Food for thought
Are students learning enough about nutrition in Manitoba schools?

BY KATIE CHALMERS-BROOKS
For The Bulletin

Joyce Slater minced no words when naming her research study Is Cooking Dead?

It’s an issue the registered dietician has heard grumblings about for decades as our “foodscape” has transformed from home-cooked and more wholesome to processed and less healthy.

“People are eating about half of their meals outside of the home. We have a very highly processed commercial food supply and it’s making us sick. So how do we equip people to engage with that in ways that reduce their risk of becoming sick?” asks Slater, an assistant professor in the departments of human nutritional sciences and community health sciences.

Processed foods are generally high in sugar, salt and fat. More than 60 per cent of adults and a third of children are now considered overweight or obese.

The majority of deaths in Manitoba are from diseases linked to nutrition like Type 2 diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

To find out what our future holds, Slater looked to junior high and high school students across the province. She wanted to know to what extent food skills and nutrition are being taught in schools and whether or not kids are applying what they learn.

“We need to equip our young people to interact with a very complex food system,” Slater says.

A study of 100 Manitoba public schools revealed a 10 to 30 per cent jump in enrollment in food and nutrition classes—traditionally known as home economics—over the last decade. The increase is partly due to a switch that made the classes mandatory for boys, Slater says. She also discovered that half of the middle schools she studied don’t offer these classes at all, and where offered, the classes are often shorter and less frequent due to competition from other optional courses like dramatic arts and computers.

Slater interviewed teachers and superintendents and heard about Grade 7 students who have never turned on an oven or cracked an egg, and teenagers who pack a couple of cans of Red Bull for their lunch and come from homes that don’t stock the basic kitchen utensils. Busy, working families are not making nutrition a priority, says Slater, who for years worked as a public health nutritionist.

“We’re doing our young people a disservice by watering down or removing home ec and by not providing them with a comprehensive education in food and nutrition,” she says. “They don’t know what they don’t know. And that’s not meant to sound patronizing. We have normalized this way of eating and interacting with food. It really concerns me. But this isn’t about wanting to necessarily save home economics. Maybe we need to get rid of traditional home economics, maybe blend it into other curriculum. I’m not sure yet what the answer is.”

Slater is now working with stakeholders to discuss new curriculum, which hasn’t been updated in over 20 years. She notes some classes still have students cooking with white flour or focusing more on assembling food—like making mini pizzas from hamburger buns—rather than learning how to prepare food using basic, healthy ingredients and navigate nutritional information in food labels and menus.

We should follow England’s lead, Slater says. Earlier this month, the British government made classes in healthy foods and cooking mandatory for middle school students.

She insists it doesn’t make sense to only make gym class compulsory—as it is the case in Manitoba. Many of the lessons in nutrition were transferred to physical education curriculum in 2000 but they don’t translate, she says. “One teacher told me that’s like learning basketball by watching YouTube. You can’t learn about food theoretically. You need both theory and the applied aspect.”

Her study—the first of its kind in Canada—also revealed concerns about a surge in retirement among home ec teachers, the growing number of teachers who are assuming the role but don’t have the specialized training, and the transformation of home ec into culinary arts, which focuses more on preparing young people to work in the food industry rather than healthy eating. But she also heard about students who are keen on educating themselves; they want to learn more about eating local foods and the effects of food production on the environment.

“It’s a crazy, mixed-up food time in society right now. (School) is a place where they can start to tackle and wrestle some of these issues,” Slater says.

March is Nutrition Month

March 15, 16, 17

A free public lecture
SATIETY and WEIGHT MANAGEMENT
Dr. Susan Raatz from the USDA-ARS Human Nutrition Research Center Robert B. Schultz Theatre March 21, 7pm

Awards night. Join the round table as a panel of experts discuss the role of food in maintaining health.

Functional Foods and Natural Health Products Graduate Research Symposium Canad Inn, Fort Garry Campus March 22

Screening of documentary Food Inc. and test your grocery shopping skills with the Supermarket Sweep game.

Fireplace Lounge, University Centre March 28