11-10-2009

Socio-cultural Diagnostic of Eating Habits of Teens in Comitán, Chiapas

G Álvarez

J Eroza

E Ramírez

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Objectives: To identify family, school and peer atmospheres, as well as adolescents’ socio-cultural dynamics involved in food practices of two areas of Chiapas, Mexico.

Methodology: Qualitative study. It included a sample of four high schools in urban areas and one in the countryside. Participants are on one side, teenage students who also work and belong to the upper-middle and lower-middle socioeconomic classes, and in the other side, teachers from two schools. Data were collected through focus groups.

Results: The authors report the outcomes in three areas: the culture of food, bodily control, and the relationship between eating and health.

In terms of food culture, they describe three outcomes: 1) household food culture impact on the predisposition of its members to exert quality eating habits; 2) young people consume junk food to reduce the tedium class hours, and while short breaks and their relationships within and outside the school influence their consumption habits, these habits show the limited supply of nutritious foods in schools and the incidence of food companies marketing; 3) the school location of either rural or urban areas affects the availability and quality of food for its students.

In reference to bodily control, the authors deliver findings on two topics: a) physical activity and b) body image. Referring to the first, teens from both urban and rural areas refer three notable concerns: 1) schools do not encourage physical activities in both male and female students; 2) unhealthy dietary practices push women toward certain compensatory exercises; 3) students are concerned with their body image, and they value basically female fragility and male strength. However, in rural areas, adolescent girls expressed concern about physical performance while the urban adolescents are more concerned by thinness, social acceptance, competitiveness and the expectation to be attractive.

Finally, within the subjects of health and nutrition, the authors describe several factors that influence the dynamics of food consumption: beginning and end of class schedules; gender perspective; the absence of curriculum content that could promote healthy eating; few incentives for professionals to work toward healthy eating practices; the arrangement between school directors and corporations (such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi) for selling their products in schools; and finally the low economic resources of students. The authors mention that gastritis is a health problem arising from inadequate eating practices among adolescents.

Conclusions: For the authors, the eating habits of adolescents are shaped by the dynamics of global and regional development. They conclude that the interests of the market impact practices associated with health, food and body image. The authors find inconsistency between healthy eating knowledge and healthy eating practices among the young people under study.