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Mindful Eating Education: A Framework for Fostering Emotional and Physical Health Resilience in Nigerian School-Aged Children and Families

Kangyang Pam Jari & Ngosar Nenman Iliy

Home Economics Department

Federal University of Education Pankshin, Plateau State

Corresponding email: kjari101@gmail.com

Abstract

In an era where Nigerian children grapple with rising obesity rates, exacerbated by urbanization, processed food influx, and economic pressures, and families navigate chronic stress from environmental uncertainties, the integration of mindful eating into Home Economics education emerges as a vital strategy for building resilience. This paper proposes a theoretical framework grounded in Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction model, adapted to the cultural fabric of Nigerian family life, to embed mindful eating practices within school curricula. By fostering intentional awareness during meals such as savoring local staples like jollof rice or garri, Educators can empower school-aged children and their households to cultivate emotional regulation and healthier physical habits, countering the dual threats of stress-induced emotional eating and metabolic disorders. Drawing on family systems theory and ecological perspectives from human ecology, the framework outlines curriculum modules that blend interactive storytelling, communal meal-sharing exercises, and reflective journaling, tailored for low-resource settings like those in Plateau State. Through this lens, mindful eating transcends individual behavior change; it nurtures intergenerational resilience, linking personal wellbeing to sustainable agricultural practices and community cohesion. Preliminary conceptual mapping suggests potential outcomes, including reduced BMI trajectories and enhanced family coping mechanisms, with implications for policy reform in Nigeria's education sector. Ultimately, this approach positions home economics not merely as a domestic skill but as a resilient anchor for future generations, urging policy makers and other stakeholders to champion its adoption amid climate and socioeconomic flux.

Keywords: Mindful eating, Family resilience, Home Economics Curriculum, Stress reduction,

Introduction

Recent systematic reviews confirm that overweight and obesity among Nigerian school-aged children have risen sharply over the past two decades, with some urban cohorts recording combined overweight/obesity prevalence rates approaching 15.5% (Adeloye, Ige-Elegbede, Ezejimofor, Owolabi, Ezeigwe, Omoyele, Mpazanje, Dewan, Agogo, Gadanya, Alemu, Harhay, Auta & Adebiyi, 2021). This nutritional transition is fueled by the growing availability of energy-dense, nutrient-poor processed foods, sedentary lifestyles, and the psychological consequences of chronic socioeconomic stress experienced by families navigating poverty, infrastructure deficits, and climate-induced agricultural disruptions (Obembe, Bose, Ariyo & Adeniji, 2024).

Nigeria's nutritional crisis is characterized by the paradox of concurrent undernutrition and overweight, a phenomenon increasingly common across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). National surveys confirm that Nigerian school-aged children face significant rates of stunting and wasting, particularly in rural areas and among children attending public schools, while overweight and obesity are more prevalent among urban and private school children (Obembe et al.,

2024). A study of 440 school-aged children aged 6–13 years in Lagos found that 8.9% were obese and 6.6% were overweight, with mothers frequently misidentifying excess weight as a sign of healthy child development (Araromi, N., Okoronkwo, C., Erinne, O., Dada, T., Falade, I., Annonye, B., Agada, A., Okobi, R., Okobi, O., Akpamgbo, E., & Obodo, O., 2024). Dietary patterns have shifted markedly, with Nigerian schoolchildren increasingly consuming processed foods while reducing intake of traditional nutrient-dense staples, a trend associated with rising obesity incidence (Obembe et al., 2024).

Traditional approaches to nutrition education in Nigerian schools have proven insufficient. The Home Economics curriculum, historically tasked with equipping students with domestic skills including food preparation and family health, has struggled to respond to contemporary challenges (Adesoji & Soyebo, 2024). Critics note that Nigerian Home Economics education has not kept pace with shifting global trends, with curricula that often remain disconnected from the psychosocial dimensions of eating behavior, stress management, and family resilience (Onuoha & Chukwuone, 2022). Yet it is precisely within Home Economics education that transformative interventions can be embedded, ones that reach not just individual students but their families and communities.

The psychological dimensions of Nigeria's health crisis are inseparable from its nutritional manifestations. Families in states like Plateau State contend with chronic stressors including economic insecurity, communal violence, climate variability affecting agricultural livelihoods, and inadequate social safety nets. Parental stress is a potent determinant of poor family feeding practices: elevated stress is associated with less healthy parental food choices, reduced availability of nutritious food at home, and a diminished capacity to maintain obesity-prevention efforts (González et al., 2022). Emotional eating, consuming food in response to emotional distress rather than physiological hunger, has been extensively linked to childhood and adolescent obesity, particularly when emotional dysregulation is present (Araromi et al., 2024). Research confirms that children who witness or experience chronic household stress develop maladaptive eating patterns that persist into adulthood (Dunning et al., 2022). In the Nigerian context, these risks are amplified by limited access to mental health services and the social normalization of food as comfort and social currency within family settings.

Schools represent one of the most appropriate and scalable sites for health education interventions targeting children (Sobngwi-Tambekou et al., 2024). Within the school context, Home Economics occupies a unique interdisciplinary position: it integrates food science, family health, nutrition, consumer education, and human development into a holistic educational experience (Erjavsek, 2021). Despite this potential, Nigerian Home Economics curricula have been critiqued for failing to align with contemporary health challenges. Adesoji and Soyebo (2024) observe that Nigerian Home Economics education increasingly faces attitudinal resistance from students and parents who perceive the subject as outdated or gender-stereotyped, while curriculum planners have not sufficiently updated content to address emotional eating, stress management, and food mindfulness. This gap represents both a challenge and an opportunity: it signals the urgent need for curriculum reform while confirming that Home Economics remains an ideal vehicle for such reform.

Mindful eating, broadly defined as the practice of bringing non-judgmental, present-moment awareness to the sensory and emotional dimensions of eating, represents a promising pathway to address these intertwined physical and psychological health challenges (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Home Economics as a field is already premised on the idea that the domestic and family sphere, including food preparation, nutrition, and family health, is sufficient territory for meeting the health needs of individuals and families when its content is properly designed and delivered. The inadequacy identified above is therefore not that Home Economics is the wrong vehicle for this work, but that its current curriculum content has not been updated to include the psychosocial and emotional dimensions of eating. This paper accordingly proposes mindful eating education as a specific content

addition to the existing Home Economics curriculum, rather than as a parallel or competing program. While mindfulness-based programs have demonstrated significant impacts on stress reduction, emotional regulation, and dietary behavior in Western and high-income contexts (Crane et al., 2023), their application within Home Economics curricula in sub-Saharan African school settings remains nascent and underexplored.

This paper presents a theoretically grounded framework for integrating mindful eating education into Nigerian Home Economics curricula, with specific attention to Plateau State. The framework draws on Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) model, Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST), and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to argue that mindful eating education can simultaneously address individual dietary habits, family coping mechanisms, and community-level health behaviors. The paper maps preliminary conceptual outcomes and advances specific policy recommendations for Nigeria's education sector.

The Proposed Mindful Eating Education Program (MEEP)

Program Philosophy and Goals

The proposed Mindful Eating Education Program (MEEP) for Nigerian Home Economics classrooms is grounded in the conviction that food is not merely a nutritional substrate but a relational, cultural, and emotional experience. The program's overarching philosophy is that by transforming how children and families relate to eating, from automatic, stress-reactive consumption to intentional, aware nourishment, educators can simultaneously address physical health outcomes, emotional resilience, and family wellbeing. The specific goals of MEEP are: (a) to develop children's capacity for present-moment awareness during eating; (b) to reduce stress-induced and emotional eating patterns; (c) to strengthen family communication around food and health; (d) to connect mindful eating to local food culture and sustainable agricultural practices; and (e) to build teacher capacity as health resilience facilitators.

Curriculum Modules

The MEEP is structured as an eight-week modular curriculum embedded within existing Home Economics lessons, requiring no additional class time and minimal material resources, critical design principles for low-resource schools in Plateau State. Each module builds progressively on the preceding one, creating a coherent learning arc from individual body awareness to community-level action.

Module 1: Understanding Hunger and Fullness introduces students to the distinction between physical hunger cues and emotional eating triggers through interactive body-scan exercises adapted from MBSR's body awareness protocols (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Storytelling using Nigerian narrative traditions explores characters who eat in response to emotions versus physical need, making abstract concepts accessible to children aged 8–14 years.

Module 2: Savoring Nigerian Foods employs communal meal-sharing exercises focused on traditional foods, including garri, jollof rice, egusi soup, and tuwo, guiding students to engage all senses while eating slowly and attentively. This module explicitly celebrates Nigerian food culture, countering the implicit devaluation that accompanies many health interventions.

Module 3: Emotions and eating uses reflective journaling to help students track emotional states before, during, and after eating. Teachers facilitate group discussions connecting emotional regulation skills drawn from mindfulness traditions to food choices and eating behavior.

Module 4: Family Meals as Healing Spaces draws on BFST to engage students in family meal planning and communication exercises, including take-home activities that involve parents and caregivers, framing the family meal table as a site of connection and stress reduction.

Module 5: Food, Stress, and the Body presents age-appropriate psychophysiology of the stress response and its relationship to eating behavior through simple diagrams and role-play activities, introducing breathing exercises as portable stress management tools.

Module 6: Local Foods and Community Health connects mindful eating to local agricultural systems and community food security, linking individual health behaviors to broader ecological sustainability.

Module 7: Mindful Cooking and Food Preparation applies mindfulness principles to the act of food preparation itself, attending to textures, aromas, and the care embedded in cooking traditional Nigerian recipes.

Module 8: Building a Mindful Eating Community serves as a capstone in which students design and present family and school-level mindful eating initiatives, fostering leadership, community engagement, and sustainable behavior change.

Pedagogical Approaches

The MEEP employs three core pedagogical strategies suited to Nigerian school environments. Interactive storytelling leverages Nigeria's rich oral narrative traditions to teach mindfulness concepts in culturally resonant ways, making abstract psychological principles accessible to diverse student populations. Experiential learning through communal meal exercises and practical cooking activities reflects the evidence base for active, participatory health education in African school contexts (Sobngwi-Tambekou et al., 2024). Reflective journaling, adapted for varying literacy levels through drawing and group oral reflection where needed, promotes metacognitive awareness and emotional self-regulation, core competencies identified in both MBSR and social-emotional learning frameworks (Dunning et al., 2022).

Mindful Eating and Physical Health

The evidence for mindful eating interventions in reducing obesity-related outcomes, while still emerging, is increasingly compelling. Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to reduce BMI in school-aged children through mechanisms that include improved dietary self-regulation, reduced binge eating, and enhanced responsiveness to physiological satiety cues (de Lara Perez et al., 2025). In the Mindful Eating Program for Children and Parents (MEPCOP) evaluation, primary school students aged 6–11 years demonstrated significant improvements in food consumption behaviors following a school-based mindful eating program, supporting the feasibility and effectiveness of such programs in educational settings (de Lara Perez et al., 2025). Similarly, a 14-week mindfulness-based healthy eating and stress management program targeting economically marginalized families in the United States showed positive preliminary effects on both children's and parents' eating behaviors, household food security, and anthropometric measures (Rodriguez et al., 2025). These findings from low-resource family contexts are directly relevant to Nigerian settings.

Mindful Eating and Emotional Regulation

The emotional health benefits of mindfulness-based interventions for children and adolescents are supported by a growing body of randomized controlled trial evidence. A meta-analysis of mindfulness-based programs found significant improvements in cognitive skills, behavior, and mental health among children and adolescents (Dunning et al., 2022). Mindfulness-based

interventions have been specifically shown to reduce emotional dysregulation in adolescents through enhanced awareness, attunement, and self-regulation capacities (Piguet et al., 2025). For the specific nexus of emotional eating and mindfulness, parental mindful eating practices are directly associated with decreased emotional eating behaviors in children across multiple study designs (Martin et al., 2022). In the Nigerian family context, where communal eating practices create natural opportunities for shared mindfulness experiences, these family-level effects may be amplified.

School-Based Interventions in African Contexts

While evidence specifically from Nigeria remains sparse, the experience of neighboring African contexts offers instructive lessons. A nutrition education program in Cameroon for school-going adolescents demonstrated that school-based health interventions can yield measurable improvements in dietary knowledge and health-related behaviors when teachers are adequately trained and the program is adapted to local food cultures and school environments (Sobngwi-Tambekou et al., 2024). For Nigerian schools specifically, successful quasi-experimental nutrition education programs have demonstrated significant enhancements in participants' knowledge, dietary practices, and nutritional intake following structured Home Economics training in low-income settings (Eze et al., 2022). This precedent supports the feasibility of the MEEP framework within existing Nigerian educational infrastructure.

Implementation Considerations for Low-Resource Settings

Teacher Training and Capacity Building

Effective implementation of the MEEP framework requires that Home Economics teachers receive foundational training in mindfulness principles and their practical application in educational settings. Teacher-led nutrition programs have been recognized as promising, cost-effective approaches to school health promotion in sub-Saharan Africa, with evidence that trained teachers serve as effective agents of healthy eating behavior change (Mwangi et al., 2024). The proposed MEEP would embed a 30-hour pre-program teacher training module covering MBSR basics, culturally adapted mindful eating practices, facilitation of reflective discussions, and identification of students showing signs of stress-related or disordered eating. For Federal University of Education Pankshin, positioned within Plateau State's teacher education ecosystem, this training framework represents an opportunity to position the institution as a hub for mindful health education innovation in North-Central Nigeria.

Resource Adaptation and Family Engagement

A distinctive strength of the proposed framework is its minimal resource requirement. Unlike many health interventions that depend on specialized equipment or commercial materials, MEEP relies primarily on human resources, teacher facilitation, peer group interaction, and family engagement, and on locally available foods for sensory eating exercises. Journaling materials can be replaced by oral group reflection for schools with limited stationery resources. The program's core exercises, mindful breathing, slow eating, and sensory awareness, require no materials at all. This design philosophy responds directly to the well-documented resource constraints facing Nigerian public schools (Onuoha & Chukwuone, 2022). The MEEP framework deliberately extends beyond school walls to engage families as active partners in mindful eating practice, with take-home activities, family meal reflection guides, and community sharing sessions. This approach is consistent with evidence that family-based mindful eating interventions are more effective than child-only programs in reducing emotional eating and improving dietary quality (Martin et al., 2022).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The MEEP framework carries direct implications for the reform of Nigeria's national Home Economics curriculum. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) should review and update the Basic Education Curriculum for Home Economics to formally incorporate a mindful eating and emotional health component at the primary and junior secondary levels. This reform would align Nigeria with the World Health Organization's school health frameworks and the Sustainable Development Goals' targets for health and wellbeing (United Nations, 2015), while positioning the country as a continental leader in holistic health education. Embedding mindful eating within the existing Home Economics curriculum represents a lower-cost, more sustainable pathway than launching standalone nutrition programs (Mwangi et al., 2024).

Federal Colleges and Universities of Education across Nigeria should integrate mindful eating education pedagogy into their pre-service Home Economics teacher training programs. Minimum competency standards for Home Economics teacher graduates should include the capacity to facilitate mindfulness-based learning experiences and basic emotional health literacy. The National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) could support this integration through curriculum development grants and professional development funding.

At a broader level, addressing the dual burden of malnutrition and the psychosocial determinants of eating behavior in Nigeria requires coordinated action linking health, education, and agriculture sectors. Mindful eating education within schools can serve as a nexus point for this multi-sectoral approach: connecting agricultural extension programs that promote local food production with school nutrition education; linking school health services with early identification of children showing stress-related eating concerns; and engaging community health workers as partners in family-level program delivery. Such harmonization is identified as central to combating malnutrition and advancing health equity in African contexts (Mwangi et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Nigeria's children face a complex intersection of nutritional, psychological, and socioeconomic challenges that demand responses as multidimensional as the challenges themselves. The integration of mindful eating education into Nigerian Home Economics curricula represents a theoretically rigorous, culturally adaptable, and practically feasible pathway to building emotional and physical health resilience in school-aged children and their families. By drawing on the complementary insights of Kabat-Zinn's MBSR framework, Bowen Family Systems Theory, and ecological systems perspectives, the proposed MEEP curriculum framework positions mindful eating as more than a dietary intervention: it is a vehicle for cultivating the reflective self-awareness, emotional regulation, and relational attunement that underpin individual and family wellbeing across generations.

For Nigeria's Home Economics educators, researchers, and policymakers, this framework represents an invitation to reimagine the discipline not as a set of domestic skills but as a resilient anchor for future generations navigating an increasingly complex world. The jollof rice at the center of a family table, eaten slowly and with full attention, is both a cultural treasure and a tool for healing. Policymakers, curriculum developers, teacher educators, and community stakeholders are urged to champion the adoption and rigorous evaluation of mindful eating education programs, and to prioritize the curriculum, teacher-training, and multi-sectoral recommendations outlined above as a priority investment in Nigeria's human and social capital.

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