

Discussing the possibilities and challenges of school's cooks in the actions of Food and Nutrition Education

Dialogando sobre as possibilidades e desafios das merendeiras nas ações de Educação Alimentar e Nutricional

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Abstract

Objective: To discuss the role of school's cooks within the Brazilian National School Feeding Program, as well as its possibilities and challenges in the actions of Food and Nutrition Education. *Methods:* Qualitative research, using the techniques of participant observation and Choice Work Dialogue. The studied group consisted of 23 school's cooks from a city in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro state. *Results and Discussion:* The educational potential of school's cooks is based on the relationships of affection they develop with students and on the qualifications they perform in order to develop new skills. However, the lack of time and of integration with the school staff are challenges for the fulfillment of the educational function of these professionals. *Conclusion:* The educational function of school's cooks is permeated by possibilities and challenges; hence, it is interesting to value its potential aspects for Food and Nutrition Education and to contribute to overcome its challenges. Thus, it will be possible to enjoy even more the educational potential of this program.

Keywords: Scholl feeding. Qualitative Research. Food and Nutrition Education.

Resumo

Objetivo: Discutir o papel da merendeira no Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar, assim como suas possibilidades e desafios nas ações de Educação Alimentar e Nutricional. *Metodologia:*

Pesquisa qualitativa, utilizando a técnica de Grupo de Diálogos. O grupo estudado foi composto por 23 merendeiras de uma cidade da Baixada Fluminense, Estado do Rio de Janeiro. *Resultados e Discussão:* O potencial educativo das merendeiras está apoiado nas relações de afeto que desenvolvem com os educandos e nas qualificações que realizam para desenvolver novas habilidades. Entretanto, a falta de tempo e de integração com a equipe escolar se apresentam como desafios para a realização da função educativa dessas profissionais. *Conclusão:* A função educativa da merendeira está permeada de possibilidades e desafios, sendo interessante valorizar seus aspectos potenciais para a Educação Alimentar e Nutricional e contribuir para a superação de seus desafios. Assim, será possível usufruir ainda mais do potencial educativo desse programa.

Palavras-Chave: Alimentação Escolar. Pesquisa Qualitativa. Educação Alimentar e Nutricional.

Introduction

The National School Feeding Program (Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar - PNAE) is the oldest public nutrition policy in force in Brazil. Its implantation occurred in 1955, being called at the time National School Food Campaign, aiming to guarantee school feeding to all students of the basic education of public or philanthropic schools.

Currently, the program benefits students from all over the country, from kindergarten through high school, going through adult education. In 2014, the PNAE benefited more than 42 million students across Brazil, totaling an investment of 3.6 billion reais.¹

Santos² highlights that different studies have pointed out the historical link between food and nutrition education with food and nutrition policies. With the PNAE it is the same, and among the objectives of this program is the contribution to the formation of healthy eating habits of students, through actions of food and nutritional education.³ Thus, the program sets up an excellent atmosphere for the practice of food and nutrition education (FNE), where the school gains a prominent role as a preferred space for healthy eating practices and learning about the multiple meanings of feeding.

The Ministry of Health also recognizes the school as a privileged place for promoting healthy eating practices. In 2006, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, guidelines were established for the Promotion of Healthy Eating in public and private schools across the country, favoring the

development of actions that promote and guarantee the adoption of healthier food practices in the school environment.⁴ Thus, considering that FNE activities at school have significant potential, it is necessary to emphasize that there is an essential characteristic of this process: the importance of involving all social actors in the educational process, making collective educational actions possible.

However, within the school staff, there is a professional whose educational functions are invisible: the professional responsible for the preparation of school meals. There are several terms used to designate this professional, and in this study the term “school’s cook” (merendeira) will be used, due to its historical and cultural relevance. In addition, this noun was used in the female gender in Portuguese, since this group is expressively composed of women.

School’s cooks, besides preparing the meals, are the link between school feeding and students. Considering that the meal has the potential to be an educational moment, these professionals could explore more their educational skills.⁵

This context has raised some questions, such as: what role does the school’s cook play in school feeding? Are these professionals potential educators in the context of FNE in the school environment? What are the possibilities and challenges for their performance?

From these questions, the objective of this study is to discuss the role of school’s cooks in the PNAE, as well as its possibilities and challenges in the FNE processes and practices, using the Choice Work Dialogue (“Dialogue Groups”) methodology.

Methods

This study used the qualitative methodology, which aims to describe and to decode the components of a complex system of meanings.⁶ It is, therefore, timely to study topics related to eating practices, which have references in the complex social dynamics.

The qualitative methodology is also interesting for studying the school environment, since in this place, the process of human relations is dynamic, interactive and interpretative.⁷ Qualitative research has multimethodological characteristics and uses a varied number of methods and instruments of data collection.

In this research, the data collection took place in two stages. The first one used the technique of participant observation, in which there is the direct contact of the researcher with the studied phenomenon, with the purpose of obtaining information about the reality of people in their own contexts and in the spontaneous occurrence of the fact.⁸ Thus, the researcher spent time with eight school’s cooks during three months, performing the tasks inherent to these professionals, the other social actors of the school not being aware that it was a research. The observation took

place in the kitchen-cafeteria environment of two schools in Rio de Janeiro, one state and the other municipal, with four professionals in each school.

At this stage, it was possible to participate in activities related to the preparation and distribution of school meals, with the objective of bringing the researcher closer to the reality of school's cooks, making it possible to identify some important aspects related to the role of these professionals in their work context. At the end of each observation, the data were recorded in the field diary, in order that there was no loss of relevant and detailed information about what was observed.

From this stage on, the four possible paths to answer the question were elaborated: "What is the role of the school's cook in school feeding?". These paths were: Preparing and serving with love, Educating through feeding, Cooking, Following technical standards. These paths were presented in the form of printed material, and a reflective video was prepared by a working group specifically for this purpose.

In the second stage, the technique used was the Choice Work Dialogue ("Dialogue Groups"), which consists of a group of people who are invited to debate on a certain theme, aiming at the collective construction of opinions through dialogue.

The Choice Work Dialogue technique was developed in Canada, due to the concern about the logic of domination that permeates opinion polls in the field of public policies, in which there is no room for citizens to reflect before they position themselves on the subject.⁹ It has undergone some adaptations to suit the Brazilian reality and the school environment.^{10,11}

The objective, through this technique, was to discuss the role of the school's cook professional in the PNAE, as well as its possibilities and limits in the processes and practices of food and nutritional education. The intention was to build a space for interaction among the participants, producers of collective meanings, since the difficulties found in the educational process in school feeding will not be transposed by a single subject, and require effort and reflection, as well as collective practices.

The dialogue group took place in the municipal network of education of a city in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro state, emancipated little more than a decade ago. The city had about 170 thousand inhabitants, 33 teaching units, where about 12 thousand students attend school and 1,600 employees work. Of these, 120 work directly in the preparation of school feeding.

The 23 school's cooks who attended the Day of Dialogues watched the video together. They were then divided into four groups, when they read the printed material, talked about it and built posters with the conclusions of their group, which were later presented to the whole group. All dialogues were recorded in audio and followed directly by the researchers.

The data constructed during the Day of Dialogues through the audios, the notes and the posters were analyzed with great caution, respecting the conjuncture in which the words were

spoken, being careful not to use the discourses detached from their contexts.

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, a code was used regarding the group number of which they were part and the order in which they spoke during the Day of Dialogues. Thus, for example, if the school's cook belonged to group 1 and was the first one to speak in her group, she was called M1.1.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Instituto de Estudos em Saúde Coletiva da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (Institute of Collective Health Studies of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) (protocol 288.335, on 04/17/2013). All participants read and signed the informed consent form, as directed by the committee.

Results

During the Day of Dialogues, each of the four groups produced a poster, which illustrated the dialogue summary they set up after watching the video and reading the printed material. The elaborated posters were colorful, with drawings and decorated letters; their contents indicated what attributes a school's cook needs to have and some of her desires.

In the poster of group 1, a great sun was exposed, which, according to the school's cooks, could illuminate their lives. In addition, two hearts were present; one with the inscription "love in the kitchen"; the other heart appeared next to a pineapple, signaling that they want to receive more affection in detriment of the adverse situations they usually face. Sentences associated with the desired appreciation also appeared on the poster.

Group 2 drew a large heart on its poster and within it, characteristics that they believe are indispensable to a school's cook. Responsible, punctual, dedicated, happy, caring and cheerful were the aspects chosen by this group. On the back, they wrote what they think school's cooks deserve: respect, good wages, good working conditions and the same rights as the other school professionals.

The heart was also the central figure of the poster of group 3, and inside it was the school kitchen. Arrows departed from this heart, indicating characteristics inherent to the work performed by them, which includes qualification, love and dedication.

Group 4, on the other hand, did not show any drawings on its poster, however, it was the only one that directly referenced the paths pointed out by the video and by the printed material. This group chose path 2 as an answer to the proposed question—Educating through food, and path 4—Preparing healthy foods and without contamination. Furthermore, the poster presented some demands, such as improving the material they received, the desire for participation and appreciation.

A fifth poster was produced collectively, after the presentation of all groups, in which the participants highlighted that the school’s cook has an educating role, besides the function of cooking with love and professionalism, to participate in school planning and in the political-pedagogical project, to be integrated with all the activities carried out in the school, to be responsible and to work as a team.

Another item produced by the participants was the pre and post-dialogue records, in which besides observing the degree of importance attributed to each of the paths, it was also possible to perceive the changes of opinion after the group dialogue. The means of the values assigned by them on the scale from 1 to 7 in the pre and post-dialogue records were calculated for each of the Dialogue Paths, according to table 1.

Table 1. Mean of the opinions of the participants of the Dialogue Groups on each of the presented paths (n = 23). Pre and post-dialogue record. Rio de Janeiro, 2013.

Paths	Mean Option PreDialogue	Mean Option PostDialogue
Preparing and serving with love	6.86	6.61
Educating through feeding	6.17	6.50
Cooking	6.14	6.21
Preparing healthy foods and without contamination	6.70	6.15

By means of these records, it was possible to follow the post-dialogue change of opinion, which is described in table 2, where “less favorable” refers to the percentage of participants who, after the dialogue, started to assign a smaller grade to the path. “Remained stable” refers to the percentage that did not change the value assigned to the path; and “more favorable” refers to the percentage that assigned a higher value to the path after the dialogue.

Table 2. Displacement of pre and post-dialogue opinion of the participants of the Dialogue Groups on each of the presented paths (n = 23). Rio de Janeiro, 2013.

Paths	Less favorable	Remained stable	More favorable
Preparing and serving with love	8.69%	86.95%	4.35%
Educating through feeding	0%	78.26%	21.74%
Cooking	26.08%	56.52%	17.39%
Preparing healthy foods and without contamination	13.04%	82.61%	4.35%

The collected data showed that the first path, related to affectivity, was the item that remained more stable. The second one, which exposes educational possibilities, was where more favorable changes were observed, giving a higher grade to the path. The third path, cooking, was the one that presented the most variation of opinion, and when this occurred, most of school's cooks gave it a lower grade after the process of dialogue. The same result was observed in relation to the fourth path, which also presented a reduction of the grades attributed in the post-dialogue records.

In addition to the posters and information of the pre and post records, the Day of Dialogues yielded six hours of recording and 12 pages of observation. Based on this material, several meanings emerged, which allowed us to perceive that school's cooks believe they have an educational role and see affectivity and qualification as a possibility; on the other hand, the lack of integration and the limitation of time are seen as challenges.

Discussion

The collectively constructed data indicated that the school's cooks of this study recognize the educative function as one of their roles in school feeding. Several times and in different groups, speeches were always present which recognized school's cooks as professionals of education with enormous potential for FNE.

During group discussion about path 2 (Educating through feeding), M1.1 stated: "We are education professionals, the teacher by herself teaches nothing". In the same context, M3.1 says something similar in another group: "School's cooks have an educating role; the teachers are not the only ones who have the function of educating".

The same may be observed in the analysis of the pre and post-dialogue records, in which it

was possible to perceive that, after the dialogue, the participants attributed a higher grade to the path of education. In addition, this path presented the greatest displacement, increasing the value attributed to it in the comparison of pre and post-dialogue records.

The school's cooks pointed out that this educational potential is due to their proximity to the students. According to the school's cooks, such affinity stimulates dialogue, because, as they affirmed: "they speak their language", diluting the authority and approaching the conversation between them - school's cook/student and educator/learner - to the true dialogue.

Paulo Freire,¹² in his *Pedagogy of Autonomy*, emphasizes that teaching requires availability for dialogue. The school's cooks agree and state that when this dialogical contact with the students happens, a transformation, a change in the behavior of the students, may occur. In this context, M4.1 pertinently stated: "It's just a matter of talking, we talk, they try it and ask to repeat it, sometimes they say they've never tried it". The following sentence corroborates the previous one:

Sometimes a conversation is enough for the child to eat. Older children have more difficulties with dialogue. So we use strategies, we speak their language. (M1.5).

The relationship developed by school's cooks and students is permeated by affection, and on the Day of Dialogues, love was constantly present. Hearts drawn on the posters prepared by the groups, affectionate speeches and some stories told showed the affection that floods the work of these professionals. This relationship is nourished with daily contact, with every word spoken and with every sweet look exchanged.

The path "preparing and serving with love", presented to the school's cooks in this study, was also highlighted in the pre and post-dialogue records. This path received the highest mean grade before and after the group dialogues; it was also the path which the participants less changed their minds, demonstrating the conviction they carry in this regard.

The school's cooks feel that their job is to take care of the children. They are responsible for their well-being and care about the health of their students; they believe they are the "school mothers", as one of them wrote in the post-dialogue record. This affection is felt by the students, who return it by complimenting the food and giving acknowledgements - in this sense, M4.1 and M4.2 shared their experiences:

We must keep in mind that we need to feed the children with love. The child often spends more time in school than in his or her own home. So we need to be aware that we are somehow responsible for their well-being. (M4.1).

Students like us better than the rest of the school. I was already honored at the 9th grade graduation. Even overloaded, we make time for a gesture of affection, a hug. We speak their language, we are even compared to the mothers, the school mothers. (M4.2).

This affective bond is directly related to educational possibilities. Paulo Freire¹² states that affectivity and love permeate every pedagogical relationship, since its reason for being are human beings in the process of humanization, in which learning processes are constant. At this point, a speech that demonstrates how school's cooks recognize in this feeling their educational possibilities is highlighted.

We are aware that we are educators. I've even thought about going from classroom to classroom ... to give a talk [...] because we have more affinity ... so it would be easier to learn.(M1.2).

However, affectivity is not excluded from cognoscibility. The development of intelligence is inseparable from the world of affectivity –i.e., of curiosity, of passion, which in turn are the thrust of research for new knowledge.¹³ Thus, knowledge is also of great importance in the process of strengthening the educational potential of school's cooks.

In the municipality where the Day of Dialogues was held, the school's cooks believed in the essentiality of training. "Offering training and recycling courses for employees is of the utmost importance!" said M2.3 during the presentation of her group to the other groups. M3.1's claim also illustrates this statement: "Certainly technical knowledge is fundamental for a good professional performance".

They believed that the more courses they took and the more knowledge they had, the better they would perform their duties, as M3.3 stated during the presentation of her group to the other groups: "We are professionals qualified to meet the demands of the sector". Thus, skills contribute to improving self-esteem and stimulating the search for new knowledge.

Educational opportunities have been presented as a fundamental requirement for empowerment. The notion of empowerment is situated, in Paulo Freire's¹⁴ thinking, as a process and result, emerging from a social action in which individuals take possession of their own lives through interaction with other individuals, and as a stimulus for the participation of collective actions.

The school's cooks of the studied municipality showed a great predisposition to participate in collective actions and they feel prepared to participate in decision-making that involves aspects of the school. They emphasize that they want to be part of it, they want to participate in everything that happens in school.

To that end, they wanted to be more integrated with the school staff and they believed that this is a challenge for their educational function, breaking the barriers that separate them from the pedagogical body of the school. This scenario was evidenced in the fifth poster, built collectively, in which of the six functions they cited, three were directly related to participation, and they were: Participating in the school planning and in the Political-Pedagogical Project, being part of all school activities and working as a team.

The school's cooks said that their participation is essential to all actions at school. M3.4 stated to her group that "The kitchen is the heart of the school, because all school activities go through ... they depend on feeding". M3.5 added: "What may change is that kitchen professionals should be part of school planning". Thus, it was possible to perceive that, for these professionals, the insertion in the school team favors the exercise of their work, besides contributing to their self-esteem, appreciation and autonomy.

A greater integration with the school feeding nutrition team was also a desire demonstrated during the dialogue. In a consensual way, they stated that they could have a significant say in the elaboration of the menu. M3.3 highlighted that "There has to be harmony between the school's cooks and the nutrition sector, for a better commitment in the kitchen, because we can help on the menu".

Within the same line of thought, Costa et al.,¹⁵ in a study that discusses PNAE as a space for learning and knowledge construction, demonstrate that all school staff should have an active participation in discussions. For the authors, knowledge is constructed through interactive processes.

However, it is often entrusted to the school's cook the participation of only what is essential to the preparation of school meals and in a vertical way. It was possible to verify this fact during the dialogue group, when M4.5 stated that "[s]he [director] arrives there [in the kitchen] and says that she received an e-mail and from now on we have to cook this or that way, but where is the e-mail? She doesn't show us".

In a study Fernandes¹⁶ carried out, a similar scenario was found, when the insertion of school's cooks in activities outside the kitchen-cafeteria was restricted. The interviewed professionals state that their participation does not regularly occur and that it usually happens in the first meeting of the year and throughout the school year only when there is a problem or modification in the school feeding.

The difficulty in accomplishing the participation of school's cooks has several roots. Bezerra¹⁷ explained that the vision of their function as technical apparently provokes the disconnection of school's cooks from educational processes, hindering their integration and participation.

Teo et al.¹⁸, on the other hand, believe that these restrictions may be attributed to the exclusion caused by the school's professionals and to the self-exclusion generated by the school's cook because she considers her work to be strenuous and there is no time left for participation in other activities.

"Time" was a term often mentioned during the Day of Dialogues, always being expressed in a limiting perspective, hindering the work of these professionals, and as a challenge to be overcome in order to achieve the goals they considered important in their daily routines.

School's cooks suffer from the pressure of time, which has negative consequences both in their personal and professional lives. Nunes¹⁹ states that in some cases, double or even triple shifts do not allow them to have sufficient rest time to recover the energy spent in performing these activities.

During the Day of Dialogues, it was possible to perceive that these professionals are resented for not having the time they consider appropriate for the full accomplishment of their functions: "Time often does not let me even look at the child's face, because I do the distribution of food alone", said M2.2.

On several occasions, they indicated time as a limiting factor for the execution of their work, forcing them to stop performing activities that they believed were important. In this context, M1.3 claimed: "I find it important to educate, but I often do not have time to talk to students". On the other hand, M4.1 stated: "The lack of workforce prevents us from sanitizing food properly. We give the fruit and we ask them (students) to wash it, because we did not have time to do it".

Another aspect that marks the activities of school's cooks by the pressure of time refers to the fact that their work is marked by rigid schedules. This is due to the meal schedule and its relation to the daily schedule of classes and breaks: professionals are concerned with always having meals ready at predetermined hours. This fact may be perceived in the sentence spoken by M2.2 during the presentation of her group:

We must have many responsibilities in mind: such as punctuality. Meals need to be served at the right time so that children have the habit of eating at the right time. (M2.2).

Nunes¹⁹ found a similar situation in his study, in which she concluded that in the kitchen, activities are uniquely time-bound, and that the hours of each meal are rigid due to the interference that a delay could cause in class hours. The author also compares the work of the school's cook with that of a "gear" on the assembly line. Therefore, time is a barrier to the work of these professionals.

The statements they stated during the dialogue showed the desire to orient and to stimulate students during the feeding period, talking with them, presenting the foods that students do not know and encouraging them to try them.

Conclusion

During this study, it became apparent that these professionals have other potentialities in the school environment, surpassing the act of merely cooking. The educational potential these professionals present has clearly emerged, since they often act in the direction of encouraging learners to feed themselves properly.

In the context of educational dimension, during the course of the dialogue, two factors that school's cooks possessed and that widen their potential as educators were highlighted. The affective relationship they establish with students is one of them, for this affection conceives a bond of trust and makes it easier to establish a dialogue, which is a fundamental means for learning.

The other factor is related to the development of knowledge. Emphasis was placed on the importance these employees assigned to courses and training; through the conquest of knowledge that occurs in these spaces, they believe that they are more prepared to play their role. Thus, they become safer professionals, able to develop activities commonly delegated only to teachers, such as the educational role.

The educational function was not unanimous; some of them stated that it is not possible to practice this role due to lack of time. Thus, the school's cooks say that "overcoming" time is a daily challenge, and that when they have time, they may act in the educational dimension, since they may stimulate students to accept the meal and present to the students foods that they do not know.

The lack of integration with the pedagogical and nutrition teams is also presented as a challenge. The school's cooks believe that they may contribute to the school organization and to the planning of the menu, since they are aware of the diverse environments of the school, with observations collected and elaborated in spaces other than those of the classroom.

It is essential to build a more dialogic and democratic school, where the different social actors of the school develop an attentive look at the potentials of school's cooks. It is important to develop other studies in this direction, identifying and appreciating the different roles, especially the educational function that these professionals present.

Building a path in this direction may be interesting to contribute to the transposition of the purely caring nature that many see in the PNAE and, thus, to enjoy even more the educational potential of this program.

Contributors

Gomes KS and Fonseca ABC worked in all stages, from the conception of the study to the revision of the final version of the article.

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