

ABSTRACT

Café Scientifique is a science communication initiative that focuses on creating a two-way dialogue between scientists and the public. Scientific topics are discussed and debated with a scientist in the informal environment of a bar or café. The concept was developed for adults, but since 2005 a Junior version of Café Scientifique (JCS) has been instigated in schools, principally in the North of England.

This study uses a mixed-method approach to consider the challenges that are involved in running JCS in schools and to ask what students (aged 11-18) feel are the components of JCS that engage them in science.

Interviews with JCS organisers revealed that teachers perceive barriers to setting up this initiative that include the time taken and the problem of finding speakers. The interviews identified that the external JCS organisers have a pivotal role in the development of the events. Speakers' presentation style and the way they facilitate the discussion influence students' engagement with the science in JCS.

The findings from questionnaires completed by students show that they are engaged with the JCS model of presenting science. They are enthusiastic, keen to meet real life scientists and hear about science outside the classroom, and open to the JCS opportunities for discussion. Students found the discussions thought provoking, but the level of student involvement in these discussions was not always very high.

The integration of the findings suggests that recommendations for developing JCS should include concentrated efforts to expand the network of JCS organisers and to promote links with the scientific community to encourage potential speakers to become involved. JCS is more likely to be successful if a JCS experienced science communicator is speaking.

Students' experiences of school science lessons, particularly in the light of recent National Curriculum changes, may influence how JCS run in the future. The findings from this study suggest that JCS is applicable to all types of secondary schools and across a broad age range of students.

By concentrating on the basics of strong speakers and facilitated discussions, JCS is a successful model for engaging young people between the ages of 11-18 with science.