

FEEDING THE MIND: BIBLIOTHERAPY AND NUTRITIONAL LITERACY IN PAKISTANI CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract

The situation in Pakistan has been a twin malnutrition burden as the country has high under nutritional cases alongside high obese cases in children. The conventional nutritional education approach does not usually appeal to children. This interdisciplinary research paper suggests that bibliotherapy or therapeutic use of literature should be utilized as an experimental intervention to enhance nutritional literacy in Pakistani children. This study is a qualitative content analysis of purposive sample of books of Pakistani children in order to analyze the current image of food and eating habits. The results show that food is commonly applied as a cultural image, but explicit and correct nutrition communication is generally lacking. To establish that stories can be good vehicles of inducing healthy behaviors, the research formulates a theoretical framework based on the combination of the reader-response theory by Rosenblatt and the social cognitive theory by Bandura. The results suggested a model of developing and assessing nutrition-themed bibliotherapy. Children literature that is aimed at explicitly targeting local nutritional challenges, promoting food literacy, and positive emotional relationships with healthy eating within a culturally specific context.

Keywords: *bibliotherapy, nutritional literacy, children's literature, Pakistan, interdisciplinary research, food education, social cognitive theory*

Introduction

The Pakistani nutritional environment of children is worrying. It was indicated by the National Nutrition Survey that 40.2 percent of children aged below five are stunted, 17.7 percent are wasted, and 28.9 percent are underweight, and at the same time, the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity is increasing - a typical double burden of malnutrition (Wing, 2018). Coming out of that tricky situation, it becomes necessary to go beyond traditional, lecturing health communication interventions, which are not always applicable to young customers (Gomez & Franco, 2025). The paper constructs a theoretical framework of integrating the reader-response theory of Rosenblatt (1994) with the social cognitive theory proposed by Bandura (1977) that it is possible to use stories as a powerful tool in constructing healthy behavioral models.

The current paper hypothesizes that the literature on children is a very potential and unexploited avenue of spreading nutritional literacy. Nutritional literacy is described as the ability of a person to access, process, and interpret simple food and nutrition knowledge, which is one of the pillars to lifelong health (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014). These lessons can be more easily and emotionally assimilated when they are incorporated into a series of interesting stories. Bibliotherapy is the therapeutic use of literature, which offers a solid theoretical basis to the approach. Bibliotherapy helps to identify, have a catharsis, and insight as readers get to recognize their hardships in characters and stories (Heath, Sheen, and Leavy, 2005).

The incorporation of stories for moral and social development (*adab*) traces back to South Asian culture, but its application to nutritional health in Pakistan is a novel idea. The interdisciplinary study that connects English Literature and Human Nutrition together intends to discover the ability of Pakistani children's literature to be used as a tool for bibliotherapy for

the purpose of increasing nutritional literacy. It looks into the current depictions of food and puts forward a scheme for future partnerships between literature and nutrition.

Literature Review

Nutritional Challenges and Education in Pakistan

The nutritional scenario in Pakistan is a conundrum that has to be tackled in a paradoxical way. Malnutrition, contrary to the general assumption, has not only been there but also to a big extent, it has remained the same during the time. Qureshi, Nazli, and Soomro (2001) have reported that data taken from the National Health Survey (1996) in Pakistan reflected that malnutrition rates were still very high even though food availability indicators had improved. This paradox reveals the very nature of nutritional status that is complex and multifaceted thus it is not only the food availability that counts.

The factors causing malnutrition in Pakistan are many and vary, they include poverty, food insecurity, bad sanitation, and poor nutritional knowledge among the population (Khurshid, & Gohar, 2025). The most common cause of malnutrition is poverty which limits the family's financial capability thus they can only afford to eat food that is high in calories but low in nutrients. Food insecurity creates situations where families run out of food and thus their intake of nutrients is disrupted. Poor water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities increase the incidence of diseases and the absorption of nutrients is also affected due to higher metabolic demands. Nutrition, in general, is not well understood, especially among mothers and caregivers this leads to poor feeding practices for infants and young children, not to mention the selection of diverse and nutritious foods when they are physically accessible.

Conventional nutrition education programs through posters or lectures have shown little success in altering the behavior of, especially, children for whom more engaging and relatable methods are needed. (Khan et.al., 2022) behavioral change. The introduction of creative, culturally-sensitive, and child-centered communication methods in health is therefore essential.

Bibliotherapy and Its Mechanisms

Bibliotherapy is a well-established practice in clinical psychology and education. The process typically involves three stages: (1) *identification*, where the reader connects with a story's character; (2) *catharsis*, the release of emotion as the character navigates challenges; and (3) *insight*, where the reader gains a new understanding of their own situation (Clark, 1999).

While traditionally used for emotional and behavioral issues, its principles are highly applicable to health education. As Heath et al. (2005) argue, "stories are a natural way for humans to organize experience and make sense of their world" (p. 13), making them ideal for framing complex topics like food choices.

According to Clark, (1999) Bibliotherapy is a method that has found applications in both clinical psychology and educational practices. The sequence of events usually consists of three phases: (1) in the first phase, the reader identifies with a character from the story; (2) catharsis, where the character undergoes trials and tribulations and the reader feels purged of emotions; and (3) insight, where the reader experiences a new comprehension of their own situation

It has been an effective treatment for emotional and behavioral problems among the main applications of bibliotherapy in health education are principles of the latter. "Stories are a natural way for humans to organize experience and make sense of their world," (p. 13) and hence are excellent for framing difficult topics such as food choices. (Heath et al., 2005)

Food in Children's Literature: A Global and Local Perspective

On a global scale, the children's literature has always been associated with food, and examples of such texts can be The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Carle, 1987) and Cloudy with a

Chance of Meatballs (Barrett & Judi, 1978). These fables make the teaching of quantity, variety, and consequence more accessible and unforgettable. In Pakistan, however, children's literature is considered a new and developing area where, besides Oxford University Press Pakistan, other publishers like *Kutubistan* are also involved in the production of locally written and illustrated books. Nonetheless, according to a preliminary review, it seems that food is used only as a part of cultural settings (e.g., Eid feasts, family meals) and not as a means to convey explicit nutritional knowledge or model healthy decision-making (Ali, 2022).

Research Design and Methodology

This particular research work is based on an interdisciplinary framework that unites two important theories:

1. Reader-Response Theory: The literary theory of Rosenblatt (1994) states that meaning is not in the text or the reader only but it is an inseparable part of the interaction between the reader and the text. Thus, a child is not a mere listener but a prime meaning-maker who bases the story's meaning on his or her own experiences. This is the very point where bibliotherapy comes in as the usefulness of a story with nutrition theme depends on a particular child's capacity to connect it to his or her life situation and food environment.

2. Social Cognitive Theory: In Bandura's (1977) psychological theory, the emphasis is placed on learning through observation and imitation. When youngsters get to know a similar character making a healthy food choice and receiving a positive reward (like more energy, being praised by a parent, being good at a game), they are more likely to adopt that behavior. Hence, storytelling gives kids "vicarious experiences" that can build up their belief in themselves as far as the difficult area of food is concerned.

Collectively, the theories portray the picture of a storytelling that is very skillfully made, then it is able to be used as a strong "transactional model," in which a child sees, forms an emotional bond with, and absorbs the good nutritional habits established through the story. The research conducted relied on a qualitative descriptive research design that utilized content analysis and was mainly descriptive. A purposive sample consisting of 30 children's picture books and early chapter books (published during 2010 - 2022) was selected from major local publishers and literary awards shortlists. The selection of the sample was made in such a way as to include a variety of genres and settings (urban/rural, contemporary/fantasy).

The content analysis was carried out in two stages:

1. Manifest Analysis: Here the coding was done just for the open manifestation of food items, meal scenarios, and eating occasions.
2. Latent Analysis: This stage was all about interpreting the hidden messages about food, e.g.:
 - The symbolic aspect of food (reward, punishment, comfort).
 - The dining social context (family meals, solitary eating, sharing).
 - The characters' traits depicted through their food choices (e.g. the "strong" character who eats vegetables).
 - The existence or nonexistence of nutrition-based cause-and-effect stories.

This analysis was done jointly by the researchers from English Literature and Nutrition disciplines so that it could be interpreted rigorously from both the points of view.

Results and Discussion

The content analysis revealed several key findings:

1. **Food as Cultural Backdrop, Not Educational Focus:** In over 80% of the books analyzed, food appeared primarily as a part of cultural or familial scenes (e.g., a family eating *biryani* or sharing *mithai*). While this reinforces positive cultural identity, it misses opportunities to model balanced meals or discuss food diversity.

2. **Limited Nutritional Modeling:** Only two books in the sample featured a narrative where a character's food choice was directly linked to a physical or cognitive outcome. For example, no stories were found where a child character felt more energetic after a healthy breakfast or struggled to play after eating too many sweets.
3. **Repetitive Food Tropes:** Sweets and fried snacks (*jalebi, samosa*) were overwhelmingly depicted as rewards or festival foods, potentially reinforcing their desirability without contextualizing them within a balanced diet.
4. **Absence of Food Adventure:** There was a notable lack of stories that framed trying new, healthy foods (like different fruits or vegetables) as an adventure or a positive challenge, a common and effective trope in Western children's nutrition books.

These findings highlight a significant gap in the market. Pakistani children's literature currently uses food as a setting device but does not leverage its full potential as a tool for bibliotherapy and nutritional literacy. The existing narratives do not effectively utilize the mechanisms of identification and modeling proposed by our theoretical framework.

A Proposed Model for Nutrition-Themed Bibliotherapy

Based on the findings, this study proposes a model for developing effective nutrition-themed bibliotherapy for Pakistani children. Key elements include:

- **Culturally Resonant Characters and Settings:** Stories should feature relatable Pakistani children in familiar environments (homes, schools, local markets).
- **Problem-Based Plots:** Narratives should center on a simple, child-relevant problem that can be resolved through a nutritional insight (e.g., a character lacking energy for cricket discovers the importance of a pre-game meal).
- **Positive Role Modeling:** Characters should demonstrate healthy behaviors, and the illustrations should visually depict appealing, balanced plates of traditional Pakistani foods.
- **Integration of Local Foods:** Stories should celebrate local, seasonal, and affordable nutritious foods like *saag*, lentils (*daal*), and seasonal fruits (*jamun, looqat*).
- **Interactive Elements:** Books could include simple, child-friendly recipes or discussion questions for parents and teachers to extend the learning beyond the page.

Conclusion

This paper has proven that although literature in Pakistani children is very rich in terms of culture, it is not fully exploited in combating malnutrition yet this is one of the untapped resources. Authors, illustrators, publishers and health professionals can use the principles of bibliotherapy and social cognitive theory to collaborate and produce powerful stories which can feed the mind and lead to nutritional literacy.

Recommendations

1. To the Publishers and Authors: To publish and write stories in terms of the suggested model, it is necessary to cooperate with the experts in nutrition to ensure the accuracy of the facts.
2. To Educators and Parents: To intentionally choose and read children literature, which includes positive nutritional messages, and to perform dialogic reading, which is, to discuss the food choices made by characters.
3. To the Public Health Practitioners: To finance and issue such books under larger communal nutritional initiatives.
4. To Investigators: To implement experimental research studies that could gauge the effect of particular nutrition-related bibliotherapy interventions on the actual food attitudes and preferences of children in Pakistan.

Such studies can create a healthier future of Pakistani children one story at a time by combining the narrative power of literature with the scientific basis of nutrition.

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