

The Political Action of Food Literacy: A Scoping Review

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Food literacy (FL) has become a key concept for many family and consumer sciences/home economics (FCS/HE) professionals, especially those with specializations in dietetics and nutrition, food studies, and education. References to food literacy have grown exponentially since its first mention in the 1990s (Begley & Vidgen, 2016) and are used across a range of sectors (agriculture, sociology, health, FCS/HE education, social justice).

In this review, we concentrated on FL reports from 2009 to 2019, selecting articles in English language peer-reviewed journals that focused on defining, defending, or implementing FL. Thirty-six FL articles were selected in these categories: those that focused on definition/conceptual issues (10); those that emphasized programmatic/curriculum descriptions (9); those that advocated for inclusion of broader social, cultural, economic, political, environmental issues (8); those that highlight barriers or raised assessment issues (6); and those that made connections to home economics or health literacy (3).

Food and nutrition has always been a significant component of FCS/HE, therefore our goal was to highlight areas for FCS/HE leadership. We

found considerable attention on the topic by Australian and Canadian HE and health professionals and articles from a few other countries such as Denmark (Benn, 2014), Netherlands (Poelman et al., 2018), Switzerland, Japan (Kimura, 2011), Italy (Palumbo et al., 2019) and South Africa (Fisher et al., 2019); however, we found very few American sources that used the term *food literacy*.

We begin with an overview of definitions/descriptions of FL and then focus on the rationales offered for FL education. To understand and explain the rationales, we ventured into associated literature. We then identified areas that are problematic, and throughout the paper we discuss how FCS/HE professions can provide leadership to FL programs.

Defining Food Literacy

Descriptions of the concept range from the specific ability to cook or read food labels to the broad ability to apply knowledge and critical skills related to food preparation, food systems, food safety, food security, sustainability, food culture, nutrition, and health in making ethically defensible decisions and actions related to food acquisition and use (Benn, 2014; Smith, 2009). Technical skills initially dominated the field and remain a strong component but FL has broadened to include action and decision-making (Slater, 2017), “social and cultural connections” (Begley & Vidgen, 2016,

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p. 18), food acquisition and consumption “as a socially embedded practice” (Renwick & Powell, 2019, p. 24), and critical food pedagogy (Renwick, 2017). Begley and Vigden (2016) argued that FL includes every activity associated with food.

Various attempts have been made to describe/define FL by extracting its key attributes. Vidgen and Gallegos (2014) defined FL as “a collection of interrelated knowledge, skills and behaviours required to plan, manage, select, prepare and eat foods to meet needs and determine food intake” (p. 19). Their definition, drawing from studies of experts and individuals, also included “the scaffolding that empowers individuals, households, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change and support dietary resilience over time” (p. 55). Truman et al. (2017) used a scoping review to map out six major themes related to FL: skills and behaviors, food/health choices, culture, knowledge, emotions, and food systems. Perry et al. (2017), also using a scoping review, conceptualized food literacy as involving intrinsic (food skills, food and nutrition knowledge, self-efficacy, and confidence) and extrinsic (ecologic) factors to make food decisions. Slater et al. (2018) used a Delphi study to create a list of competencies under the headings of confidence and empowerment with food; joy and meaning with food; and equity and sustainability for food systems. Probably the most comprehensive definition at this time is the one created by Cullen et al. (2015), who synthesized more than 50 articles into the following:

[Food literacy is] the ability of an individual to understand food in a way that they develop a positive relationship with it, including food skills and practices across the lifespan in order to navigate, engage, and participate within a complex food system. It’s the ability to make decisions to support the achievement of personal health and a sustainable food system considering environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political components. (p. 4)

A definition based on the Family and Consumer Sciences Body of Knowledge (FCS-BOK) (AAFCS, 2010) would make a valuable contribution to the literature and professional practice. Food is a

basic need and therefore a comprehensive conception of FL should include all the components of the FCS-BOK model: considerations of individual well-being, family strengths, and community vitality; human ecosystems and life course development; as well as considerations of global interdependence, resource development and sustainability, wellness, appropriate technology, and capacity building.

Why Food Literacy?

Stakeholders and context often determine the intent of FL. Rationales for FL vary according to involvement of policymakers, health professionals, dietitians, educators, community activists, and the particular milieu such as agriculture and food systems education (Powell & Agnew, 2011), FCS/HE education (Benn, 2014; Pendergast & Dewhurst, 2012; Slater, 2017; Smith, 2009), obesity reduction interventions (Nelson et al., 2013), and nutrition and dietetic practice (Cullen et al., 2015). As a result, various reasons are advanced for FL. The following examination of the dominant discourses reveals what FL is or should be.

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We Eat Food, Not Nutrients

Many advocates argue that the domination of nutrient-centered practice, education, and research has not been effective in improving health or disease prevention (Krause et al., 2016; Smith, 2009; Velardo, 2015; Worsley, 2015). Mayes and Thompson (2015) describe the current obsession with nutrients as *nutritional scientism* whereas Scrinis (2008; 2016) uses the term *nutritionism*. The ineffectiveness lies in the emphasis on nutrients rather than food, resulting in standardizing and quantifying food body-relationship (food groups and serving sizes; calorie counts; nutrient analysis; BMI; etc.), decontextualizing food behavior from





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ecological factors, and reinforcing the hierarchy of expert knowledge (Krause et al., 2016). Scientists have difficulty deriving clear guidelines because studies focused on individual nutrients fail to produce an understanding of what happens to nutrients when mixed with other nutrients in the body (Nestle, 2006). *Nutritionism* is also used by industry to convince consumers that even highly processed foods may be perceived as healthful depending on their content of “good” or “bad” nutrients (Scrinis, 2016).

Thus, the concept of FL is advocated by FCS/HE and other scholars because it rises above the transmission of information about nutrients and the focus on biometric markers to encourage critical thinking and positive relationships with food and food as a social practice (Benn, 2014; Pendergast & Dewhurst, 2012; Pendergast et al., 2013; Renwick & Powell, 2019; Slater, 2017; Smith 2009).

Diminishing Cooking Skills

The inability of many people to cook food for themselves means that advice regarding healthy eating is insufficient if people lack the skills to apply it (Caraher, 2012; Caraher & Lang, 1999). Much of the “bring back home ec” literature focuses on the inability to cook (Pendergast et al., 2013; Smith, 2016). There is strong support for FL interventions that include food preparation skills. In fact, it is suggested that cooking skills should be part of dietetics training (Canter et al., 2007) and higher education in FCS/HE (Fordyce-Voorham, 2016). Advocacy for food preparation programs as FL education is an opportunity for the advancement of FCS/HE courses in schools.

The Way We Eat Is Unsustainable

Sustainable diets and understanding the food system are increasingly promoted as essential aspects of FL (Alsaffar, 2016; Johnston et al., 2014; Sumner, 2015). Food production has changed drastically over the years—from small family farms supplying food for themselves and the local community to large corporate-controlled agribusinesses producing and processing food from all over the world (Scrinis, 2007, 2016). In the transition, food production is seen as something to be privatized, owned by

monopoly businesses for profit, traded on commodity markets, and moved across national boundaries to wealthy countries for consumption by those who can pay (Crowther, 2013; Hopma & Woods, 2014; Jarosz, 2014; Nestle, 2006). A result is the widespread availability of inexpensive, high-energy dense foods, food advertising and marketing messages that include unhealthy eating behaviors, opportunities to consume food throughout the day (more ready-to-eat foods available, fast-food outlets, vending machines, etc.) and out of the home, and increases in portion and packaging size (Williams & Nestle, 2015). Consumers have lost touch with how food is produced, where it is produced, and under what condition (Booth & Coveney, 2015; Scrinis, 2016; Vileisis, 2008). Thus, FL advocates argue that FL education ought to include all of the processes and resources involved in moving food from producer to consumer and related sustainability issues; for example, agricultural practices (e.g., chemical use, water consumption, fossil fuel use, monocropping) and many food processing and consumption practices (e.g., food waste, packaging, excessive transportation) are disruptive and have led to environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, global warming, and climate change (Meek & Tarlau, 2016; Rowat et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2013; Sumner, 2015; Widener & Karides, 2014).

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Stall-Meadows (2010) argued for weaving sustainability into FCS education. Slater (2017) posited that FCS/HE professionals need to be at the forefront of FL education as a way to address eroding food knowledge and dependence on highly processed foods. Others use programs such as school gardens as sites for FL education (Nowak et al., 2012).

Food Justice

Those who advocate more critical approaches to FL suggest that FL programs should focus on





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developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes to address food injustices (Gallegos, 2016). Two main food justice goals of projects and policies are described as “increasing access to healthy food among marginalized communities and the establishment of community control over food and agricultural systems” (Alkon, 2017, p. 413). The discourse important to FL centers on food security, food sovereignty, food citizenship, and democracy. Each term warrants consideration for how FCS/HE professionals frame their work within their food education programs.

Generally, *food security* is taken to mean that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Micro-level food security includes individuals and households having an adequate supply of nutritious, safe food to meet their needs, and living in communities where members can obtain safe, culturally acceptable and nutritious diets through sustainable food systems that maximize community self reliance and social justice. Macro-level food security refers to country specific issues and global contexts. The national level includes topics such as national agricultural production; international trade and economic interdependence; national policies related to food production, processing, and distribution; and available resources for production and distribution. The global level includes topics such as equitable control and fair and effective policies related to food production, processing, and distribution; efficient responses to food crises; international aid programs; and sustainable agricultural practices. Distinguishing between the various levels of food insecurity is important to food literacy because strategies directed toward improving food security at one level may be quite different from those aimed at other levels (Smith et al., 2013).

FL education programs have a role to play in addressing food security (Gallegos, 2016; IFHE, 2014). To do so, programs need to provide knowledge, skills, and abilities for those who are food insecure, and they need to educate the general population about the complexity of the problem, fostering the ability to critique policies and actions that are simplistic or ineffective. At the macro level, for example, nations, governmental agencies, and transnational agribusinesses frequently “promote

technological, market and political solutions that are variously framed at global, regional or national scales” (Hopma & Woods, 2014, p. 774). These solutions tend to support agribusiness and the corporations that control the food supply with both environmental and social implications (Holt-Giménez et al., 2012; Hopma & Woods, 2014; Jarosz, 2014) but with little impact on food security (Andrée et al., 2014; Hopma & Woods, 2014; Lang, 2007). At the micro level, cooking classes often overlook the real lives of people and their circumstances that make it impossible to act differently (Bowen et al., 2014; Meah & Watson, 2011).

Those who advocate for food sovereignty believe that agriculture should remain outside the control of trade agreements meaning that individuals, people, communities, and countries are able to establish their own food policies.

Food sovereignty is defined as the right of peoples to determine their own food and agricultural policies and to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives and prevent the dumping of agricultural and food products in their markets (Andrée et al., 2014; Booth & Coveney, 2015; Prost et al., 2018; Via Campesina, 1996). Those who advocate for food sovereignty believe that agriculture should remain outside the control of trade agreements meaning that individuals, people, communities, and countries are able to establish their own food policies. Food sovereignty takes a political stance for people’s empowerment, social justice, and food as a human right (Hopma & Woods, 2014; Jarosz, 2014) challenging the increasing monopolization and control of global agribusinesses and the state (Andrée et al., 2014; Crowther, 2013; Hopma & Woods, 2014; Jarosz, 2014; Lang, 2007; Via Campesina, 1996). Principles that underlie food sovereignty include: respect for the natural processes of the earth and sustainability (Andrée et al., 2014; Desmarais, 2003; Lang, 2007); grounding





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the production and consumption of food in and governed by social values that are just and equitable as well as moral and ethical (Booth & Coveney, 2015; Hopma & Woods, 2014; Jarosz, 2014); the ability to acquire food is ensured and that the food itself is nutritionally adequate and personally and culturally acceptable (Desmarais, 2003; Hopma & Woods, 2014); food is obtained in a manner that upholds human dignity including fair pay and work conditions for workers (Andrée et al., 2014; Jarosz, 2014; Lang, 2007) and the rights of women as farmers and also primary care-providers for the health and well-being of their families (Desmarais, 2003).

Powell and Wittman (2018) argued for the inclusion of food sovereignty in FL programs and Meek and Tarlau (2016) suggested it is central to food system education that draws upon critical pedagogy and transformative education theories. These theories are familiar to FCS/HE professionals (Laster, 2008; McGregor, 2004; Smith, 2017).

Food citizenship and *food democracy* are also part of the food justice literature and are sometimes used interchangeably. For Wilkins (2005) food citizenship is “the practice of engaging in food-related behaviours that support the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system” (p. 271). For Lang (1998), food democracy is “the right of all citizens to have access to a decent, affordable, health-enhancing diet, grown in conditions in which they have confidence” (p. 18). Food citizenship acknowledges the rights associated with food choices and the responsibility of individuals to make appropriate decisions in their everyday lives (Booth & Coveney, 2015) within a civil society (Prost et al., 2018). Food democracy is practiced outside the industrial food system (Booth & Coveney, 2015; Prost et al., 2018) and is instead positioned within a human economy where food transactions are part of our daily lives, respond to where we are, and contribute to our humanity and the world (Via Campesina, 1996). The focus therefore becomes about how to respond to and change with our mutable lifeworlds (Booth & Coveney, 2015). As Booth and Coveney (2015) pointed out, a food

democracy focus requires a citizenry that can “gather and share information and empower themselves about where their food comes from and how they can respond meaningfully” (2019, p. 87). Food literacy programs in FCS/HE need to consider how to foster critical food citizenship (Rowat et al., 2019; Williams, 2016).

Although additional factors have not been covered for the sake of brevity (e.g., food safety; labor and gender issues in the food system; the loss of food culture), this brief overview of the main rationales advanced for *food literacy* reveals that it is much more complex than *nutrition knowledge* and *food preparation skills*. To avoid the pitfall of single-agenda rationales in FL programs, the challenge is to integrate them all.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

In reviewing the literature on FL, several gaps emerged. Renwick and Powell (2019) argued that FL is at risk of being over theorized and under practiced. They highlighted the lack of attention to *literacy*, the over emphasis on the individual, and the limited information on implementation.

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Little Emphasis on *Literacy*

One flaw in the definitions is “an overwhelming emphasis on food, with far less attention being paid to literacy” (Renwick & Powell, 2019, p. 24). Pendergast and Dewhurst (2012) link FL to HE literacy. Later, Pendergast (2015) outlined the essential elements of HE literacy as: focusing on the fundamental needs and practical concerns of individuals and families, including multidisciplinary integration of knowledge and skills; and the capacity to take critical/transformational action for the well-being of all. FL has also been linked to Nutbeam’s (2000) notion of levels of health





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literacy: functional, interactive, and critical (Smith, 2009; Velardo, 2015). Smith (2009) noted the similarities between Nutbeam's levels and the systems of action in the Brown and Paolucci (1979) mission of home economics and Renwick (2017) recommended a critical literacy approach in which there is no hierarchy and all three dimensions for literate practice be connected with the social context. These uses of *literacy* all speak of it in terms of what it enables us to do as compared to a measure of achievement in reading and writing.

Luke and Freebody (2003), in arguing that literacy is so much more than reading and writing, proposed that literacy is about "the extent to which people and communities ... can take part, fluently, effectively and critically, in the various text and discourse-based events that characterize contemporary semiotic societies and economies" (p. 52). In their focus on the "everyday," Luke and Freebody pointed out that being literate involves being "able to talk and listen, view and engage with various written, spoken, visual and aural texts in order to achieve social position" (p. 53). This definition of *literacy* as an everyday activity and its relational nature is not well articulated in the FL literature but is familiar territory for FCS/HE professionals and is an opportunity to share their expertise.

Focus on the Individual

There is a strong focus in much of the literature on individual action, missing the familial, contextual, environmental, and global factors that are beyond an individual's control (Meah & Watson, 2011; Renwick & Powell, 2019). Cullen et al. (2015) acknowledged that FL is broader than the individual when they include "the achievement of personal health and a sustainable food system considering environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political components" (p. 4). In order to achieve this, people must be able to act not only as individuals but also in concert with others about a food supply that meets social and environmental needs. Unique possibilities for leadership and research in FL education are available for the FCS/HE profession to foster the evolution of food literacy from a continuing reliance on the development of food skills and

knowledge to one that aligns with the FCS-BOK, especially capacity building.

Limited Implementation Literature

According to Renwick and Powell (2019), the practical implications of FL have been unexplored. Assessment and evaluation research on programs is limited (Begley et al., 2018; Poelman et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2019; Yuen et al., 2018), and the existing research indicates that FL can be problematic. Anderson and Falkenberg (2016) found that functional skills were emphasized and critical and relational issues were overlooked. Brooks and Begley (2014) questioned the effectiveness of programs after finding that most did not use a theoretical basis for their development. Leahy and Wright (2016) suggested, "students would be better served if classrooms sought to engage with the complexities of food, its supply and availability, ethics, cultural meanings and aesthetics" (p. 15). Food pedagogy is largely ignored (Flowers & Swan, 2016), although FCS/HE teachers possess pedagogical expertise required to design effective food literacy programs (Fordyce-Voorham & Lai-Yeung, 2016). The actual practice of FL in FCS/HE classrooms is definitely an area for further research (Markow et al., 2012).

Additionally, attention should be given to those teaching FL. In an Australian study, most teachers mentioned that they needed more training and resources to increase their confidence in teaching FL curriculum (Nanayakkara et al., 2017, 2018). In a systematic review of FL in school programs, Bailey et al. (2019) recommended that future research should focus on providing teachers with greater support and adequate professional development in FL. There is a role here for AAFCS and other FCS/HE professional organizations.

For effective FL education in schools and communities, elimination or reduction of barriers is necessary (Colatruglio & Slater, 2016; Ronto et al., 2016, 2017; Truman & Elliott, 2019). Truman and Elliott's (2019) literature review revealed six types of barriers evident in varying degrees depending on the context of individual, school, or community adoption: lack of knowledge, lack of interest, lack of skills/abilities, lack of resources and time, and environmental conditions. Ronto et al. (2016,





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2017) also highlighted the lack of status of FL as well as insufficient time to develop sustainable food-related life skills and introduce broader concepts of FL such as environmental sustainability and non-supportive school environments. FCS/HE professionals should be involved in researching and determining how to address the barriers to implementing FL.

Conclusion

Food literacy has become a key concept for educational programs or initiatives that involve food, nutrition, and health: in schools (Anderson & Falkenberg, 2016; Bailey et al., 2019; Brooks & Begley, 2014; Fordyce-Voorham & Lai-Yeung, 2016; Nanayakkara et al., 2017; Nowak et al., 2012; Powell & Agnew, 2011; Ronto et al. 2016, 2017); in communities (Prost et al., 2018; Slater, 2017); and by health and dietetic professionals (Canter et al., 2007; Cullen et al., 2015; Yuen et al., 2018). The field of FCS/HE has a long history in food education, conjoined with its multi- and interdisciplinary expertise; FCS/HE professionals are uniquely placed to engage with FL. With growing interest in FL comes an increased demand to not only understand the term but also to find ways to support individuals and families in understanding how to work with food inside and outside their kitchen spaces.

Being food literate includes more than individual food skills and knowledge.

Being food literate includes more than individual food skills and knowledge. There is a need for building capacity and capability to be literate about food in other ways. Current social, economic, and environmental changes point the way to a broad concept of FL that enables understanding where our food comes from and also awareness of the impact of food knowledge on health, our relationships with others, and the ways in which we can feed ourselves and others in sustainable ways. There is considerable interest in FL across a spectrum of disciplines and fields, leading to many opportunities for FCS/HE scholarship and leadership.

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