

The Status of Food and Cooking Education in Maltese Primary Schools: An Exploratory Study

Suzanne Piscopo*, Dept. of Health, Physical Education & Consumer Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Malta;
Karen Mugliett, Dept. of Health, Physical Education & Consumer Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Malta.

*Email: suzanne.piscopo@um.edu.mt

SNEB Competency:

Nutrition education program design, implementation and evaluation

ABSTRACT

Background & Objectives:

Quality Food and Cooking Education (FCE) in schools can contribute to promoting children's wellbeing and is advocated as a curricular entitlement. This study sought to explore the food and nutrition (FN) and food preparation and cooking (FPC) education being implemented in Maltese Primary schools.

Study Design & Participants:

In November 2021, teachers were invited to participate in an online survey via social media posts on multiple education-related Facebook groups/pages. Sole inclusion criterion was being a practising Primary schoolteacher in Malta.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis:

Frequency distributions were used to identify teachers' interest in FN and FPC; self-perception of FN knowledge, FPC skills and self-efficacy to teach FN and FPC; relevant training received; coverage of FN topics – meals, foods, food groups, processes, sustainability; and FPC practices, activities and barriers.

Results:

51 teachers teaching different year-groups responded. These were mainly female, age 23-45 years, with 11+ years of experience. The majority were interested or very interested in FN (78%) and FPC (74%), were self-taught in FN (77%) and FPC (88%), and felt they had very good or excellent FN knowledge (61%) and FPC skills (65%). About half felt very good to excellent self-efficacy to teach FN (51%) and FPC (49%). Most commonly taught topics, often integrated with literacy and science lessons, were snacks, breakfast, packed lunch, lunches; vegetables, fruit, water, fresh fruit juices, smoothies; food hygiene, food safety, food waste, composting; seasonal festive dishes, and traditional local dishes/food. 89% of the teachers had done FPC with students. Most prepared items were pizza, healthy sandwiches, wraps, smoothies and fruit kebabs. Reported barriers to FPC were inadequate resources, classroom management concerns and limited personal knowledge or skills.

Conclusions & Recommendations:

FCE implementation in Maltese Primary classrooms is fairly broad, but is limited in food groups coverage and recipe variety. Lack of training is one possible reason. A study limitation is non-assessment of the accuracy of the teaching. Developing a national FCE curriculum, supported by teacher training and resources is recommended.

BACKGROUND

Quality Food and Cooking Education (FCE) in schools can contribute to promoting children's wellbeing and is advocated in multiple fora as a curricular entitlement.

The Maltese national curriculum (2012) states that, by the end of compulsory schooling, all students should 'understand the importance of nutrition and eating in a healthy way' (p. 55) and schools should facilitate learning that 'strives towards a world in which all humans have access to sufficient food and water, a healthy and productive life.' (p. 38)

!Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, *A National Curriculum Framework for All*. Malta: Salesian Press, 2012.)

OBJECTIVES

This study sought to explore the extent and type of food and nutrition (FN) and food preparation and cooking (FPC) education being implemented in Maltese Primary schools.

More specifically it aimed to uncover:

- The FN topics addressed
- The inclusion of FPC activities
- Teachers' training in FCE
- Influences on teachers' choice of FCE implementation
- Challenges faced by teachers in FCE implementation.

STUDY DESIGN & PARTICIPANTS

- **A quantitative approach** was adopted using an online survey.
- An **original questionnaire** was designed through the Google Forms App and **distributed in November 2021.**
- **The target study population was active primary school teachers** in State and non-State (Church or Independent) schools in Malta and Gozo.
- Participants were **recruited via social media posts and snowballing**, using Facebook pages owned by primary school teachers groups, educational institutions, and other groups related to food education in Malta.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

- **51 teachers** completed the survey.
- Gender: Majority **female** (98%)
- Age: 72% = **23–45yrs**; 26% = over 46yrs
- Schools: 65% **State**; 22% Church; 14% Independent
- Teaching experience: A good balance from 5 years or less, to 21 years and over; majority had **11+ years.**

TEACHERS' SELF-PERCEIVED COMPETENCY AND INTEREST IN FN AND FPC

- The majority of respondents:
 - Were interested or very interested in FN (78%) and FPC (74%)
 - Felt they had very good or excellent FN knowledge (61%) and FPC skills (65%)
 - Were self-taught in FN (77%) and FPC (88%)
- A very small proportion of teachers had received a few hours of training during their university course.
- About half of the respondents felt very good to excellent self-efficacy to teach FN (51%) and FPC (49%).

MOST COMMON CROSS

CURRICULAR INTEGRATION of food topics was with literacy (38%) and science lessons (30%).

"[In science] we have a topic on food where we include the healthy plate and food hygiene, for example, cross contamination. I also included healthy lifestyle during a special assembly. I discuss about healthy food randomly during the day, for example during break times."



RESULTS

MOST COMMON TOPICS TAUGHT

Meals

- Snacks (47%)
- Packed lunch (40%)
- Breakfast (39%)
- Lunch (39%)

Drinks or food groups

- Water (75%)
- Fruit (72%)
- Vegetables (64%)
- Fresh fruit juices and smoothies (54%)

Food system themes

- Food hygiene (56%)
- Food safety (49%).

Food sustainability themes

- Food waste (53%)
- Seasonal festive dishes (33%)
- Traditional local dishes (33%)
- Traditional local foods (31%)
- Composting (30%)

LESS COMMON TOPICS TAUGHT

Meals and foods

- Supper as a meal (16%)
- Rabbit meat (10%)
- Nuts (18%)
- Herbs and spices (14%)
- Foods and dishes from other cultures (16%)

Food systems

- Growing crops at home (14%)
- Home-rearing of animals for food (8%)
- Nutrition labels (16%)
- Sustainability labels (14%)
- Health claims on packaging (12%)

FOOD PREPARATION AND COOKING DONE

- **89% of the teachers had done some FPC in the classroom.**
- **The most common items prepared/cooked were:**
 - Healthy sandwiches (42%)
 - Wraps (23%)
 - Pizza (40%)
 - Fruit kebabs (23%)
 - Smoothies (30%)

Students enjoyed most:

- Making pizza (28%), sandwiches (15%) and coconut balls (13%)
- Eating pizza (29%)

TEACHERS' CHALLENGES/BARRIERS TO COOKING

- Lack of resources (42%)
- Concerns re classroom management (33%)
- Lack of personal knowledge (25%) or skills (25%)

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- **FCE implementation** in Maltese Primary classrooms is **fairly broad**, but **does not address all food literacy components.**
- **Pre-service and in-service teacher training is needed** to ensure/facilitate quality F&N and FC&P learning activities.
- Teachers need **more FCE resources and facilities.**
- Further research is required to **develop a national FCE curriculum, supported by teacher training and resources.**