

School meals defined from the perspective of students catered for under the National School Feeding Program, Brazil

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Abstract *Based on socio-anthropological studies into food and in connection with guidance from the Public Policy on Food and Nutrition Security in Brazil, this paper sought to objectively analyze students' views of the school meals given to them as part of the National School Feeding Program (PNAE). The data was produced through ethnographic exercises that were developed where the above Program (hereafter Program) had been implemented in a semi-arid municipality in the state of Bahia. The exercises also involved the production of written material and the use of focus groups with teenagers in primary school education. Of particular note in this study was the time and space the students had for their break/recreation period which brought to light the relationship between the body and food. Based on the responses given we were able to identify different understandings and meanings associated with the food served in these institutions. The study helped to shed some light on the relational aspects between habitual eating at "home-on the road-and-in school" with the right to have school meals. We were also able to obtain a broader understanding of the eating habits of teenagers that are catered for as part of the PNAE.*

Key words *School feeding, Eating habits, Public policies, Food and nutrition security*

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Introduction

Under the ambit of the National School Feeding Program (PNAE), the acceptability of school meals that are offered is a challenge when one considers the vast array of eating habits that exist amongst pupils in Brazil. In the last decade, studies took different approaches to these themes. Some studies looked to identify the acceptance or rejection rate of food served in schools as well as looking at the conditions stipulated for acceptance¹⁻⁴. Others used the strategy of objective qualitative research to widen the understanding of sociocultural questions that are related to the eating habits of pupils and eating school meals⁵⁻⁷.

In a similar vein, with a view to promoting healthy eating, the following themes were researched: program management, its trajectory, institutional design issues, an analysis of consumer consumption in accordance with official recommendations, an evaluation of nutritional states and educational actions⁸⁻¹². Therefore in a general way, the results of the above studies have allowed us to reflect on the reality of the PNAE whose objectives are to aid in the development of publicly enrolled students in basic education in the public school system through providing healthy and adequate school meals¹³.

The PNAE, which was officially launched in the 1950s, went through a number of changes relating to its legal status. Its present remit is to provide school meals which ensure compliance with the Human Right for Adequate Food (DHAA) policy that respects cultural diversity. For many, there is a need to have school meals which are very similar to the food that is generally eaten by the target public which would increase the consumption of the food that is offered.

Taking into consideration socio-anthropological studies in food consumption connected with the guidance from the Public Policy on Food and Nutrition Security (SAN) developed in Brazil, this study sought to analyze the views and opinions given by young people on school feeding. Its originality lies in the unusual theoretical-methodological approach, rarely employed in the field. This research has international relevance as it has contributed to qualitative evaluations on a program that has influenced similar programs in Latin American countries and countries in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia⁹. It has also contributed to the debate on the themes in the DHAA with reference to school feeding.

This study notes that understanding the eating habits of students permits a better unders-

tanding of their own eating experiences in their daily lives. We were able to understand childhood memories and affective values in eating habits. Eating habits are defined by a multiplicity of different influences that exist in the world. Therefore the material/economic conditions that determine our social group influence our eating habits and our understanding of food^{14,15}.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study based on analyzing the work of PNAE in the municipality of Valente (a semi-arid area) in Bahia which in 2010 had 24,560 inhabitants according to the census data from IBGE¹⁶. The criteria used to choose the municipality was based on whether the program was set up in accordance with the relevant legislation and whether support was given by nutritionist.

The field work began in April 2010 until July of the same year. It consisted of: making a note of observations, carrying out semi-structured interviews, taking down statements and setting up focus groups. The interviews were carried out with the following people: the schools food coordinator, the nutritionist, the person in charge of school meals in the municipality, the president of the school feeding council (CAE), three directors and three school cooks in the school (with two from the urban zone and two from the rural zone for each of the above).

Statements were taken from teenagers in the urban zone who were in their 6th and 9th grade in primary school and who attended school either in the morning or afternoon. The idea was to analyze characteristics related to their eating habits. We started off with brainstorming to understand when, with whom and how the students ate, considering their eating habits in: eating at home, on the road and at school. After our discussions, the pupils drafted their written responses to the question "What are my eating habits?". The average time between the beginning and the end of the activity was 40 minutes and the final product was a composition consisting of 250 statements.

The strategy involved the use of four focus groups with a view to understanding better the students' views on school meals. Two of these were carried out in urban zone schools where statements were later produced and the other two were done in rural zones. In each school we put together groups from the 6th and 7th grades who were aged between 11 and 12 years old. We also had a group of pupils from the 8th and 9th

grades who were aged between 13 to 15 years old. We decided that each group would have six participants and we took into consideration the balance in relation to the sexes. 23 pupils took part (13 females and 10 males) with one group having only five teenagers. Participation in the study was only permitted after a consent form had been signed by a parent or a legal guardian of the pupil.

Focus groups can be used to understand better the opinions of individuals on the development and evaluation of programs, events and services. They can also be used to explore the reasons behind certain behaviors and thought processes and it allows people to express their perceptions about phenomena¹⁷. During the interviews we sought to understand why they ate or did not eat a particular meal based on the following questions: (1) "I would like you to talk about the school meals that are on offer here. What do you think about them? How do you view them in the school?". (2) What are the similarities and differences between what you eat at school and what you eat at home? What differences are there from the food you eat on the road?". The following themes guided our debates: the school menu put together by the nutritionist, the meals offered based on the PNAE and how the food was prepared based on regional food habits.

The production of the data would eventual form part of a bigger project that was based on what the Program had envisaged. Ethnographic exercises and the observation of participants were also carried out. Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee in Research in the School for Nutrition at the Federal University of Bahia. The process of reading through the information obtained from field work was a fundamental test for developing categories for analysis and for organizing our data. It was then triangulated permitting greater analysis on eating habits in schools.

Results and discussion

What school meals mean for those involved with them

Based on the responses given by the pupils, we were able to identify different meanings associated with the food served in these institutions. It was possible to clarify the close connections between food to the corporeal, spatial and temporal nature involved in eating. We also looked at meanings related to food being seen as: light, heavy, different, good, bad, healthy and unhealthy.

Also it is worth mentioning what the purpose of break time was, relating to "space-time" that is highlighted in this study. In particular, it brought to light the relationship between the body and eating. In the eyes of the students, break time between classes represented a time to be free, even though this was not necessarily the case as they were under the watchful eye of their institution. Thus, even though the act of eating could be considered as a form of discipline, at this point in their school day the body "cries out" for freedom.

Based on this idea, the pupils play time was made difficult by the food that was on offer: "Rice and beans isn't like a packed lunch from home, it's a proper lunch", "I don't eat macaroni and rice in our break times because we've already eaten lunch....", "We might want to play but how can we play with a heavy stomach full of food, that's annoying", "It needs to be something light so that you don't feel hungry", "A school meal ought to be biscuits with fillings....fruit juice. That's it.... because it's light, it's possible to run and play", "I think the school meals should be light, why? Break time, isn't it not for playing? People are going to want to jump, I think the food is not going.... to settle....people want to eat light!", "The Nestle hot chocolate (or any other chocolate drink) was hot, so you have to wait until it cools down until you can run around, and then your play time becomes short", "I think it's wrong that she gives us coffee with biscuits...we want to play in break time and drinking something hot... makes your stomach hot", "They give us soup which is really hot so you have to wait until it cools down using a fan".

Tell us about what you would like to be served. "They are always talking about our health but they never give us fruits. They give us dough instead of fruits". "That leaves us feeling heavy". "If they were to give us fruits, many of us here would eat them. They just think that all we eat is rubbish". "I think if they were to give us fruits, more people would be more interested in school meals than the food that is sold just outside the school gates", "...we're unlikely to get school meals with just fruits".

The pupils stated that they ate fruits for lunch at home and they would like to eat the same at school. In the next question we asked whether fruit salads would be wasted if it were on offer: "It's unusual for someone not to like eating fruits". "The majority of people like them". They said that "it's good for your health", "Because there are a lot of fruits that have nutrients", "and they have vitamins, don't they?". They are important

“even for studying”. “We eat lunch and we’ve got footy down there, we eat, sweat, it’s good isn’t it? Let’s suppose it gives us energy, right Miss”, “Yes-ssss!! (Everyone in unison)”.

Our understanding is that the pupils want meals relevant to their own context and school experience which allows them time in their breaks. At school this meal is intrinsically linked to their play time in which they: skip with ropes, run, play football, and socialize. Therefore we noticed that the more the school meals resembled the meals that were accustomed to eating either at home or on the road, the longer the queue was for getting these school meals. It is important to note that in relation to snacks being sold “outside of school”, “no everyone would eat lunch every day”. In summary, pupils want to eat in order to play whilst the adults feel obliged to “bulk-up” the food as stated by Bezerra¹⁸.

It is also worth noting the role played by the school cooksto avoid wasting food by trying to only make the right amount of food based on the preferences of the teenagers. They would often get a lot of pleasure in making food that many pupils would eat, such as hot dogs on extracurricular activity days.

According to them, meals offered on special days were “really well-made” and the take up was good. Special menus are made on commemorative days such as St John’s day. Nevertheless, they complained about how the food was prepared on a daily basis. They stated that they were not “well-prepared” (watered down fruit juice, a chicken’s foot was habitually place in the rice, soup without salt and rice pudding without sugar) and they thought home cooked food was of better quality than school meals.

Upon studying what pupils in primary schools and high schools felt about school meals and how they would define them, Freitas et al.⁵, noted that refusals to eat school meals were related to the idea that schools were strange, alien places without any recognizable identity, whereas the idea of acceptability was connected with play time, the family and other similar places of meaning. Therefore offering soup at play time would be considered strange (out of place and at an usual time). However, having it for dinner in a family setting would be understood and recognized. According to the authors, this type of food being offered as a school meal does not equate with the pupil’s idea of eating and then playing and having freedom. So PNAE, upon competing with this social realm, could provoke an opposite reaction to their purpose, resulting in a refusal

that is not only organic but also “a response to the emotional and cultural values of their tastes and imagnetic”¹⁴. The pupils just want meals that are adequate for their age and their values.

According to Bourdieu¹⁹, an individual’s current and past position on social structures is transported in time in a *habitus* way, meaning individuals transform their *habitus* into habits. The *habitus* is something that has been acquired and made a part of someone in a durable way with a sense of order. It is a type of capital that is considered innate and it works in such a way as individuals reproduce social conditions in an unpredictable way²⁰.

According to Freitas and Minayo¹⁴, what people eat is based on their daily eating habits and it is a representation of their culture, identity, values and social structure. For Freitas et al.¹⁵, maintaining this habit means not being estranged from the world and it provides a sense of “emotional security” in eating something that is recognizable. Continuing with this idea, Carvalho²¹ notes that there is a worry on the duration of the action/habit which has been expressing itself on a continuous basis. In relation to eating habits, what is clearly understood is the assiduity of the action as well as its continuity and repetition.

Current thinking on food is connected to beliefs and social standards on how food is used and restrictions placed on it. There is now more calls for changes aimed at improving health. However, in spite of the amount of information and guidance that exists, eating patterns still revolve around habits and define one’s socialidentity¹⁵.

For the pupils, hot dogs “are the best school meal there is!”, “it is unusual and it is a snack”. “Why aren’t Fridays designated as hot dog days?”. They want it to be offered as a school meal “at least twice per month”, “twice per month doesn’t do any harm”, “it’s just to add some variety to the menu”. Upon asked why it is not currently served as a school meal they stated “it wasn’t healthy”, “sausages are canned food”, “or in shrink wrap packaging”, and are “industrialized food”. They rebutted stated that hot dogs (done in the traditional way) could be served with cabbage and tomatoes. “Or add lettuce, cabbage and you’ll have type of mixed filling sandwich”. This would be a way to make them “healthier”.

Previously to the appointing of a nutritionist, sausages were frequently served by the Program in preparations such as hot dogs and sausage pasta or rice dishes. What is interesting is that even though pasta dishes can be considered as

lunches, in the eyes of the pupils they considered them “differently” and could accept them. This is not the case for rice with beans or rice with soya meat.

There is an overwhelming preference for sausages and a low take-up rate for any meals that include soya (soya proteins). In the study it was noted that this product is not regularly eaten by the population “only when someone is ill”. The school children complained about its smell, the way how it was prepared and the fact that it was continuously served. They highlighted the fact that soya was present even in the hot dogs, as well as being frequently used in rice, soup and bread. “When you enter the canteen the smell makes you want to leave (laugh)”, “Nothing is eaten. All the food is left behind”, “No one eats soya. Why do they make so much if it’s going to be wasted?”.

The feeling of hot dogs being “different” is not only to do with their being something that is not eaten often in schools, it also indicates the eating of something that is recognized as fun. In a particular context it means eating without there being any “discipline”, which is similar to eating on the road in the weekends. It is interesting to note that the teenagers understood and took on board the notions of nutrition and health and the need for moderation. They got this from official speeches on health. With reference to the repetitive use of soya and similar foods, the students felt as though these made them want to “throw-up” due to their being served so often. This was also the case in not eating school meals.

According to DaMatta²², one must be well situated before “seeing” and “feeling” the space. This “confuses itself with its own social order” and thus, in order to understand it, it is necessary “to understand society with its network of social relations and values”. With the space that he mentions, there is an inter-connection with values that guide what is social and it does not exist as “an independent social dimension or something that is individualized.” The demarcation of space is not easy as it limits itself to the establishment of borders on a piece of ground. Space is therefore a complex category of thinking and actions that are related to each other in time. In this vein, time and space, build and are built by “the society of men”, being present in the most varied social systems²².

For both of them to be materialized and felt, there needs to be a “system of contrasts”²²:

.....the activities which demarcate time and help to construct it....are the activities which always occur in distinct spaces. There is a system of con-

trast or opposition in space....; just as there are activities that are equally distinct.

Days of the week, for Brazilians, have marks referring to different conceptions of time. In this way, for the author, the “grammar of spaces and the temporal nature” in every society only exist as being “completely expressed” through ordered activities that are in “opposition”. Daily routines and situations such as “parties, ceremonies, rituals and solemn occasions” mean contrast in the case of time. There is a modification in space and in the way that duration comes about. In this way the social nature of time changes. Routine time is marked by “looking after of the body” through eating and sleeping, which is different to ritual time. This means that with the order of things, this allows us to confirm situations. At a birthday party, for example, you will find “food, sweets, drink and soft drinks, and smiling people waiting to welcome people”²².

“Spheres with social significance” such as houses and roads encompass “visions of the world” and “specific ethics”. These are “spheres with meanings that construct your own reality and permit the normalization and moralization of behavior”. Therefore, different spaces demarcate different “attitudes, gestures, clothes, issues and social roles”. Common feelings and morality on the street differ to what exists in the home. Homes are places that are “calm, restful, where you can recuperate and are welcomed”. There you will find “love, care and human warmth”. This is different to what you will find on the streets²².

Taking on these ideas of this author, it is possible to see the relations between the different spaces for eating. We can see the closeness and distance with reference to eating at home, on the road and at school. The school is seen as a place where pupils should be protected and educated and is almost an extension of their home. With this in mind it should sustain and stimulate the consumption of healthy eating and good habits. Contrary to this, the streets become the place of temptation where there is a feeling of freedom and where there are no restrictions on what can be eaten. Both the school and on the street can represent places for innovation in relation to eating. Eating hot dogs at school, for example, gets close to the idea of *habitus* eating on the road, having this feeling of doing something that differs from the norm which is both different and fun.

Another issue that came out from the statements was that just because a dish is a traditional regional dish, does not mean that it will be accepted by the young people. “There is no general

rule that regional food that is habitually eaten will be well embraced, such as porridge made out of corn²³. According to the pupils “the majority of us can’t stand porridge”, “there are some who take one look, then look away”, with a few exceptions. They complained about the repetitive nature of the food on offer and the way how it was prepared. “It makes you sick, every Monday we have rice pudding. Every week it’s like that”. “It’s a lot of porridge, which should be changed for fruits”. “Porridge, porridge, porridge, it’s sickening”. “Porridge and rice pudding are similar..... are there any differences?”. “Porridge Thursday, Tuesday, Friday and other meals with milk. The truth is they just give us really cheap stuff”. “Are they going to force us to eat this? No!”. “It’s always rice pudding and soup, always, always, always.... and the more we don’t like it...the more we chuck the food down in the corridors”. Due to the low popularity of cornmeal porridge in the schools, the nutritionist changed the menu in 2010 to include porridge made from powdered milk produced by farming families.

According to the anthropologist Raul Lody²⁴: *the so called “easy to eat food” brings to the imagination food that can be eaten quite easily by children and the elderly when there is no need to chew, which can be the case for other dishes... manioc flour thickened broth, a savory thick cornmeal porridge and traditional porridge, all of which are “easy to eat”. They can be eaten quickly to get rid of your hunger and they fill your stomach. Historically speaking, this was food given to the slaves.*

Based on the account of this author, porridge that is traditionally served in Bahia is “eaten in the morning” and it can “sustain” you in such a way that you can wait for lunch time “with tranquility”²⁴. For us, it is worth noting the problem in the context of the PNAE where porridge can be considered as food for babies, which may pose difficulties when trying to identify this type of food with teenagers.

Also for the students, they did not raise the issue of whether the food was “regional” or “non-regional”. They go for food that they prefer and that they are accustomed to eating. Thus manioc flour biscuits and yogurt, for example, are very popular. Nevertheless, in spite of being produced by farming families in the region, the interviewees did not consider yogurt a “regional food habitually eaten”.

According to Freitas et al.⁵, the young people associated porridge with vomit and sperm which were quite distinct images. They also thought this type of food was for “little kids” and the “elderly”

just like soup. According to Freitas and Minayo¹⁴, the Program goes against what the pupils want by promoting food that is independent of socio-cultural identity. It does not take into account their feelings on food and as a result the pupils are treated as mere consumers. The Program emphasizes objectivity in physical development and health but it is oblivious to cultural singularities.

For the teenagers, “good food is rubbish whilst rubbish food is good”. They stated that “junk food is food that’s not worth it and doesn’t help your health” for example “fried pasties, sausage or cheese rolls, all of which are fried in oil”, “mini pies, patties and bakes”, “sweets” that you eat on the street. They suggested school meals should be pleasurable, eating “pasties, patties, pizzas and hot dogs” which is food that they prefer. On the other hand they affirmed that “good food” is “beans, rice, grilled ham and cheese, salads..... but they’re not nice”, “good food is healthier... fruits, vegetables”. This type of food has connections with rules that need to be obeyed at home.

They said on the road they ate everything that was unhealthy because they liked it and it was different to what they ate at home. For some pupils these snacks (junk food) ought to be offered as school meals. Therefore one moment they seem to want this type of food and next they complained about their health implications. They noted that even if the school serves healthy food “...the majority of young people today don’t prefer healthy food”.

According to Turmo²⁵, “one’s first food preferences are learnt in a person’s infancy and is connected to the maternal world and a person’s first home”. It is a fundamental part of interpreting reality through the passing of time, allowing a person to get close to new models and reflect on certain foods or re-identify with their own world involving their social group, people, the home and religion. In any case, these preferences are rooted and internalized through slow development and difficult rationalization²⁵.

For the author²⁵, with the exception of when “new food” gains a lot of social acceptance where for example it is directly advertised to young people, generally speaking, ethnocentric connections with food are so strong that anything considered new is normally viewed with suspicion to the point of suffering complete rejection. According to Freitas et al.⁵ young people are attracted to food advertised by the media, (such as hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries, biscuits with different fillings and soft drinks) because they are sold

using images portraying feelings of being free and liberated. Upon eating such food, they feel as though they are in the center of their own world.

What can be learnt through social conventions is fundamental when food is chosen and when it is made into identity symbols. For Turmo e Toussaint-Samat²⁵, “what someone likes is a question of how they are made to feel. It is also related to becoming aware of something through analysis. In summary it is an “intellectual act”. The materialization of a person’s food preferences is based on a number of factors such as: taste, the feel, consistency, the smell, and the physical sensation that is captured, processed and identified. What is also important is where a person lives in the world and their perceptions of their place. Nevertheless, their likes are connected to a specific model that responds to their local identities as well as their *status*, gender, age, ethnicity and religion²⁵.

Taking into consideration Bourdieu in *The Distinction*, the author²⁵ states that food preferences are connected to a person’s socioeconomic position and their class. In this way, “preferences bring together those that share the same likes and it separates them from the rest. What remains are fundamental polar differences that separate the taste for luxuries from the taste for necessities”.

As noted before, in the last decade some studies were done that dealt with the acceptability of school meals in the country. Muniz and Carvalho³, in a study with 240 pupils in their fifth year in ten municipal schools in the area of João Pessoa (PB) showed that the following food was accepted by most the pupils: biscuits (40.5%), yogurt (30.0%) and fruit juice (24.5%). The food that was least accepted was: soup (31.7%), macaroni (19.4%) and coconut/cornmeal porridge (12.2%).

Danelon et al.², in a study carried out with 324 students (between the ages of 6 to 14) in six public units in Campinas (SP) showed that meeting the food preferences of pupils directly correlated with their adherence to the Program. This should be considered by the PNAE. In this study, the students’ preferences were divided up into the following: snacks with fruit juice (21.4%), snacks with milk (21.1%), desserts (19.4%), any types of lunch (15.9%) and soup (6.4%).

For Martins et al.²⁶, in a study with 480 pupils in 12 public primary schools in Piracicaba (SP), amongst the unpopular dishes was soup (47%).

Silva et al.⁴ noted, upon interviewing 1,500 pupils from state schools in Minas Gerais found low rates of acceptance (28.2%) and low rates of

adherence to the Program (45.1%). According to the authors, 58.4% of the pupils stated that fruits were not a part of the menu and 27% suggested that they be included to improve the menu. This was the most mentioned food suggestion.

The Right to School Feeding

In the area of school feeding there is the idea that the school meal is considered the main meal of the day for pupils in public schools. In this vein, it is worth noting a paradigm transition in relation to the justification given by the Public Policy on Food and Nutrition in Brazil. The current fundamental ideology is that the DHAA is central. However in the 1940s public policies centered around speeches using binomial phrases like “malnutrition-underproduction” which essentially meant caring for the population through maintaining and increasing productivity²⁷. In the 1970s the idea was that the state ought to do something to help the poorest in society so that they would not die of hunger. Discussions were also centered on the redistribution of wealth to curb malnutrition, but this did not amount to anything²⁸.

There seems to be a form of “rancidness” in the assistive nature of the Program when school feeding is not understood and recognized as a right. The vulnerabilities become evident, particularly in schools where there are food street sellers selling food and many students opt for this option rather than eating in schools. This decision is obviously made based on their food preferences.

During this study there were reports that pupils were embarrassed to join the queue to obtain the food that was on offer based on the PNAE. The teenagers stated: “there are some kids that are just embarrassed. They are a bit stuck-up. They don’t want the food, like, they are better than other people”, “like I don’t eat this”. “Sometimes, even their own mates discriminate in this way”. “It’s bad for those that are hungry and want to eat but are too embarrassed to do so for fear of being picked on”. The pupils are quite critical in relation to the cost of the food: “If they were to offer minced meat, it would be more expensive” (when compared with soya mince). “In reality they just give us cheap stuff”. “It’s because it’s for us. If it was for them, the food would be better”. They thought it more important to have better quality products for school meals that “wouldn’t be more expensive, but better made and of better quality”. What is behind these ideas is that school

meals are principally for the poorest and neediest pupils and thus not a lot of care is taken in the food given.

Freitas et al.⁵ mentions situations in which school children state that they eat school meals “because they don’t have a choice”. When they do not have any money they eat them even though it goes against their *habitus*. In the focus groups, similar results were found. On this point the pupils stated, “If you don’t want to eat it, you don’t eat. If you want to eat it, you eat”. “In any case you’re force to eat... because if you don’t you’ll become hungry”. “We force ourselves to knuckle down and study. Try doing that on an empty stomach”.

According to the authors, school meals represent a recognition of conditions of poverty where a lack of food in people’s homes has redefined the roles of public schools as being not just places to learn and to interact on a social basis, but also being places to eat at. The authors draw attention to the desire to have routines involving students having a morning meal and lunch or a lunch and a dinner in dignified places, even though these wishes are not always expressly stated. They mentioned that without their being analysis which is intersubjective in context, in relation to the Program “the official text on school feeding would switch to being controlled and governed by contracts financed by the states”⁵.

According to Bezerra¹⁸, the food preferred by students is not a consideration. Consideration is placed on the finances that are available and the ideas espoused by the leaders that there are *poor, starving and needy pupils in need of a bowl of soup*. Therefore what is offered is only based on filling *bellies*, which does not take into account pupils’ preferences who are tired of the repetitive nature of just being offered soup which leads to many rejecting school meals. In this context, the author notes that school meals are offered like *rations* being served with two soup spoons for each pupil¹⁸.

According to this author¹⁸, the promotion of a service that provides adequate food that respects regional eating practices, would allow students to choose what they really want to eat. This includes talking to all those involved including families. The results of Bezerra¹⁸ thesis is that school meals do not correspond with the likes and anxieties of the pupils. School food does not just restrict itself to the food that is served but it also encompasses how it is served (bowls, plates, cups, spoons) and the type of environment where it is served; in that some place are less than appropriate¹⁸.

With this scope in mind, the “food war” turns into another relevant theme which relates to place, habits, identity and that which is considered strange, all of which had not been considered beforehand. There were many reports of “wars” breaking out because the popcorn or *beiju* was “very dry”. There were also reports given in favor of school allotments. In the food conflicts: soya food was “catapulted” with a spoon, bread with honey was thrown on the school roof, rice pudding was thrown on the ground and soup thrown out. There were also reports that some would put food in their mouth and spit it at their colleagues.

Therefore there is an assistance related type of idea in the remit of the Program being executed based on philanthropy where school meals are not understood or recognized as a right, but are seen as more of an act of charity for the poorest and most vulnerable in society. This idea needs to be debunked because isn’t adequate food a legitimate human right in this day and age? What strategies can be used to encourage pupils want to consume school meals?

Final Considerations

The analysis of perspectives of school meals has contributed to clarifying aspects related to teenagers’ eating habits and what they often eat: at home, on the road and at school. As mentioned earlier, food institutionally served, can mean different things to different people. Sometimes they are referred to as to school snacks and sometimes as school meals. These distinct terms are challenging in light of the Program and thus deserve more in-depth studies that contrast the different concepts and perspectives.

It has been highlighted that little scrutiny has taken place into the fact that there is a habit of offering lunch and dinner during snack time even though this area raises social vulnerability issues. The current perspective that guarantees the serving of school meals as a right which makes the institutions think that they are providing “food for the poor”, often debases school meals and its influence on the social identity of the students. Taking this line, it is worth reaffirming that the PNAE represents an open space for this debate to occur and be consolidated, because it recognizes that the provision of these meals constitutes a fundamental human right based on Brazilian legislation. To this end, it should be considered that symbolic dimensions have the ability affect what is consumed as school meals.

Collaborations

JB Paiva participated in: the planning, the execution of the research, the analysis and interpretation of data and the drafting and revision of the article. MCS Freitas collaborated in coming up with the idea for this project and critically reviewed this paper. LAS Santos participated in: coming up with the idea for this paper, providing guidance on the research undertaken, analyzing and interpreting the data and drafting and revising the final draft.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank: the teams at the Collaborating Center for School Feeding and Nutrition (CECANE - UFBA) for their support, Nucleus for the Study and Research into Food and Culture (NEPAC - UFBA) and the Municipal Health Secretary in Valente -Bahia, Brazil.

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Article submitted 04/05/2015

Approved 22/08/2015

Final version submitted 24/08/2015