FOOD LITERACY AND MINDFUL EATING: A STRATEGY FOR NUTRITIONAL EDUCATION"

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the role of nutrition education and mindful eating in the prevention of eating disorders from a lifelong learning perspective, in which the development of food-related competencies is understood as a continuous and ongoing process throughout the entire lifespan. In a context characterized by the widespread availability of ultra-processed foods, unbalanced dietary patterns, and the growing influence of socio-cultural and media factors on eating behaviors, it becomes essential to promote effective educational strategies aimed at improving both diet quality and individuals' relationship with food. Therefore, mindful eating may be considered an integrated educational approach that combines nutritional knowledge with food awareness and appears particularly effective in fostering psychophysical well-being and in reducing the risk factors associated with the major eating-related disorders during childhood and adolescence.

KEYWORDS
Nutrition Education, Food Literacy, Mindful Eating, Lifelong Learning.

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1. Introduction

Nutrition education plays a fundamental role, particularly in the prevention of eating disorders, as it contributes to the development of a balanced, conscious, and non-conflictual relationship with food and one's own body. In contemporary society, characterized by often unrealistic aesthetic ideals, the widespread dissemination of contradictory nutritional information, and the increasing availability of highly palatable ultra-processed foods, children and adolescents are especially exposed to the risk of developing dysfunctional eating behaviors.

In this context, nutrition education assumes not only a nutritional function, but also a preventive, relational, and emotional one. From a pedagogical perspective, educating individuals about nutrition means promoting a culture of well-being based on listening to bodily needs, respecting personal individuality, and valuing health rather than aesthetic control of body weight.

In this regard, the concept of food literacy has gained increasing relevance in recent years and may be defined as the set of knowledge, competencies, and critical skills that enable individuals to navigate the contemporary food system in a conscious and informed manner. Food literacy involves the ability to understand the meaning of food, interpret food labels, recognize the influence of marketing, and make autonomous and healthy food choices; therefore, it goes beyond the mere acquisition of nutritional information. Numerous scientific studies suggest that an adequate level of food literacy may contribute to improving diet quality, preventing obesity, and reducing risky eating behaviors, particularly during developmental age.

At the same time, increasing scientific attention has been devoted to mindful eating, an approach derived from mindfulness and applied to eating behavior. This approach consists of paying intentional and non-judgmental attention to the eating experience, encouraging the recognition of hunger and satiety cues as well as emotions associated with food. In other words, mindful eating involves experiencing the act of eating with conscious awareness.

Therefore, the integration of nutrition education, food literacy, and mindful eating appears particularly significant in the prevention of eating disorders. While food literacy provides the cognitive and critical tools necessary to understand and evaluate food choices, mindful eating helps translate these competencies into conscious daily practices, supporting processes of emotional and behavioral self-regulation. In this sense, these approaches may represent valuable educational tools for fostering a healthy relationship with food among young people, counteracting the spread of dysfunctional eating patterns, and promoting the overall psychophysical well-being of the individual.

2. Nutrition Education and Diet Quality: The Contribution of the NOVA Classification System

Nutrition education represents a set of educational interventions and training strategies aimed at guiding individuals toward healthy, conscious, and balanced food choices, taking into account not only the nutritional aspects of food, but also its psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. In particular, nutrition education may be defined as an educational process closely related to health and psychophysical well-being, whose objective is to promote and develop knowledge, competencies, and conscious behaviors concerning food and nutrition.

Providing nutrition education means planning and structuring an educational intervention capable of promoting healthy, sustainable, and long-lasting dietary habits. It is not merely a temporary diet, but rather a pathway through which individuals learn to make informed and conscious food choices. Making informed choices, in practice, means being able to read and interpret the information provided on food labels, as established by European consumer information legislation (EU Regulation No. 1169/2011).

This competence helps individuals compare similar products and reduce exposure to excessive amounts of salt/sodium, sugars, and unhealthy fats, factors that, according to the World Health Organization, significantly influence the risk of non-communicable diseases. Therefore, food awareness concerns not only what to eat, but also how to recognize hunger and satiety cues and manage emotional and social influences related to eating. This contributes to improving the relationship with food and making dietary choices more stable over time. Consequently, food-related competencies exert a significant influence on individuals' physical, psychological, and social well-being. Within this perspective, the principles of nutrition education emerge as a set of pedagogical, nutritional, and behavioral guidelines.

One of the fundamental principles of nutrition education is nutritional balance, which implies an adequate and balanced intake of the different macronutrients, such as carbohydrates, proteins, and lipids, as well as micronutrients including vitamins and minerals. In this sense, nutrition education has the task of guiding individuals toward varied and proportionate food choices, promoting moderation and awareness. Closely related to this principle is the principle of variety, which ensures a complete intake of nutrients and, especially during developmental age, encourages the expansion of the individual's food repertoire.

The literature highlights how repeated exposure to new foods represents an effective strategy for counteracting phenomena such as food neophobia, thus contributing to the development of more balanced food preferences (Tamburri, 2015). Another important principle is meal regularity, which serves both physiological and educational functions. The structuring of defined eating moments (breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snack foods) contributes to stabilizing metabolism,

creating reassuring routines, and preventing disordered eating behaviors that, over time, may evolve into actual eating disorders.

Another particularly relevant principle is food awareness, which involves the ability to recognize internal hunger and satiety signals, pay attention to the sensory experience of eating, and understand the emotional and social influences that shape food choices. From this perspective, nutrition education also assumes a psychological value, contributing to the prevention of dysfunctional behaviors (Mercuri, 2026). Another key pillar is moderation, understood as the ability to manage both the quantity and frequency of food consumption, particularly with regard to high-calorie foods. This does not imply rigid restriction, since excessively prohibitive educational approaches have proven counterproductive, as they may increase the desire for restricted foods.

Finally, a principle that is becoming increasingly central is food sustainability, which integrates nutritional, environmental, economic, and cultural dimensions. In particular, educating individuals toward sustainable eating means promoting the consumption of seasonal, local, and minimally processed products while simultaneously developing critical awareness regarding the global food system.

From an educational perspective, these principles are not limited to the transmission of nutritional knowledge, but rather constitute educational tools aimed at developing competencies, attitudes, and healthy habits capable of supporting lifelong learning processes and accompanying individuals throughout their entire lifespan (Sumner, 2013).

Within this framework emerges the paradigm of Lifelong Learning, also promoted by UNESCO (2015) and the European Union (2000), which argues that learning should develop in a permanent, flexible, and transversal manner, involving all dimensions of everyday life. In this perspective, nutrition represents one of the most significant educational contexts, since food choices are continuously influenced by cultural, social, economic, and emotional factors that change over time. Consequently, the concept of lifelong learning applied to nutrition education is based on the idea that the relationship with food is not a static behavior acquired once and for all, but rather a dynamic learning process accompanying the individual throughout life.

In this perspective, nutrition education acquires a profoundly pedagogical value, since it concerns not only the acquisition of nutritional knowledge, but also the continuous development of competencies, critical attitudes, and decision-making abilities oriented toward both personal and collective well-being.

The lifelong learning approach also highlights how eating habits change throughout the various stages of life. During childhood, the first preferences and routines are established; during adolescence, social and identity-related influences emerge; in adulthood, work and family-related aspects become more relevant; while in older age, maintaining health and preventing disease become central concerns. For this

reason, nutrition education should be conceived as a continuous process of guidance and re-elaboration of one's eating practices.

Within this perspective, the studies conducted by Leann L. Birch (1999) emphasize the crucial role of the family environment and educational practices in shaping children's eating behaviors. Food learning is not merely cognitive, but also experiential, emotional, and social. Children learn primarily through observation, imitation, and by experiencing mealtime as a relational moment, thereby developing competencies that may influence their future lifestyle.

Indeed, nutrition education during developmental age finds a fundamental contribution in the studies of Leann L. Birch (1999), who investigated the mechanisms through which children develop their food preferences and eating habits. In particular, children possess a natural ability to self-regulate food intake based on internal hunger and satiety cues; however, this natural ability risks being compromised by inappropriate educational practices such as excessive control, coercion, or the use of food as a reward (Birch & Fisher, 1998).

More specifically, research suggests that imposing certain foods or rigidly restricting others tends to increase attraction toward forbidden foods and generate a dysfunctional relationship with eating (Herman & Polivy, 2008). On the contrary, a positive food environment characterized by repeated exposure, variety, and modeling—therefore grounded in the principles of nutrition education—promotes the development of healthy and lasting eating habits (Birch, 1999).

In light of these considerations, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024), considering its definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being rather than merely the absence of disease, has defined nutrition education as an informative and educational process aimed at improving individuals' nutritional profiles through the promotion of healthy and conscious habits.

In this regard, the recent guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) emphasize school food environments, underlining that children's food choices depend not only on knowledge, but above all on the contexts in which they live.

In particular, the main points of the new WHO Guidelines (2024) concern mandatory nutritional standards according to which governments should establish clear regulations for school canteens by increasing the availability of nutritious foods and limiting products rich in fats, sugars, and salt. Another important strategy involves "nudging" interventions, which consist of modifying the environment through the arrangement and presentation of foods in order to make healthy choices the easiest and most natural option for students. Finally, the third aspect concerns marketing restrictions aimed at protecting children from the advertising of ultra-processed foods within and around school environments.

Furthermore, in light of the above considerations, another particularly relevant aspect concerns processed foods. Today, nutrition education plays a fundamental

role in fostering a critical understanding of the consumption of these products. Processed foods are foods that have undergone transformation from their natural state in order to improve preservation, safety, or palatability; however, not all processed foods are inherently unhealthy, as the issue mainly concerns the degree of processing. Indeed, these foods are classified according to the NOVA classification system (Monteiro et al., 2019), developed by researchers at the University of São Paulo.

The NOVA classification (Fig. 1) represents one of the most innovative models in the field of nutrition education and public health because it proposes a classification of foods based not exclusively on nutritional content, but primarily on the degree and purpose of industrial processing. It distinguishes foods according to their level of industrial processing, dividing them into four groups:

- Group 1 – Unprocessed or minimally processed foods: these include natural foods such as fruits, vegetables, and fresh meat, or foods minimally modified through processes such as drying or freezing without the addition of external substances.
- Group 2 – Processed culinary ingredients: these include substances extracted from Group 1 foods or from nature and used for seasoning and cooking, such as vegetable oils, butter, sugar, and salt.
- Group 3 – Processed foods: this group includes products created by adding Group 2 ingredients (salt, sugar) to Group 1 foods with the aim of extending shelf life or improving flavor, such as pickled vegetables, canned fish, fruit in syrup, and cheeses.
- Group 4 – Ultra-processed foods: this group includes industrial formulations containing five or more ingredients, often including additives such as colorings and flavorings, that is, substances not commonly used in home cooking. Examples include packaged snacks, sugary drinks, ready-made meals, and processed snack foods.

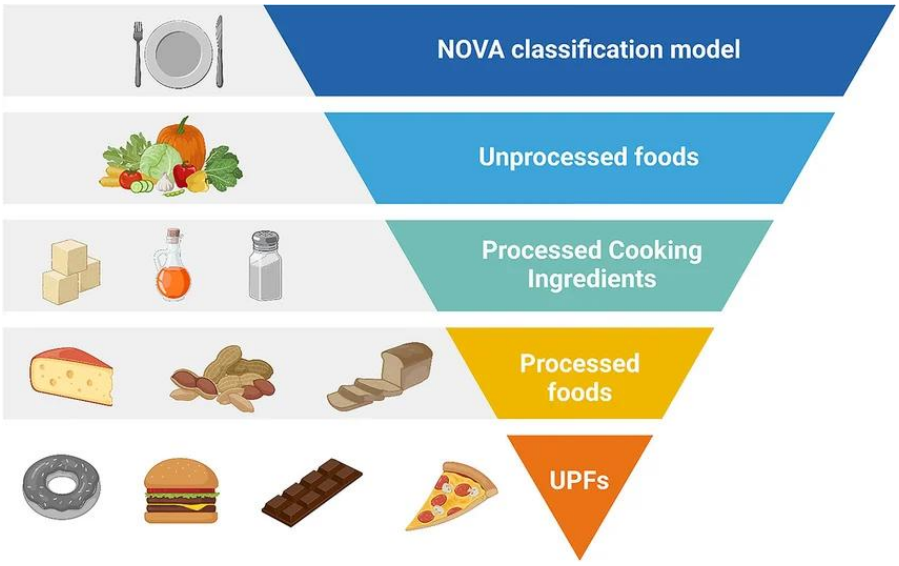


Figure 1: *NOVA Classification Model: inverted pyramid of food groups by degree of processing. Abbreviations: UPFs = ultra-processed foods. Adapted from Vallianou et al. (2025).*

Several studies (Juul et al., 2018; Dicken et al., 2024) have highlighted how the frequent consumption of ultra-processed foods is associated with an increased risk of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and eating disorders. These products are often high in sugars, saturated fats, and salt, while being poor in fiber and essential micronutrients. Moreover, their high palatability may interfere with the natural mechanisms of hunger and satiety, particularly in children, thereby promoting dysfunctional eating habits.
In light of this evidence, it becomes essential to educate children, adolescents, and adults about the differences between fresh foods, minimally processed foods, and complex industrial products. In this sense, nutrition education should not be limited to the simple transmission of nutritional information, but should also promote competencies related to the critical interpretation of food labels, marketing strategies, and the cultural dynamics that influence consumer choices.

3. Food literacy and mindful eating: integrated approaches to conscious eating behavior

Food literacy represents the set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to choose, prepare, and consume food in a conscious and healthy way. It may therefore be understood as the collection of competencies that allow

individuals to make informed, autonomous, and conscious food choices, constituting the outcome of the educational process of nutrition education aimed at promoting correct dietary knowledge and behaviors.

Food literacy implies a level of literacy that extends beyond mere knowledge of nutrients, encompassing the ability to navigate the contemporary food system, which is characterized by the widespread availability of industrial and ultra-processed products often associated with an increased risk of overweight, obesity, and chronic diseases. In particular, food literacy includes four main areas: knowledge related to the origin of food, nutrients such as carbohydrates, proteins, and fats, and the recognition of healthy and ultra-processed foods. The second aspect concerns practical skills, such as cooking, interpreting nutritional labels, and grocery shopping in a conscious manner.

Critical awareness represents the third component of food literacy and refers to the ability to critically interpret how advertising and marketing influence food choices, recognize food-related fake news, and evaluate the quality and sustainability of foods. Finally, the fourth aspect concerns behaviors and choices related to adopting a balanced diet, reducing food waste, and selecting sustainable foods for both health and the environment. In other words, food literacy represents the ability to navigate the world of food by integrating health, education, and social awareness (Cullen et al., 2015). Scientific literature highlights how food literacy consists of a combination of knowledge, practical abilities, and critical competencies that directly influence daily food choices. Indeed, several studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between higher levels of food literacy and improved diet quality among adolescents.

In particular, a systematic review found that most included studies reported a significant association between greater food literacy and increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, and home-prepared foods, suggesting a protective effect against unhealthy eating behaviors (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014).

Additional evidence indicates that practical competencies, such as cooking skills and the ability to correctly interpret nutritional labels, are associated with healthier eating habits among adolescents. A study conducted on a large youth sample revealed that individuals with greater food-related competencies showed significantly higher consumption of fresh foods and reduced intake of ultra-processed products (Lavelle et al., 2016).

Within the European context, epidemiological data also show widespread consumption of ultra-processed foods among children and adolescents, associated with lower intake of fruits, vegetables, and minimally processed foods. This situation appears particularly critical among individuals with low levels of food

literacy, in whom food choices tend to be less conscious and more strongly influenced by external factors such as marketing and economic availability (Monteiro et al., 2019).

Therefore, in light of the available evidence suggesting that increasing food literacy may represent an effective health-promotion strategy contributing to improved diet quality and the prevention of overweight and malnutrition among young people, it is also important to consider the role of mindful eating as a practical and complementary tool.

To understand mindful eating, it is necessary to refer to mindfulness, a practice and psychological construct that consists of experiencing the present moment intentionally and without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The term originates from the Buddhist meditative tradition, but over recent decades it has been integrated into clinical psychology and health sciences as a tool for promoting psychophysical well-being, emotional self-regulation, and self-awareness.

Mindfulness therefore involves the ability to observe thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and experiences without reacting automatically or impulsively. It is an approach that fosters greater awareness of one's internal states and everyday behaviors, interrupting cognitive and emotional automatisms often associated with stress, anxiety, or dysfunctional behaviors.

Within healthcare and educational contexts, mindfulness is applied in numerous areas, including stress management, emotional regulation, and the prevention of psychological disorders. When the principles of mindfulness are applied to eating behavior, the concept of mindful eating, or conscious eating, emerges.

Mindful eating therefore represents an innovative approach within nutrition education and health promotion. It is a practice consisting of bringing intentional, conscious, and non-judgmental attention to the experience of eating, focusing on the physical, emotional, and sensory sensations associated with food and mealtimes.

Unlike traditional approaches mainly centered on calorie control or dietary restriction, mindful eating aims to develop a more balanced and functional relationship with food by promoting the recognition of physiological hunger and satiety cues and reducing automatic or impulsive eating behaviors through focused attention on the eating experience itself.

Mindful eating is based on specific principles derived from the application of mindfulness to eating behavior. One of its fundamental principles is awareness of the present moment, which involves intentionally focusing on the mealtime experience by paying attention to flavors, smells, food textures, and bodily sensations related to eating. This conscious attention, consisting of intentionally

living in the present moment, helps reduce so-called “automatic” or distracted eating, which is often encouraged by the fast pace of everyday life and the simultaneous use of electronic devices during meals.

Another fundamental principle concerns the recognition of internal hunger and satiety cues, encouraging individuals to distinguish physiological hunger from emotional hunger, learn to listen to their bodies, and stop eating when satiety arises. This process may contribute to the prevention of dysfunctional behaviors such as overeating and binge eating by fostering greater dietary self-regulation.

Another principle of mindful eating is non-judgment, which consists of observing one’s eating habits without guilt, rigidity, or self-criticism. This attitude promotes a healthier and less conflictual relationship with food, reducing the risk of excessive restriction and compensatory eating cycles.

From this perspective, food is not rigidly classified as “good” or “bad.” Indeed, mindful eating distances itself from the traditional dichotomous view of nutrition, promoting a healthy and balanced relationship with food by integrating it into a more conscious and balanced eating experience.

Emotional awareness represents another principle of mindful eating and refers to the ability to recognize the relationship between emotions and eating behavior. Stress, anxiety, boredom, or sadness may influence food intake, encouraging the use of eating as a compensatory mechanism. Mindful eating promotes awareness of these dynamics, helping individuals develop more adaptive forms of emotional regulation.

Finally, among the principles of mindful eating is the practice of eating slowly and intentionally, dedicating time and attention to meals. This principle promotes not only digestion and the early recognition of satiety, but also greater sensory gratification and a reduction in the impulsive consumption of high-energy-density foods.

In recent years, this approach has gained increasing relevance within scientific literature. Several studies (Katterman et al., 2014; Ling et al., 2025) have shown that mindfulness-based interventions among adolescents are associated with improvements in body image and relationship with food, together with reductions in weight-related concerns and dysfunctional eating behaviors.

Scientific literature also highlights positive associations between mindfulness practices and reductions in binge eating, dietary restriction, and eating in the absence of hunger, as well as improvements in body acceptance and willingness to consume healthy foods (Bacalhau et al., 2025).

Therefore, the available evidence suggests that mindful eating may represent an important complement to nutrition education and food literacy interventions.

While food literacy provides the knowledge and competencies necessary to make informed food choices, mindful eating facilitates the concrete translation of these competencies into conscious and sustainable daily behaviors.
Moreover, in a context characterized by accelerated lifestyles, widespread availability of ultra-processed foods, and the strong influence of media and food marketing, mindful eating is proposed as an educational tool aimed at fostering greater awareness of one's food choices and of the psychological mechanisms influencing food consumption from developmental age onward.
From this perspective, mindful eating does not merely modify what individuals eat, but also transforms the way food is experienced and consumed, contributing to the development of healthier, more autonomous, and more sustainable eating behaviors over time.

4. Conclusion

The promotion of proper nutrition education represents a fundamental element in the prevention of obesity and eating disorders during developmental age and adolescence.
In particular, within the contemporary socio-cultural context characterized by the growing diffusion of ultra-processed foods, an overabundance of nutritional information, and the pervasive influence of aesthetic models promoted by the media, the promotion of educational interventions capable of guiding food choices in a conscious and critical manner has become increasingly essential.
Therefore, in this perspective, the concept of food literacy plays a central role, as it encapsulates the set of competencies necessary to understand, evaluate, and manage one's eating behavior in an autonomous and informed way.
However, nutritional knowledge alone is not sufficient to produce stable and long-lasting changes in eating habits, especially among younger individuals, in whom emotional, contextual, and environmental factors exert a significant influence.
In this regard, mindful eating emerges as a complementary approach of considerable educational and preventive relevance. Through the development of mindful and non-judgmental awareness of the act of eating, it promotes better regulation of hunger and satiety signals, reduces automatic eating behaviors, and fosters a more balanced relationship with food and one's own body.
Therefore, the integration of nutrition education, food literacy, and mindful eating appears particularly effective in promoting healthy and sustainable lifestyles, contributing not only to improved diet quality but also to psychological well-being

and the prevention of major eating-related problems from early developmental stages.

Such an approach thus represents an educational strategy for addressing the challenges posed by the contemporary food environment and, at the same time, it can be understood as a lifelong learning process, in which the acquisition of food-related competencies and the development of critical awareness constitute continuous and evolving processes throughout the entire lifespan.

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