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# Cooking in schools: Lessons from the UK

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## Abstract

*In the United Kingdom (UK), under successive governments, there have been many changes over the years on 'cooking in schools' policy, ranging from the removal of cooking from the curriculum to a promise from the current government to make cooking compulsory for all 11–14 year olds by 2011. This paper reports on the current activity around cooking in schools policy in the UK. It also looks at how previous approaches led to these activities and to changes in the school environment, and the problems associated with an un-coordinated approach to the introduction of cooking in schools.*

## Introduction

In the UK the teaching of cooking skills fell out of favour in the 1980/90s as a number of industry dominated reports called for the teaching of skills for those who might go to work in the food and catering industries. These latter skills were not deemed to be hands-on cooking skills but much more around management of food preparation processes, and the marketing and promotion of foods (ACARD, 1982). All these concerns contributed to the development of the design and technology curriculum, within which food was located and which replaced the old domestic science curriculum (Leith, 1997). All the above contributed to the removal of cooking from the National Curriculum in English and Welsh schools when it was restructured, and replaced with 'food technology' under the design and technology curriculum.

As many industrial societies approach a situation where the amount of food eaten out of or brought into the home but prepared outside of it, is equal to or overtakes the food prepared in the home, the place of (domestic) cooking skills is open to question. Fieldhouse (1995) asked '*if prepared food is so easily accessible, why bother to learn to cook? If you haven't acquired cooking skills, then fast foods are the most efficient answer*'. This led to Caraher, Dixon, Lang and Carr-Hill (1999)

questioning the basis of cooking skills and the importance of possessing skills to deal with new foods and the necessity of learning new skills for new technology and processed foods. This was certainly the case when, in 2004, the amount spent (in GB£) on eating out was greater than that spent on meals inside the home (National Statistics, 2006). Such thinking has been refined and informed by authors such as Short (2003 and 2006), who argues that what is occurring is a restructuring of skills and not a demise in skills per se. All this represents a change to the concept of what constitutes cooking and food preparation. Such trends do tend to cause alarm and lead to the development of popular support for the teaching of cooking. It should be noted that there is little evidence of a cause-effect relationship—that is, that a demise in or lack of cooking skills leads to an increase in food prepared by others (Lang & Caraher, 2001). Despite this, the promotion of cooking and campaigns to reinstate it in the curriculum were often based on such suppositional relationships (Rubin, Rye & Rabinovich, 2008). Such concerns capture the common zeitgeist where convenience and ready-prepared foods are rapidly becoming the norm.

This call to action by activists has received attention in the policy literature, as can be seen from the examples that follow. An independent report on inequalities in 1999 included, among its recommendations, the extension of health promoting schools and specifically:

*...further measures to improve the nutrition provided at school, including: the promotion of school food policies; the development of budgeting and cooking skills; the preservation of free school meals entitlement; the provision of free school fruit, and the restriction of less healthy food.* (Acheson, 1998, p. 44).

In 2005, the School Meals Review Panel, commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills set up to advise on the revision of school meals standards, stated in its report:

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*The Panel is convinced that cooking is an essential life-skill and that no child should leave school unable to cook for themselves. It is also desirable for children to have a practical understanding of where food comes from, and how it is produced and treated. Whilst a purely academic knowledge of food may also be valuable, the focus at primary and Key Stages 2 and 3 should be on practical cooking skills* (School Meals Review Panel, 2005, p. 40).

The same panel said food education should be compulsory:

*All children should be taught food preparation and practical cooking skills in school in the context of healthy eating. Far more emphasis should be placed on practical cooking skills within the curriculum space currently devoted to Food Technology, and the KS3 review should consider this* (p. 12).

The *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives* anti-obesity-strategy document (HM Government, 2008) gave prominence to cooking with the promise to introduce compulsory cooking for Key Stage 3 (11–14 year old students). It stated there are plans to ‘*Invest to ensure all schools are healthy schools, including making cooking a compulsory part of the curriculum by 2011 for all 11–14 year-olds*’ (p. XII).

### Current policy developments

As noted above, in January 2008 the UK Government announced that cookery lessons would be made compulsory for 11 to 14 year olds by 2011 in England (HM Government, 2008). The new initiative is part of the Government’s *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives* obesity strategy and has raised the profile of cooking and home economics, previously in decline (Rubin, Rye & Rabinovich, 2008; Caraher, Dixon, Lang & Carr-Hill, 1999). This move reflects debates over the role of cooking skills in helping people achieve healthy lifestyles. Similar discussions are occurring all over the globe.

Below we set out the situation in each of the four administrative areas in the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). This is followed by some detail of some of the many cooking initiatives run by charities and non-government organisations.

#### England

Until the recent announcement on compulsory cooking for 11–14 year olds by 2011, the following was the situation in schools in England. Children begin their formal food education in primary schools. Food technology is mandatory

at Key Stages 1 (for 5–7 year olds) and 2 (for 7–11 year olds) in England, under design and technology (D&T) and science (nutrition). There is no statutory requirement to include practical cooking at Key Stages 1 or 2. Table 1 sets out some of the food technology learning outcomes within the design and technology curriculum for England for students aged 5 to 14 years and Table 2 illustrates some relevant schemes of work for the different stages.

The current situation in English schools is made more complex by the loss of skills among teachers, the aging profile of teachers and the fact that many schools no longer have cooking facilities, having turned kitchens into teaching rooms and general space. This is a reflection of the situation in the other three administrations. Primary school teachers may receive little formal training in cooking methods, and the existing group of secondary school design and technology teachers with backgrounds and training in domestic science are largely in their fifties and retiring (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008 and 2009). This workforce is being replaced by a younger group of teachers, often with no specific training in cooking skills.

Although, in essence, food education should be taught in primary schools (Key Stages 1 and 2) and many say it is compulsory, the focus may be more on food education as opposed to preparing, handling or cooking food. This is a distinction that many authors fail to address, witness Ballam (2010) when talking about food and nutrition—he lacks clarity and uses the terms interchangeably, talking in one paragraph about cooking food and then morphing into using the term ‘food education’, which on a quick read suggests cooking is compulsory in primary schools, whereas it is food education that is specified in the curriculum documents. Indeed, this confusion extends as far as the UK Government Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), which stated in a press release announcing the introduction of compulsory cooking for 11–14 year olds that ‘*cooking is already compulsory in primary schools*’ (DCSF, 11 September 2008, p.1).

For pupils at Key Stage 1 and 2, cooking and food preparation classes remain an option under the design and technology (D&T) curriculum. Provision depends on the individual school, teacher, resources and facilities and cooking may, if taught, cross subject areas such as design and technology, science, geography and personal and social skills. Although the study of food provides excellent opportunities for work across the whole curriculum, in topic work or as a

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Table 1. Some of the food technology learning outcomes within the design and technology curriculum for England

Design & Technology (Including Food Technology)	Key Stage 1 (5-7 years)			Key Stage 2 (7-11 years)			Key Stage 3 (13-14 years)		
	<b>Developing, planning and communicating ideas</b>								
	1b - develop ideas by shaping materials and putting together components.			1a - generate ideas for products after thinking about who will use them.			1f - suggest outline plans for designing and making.		
	<b>Working with tools, equipment and materials to make quality products</b>								
	2a - select tools, techniques and materials for making their product. 2b - explore the sensory quality of materials. 2c - measure, cut and shape a range of materials. 2f - follow safe procedures for food safety and hygiene.			2c - explore the sensory qualities of materials and how to use them. 2f - follow safe procedures for food safety and hygiene.			2b - take account of the working characteristics and properties of materials when deciding how to use them. 2c - to join and combine materials accurately to achieve functional results. 2d - to make single products and products in quantity, using a range of techniques. 2e - about the working characteristics and applications of a range of modern materials (genetically engineered foods or synthetic flavours, and smart materials such as modified starches).		
	<b>Evaluating processes and products</b>								
				3c - recognise the quality of a product depends on how well it is made.					
	<b>Knowledge and understanding of materials</b>								
	4a - taught about the working characteristics of materials.			4a - how the working characteristics of materials affect the ways they are used. 4b - how materials can be combined and mixed to create more useful properties.			4a - to consider physical and chemical properties and working characteristics of a range of common and modern materials.		
	<b>Breadth of study</b>								
	5a - focused practical tasks that develop a range of techniques, skills, processes and knowledge. 5b- design and make assignments using a range of materials, including food.						5c - design and make assignments in different contexts. The assignments should include control systems, and work using a range of contrasting materials, including resistant materials, compliant materials and/or food.		

Table 2. Examples of schemes of work

Key Stage 1 (5-7 years)	Key Stage 2 (7-11 years)	Key Stage 3 (13-14 years)
<p><b>Unit 1C Eat more Fruit and Vegetables</b> This unit develops children’s understanding of designing and making with food and the importance of healthy eating. They make choices based on the properties of different fruit and vegetables in order to design and make a product for a particular occasion or target group to encourage them to eat more fruit and vegetables.</p> <p>Pupils are introduced to a sensory vocabulary.</p>	<p><b>Unit 3B Sandwich Snacks</b> Children learn basic food preparation techniques and ways of combining components to create simple food products for a particular purpose.</p> <p><b>Unit 5B Bread (This unit can be adapted to make other baked food product e.g. biscuits, cakes, pizza or snack bars.)</b> This unit provides an opportunity to develop children’s understanding of, and skills in, working with food through a range of activities related to bread products.</p> <p><b>Unit 5D Biscuits</b> This unit builds on unit 5B. Children learn how to adapt a basic food recipe to develop a product with specified criteria. Investigation of existing product from all cultures will inform design ideas.</p>	<p><b>Unit 7A Understanding Materials</b> Pupils develop their understanding of the properties of materials/ingredients and apply this when designing with food. Pupils design and make a new salad/soup that encourages people to eat plenty of fruit and vegetables.</p> <p><b>Unit 8A Exploring Materials</b> Pupils explore properties of materials/ ingredients so they will be able to identify appropriate materials/ingredients for a task. Pupils design a layered chilled dessert, or a sauce with other ingredients to make a ready-prepared meal.</p> <p><b>Unit 9A Selecting Materials</b> Pupils design and make a meal for customers with special dietary needs, selecting ingredients based on their nutritional and working characteristics.</p>

focus for literacy, numeracy or health education, the majority of children's practical experience with food in school is concentrated within the D&T area, focusing on learning 'about' materials, processes, marketing and products. This is especially the case in secondary schools at Key Stage 3 (for 11–14 year olds).

In secondary schools there are four options within the English D&T curriculum, of which food technology is one. Within this remit, until September 2007, food was not compulsory and could be covered either theoretically or practically, depending on teacher/school commitment, facilities and equipment. So, for example, you could teach about food composition but not do hands-on cooking skills and there is currently no compulsion to do so. Committed teachers will include cooking as the means to achieve curriculum outcomes but our reading of the situation is that this is not compulsory. In the interim, the gap is covered by an initiative called *Licence to Cook* (see <http://www.licencetocook.org.uk/> for more details) and out-of-school cookery clubs under the *Let's get cooking* program. Under *Licence to Cook*, all 11–16 year olds are 'entitled' to take part in a minimum of 16 hours of practical cooking lessons (Carter, 2010). Those schools that do not provide practical cooking lessons are obligated to provide them on pupil request. So the entitlement needs to be positively activated. Out-of-school cookery clubs under the *Let's get cooking* program are being set up by the School Food Trust with £20 million of lottery monies.

At Key Stage 3, where pupils opt to study food under D&T, the opportunity to take part in 'hands-on' activities is very much dependent on the individual school, teachers, available expertise and resources. The new proposals to make cooking compulsory for all 11–14 year olds by 2011 are not, at present, clear on how they will be incorporated into the curriculum, evaluated and monitored or how schools that do not have teaching kitchens will be able to provide practical cooking lessons.

State-maintained secondary schools in England have been offered the opportunity of one day's training to deliver practical cooking sessions and to learn how to use the online supporting resource before 2011. Following on from the day's training, teachers can access guidance and recipes online. In addition, some primary school teachers and teacher assistants are being trained

by secondary school food teachers, under the *Food in Schools* initiative. Again, however, training is delivered in either one or two days. Whether this is enough or comparable to that received by domestic science teachers is questionable.

For the longer term, *Licence to Cook* has initiated a development program to increase practical food skills and strategies to teach food technology to 11–14 year olds. The aim is to support qualified design and technology teachers who need to develop their food technology knowledge, qualified teachers from other subjects and newly qualified teachers. Trainees will go through an application process and undergo a needs assessment to identify learning needs before training and there are only 400 places available in England. In addition DCSF will train higher-level teaching assistants<sup>1</sup> (HLTAs) in food technology provision. They will, however, need support from their school to undergo HLTA food technology training, as well as securing funding. Training provider and training length will be decided at local authority level (Elms, 2010).

### ***Northern Ireland***

In Northern Ireland (NI) cooking was optional within the home economics curriculum until September 2009, when a revised Northern Ireland curriculum was introduced. This has had many implications for the teaching and status of home economics in the province. Now, practical food lessons are compulsory in NI at Key Stage 3 (for 11–13 year olds) under home economics, which sits within the 'Learning for Life' part of the curriculum, although teachers are encouraged to make cross curricula links. The problems facing NI are, like England, school facilities and a shortage of trained teachers (Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment, 2007).

In primary schools, the curriculum is an integrated one, combining six areas of learning, where food education should be taught as a cross curricula aspect—so in geography or history as well as in personal development. There is, however, no emphasis in the NI curriculum on cooking activities.

### ***Scotland***

In Scotland, it is mandatory for all pupils from age three years through to 18 years to take part in practical food lessons within the Health and Wellbeing part of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (The Scottish Government, 2009).

<sup>1</sup> In the UK, in recent years, teaching assistants have been recruited by schools to support teachers. Once in post, teaching assistants can apply to train to become a higher level teaching assistant with a specialism in a specific subject or department.

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However, within this remit, there is no minimum time allocation for practical cooking and the amount of time spent on practical lessons is decided by individual schools. Again, though this mandatory status is welcome, it still leads to variance in the delivery of how this is interpreted, with some doing food education as opposed to cooking or hands-on food preparation skills. It is indicated in the guidance documents to the curriculum that cooking might be best taught through three areas: health and wellbeing, science and technologies. In essence, the approach is through an integrated curriculum where home economics will have to 'fight' it out to gain time on the curriculum in individual schools. This may prove to be less of a problem in primary schools with class-based teachers and integrated curriculums as opposed to specialist teachers with timetable slots in secondary schools.

### **Wales**

In Wales, practical cooking under the design and technology curriculum also became compulsory in September 2009 for pupils at Key Stages 2 (for 7–11 year olds) and 3 (for 11–14 year olds) (Welsh Assembly, 2008). This was in line with a host of other developments in Wales related to health and food (Caraher, Lloyd & Crawley, 2009). The three areas within which the food option is located are design and technology, science, and personal and social education. Again, this is designated a compulsory element of the curriculum but, as with England, the nature and operational interpretation of compulsory and what is taught is subject to much variance.

### **Initiatives by charities, NGOs and the food industry**

With many English schools struggling for funding to deliver food education and cookery sessions, a plethora of initiatives have plugged the gap in provision. At a national level, these include *Food for Life*, *Food—a fact of life* (British Nutrition Foundation<sup>2</sup>), *Focus on Food* cooking buses, the Academy of Culinary Art's *Chefs Adopt a School* and *Can Cook Will Cook* school sessions, not to mention any number of schemes run individually by schools or those run locally by health agencies and which link with schools (Caraher & Cowburn, 2004). We set out some of these below in more detail. In addition, there are industry-funded initiatives such as those funded by Sainsbury's supermarkets and Flora margarine. Both of these have started 'cooking in

schools' initiatives, where shoppers collect tokens that can be used to buy cooking equipment. While there are plenty of programs for schools that have an interest in cooking, uptake may be dependent on a member of staff or a parent who can teach practical cooking skills or who is passionate enough to promote it. Provision is neither cohesive nor evaluated to measure impact on diet or cooking skills.

The program *Let's get cooking* is run by School Food Trust<sup>3</sup>; it is planned to fund 5,000 after-school cooking clubs. Some of these will be clubs that are already established in schools and will be known as associate clubs. The scheme is being rolled out region by region by working with local authorities, who send invitations to schools to take part. Some clubs are run by parents and some are for parents as well as children. Three hundred of the 5000 clubs are taking part in an evaluation, the aim of which is to measure whether the initiative increases consumption of healthy foods over less healthy foods, cooking skill transference into the home environment and whether participants had shown these skills to another person. Impact will be measured at the beginning of the *Let's get cooking* six-week course and at the end (Clarke, 2009).

*Let's get cooking* and *Licence to cook* both feed into a Cooking in Schools Programme Board, which has been set up by the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). This Board has been established to manage the transition to compulsory cooking in the curriculum. However, as schools opt into both these schemes, those that are not engaged may be left behind and as a result may well have difficulty initiating successful cooking sessions. Indeed, the School Food Trust engagement of 'hard to reach schools' entails sending an invitational letter to schools with high free school meal entitlement (>22.8%) before other schools (that have lower free school meal entitlement uptake) to give them first refusal.

The *Chefs Adopt a School* initiative is delivered by the Academy of Culinary Arts, a group representing Britain's leading professional association of head chefs, pastry chefs, restaurant managers and suppliers (see [www.academyofculinaryarts.org.uk](http://www.academyofculinaryarts.org.uk) for more details). At present, sessions are provided all over England from Cumbria to Cornwall, subject to demand and resources (with a few sessions being delivered in Scotland too). Annually, 21,000 children take part in the

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<sup>2</sup> British Nutrition Foundation is a food industry charity funded by companies such as British Sugar, Cadbury, Coca Cola, Danone, Kellogg's, Kraft Foods, Sainsbury's and Unilever. Accessed 3 March 2010: <http://www.nutrition.org.uk/aboutbnf/membercompanies/sustaining-members>.

<sup>3</sup> The School Food Trust is an independent body, with the remit of transforming school food and food skills and is funded by the Government's Department Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

initiative. Delivered by professional chefs, the program aim is to teach children about food, food provenance, health, nutrition and cookery.

The *Active Kids Get Cooking* scheme is funded by Sainsbury's supermarket, the Design and Technology Association<sup>4</sup> and the British Nutrition Foundation. With schools lacking budgets and money, there is a vacuum of funding and industry is only too pleased to be involved. The scheme provides cooking, healthy eating and food knowledge through teacher and pupil resources, awards pupils for cooking and knowledge achievements, and also promotes Sainsbury's brand (the program logo is in the Sainsbury's brand colours).

Another one is run by Flora (see <http://www.cookingwithschools.com/pages/Home.aspx?WT.srch=1> accessed 2 March 2010 and Figure 1 below). Of the eleven recipes featured on the Flora website, eight included Flora products as ingredients. The free cooking equipment is on the basis of buying Flora products with the special tokens that can then be redeemed and contributed to a specific school on the website.

Figure 1. Web page for Flora *Cooking for Skills* showing links to Government initiatives



Figure 2. Flora pack with special offer



Most of these sites stress their links with government run programs as in Figure 1, with the mention of the government-supported *Change4Life* program and the promotion of healthy eating through cooking.

In addition, there are many local and regional initiatives, some of which are supported and run by interested parents and organisations. Many of these are run without reference to the curriculum or pedagogical issues in the curriculum and are subject to both the waning of enthusiasm and a lack of on-going support and resources.

## Discussion

The long-term consequences of poor cooking skills could be a barrier to widening food choice and thus reduce the chances of choosing and eating a healthy diet. The National Consumer Council (2003) found that respondents on low incomes reported the barriers to a healthy diet as being too tired to cook and not being able to cook, despite believing pre-prepared foods to be more expensive and less healthy (National Consumer Council, 2003). So cooking skills can be seen as part of the necessary repertoire of life-skills but obviously not sufficient on their own to bring about change. Equally, without them it is difficult to achieve a healthy lifestyle. As Dewhurst and Pendergast (2009) note, there is a need to 'rid the subject of outdated and intransigent perceptions associated with cooking and sewing' (page, 78) without sacrificing the roots of the home economics profession. So these cooking skills need to be reflective of modern society and how people live their lives.

By our estimates, upwards of £30m is being spent on cooking-related programs in the UK, despite the absence of evidence of their efficacy. Much of this amount is short term and from lottery funds. This estimate does not include teachers' time. Many will say the evidence is not essential, however the problem is that cooking skills are being reintroduced to meet various agendas, often on ideological grounds and not evidence-based. If, in ten years time, there are no changes in the behaviours targeted then cooking may again fall into disfavour among politicians and policy makers and cease to be supported or funded. For example, the current provision for cooking for 11–14 years old in England is being introduced under the auspices of an obesity strategy. If it does not result in a reduction in obesity levels (highly unlikely given the dearth of other policy responses) then will it be removed from the curriculum? We take the stance that

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<sup>4</sup> Design and Technology Association supports design and technology teaching staff and schools.

cooking skills are an essential life skill and should be taught regardless of outcome (Fordyce-Voorham, 2009).

Cooking and associated behaviours such as eating together are being claimed by politicians as a necessity for family life (Rubin, Rye & Rabinovich, 2008). There are some positive correlations between family meals and healthier eating habits (Feldman, Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer & Story, 2007; Videon & Manning, 2003) but a decline in family mealtimes is debatable—UK time diary data show that, if anything, people spent slightly longer per eating episode at home in the noughties than in 1975 (Warde, Cheng, Shu-Li, Olsen & Southerton, 2007). This latter study, however, did find that substantially less time was being spent preparing meals at home. However, even eating together as a family in front of the television was found to be associated with healthier eating habits compared to children who ate less regularly as a family. Ultimately, the evidence here is ambiguous as is the role of cooking skills in such processes.

Linked to this politicisation and higher profile of cooking skills are the moves by industry to become more involved in provision by providing support. Such initiatives are inevitable if government does not provide adequate support for cooking in schools. However, it is our opinion that schools should remain commercial-free zones for two reasons. One is to protect children from unnecessary marketing or the building of brand identity and loyalty, and the second is that such initiatives are not linked to pedagogical approaches.

In the UK and elsewhere, the opportunity exists to build in rigorous evaluation to school-based cooking programs, if for no other reason than to monitor public spending. New interventions should be based on the best available evidence of what works. This should include impact and outcomes and also approach through engagement with children and their parents. There also exists the opportunity to develop pilot programs that test various approaches in different settings. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to address how much, how often and when? Under *Licence to cook*, 11–14 year olds have access to 16 cooking sessions. Is this enough to embed those life skills to have an impact on eating habits? Is this too late, do interventions need to be aimed at primary school-aged children? Our own research on the *Chefs Adopt a School* initiative shows that a very short input of two sessions (including one practical) with primary school-aged children brought about small but significant improvements in eating behaviour

and confidence in cooking skills. Due to a lack of resources to measure and follow up pupils, we were unable to follow through and demonstrate if these short-term benefits resulted in any long-term behaviour outcomes and improvements in health (Seeley, Wu & Caraher, 2009).

We caution against the tying in of cooking skills to one outcome such as reduction in obesity levels. Such moves are doomed to failure as obesity is a multi-faceted problem and unlikely to be affected by one intervention. Cooking skills, we believe, have an important part to play in equipping young people and adults with the practical ‘how to’ knowledge and skills necessary to achieve healthy eating practices but need to be located, not as single policy approaches, but as part of a myriad of approaches. This, of course, does not negate the need for evidence for effectiveness of delivery and of outcomes.

What can be seen from the UK situation is an un-coordinated approach across the four administrations and a lack of support for the teaching of cooking in schools. In addition, the policy and curriculum documents obfuscate the distinction between cooking and food education. Cooking skills and the teaching of them clearly need to be relevant and updated but not hidden away within the term ‘food education’ and should be clearly highlighted as a relevant and important part of food education. Our analysis shows that, in many instances and in some of the curricula, food education is conflated with the term cooking, hence the assertions that cooking is compulsory. While we are sure there is a separate paper in this distinction, the point is that the emphasis is not always on cooking as a skill within home economics. This chimes with Fordyce Voorham’s (2009) call for a need to define food skills.

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