

## *The Importance of a Good School Food Culture*

### *Case Study: New Rush Hall SEN School*

The New Rush Hall School is a special school for children aged between 4 and 16, who have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. It is located in the London Borough of Redbridge. In the last two Ofsted inspections it has been judged to be outstanding.

#### *The Allotment*

The school allotment has been running for approximately six years. It required fairly substantial set up costs, mainly for installing a high fence to protect the designated area, to have water plumbed in and to buy and install a sturdy shed, greenhouse and tools, including a small rotavator. The school employs a horticulture teacher two days a week, one in primary and one in secondary, to manage the allotment and teach the pupils.

#### *What Do We Grow And How Do We Use It?*

In the communal areas we grow herbs, flowers, fruit and vegetables. These are mainly tended by the primary pupils. Secondary pupils have their own small plots within the allotment and research and choose their own varieties for growing. The only restrictions are that what they grow does not interfere or shade anyone else's plot and that it is legal! Primary and secondary pupils also cut and arrange flowers for the dining room and school foyer. The produce is used in school dinners or in cookery lessons so that pupils can experience every stage of food use, from planting, through to growing, harvesting and eating.

The school feels so strongly that this an important part of the curriculum and learning for life that three years ago it invested in a new food technology room, at a cost of £100,000, that provides a state of the art learning environment. For the last 6 years it has also employed an experienced chef to improve the quality of school lunches and provide children with wholesome, freshly cooked meals every day. Along with the food technology teacher, he also helps to teach the children how to cook and prepare what they grow.

#### *What Do The Children Get Out Of It?*

- They are encouraged to try new types of fruit and vegetables, improving their diet and expanding the range of healthy food they eat. They are also encouraged to use the wide range of herbs that they grow in cooking and learn how they can enhance the flavour of food.
- They learn how to use a range of tools safely and the horticultural techniques needed for successful growth.
- They learn to understand the links between animals and plants, for example, the importance of earthworms in improving the soil and the damage that slugs and snails can do to plants.



- They learn patience! In a world that often makes them demand instant gratification, having to wait a few weeks or months to get their final product can be much more rewarding; this can be seen in the face of the child who eats the first strawberry that he grew himself!
- As many of the children have emotional and behavioural problems, the therapeutic value of the allotment cannot be underestimated. It provides a quiet and non-threatening space which allows them to think and talk about what is going on in their lives as they work.
- For a child with low self-esteem, a huge sense of achievement can be gained from growing their own food and seeing others enjoying eating it.

