help with food because he was in the kitchen. So he came out from the kitchen...So he came out, oh yeah, head down and that and went to the table and the first main police officer that he's seen was a police officer that had helped his family in a very traumatic incident and he [the policeman] was just in awe – the policeman he's like 'oh my God, is that Michael, Michael's here' and it was just amazing how...the child, my client, he just flipped. He was like... he knew, the whole thing changed and then it was really interesting because then he sat there talking to him [the policeman] for the next ten minutes and then all the kids were reflecting, him speaking to a police officer – it's like 'how do you know him' and he's like 'he's my mate' and it was really positive within the negative. And then you've got the police officer looking at the client going, 'good on you, see look at you now, look what you're doing, you've applied yourself and you're doing something good mate. It's great to see you're not in the police station'... And the kids see that as well and yeah, and then they discuss that as well. *K, Youth worker, T3.*

The above excerpts and discussion has attempted to illustrate the potential of food literacy in changing students' outlook through exposure to food rich environments. One teacher describes from her perspective why she thinks the program has such an impact.

I mean one of the things about the hospitality program is its quite rich in terms of exposing kids to different elements of the hospitality industry. You know the visit at the Langham [5 star hotel] sort of shows your top of the range and what people might aspire to, so they get to see what that's like. They go to the markets; you take them out to the farm to see animals in their natural state. You've got to be aware of all those issues relating to food, so I think – it's such a rich program that kids could not fail to be influenced in some kind of way no matter how resistant they might be. Or appear to be resistant to some of the ideas that you're explicitly teaching. I think it filters through because it's such a new experience and it takes them into a completely different world. It matures the students, some of them, not all of them, but I think it contributes to the maturation, yeah and certainly how could you not help and end up seeing the world in a slightly different way having gone through all those different experiences that you've never been exposed to or been oblivious to previously. I think that's our job really and it does certainly contribute to their understanding and their place in the world. *T1, J, Literacy teacher*

and finally, the satisfaction of the end product is evident when the outcome is thus:

They do the cookery program, they then like it, they then do VCAL with us, they do the Certificate II, next they are doing a

diploma of hospitality –and now they are managing a venue. They are buying lunch for me. My job is done! *T2, C, Senior educator-youth programs*

The use of semi-structured interviews has allowed the exploration of different perspectives from a wide range of interested practitioners, in relation to transformation of students' through food literacy. The range of quotes from the interviews has attempted to demonstrate and indicate the potential for personal, social and professional change when students engage with the variety of food programs being offered through educational sites.

When presented in a supported and non-threatening environment, the range of experiences offered in a well structured food based program presents a wide range of potentially rich encounters that enable and normalise positive behaviours. This in turn has on-going flow on constructive effects on other aspects of the students' lives, as was demonstrated for instance in Michael's subsequent encounter with the policeman.

## **Conclusion**

Albeit based on a small number of sites and interviews, the initial indications of this research and the resultant material tends to suggest that a better understanding of food, through gardening, cooking and eating healthily may have the capacity to engage some students in a more meaningful and relevant way to the world they live in today.

Not only do the findings resonate with Dewey's 100 year old philosophical approach to applied learning, but correlate with recent studies identified in the literature review that support the contention that exposure to food rich programs have the capacity to engage students, and consequently transform lives through empowerment.

If this increase in personal food literacy has the potential to capture students' interest, then such programs may be one way to not only positively address the current health crisis in young people, but provide constructive strategies to engage with disengaged youth and help deal with other issues that are relevant in the modern world.



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