

Special dietary requirements in the school environment: an essay on the interface between Nutrition and Bioethics

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Abstract

This essay aims at rising discussions on the building of strategies on public policies to meet special dietary needs in the school environment, in light of the interdisciplinarity of Nutrition Science and Bioethics, with the intent to reach food and nutritional security and the human right to adequate food. This reflection is supposed to motivate the development of lines and inter-institutional research networks, contributing to the production and implementation of nutritional and food security indicators for the management of public policies in the context of special dietary needs.

Keywords: Special Dietary Needs. School Feeding. Food and Nutritional Security. Nutrition. Bioethics. Human Right to Adequate Food.

Introduction

This present essay aims to discuss public policy strategies to meet the special dietary needs in the school environment, in the light of the interdisciplinarity of Food and Nutrition and Bioethics, in the perspective of food and nutrition security and the human right to adequate food (HRtAF).

Eating has always been a great individual and collective concern for humanity, since it is supposed to meet one of humans basic needs for survival. Thus, in Brazil, the application of the right to food regulation – enacted by Constitutional Amendment 64, which included the right to eat in the human social rights, as set out in Article 6 of the Constitution, on February 5, 2010¹ – has been referenced in the perspective of strategies that aim for Food and Nutrition Security (FNS). It revalidates the dimensions of the Brazilian FNS concept, in which “food and nutrition security is the realization of the right of all to regular and permanent access to good quality food in sufficient quantity, without compromising access to other essential needs, based on nutrition practices that promote health, respect cultural diversity and are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable”.²

SAN is a public policy matter that is undergoing a process of establishment in Brazil, encouraging the inclusion of HRtAF in the political agenda and public management through systematic national conferences and the structuring of legal frameworks in the national policy that support the composition of the System and of the National Food and Nutrition Security Plan (SISAN).³⁻⁷ One of the intentions of FNS actions is to articulate a relationship between the government and society for the creation of policies and guidelines that will guarantee human right to food in Brazil - in order to enforce the duty of the government to respect, protect, promote, provide, inform, monitor, inspect and assess the execution of the human right to adequate food, as well as to guarantee mechanisms that will ensure its applicability.³

The National Food and Nutrition Security Policy comprises the principles of broadness, intersectionality, equity, social participation and coordination between emergency and structural measures.⁸

Its guidelines are organized to meet eight requirements, among which the following should be highlighted for having strong correlation with the proposal of this research: to promote universal access to adequate and healthy food, with priority given to families and people in food and nutrition insecurity; to promote the supply and structuring of sustainable and decentralized systems of agroecology, production, extraction, processing and distribution of food; establishment

of continuous processes for food and nutrition awareness, research and training in the areas of food and nutrition security and for the human right to adequate food; strengthening of food and nutrition actions for health care, pivotally to the other security actions on food and nutrition security; and monitoring the execution of the human right to adequate food.³

Among the basic strategies for government action in this context, there is the organization of nutritional care at all levels of the Unified Health System (SUS) and the National School Feeding Program (PNAE - Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar).

As for the legal framework on the eating approach within the scope of SUS, Law No. 8080 of 19/09/1990⁹ gives evidence in its content to the eating component in the process of health-disease assessment and, therefore, as a parallel strategy to the created and employed actions under the care responsibility of the State, which must be continuously evaluated for the public health system.

Thus, by means of the contents of the legal instrument referred to above, in association with the publication of the first version of the National Policy on Food and Nutrition (PNAN),¹⁰ it is possible to perceive a new identity space of the relationship between diet and health in the operation of SUS. It is noteworthy that this process marks a perspective toward the execution of the food and nutrition actions beyond the healing and care activities, but advancing to an inter-sectoral demand when addressing the population determinants on health and nutrition. These actions become concrete with the execution of food and nutrition surveillance and diet guidance strategies at individual and collective levels. From that legitimized space, the fields of assistance, education and management for nutrition actions in health¹¹ may be outlined.

In the context of SUS, the National Policy on Food and Nutrition (PNAN) has as a priority the promotion of adequate diet, which involves appropriate eating in the biological and sociocultural aspects of individuals, as well as the sustainable use of the environment, meeting the needs of each life phase. It is noteworthy, within this same perspective, that PNAN includes as demands for nutritional care in SUS the care for individuals with especial eating needs.¹²

It has been acknowledged that, after a decade of publication, PNAN faces complex challenges with regard to the requirements in the creation and employment of solutions to meet the dimensional plot involving impacts on food and nutrition in the Public Health field. Thus, it has been increasingly integrated with the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security.¹³

Among the complex demands in nutrition and health, it is possible to identify the course of life situations where metabolic and physiological changes emerge, requiring changes in the dietary needs of individuals. Thus, PNAN provides assistance to such situations considered to be “special eating needs”:⁷

[...] the dietary needs, whether stringent or additional, of individuals with metabolic or physiological alterations that cause temporary or permanent changes related to the biological use of nutrient or the route of administration (enteral or parenteral). Examples: inborn errors of metabolism, celiac disease, HIV / AIDS, food intolerance, food allergies, eating disorders, prematurity, kidney diseases, etc.

Special dietary needs in school feeding policy actions: paths to visibility, subjectivity and inclusion

Within the school feeding scenario, according to one of the principles that guide the PNAE, equity **stands out as a foundation for the promotion** of “equal treatment for healthy students and special treatment for students with special needs, such coeliac and diabetic students, who should receive adequate diet to according to their conditions, by means of a menu prepared by a dietitian”¹⁴. This decision is seen as a founding process for the visibility of matters from the NAE, in terms of public policy.

Another important legal framework, while proposing inter-sectoral advances toward the quality of diet and its impact on school health and nutrition, concerns the Ministerial Decree No. 1010 of May 8th 2006, establishing the guidelines for the Promotion of Healthy Eating in national public and private elementary, junior and high schools.¹⁵

However, the main recent FNS achievement in the school feeding scenario was the adoption of the legal framework concerning the interaction of PNAE and family agriculture in the supply of products to food assistance, including the prioritization of food produced in agroecological models of food systems.¹⁶ Law No. 11 947/2009 provides for the state and city governments’ mandatory use of at least 30% of funds transferred by the Federal Government on the purchase of products from family farming. In the state of Paraná, the ordering and supply of food products are made from organizations that represent family farmers, such as cooperatives or associations that must carry Legal DAP (Aptitude Declaration to Pronaf).¹⁷

Regarding the dimension of existing subjectivity in the lived experiences of individuals with special dietary needs, institutions aimed at protecting and assisting them have called attention to

the fact that public policy oriented dietary restrictions with no right of access to appropriate food is a factor of social exclusion. In this conception, such condition is characterized as a situation of food and nutritional insecurity, enhanced by social restrictions that are imposed to people with organic dysfunction.

Thus, it has been possible to diagnose that, from public policies for food and nutritional security, a tab has been opened for the disclosure of the issue of the human right to adequate food for people with special dietary needs. As described in the context of sectoral policies with interface in food assistance and focus on FNS, the School Feeding Program has presented proposals that may represent progress toward attention to subjects with special dietary needs.

With the recent improvements of legal frameworks of public policies and specific resolutions that show the nutritionist skills within health promotion interventions in the school environment, there has been a concern for turning articulation actions into institutional actions between these professionals and educators in making joint actions of food and nutrition education for the school community. Within the same focus, guidance documents have been produced from the viewpoint of development and implementation of activities related to PNAE, concerning the provision of school meals to meet the needs of individuals with diabetes, hypertension, celiac disease, phenylketonuria and intolerance to lactose.¹²

On the national scene, experiences in favor of SAN's perspective of improving the school environment and concerning the implementation of the School Food and Nutrition Surveillance System (SISVAN Escolar) have been identified as monitoring instruments for the nutritional profile and planning of preventive actions and control of obesity and non-transmittable chronic diseases. Another important step has been the identification of students with special dietary needs, in the registration of public networks.¹⁸ The mapping of these schools is the first step for the implementation of strategies to meet their needs.

The presence of children with special dietary needs has also been the focus of important reflections in the field of educational inclusion. That is, studies try to reconsider discussions within the school system on the dimensions of dietary awareness, from the perspective of inclusive practices.

This scenario highlights the need to implement inter-sectoral strategies to strengthen awareness and health, in order to promote food and nutrition security to meet special dietary needs, including all actors in the school setting. Meanwhile, they especially address, beyond the medical sphere, the importance of identifying and analyzing various dimensions of the nutritional outcome of those with special dietary needs, who are more vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity.¹⁹

The need for deeper understanding of the complexity of lived experience in the daily life of people with special dietary needs, expanding beyond biomedical aspects; the evaluation of existing food assistance strategies, along with their nutritional impact; and the strengthening of actions to monitor HRtAF subject violations are among the challenges that might be pointed for the production of knowledge and that represent existing gaps in public policy.

Meeting special dietary needs at school: a bioethical matter

Our current historical context and moment make bioethics rely on the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, epidemiological and demographic transformations to approach collective issues, especially in countries with high levels of social inequality, such as Brazil.²⁰ Thus, there is a need to expand the perspective of bioethics to existing concrete issues in the country, including those related to the quality of human life, such as having access to adequate food. The type of bioethics that is driven by respect and encouragement of individual freedom to decision-making, along with principles of solidarity, justice, equity and accountability, reinforcing the need to protect the needy, vulnerable, violated or weak individuals.²⁰

Bioethics and its references must be crucially incorporated into the processes of defining public policies, helping to build societies that guarantee human rights, since it is based on a macro view, that is enhanced and certainly committed to the social dimension.²¹ Interdisciplinarity, which is a fundamental condition for Bioethics, makes it a peculiarly interesting field to discuss issues related to human rights, because, if the reality they will be applied is taken for granted, the simple adoption of universal principles will not suffice.²²

Regarding the special dietary needs, specifically, a failure is said to consider only the integrity and dignity of the person for the implementation of strategies to ensure adequate food for this population. It must be acknowledged that this and other rights can only be fully achieved in a society with equitable distribution of goods and access to dignifying living conditions.²³ The inclusion of bioethics in HRtAF is evident in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, “Social Responsibility and Health”, which deals with the issue of access to essential conditions for the physical and social survival of human populations in item ii, “Access to adequate nutrition and good quality water”.²⁴

Thus, HRtAF can not be reduced to a mere normative conception. Human rights are built on a dynamic basis of respect, inclusion and acknowledge.^{25,26} For the incorporation of the concept of HRtAD in social development strategies and FNS, changes are needed in the processes, manners

and fundamentally in the institutional culture of the State, of servers and population in general.^{27,28} Also, the urgency of operational reviews stands out for FNS public policy, such as PNAE, so that they can be integrated with the principles governing the approach based on human rights and to acknowledge the individual as a subject of rights.²⁹

Siqueira et al.,³⁰ discussion of the incorporation of the right to food perspective in the institutional design of PNAE, claim that this SAN policy began to replace the vision of a welfare character of policy and resource transfer to a conception of benefit as a right that should have social control. However, there are still many obstacles to overcome, described above, that hinder their achievement as a measure to promote HRtAF.

Siqueira et al.³⁰ suggest that one of the factors that provide the persistence of these obstacles is the fact that the PNAE is a large-scope program in which inevitably changes occur with different pace and impact and conditioned to social, political and economic interests in states and municipalities. Particularly in the state of Paraná, there has been progress in relation to promoting HRtAF in school feeding. This finding is supported, more specifically, by the observance of initiatives in the public management of the education sector including the registration of students with special dietary needs and coordination with the Food Acquisition Program, providing supply for especial diets, more appropriate for this group. In addition to the assessment of body composition, by finding the weight and height of students in 2011, the verification of the incidence of students with diabetes, lactose intolerance and celiac disease, and situations involving special dietary needs were included to the monitoring process.

These initiatives, though not enough to fully ensure the right to food of the subjects in question, represent signs of the incorporation of reference of bioethics, such as vulnerability,³¹ equity³² and justice³³ on State actions addressing school feeding. Specifically, it can be said that recognition of the particular vulnerability of an organic dysfunction presented by students with diabetes, lactose intolerance and celiac disease, translates into equal shares. That is, the “equity takes care of equality in that it treats them as equal what is equal, but when necessary, treat unequally (but adequate) which is unequal,”³¹ which is sometimes necessary to achieve equality. Therefore, in the case of students with special dietary needs, everyone can be said to have equal right to eating, but they should have different needs met. When treating students with (different) special dietary needs unequally (but adequately), justice is applied as a primary virtue of social institutions, a result of human cooperation that should aim at reaching mutual benefits.³⁴

Final Remarks

Despite increased interest in scientific research on the subject of special dietary needs, there are needs to expand investments for research projects in academia, especially in regard to placing the issue of special dietary needs in HRtAF, in particular, its inclusion as healthcare field that relies on the National School Feeding Policy. Encouraging this line of research is thus crucial, since it is potentially entailed to provide qualification strategies to achieve FNS in the scenario of special dietary needs.

From this work, it is possible to raise, in the field of production of scientific knowledge in Nutrition, important analytical dimensions on the issue of NAE in the school environment. These involve the quality of production processes and food supply, aspects relating to the nutritional outcome of individuals with special dietary needs, subjectivities related to food and nutrition in the context of the school environment to what regards the pathologies that require dietary restrictions and institutional framework of the human right to appropriate eating.

Also in the field of bioethics, the adoption of an inclusive perspective is proposed, with a perspective of the school scenarios associated with their community ties, in a social, economic and cultural context. Thus, the denial or violation of their rights, more particularly the human right to adequate food, can affect students with special dietary needs, in all the spheres of their lives.

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