



Dinner in Dubai? The Role of Creative Art Workshops in Examining the Nutrition Education of Emirati Students

Dr. Ruqiyabi Naz Awan

Naz.Awan@buid.ac.ae

The British University in Dubai, (United Arab Emirates)

Abstract

This study sought to investigate the issues of nutrition education within four classrooms in four different public schools in Dubai. Research suggests that the changing lifestyle in the United Arab Emirates has manifested itself in many new ways including new eating habits as well as changes in individual's daily physical activity. The growing trend in obesity and associated conditions such as diabetes and heart disease is one of international and national concern. In order to alleviate the possible future demands on the health service and as a means to empowering the individual at a civic level, numerous countries have implemented 'healthy eating and lifestyle' programs. Within the UAE no comprehensive study has been conducted to date that has sought to examine how the formal education system could be used to address this problem. While traditional research methods (questionnaires, diaries, interviews) have generated interesting findings there is growing evidence that these methods do not necessarily allow the individual to explain their own understanding of their social world in their own words. This study therefore used a creative visual research method. Art based workshops were conducted that allowed students to concretely represent and describe their beliefs, attitudes and nutrition behaviour (diet and exercise) using visual representations such as pictures from magazines and newspapers, their own drawings, and product wrappers. The results from the art based workshops revealed that students had a complex understanding of the issues involved in nutrition education which extended beyond identifying food and exercise as 'good' or 'bad'. Issues that dealt with economic and cultural reasons for food and exercise choices were made explicit. Furthermore notions concerning the locus of control in food and exercise decisions also highlighted the issues concerning the 'idealized' perception of their nutritional and physical activity selves and their understanding of their own 'actual reality'.

1. Introduction

Childhood is a critical time for the development of eating habits and self image. Schools could be argued to be in a unique position to contribute to the development of healthy, 'informed' eating habits. The issue of childhood obesity in the Emirates suggests that 'the level of obesity among children in the Emirates stands at 30% while the total obese population is rated at 19.5% [1]. Commentators note that as a result of the UAE lifestyle obesity is now higher in the UAE per capita than in the USA [2]. In recent years, countries have launched national and international healthy eating and lifestyle initiatives designed to improve young peoples dietary choices and exercise habits [3]. The limited impact of these initiatives upon dietary and physical activity behaviours with young people has been attributed to an inadequate understanding of the factors associated with children and adolescents dietary choices [4].

Theoretical formulations as to how individuals understand and explain their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour have rested heavily on empirical methods that are often grounded in participants producing instant verbal, or written responses. This usually occurs in an artificial environment of an interview, semi-structured questionnaire or focus group discussion where the researchers interpretation is still considered the 'authoritative voice'. Within the context of this study, it is posited that in order to



understand the motives and factors affecting students dietary lifestyles and decisions, a methodological approach should be adopted that allows those whose life and lifestyle decisions are being investigated to have their 'own voice'.

Visual research methods provides a framework that allows individuals (children in particular) to express their emotions visually – using drawings/photographs/videos that they have either produced themselves or alternatively images that they have selected (from newspapers, magazines, the internet) to express their emotions on a given subject [5]. This method has been used to examine the effects of curriculum development of health education programmes aimed at children. The findings of this research has found that when children are encouraged to explain their understanding of the social world, in their own words, in terms of how they see themselves and significant others, how they conceived and explain social phenomena; these constructed visual artefacts and accompanying textual and spoken explanations allowed researchers to facilitate a deeper understanding of children's perceptions of their worlds [6].

The purpose of this study was to examine factors associated with children and adolescents dietary choices using a creative visual research method approach within the context of a classroom based art workshop. The subject of the art workshop was to create a day plan for a 'similar other' student using a visual images such as local supermarket magazines (provided by the researcher), product wrappers (that children had collected) as well as childrens own drawings. The day plan was later used to explore the issues of diet in focus group discussions with the respective student groups that created them.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Four single sex public schools in Dubai were randomly selected from the Knowledge and Human Development Agency's (KHDA) list of approved public schools (two cycle one schools and two cycle two schools). One class from each school was selected by the respective Principal to participate in the study. The participants were 18 boys at cycle one (mean age = 10.6 years old, S.D = 0.50), 23 girls at cycle one (mean age = 9.8 years old, S.D = 0.81), 23 boys at cycle two (mean age = 14.7 years old, S.D = 1.2) and 19 girls at cycle two (mean age = 14.8 years old, S.D = 1.32).

2.2 Materials

Multiple copies of supermarket magazines were collected from large scale supermarkets in Dubai that are located close to students' schools and equally distributed to students in the art workshop. Other art materials such as scissors, glue sticks, colouring pencils and pens were provided to students. The 'day plan' was to be created on a poster sized piece of card that was provided to the students by the researcher.

2.3 Procedure

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from KHDA and the University research committee. Letters providing parents and guardians with a full explanation of the study to be conducted were circulated. Each participating school principal and classroom teachers received a formal presentation detailing the rationale for the study and the methods that would be used to collect information.

The art workshops were led by a research assistant that is fluent in Arabic. Students were placed into small groups and told that they would be creating a 'day plan' for a 'similar other' and that they should represent the activities the student should and could do during an average weekend day. They were instructed to look over the materials available to them and to decide in their group how they would like to represent their 'similar other's' day and arrange their poster. Students were told that they could use the pictures from the magazines as well as drawing their own pictures and adding written text to their posters also. All students were told that they would need to make their poster in the art workshop class (45 minutes) and that the research assistant would talk to each group about their posters the following week. The focus group sessions with each group lasted no more than 20 minutes. A semi



structured interview schedule was developed to focus the discussion. The following topics were discussed, the created poster, health and nutrition beliefs, usual food habits, likes and dislikes. The group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed and then translated into English.

2.4 Data Analysis

Focus group discussions were analysed using inductive thematic analysis [7]. The categories and themes emerged from repeated readings of the transcripts and were identified as key concepts by the researcher. The existence of thematic categories was validated by another rater being able to allocate responses to identified category headings.

3. Results

Analyses of the data revealed the development of two key themes. These broadly encompassed individual factors; food choices and familial factors: the home food environment.

3.1 Awareness of healthy eating and its relationship to well being

Food preferences were consistently seen to provide the basis for food selection: *"I like spring rolls", "these hot dogs are tasty", "it's nice to eat biscuits and drink tea with my friends"*.

There was a demonstrated understanding that particular foods and beverages are nutritionally valuable: *"Fruit and vegetables are good for you", "all natural food is good for you", "fish, chicken, meat, rice are good and so are fruit and vegetables"*.

However a surface understanding as to why particular foods are understood as good and others as bad was noted. Students were unable to articulate factual reasons for this classification: *"Eggs and milk are good for us, they help us grow", "Oily food is bad for us, my mum and dad and teachers say its bad for us", "fizzy drinks, chocolate and potato chips are bad for us, my mum and dad and teacher says so"*.

Food choices outside of main meals were based upon busy lifestyles so pre-prepared foods (snacks and meals) were often noted: *"She's hungry after being at the club (horse riding) so she stops at the petrol station and buys a chocolate pie", "He eats a meat sandwich from a restaurant near his home after he has been to the Mosque on his way home"*.

3.2 The role of the home environment

A familial meal at least once a day was noted by most students in their posters and later discussions. An interesting finding was that none of the students appeared to be involved in the preparation of the meal and that often the person preparing the meal was either the mother or the maid: *"I wait for dinner to be ready, the maid calls me and my family when it's ready", "I go home and have dinner with my family...the maid prepares the food", "I have dinner when I get home from school"*.

Main meals often constituted of multiple dishes: *"I had spaghetti and sausages and vegetables", "I had samosas, and then chicken, meat and rice, but I don't eat it all", "I don't like the fish or the meat that has been made so mum gets me chicken to have with my rice"*.

Within the home outside of main meals a great deal of snacking was noted in the posters and discussions: *"I sit in my room and eat crisps and biscuits when I'm on the internet chatting to friends", "I have pieces of fruit with chocolate syrup on top while I'm watching TV"*..

4. Discussion

There was a clear demonstration that children in our sample have a nutritional knowledge base and there is an understanding of the connection between healthy eating and its relationship to physical and psychological well being. However, childrens food choices appear to be based upon the foods they like to eat and convenience foods that are quick and easy to purchase and consume rather than the foods they consider healthy, this finding is consistent with previous research [8].

Children were able to classify foods in terms of if they were 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' but were unable to articulate factual reasons for their classification beyond having been told by someone. This finding has been found in other studies and suggests that children often sample lack the scientific and



nutritional knowledge concerning the chemical and nutritional properties of food and their respective role and impact upon the human body [9].

Within the context of the 'family meal' findings suggest that there is a variety of food items that can be selected by children during main meals and that the issue of nutritional balance in food item choices during a meal is not understood by children. Also comments regarding the amount of food consumed during a meal suggest that students understanding of portion size and its relationship to healthy eating are not well defined [9].

Home environment influence appeared to diminish beyond organised meal times and snacking decisions appear to be controlled by the child. Factors such as time and convenience have been found to be a primary influence on childrens eating behaviour and have been found to be less related to healthy eating behaviours [10, 11]. The emergence of economically empowered children that are able to make independent food purchasing decisions beyond those of conventional 'candy and chocolate' may also in part be attributable to the rise of independent snacking behaviour. Furthermore the demise of small retail outlets specialising in sweets and snacks and the emergence of large supermarkets and bakeries that have the 'stack 'em high, sell 'em cheap' philosophy means that the variety of choice both available and accessible to children is larger than in previous decades [12].

Nutritional independence is an important factor that children need to be equipped with in order to deal with making informed decisions. There is sufficient research evidence to demonstrate that autonomy in food consumption choices in children and adolescents is a risk factor associated with poor nutrition [12].

Within the research there was a noted absence of students commenting on either their own or 'their significant others' participation in the food preparation process. This absence of the child from the process of understanding 'food and nutrition' through a process of active engagement with meal preparation appears to resign the child to solely a position of consumption and further distances the child from the process of meal production which is invariably related to nutritional knowledge of food items as well as cultural understandings of nutrition.

5. Conclusion

This study provides detailed information concerning young students perceptions of food and the factors that influence their food choices. Research demonstrates that there are multiple factors that affect how decisions are made. The use of creative visual research methods with focus group discussions based around the created artefact (a poster) allowed the researcher to begin to understand the interplay of factors identified by children and the prescribed meaning and interpretation given to them *by children* and how they are used and not used to inform nutritional knowledge and behavioural actions. The factors that affect food choices for Dubai based students at public schools is multi faceted and demands further investigation in order to develop appropriate interventions that are tailored to the needs of children in Dubai.

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