NEUROINCLUSIVE FOOD LITERACY: RETHINKING FOOD EDUCATION BEYOND NEUROTYPICAL STANDARDS

Francesca Finestrone
University of Foggia
francesca.finestrone@unifg.it

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary food education is increasingly framed through the concepts of Food Literacy and health promotion. However, many educational approaches continue to rely on implicit neurotypical assumptions regarding sensory regulation, flexibility in eating behaviors, and participation in shared food environments. Within this framework, food selectivity in autistic individuals is often interpreted through deficit-oriented or behavioral perspectives, while the embodied, sensory, and emotional dimensions of eating remain marginal. Starting from the neurodiversity paradigm and from recent reflections on inclusive pedagogy, this contribution proposes a critical re-reading of food literacy through the lens of sensory accessibility and neuroinclusion. The paper explores how educational practices related to food -particularly in school and community contexts -may unintentionally reproduce exclusionary dynamics by promoting normative models of eating and adaptation. Particular attention is given to the role of sensory processing, predictability, environmental overstimulation, and social pressure during meals, with reference to experiences frequently associated with autism and sensory sensitivity. The contribution is positioned within the fields of inclusive pedagogy, food education, and embodied learning. Through a theoretical and interdisciplinary analysis, the study connects literature on Food Literacy, neurodiversity, sensory processing, and inclusive educational practices in order to identify critical issues and possible directions for more accessible food education frameworks. The discussion highlights how apparently ordinary educational practices -such as forced tasting, rigid meal routines, or the moralization of "healthy eating" - may become sources of distress and symbolic exclusion for neurodivergent individuals. The paper argues for the development of a neuroinclusive approach to Food Literacy, grounded in flexibility, sensory awareness, emotional safety, and non-stigmatizing educational communication. Rather than promoting standardized eating behaviors, inclusive food education should recognize the plurality of embodied relationships with food and support accessible participation in food-related experiences. In this sense, sensory accessibility emerges not as an individual accommodation, but as a broader pedagogical and cultural issue connected to educational equity and inclusion.

KEYWORDS

Food Literacy; Neurodiversity; Sensory Accessibility; Embodied Learning; Inclusive Pedagogy.

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1. Methodology

This paper adopts a theoretical and interdisciplinary approach grounded in a narrative literature review. Rather than conducting a systematic review aimed at quantitative synthesis, the study critically examines contributions from different research areas, including Food Literacy, neurodiversity studies, autism research, sensory processing, embodied cognition, and inclusive pedagogy.

The literature selection process was guided by thematic relevance to the concepts of neuroinclusive food education, sensory accessibility, and embodied eating experiences. Peer-reviewed articles, theoretical contributions, and interdisciplinary studies published primarily between 2010 and 2025 were considered, with particular attention to recent research addressing sensory processing, food selectivity in autism, and inclusive educational practices.

Databases including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar were consulted using combinations of keywords such as “food literacy,” “autism,” “food selectivity,” “sensory processing,” “neurodiversity,” “inclusive education,” “embodied cognition,” and “sensory accessibility.” The selected literature was analyzed through a critical pedagogical lens in order to identify implicit neurotypical assumptions embedded within contemporary food education models and to explore possible neuroinclusive perspectives.

Given the exploratory and theoretical nature of the contribution, the aim of the paper is not to provide generalizable empirical evidence, but rather to propose a conceptual and pedagogical framework capable of supporting future research and accessibility-oriented practices in food education contexts.

2. Food Literacy and Implicit Neurotypicality

In recent years, the concept of Food Literacy (FL) has gained increasing relevance within educational research and health promotion, gradually moving beyond a purely nutritional perspective toward a broader understanding of food-related knowledge, critical awareness, sustainability, and active citizenship. Contemporary literature describes FL as a multidimensional construct that includes the ability to access, understand, select, prepare, and consume food in conscious and socially responsible ways (Ares et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2023). Within this framework, food

education is increasingly presented as a key element for individual well-being and social participation.

Despite this theoretical expansion, many educational approaches to food and eating continue to rely on implicitly neurotypical assumptions. Food education practices implemented in schools and community contexts often presuppose a "standard" relationship with food, characterized by sensory tolerance, behavioral flexibility, adaptability to shared meal routines, and the ability to self-regulate within perceptually intense environments. Consequently, "appropriate" eating behavior is frequently associated with willingness to try unfamiliar foods, tolerate different textures and smells, participate in collective eating rituals, and adapt to socially recognized dietary norms.

These assumptions become particularly visible in the interpretation of food selectivity, which is still commonly framed as oppositional behavior, rigidity, or poor eating habits. Such interpretations risk overlooking the embodied and sensory dimensions of eating experiences, especially in neurodivergent individuals. Recent research has shown that eating behaviors in autism are deeply intertwined with sensory processing, including sensitivity to textures, temperatures, odors, colors, predictability, and environmental overstimulation during meals (Koomar et al., 2021; Suarez, 2022). In many cases, selective eating does not emerge from refusal itself, but from the need to manage sensory distress and maintain bodily and emotional regulation.

From this perspective, the issue cannot be reduced solely to the individual. Rather, it also concerns the ways in which educational environments, meal practices, and dominant narratives around food are socially and pedagogically constructed. Neurodiversity studies increasingly emphasize that many forms of difficulty experienced by neurodivergent individuals arise from the interaction between specific sensory characteristics and environments designed according to neurotypical standards (Chapman, 2021). Applied to food education, this perspective challenges the presumed neutrality of many educational practices and invites a critical reconsideration of what is commonly defined as "normal" eating behavior.

At the same time, contemporary discourses surrounding healthy eating are often shaped by moralizing narratives that connect food choices to discipline, self-control, and personal responsibility. Within these frameworks, neurodivergent experiences frequently remain invisible. Sensory discomfort may be interpreted as

resistance, the need for predictability as rigidity, and food selectivity as an educational failure. As a result, practices commonly considered ordinary -such as forced tasting, exposure-based pressure, or rigid meal routines -may become experiences of distress, shame, and symbolic exclusion for neurodivergent individuals.

In light of these considerations, rethinking Food Literacy through a neuroinclusive lens becomes increasingly necessary. This implies moving beyond universalistic models of food education and recognizing that eating is never solely a nutritional act, but also a bodily, sensory, emotional, and relational experience. In this sense, the concept of sensory accessibility may offer an important pedagogical framework for designing more flexible and inclusive food environments, capable of supporting different embodied relationships with food rather than normalizing them.

3. Food selectivity as an embodied and sensory experience

Within dominant educational and social narratives, food selectivity is frequently described through simplified labels such as “picky eating,” rigidity, or oppositional behavior. These interpretations, however, often fail to recognize the extent to which eating is rooted in sensory perception, bodily regulation, and environmental interaction. Particularly in autistic individuals, the relationship with food cannot be fully understood without considering the embodied dimension of eating experiences and the role of sensory processing in shaping everyday food-related practices (Cermak et al., 2010; Koomar et al., 2021).

Recent literature has increasingly highlighted that food selectivity in autism is closely associated with atypical sensory processing patterns rather than with mere behavioral resistance (Bandini et al., 2017; Suarez, 2022). Texture, smell, temperature, color, consistency, sound, and even the visual arrangement of food may significantly influence the experience of eating (Chistol et al., 2018). In this sense, the refusal of specific foods may represent an attempt to avoid sensory overload or preserve bodily regulation rather than a rejection of food itself. Certain textures may be perceived as physically intolerable, mixed foods may generate distress due to unpredictability, while strong smells or noisy eating environments may intensify discomfort and dysregulation (Ferrara et al., 2025).

The embodied nature of eating also emerges in the need for predictability and sameness frequently reported in autistic individuals. Repetitive food choices are often interpreted as restrictive habits to be corrected, yet they may function as

stabilizing strategies that reduce uncertainty and support emotional and sensory safety (Kinnaird et al., 2019). Familiar foods can provide consistency in taste, texture, and sensory expectations, allowing the individual to maintain a manageable relationship with the eating experience. From this perspective, selective eating may operate as a form of self-regulation rather than dysfunction.

Such considerations align with embodied cognition perspectives, according to which cognitive and emotional processes are inseparable from bodily experience and environmental interaction (Wilson, 2002; Shapiro & Stolz, 2019). Eating is not simply a nutritional act guided by rational decision-making, but a multisensory experience shaped by perception, memory, affective associations, and contextual stimuli. The body does not passively receive food-related information; rather, it actively participates in constructing the meaning and tolerability of the eating experience (Gallagher, 2017). Consequently, educational approaches that overlook sensory embodiment risk misunderstanding the complexity of neurodivergent food relationships.

The sensory dimension of eating also intersects with emotional regulation and interpersonal dynamics. Mealtimes are often socially dense environments characterized by conversations, smells, noises, visual stimuli, expectations, and implicit behavioral norms. For neurodivergent individuals, navigating these simultaneous demands may require continuous sensory and emotional regulation (Ashburner et al., 2008). In school settings, cafeterias and collective meals can therefore become spaces of significant stress rather than opportunities for participation and well-being. The difficulty is not necessarily located in the food itself, but in the interaction between the body and an environment that may be experienced as perceptually overwhelming.

Moreover, repeated experiences of misunderstanding or pressure around eating may contribute to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and anticipatory anxiety. Educational practices centered on forced tasting, behavioral normalization, or reward-based exposure may unintentionally intensify distress by disregarding the sensory legitimacy of refusal (Ledford & Gast, 2006; Suarez et al., 2012; Suarez, Nelson & Curtis, 2014). When bodily discomfort is interpreted as noncompliance, neurodivergent individuals may experience the meal context as unsafe, leading to further withdrawal or rigidification of eating behaviors.

Understanding food selectivity as an embodied and sensory experience therefore requires a shift from corrective models toward relational and accessibility-oriented

perspectives. Rather than asking how neurodivergent individuals can adapt to normative food environments, it becomes necessary to question how educational and social contexts might become more sensorily accessible, predictable, and emotionally safe. In this sense, the issue is not simply expanding dietary variety, but creating conditions in which eating can occur without distress, coercion, or fear of judgment.

4. Mealtimes, educational spaces, and invisible exclusion

Although eating is commonly framed as an individual behavior, food-related experiences are deeply shaped by social and educational contexts. Schools, cafeterias, community settings, and family routines do not simply provide access to food; they also transmit implicit norms regarding appropriate eating behaviors, bodily regulation, participation, and conformity. Within these environments, eating becomes a social practice governed by expectations that are often perceived as neutral or universally applicable, despite being strongly grounded in neurotypical standards (Classens & Sytsma, 2020).

Educational settings play a particularly significant role in this process. School mealtimes are frequently organized around collective routines characterized by noise, time pressure, sensory density, social interaction, and limited flexibility. While these environments may appear ordinary for many students, research increasingly suggests that they can become highly dysregulating for neurodivergent individuals, especially those experiencing sensory sensitivities associated with autism (Ashburner et al., 2008; Robertson & Simmons, 2015). Crowded cafeterias, overlapping sounds, strong smells, visual confusion, and expectations surrounding social participation may transform meals into experiences of sensory overload rather than opportunities for well-being and inclusion.

At the same time, educational discourses surrounding food often reinforce moralized notions of “good” eating behavior. Children are encouraged to “try everything,” avoid waste, eat quickly, or conform to shared routines, while refusal is frequently interpreted as problematic behavior requiring correction. Although these practices are generally justified through nutritional or educational intentions, they may unintentionally invalidate sensory discomfort and embodied boundaries. In this sense, the issue is not merely behavioral management, but the implicit assumption that all students should be able to participate in food environments in the same way.

Research on autism and sensory processing has shown that food refusal may represent a legitimate response to overwhelming sensory input rather than oppositionality or defiance (Cermak et al., 2010; Chistol et al., 2018). However, institutional responses often remain centered on normalization and adaptation. Neurodivergent students may therefore experience repeated pressure to override bodily discomfort in order to meet socially expected behaviors. Such dynamics can contribute to anticipatory anxiety, shame, masking behaviors, and emotional withdrawal around eating contexts (Kinnaird et al., 2019).

This dimension becomes even more relevant when considering the social meaning of shared meals. Eating in schools is not solely connected to nutrition; it also involves belonging, participation, peer interaction, and visibility within the group. Consequently, food selectivity may expose neurodivergent individuals to forms of subtle exclusion, stigmatization, or infantilization. Students who eat "differently," require predictable foods, avoid certain textures, or struggle in noisy cafeterias may be perceived as difficult, immature, or socially uncooperative. These perceptions are often reinforced by broader cultural narratives that associate flexibility and adaptability with maturity and self-regulation.

The invisibility of sensory distress within educational contexts reflects a broader tendency to prioritize normative participation over accessibility. While educational inclusion has progressively addressed physical and cognitive accessibility, sensory accessibility remains comparatively underexplored in food education and school meal design (Tomchek & Dunn, 2007). As a result, many neurodivergent individuals are expected to adapt to environments that were not designed with sensory diversity in mind.

From a pedagogical perspective, this raises important questions regarding the meaning of inclusion in food-related educational practices. Inclusion cannot be reduced to physical presence within shared spaces if participation itself occurs under conditions of distress, coercion, or sensory overload. Rather than treating neurodivergent eating behaviors as deviations from normative expectations, educational systems should critically examine how meal environments, communication styles, and behavioral norms may contribute to exclusionary experiences.

Reframing school meals and food education through a neuroinclusive lens therefore requires a shift from behavioral normalization toward accessibility-oriented design. This may involve creating more predictable meal structures,

reducing sensory overstimulation, allowing flexibility around food participation, and recognizing sensory boundaries as legitimate rather than oppositional. In this sense, inclusive food education is not simply about encouraging healthier eating habits, but about constructing educational environments in which different embodied experiences of food can coexist without stigma or pressure.

5. Toward a neuroinclusive food literacy

If contemporary approaches to Food Literacy continue to rely on implicitly neurotypical assumptions, then inclusion in food education cannot be limited to adapting neurodivergent individuals to normative eating environments. Rather, it requires a broader pedagogical shift capable of reconsidering how food-related knowledge, practices, and environments are designed in the first place. From this perspective, developing a neuroinclusive approach to Food Literacy means recognizing sensory diversity not as an exception to accommodate, but as an integral dimension of human experience.

Current literature increasingly emphasizes that inclusive educational practices should move beyond deficit-oriented models and focus instead on accessibility, participation, and relational well-being (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Slee, 2018). Applied to food education, this implies questioning pedagogical practices centered on normalization, compliance, and behavioral correction. The goal should not be encouraging all individuals to eat according to the same standards, but creating conditions in which different embodied relationships with food can be recognized, negotiated, and supported without stigma.

Within this framework, the concept of sensory accessibility becomes particularly relevant. Sensory accessibility refers to the extent to which environments, practices, and interactions take into account diverse sensory processing needs and minimize unnecessary distress or overstimulation (Robertson & Baron-Cohen, 2017). In food-related contexts, this may involve considering factors such as noise levels, smells, lighting, food presentation, texture variability, predictability, and social demands during meals. What is often interpreted as “problematic eating” may instead reflect a mismatch between sensory needs and inaccessible environments.

A neuroinclusive perspective on Food Literacy also requires reconsidering the communicative dimensions of food education. Public and educational discourses surrounding healthy eating are frequently shaped by moralizing narratives that

associate dietary flexibility with virtue, maturity, or self-control (Puhl & Lessard, 2020). These narratives risk framing neurodivergent eating behaviors as failures of motivation or responsibility while obscuring the sensory and emotional realities underlying food selectivity. Consequently, educational communication should avoid stigmatizing language centered on “good” versus “bad” eating behaviors and instead promote approaches grounded in respect, bodily autonomy, and sensory legitimacy.

Another central aspect concerns agency. Neurodivergent individuals are often excluded from decision-making processes regarding food because selective eating is interpreted primarily as a symptom to manage. However, recent disability and neurodiversity scholarship highlights the importance of recognizing autonomy and self-determination in educational and health-related practices (Kapp, 2020). In food education, this means involving individuals in choices related to meals, respecting sensory boundaries, and avoiding coercive exposure practices that may undermine trust and emotional safety.

5.1 Practical Implications for educational contexts

The principles of neuroinclusive Food Literacy may be translated into practice through concrete adjustments capable of improving accessibility and reducing sensory distress in educational and community settings. In school cafeterias, for example, quieter eating corners, reduced crowding, or the possibility of eating in smaller groups may support students who experience auditory overstimulation during meals. Similarly, maintaining predictable meal structures — such as presenting foods separately rather than mixed together — may reduce anxiety linked to uncertainty and sensory unpredictability.

Accessibility may also involve flexibility in participation. During food-related educational activities, some students may initially engage through observation, smelling ingredients, touching textures, arranging foods by color or shape, or participating in cooking tasks without being required to taste unfamiliar foods immediately. In this sense, participation is not reduced to consumption itself, but expanded to include multiple forms of sensory and relational engagement with food.

Communication strategies are equally relevant. Replacing corrective expressions such as “you have to try it” with descriptive and autonomy-supportive language may contribute to safer educational interactions. For example, educators might

invite students to describe textures, smells, or visual characteristics of food without framing refusal as problematic behavior. Visual menus, anticipatory explanations of meal routines, and the possibility of choosing between different textures or food presentations may further support predictability and emotional regulation.

Some educational experiences have also experimented with participatory cooking activities designed around sensory exploration and agency rather than behavioral normalization. Preparing simple recipes, handling ingredients gradually, or allowing students to modify textures and food combinations according to individual comfort levels may foster familiarity without coercion. In family contexts, similar approaches may include maintaining predictable mealtime routines, avoiding pressure-based feeding practices, and recognizing sensory discomfort as legitimate rather than oppositional.

Although these practices remain relatively underexplored within the literature on Food Literacy, they illustrate how neuroinclusive principles can be translated into practical educational actions. Rather than aiming to normalize eating behaviors, these approaches seek to create conditions in which food-related experiences become more accessible, participatory, and emotionally sustainable for neurodivergent individuals.

5.2 Implications for educator training

Developing neuroinclusive approaches to Food Literacy also requires rethinking educator training. Teachers, school staff, and professionals involved in food education frequently receive limited preparation regarding sensory processing differences and neurodivergent eating experiences. As a result, food selectivity is often interpreted through behavioral or disciplinary frameworks rather than through accessibility-oriented perspectives.

Training pathways should therefore include competencies related to sensory awareness, neurodiversity-informed communication, emotional regulation, and inclusive educational design. Educators should be supported in recognizing sensory distress signals, avoiding coercive practices, and creating flexible food-related environments that prioritize participation and psychological safety.

At the institutional level, resistance to change may emerge from deeply rooted cultural beliefs surrounding food, health, and normative eating behaviors. For this reason, promoting neuroinclusive Food Literacy also requires broader cultural reflection within educational systems, moving beyond models centered exclusively on normalization and compliance.

From a pedagogical standpoint, neuroinclusive Food Literacy should therefore be grounded in flexibility rather than standardization. Educational practices may include gradual and non-coercive exposure to new foods, sensory-sensitive meal environments, predictable routines, multimodal communication strategies, and the possibility of alternative forms of participation during collective meals. Importantly, inclusion should not be measured by the degree to which neurodivergent individuals conform to normative eating behaviors, but by the extent to which environments allow meaningful and non-distressing participation.

This perspective also expands the meaning of Food Literacy itself. Rather than focusing exclusively on nutritional competence and individual responsibility, neuroinclusive Food Literacy recognizes the relational, embodied, and contextual nature of eating. Food choices do not emerge solely from rational decision-making processes but are deeply intertwined with sensory processing, emotional regulation, social belonging, and environmental accessibility. As a result, food education cannot be fully inclusive unless it acknowledges the plurality of bodily experiences through which people encounter food.

Ultimately, rethinking Food Literacy through neurodiversity challenges broader cultural assumptions about normality, health, and participation. It invites educators, schools, and institutions to shift attention from correcting individual behaviors toward designing accessible environments capable of supporting different sensory and embodied ways of engaging with food. In this sense, neuroinclusive Food Literacy is not simply a specialized approach for autistic individuals, but part of a wider pedagogical commitment to accessibility, equity, and educational justice.

6. Limitations and future directions

This paper is primarily theoretical in nature and therefore presents some important limitations. The discussion is based on an interdisciplinary narrative analysis of existing literature and does not include empirical data collection or direct observation of educational contexts. Consequently, the proposed framework

should be understood as an exploratory and interpretative contribution rather than as an evidence-based intervention model.

Furthermore, while the paper focuses mainly on autism and sensory-related food selectivity, neurodivergent experiences are highly heterogeneous and cannot be fully generalized. Future research should therefore explore how neuroinclusive approaches to Food Literacy may apply across different neurodivergent profiles, age groups, and sociocultural contexts.

Additional empirical studies are needed to investigate the practical implementation and long-term effectiveness of accessibility-oriented food education practices. In particular, longitudinal and participatory research designs could help examine how sensory accessibility, environmental adaptations, and non-coercive educational approaches influence well-being, participation, and relationships with food over time.

Future investigations may also explore the perspectives of educators, families, and neurodivergent individuals themselves in order to develop more context-sensitive and participatory models of inclusive food education.

7. Conclusions

Food education is often presented as a universal and neutral process aimed at promoting healthier lifestyles, informed choices, and individual well-being. However, as this paper has argued, many contemporary approaches to Food Literacy continue to rely on implicit neurotypical assumptions regarding sensory regulation, flexibility, participation, and eating behavior. Within these frameworks, neurodivergent experiences frequently remain marginal, misunderstood, or reduced to behavioral issues requiring correction.

Reconsidering food selectivity through the lens of neurodiversity allows a shift away from deficit-oriented interpretations toward a broader understanding of eating as an embodied, sensory, emotional, and relational experience. In autistic individuals, selective eating cannot be fully separated from sensory processing, environmental

accessibility, predictability, and bodily regulation. Consequently, difficulties associated with food participation do not emerge solely from the individual, but also from the interaction between sensory needs and environments structured according to normative expectations.

This perspective has important implications for educational contexts. School meals, food education programs, and public discourses surrounding healthy eating are never purely nutritional spaces; they also communicate ideas about normality, participation, self-control, and belonging. Practices such as forced tasting, rigid meal routines, or the moralization of dietary flexibility may unintentionally generate distress, shame, and exclusion for neurodivergent individuals, especially when sensory discomfort is interpreted as oppositionality or lack of cooperation.

In light of these considerations, the paper has proposed the concept of neuroinclusive Food Literacy as a possible pedagogical framework capable of integrating accessibility, sensory awareness, and inclusion into food education. Rather than promoting standardized eating behaviors, neuroinclusive approaches seek to create educational and relational conditions in which different embodied relationships with food can be recognized and supported without stigma. Within this perspective, sensory accessibility becomes a central educational issue connected not only to well-being, but also to participation and educational equity.

Ultimately, rethinking Food Literacy through neurodiversity contributes to a broader reflection on inclusion itself. Educational inclusion cannot be limited to physical access or formal participation if environments continue to privilege normative sensory and behavioral standards. Designing more inclusive food environments therefore requires moving beyond models centered on normalization and toward approaches capable of acknowledging human sensory diversity as a legitimate and meaningful dimension of educational experience.

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