

National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

CO 04

Inquiry into Childhood Obesity

Evidence from : Dr Emily Warren

In response to your letter regarding the Inquiry into Childhood Obesity, please find attached a summary of my PhD thesis (completed in July 2012), which may be of interest to you. My title was "Families, Schools and Food: A qualitative study of food-related beliefs and behaviours among young children in North Wales" and the full version will soon be available for download from my page of the Glyndwr University online research repository,

http://epubs.glyndwr.ac.uk/do/search/?q=author_lname%3A%22Warren%22%20AND%20author_fname%3A%22Emily%22&sort=date_desc&fq=ancestor_key:521377. On this page are other publications of mine, which may be of interest to you. Particularly, the paper I wrote for Health Promotion International regarding children's food choice in North Wales (<http://epubs.glyndwr.ac.uk/siru/14/>).

Wishing you the best for your endeavours.

Dr Emily Warren (PhD)

Families, Schools and Food: A qualitative study of food-related beliefs and behaviours among young children in North Wales

Summary

This PhD study set out to capture the food-related beliefs and behaviours of children within their local contexts. The PhD thesis begins by exploring literature relating to health inequalities in developed countries. The focus then turns to food-related inequalities in the UK and Wales in particular. Here, the effects of social and environmental differences on children's dietary health become the central theme of the literature review. The study used a qualitative design, theoretically informed by post positivist methodologies, including social interactionism, phenomenology and critical realism. A qualitative study design allowed the researcher to ascertain the perspective of participants, particularly children, and gather in-depth information on the subject of study.

The study focused on two areas in North Wales situated in close proximity to one another, which are characterised by contrasting advantage and deprivation. The two areas were purposively selected in order to observe and examine children and families' food-related beliefs and behaviours within these two contrasting areas. Research methods included observations of the local areas and schools, focus groups with a sample of children from

schools in two study areas and interviews with a sample of parents, school and local education authority staff. Hence, the qualitative study explored children's eating behaviours within their wider social contexts (namely the home and school).

The study findings highlighted differences in the local environments of the two areas involved in the study. Here, characteristics of area, such as open spaces, leisure facilities, retail environments and perceptions of local safety, were examined. Then, children's two primary social contexts (home and school) were explored in relation to how children experienced food in those environments. Within the home setting, eating/shopping habits of parents, parental attitudes towards healthy eating and experiences of family illness, were highlighted as particularly poignant to children's experiences of food. Findings relating to schools indicated that while national agendas for health promotion were in place in all schools, the ensuing changes and interventions were often experienced differently in the two areas.

Having considered the differences between the two areas of study, the findings turned to similarities between food-related beliefs and behaviours among participants in the two areas. Here, several constraints and facilitators were identified, which, relating to children's eating behaviours, cut across socioeconomic characteristics area. These included attitudes towards obesity, the enduring paradoxical relationship between knowledge about nutrition and food preferences, and family dynamics (including employment, parental separation, grandparents and siblings).

The findings are discussed in relation to relevant literature relating to people, place and food, ideologies of health, lifestyle constraints, experiences of illness and intergenerational influence. Finally, the theoretical arguments of Bourdieu's capital accumulation and expenditure were drawn on, and discussed in relation to the study findings.