

Food and nutrition education within Australian primary schools. How is it implemented in the classroom?

E. Driscoll, A. Booth, C. Margerison and J. Nanayakkara

Eating habits developed during childhood are more likely to be maintained throughout adulthood.⁽¹⁾ Only 6% of Australian children aged 4–13 years meet the recommendations for daily fruit and vegetable consumption,⁽²⁾ with discretionary foods accounting for 38% of their daily energy intake.⁽³⁾ School-based food and nutrition education (FNE) allows children to gain knowledge, skills and capacity to source and prepare healthy food.⁽¹⁾ Approximately 10–15 hours per year of classroom based FNE can successfully improve children's knowledge and understanding of food, nutrition, and health.⁽⁴⁾ However, FNE is not one of the Key Learning Areas within the Australian Curriculum and implementation is at the discretion of individual states/territories, schools, and teachers. The aim of this study was to explore teaching practices adopted by general classroom teachers and gain a deeper understanding of how FNE is implemented within Australian primary schools. General classroom teachers with > 2 years of experience from Australian primary schools were invited to participate in this qualitative study. Semi-structured Interviews were conducted via Zoom, were audio recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis using NVivo. Eleven questions were asked relating to FNE teaching practices, and the barriers and facilitators associated with teaching FNE. Fourteen general classroom teachers from primary schools across six Australian states and territories, participated. Seven themes were identified in relation to current FNE teaching practices and the perceived barriers and facilitators to teaching FNE; i) implementation of FNE in the classroom; ii) time spent teaching FNE; iii) topics taught and resources used; iv) time, overcrowded curriculum and competing priorities; v) teacher knowledge; vi) guidance and motivation to teach FNE; vii) school and home environment. Teachers included FNE in their lessons as a requirement of the curriculum ($n = 6$) or by personal preference ($n = 4$). All teachers agreed that FNE is of high importance, yet most believed that not enough time is spent teaching it. Barriers to teaching FNE included, lack of time ($n = 14$), overcrowded curriculum and subject prioritisation ($n = 10$), teacher knowledge ($n = 8$), and lack of community support ($n = 7$). All teachers believed that embedding FNE within the core curriculum would enable them to teach more FNE in the classroom. Resources and guidance ($n = 14$), professional development ($n = 5$) and external incentive ($n = 5$) were also proposed enablers for the successful implementation of FNE in primary schools. In conclusion, although teachers acknowledge the importance and benefits of FNE, integration into the Australian primary school curriculum remains voluntary and at the discretion of individual classroom teachers. Thus, creating inconsistencies in the delivery of FNE within Australian primary schools. Suggestions provided by teachers will be used to inform school food policies and the implementation of FNE within the primary school curriculum.

References

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