



Defining food literacy: A scoping review



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ABSTRACT

The term “food literacy” describes the idea of proficiency in food related skills and knowledge. This prevalent term is broadly applied, although its core elements vary from initiative to initiative. In light of its ubiquitous use—but varying definitions—this article establishes the scope of food literacy research by identifying all articles that define ‘food literacy’, analysing its key conceptualizations, and reporting outcomes/measures of this concept.

Methods: A scoping review was conducted to identify all articles (academic and grey literature) using the term “food literacy”. Databases included Medline, Pubmed, Embase, CAB Abstracts, CINAHL, Scopus, JSTOR, and Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Of 1049 abstracts, 67 studies were included. From these, data was extracted on country of origin, study type (methodological approach), primary target population, and the primary outcomes relating to food literacy.

Results: The majority of definitions of food literacy emphasize the acquisition of critical knowledge (information and understanding) (55%) over functional knowledge (skills, abilities and choices) (8%), although some incorporate both (37%). Thematic analysis of 38 novel definitions of food literacy reveals the prevalence of six themes: skills and behaviours, food/health choices, culture, knowledge, emotions, and food systems. Study outcomes largely focus on knowledge generating measures, with very few focusing on health related outcome measures.

Conclusions: Current definitions of food literacy incorporate components of six key themes or domains and attributes of both critical and functional knowledge. Despite this broad definition of the term, most studies aiming to improve food literacy focus on knowledge related outcomes. Few articles address health outcomes, leaving an important gap (and opportunity) for future research in this field.

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The term “food literacy” describes the idea of proficiency in food related skills and knowledge. It is broadly applied in educational campaigns and industry reports to refer to both micro and macro level food environments. Examples range from the food literacy initiative “Six by Sixteen” (created by the Ontario Federation of Agriculture) that aims to promote food literacy by helping “young people learn to plan and prepare six nutritious, locally sources meals by the time they are sixteen years old” (“Six by Sixteen”), to the Canadian Museum of Agriculture’s food literacy initiative that teaches “children and families about keeping food nutritious and safe from farm to fork” (“Food Literacy Initiative”). In contrast, the

Conference Board of Canada’s 2013 report “What’s to Eat?: Improving Food Literacy in Canada,” addresses “household attitudes, skills and knowledge about food” (Howard & Brichta, 2013, preface). These examples demonstrate that use of the term “food literacy” is wide-ranging, used to describe everything from food preparation and cooking skills, to food science and safety, to household related food production (i.e. food safety) and consumption issues (i.e. food marketing).

The varied use of the term by industry groups, cultural institutions, and expert organizations raises the question of how food literacy can be understood. This is especially important because policy makers are mobilizing the idea of food literacy as tool to achieve population health and environmental outcomes. If basic literacy is defined as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written

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materials associated with varying contexts,”¹ what does it mean to be “food literate”? What food related skills and knowledge are necessary to become proficient in this area? How are these components of food literacy articulated in its various definitions?

A previous scoping review by Cullen, Hatch, Martin, Higgins, and Sheppard (2015) proposed a definition and framework for food literacy based upon a review of existing definitions, which highlights the importance of the socially situated nature of food literacy. Cullen et al. present a new concept of food literacy that is informed by “a CFS [Community Food System] and health promotion lens” (p. 141). However, their review is limited theoretically and methodologically: it lists the identified definitions of food literacy, but does not provide details of their analysis (which compares 22 definitions to identify conceptual overlap and to highlight shared elements), and has limited scope with respect to the search (including gaps in terms of timeline and key databases).

While Cullen et al. provide a starting point to understanding food literacy, their scoping review may not reflect the entire state of knowledge given its methodological limitations. As such, we conducted a comprehensive scoping review to address this gap. Our aim was to identify: 1) the scope of articles on the concept of food literacy, 2) conceptualizations of the term (definition or discussion of components), and 3) food literacy outcomes. Including new and emerging research (master’s theses, doctoral dissertations, and grey literature), and with no limits on publication dates, our scoping review identifies a broader scope of food literacy research. It expands on the knowledge base established by Cullen et al. by collecting, categorizing and synthesizing food literacy definitions to identify key themes. These themes (or “domains”) of food literacy highlight the food related skills and knowledge that are articulated as important components of this concept, identifying potential categories for measuring proficiency. As such, our scoping review highlights current uses and trends when it comes to applying the term, and identifies gaps where further research is needed to develop strategies for measuring food literacy proficiency. This is a critical gap to address—especially in light of the proliferation of food literacy initiatives, which vary in both content and goals.

1. Methods

A comprehensive literature search of health databases was conducted for all available years to February 2016 to identify articles using the term “food literacy.” Databases included Medline, Pubmed, Embase, CAB Abstracts, CINAHL, Scopus, JSTOR, and Web of Science. Google Scholar was also searched to identify articles in the grey literature (Fig. 1).

This was followed by a hand search of the included article reference lists to identify potentially relevant articles that may have been missed in the initial search. One reviewer identified all English publications using the term “food literacy” in the context of food related skills or knowledge for the descriptive analysis (see Table 1).

Inclusion criteria was based on the contribution of the study to the science of food literacy: it needed to add to the literature by providing a conceptualization of the term (definition or discussion of components). Studies that simply mentioned the term “food literacy” were not included for data extraction. Two reviewers then independently screened these publications to identify any novel definitions of the term found in the academic peer-reviewed journals (Table 2). Disagreements were resolved by consensus.

For included studies, data were extracted on country of origin, study type (methodological approach), primary target population (adult/adolescent/children), and the primary outcomes relating to

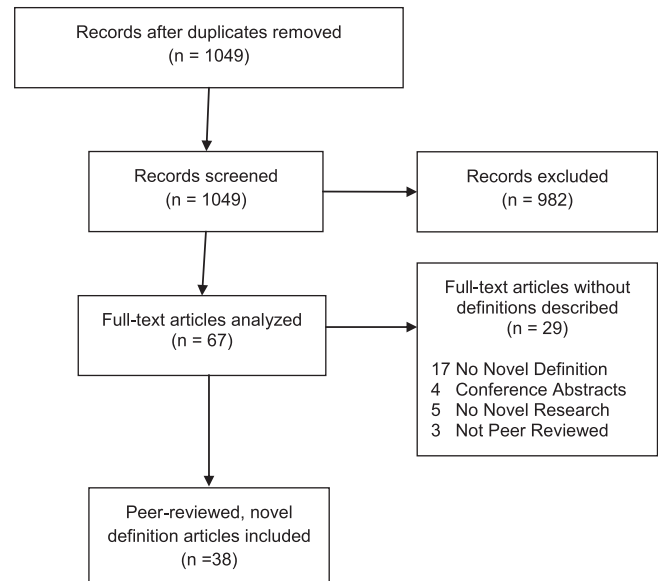


Fig. 1. Scoping review flow chart.

food literacy (see supplemental information). Studies were grouped based on the type of publication according to five main categories: peer-reviewed; literature review (literature search, summarized with minimal input from experts); expert review (literature review plus consensus by 2 or more experts); thesis (doctoral dissertation or master’s level thesis by graduate student); conference abstract (summary of academic conference paper); and grey literature (non-scientific publications or opinion articles). The sorting of studies into one of these five categories was primarily determined by how they were published and an assessment of the methodological quality of the publication. Outcomes specifically relating to food literacy were grouped thematically.

Guided by our research objective to identify current definitions or conceptualizations of food literacy, we undertook an exploratory approach to identify central themes with a thematic analysis. Two reviewers independently extracted a comprehensive list of key terms, as they were presented in the extracted definitions or conceptualizations of “food literacy,” for all included studies. These key terms reflected the purpose, actions, and objectives of food literacy, as defined by the individual authors. Examples of terms included: organization, knowledge, capacity, best use, attitudes, skills, tools, motivation, nutrition, interactive, critical, consumers, understanding, food choices, interactive, education, food system, environment, literacy, food origins, food wastage, health decisions, behaviours, food relationship, and diet resilience. These terms were then (1) grouped to reflect overarching central themes, and (2) labelled using the dominant recurring keyword representing the theme of that group. For example, the two reviewers grouped the terms knowledge, understanding, information, and education together as like terms, and the concept of “knowledge” was then used as the label to represent the overarching theme of the category.

Articles were also grouped by the type of knowledge they added—either critical knowledge, functional knowledge or both. “Critical knowledge” refers to information and understanding of food and food issues (acquisition of knowledge, such as nutritional, emotional, or contextual information), while “functional knowledge” refers to skills, abilities, and choice-making related to food (the application of knowledge in action). Definitions were described for all peer-reviewed articles that conducted novel research or developed a novel definition for the term (see Table 2).

¹ (“Adult Literacy”, n.d., para. 4).

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