

# Food and Nutrition Education: The defense of a counter-hegemonic and historical-critical perspective for education

## Educação Alimentar e Nutricional: a defesa de uma perspectiva contra-hegemônica e histórico-crítica para educação

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### Abstract

This essay proposes to problematize the strategies of food and nutrition education in the context of food and nutrition programs, which, in general, have shown little effectiveness in the face of the challenges of the current scenario, considering the continuous increase of overweight and obesity in the Brazilian population. In general, the programs in this area, aim at the dissemination of guidelines, recommendations and information for the consumption of proper and healthy food, with a view to health promotion, having the biomedical approach as hegemonic model. It will seek to point out theoretical and methodological foundations of education that have a historical-critical perspective, focused on the subjects' reflection on themselves, their practices and eating habits, intending to overcome the biologicist perspective. The debate is based on the premise that the act of feeding involves socio-cultural, environmental, economic, emotional and affective dimensions that should not be ignored or subordinated, since they are determinant in the formation of eating habits and choices, or, by contradiction, in the lack of options in these choices. It is understood that these habits are forged, to a great extent, by the living and working conditions of the subjects, with a strong implication in the organization of their daily lives, in function of the limitations that these conditions produce. Therefore, intervening in these choices requires care, because it deals with objective and subjective dimensions, in particular, cultural and social aspects, in addition to requiring an educational practice that is critically grounded and with theoretical consistency, which

can contribute to the purposes established in the interventions of Food and Nutrition Education.

**Keywords:** Education. Health Education. Public Policies. Food Habits. Obesity.

## Resumo

Este ensaio se propõe a problematizar as estratégias da educação alimentar e nutricional, no âmbito dos programas de alimentação e nutrição, que, de maneira geral, têm apresentado pouca efetividade frente aos desafios do cenário atual, considerando o aumento contínuo do excesso de peso e da obesidade na população brasileira. Os programas nessa área, em geral, visam à disseminação de orientações e recomendações para o consumo de uma alimentação tida como adequada e saudável com vistas à promoção da saúde, tendo como modelo hegemônico a abordagem biomédica. Procurar-se-á apontar fundamentos teóricos e metodológicos da educação que tenham uma perspectiva histórico-crítica, voltada para a reflexão dos sujeitos sobre si e sobre as questões que influenciam suas práticas e hábitos alimentares, que buscam superar a perspectiva biologicista. O debate fundamenta-se na premissa de que o ato de se alimentar envolve dimensões socioculturais, ambientais, econômicas e afetivas que não devem ser ignoradas ou secundarizadas, pois são determinantes na formação de hábitos e escolhas alimentares, ou, por contradição, na falta de opções nessas escolhas. Compreende-se que esses hábitos são forjados, em grande medida, pelas condições de vida e de trabalho dos sujeitos, com forte implicação na organização de seu cotidiano, em função das limitações que essas condições produzem. Portanto, intervir nessas escolhas exige cuidado, pois se lida com dimensões objetivas e subjetivas, em particular, aspectos culturais e sociais, além de exigir uma prática educativa fundamentada de forma crítica e com consistência teórica que possa contribuir com os propósitos estabelecidos nas intervenções da Educação Alimentar e Nutricional.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação. Educação em Saúde. Políticas Públicas. Hábitos Alimentares. Obesidade.

## Introduction

Food recommendations, whether official or not, are usually disseminated in programs to promote health and adequate and healthy food, through educational practices developed in different environments and through various strategies. Institutions of education, basic health care and workplaces have been recurrent spaces used to carry out educational actions, directed to various social groups, made up of subjects from different segments and age groups.

Educational practices are one of the most usual forms of intervention, used since the first initiatives in the scope of public social policies of food and nutrition. The Social Security Feeding Service (SAPS), created in the 1940s, stands out in this way, where food education actions fulfilled a strategic and ideological role in the social policies of Getúlio Vargas's government. Strategically, the actions aimed at disseminating information about the nutritional value of food and rules for the consumption of a rational and economic diet, through leaflets and posters, addressed to workers, with priority to lower-income workers and their relatives, seeking to demonstrate concern and care for the health of the working class. However, from the ideological point of view, responsibility for inadequate food consumption was attributed to the worker himself when, even after accessing the information and recommendations made, his/her food choices remained unchanged, thus reducing a social problem to individual choices.<sup>1</sup>

At present, educational processes in the sphere of social policies of food and nutrition have been valued and widely reproduced, supported by the increase in the occurrence of chronic noncommunicable diseases (CNCD) and, in particular, obesity, which have been expanding rapidly in recent decades in the country. Inadequate nutrition, together with physical inactivity, are among the main risk factors for CNCD,<sup>2</sup> and they are also priority subjects of interventions by the State. In this sense, the consumption of healthy food is now recommended as a fundamental element for promoting health, avoiding or reducing illness, besides contributing with a series of other benefits ranging from physical and mental well-being to longevity.

This essay aims at problematizing the strategies of food and nutritional education which, in general, maintain the biomedical approach in a hegemonic way, besides proposing to point out theoretical and methodological foundations of historical-critical education, which seek to overcome the idealistic and biological perspectives that isolate educational actions from socio-historical contexts.

## The evolution of the nutritional status of the population: the materiality of a serious public health problem

To give substance to the scenario that has led to the expansion of educational actions in the field of health and healthy eating, it is considered pertinent to present data that explain the growing concerns and interventions in the area of food and nutrition.

According to estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO), 70% of the causes of death in the world in 2014, out of a total of 38 million deaths, are attributed to CNCD.<sup>3</sup> In Brazil, the rapid and systematic increase in the occurrence of CNCDs, among them cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases and neuropsychiatric diseases, has caused the percentage of causes of death, attributed to chronic diseases, to triple in the last 60 years, reaching 72.6% of deaths in 2014, most of them before the age of 70 years.<sup>4</sup>

The National Health and Life Cycle Survey (PNS), in 2013,<sup>5</sup> estimated that 56.9% of the population over 18 years of age were overweight, a percentage that represented more than half of that population, reaching about 82 million people. The data indicate a higher prevalence in females (58.2%) than in males (55.6%). Only after the age of 65 years, these percentages begin to decline in both genders. On the other hand, obesity reached 16.8% of men and 24.4% of women, a significant index indicating a serious public health situation in the country.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the evolution of the nutritional status, referring to the adult population aged 20 years or over, the data analyzed confirm the progress of these prevalences, showing a worrying situation. Estimates of overweight and obesity growth were calculated according to data from the Family Budgeting Survey - POF 2002-2003,<sup>6</sup> POF 2008-2009<sup>7</sup> – and of PNS 2013,<sup>5</sup> already mentioned, carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).

The data indicate a continuous increase in overweight and obesity, over that period, i.e. between 2002 and 2003<sup>6</sup> and 2013,<sup>5</sup> in the population aged 20 years or over. In relation to males, excess weight increased from 42.4% to 57.3%, and obesity, from 9.3% to 17.5%. In the case of women, this evolution was even more pronounced, going from 42.1% to 59.8%, while obesity increased from 14.0% to 25.2%.<sup>5</sup> These percentages show that the prevalence of obesity has practically doubled in this period of ten years.

Considering that food is among the main risk factors for CNCD, data collected by the Family Budgeting Survey - 2008-2009,<sup>7</sup> corroborate the evolution of these prevalences. The research indicated a systematic increase in the consumption of processed and ultraprocessed foods, with high levels of fats, sodium and sugar, low nutrient content and high energy value. In addition, it pointed out the low consumption of fruits and vegetables, habits assessed as inadequate for health promotion and that are in line with the indicated nutritional status.<sup>8,9</sup> The average consumption

of fruits and vegetables remained stable, however, estimated to be half of the value recommended by the *Food Guide for the Brazilian Population*.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, the 2013 National Health Survey (PNS),<sup>11</sup> which presents information on the perception of health status, lifestyles and chronic diseases, also investigated the consumption of fruits and vegetables by the population, evaluated as an appropriate food marker. The result showed that only 37.3% of people, 18 years of age or older, consume five servings of fruits and vegetables daily in meals, and fruits or fruit juices between meals, considering the weekly frequency of consumption. For its part, the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>12</sup> recommends consuming at least 400 grams of these foods, equivalent to five servings daily. In general, women (39.4%) consume larger amounts than men (34.8%), and intake increases with both age and educational level and income of the population.<sup>11</sup>

The latest data from the Surveillance of Risk Factors and Protection for Chronic Diseases by Telephone Inquiry (VIGITEL) indicate that, in 2015, more than half the adult population, 53.9%, present overweight, reaching the percentage of 57.6% among men and 50.8% among women,<sup>13</sup> thus ratifying the data established by the 2013 PNS. The same survey shows that obesity increased very rapidly in both genders, reaching 18.1% of men and 19.7% of women. These percentages point to significant increases in the prevalence of obesity in the adult population, considering that it went from 11.8% in 2006 to 18.9% in 2015, confirming the severity of the public health problem in the country.<sup>13</sup>

The above mentioned surveys, besides data on food consumption and nutritional profile, present complementary information about the behavior of these indicators, taking into account age, sex and schooling, among others. In relation to schooling, the prevalence of overweight and obesity decreases, in the general population and in the female sex, as the years of schooling increase, which is more pronounced when it exceeds 12 years of schooling.<sup>13</sup> The association between the effects or consequences of schooling and educational processes in general, carried out in a formal or informal way, is not always straightforward or should be understood in the same way. However, it dares to affirm that it is possible to seek to transform social reality through educational practices and actions, besides contributing, almost exclusively, to the maintenance of production and reproduction of social relations of exploitation. A greater or lesser effectiveness will depend on the fundamentals on which the practices are based and on the necessary articulations with the objective conditions of the subjects participating in the educational action. In particular, this possibility is credited to the actions that incite the subjects to reflect critically on the reality where they are inserted.

The scenario presented may justify the widespread and comprehensive dissemination of food recommendations in the country, through guides, bulletins and booklets, among other vehicles

used as tools to support Food and Nutrition Education (FNE) actions, in the health system and in other sectors, such as the *Food Guide for the Brazilian Population*.<sup>14</sup> However, despite not being aware of other proposals and strategies developed to address the problem, and other risk factors other than food, the evolutionary state of nutritional status presented leaves uncertainties as to the effectiveness of these strategies, among them the actions of food and nutritional education planned and executed. In fact, states of illness and inadequate and insufficient food should not be separated from the social totality in which the subjects live. The problematic arising from this association and the corresponding or necessary educational practice must have theoretical foundations as a presupposition or reference, that make possible “the understanding of a certain object given its root. Therefore, it is natural to look with suspicion at the immediate form of all that is presented to us.”<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand, it can be seen that educational actions carried out in an isolated, discontinuous and decontextualized way are not capable of changing the scenario in which they are carried out or facing the challenges posed. On the other, it is evaluated that the theoretical and methodological options of a counter-hegemonic and critical education<sup>a</sup> can facilitate the problematization of the elements present in the social context, indicated as inducers of the described picture, referring to health and food. For example, participatory planning and the circumstances of people’s lives, in addition to monitoring and systematic evaluations of actions and scenarios, are essential steps in a counter-hegemonic educational process.

From this historical context, how to think about education and educational actions? What theoretical and methodological foundations can support food and nutrition education (FNE), with a view to contributing to the possible and necessary social transformations in the presented scenario? How to promote, facilitate and expand access to social policies that seek to materialize rights, such as the human right to adequate food and health? What role can Food Education and Nutrition play in this scenario?

## The historical and social context of the emergence and consolidation of FNE

The genesis of food and nutrition education has historical material circumstances in Brazil. It is considered as a milestone in the beginning of the 20th century, in the midst of the emergence of the science of nutrition from the upsurge of malnutrition, hunger and malnutrition, identified

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a Counter-hegemony, as Saviani defines it in the book *História das Ideias pedagógicas no Brasil (History of Pedagogical Ideas in Brazil)*,<sup>16</sup> are theories of education that are “structured from and according to educational practice. [...] [with] the objective of formulating guidelines that guide the educational activity” (p. 399) and are against the prevailing order. Moreover, they have to be critical because they presuppose a thought and a theory that questions reality beyond appearances and tries to establish articulations to grasp the essence of contradictory situations in society.

as social problems in the context of the First World War. The financial difficulties aggravated by the decline in the export of coffee, the main product exported by the country, also gave rise to a serious situation of inadequate sanitary conditions. In this context, a movement known as hygienist arose, which would strengthen the biologicist character of health and nutrition, supported by the advance of medical physiology.<sup>17</sup>

The theoretical-methodological foundations of the initiatives attributed to nutritional education were associated with the knowledge that was beginning to be systematized about the biological value of food and its use by the organism. It can be considered that hunger and malnutrition became the object of nutritional education, evaluated as a social phenomenon, but could only be understood within the framework of biosociology, due to the strong intersection between social and biological.<sup>17</sup> However, the intervention proposal, in order to address the identified social problem, would be restricted to the dissemination of information about good nutrition.

Subsequently, in the 1940s, with the establishment of programs for the protection of workers and the workforce, in the context of social food policies, such as SAPS, food and nutrition education (FNE) was expanded and materialized as an instrument for guiding food choices by the population.

Santos<sup>18</sup> presents a periodization for FNE identifying four distinct phases in this course, which are differentiated by the approach, the assumptions and the objectives outlined. From 1940 to 1960, the earliest educational programs, which were part of the incipient food policy, were premised on ignorance of the population, considered as a barrier to overcoming nutritional deficiencies. The population, blamed for their nutritional problems, should be educated to change eating habits, passing to “better eating”. Food recommendations had as paradigm the strictly biological needs, disregarding broader dimensions in the constitution of eating habits and choices, including income as the main determinant factor in the most impoverished segment of the working class. Teaching to eat properly was the main purpose of FNE.<sup>19</sup>

In a second phase, covering the period from 1970 to 1990, individuals were considered victims of capitalist social organization, generating social inequalities and problems of nutritional deficiencies, determined to a great extent by insufficient income. From this diagnosis, FNE, which until then had proposed to teach how to eat correctly, was removed from the feeding and nutrition programs, giving rise to food supplementation. FNE would not be able to change the scenario in which malnutrition and nutritional deficiencies prevailed, since income was the determining factor.

In the third phase identified, from the 1990s to the 2000s, rescued food education was linked to the processes that sought to provide subsidies to the population, again through information about adequate food, so that correct food choices and consumption could prevent illness and nutritional problems. And finally, starting in the 2000s, with the legitimization and materialization of some social rights, among them, the human right to adequate food, FNE programs, also leveraged by the dissemination of health promotion practices, began to have as their objective to strengthen the

power of choice and decision of individuals,<sup>18</sup> which means strengthening individual accountability, with all the problems that this alternative tends to provoke.

Linked to the historical and social contexts and public policies mediated and formulated by the State, the FNE consolidated its ideological bias throughout its course. In this sense, it sought to make universal and legitimate diagnoses, propositions and food recommendations emanated from the State, largely in the role of representative of the ruling class, thus fulfilling one of the presuppositions inherent in educational actions, reproduction and consolidation of ideas from a social class. This is the way in which education, used as the ideological instrument of the ruling class, propagates ideals and opinions, converting them into universal factors, contributing to the production and reproduction of the capitalist mode of production and social relations of exploitation.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, it is observed that the premises of educational practices were altered according to the historical context, interests in dispute, the correlation of forces and the need to legitimize the proposal formulated by the official bodies. This is what expressed the concise account of the FNE trajectory.<sup>18,21</sup> In the demarcated periods, the epidemiological and nutritional findings that justified the proposed official actions were present, with more or less emphasis.

The hegemonic character, in order to meet economic demands, is also evidenced in the campaigns directed to the introduction of soy in food, carried out in the 1960s. During this period, nutritional education was used for the purpose of boosting food consumption, including soybeans, sent to the country through the establishment of agreements between the Ministry of Education (MEC) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), aimed at alleviating American agricultural surpluses.<sup>22</sup>

In the following decades, 1970 and 1980, the consumption of soybeans and their derivatives would continue to be motivated, but now due to the expansion of internal cultivation, through the dissemination of informative and educational actions. In addition to economic interests, it was evident in the actions that directed the FNE, with greater emphasis until the 1990s, to overvaluing the nutritional aspect of food, disregarding the relevance of other elements intrinsic to the act of feeding.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it is not possible to isolate the educational action in FNE from the questioning about the material conditions of existence and the project of man and society that one wants to maintain or to transform.

### An updated discourse with the same biomedical approach

In the last two decades, it has been possible to identify changes in the discourse about the purposes of food and nutrition education, in the context of the formulation of social policy at the central level. This discourse would have advanced in the perspective of popular education of the



Freirean approach,<sup>b</sup> surpassing the rationality of the biomedical model, still hegemonic in the area of health and nutrition.<sup>18</sup>

Prepared by the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger in 2012, the *Framework for Food and Nutrition Education for Public Policies*<sup>22</sup> is based on a concept of popular education and represents a legal framework, through guidelines, laws and programs for the FNE agenda in public policies. Formulated in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, the document considers the FNE a strategy for the prevention and control of contemporary food and nutrition problems, values the different expressions of food culture and strengthens regional habits, as well as assessing advances in fundamentals theoretical and methodological aspects of actions and programs.

The understanding expressed by the authors of the document considers that, in the health sector, the approaches on FNE have been repositioned both with respect to the conception and the valorization of the subject in the sphere of public policies. According to its updated paradigm, the FNE aims to promote the autonomous and voluntary practice of healthy eating habits, and should recognize food options as a result of food availability and access. Education is defended as a critical action, contextualized, with horizontal relations and appreciation of popular knowledge and practices, aligning itself with the democratization and equity movements.<sup>22</sup>

However, in spite of the changes observed in the lectures and in the guidelines of policies and programs, educational practices remained, in particular, in the municipal and state spheres, based on a strong biologicist bias, without major changes in the theoretical and methodological framework and, consequently, without problematizing the difficulty of access to adequate food. In this sense, a gap is identified between the purposes of the policies formulated at the national level, and the implemented actions, as well as between the central discourses and the local practices, where the biological approach still predominates, to the detriment of approaches that favor a reflection of the subjects on the issues that influence their practices and eating habits.<sup>18</sup>

Even in the *Food and Nutrition Education Reference Framework*,<sup>23</sup> where substantive advances are identified in order to overcome the biological foundations of the FNE, some questions need to be addressed. Its guidelines and theoretical and methodological formulations, which focus on the educational practice, do not guarantee a historical-critical formation of the subjects, as would be necessary and expected, nor do they contemplate the expectation of pointing out new possibilities and paths, in the scope of food and nutrition education, in order to help overcome adverse scenarios.

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b The Freirean approach of education, coined by Paulo Freire,<sup>24</sup> in the formulation of the pedagogy of the oppressed, seeks to identify and value the knowledge of historical subjects, seeking to contribute to social transformation and the democratization of society through the educational process. The focus of education are topics based on class knowledge and forged from concrete and existential situation.

In the *Food Guide for the Brazilian Population*, launched in 2006 by the Ministry of Health,<sup>10</sup> and revised in 2014,<sup>14</sup> it is possible to observe the same gap pointed out by Santos,<sup>21</sup> when it presents the purpose of promoting healthy eating “to broaden and foster the autonomy of decision-making by individuals and groups through access to information for the choice and adoption of healthy eating (and living) practices.”<sup>10</sup> However, the normative and prescriptive framework with which this guide was designed, as well as most of the instruments used to disseminate food guidelines, tends to prioritize actions in the sphere of prevention, not promotion. It can also be argued that existing rules, norms, systems of control and mechanisms of coercion in societies, in all spheres and segments, become legitimate because they are ideologically forged, that is, presented as hegemonic and universal.

In general terms, prevention actions seek to intervene in eating behaviors in the expectation of reducing health risks, in addition to valuing scientific knowledge to the detriment of other aspects inherent to the cultures and alimentary habits. With another perspective, according to its paradigm, the promotion tries to potentiate the health, the well-being and the qualification of the existence.<sup>25</sup> Prevention actions do not confer or value the autonomy of individuals, as this would imply the freedom to freely manage their lives, their routines and their choices. When it is argued that man is free by nature and expresses this freedom by his/her ability and possibility of choice, without evaluating in which situations or what options are placed for his/her choice, it seems that this decision is also free, that is, that everyone can choose what they wish and on equal terms. “This idea of freedom as an equal right to choose is the idea of freedom of the bourgeoisie, not the historical-social reality of freedom.”<sup>26</sup>

The process that conceives the subject as apt to make rational choices in freedom is impregnated by the ideology of a cultural system based on individuality, rationality and liberalism.<sup>27</sup> This assertion is based on the assumption that the ability of individuals to exercise this freedom of choice depends on the knowledge acquired by each one and the information available, and not on the collective capacity to perceive the limitations that the material conditions of existence impose on their possibilities of choice.

Finally, the texts used in educational processes in the area of nutrition and food tend to prioritize the preventive approach and the epidemiological knowledge that is usually the main argument to justify the intervention. The actions aimed at the dissemination of scientific information seek to *convince* the subjects to adhere to the recommendations instead of seeking to potentiate their health, issues that are in the social and existential scope, beyond the technical and normative dimension.<sup>18</sup>

## The theoretical and methodological foundations for a historical and critical FNE

It is evaluated that the defense of a historical-critical pedagogy<sup>c</sup> is the one that presents itself as the most consistent, in the proposition set forth herein, of coping with and overcoming the challenges present in the aforementioned scenario, and in an unequal society and with hegemony of capital. The proposal of an education based on the historical perspective requires the understanding of the structural conditions in which the subjects are inserted, and in its critical dimension, it stimulates the inquiry and the questioning about its existence before the concrete circumstances. Thus, the foundation in the historical and critical perspective requires that public and social policies and their educational actions are capable of interventions that do not abstractly consider education or subjects as individually capable of transforming social reality without the structures being modified or refurbished.

Observing the historical circumstances and conceiving them critically means objectively that, for example, hunger has different materialities for different subjects, as Marx emphasizes: “Hunger is hunger, but hunger that satisfies itself with cooked meat, food with a knife and fork, is not the same hunger that devours raw meat with the help of the hand, the nail, the tooth.”<sup>28</sup>

In this sense, the foundations associated with the critical sense of education, proposed by the *Food and Nutrition Education Reference Framework*,<sup>23</sup> do not correspond to those linked to historical-critical pedagogy, when, for example, they defend “education as a permanent process and generator of autonomy, and active and informed participation of the subjects” or when it is stated that

it is important for the individual to develop critical judgment in different situations and to establish appropriate strategies to deal with them [...]. In this sense, FNE should broaden its approaches beyond the transmission of knowledge and generate situations of reflection on everyday situations, and in the search for practical alternatives solutions.<sup>23</sup>

In these passages, one defends an education beyond the transmission of knowledge. And what does it mean? Would it be an education aimed at the practice and adaptation of how to deal with adverse situations or to contribute to the transformation of reality? Which foundation, and what kind of educational action, is indicated as a reference?

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c Pedagogy conceived by Dermeval Saviani, in the context of counter-hegemonic theories in the 1970s, which is an important milestone in the scope of pedagogical ideas in Brazil.<sup>16-29</sup>

Referring again to Saviani,<sup>29</sup> there are three essential aspects that must compose the educational action: theory, practice and material conditions. Thus, for the author,

Educational action [...] is developed from material conditions and under material conditions. These material conditions are configured in the scope of practice. This is exercised within the scope of materiality and is one of the foundations of the pedagogical conception that is being analyzed, that is, historical-critical pedagogy, which, as we know, considers that theory has its foundation, its criterion of truth and its purpose in practice. This means that we cannot limit ourselves to just think about practice from the development of theory. When we understand that the practice will be so much more coherent and consistent, it will be all the more qualitative, it will be as much more developed as the more consistent and developed the theory behind it.<sup>29</sup>

In addressing the materiality of pedagogical action, Saviani<sup>29</sup> discusses three challenges that historical-critical pedagogy has to face: a) the absence of an education system; b) the emergence of new theoretical presuppositions that, generally, do not correspond with the objective organization to transform the practice; c) the discontinuity of public policies.<sup>29</sup>

These challenges are also present in the materiality of FNE's educational action, such as the elaboration of the *Framework of Reference*,<sup>23</sup> when it states that the focus for its formulation was "food and nutrition education for public policy."<sup>22</sup> Since policies take place on several fronts and networks, such as health promotion, food, and food and nutritional security, which requires organization and articulation of their actions, which must be developed in a permanent, transdisciplinary, intersectoral and multiprofessional way.

In studying the document, the absence of a national system stands out,<sup>d</sup> according to a proposal defended by Saviani,<sup>29</sup> which, in the specific situation of FNE, could express national co-ordination to address food and nutritional problems, which imply individual and collective health, thus overcoming the fragmentation observed in the various programs. It should be noted that the absence of active coordination, despite all the critical analysis and the advancement of some propositions, can often restrict FNE as a strategy for transforming health and nutrition conditions into slogans without allowing consolidation of a specific field of action. This assertion is based on the understanding that FNE, as an intervention object, should be transversal, intersectoral and transdisciplinary, as proposed. However, it is questioned how it will be possible to consolidate a strategic public policy, with a field of action as broad, complex and dispersed, without a national coordinating body.

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d For Saviani,<sup>30</sup> "Since there is no educational system in Brazil, it presents itself as a task for educators. How to accomplish this task? The starting point for the system are the structures. Once man immerses himself in the structures, the criterion of external coherence is imposed. It is necessary to be aware of the situational needs, to deepen the knowledge of the situation in order to be able to intervene in it, transforming it in the direction of the promotion of the man. And since there can be no system without systematizing activity, that is the starting point. [...] This systematization requires a capacity for reflection and theoretical foundation."

It is assessed that the absence of a national system, or the equivalent in the FNE, can be one of the central explanations for the paradox reported in the document: “At the same time that its strategic importance is pointed out, its space of action is not clearly defined. Food and nutrition education is everywhere and, at the same time, it is nowhere.”<sup>22</sup>

The very conception of public policy in the *Framework of Reference* does not offer explicit methodological support, especially, when it affirms in the presentation that “this is a document in continuous construction and it should have its own unfolding as the sectors that act in FNE are incorporating the principles set out in their practices”.<sup>23</sup> Further, it is stated that “the purpose of this document is to qualify and refer FNE’s actions, as well as to promote a common field of reflection and practical guidance [...] The intention of this construction is to foster and subsidize new developments within each sector that acts with FNE.”<sup>23</sup> Is it important to question how to implement, monitor and evaluate a public policy that proposes to face the enormous challenges presented with a document under construction? It is understood that a public policy, or a proposal to meet the policies, as proposed in the *Reference Framework*, should be discussed, presented for consultation, if appropriate, and elaborated as to the nature, principles, guidelines and foundations. Otherwise, it may express inconsistency and be difficult to be apprehended and implemented. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the policy cannot be revised and updated periodically, when the scenario changes or the correlation of forces, present in its formulation, becomes more favorable to the fulfillment of social demands. This circumstance is more unequivocal when the theoretical and methodological foundations that intend to sustain politics are defined and incorporated into the premises of politics.

The proposed public actions are not based on an explicit definition that points one way towards the FNE, especially on why, for what, for whom and how to develop educational actions. These issues require sustained responses by a clear political option regarding the economic and ideological role that education must take in the face of public policies, especially considering that the role of the State is to serve, preferably, the interests of capital.

Another challenge of education pointed out by Saviani<sup>29</sup> is also related to the actions of FNE, when it is argued that the theoretical advance in this area should not be dissociated from the objective changes of the practice. If it happens, there is a risk of creating a gap between what is proposed, supported by theory, and the conditions for its practical realization. Any action in the field of food and nutrition education should have as its theoretical basis the inevitability of conceiving practice to material conditions. These actions cannot neutralize or extinguish the circumstances of the food and nutritional problems to which the individuals are subjected, since not always within the scope of the FNE the socioeconomic and cultural circumstances of the subjects await interlocution with the educative action. Public policies of education and FNE should not propose interventions and unfolding away from the circumstances and the concrete alternatives

reached by the subjects to deal with situations arising from the evolution of the nutritional status of the population whose materiality expresses a serious collective health problem. Therefore, in the perspective of a critical-historical education, theory and practice must maintain an organic and immediate relationship with one of its central foundations.

Finally, when considering some elements of the theoretical and methodological foundations in the FNE, the third challenge emphasized by Saviani is imposed:<sup>29</sup> the discontinuities of the policies. In the historical process of genesis and consolidation of the FNE, these discontinuities are evidenced, often emphasizing the diffuse character of the field of action of its actions and its ideological bias, often supported by economic, political and social issues, to a great extent, responsible for food and nutritional problems. Overcoming these discontinuities does not depend only on the definition of better fundamentals and / or theoretical contributions, but on the organization of the FNE field with autonomy in the face of State policies, including to critically influencing its formulation.

FNE should appropriate theoretical references to criticize the hegemonic model of policies, which often project ephemeral programs with punctual and decontextualized actions, with restriction of financial resources, and the untying of a national system or coordination. In addition, these references should provide the instrumentalization to understand the capitalist circumstances of Brazilian society and facilitate dialogue with the subjects, respecting their cultures and knowledge, while enabling the apprehension of the scientific knowledge that is required in the practice of FNE.

It is considered that one of the central methodological foundations for the planning and execution of educational practices is the organization of the FNE field, as well as the recognition of the participants as historical subjects through FNE. It is important to emphasize that these subjects must organize themselves collectively and, when having contact with scientific knowledge, question the circumstances of their existence and demand continuous public social policies that transform reality. They must be recognized as the main contributors to the public fund, which underpin public policies in general, and those specific in the field of FNE, which are an indisputable right of all, individually and collectively.

## Final considerations

The eating behavior of the populations is an extremely complex issue, since food is a necessity that must be satisfied to guarantee life and an action that must be performed every day and throughout life.<sup>31</sup> It is not possible to dispense with food, to eliminate it or to replace it, as with other social habits, which can be suppressed if the subjects decide or wish to do so.

The multiple dimensions linked to food and eating habits leave food and eating subject to different political, economic and cultural interests, such as those associated with the food industry, agribusiness, the media and advertising, which try to influence food choices and consumption. Based on this set of elements that compose the eating behavior, it is possible to infer the complexity and difficulties inherent in the initiatives that seek to work with food habits and options, without taking into account the social determinants of the issue. We will only find ways to identify and confront the determinants of food problems, which are aggravated, from the concrete reality, that is, a society of classes whose differences and specificities must be known and considered in the formulation of intervention actions. This presupposes that we must start from the real and possible.

The eating issue, both in relation to the consumption pattern and the difficulty of access to food, and its food and nutritional consequences, is a social question whose intervention must take place in a coordinated way in the macro-structural plan, with measures that articulate actions of different spheres and instances of power, and among them, educational actions. Considering that health and nutrition indicators reflect social inequalities and differences in income, housing, education, access to public services, gender, and among ethnicities, the improvement in access to basic health care and population income, occurred in recent years<sup>32</sup> could have reversed the observed trend of marked increase in CNCD, reported in the surveys presented. However, the evolution of these indicators, which should positively influence health and food data, has not presented the expected repercussion. As shown, the evolution of the nutritional status, referring to the adult population in the country, confirms the undeniable advance of the prevalence of overweight and obesity, evidencing a worrying situation and a serious public health problem.

The National Food and Nutrition Policy, updated in 2012,<sup>32</sup> presents some contributions to this reflection and the repositioning of education processes associated with health promotion and access to adequate food. The text reinforces the need to overcome the biomedical model that is based on diseases and not health, and still prevails in instances of basic health care. Besides problematizing some issues, it points out the need to rethink processes, such as: “approaches that are limited to the production and supply of technical-scientific information; the fragile integration of scientific knowledge into popular knowledge and the insufficient appropriation of the cultural and social dimensions as determinants of eating habits.”<sup>33</sup>

Programs and strategies for food and nutrition education, which are cross-cutting in the context of food and nutrition security policy, and food and nutrition, can make important contributions to addressing and alleviating the social problem. However, it is believed that this assertion will only have materiality if the planned and executed educational practices are based on a historical and critical perspective, which seeks to create conditions for subjects to problematize social conditions from their concrete circumstances and, collectively, find alternatives.

Finally, it is observed that educational processes, widely disseminated in the area of food and nutrition, are based on pedagogical theories of formal education, which tend to reproduce class relations and the dominant ideology, and mask the determinants of food problems, prioritizing the disclosure of requirements for a correct and healthy diet. The perspective of a critical orientation of these processes, which discusses and problematizes the material conditions of existence as one of the main determinants of the food issue, has not yet been effectively incorporated by these initiatives, but it is judged that this appropriation is urgent and necessary. It seems to be a consistent and viable path to be followed, so that the possibilities of social transformation become closer and more concrete.

## Contributors

SMP participated in conception, essay design, writing, reviewing and final version of the article. OBA participated in the writing and review of the article. GB participated in conception, writing and review of the article.

Conflict of interests: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Received: May 09, 2017

Reviewed: July 17, 2017

Accepted: July 20, 2017