

Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility. At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

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PROCEEDINGS

02

Cultures, Practices, and Change

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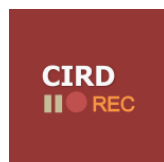
3rd International Conference
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Vol. 2

**Cultures,
Practices,
and Change**

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I AM WHAT I EAT. EDUCATION MUST SUPPORT ADOLESCENTS' SUSTAINABLE FOOD CHOICES

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Adolescence is a critical developmental period characterized by transitioning from a diet controlled primarily by parents towards a more self-directed diet. Food choices allow adolescents to assert themselves, build their identity, and form their values. One of the areas in which adolescents define themselves as moral subjects is respect for the environment and, more generally, sustainability. Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between vegetarian nutrition and health in developmental age, demonstrating that if the diet is well monitored and managed in a balanced way, there is no risk associated with vegetarian regimes. Several studies have shown benefits such as reduced risk of being overweight, diabetes onset, cardiovascular diseases, and some cancers. On the other hand, concerns have surfaced regarding potential nutritional deficiencies in vegetarian diets. In response to these concerns, numerous scientific paediatric associations warned that the successful provision of a completely vegetarian diet for young people requires expert guidance, planning, and supplementation. Adolescents adopting a vegetarian diet must be guided and supported by adult reference figures. Education can contribute to developing well-informed and empowered adolescents who can make sustainable and healthy dietary choices.

vegetarianism; sustainability; adolescence; food choices; education.

INTRODUCTION

In industrialized countries, interest in plant-based diets has grown among various age groups, including adolescents (Cramer et al., 2017; Eurispes, 2019; Mensink et al., 2016; Ponzio et al., 2015). These dietary regimes often represent a philosophy of life: ethical vegetarians are mainly supported by moral reasons, such as animal welfare, non-violence, equality, respect for differences, or the idea that they can contribute to reducing environmental pollution or world hunger.

Despite the increasing rates of vegetarianism in industrialized countries, few studies analyze the phenomenon with specific reference to adolescents (Del Ciampo & Lopes Del Ciampo, 2019; Orlich et al., 2019; Patelakis et al., 2019). One of the first studies on this topic (Wright & Howcroft, 1992) found that emotional reasons associated with animal welfare, rather than health, are the basis of being vegetarian among adolescents.

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Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between vegetarian nutrition and health in developmental age, demonstrating that if the diet is well monitored and managed in a balanced way, there is no risk associated with vegetarian regimes (Eurispes, 2019; Tosatti & Doria, 2021). Several studies showed benefits such as reduced overweight risks, diabetes onset, cardiovascular diseases, and some cancers (Lee & Park, 2017; Matthews et al., 2011; Sabaté & Wien, 2010; American Dietetic Association, 2003). Moreover, findings suggest that adopting a vegetarian lifestyle during adolescence, characterized by a diet abundant in fruits, vegetables, legumes, eggs, and milk, can yield lasting benefits for bone health in adulthood (Movassagh et al., 2018).

On the other hand, concerns have surfaced regarding potential nutritional deficiencies in vegetarian diets (Lemale et al., 2019; Ferrara et al., 2017). In response to these concerns, numerous scientific paediatric associations warned that successfully providing young people with an entirely vegetarian/vegan diet requires substantial commitment, expert guidance, planning, resources, and supplementation (McEvoy et al., 2012; Kiely, 2021).

Everything explained so far implies that adolescents who adopt a vegetarian diet must be guided and supported by their adult reference figures. Supporting adolescents who choose to be vegetarian involves understanding and respecting their decisions, providing information, addressing nutritional concerns, and creating an environment that respects and accommodates their dietary preferences.

Education can contribute to the development of well-informed and empowered adolescents who are capable of making environmentally sustainable and healthy dietary choices, including vegetarianism.

This paper focuses, in particular, on the potential role of education to accompany adolescents in making conscious choices regarding nutrition, respecting their health, the environment, and living beings.

1. MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND FOOD CHOICES

The process of building identity is the common thread of the developmental tasks in adolescence (Ammaniti & Ammaniti, 1995; Andreoli, 2004; Bortolotto, 2013; Lancini et al., 2020; Pietropolli Charmet & Cirillo, 2010; Siegel, 2013). We can see adolescence as the search for a path, choices, and commitment. Moral development implies defining values, respecting them (coherence), and finding recognition from others (relationships).

One of the areas in which adolescents define themselves as moral subjects is that of environmental justice. Food choices can be a way for adolescents to take a stand

when transitioning from a diet controlled primarily by parents towards a more self-directed diet.

1.1. Research questions and design

This paper presents the preliminary results of a phenomenological research conducted to investigate the topic of vegetarian food choices in adolescence, delving into the motivations that lead adolescents to prefer plant-based diets, the conditions in which they make their choices, the support needs that derive from them at an informational, organizational, emotional and communicative level.

The research, which has received approval from the Ethics Committee for Research of the Department of Humanities at the University of Ferrara, seeks to develop educational settings and prepare educators to guide adolescents in their process of self-discovery, empowering them to make conscious decisions about their future.

It is based on semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of adolescents (18-22 years old), and it focuses on the role of adults (school teachers, families, educators) and the relationship between teenagers and adults. So far, six interviews were conducted with vegetarian female participants aged 18 to 20. Five participants were in their final year of secondary school, while one had taken a gap year to volunteer. All interviewees chose to become vegetarian for ethical reasons: respect for animals and the environment. Three interviewees consented to audio recording of the interview, while the content of the others was manually transcribed during the interview itself. The transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012) to identify recurring categories.

After collecting general data (name, age, qualification and/or educational background, housing situation, employment status), the questions posed to the interviewees are as follows:

1. Describe your current diet.
2. What are the reasons for your choices regarding nutrition?
3. Do you usually communicate your food choices and the reasons related to them to others?
4. Think about *school*. Did it provide you with opportunities to learn and reflect on food choices?
5. Think about your *extracurricular* activities and the environments you frequent. Did they provide you with opportunities to learn and reflect on food choices?
6. Think about your *family life*. Thanks to your family members and the time you spend together, did you have opportunities to learn and reflect on food choices?
7. Think about your relationships with your *peers*. Thanks to them and the time you spent together, did you have opportunities to learn and reflect on food choices?
8. Did you encounter, or are you experiencing, *obstacles* in respecting the choices made regarding your diet?

9. What would you *need* to make your food choices peacefully and consciously?
10. How could *adults* help you in carrying out your food choices consciously?

1.2 Preliminary results

This section will present the findings from the initial six interviews conducted in the first half of 2024, highlighting common themes.

A significant finding was the limited opportunities for adolescents to discuss their food choices. When asked about school, none reported meaningful experiences related to food choices, and three explicitly stated that “food is not a school subject”. All participants continue to live with their families. While two reported family conflict and the need to conceal their dietary choices, the others described family acceptance but limited understanding of their motivations and lack of knowledge about the subject. As one participant put it, “[...] my parents insist that as I am growing, I need to eat meat, but I know this is not necessary”. One participant’s mother dismissed her daughter’s choice as a temporary phase, stating: “Do as you please, this too shall pass”.

Regarding extracurricular activities, one interviewee described her participation in a student collective where she feels she can express her political and social ideas, including her dietary choices. Another reported attending a yoga course and meeting an older person there who inspired her to become a vegetarian. In the other interviews, no significant extracurricular environments were mentioned.

Four individuals stated that they prefer not to share their choice to be vegetarian with their peers for fear of being ridiculed. One of them said: “I am not yet able to explain well to others why one should be vegetarian. I should be more informed and assertive myself”. The other two interviewees do not hide their choice from their peers but, at the same time, do not make it a topic of discussion, considering that there is no fertile ground.

The second recurring concept is the abundance of information available on the internet and, at the same time, the difficulty of selecting reliable sources. All interviewees reported conducting independent research, finding articles and other sources that sometimes reported contradictory evaluations. As a result, they need help understanding how vegetarian choices impact their health and what kind of supplements are necessary. Only one of the interviewees stated that she had relied on a dietitian. During the interview, she mentioned having suffered from eating disorders, and therefore her family deemed it appropriate to consult a specialist.

Another common theme among the participants was concern about their diet. Three participants dwelled on their eating habits, emphasizing that being vegetarian does not necessarily mean “eating healthy”. They expressed concern about consuming too much “junk food” and not enough nutritious foods. One participant addressed the issue of the high costs of healthy vegetarian foods, stating that she did not feel comfortable asking her parents to spend more money “to please her”.

2. CONSTRUCTIVE REFLECTIONS

The preliminary results of this study indicate significant areas for improvement in the educational context. Neither schools nor families provide adequate support, and for four out of six interviewees, there seem to be no other settings where they can express themselves and receive recognition, feedback, and help in pursuing their choices.

In school, the traditional organization of teaching by disciplines leads to underestimating crucial topics for the well-being of the person and the planet, such as nutrition. Time has come to introduce transdisciplinary teaching for “global rights”, and “common concerns” (Booth & Ainscow, 2014; Nicolescu et al., 1994).

Schools should offer inclusive teaching that leads every student to academic success by exposing them to learning experiences and opportunities for interaction that are meaningful to them, based on their experiences, aspirations, and values.

The ability to source information, critically assess it, and articulate one’s own perspective through dialogue is fundamental to adolescent development. Adult guidance is crucial in supporting young people as they navigate their moral and personal identities. Without such support, their choices may be influenced by superficial or ideological factors.

Adolescence should be recognized as a valuable period of growth (Siegel, 2013). Rather than viewing it as a transitional phase, we should foster a cultural environment that supports young people’s development into integrated individuals who are self-aware and socially engaged.

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