The importance of food and nutrition education in schools has never wavered in my personal view, having originally trained as a “food” teacher. What has changed is the societal context in which food and nutrition education now sits: increasing rates of childhood obesity, resource challenges in schools, and issues relating to teacher recruitment and training.

In the context of child health in the UK, the focus is centered on childhood obesity, with one in ten children aged 4–5 years being overweight or obese when they start school, rising to one in three children by the age of 11–15 years. There is clearly a call to action in relation to obesity; however, there are also concerns over other aspects of children’s diets.

The National Diet and Nutrition Survey shows low intakes of a number of micronutrients, as well as fiber, and 16% of children aged between 5 and 15 years ate the recommended five or more portions of fruit and vegetables a day. This suggests that there is an issue with the whole diet, not just one that focuses on overweight and obesity. In addition, many children are also not reaching the recommended one hour of physical activity per day.

The UK government has introduced a number of measures through the Childhood obesity – a plan of action, including a soft drinks levy (sugar tax), a sugar reformulation program reduction in the food most commonly eaten by children, introducing a Healthy rating scheme for schools, promoting physical activity, and updating school food standards. While the importance of food education in the formal school curriculum is mentioned, no specific recommendations are made.

The curriculum in England specifically includes ‘cooking and nutrition’, requiring pupils aged 5–14 years to be taught about food origins and provenance, cooking and food preparation, and applying healthy eating and nutrition. However, research indicates that since its introduction in 2014 there has been no change (or a decrease) in lesson length, funding, and teaching resource provision. Teachers also report that they are
constrained by a lack of time, budget, and resources to deliver the food skills and knowledge in the curriculum and have limited opportunities for continuing professional development. All teachers should receive training in relevant aspects of nutrition and have an understanding of the important role they play in supporting the health and wellbeing of children in their care. It has been suggested that Key Performance Indicators for delivering food education in schools should be established, helping to set out minimum learning experiences that school pupils should receive as part of their education entitlement.

Another vehicle to support the promotion of food and nutrition is through health promotion programs. A number of such programs are funded by local authorities, providing holistic support through a whole school perspective. In addition, there are many other organizations nationally and locally, typically non-profit, that also offer advice and support in health promotion. For example, British Nutrition Foundation runs a Healthy Eating Week for schools providing a focal point during the year. Schools welcome these types of health promotion programs, enabling them to engage in national initiatives, implement health promotion activities, and develop competence.

While it is acknowledged that there are a number of issues, it must be remembered that there is also a lot of great work happening in our schools every day. The focus must be on ensuring that policy and practice directly address these issues. Food and nutrition education must be compulsory in all our schools; teachers should be supported professionally through their teaching career; and those supporting food and nutrition in schools must work together to make a lasting difference which is lifelong for children.