Time to cook! Developing a conceptual framework to guide healthy eating education in time-scarce lifestyles

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ABSTRACT

Background
Various countries around the world have seen a decline in home cooking with time constraints being forwarded by individuals of different ages and life stages as one of the main reasons. This decrease is manifest in different ways, ranging from an overall reduction in home-prepared meals, to greater use of convenience foods, including highly processed ingredients and partially- or ready-prepared meals. Time constraints are often explained as an outcome of increased hours in paid employment, lack of time to ‘buy’ time by paying for home help or child care. With respect to food preparation, time constraints are sometimes exacerbated by lack of cooking skills and meal ideas, perceived lack of self efficacy, unwillingness to make an effort, and a lack of support from other family members, amongst others. Studies have shown that frequent home cooking in general, and of healthy meals in particular, can improve diet quality and reduce the risk of various chronic diseases. As a result, different interventions have sought to offer training in healthy meal planning and cooking skills to specific target audiences, in diverse settings and using different approaches and media.

Objective
The aim of this study was to review existing literature and delve deeper into perceptions of time as a barrier to home cooking, the relationships between time and cooking skills and related outcomes, and how time is addressed in food, nutrition and cooking educational initiatives. The goal was to generate a conceptual framework to help inform healthy eating education for different learners keeping in mind the perceived or actual barrier of time scarcity in contemporary Western-style lifestyles.

Methods
A narrative literature review was conducted, involving searches in PubMed and Google Scholar, using the keywords time, food preparation, cooking, health, and by consulting other grey literature. Years covered were 2010-2020.

Analysis
102 studies were reviewed and thematic analysis was used to elicit main time-related factors which directly or indirectly were involved in food choices, preparation and consumption, and food, nutrition and cooking skills education.

Results
Multiple themes emerged which were grouped under five key themes as follows:
- general time scarcity and association with consumption of food of low nutritive value (e.g. highly-processed ready-prepared meals);
- duration of food preparation and association with consumption of specific foods (e.g. vegetables, fruit, cholesterol-rich foods);
- diversity of educational strategies to successfully promote and aid time cooking efficiency directly or through intermediaries;
- creative and motivational inspiration for healthy snack and meal production based on personal attitudes to cooking;
- practical skills to plan and prepare healthy meals for future or immediate consumption.

These themes often manifested differently depending primarily on the age, gender, ethnicity, and parental, employment, health or financial status of the individuals involved, as well as personal priorities, social norms and contexts. The educational interventions often addressed time constraints alongside other barriers to home cooking, acknowledging the complexity of the related behaviours and inter-related influencing factors.

The conceptual framework designed aimed to integrate these themes to guide educational planning. This framework is of a preliminary nature and will be further refined as the salient themes are revisited in order to better study the interlinkages.

Conclusions
A conceptual framework based on evidence from the literature shows how time availability and usage have implications for diet quality, and how time can be addressed in education for healthy eating. Further research could test the conceptual framework in setting development of practical nutrition education to suit contemporary time-scarce lifestyles.

FOOD PREPARATION

Conclusions
Time usage for home cooking has implications for dietary outcomes, health and quality of life. The role of time in different stages of meal planning and preparation has diverse meanings for individuals and is thus also managed differently. Some aspects of time are already addressed effectively in education for healthy eating. The conceptual framework presented aims to build on what already works well. Future research could test the refined framework to assess its potential for developing targeted, acceptable and practical nutrition education for healthy home cooking in current time-scarce lifestyles.

Figure 2. The Home Cooking in Time-Scarce Lifestyles Conceptual Framework for Healthy Eating Education.