Food literacy: An emerging concept for dietary education

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INTRODUCTION

Food Literacy (FL): An emerging concept in both research literature and health promotion efforts
- Practised as a set of practical tools and retrieval perspectives that can help individuals to develop a positive relationship with food & eating that results in improved personal and planetary health [1,2]
- Situates nutritional health within a socio-ecological context [1,2]

Dietetics Profession:
- Loss of a connection to practical foods & skill & knowledge in previous decades has been recognized by Canadian & US dietetics professions [3]
- In 2020, diet literacy was added to the Integrated Competencies for Dietetic Education and Practice (ICDEP) for Canadian dietetic training programs [4]

Little data exists regarding implementation of this complex topic into dietetic education programs

OBJECTIVE

To explore the experiences and perspectives of dietetic educators in incorporating food literacy into undergraduate food and nutrition programs across Canada

METHODS

- Interpretive Description (ID) was the qualitative methodology used [5]
- ID aims for practical outcomes that can inform practice [5,6]
- Dietetic educators (i.e., faculty & instructional staff) who were involved in planning and teaching academic courses within Canadian food and nutrition programs were recruited through:
  - Program Directors from Canadian accredited undergraduate food and nutrition programs and dietetic educator networks
  - One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in both English & French (Nov 2021-Apr 2022) & transcribed verbatim
- Analysis consisted of coding, categorizing and eventual construction of themes with aid of NVivo software
- Ethics approval obtained from USask Behavioural Research Ethics Board

RESULTS

Demographics:
- > 10 Canadian dietetic educators were interviewed
- > 3 of 10 educators were French speaking
- 15 of 18 educators were dietitians

Table 1. Relevant demographic data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic region</th>
<th>type of program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General &amp; British Columbia</td>
<td>n = 7 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially integrated</td>
<td>n = 7 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full integrated</td>
<td>n = 9 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Experience</td>
<td>Level of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5 years</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 5-15 years</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 15 years</td>
<td>BSc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Themes: Data analysis yielded four themes with (supporting sub-themes) that further our understanding of incorporating food literacy into dietetic education programs

- Food literacy is important to the Dietetic Profession:
  - 1. Addition of FL to dietetic education is enthusiastically embraced
  - 2. Philosophical alignment with FL
  - 3. FL is important to the dietetic practice
  - 4. Changing attitudes in the dietetic profession

- Conceptualization of Food Literacy is still evolving:
  - 1. Emphasis on food skills & food knowledge
  - 2. Positive view of FL definition
  - 3. FL is too aspirational
  - 4. Practical use of FL is questioned

- Aspects of Food Literacy Well Represented in Curriculums, but there is room for Growth:
  - 1. FL taught throughout many courses
  - 2. Few to no chances made to curriculum with new competencies
  - 3. Teaching of some ecologic FL components could be enhanced

Food Literacy’s Incorporation in Curriculum is Challenged by Unclear Key Expectations:
- 1. Lack of an operational FL definition
- 2. Lack of clarity in assessing the FL practice competency in ICDEP
- 3. Students’ understanding of the role of dietitians

- Conclusions:
  - The importance attributed to food literacy confirms the profession’s appreciation for a wider view of health that includes a socio-ecological perspective
  - This approach signals a continuing return focus to food as central to dietetic practice that began two decades ago
  - A more fulsome understanding of food literacy, beyond food skills and food knowledge, will develop as the profession engages more with this topic
  - Fostering food literacy in clients will nurture a more participatory client/health care provider relationship
  - Clients can decide how and to what extent to apply their food literacy

- Implications for Practice:
  - An operational definition of food literacy, which considers FL in the context of dietetic practice, will be helpful for incorporation of this topic into dietetic education programs
  - Best practices going forward should incude a focus on the broader concept of literacy
  - Extra support and instruction is recommended for educators to use the prescribed assessment tool (i.e., Miller’s Pyramid) to evaluate student achievement of the food literacy practice competency in the ICDEP
  - Introducing food literacy or a socio-ecological perspective early in programs may be helpful to offset resistance by some students who are not as familiar with this perspective of nutritional health

REFERENCES


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