

### SESSION 3: NUTRITION EDUCATION THROUGH EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

#### **Opportunities in today's school curriculum**

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During the past 10 years our approach to nutrition education has changed but it has primarily changed from that of a battering ram to that of a blunderbuss; children are now showered with facts and it is hoped that some of them hit home. It is, however, all too easy to generalize; nutrition teaching in schools is not all haphazard and disjointed, as are the typical eating patterns of its average recipients.

The Department of Health and Social Security (1979) publication *Eating For Health*, along with many others since 1979 (see, for example, National Dairy Council, 1982; Richardson, 1982; King, 1983), clearly regard nutrition education as high priority and that an individual's responsibility for his or her own health needs must begin as early as possible. However, a syllabus that enables a child to present attractive meals, or to know the structure of an essential fatty acid, does not mean that he or she will learn any nutrition that will be of value to them in later life. Yet the need to develop a co-ordinated and meaningful programme on nutrition, that is in keeping with the life-style of the child, is as great now as it ever was. The reasons are threefold:

1. Health and fitness have become prime considerations in the launch of any new food product coming on to the market. The increased number of products, which are advertised as high in fibre or low in salt or fortified with one or other nutrient, that have appeared on the supermarket shelf is significant in comparison to the range available 10 years ago. It is still possible, however, to choose a diet that is not necessarily conducive to good health, despite the advertisers' suggestions to the contrary.
2. Our traditional patterns of eating are changing. We can no longer assume that the accepted combinations of foods which used to ensure a reasonable variety and balance in our diet, are popular with children today. Cheap, convenience or fast foods along with increased interest in foods from overseas now form the substantial part of what many children would choose to eat. Many of these alternative eating patterns result in larger quantities of fat, sugar and salt being consumed.
3. In addition to the changing patterns of eating, changes are also taking place in family and social structure, such that feeding the family is no longer first priority.

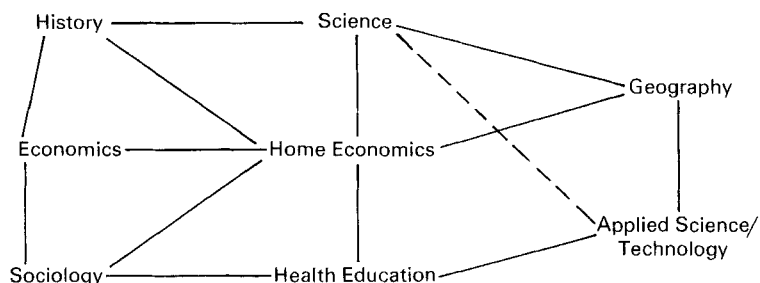


Fig. 1. Opportunities for nutrition education in the school curriculum.

All these trends not only present difficulties in positioning nutritional messages in their correct perspective, but also present the young consumer with decision-making processes that are not normally dealt with in many existing syllabuses. Based on these wider considerations, it can be appreciated that nutrition is a subject that has relevance everywhere in the school curriculum.

Sadly, however, nutrition has been taught for many years mainly in a theoretical way with undue emphasis on the sources and functions of nutrients. Detailed studies of the discovery of vitamins may be fascinating to historians, but are not relevant to the everyday decisions that children make about what they will eat and why. Ideally there should be a follow-through from early teaching in primary schools of facts about food and people, to more advanced subjects taught in secondary schools. With the need to emphasize a practical approach that has immediate impact, home economics seems to provide an ideal vehicle for teaching nutrition at secondary-school level.

There is also a need to develop the nutrition component of the curriculum in different subject areas (see Fig. 1). Although some opportunities in the classroom have been identified, there is also a role for the school-catering service to play a part in nutritional education. It provides an opportunity to relate theory to practice and to consolidate the message that nutritional knowledge and practice are both important in developing a clear understanding of the way food affects the body and its health. This must be the core of modern thinking on nutrition and health education at all levels.

#### REFERENCES

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