

Exploring Students' Perspectives And Experiences on Healthy Eating: A Qualitative Inquiry into Food Literacy in School Canteens

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Abstract

Healthy eating plays a vital role in adolescent development and overall well-being. However, in many school canteens in Maguindanao del Norte, access to nutritious food options remains limited. Despite the presence of food literacy education, students often struggle to make healthy food choices due to environmental constraints and social influences. This study, titled *"Exploring Students' Perspectives and Experiences on Healthy Eating: A qualitative inquiry into Food Literacy in School Canteens,"* aimed to examine the lived experiences and views of secondary students regarding healthy eating and food literacy in selected schools. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes: (1) healthy eating is commonly associated with the consumption of fruits, vegetables, and clean food; (2) students' food choices are influenced by price, availability, and peer pressure; (3) schools promote healthy eating through lessons but lack consistent reinforcement in canteen practices; (4) barriers include limited healthy options and a poor understanding of food labels; and (5) students recommend awareness campaigns, better canteen offerings, and stronger policy implementation. The findings emphasize that while students recognize the importance of healthy eating, systemic barriers hinder their ability to act on this knowledge. These insights provide a strong foundation for crafting school-based policies aimed at improving food literacy and the overall nutritional environment.

Keywords: *Healthy Eating, Food Literacy, School Canteens, Student Perspectives, Qualitative Research, School Policy, Maguindanao del Norte.*

Introduction

Healthy eating is vital for adolescent development, influencing their cognitive performance, physical health, and overall well-being. In school settings, students' food choices are greatly influenced by what is available in the canteen, making school food environments essential to forming healthy eating habits. However, many students face challenges related to food availability, peer pressure, and limited food literacy. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has implemented policies to promote healthier school food environments, yet their full implementation remains difficult, especially in rural areas like Maguindanao del Norte.

This study investigates how junior high school students understand healthy eating, the factors that influence their food choices, their experiences with school canteens, and their suggestions for promoting food literacy. Theoretical frameworks guiding the study include Social Cognitive Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, the Food Literacy Framework, Theory of Planned Behavior, and Self-Determination Theory.

Research Questions:

1. How do students define and understand healthy eating?
2. What factors influence students' food choices in the school canteen?
3. How do students perceive the role of the school in promoting food literacy?
4. What challenges do students face in making healthy food choices?
5. What suggestions do students have for improving food literacy in school canteens?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically using a phenomenological approach. This method was appropriate for exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of students regarding healthy eating and food literacy in school settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in three public secondary schools in Maguindanao del Norte: Datu Mantato National High School, Kabuntalan National High School, and Bai Hanina Sinsuat National High School. These schools were selected due to their active school canteens and diverse student populations.

Participants and Sampling

Twelve junior high school students (Grades 7–10), four from each school, were selected through purposive sampling. Participants were chosen based on their regular interaction with the school

canteen and willingness to share their experiences. Prior to participation, informed consent from parents and assent from students were obtained.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used, adapted from previous studies on adolescent food literacy and school food environments. Questions focused on food choices, perceptions of healthy eating, canteen experiences, and suggestions for improvement.

Data Collection Procedure

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a quiet setting within the schools. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Participants were encouraged to speak in the language they were most comfortable with, including Tagalog.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. Transcripts were coded, categorized into clustered themes, and synthesized into overarching themes that captured the students' shared experiences and insights.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical protocols including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Ethical clearance was secured from the DepEd Division Office, and school administrators provided permission to conduct the study.

Results

The findings are presented based on the five central research questions. Each section includes a thematic summary and is supported by tables that highlight the emerging themes, clustered concepts, and representative student responses.

RQ1: How do students define and understand healthy eating?

Students generally defined healthy eating as the consumption of fruits and vegetables, describing these foods as essential for maintaining strength, preventing sickness, and supporting the body. They also associated healthy food with cleanliness and natural preparation, while junk food and processed meals were consistently viewed as unhealthy.

Table 1. Emerging Themes on How Students Define and Understand Healthy Eating

Significant Statements	Initial Codes	Clustered Themes	Emerging Themes
Uhhmm ang healthy eating is ito yung mga pagkain na kailangan natin i-maintain... – Student 1	Fruits as source of vitamins	Fruits and Vegetables as Healthy Choices	Healthy Eating as Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables
Aah..para sa akin is ang ah paano mo maipaliwanag ang healthy eating... – Student 3	Daily intake of vegetables and fruits	Fruits and Vegetables as Healthy Choices	
Para sakin, ang healthy eating ay ang pag kain natin ng mga masustansyang gulay... – Student 11	Avoidance of harmful foods	Avoidance of Junk and Street Food	Avoidance of Junk and Street Food
Malinis, nagbibigay lakas sating katawan at piliin natin yung mga pagkain... – Student 12	Clean and nutritious choices	Clean and Natural Food Choices	Healthy Eating as Choosing Clean, Natural, and Nutritious Food
Para sa akin is ang malusog na pagkain is like mga prutas... unhealthy naman... – Student 1	Harmful effects of street food	Avoidance of Junk and Street Food	Avoidance of Junk and Street Food
Ahm tinuturing kong healthy yung food yung like namba mga vegetables... – Student 2	Vegetables seen as strong food	Fruits and Vegetables as Healthy Choices	Healthy Eating as Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables
Ahmm ang itinuturing kong malusog na pagkain like pakwan... – Student 6	Junk food and drinks affect health	Avoidance of Junk and Street Food	Avoidance of Junk and Street Food
Siomai... malusog? Gulay. Ahm mga hindi malusog siomai... – Student 9	Siomai seen as unhealthy	Avoidance of Junk and Street Food	Avoidance of Junk and Street Food
Ang malusog na pagkain ito ay makakatulong sa aking katawan... – Student 10	Vegetables prevent illness	Strength and Illness Prevention	Healthy Eating as a Way to Strengthen the Body and Prevent Illness

Emm ah ang malusog na pagkain po ay.. banana nakakapaglakas... – Student 5	Banana strengthens the body	Strength and Illness Prevention	
Ahmmm ang pagkain na nagpapalakas ng ating mga pangangatawan. – Student 6	Strengthening the body	Strength and Illness Prevention	
Mga prutas katulad ng orange na maraming vitamin C... – Student 11	Fruits aid hydration and immunity	Strength and Illness Prevention	Healthy Eating as a Way to Strengthen the Body and Prevent Illness
Ahm ang heathy foods is apple... unhealthy food is ahmm beef... – Student 7	Apple helps nutrition, meat too oily	Clean and Natural Food Choices	Healthy Eating as Choosing Clean, Natural, and Nutritious Food
Ang pagkain na itinuturing kong malusog ay like orange at apple... – Student 8	Fruits prevent high blood pressure	Clean and Natural Food Choices	
Yung para sa akin ang healthy food is like... ang itinuturing kong malusog... – Student 3	Fruits vs. processed food	Clean and Natural Food Choices	

Research Question 2: What factors influence students' food choices in the school canteen?

Students reported that price, taste, and food availability were the most influential factors in their food selection. Additionally, peer influence played a significant role, often dictating what students purchased or consumed regardless of personal preference or nutritional knowledge.

Table 2. Emerging Themes on Food Choices in the School Canteen

Significant Statements	Initial Codes	Clustered Themes	Emerging Themes
“Ahmm like ah bananaque, mga ahh aahh mga lumpia, mga kikiam.” – Student 1	Preference for fried and processed food	Fried and Processed Foods	Fried and Processed Foods in School Canteen Choices
“Ma’am sa akin ma’am is kanin, pastil and street food like fishball	Familiar, flavorful, and cheap options	Fried and Processed Foods	

or quick-quick.” – Student 3			
“Ehm nakakaapekto yun kapag konte yung baon natin tapus pinagkakasya pa natin tapus yung bibilihin natin is sobrang mahal.” – Student 1	Limited budget affects choices	Price and Availability	Influence of Price, Taste, and Availability on Food Selection
“Ang pinaka nakakainfluence sa akin sa pagkain ko sa canteen ay ang presyo nito dahil mura lang namn ito.” – Student 11	Affordable food preferred	Price and Availability	
“I think ma’am is aahhh minsan inpluwensya ng kasama kasi yung hindi mo gustong pagkain is nakakain ka dahil sa mga kasama mo.” – Student 3	Peer influence affects food decisions	Peer Influence	Peer Influence and Social Dynamics in Food Decisions
“Sa akin din inpluwensya ng kaibigan kasi minsan kasi wala kang baon tapus naiingit ka sa kanila.” – Student 6	Peer sharing influences choices	Peer Influence	Peer Influence and Social Dynamics in Food Decisions
“Yes po dahil sa kaibigan minsan kasi ma’am ginayaya ka nila pumunta sa street food hindi makatanggi.” – Student 2	Friends inviting to buy unhealthy food	Peer Pressure and Social Eating	

“Yes ma’am kasi napipilitan din talaga kasi pag wala kang pera pinipilit ka talaga nila, nililibre nila ako.” – Student 4	Treated to food by peers, can't refuse	Peer Pressure and Social Eating	
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Research Question 3: What challenges do students face in making healthy food choices?

Students face several barriers in practicing healthy eating. These include limited financial resources, social pressure from peers, lack of healthy canteen options, and personal dislike for certain healthy foods, particularly vegetables. These challenges highlight the gap between knowledge and practical application.

Table 3. Emerging Themes on Challenges Students Face in Making Healthy Food Choices

Significant Responses	Initial Themes	Clustered Themes	Emerging Themes
“Ang humahamon sa akin is mga kaibigan ko...” (“The ones who challenge me are my friends...”) – Student 1	Peer judgment on food choices	Peer Influence	Peer Pressure as a Barrier to Healthy Eating
“Lagi talaga to sakin nangyayari...” (“This always happens to me...”) – Student 12	Conformity due to peer influence	Peer Influence	Lack of Healthy Food Options in the School Canteen
“Pagwala pong healthy food sa canteen...” (“There are no healthy foods...”) – Student 2	No healthy food sold in canteen	Availability of Healthy Food	Personal Preferences and Internal Struggles with Healthy Eating
“Ahmm kasi wala din kasi masyado sila binebenta...” (“They don’t sell much healthy food...”) – Student 7	Limited nutritious options available	Availability of Healthy Food	Lack of Healthy Food Options in the School Canteen

“Minsan nagdadalawang isip pa ako...” (“Sometimes I hesitate...” – Student 3	Preference for junk food	Taste Preference	Personal Preferences and Internal Struggles with Healthy Eating
“Hindi ko gusto yung lasa masyado.” (“I don’t really like the taste...” – Student 12	Dislike for vegetable taste	Taste Preference	

Research Question 4: How do students perceive the role of the school in promoting food literacy?

Participants recognized the role of schools in promoting healthy eating through classroom instruction, particularly in Technology and Livelihood Education (TLE), and during activities such as Nutrition Month. However, they noted a discrepancy between these lessons and the actual food options available in school canteens, which they felt did not support or reflect the teachings.

Table 4. Emerging Themes on Students’ Perceptions of the Role of the School in Promoting Food Literacy

Significant Statements	Initial Codes	Clustered Themes	Emerging Themes
Yes ah like diba sa nutrition month pinagaaralan yung mga prutas... – Student 1	Nutrition Month education	Formal School-Based Nutrition Education	Classroom-Based Food Literacy Education Classroom-Based Food Literacy Education
Opo ma’am kasi minsan itinuturo ito sa amin sa paaralan. – Student 5	Healthy eating taught in class	Formal School-Based Nutrition Education	
Oo, dahil sa kasali na sa curriculum ang pag aaral... – Student 10	Curriculum includes nutrition	Curriculum and Classroom Instruction	
Ma’am ah yes kasi aah yung other teachers is sinasabi nila... – Student 3	Teachers recommend nutritious food	Teachers as Nutrition Advocates	Teacher as a Primary Source of Nutrition Knowledge
Yes ma’am kasi lagi din po natuturo yung	Frequent lessons on healthy eating	Frequent Teacher-Led Lessons	

healthy food. – Student 2			
Opo po tinuturuan din po kami ng aming mga guro. – Student 8	Teachers reinforce food choices	Daily Teacher Reminders	
Naiintindian ko yung iba na nakalagay na sulat po... – Student 5	Partial comprehension of food labels	Reading Labels but Partial Understanding	Partial Understanding of Food Labels and Ingredients
Sa akin is kapag, example is soft drinks binabasa ko... – Student 3	Focus on sugar content	Nutrient-Specific Focus	
Every time kasi na bumibili ako ng pagkain tinitignan ko... – Student 2	Uses phone to understand ingredients	Technology-Aided Comprehension	
Minsan kasi sa mga ulam na nabibili namin sa canteen... – Student 11	Canteen foods often unlabeled	Label Absence in Local Food Items	Barriers in Understanding Food Literacy Concepts
Eeh nauunawaan ko eeh nababasa ko at pero hindi ko maintindian... – Student 9	Struggles with food label vocabulary	Lack of Vocabulary Knowledge	
Para sakin NG hindi masyado clear yan sa sa akin... – Student 12	Low clarity and confusion	Limited Conceptual Clarity	

Research Question 5: What suggestions do students have for improving food literacy in school canteens?

Participants shared insightful and practical suggestions for promoting healthy eating and improving food literacy. These included the introduction of affordable healthy options, student involvement in menu planning, and interactive learning activities such as cooking demonstrations and nutrition contests.

Table 5. Emerging Themes on the Suggestions for Improvement

Significant Statements	Initial Codes	Clustered Themes	Emerging Themes
Itipon lahat ng mga studyante tapus	Use of pictures to promote healthy food	Visual Tools for Healthy Food	Visual and Informational

magpakita ng mga larawan... – Student 1		Education	Campaigns for Awareness
Ahmm pwede rin po sila na magpakalat ng information sa paligid... – Student 2	Posters and visual campaigns in schools	Visual Tools for Healthy Food Education	Visual and Informational Campaigns for Awareness
I think na alisin na yung mga hindi masustansyang pagkain... – Student 4	Ban unhealthy food from canteen	Policy Enforcement on School Food	Policy and Regulation of School Food Offerings
Kailangan po nila maggawa rules likeawal po sila ng magtinda... – Student 8	Establish food regulation rules	Policy Enforcement on School Food	Policy and Regulation of School Food Offerings
Ehmm yung binibenta nila like halimbawa hindi dapat araw-araw... – Student 1	Schedule healthy food days	Improving School Canteen Practices	Structural and Practical Changes in the Canteen
Para sa akin...dapat marami ang pagpipilian na healthy food... – Student 10	Affordable and diverse food options	Improving School Canteen Practices	Structural and Practical Changes in the Canteen

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore students' perspectives and experiences regarding healthy eating and food literacy in the context of school canteens. The discussion below interprets the findings in relation to the study's objectives, existing literature, and theoretical perspectives.

Understanding Healthy Eating

The findings revealed that students generally associated healthy eating with the consumption of nutritious foods such as vegetables, fruits, and balanced meals. Participants acknowledged the importance of healthy eating for growth, academic performance, and overall well-being. This understanding reflects a foundational level of food literacy, consistent with the definitions of Vidgen and Gallegos (2014), where food literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills to make healthy food choices.

However, several participants also expressed the perception that healthy food is often more expensive or less satisfying than junk food. This misconception points to the need for deeper, critical food literacy that goes beyond basic nutrition knowledge. According to Slocum (2011), critical food literacy involves an awareness of social, cultural, and economic factors that influence food environments. In this case, students were aware of health concepts but constrained by practical and economic considerations in their decision-making.

Factors Influencing Food Choices

Students' food choices were strongly influenced by availability, affordability, peer preferences, taste, and convenience. The predominance of processed and fried foods in the canteen limited students' ability to apply their knowledge about healthy eating. Despite understanding the benefits of healthier options, many students admitted to choosing unhealthy foods due to lower cost or lack of healthier alternatives.

These findings mirror previous studies by Slater and Mudryj (2016), which highlighted the disconnect between nutrition knowledge and actual food behavior among adolescents. The "knowledge-behavior gap" remains a significant barrier, especially in school environments that fail to support healthy choices through the availability of nutritious meals and snacks.

Role of the School in Promoting Food Literacy

Participants emphasized the crucial role schools play in shaping food choices and promoting food literacy. While students appreciated classroom lessons about nutrition, they also pointed out inconsistencies between the school curriculum and the food offerings available in the canteen. Many felt that the school should serve as a role model in implementing what is taught about health and nutrition.

This finding supports the integrated approach proposed by Pérez-Rodrigo and Aranceta (2017), who argue that schools must offer both education and practical application through supportive food environments. The integration of food literacy into both academic and operational aspects of the school—such as the canteen policy—was seen by participants as essential in reinforcing healthy behaviors.

Challenges in Making Healthy Food Choices

Students encountered several challenges when attempting to make healthy food choices. These included the limited availability of nutritious options, high prices of healthier items, peer pressure, and cultural norms. Some students expressed embarrassment when bringing home-cooked meals due to social stigma, which further discouraged healthy practices.

Such barriers highlight the intersection between social and economic determinants of food choices, which are often overlooked in traditional health education programs. As supported by

Slocum (2011) and Cullen et al. (2015), food literacy must address not only knowledge but also the broader structural and cultural context in which food decisions are made.

Suggestions for Improving Food Literacy in School Canteens

Participants offered practical suggestions for improving food literacy and promoting healthier eating habits in schools. These included reducing the prices of healthy food items, improving the taste and presentation of vegetables, involving students in canteen menu planning, and making nutrition education more interactive and engaging.

These recommendations align with participatory models of food system education, which empower students as stakeholders in the school food environment (Bevans et al., 2011). By integrating students' voices into decision-making processes, schools can create more responsive, equitable, and sustainable food environments.

Conclusion

Summary of Outcomes

The study revealed that students have a basic understanding of healthy eating, recognizing the importance of consuming balanced and nutritious foods. However, their actual food choices are influenced by affordability, availability, peer influence, and canteen offerings. A disconnect exists between what is taught in nutrition education and the unhealthy food options available in school canteens. Students face barriers such as limited healthy options, high prices, and social stigma related to bringing home-cooked meals. Despite these challenges, students expressed clear and practical suggestions to improve food literacy and access to healthier food in schools. Overall, the study highlights the need for a more supportive, student-centered, and health-promoting school environment.

Recommendation

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Strengthen nutrition education through practical and student-centered approaches.**

Schools may go beyond theoretical instruction and provide hands-on learning experiences such as label-reading exercises, healthy food demonstrations, and interactive nutrition games. Embedding these in subjects like TLE or during Nutrition Month can make lessons more memorable and meaningful.

2. **Improve the availability and affordability of healthy food options in the school canteen.** School administrators may work with canteen operators to ensure that fruits, vegetables, and clean, affordable meals are consistently available. Special attention may be given to pricing to ensure that even students with limited allowances can afford nutritious food.
3. **Implement clear and visible policies on food sales.** Schools may establish and enforce rules limiting or banning the sale of unhealthy food and drinks in the canteen. Posting visual reminders, health tips, and food guidelines can reinforce these policies and influence daily decision-making.
4. **Address social and peer influences through student-led initiatives.** Peer influence can be a powerful tool for positive change. Creating student health ambassador groups, organizing healthy eating challenges, or involving student councils in nutrition campaigns can promote a supportive culture around healthy food.
5. **Reorganize the canteen food layout to promote healthy choices.** Small changes such as placing fruits and vegetables in the most visible areas or separating junk food from more nutritious options can guide students' choices through visual cues.
6. **Ensure food hygiene and quality.** Healthy food must not only be available but also clean, fresh, and well-prepared. Vendors may receive training in basic food safety, and regular inspections may be conducted to ensure cleanliness and maintain quality standards.
7. **Involve students in decision-making and feedback.** Allowing students to participate in planning menus, evaluating canteen food, or recommending policies fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that changes align with their preferences and realities.

8. **Conduct further research.** Future studies may explore the long-term impact of school nutrition programs on student health, behavior, and academic performance. Broader studies involving different grade levels, school types, or regions may also reveal deeper insights into student nutrition and its relationship with school food policies.

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