Connecting with Cultural Identity Foods

LeeKit: Unveiling Ancestral Foods through Workshops in Welsh Schools | Wales

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"First, we learn to appreciate food, then to cook, and finally to prepare it for others." This quote by renowned chef Ottolenghi encapsulates the journey of the Leekit project, which reimagines food education for students in Wales by linking them to their cultural and ancestral food heritage. This initiative sparks curiosity, builds awareness, and fosters a deep connection to food beyond its nutritional value.

BACKGROUND

The project Leekit describes a methodology of connecting students and teachers with culturally relevant, ancestral food, through a practical, dynamic workshop in schools. Leekit was inspired by Tapiokit, the workshop focused on the cultivation of cassava in Brazil. The teams at Maniva Institute and Food Sense Wales, together with a group of Welsh food leaders, including historian Carwyn Graves and the Dietetics team at Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, adapted the Tapiokit methodology specifically for teachers and students in Wales.

The project aimed to verify the replicability of the Brazilian method in a new cultural context. By studying Welsh food traditions and involving local experts, the team chose the leek, a symbol deeply rooted in Welsh history, as the focal ingredient.

Educational materials were translated into English and Portuguese, and the Brazilian team visited culturally significant sites in Wales to deepen their understanding of the local food heritage.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS APPROACH

The first stage of the Leekit process was the cultural adaptation of the Tapiokit methodology to the Welsh context. The approach offers historical and geographical knowledge, culinary and nutritional, symbolic and cultural insights, and introduces mindful eating.

This process sought to verify the replicability of the original project's methodology in another country. To this end, a study was carried out on the territory and the local food culture, selecting an ingredient that was in tune with this culture. The learning journey for this adaptation involved collaborating with the food historian Carwyn Graves and the Dietetics team at Cardiff and Vale University Health Board. The materials for the workshops - which included one guide for teachers and another for students - were translated into both English and Portuguese.

In addition, preceding the delivery of the workshops, the facilitators from the Brazilian Maniva Institute team (Teresa Corção and Caroline DeCnop) visited a series of culturally significant sites to immerse themselves in the heritage and history of Wales.

The sites visited were St. Davids Cathedral, St. David's birthplace, Caerhys Organic Farm, and National Museum of Wales (St. Fagans).

The second stage of the Leekit intervention was the delivery of the workshops. This involved one session to ‘train the trainers’, in which teachers and dietitians were introduced to the methodology. Then there were two workshops of two hours each delivered at Pentrebane Primary School, on the outskirts of Cardiff. The first session, delivered to a (year 2) class of 6-year-olds, was facilitated by Teresa Corçao of the Maniva Institute. The second session, for a (year 4) class of 9-year-olds, was facilitated by the teachers and observed by the Maniva Institute and Food Sense Wales teams. These workshops involved an interactive session exploring the history and geography of the Leek, including its significance to the nation.
The whole approach was described in detail in a beautifully designed teachers’ manual and students’ handbook which not only supported this series of workshops but also provided a resource for other schools and settings.

The final dimension to the project was the engagement of policymakers with the initiative. There was a visit to the Welsh Parliament/Senedd, and a meeting - with members of Senedd and the Commissioner for the Welfare of Future Generations - presenting Brazilian Public Policies on food to the Welsh Government, and discussing the Brazilian School Feeding Programme (PNAE) and its relevance to Wales.
The whole process was described in the following press release.

Consciousness elements

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosophers’ literacy method was based on the premise that one learns to read faster if the words have meaning and relate to the student’s reality.

By the same token, the Tapiokit and Leekit workshops renew meaning and awareness of the relationship children have with food in the context of their local culture and environment. The methodology provides educators with a technique for engaging with children in a way that’s different to the simpler transfer of knowledge. This is particularly relevant when working on food as teaching on nutrition in Western cultures is often confined to “do’s and don’ts” about what to eat. This approach engages children’s minds, hearts and senses.

During the workshop, the technique of "playing the ball" (the name given to the exchange of questions and answers with and for the children) is part of the workshop methodology that encourages the children to let go, to engage in a curious way, and to launch ideas in an open and non-judgmental way during practice.

Additionally, Teresa's guided meditation on body awareness and the present moment was carried out before the meal based on the mindful eating technique of Zen master Thich Nhat Hann, to help bring the focus to the present moment, calm them down and prepare them to try the soup made in class.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

Impacts on the different groups involved:

Children: All of the children tried the soup and about half liked it – teachers reported that this was more than expected. About half of them said they enjoyed eating together and trying new food. The most visible and immediate impact was the sense of joy expressed by the children and school staff. Although some children, during the workshop, did not like the soup, they all tried it. This is a crucial aspect of encouraging them to move away from "junk food" consumption patterns and develop a curiosity for genuine, fresh flavours. Additionally, the interest shown by children in not only consuming but also preparing food plays a significant role in fostering empathy, collaboration, and compassion.

Dietitians: According to the survey undertaken after the workshops, 60% of the dietitians who participated believed that the project provided opportunities for students to learn about the preparation and consumption of food in a healthy and conscious way. They also believe that Leekit is effective in bringing together healthy and traditional recipes at school, and promoting positive changes in students' eating habits, encouraging healthier and more balanced choices.

LEARNINGS

The learnings from this initiative emphasize several key aspects. First, the cultural and logistical adaptation of the methodology posed challenges, particularly with language barriers, geographical distances, and working across different cultures, especially in online settings. The Brazilian team noted difficulties with English proficiency, highlighting the need for additional team members, including another permanent administrative person to assist in applying the methodology.

Differences in the learning environments also became apparent. In Wales, schools were

better resourced, and teachers had more technical knowledge about nutrition compared to their Brazilian counterparts. Despite these differences, the Tapiokit/Leekit approach proved beneficial in both settings, offering new insights and sensations to students and teachers. A Wales team member remarked that while cultural differences were significant, the core ideas shared were universal.

There are several potential routes for scaling up the methodology. One involves delivering it to new groups, such as parents, allowing them to engage in hands-on cooking activities with their children. This approach could strengthen family bonds and encourage healthy eating at home. Another path focuses on expanding to more classes and schools. For example, staff at a Cardiff school expressed interest in applying the methodology across the entire school, which would increase its reach without requiring additional training. There is also the possibility of connecting the methodology with existing networks like the ‘Food and Fun’ summer activities in Wales. By developing an online training package, employees could be trained to implement Leekit during the summer holiday programs.

Further opportunities include developing workshops in other countries with a Celtic cultural foundation, which would create a deeper connection to Wales. The methodology could also be adapted for different continents and cultures. An upcoming collaboration with the Kairos Institute in São Paulo, Brazil, will explore how this approach can be applied in connecting local farmers with public food procurement for school lunches.