

Agrifood systems and Food Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Food is central to our daily routines and essential to sustaining ourselves, reminding us that every human being is connected to the earth and dependent on ecosystems (Martina & Massicote, 2021). Several major initiatives in recent years, have brought renewed attention to the benefits of improved food and nutrition literacy, namely for the individual - better health, more self-esteem, but also for the community, bringing a better quality of life. In this context, there is growing evidence that increased food literacy significantly influences eating patterns (Perry et al, 2017). Improved food and nutrition literacy can lead, in the long term, to greater adaptability of eating habits to different conditions caused, for example, by instability in the supply chain (e.g., by war or pandemics) or the effects of the changes need to be addressed to reach the limits of carbon neutrality by 2050 or to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. The need to improve food literacy is also related to others, often overlooked, issues. Food and nutrition illiteracy, often reflects poverty, economic deprivation/crisis situations, basic skills and unearned knowledge that could foster a healthy relationship with food and contribute to the health and well-being of some population groups.

This communication adopts the definition of food literacy proposed by Tracy et al. (2015), which proposes the incorporation of a positive relationship with food, built on social, cultural, and environmental experiences, allowing to support individuals in making decisions that promote their health. As cited by Thompson (2021), this requires the public to meet higher levels of knowledge, skills or behaviours and have a more critical and active understanding of the food system to be considered 'food-literate'.

In Portugal, the National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition was published in 2021 (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.º 132/2021). This document highlights the strategic importance that, in the previous National Program for the Promotion of Healthy Food, defined the need to "promote and develop literacy and autonomy for the exercise of healthy choices by the consumer," related to the goal of "increasing food and nutritional literacy and empowerment of citizens of different socioeconomic and age groups, especially the most disadvantaged, for healthy food choices and practices and the encouragement of good practices in labelling, advertising and marketing of food products".

This research explored some of the results of food literacy-related programs in national and international schools in a food environment that is changing fast, with children and young people having fewer opportunities to learn and practice their food handling skills. It is recognized that food literacy is an excellent pedagogical field to encourage critical thinking and hands-on, experiential learning but Martina & Massicote (2021) recognise difficulties in providing students with comprehensive food literacy. Vidgen (2016) refers the increase in women's participation in the workforce, the phenomenon of urbanization, increasing food consumption outside home, and exposure to other ingredients, foods and cultures through travel, and the broader use of internet, as influences of a greater diversity of food tastes beyond traditional local cuisines, leading some segments of population to rely on processed and convenience foods consumption. The studies usually target children and young student, but less research was

conducted with higher education students or other young adults, and even less are worried with topics that involve the knowledge of local products, quality regimes, diversity of agri-food systems, certifications and knowledge of their logos and their correct interpretation, environmental sustainability guarantees, among other factors. In this chapter, public sector catering (e.g., schools, universities, ...) has a strategic role to play. The Agricultural European Innovation Partnership (EIP-AGRI, 2015), reports that "public procurement of food can contribute to food literacy (e.g., understanding the impact of food choices on health, environment and community), help achieve broader policy objectives (health, education and environmental goals) and support local producers and employment." The transition towards sustainable agri-food systems, is a great opportunity to game-changing solution, introducing one of the components of the International Food Literacy Survey Content Validity Study (Fingland, 2021): DETERMINE WHAT IS IN A FOOD PRODUCT, WHERE IT CAME FROM, HOW TO STORE IT AND HOW TO USE IT. This is crucial to empower students to make informed choices and become engaged citizens to promote not only but also individual health and well-being, leading to improved nutrition and less food loss and waste. (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2022). The same document reports that "Increased consumer awareness creates demand for foods from sustainable sources that can support fair trade, decent working conditions for food producers, animal welfare, and environmentally responsible green consumption (purchasing and disposal)". Surveys carried by different entities of agri-foods systems shows consumers confused by nutrition labels and conflicting views on healthy eating. The results obtained in this literature review allow us to introduce the dimension of diversity and sustainability of agri-food systems and short food circuits (re)orienting the development and evaluation of future programs of promoting healthy food consumption through schools and other public facilities.

KEYWORDS

Food literacy; sustainable agri-food systems, food literacy programs

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