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Critical food policy literacy: Conceptualizing community municipal food policy engagement

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Abstract

Food policies should be informed by those whom they intend to serve, but policy-making processes remain exclusive to privileged voices, knowledge, and experiences. Food activists, organizations, and academia have worked to make policy processes inclusive through training communities in food policy, potentially increasing their food policy literacy (FPL). In this paper, I argue that making food policy processes, information, and training accessible to community actors can better prepare them to participate in, interpret, and control food system policies, especially at the municipal level. I build on the premise that a clear understanding of food policies is a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for community engagement in food systems policy formulation, planning, and implementation. Existing literature has thoroughly defined food literacy (FL) and policy literacy (PL), but there has been very limited work on defining "food policy literacy." To address this conceptual gap, this article bridges food and policy scholarship with the critical literacy work of Paulo Freire to answer: How do we understand literacies tied to food policy? What does (or what could) it mean to be food policy literate? How can critical literacy tied into food policy transform food systems? Following this analysis, I propose critical FPL is a 'reading of the world and of words,' a critical awareness of food policy processes, a contextual and authentic learning practice, and a collective engagement with food policy transformation.

Keywords

Critical Food Policy Literacy, Food Policy Literacy, Critical Literacies, Food Literacy, Food Policy, Policy Literacy, Food System Participation, Participatory Policy, Municipal Food Policies, Participatory Food System Planning

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Introduction

The term "literacy" has been defined variously in the scholarly literature, both as an ability to read and write at a specific school level and as the knowledge and competencies that enable a person (or a collective of people) to act (Hillerich, 1976). According to Lewison et al., (2002), critical literacies involve four dimensions: "disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice" (p. 382). Numerous scholars, like Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Ira Shor, have proposed the idea of "critical literacies" beyond school competency that involve broader concerns such as justice. The concept has also been developed in the scholarly work of Voloshinov, Brecht, Hoggart, and Williams and in the poststructuralist theories of Foucault and Derrida (Luke, 2012).

As one of the main proponents of critical literacies, Freire (1985) proposed *conscientização*, or critical-consciousness-raising (Takeda, 2022), as an "awareness of how people are in and with the world" to "negotiate the world in which they find themselves" (Freire, 2018, p. 1). To Freire, this awareness is understanding "how institutions of power work to deny equality of treatment, access, and justice" (Freire, 2018, p. 17). He argued that the oppressed benefit from becoming literate if it allows them to read both the *word* and the *world*, and to confront the culture of domination by reflecting and creating a praxis of liberation through which they retake their right to "say their own word and think their own thoughts" (Freire, 1970, p. 126). Drawing from Freire, I consider critical literacies as tools for counter-hegemonic awareness, agency, self-determination, civic engagement, and freedom, rather than as a "domestication" that allows for the job readiness and social productivity that society expects (Freire, 1976). Moreover, in alignment with these critical literacies, I suggest that a "critical awareness," a "confrontation of the culture of domination," and a "praxis of liberation" designed by those most oppressed by food system inequities, ultimately enacts the community-aspired food systems.

In this paper, I propose principles for the conceptualization of critical food policy literacy (FPL) by mapping scholarship that unpacks how critical literacy about food policy is defined and understood, with particular attention to its effect in municipal-scale food systems policy. This review is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it is designed to foster readers to recognize the importance of making spaces for communities to first become aware and learn, and then engage in food policy transformations. I do not advocate for a standardized, prescribed, and measured definition of FPL, but rather I shed light on the conceptualization of FPL as a tool for community organizing, education, and planning.

Overall, the scale of food-related knowledge spans from the "micro-scale" (proteins, fats, carbohydrates, and minerals) to the "macro-scale" (social, environmental, economic, and political action) (Fuster, 2014). The multi-scalar nature of food-related knowledge influences how people understand and engage with food, including food policy (Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019). Nevertheless, across these multiple scales "power/knowledge" (Foucault, 1980) dynamics are created when people are ascribed as (il)literate on issues around food and food policies. Indeed, structural inequities impact how much people know about and engage with food policies. I build on the premise that people's clear understanding of food policies is a necessary, if insufficient, condition for community engagement in food systems policy formulation, planning, and implementation.

While policy literacy (PL) and food literacy (FL) are broadly defined in the scholarly literature, there has been very limited work on defining food policy literacy (FPL). If these concepts were to remain separate, PL without food, or FL without policy could leave power and knowledge imbalances out of food system transformation agendas. A critical lens for the existing power/knowledge asymmetries in food policy processes suggests that FPL must be accessible to people, especially those who are marginalized by public policies and often blamed for their food conditions. Knowledge plays a political organizing role, but clear understanding of what it means to be knowledgeable about food policy is still necessary. A lack of clarity or consensus about concepts tied to food policy (i.e., FPL) allows for the co-opting of policy by actors with vested interests (Andrée et al., 2015; Siddiki et al.,

2015). Questions of power/knowledge, agency, resources, and authority must be addressed in food systems transformation, but so must power over information, access to policy resources, and control over definitions (Frimpong Boamah et al., 2020; Sumner, 2015).

Without clear conceptualization of critical FPL, processes of food policy training, education, and participatory planning might not be appropriately addressed. Likewise, without this conceptual clarity food system planning research and related fields will lack effectiveness in supporting much-needed community-led food systems transformations that reach beyond consumer choice alternatives (Andrée et al., 2015; Cuy Castellanos et al., 2017; Meek & Tarlau, 2016) and solutions conceptualized by the corporate food regime (Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Planning has an ideal interdisciplinary character for the conceptualization of FPL because it plays an intermediary role between policy and knowledge generated by other fields of research and activist experiences. As a policy- and system-oriented discipline, planning can help conceptualize FPL from both a food policy and system perspective.

Extending the idea of food policy literacy beyond agricultural literacy (Dale et al., 2017), nutrition literacy (Velardo, 2015), and food agency (Trubek et al., 2017) allows room for the consideration of food's broader role as a vehicle for learning across the food system. A critical awareness of the food system and its policies could result in more structural food policy transformations. Moreover, moving away from a historical, apolitical, and individual behavior-centered literacies makes it possible to address prevailing neoliberalizations of the corporate food system (Guthman, 2008). Existing critical approaches to food literacy take many forms (Cullen et al., 2015). For example, some scholars propose critical food literacies to raise awareness of food workers across the food system through multicultural texts (Yamashita & Robinson, 2016), critical food system literacy within environmental education (Rose & Lourival, 2019), and critical food system education as a political project that contributes to the global food sovereignty movement (Meek & Tarlau, 2016).

Food policies and food policy processes must be defined by the communities' food transformation goals, especially at the governmental level closest to the particular communities. Recently, attention toward food policy has been growing in part from food activists, local food policy councils, and organizations engaged in food systems transformation.[1] Over the last two decades, municipal-scale food policy has gained increasing attention from policymakers, international organizations, and community food activists (Cabannes & Marocchino, 2018; Raja, 2021). Community organizations transforming the food system are also increasingly interested in policy changes (Raja et al., 2014; Roberts, 2014). The aim of this article, then, is to build on existing literature to conceptualize critical FPL and explicitly focus on municipal-level food policies.

The conceptualization of FPL developed in this paper might appear similar to the concept of food citizenship (Gómez-Benito & Lozano-Cabedo, 2014). Nevertheless, FPL should not be limited to "rights-holding subjects," nor be bound to the duties and obligations that citizenship encompasses (Benito & Lozano-Cabedo, 2014, p. 141). Instead, FPL heeds questions of power imbalances in learning how to engage with or create food policies. It "[supports] learners to become aware of the [food system] forces that have pivoted to rule their lives and especially shape their consciousness" (Freire, 2018, p. 9). FPL enables and potentiates food citizenship.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I introduce the methodological approach for conceptualizing critical FPL through the "family resemblance" of food literacy and policy literacy. Second, I provide an overview of selected literature, and explore the conceptual characteristics shared between policy literacy and food literacy, as well as their respective approaches to critical literacies. Third, I contextualize these concepts at the municipal food

[1] For example, Food Strategies and Official Community Plans are two forms of food policies (i.e., in Canada and UK) at the scale of municipal government. These policies demonstrate ways in which coordinated approaches to food system policies can provide comprehensive solutions (Mah & Thang, 2013; Robert & Mullinix, 2018).

policy level. Fourth, I suggest causes of the limited conceptualization of FPL in the current literature. Finally, I delineate five critical FPL principles by drawing from Freire's work on critical literacies, which conceptualizes a literacy that increases community-led food system policy transformations.

Methods: Literature Review Strategies

The ideas in this literature review are drawn from an examination of peer-reviewed literature. The primary databases utilized to retrieve the literature were Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Articles were searched using several key phrases pertinent to food policy literacy.[2] Articles in English and published in peer-reviewed journals 1990–2021 were included (from any region). Ultimately, forty articles were reviewed and analyzed. Articles were broadly drawn from the following two domains: (a) food scholarship that deals with food literacy (FL), food policy, and food systems, and (b) policy scholarship dealing with policy literacy (PL). These two bodies of scholarship in combination with critical (food/policy) literacy scholarship were reviewed to elucidate five key principles of critical food policy literacy.

Conceptual Definitions from Food and Policy Scholarship

Scholarship from varied disciplinary perspectives was used to unpack FPL. The forty articles reviewed for this essay span FL, food policy, and food systems education to PL more generally. Articles on FL deal mostly with measuring it in adults (Amouzandeh et al., 2019), the effects of FL in dietary outcomes in youth and adolescents (Bailey et al., 2019; Vaitkeviciute et al., 2015), design of FL tools for secondary schools (Nanayakkara et al., 2017); and assessment tools measuring FL (Park et al., 2020; Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014). Articles on food policy focus on how governance entities, such as food policy councils, tackle food policy in combination with other public issues to carve out new food policy agendas (Maxwell & Slater, 2003; Siddiki et al., 2015). Articles on food system education emphasize progressive pedagogical approaches, including action research (Hilimire et al., 2014) and critical food system education (Meek & Tarlau, 2016). Articles on PL span media studies (Lentz, 2014), public administration (Park & Lee, 2015), literacy studies (Lo Bianco, 2001), disability and rehabilitation studies (Ohajunwa et al., 2019), and social and informational digital privacy studies (Smith et al., 2017).

Despite this growing body of literature, research that explicitly addresses literacy in the context of food policy is limited. Only one article explicitly references "food policy literacy": Hilimire et al. (2014) present FPL as one of many practical skills in sustainable food system education programs. The authors identify food policy literacy as an "industry-specific skill" (Hilimire et al., 2014, p. 730), but do not detail how such a skill is defined, acquired, by whom, nor to what end.

By connecting literature on general PL with FL, I intend to clarify the concept of (critical) food policy literacy. Policy literacy and food literacy are related concepts. Drawing on the work of Rosch & Mervis (1975), PL and FL can be said to have a "family resemblance": a relationship "consisting of a set of items of the form AB, BC (...) where each item has at least one, and probably several, elements in common with one or more other items, but no, or few, elements are common to all items" (p. 575). Identifying shared elements between concepts or items in the literature supports conceptualization of new or undefined concepts. Podsakoff et al. (2016) suggest that a "good conceptual definition should identify the set of fundamental characteristics or key attributes that are common (and potentially unique) to the phenomenon of interest" (p. 7), a charge that I seek to address with regard to critical FPL.

[2] The main search terms, used both separately and in combination, included "food," "policy," "literacy," "system." Additional keywords selected from the initial search were included in the main search terms: "activism," "adult," "advocacy," "campaign," "decision-making," "education," "effective policy," "engagement," "equity," "evaluation," "food democracy," "food policy council," "formation and implementation," "impact," "justice," "local policies," "outcomes," "participation," "pedagogy," "planning," "politics of food," "readiness," "training," and "youth." Articles were excluded if they dealt with the following topics: medical and clinical studies, dietary assessments, health literacy, agricultural literacy, marketing of unhealthy food, curriculum policy, communication technologies, and urban design.

The next section reviews the scholarship on PL and FL to identify the set of shared elements that characterize each concept. Identifying these shared characteristics elucidates core principles to conceptualize a critical FPL that supports community-led food system transformation.

How Does Scholarship Define Policy Literacy?

Scholars from various fields, including education, communications, digital privacy, disability studies, and government innovation studies, have defined the concept of policy literacy. Scholars support the importance of increased literacy in policy to fulfill the democratic potential of society. In the review, I found a limited breadth of articles defining PL. Nevertheless, the articles provide valuable information on PL education, strategies to examine policies through personal/emotional experiences, and how PL can lead to policy engagements beyond the formal policy process. Policy literacy generally consists of four thematic areas: (a) critically informed engagement, (b) going beyond passive government services awareness, voting, and conscientious consuming of information, (c) instructed through the examination of local policies, (d) acquired through situated practice.

Critical understanding of policies is needed for informed policy engagement: Media communication scholars view PL as a "counterweight to neoliberal media education agendas" (Lentz, 2014, p. 137) that can challenge digital media and communications platform companies' deregulation and liberalization aims (see Flew et al., 2019). Scholars consider PL a "precondition for informed engagement," particularly for those advocating for the public interest (Lentz, 2014, p. 138). Lo Bianco's widely cited definition describes PL as that which is "needed to deploy, participate, and understand policy events…critical understanding of the process, history, and dilemmas of the overall practice of public policymaking to contribute towards a more reflective and full participation in its processes" (Lo Bianco, 2001, p. 213). It is the ability to identify and understand policies through information and knowledge and is critical for participation and democracy. Thus, PL is both a precondition for a fuller, more reflective engagement in, or resistance to, policy processes.

Going beyond knowing about available government services, voting, and conscientiously consuming information: Policy literacy scholarship suggests that being policy literate goes beyond passively being aware of government services, voting, and conscientiously consuming information. Some scholars argue rather narrowly that PL can be measured by how much the public knows about government service programs (Park & Lee, 2015). In contrast, scholars in the field of communication and digital media argue that PL reaches beyond simply knowing about the extent and types of services provided by governments. Policy literacy is an empowering and dynamic strategy that has the potential to equip society with the "capacity to produce policy change" (Lentz, 2014, p. 136). Lentz (2014) points to PL as the "best defense against threats to democratic media" (p. 135) since it gives individuals a "sense of citizenship beyond voting or conscientious consumption" of media products (p. 137).

Instructed through examination of local policy documents, with lived experiences to support authentic learning: Scholars have explored the teaching of PL through practice-based learning and the examining of local policy documents. Ohajunwa et al. (2019) provide a detailed empirical example of a formal adult education program designed to enhance PL in disability and rehabilitation work. The course was structured in three sections: policy analysis, implementation, and monitoring. The course encouraged students to critically examine local government policy documents in terms of "aims, discourse, dominant/silenced voices, intended audience, text, and subtext, language used, the context of the formation and possible negotiations made" (p. 35). The course analyzed already enacted policies and motivated students to reflect on what might have informed policy planning and implementation.

The authors note that students perceived PL learning as foreign, as imposed instead of something they had a role in shaping. The authors believe the gap between policy and student expectations of policy outcomes existed because "policies are formed in spaces removed from the realities of implementation and the inequalities that inform them" (p. 39). To bring policy closer to students, the course used three main methods to enhance

PL: "situated learning, collaborative problem solving, and goal-based scenarios" (p. 38). In addition, the course motivated students to critically examine policies with their personal/emotional experiences to ensure policy discussions centered on what students cared about and their sense of self. This work suggests that policy awareness is possible when PL education allows for "a contextualization of learning so that the policy context itself and the [learner's] personal, social, political, and cultural experiences are constructed within a… framework that supports authentic learning" (p. 39).

Acquired through participation in situated policy-making processes: Scholars suggest PL is better achieved when people participate in situated policy-making processes and learn about the tensions, power-struggles, and non-linearity of the processes. Centering the idea of real participatory democracy, Lo Bianco (2001) focuses on the knowledge needed to make policymaking democratic, viewing the policymaking process as the "main vehicle in democratic societies for establishing authorized intervention and determining resource allocation" (p. 213). He sees PL continually in tension between "'policy' (power) and 'information' (knowledge)", and influenced by language and culture, and by the claims made by various stakeholders' legitimacy to act in policymaking (p. 214). These factors make the policy process "nonlinear and embedded within changing socio-historical contexts" (Breckwich Vásquez et al., 2007, p. 344). Breckwich Vázquez et al. (2007) suggest that steps in the policymaking process, which shape policy content, course, pace, and development, and even contributing to policy success, generally consist of "problem definition or identification of an issue; setting the agenda; deciding on the policy to pursue, and policy implementation" (p. 344).

Policymaking processes are not exempt from power struggles. Lo Bianco (2001) gives special attention to power struggles between private sectors and the government. He proposes that "informed kinds of policy activism" are needed to minimize the impacts of policies that shift "national effort towards the private sector" while reducing government activity intended to serve communities (p. 213). In other words, PL scholars suggest that place-based activism and other "unofficial" policy actions are necessary efforts against neoliberal policies, especially if the official policymaking process and policy outcome burden disadvantaged communities (Ilieva, 2020). Therefore, to be policy literate is not only to conform to existing policy procedures, steps, and structures, but also to challenge existing structures and transform them into "people's policy processes" (Rose & Lourival, 2019).

How Does Scholarship Define Food Literacy?

The term "food literacy" has gained global momentum, with Thompson et al. (2021), for example, identifying 51 definitions of FL. Conceptualizations of FL in the literature vary greatly. Some scholars offer rather individualistic and narrow definitions while others offer more systemic (and even critical) explanations. This section provides examples of the diverse set of definitions as well as critiques of current FL conceptualizations and their exclusion of 'policy.'

Implies individual-level knowledge, skills, and behaviors: Food scholarship has highlighted the importance of FL at the individual level, with some scholars defining FL as the personal "knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to access, select, prepare, and eat foods" (Velardo, 2015, p. 387), the skills required to interpret front-of-package nutrition labeling (Feteira-Santos et al., 2020), and "the behaviors involved in planning, purchasing, preparing and eating food; critical for achieving healthy dietary intakes" (Begley et al., 2018, p. 1).
Adapts to changing circumstances throughout life: Scholars note that FL is dynamic and adaptive, "developed over a person's life and adapted to changing circumstances, such as moving out of home, changing household size (i.e., the birth of children), economic circumstances (i.e., changing income levels) and lifestyle factors (i.e., diagnosis of a lifestyle-related disease such as diabetes or high blood pressure)" (Begley et al., 2018, p. 12). Rather than being static, FL adapts to changing circumstances.

Consumer awareness of processes, information, and activities in the food system: Fernandez et al. (2020) suggest that FL enables people to navigate the process of selecting, preparing, and consuming nutrient-rich

food. A more expansive view is offered by Palumbo et al. (2019), the "ability to collect, understand, process, and use relevant information to navigate the food system" (p. 104). Other scholars list the food system as one of the key themes of FL. Based on a review of 67 articles, Truman et al. (2017), for example, characterize FL by six central themes: (a) skills and behaviors, (b) food/health choices, (c) culture, (d) knowledge, (e) emotions, and (f) food systems. Rose and Lourival (2019) propose considering critical food system literacy to be a dialectic counterhegemonic project to democratize the food system.

Can food literacy expand beyond meeting needs for individual consumer food intake? One of the most cited FL definitions is by Australian researchers Vidgen and Gallegos (2014), whose work is frequently referenced for food literacy program assessments in Australia, France, Netherlands, Italy, and the U.S. (Amouzandeh et al., 2019). They define food literacy as the "scaffolding that empowers individuals, households, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change and support dietary resilience over time" and "a collection of interrelated knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to plan, manage, select, prepare, and eat foods to meet needs and determine (food) intake" (p. 54). They suggest that FL tends to contribute to beneficial outcomes beyond nutrition and what they specify as the four domains of planning and managing, selecting, preparing, and eating, although they do not indicate which outcomes or how. Policy is not explicitly discussed.

Critiques of Current Food Literacy Conceptual Definitions and the Exclusion of Policy

Scholars have demonstrated inconsistencies in the literature as to how food literacy is understood and defined (Bailey et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2017; Rosas et al., 2021; Sumner, 2015; Thompson et al., 2021). Sumner (2015) argues that the lack of consensus about FL is problematic, as "various stakeholders maneuver to control its meaning and thus mold policy that will serve their interests" (p. 128). Other scholars note that lack of consistency in FL definitions limit the development of a valid and reliable measure for effective evaluations of programs that seek to promote FL (Bailey et al., 2019). Sumner (2015) suggests that a potential explanation for lack of consensus is in the contested origins of "food" and "literacy," as both deal with power: "restricting food literacy to household attitudes, skills, and knowledge narrows the parameters of the food literacy debate and serves certain powerful interests, while disabling the broader critique necessary to transform the crisis-ridden global food system into one that will ensure everyone is fed, within the ecological limits of the planet" (p. 129). Therefore, she suggests, it is crucial to ask: What do people know by becoming food literate? And who benefits or loses when a particular definition of FL becomes the norm? Sumner (2015) draws on Freire's work to broaden the idea of FL beyond simply holding individuals responsible for the purchasing, safety, and budgeting of food:

> The ability to "read the world" in terms of food, thereby recreating it and remaking ourselves. It involves a full-cycle understanding of food—where it is grown, how it is produced, who benefits and who loses when it is purchased, who can access it (and who can't), and where it goes when we are finished with it. It includes an appreciation of the cultural significance of food, the capacity to prepare healthy meals and make healthy decisions, and the recognition of the environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political implications of those decisions. (Sumner, 2013, p. 86)

Similarly, Stinson (1998), as cited in Sumner (2015), suggests FL should be a tool to enact citizenship by enhancing "critical thinking skills necessary to analyze the interrelated aspects of the food system" (p. 24), allowing people a "heightened understanding of the connection between food, themselves, and the wider world" (p. 41). Sumner (2015) attempts to expand the definition of FL in a manner that approaches conceptualizing food policy literacy, asserting that efforts to promote FL should also integrate policy. Likewise, Rosas et al. (2021) and Rowat et al. (2021) note that policy has been left out from previous FL conceptualizations. Rosas et al. (2021) suggest that policy should be considered an influential factor in FL (i.e., regula-

tion to promote healthy consumption). Similarly, Rowat et al. (2021) include policy and economics as components of the political dimension of their FL framework. Rowat et al. (2021) state that to change the "political and economic machinations [that] allow large food corporations to dominate the food landscape by monopolizing markets and influencing nutrition research," an educated population literate in the political and economic underpinnings of the food system is required (p. 2). These scholars embed policy in the concept of FL. I argue that food policy literacy allows for an explicit claim for this knowledge gap—that is, what does it mean to be literate on food policy—and I suggest municipal-level food policies as an important space for the conceptualization of FPL.

Food Policy Literacy and Municipal Food Policies

Municipal-level food policies are increasingly a central tool in strengthening local food policy transformations (Candel, 2020; Morley & Morgan, 2021) and decentralizing food policy processes so as to serve localized community needs. Communities learn through their practice how their respective municipal food policies are nested in multilevel governance structures and are interrelated with other kinds of policies (Raja et al., 2014, 2018). Examples of municipal-level policies include (a) soft policies (resolutions, declarations, studies, etc.); (b) plans (including official plans such as comprehensive food system plans, plans for a component of the food system, and food plans integrated with comprehensive plans, as well as open space plans, community health plans, sub-area plans and strategic plans, etc.); (c) legally enforceable ordinances, bylaws, and regulations (zoning ordinances, subdivision guidelines, etc.); (d) actions that provide physical infrastructure; (e) fiscal enactments that influence community food systems (food system funds, licenses and fees, etc.) (Mui et al., 2018; Raja et al., 2018). Municipal food policies have been increasingly innovative in governance structures through creating food policy councils—civic or quasi-public organizations that develop context-sensitive, locally informed policy processes concerning food—(Gupta et al., 2018), hiring food planning staff, and supporting interagency task forces by, for example, joining the planning and public health fields (Mui et al., 2018). The growing interest in municipal-scale food policy is especially evident through the increasing number of food policy councils in the United States and Canada.[3]

Consequent to initiatives by community actors, hundreds of municipal, county, and regional governments have developed food and agriculture plans and policies intended to strengthen food systems, as identified by the Growing Food Connections (GFC) team.[4] For example, non-governmental organizations such as DC Greens[5] have helped to pass legislation such as the DC Farmers' Market Support Act, the Urban Farming and Food Security Act, and the Healthy Schools Act. Moreover, since 2015 hundreds of cities have signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, a voluntary pact that urges municipalities to engage in integrated food policies (Sibbing & Candel, 2021).

Despite growth in municipal food policy institutions and venues that may become learning hubs and places to exchange information about how to strengthen, contextualize, and transform food systems, food policy processes and policy tools (as the examples mentioned earlier) remain foreign for many communities (Clark et al., 2017; Coplen & Cuneo, 2015; Schiff, 2008). FPL is impeded by limited access to usable or comprehensible information and spaces for communities in policy decision-making processes (explored in greater detail in the following section). However, food policy is multidimensional, which offers opportunities for localized and diverse community needs and interests to be adopted at different scales, applied to varied geographies and processes, and directed to different components of the food system.

[3] By 2019, food policy councils have reached a total of 351 and 13 food policy council conveners in the US and Canada. https://clf.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=cd9c3625d9b34d728e58d3f3af95a5ed
[4] https://growingfoodconnections.org/tools-resources/policy-database/
[5] https://www.dcgreens.org/policy-1

Why Has Food Policy Literacy Been Limitedly Defined?

In this review, I argue there are at least four explanations for FPL being defined in a limited fashion in the literature, and consequently being scarcely challenged. First, food policies in general have tended to center individual actions (i.e., vote with your fork, green consumerism, etc.), or individual "consumption-as-politics" (Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011), rather than systemic solutions (Rose & Lourival, 2019). For example, Razavi et al. (2020), state that "for nearly 50 years, public health and clinical guidelines have concentrated on consumer education, behavioral change, and, to a lesser extent, food policy to help reduce sodium intake among Americans" (p. 1). Similarly, other scholars add that "people are not being asked to reconnect to context—to the soil, to work (and labor), to history, or to place—but to self-interest and personal appetite" (Andrée et al., 2015; DeLind, 2011, p. 279). To Szabady (2014):

> focus on the individual as the subject of food choice in food discourses not only detracts from the role of powerful agribusiness interests in creating a food system that serves their economic ends, but also has created an environment in which critiques are often narrowly focused on actions at the point of purchase, rather than generating fundamental changes to the production chain. (p. 638)

Second, political dimensions are usually left out of food literacy curricula and training programs, which carries pedagogical risk, as documented in the field of environmental education (Rose & Lourival, 2019; Slimani et al., 2021). Depoliticizing curricula risks students taking environmental "conflict for granted," and schools tending to "downplay the political and produce political sameness" (Slimani et al., 2021, p. 3). As in environmental education, food system education that emphasizes technical knowledge tends not to question the current organization of the food system (Meek & Tarlau, 2016; Rivera-Ferre et al., 2021).

A third explanation, at the global scale, is that issues concerning policy change are left out of mainstream discussions and, if adopted, tend to be implemented as less intrusive changes in developed countries and the Global North. Bhawra et al. (2018) claim that in "Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and several European countries, people tend to be more supportive of interventions that are less intrusive (i.e., menu labeling and educational campaigns) compared with more controlling policy interventions (i.e., taxation, bans)" (p. 503).

Fourth, the formalizing technical barriers imposed on food policymaking and implementation could be designed to limit citizen participation and disable affected groups from shaping food policy decisions. Under technocratic governments, FPL might be marked as irrelevant (Ilieva, 2020). Technocratic government regimes control the collection of information and legitimize the knowledge required for policy formation (i.e., economics and rationalism of efficiency), putting experts and professionals "above ideology, above interests, and above the conflict of different types of knowledge and systems of knowing" (Lo Bianco, 2001, p. 222). Thus, policy techniques can "raise barriers to entry into [policy] debate" and "diminish the place for the expression of values and the declaration of the preference of communities" (Lo Bianco, 2001, p. 224). Under these circumstances, food policy knowledge creates a crucial political organizing front.

Beyond Food Literacy and Policy Literacy: Conceptualizing Critical Food Policy Literacy

When communities lack the ability to decode and navigate local government food policymaking processes, equitable structural food system transformations become out of reach. This section draws from food and policy scholarship, as well as the theory of critical literacy, to elucidate principles for critical FPL. These principles seek to reduce the risk of co-optation of the meaning of FPL (i.e., reducing it to an industry-specific skill, reducing policy concerns to one component of the concept of FL, and limiting FPL to knowledge about available food policy-related government services). The five principles (Table 1) also center everyday community engagement in food systems policy formulation, planning, and implementation, especially at the municipal policy level.

Table 1. Conceptualizing Critical Food Policy Literacy from the Family Resemblance Relationship of Policy Literacy and Food Literacy

Policy Literacy	Food Literacy
[3] Precondition for informed engagement in policy steps, action, and processes (Lentz, 2014; Lo Bianco, 2001) [4] Taught through examination of local policy documents with lived experience to support authentic learning (Ohajunwa et al., 2019) [4] Learned through participation in situated policy-making processes (Breckwich Vásquez et al., 2007; Lo Bianco, 2001) [5] Beyond knowing about available government services, voting, and conscientious consumption (Lentz, 2014)	[1] Heightened understanding of the connection between food, people, and the wider **world** (Stinson, 1998; Sumner, 2015) [2] The ability to read the **word** (i.e., front-of-package nutrition labeling and policy documents) (Feteira-Santos et al., 2020) [3] Awareness of the processes, information, and activities in the food system (Palumbo et al., 2019; Rose & Lourival, 2019) [4] Adapts to changing circumstances throughout one's life (Begley et al., 2018) [5] Beyond individual consumer awareness and actions (Rosas et al., 2021; Rowat et al., 2021; Sumner, 2015)

Note: Shared elements between the concepts of policy literacy and food literacy were identified as key attributes for the conceptualization of critical food policy literacy. These were grouped into five categories 1–5.

1. *Critical food policy literacy encourages a relational awareness of each individual's position and collective positions in the* **world**: While individuality is emphasized in the FL literature (Sumner, 2015), FPL emphasizes both individual and collective awareness. In a globalized food system, "critical awareness of how people are in and with the world" is central to FPL, even when engaging with municipal-level policies. Such awareness requires that individuals know their role in society, in both the private and public spheres, and where society has put them in relation to others, human and nonhuman beings, in the food system. Indeed, critical FPL encourages an ecological awareness of the food system (Gliessman & de Wit Montenegro, 2021). It also means awareness of the inequalities and injustices in the food system and "who benefits and loses" from policy decisions. Critical awareness requires "heightened understanding of the connection between food, themselves, and the wider world" (Sumner, 2015, p. 41). To summarize, from a Freirean perspective, critical FPL is also the ability to "read the world" of food and related systems as well as to understand one's location in it. For example, the importation and exportation of food requires a "glocal" critical understanding of its economic, political, health, and environmental consequences (Wekerle, 2004). This awareness can inform community-led policy changes to protect fertile land and production (Wittman et al., 2017).

2. *Critical food policy literacy fosters the ability to use relevant policy and food system information, thus, to read the* **word**: From nutritional facts to policy document analysis, FPL fosters the "ability to collect, understand, process, and use relevant information to navigate the food system" (Palumbo et al., 2019, p. 104) and its policies, and fosters awareness of power and legitimation of data, information, and policy communication. The ability to decode documents on food systems policy can persuade ordinary people to be non-conformist as to "how institutions of power work to deny them equality of treatment, access, and justice" (Freire, 2018, p. 17) through obfuscation in policy communication. FPL is a non-conforming, unapologetic "reading of the word," and a critical interpretation of food policy-related language. A critical attention to food system discourse is required when communities engage with municipal food policies, especially at the institutionalization phase, to generate discursive responses that can lead to integrated and comprehen-

sive food policy efforts (Sibbing & Candel, 2021). For example, designating community gardens as a legitimate and permanent use of land in a city's plan requires a clear and unyielding use of language (Wekerle, 2004).

3. *Critical food policy literacy fosters procedural and systemic understanding of food and policy*: Policy formation and the food system move through "non-linear" steps, actions, or processes. While usually described through the following steps: "problem definition or identification of an issue; setting the agenda; deciding on the policy to pursue; and implementation of the policy" (Breckwich Vásquez et al., 2007, p. 344), food policy processes are dynamic and related across local, regional, and federal governments, various governmental agencies, and institutions. Similarly, food systems comprise a "chain of activities connecting food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management, as well as all the associated regulatory institutions and activities" (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000, p.113). Communities can better engage in these processes when they are aware of the usual policy procedures and their interrelations with the chain of activities in the food system in their local contexts. This awareness is both a 'full-cycle understanding of food' (Sumner, 2013, p. 86) and a "critical understanding of the process, history, and dilemmas of the overall practice of public policymaking" (Lo Bianco 2001, p. 213). In practice, municipalities do not necessarily have a "full-blown food systems approach from the start" (Sibbing & Candel, 2021, p. 580), but communities integrate specific food issues as stepping stones and start from setting policy agendas, food charters and strategies, to developing more institutionalized policies. Nevertheless, as stated previously, policy activism and "unofficial" strategies are legitimate elements of the policy participation process if the "official" policymaking processes do not benefit disadvantaged communities.

4. *Critical food policy literacies are contextually taught and learned through authentic practice*: Food and policies are influenced by the cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental characteristics of particular geographies. Therefore, FPL is taught and learned within a specific context, eventually emerging as a plurality and coexistence of multiple contextual literacies. As Meek and Tarlau (2016) state, direct exposure to food policies and processes, can promote analysis of the political and economic reasons that allow the current and local food system to exist. Like PL, FPL can be taught through "situated learning, collaborative problem solving, and goal-based scenarios" (Ohajunwa et al., 2019, p. 38). Drawing from Ohajunwa et al. (2019), FPL must connect with personal/emotive experiences and with what communities care about and their sense of self, remaining relevant to community concerns and priorities. The cognitive-emotional practice of FPL is dynamic, "developed over a person's life and adapted to changing circumstances" (Begley et al., 2019, p. 12), such as a global pandemic. The relevance, sense of self, and adaptability of circumstances centered in food policy issues selected by communities allow them to "set off goals for the food system or its parts…and determine the process for achieving these goals" (Pinstrup-Andersen & Watson, 2011, p. 29). FPL allows communities to push for food policies that will serve them according to what they value and need the most (Mah & Thang, 2013). Potentially, food policy-literate communities can tailor municipal food policy solutions to their needs, instead of choosing from a hypothetical "menu" of possible food system interventions (Candel, 2020). Nevertheless, institutional support to facilitate these practices is needed. For example, FPL programs could provide access to information on municipal policies (i.e., soft policies, plans, ordinances, regulations, and fiscal enactments) that are of interest to communities and ensure critical reflections on how these policies impact lives and how the policies could better serve them.

5. *Critical food policy literacy questions power and knowledge asymmetries for collective and transformative action*: Motivated by lived experiences and heterogeneity of identities, and in reaction to the corporate-led food system, communities that are food policy-literate "negotiate the world in which they find themselves" (Freire, 2018, p.1). Communities deal with power/knowledge asymmetries when aware that "those who have the capacity to claim what is

true [regarding the food system], have a claim to power" (Stehr & Adolf, 2018, p. 5). The enactment of people's sense of social responsibility and justice goes "beyond voting or conscientious consumption" of food (Lentz, 2014, p.137), beyond elections, representative democracy, or the individual actions of "voting with your fork" (Singer & Mason, 2006). Rather, FPL leads to collective "disruption of the commonplace" through reflective action and towards a creation of a praxis of liberation (Freire, 2018). With this awareness, communities resist the "deregulation and liberalization agendas" (Lentz, 2014, p. 137) in the food system, and confront the corporate domination of the food landscape that both monopolizes the markets and influences research (Rowat et al., 2019). Learning to negotiate the world with the "capacity to produce policy change" (Lentz, 2014, p. 136) means that engagement in, or resistance to, food policy processes from the municipal to the global scale requires active participation with other actors of the food system, especially those who are left discouraged or disincentivized to participate in shaping the food system policies that should serve them. Networks of people, groups and organizations are challenging industrial food systems through their "power to convene," and ultimately governing food beyond simple policy advocacy (Clark et al., 2021; Roberts, 2014) and towards more progressive and radical responses to the corporate food regime (Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011).

Conclusion

I have explored the "family resemblance" concept structure of FL and PL, along with critical literacies, to gain conceptual clarity about critical FPL. I also identified literacy tied to food and policy, as well as the implications for FPL for food system policy transformations at the municipal level.

I have given special attention to municipal-scale food system policies, a scale that is increasingly integrated into governance structures and decentralized food policy decisions. I also focused on who should be included in policy-making processes, and the awareness (cognitive and emotional) needed to participate in and interpret food system policies and planning. Indeed, knowledge/power imbalances influence both the participatory planning, policy process, and the conceptualization of definitions. A commitment to whom the definition of FPL intends to serve must be central to its conceptualization. I suggest, as with Sumner (2015), the conceptualization of FPL should ask "Who benefits from being food policy literate?" and "Who benefits or loses when a particular definition of FPL becomes the norm?"

A clearer understanding of critical FPL could increase stakeholder engagement and planning, shifting power and knowledge to allow for governance arrangements that equip communities to transform their food systems. A conceptual difference was shown between FL on one hand, and FPL on the other, with political and policy implications for transformative food system change. While the former is devoid of systems-level understanding on how the policy landscape impacts and is impacted by the food system, the latter provides a critical understanding of these system-level dynamics and the power relations that condition community awareness, knowledge, engagement, and advocacy within the food system.

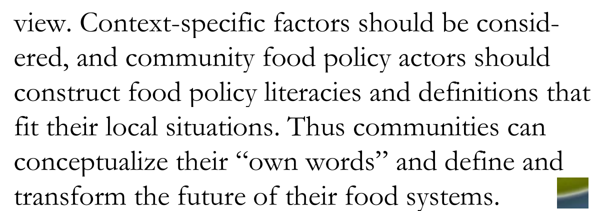
Drawing on Freire's work, I suggest that efforts to promote critical FPL must facilitate communities to (a) "read the world," (b) "read the word," (c) be critically aware of food policy processes and systems, (d) learn contextually and through authentic practice, and (e) enable them to negotiate and transform their community collectively. These five principles can be a starting point for theorizing, planning, executing, and testing food policy education and training efforts. Critical FPL initiatives need to support those most oppressed by the current corporate and global food system. Their lack of knowledge or awareness regarding food policy processes is not a reasonable justification for their exclusion. Instead, those engaged with food policy, including food system planners, should facilitate knowledge sharing with communities to ensure the accurate defining of problems and consequent effective policy solutions.

Food systems planners and food policy professionals would benefit from learning how communities train and practice FPL. Communities are already engaging in food system transformations by challenging multinational corporations and neolib-

eral paradigms, and by expanding food-related literacies for food policies at different levels of government (see the GFC database referenced earlier). Food system planners would benefit from listening to what food activists and advocates have to say about training, participating in, and creating food policy awareness in their organizations and communities.

Knowledge about engaging with food policy processes is not commensurate with actual engagement, so structural barriers to community participation must also be addressed. Food system planners and educators, particularly at the municipal level, should support locally based citizen food organizations to engage in food policy (Roberts, 2014). This support must go beyond assessing communities' FPL and aim to bridge gaps in power and knowledge to ensure critical readiness for food policy engagement.

Further research could flesh out the conceptual idea of FPL by drawing from empirical evidence. For example, interviewing experts across the food system, conducting case studies and focus groups of food system practitioners, and undertaking observation to gather empirical data from food policy groups would help validate the core principles of critical FPL included in this literature review. Context-specific factors should be considered, and community food policy actors should construct food policy literacies and definitions that fit their local situations. Thus communities can conceptualize their "own words" and define and transform the future of their food systems.



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