

Understanding preadolescent nutrition literacy in a low socio-economic region of South Australia

Stefania Velardo

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School of Education

Faculty of Education, Humanities and Law

Flinders University

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Thesis summary

Health literacy, briefly defined as the ability to access, understand and use health information, has been identified as a key public health goal in Australia and internationally. A unique health literacy discourse has emerged within the academic research community over recent years, encompassing multiple definitions, components and conceptualisations. From a health promotion perspective, conceptualising health literacy as an asset highlights the importance of fostering a health literate youth for the benefit of future generations. Yet research is largely limited to examining adults' and older adolescents' health literacy. This qualitative research embraced a child-centred approach to research, with children acting as the sole participants. The research broadly aimed to explore the concepts of health and nutrition literacy, from the perspectives of 38 preadolescent children living in a disadvantaged region of Adelaide, South Australia. This study specifically addressed questions around the construction of children's nutrition literacy, by exploring the ways in which children access, understand, evaluate, and use nutrition information in their everyday lives.

I conducted a series of focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews in order to listen to the voices of 11–12-year-old boys and girls. At the time of the interviews, all of the children were attending one of three state primary schools within the selected region. The study comprised two parts. The first component utilised a semi-structured interview technique to discuss and uncover aspects of health and nutrition literacy. Conversely, the second component specifically investigated the children's perceptions and responses to three Australian food advertisements produced by leading Australian food companies (termed *media nutrition literacy*). After viewing the commercials, participants were asked a series of eight structured questions that related to the commercial content. The study employed social constructionist and socio-ecological frameworks as a lens through which to explore nutrition literacy from the child's perspective, and to uncover the ways in which the children's experiences reflected broader social norms and discourses. Keeping with the nature of qualitative research, data analysis proceeded inductively, using the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The socio-ecological nature of this research placed emphasis on the dynamic connections between various interpersonal agents and organisational structures in shaping children's nutrition literacy. The first four themes that arose through data analysis related to mainstream health discourses, the home setting, the school setting, and traditional and non-traditional media, which all constituted key influences on health literacy. Based on the children's narratives, the school was arguably the most influential setting, particularly in regard to developing health-related knowledge and skills, and facilitating or negating healthy choices. Some children reported difficulty in finding congruency between choosing healthier alternatives and limited family budgets, or unsupportive environments, while others were provided with opportunities to become health literate. The development of child nutrition literacy was influenced by many factors, and the findings suggest that some children might influence the health literacy of significant others, namely families.

The second part of this study elicited two additional themes relating to media nutrition literacy, specifically scepticism towards advertising, and misconceptions around nutrition. These findings further confirm that media serve an influential role in the lives of children and that young people need to be equipped with a wide-ranging skill set to deal with the complexities of health in a contemporary sociocultural environment that promotes unhealthy lifestyles.

This research outlines the contextual nature of child nutrition literacy and offers the following conclusions. First, this study emphasises the importance of more integrated strategies to promote nutrition literacy amongst younger populations. Second, while functional nutrition literacy remains a fundamental task, children need opportunities across diverse settings, including schools, to develop and practise interactive and critical health literacy skills. Based on these understandings, this thesis provides recommendations for further research. Overall, greater interaction between researchers working within the field of nutrition literacy is needed to encourage methodological approaches that capture the evolving nature of this concept.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed Date

Acknowledgements

The trees that are slow to grow bear the most fruit

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