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## The Effect of Ritual Poetry Recitation in the Style of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh on Enhancing Social Skills and Empathy in Elementary School Children

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### Article history:

Received date: 2020/01/05

Review date: 2020/02/03

Accepted date: 2020/02/10

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### Keywords:

Ritual poetry recitation, children, social skills, empathy.

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**Purpose:** The present study aimed to investigate the effect of ritual poetry recitation in the style of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh on enhancing social skills and empathy among elementary school children.

**Methodology:** The study employed a quasi-experimental design with experimental and control groups. The statistical population consisted of all elementary school students in Shahrekord County, including 7,869 female students and 6,970 male students. Among them, 30 students who demonstrated difficulties in communication skills and empathy were identified by teachers and school administrators and referred to the researcher. From this group, 30 children were selected and randomly assigned to either the control group (n = 15) or the experimental group (n = 15). The research instruments included the Basic Empathy Scale developed by Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) and the Communication Skills Questionnaire developed by Queen Dam (2004). The intervention program consisted of ritual poetry recitation in the style of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, implemented over ten sessions across ten weeks. Data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

**Findings:** The findings indicated that ritual poetry recitation in the style of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh had a statistically significant effect on increasing social skills and empathy in the experimental group. Furthermore, based on eta-squared values, the effect size of ritual poetry recitation on children's social skills was 45%, while its effect on empathy was 0.78.

**Conclusion:** The findings of this study suggest that an educational intervention based on ritual recitation of the Shahnameh possesses substantial potential for enhancing empathy components and improving social skills among elementary school children.

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**Please cite this article as:** Fooladi, K., & Darikvand, F. (2020). The Effect of Ritual Poetry Recitation in the Style of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh on Enhancing Social Skills and Empathy in Elementary School Children, *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology*, 3(1): 212-222.

## 1. Introduction

Social skills and empathy are among the most fundamental psychosocial competencies that contribute significantly to children's emotional adjustment, interpersonal functioning, academic achievement, and psychological well-being. During the elementary school years, children gradually develop the ability to communicate effectively with peers, understand emotional cues, regulate interpersonal behaviors, and establish cooperative social relationships. Deficits in these competencies may lead to social isolation, emotional dysregulation, poor academic adaptation, and long-term psychological difficulties. Research in developmental psychology has consistently emphasized that social competence and empathy are critical predictors of healthy social development and adaptive functioning in childhood (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019; Stiles-Shields et al., 2021). In contemporary educational and psychological frameworks, increasing attention has been devoted to identifying culturally meaningful and psychologically effective interventions capable of enhancing these social-emotional capacities among children.

Empathy is generally conceptualized as the ability to perceive, understand, and emotionally respond to the experiences and feelings of others. This construct includes both cognitive empathy, which involves understanding another individual's emotional state, and affective empathy, which refers to sharing or resonating emotionally with another person's experiences. Empathy is strongly associated with prosocial behavior, emotional intelligence, moral development, and successful interpersonal relationships. Children with higher levels of empathy demonstrate greater cooperation, reduced aggression, improved peer acceptance, and enhanced conflict resolution abilities. Conversely, deficits in empathy are often associated with social withdrawal, interpersonal conflicts, and emotional difficulties (Hage et al., 2021; Moody & Laugeson, 2020). Therefore, educational systems and psychological interventions increasingly seek methods that can effectively nurture empathy and interpersonal sensitivity during childhood.

Similarly, social skills represent a multidimensional set of learned behaviors that enable individuals to interact appropriately and effectively with others across various social situations. These skills include active listening, assertive communication, emotional regulation, cooperation, problem-solving, and perspective-taking. Strong social skills facilitate social adjustment and emotional resilience, whereas weak social competencies are associated with loneliness, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal dysfunction (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019; Wolstencroft & Skuse, 2019). In recent years, scholars have highlighted the importance of implementing early interventions aimed at improving children's communication abilities and interpersonal functioning in both clinical and educational contexts.

Numerous studies have examined the role of social skills interventions among children with developmental, emotional, and psychosocial difficulties. For example, social communication and pragmatic deficits have been identified as central challenges among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Developmental Language Disorder, emphasizing the need for effective communicative and emotional interventions (Hage et al., 2021). Similarly, research has demonstrated that structured social skills training programs can substantially improve interpersonal functioning and adaptive behaviors across developmental stages among children with autism spectrum disorder (Moody & Laugeson, 2020). The importance of assessing and systematically improving social competence in children has also been emphasized through the development of specialized social skills measurement instruments and intervention frameworks (West & Silverman, 2021). Moreover, interventions targeting social functioning have demonstrated beneficial effects among children with chronic medical conditions and developmental disorders, further supporting the significance of psychosocial training programs in childhood (Stiles-Shields et al., 2021; Willard, 2018).

Beyond conventional behavioral and cognitive interventions, creative and expressive therapeutic approaches have increasingly attracted attention within contemporary psychology and educational sciences. Among these approaches, art therapy and expressive literary interventions have demonstrated promising effects in improving emotional regulation, social engagement, communication abilities, and psychological well-being. Art-based interventions create psychologically safe environments in which children can express emotions, explore interpersonal experiences, and develop social understanding through symbolic and imaginative

processes (Hu et al., 2021). Research indicates that artistic and narrative activities may activate emotional processing mechanisms while simultaneously strengthening social cognition and empathy.

Art therapy has emerged as an important complementary psychological intervention across a wide range of clinical and educational contexts. Studies have shown that artistic expression contributes to emotional regulation, psychological resilience, and reduction of emotional distress among children and adults (Hu et al., 2021). Painting therapy, for instance, has demonstrated positive effects on reducing negative emotions among pediatric populations experiencing functional gastrointestinal disorders (Kai et al., 2022). Similarly, art-based therapeutic interventions have been associated with emotional stabilization and improved coping among patients undergoing physically and emotionally demanding medical treatments (Koom et al., 2016; Nazaire, 2020). Such findings suggest that creative and symbolic modalities may facilitate emotional expression and interpersonal understanding in ways that conventional educational methods may not fully achieve.

The psychological effectiveness of artistic interventions may partly derive from their ability to engage both emotional and cognitive processes simultaneously. Artistic narratives, visual symbolism, storytelling, and imaginative engagement enable children to explore complex emotional experiences indirectly and safely. Through identification with characters, metaphors, and symbolic themes, children can develop emotional awareness, moral reasoning, and perspective-taking capacities. Researchers have emphasized that artistic expression may provide insight into emotional functioning and interpersonal processes, thereby contributing to psychological growth and adaptive social functioning (Mehl et al., 2021). Furthermore, creative interventions often reduce resistance to emotional learning because they rely on experiential engagement rather than direct instruction.

Within Persian cultural and literary traditions, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* occupies a uniquely influential position as an epic literary masterpiece deeply embedded in collective identity, ethical values, and cultural memory. The *Shahnameh* contains numerous narratives emphasizing courage, loyalty, justice, empathy, compassion, responsibility, friendship, and moral integrity. Its stories provide rich symbolic and emotional material that may be particularly suitable for fostering social and emotional development among children. Ritual poetry recitation based on the *Shahnameh* may therefore serve not only as a literary and cultural activity but also as a psychologically meaningful educational intervention capable of strengthening empathy, emotional awareness, and social competence.

The ritualistic dimension of poetry recitation may further enhance its psychological impact. Ritual-based educational activities often create structured emotional experiences characterized by shared attention, emotional resonance, and collective participation. Such environments may strengthen children's sense of belonging, interpersonal connection, and emotional attunement. Through repeated exposure to moral narratives and emotionally evocative poetic themes, children may gradually internalize prosocial values and develop stronger empathic capacities. In addition, oral recitation practices encourage active listening, verbal expression, emotional engagement, and social interaction, all of which are closely related to communication skill development.

The use of literary and artistic approaches for psychosocial development aligns with broader contemporary perspectives emphasizing holistic and culturally sensitive interventions in child psychology. Conventional social skills programs sometimes rely heavily on direct behavioral instruction and structured exercises, which may not fully engage children emotionally or culturally. In contrast, culturally grounded literary interventions may increase motivation, emotional identification, and meaningful participation. Narrative and poetic forms can facilitate emotional immersion and moral imagination while simultaneously strengthening cognitive empathy and interpersonal understanding.

Research examining expressive and artistic interventions has repeatedly demonstrated their potential for improving social and emotional functioning across diverse populations. Studies involving music therapy, painting therapy, and creative expression have highlighted improvements in communication, emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and psychological adaptation (Kai et al., 2022; West & Silverman,

2021). Similarly, expressive interventions have shown beneficial psychosocial effects among individuals facing emotional distress, medical challenges, and developmental difficulties (Roberts et al., 2016; S Kumar Puri & Conrad, 2019). Although many previous studies have focused on clinical populations, these findings suggest that expressive cultural interventions may also hold substantial preventive and developmental value for non-clinical child populations within educational settings.

Furthermore, modern psychological perspectives increasingly emphasize the importance of integrating emotional, cultural, and social dimensions within educational interventions. Children's social-emotional learning is most effective when educational content resonates with their cultural background and lived experiences. The *Shahnameh*, as one of the foundational literary works of Persian culture, provides narratives rich in emotional complexity, interpersonal conflict, ethical dilemmas, and prosocial values. Exposure to such narratives may facilitate children's understanding of emotions, social responsibilities, and interpersonal relationships while strengthening their communication and empathic capacities.

Despite the growing literature on art therapy, expressive interventions, and social-emotional learning, limited research has specifically examined the psychological effects of ritual poetry recitation based on classical Persian literature among elementary school children. Existing studies have primarily focused on clinical art therapy, music-based interventions, or social skills training programs within developmental disorders (Moody & Laugeson, 2020; Willard, 2018). Consequently, there remains a significant research gap regarding the potential application of culturally rooted poetic interventions for enhancing empathy and social skills in educational contexts. Investigating such interventions may contribute not only to psychological knowledge but also to culturally responsive educational practices that integrate literary heritage with psychosocial development.

Moreover, contemporary educational systems increasingly recognize the necessity of fostering empathy and interpersonal competence alongside academic achievement. In many educational environments, children experience challenges related to emotional regulation, peer relationships, social anxiety, and communication difficulties. Interventions capable of simultaneously addressing emotional engagement, cultural identity, and social competence may therefore hold particular value. Ritual poetry recitation grounded in the *Shahnameh* may provide a multidimensional educational experience that integrates emotional learning, cultural appreciation, moral reflection, and interpersonal skill development.

In light of these considerations, the present study aimed to investigate the effect of ritual poetry recitation in the style of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* on enhancing social skills and empathy among elementary school children.

## 2. Methodology

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with experimental and control groups. The statistical population consisted of all elementary school students in Shahrekord County. The sample size included 30 elementary school students selected through cluster random sampling from 6 public girls' schools, 6 non-public girls' schools, 6 public boys' schools, and 6 non-public boys' schools. In total, 7,869 female students and 6,970 male students were enrolled during the 2018–2019 academic year. Among these students, 30 children exhibiting difficulties in communication skills and empathy were identified by teachers and school administrators and referred to the researcher. Subsequently, 30 children were selected and assigned to either the control group ( $n = 15$ ) or the experimental group ( $n = 15$ ).

**Basic Empathy Scale:** The empathy scale was developed by Jolliffe and Farrington (2006). The psychometric properties of this scale were also evaluated among Italian students by Aliberti et al. (2008). The final version of the Basic Empathy Scale consists of 20 items and two subscales. The affective-emotional subscale includes 11 items (1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 17, and 18), while the cognitive subscale includes 9 items (3, 6, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19, and 20). This questionnaire is an attitudinal assessment instrument based on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The minimum possible score on the scale is 20 and the maximum score is 100. Scores ranging from 20 to 40

indicate low empathy, scores between 41 and 60 indicate moderate empathy, scores between 61 and 80 indicate desirable empathy, and scores above 81 indicate very high empathy.

**Communication Skills Scale:** The Communication Skills Questionnaire was developed by Queendom in 2004. The questionnaire contains 34 items describing communication skills. To complete the questionnaire, respondents are required to read each item and indicate the extent to which their current condition corresponds to the content of the statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “always.” The communication subskills assessed by this scale include listening skills, the ability to receive and send messages, insight into the communication process, emotional control, and assertive communication. The subscales include: (1) ability to receive and send messages (9 items: 4, 5, 6, 12, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 29); (2) emotional control (9 items: 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 28, 30, and 32); (3) listening skills (6 items: 3, 25, 26, 27, 31, and 34); (4) insight into the communication process (5 items: 1, 2, 17, 18, and 20); and (5) assertive communication (5 items: 10, 14, 15, 19, and 33). This instrument was designed by Queendom to assess communication skills in adults and includes 34 statements describing communication abilities. Respondents indicate their answers on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“always”), including always (5), most of the time (4), sometimes (3), rarely (2), and never (1). Items 2, 4, and 6 are reverse scored. Separate scores are calculated for each subskill, which are represented through subtests containing different numbers of items. In addition, the total score across all 34 items provides an overall communication skills score for each respondent. Thus, the possible score range extends from 34 to 170. Certain items are scored inversely due to their content and structure. In such items, selecting “always,” which yields the highest score for regular items, results in the lowest score (1). These reverse-scored items are marked with an asterisk in the questionnaire. According to this scoring procedure, the obtained scores are summed. The lower limit of the total score is 34, the midpoint is 102, and the upper limit is 170. Scores ranging from 34 to 68 indicate weak communication skills, scores between 68 and 102 indicate moderate communication skills, and scores above 102 indicate high communication skills.

**Poetry Recitation Protocol:** The poetry recitation sessions were conducted in one of the clinics in Shahrekord County over ten sessions, held once weekly for 90 minutes each. This ten-session program was designed to enhance social skills and empathy among elementary school children through ritual poetry recitation in the style of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. At the beginning of each session, a safe and calm atmosphere was established to enable children to express their emotions and feelings freely. By the end of each session, children were observed using the poems of the *Shahnameh* to understand and internalize fundamental concepts such as helping others, friendship, loyalty, and respect for the emotions of others in their daily behaviors.

During the first to fourth sessions, the primary focus was on familiarizing children with the concepts and poems of the *Shahnameh*. At this stage, children became acquainted with the stories and heroes of the epic while gradually learning concepts such as empathy, basic emotions, active listening, and understanding others' perspectives. Poems centered on themes such as helping others, loyalty, and respect were selected to guide the activities. In addition to creating a psychologically safe emotional environment, these poems provided opportunities for discussions regarding children's feelings and experiences and encouraged them to participate in group activities and simple drawing exercises.

During the middle sessions, namely sessions five through seven, the emphasis shifted toward teaching more advanced skills. At this stage, children became familiar with concepts such as responsibility, conflict resolution, and understanding differing viewpoints. The selected poems included *Shahnameh* stories focusing on responsibility and differences in opinions, which facilitated deeper understanding through group discussions and role-playing activities. Activities such as retelling sections of stories, role-playing, and group exercises were implemented to strengthen communication skills. Particular emphasis was placed on perspective-taking, emotional regulation, and peaceful conflict resolution.

Finally, during sessions eight through ten, the focus centered on deeper empathy, moral values, and the development of social responsibility. Poems from the *Shahnameh* emphasizing values such as honesty,

justice, courage, and loyalty were examined. Children at this stage participated more actively in activities aimed at strengthening emotional empathy, moral imagination, and problem-solving skills. These sessions included role-playing exercises designed to practice empathy, ethical discussions, analysis of various situations, and identification of peaceful solutions.

The tenth session was devoted to summarizing and consolidating the acquired learning experiences. Based on the stories and poems studied throughout the intervention, children participated in group performances or collaborative drawings to demonstrate the skills they had acquired in a practical manner. Additionally, practical exercises and group discussions continued in order to help children apply these skills effectively within family and school environments and establish more effective interpersonal relationships. This comprehensive approach, drawing upon the literary and cultural richness of the *Shahnameh*, not only strengthened social skills and empathy but also familiarized children with moral and humanistic concepts and provided effective strategies for personality growth and development.

The data obtained through the questionnaires were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in SPSS.

### 3. Findings

As shown in Table 1, all significance levels obtained were higher than the assumed significance level of 0.05. Therefore, the results indicate that the assumption of normal distribution of group scores was not violated.

**Table 1. Results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test**

Variable	Group	Kolmogorov–Smirnov Statistic	Sig.
Social Skills	Pre-test	1.21	0.06
Social Skills	Post-test	1.13	0.15
Empathy	Post-test	0.58	0.88
Empathy	Pre-test	0.56	0.91

As presented in Table 2, the interaction F values for all research variables were non-significant. Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was confirmed.

**Table 2. Results of the Test for the Assumption of Homogeneity of Regression Slopes**

Index (Variable)	Source of Variation	F Value	Sig.
Social Skills	Pre-test × Group	0.104	0.74
Empathy	Pre-test × Group	2.37	0.105

According to Table 3, the significance levels obtained from Levene's test were greater than 0.05. Therefore, these results indicate that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not violated.

**Table 3. Results of Levene's Test for Homogeneity of Variances**

Variables	df1	df2	F Value	Sig.
Social Skills	1	34	0.57	0.45
Empathy	1	34	0.19	0.66

The results presented in Table 4 demonstrate a statistically significant difference between the adjusted mean scores of social skills in the experimental and control groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that ritual poetry recitation in the style of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* had a significant effect on improving social skills in the experimental group. Furthermore, based on the eta-squared value, it can be inferred that the effect size of ritual poetry recitation on children's social skills was 45%.

**Table 4.** Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (Dependent Variable: Communication Skills)

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared
Corrected Model	3475.072	8	434.384	7.013	0.000	0.728
Group	1086.967	1	1086.967	17.548	0.000	0.455
Error	1300.795	21	61.943			
Total	243832.000	30				
Corrected Total	4775.867	29				

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that after controlling for the effect of the covariate (pre-test) on the dependent variable, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of empathy scores ( $p < 0.05$ ). In other words, ritual poetry recitation in the style of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* had a significant effect on children's empathy. These findings suggest that ritual poetry recitation in the style of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* was effective in improving children's empathy levels. Furthermore, given that the eta-squared value for the group variable was 0.78, it can be concluded that 78% of the total variance and dispersion of the empathy variable was explained by the group effect.

**Table 5.** Results of One-Way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on the Mean Empathy Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups with Pre-test Control

Variable	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared
Empathy	Pre-test	1121.04	1	1121.04	82.47	0.001	0.71
Empathy	Group	3485.04	1	3485.04	256.38	0.001	0.78
Empathy	Error	448.57	33	13.59			

#### 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of ritual poetry recitation in the style of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* on enhancing social skills and empathy among elementary school children. The findings demonstrated that the educational intervention based on ritual *Shahnameh* poetry recitation significantly improved both social skills and empathy among children in the experimental group compared with the control group. The obtained results indicated that ritual poetry recitation had a substantial effect on children's communication abilities and empathic functioning, with large effect sizes observed particularly for empathy. These findings suggest that literary and culturally grounded interventions can play a meaningful role in promoting psychosocial development during childhood.

One of the principal findings of the study was the significant improvement in children's social skills following participation in the ritual poetry recitation program. This finding is consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of structured social-emotional interventions in enhancing communication abilities, interpersonal functioning, and adaptive social behaviors among children (Moody & Laugeson, 2020; West & Silverman, 2021). Social skills are not merely behavioral competencies but involve emotional understanding, self-regulation, active listening, assertive communication, and perspective-taking. The *Shahnameh*-based intervention appears to have facilitated these processes by engaging children in emotionally meaningful narratives and collaborative activities that encouraged interaction, dialogue, and shared emotional experiences.

The improvement in social skills observed in this study may be explained through several psychological mechanisms. First, the ritual recitation process created a structured and emotionally safe environment in which children were encouraged to express feelings, listen to others, and participate in group discussions. Such interactive settings likely enhanced children's verbal communication and interpersonal confidence. Previous studies have similarly emphasized that interventions promoting social communication and pragmatic engagement contribute significantly to improved social functioning among children (Hage et al., 2021). In the present study, children were repeatedly exposed to opportunities for collaborative

storytelling, role-playing, emotional discussion, and group participation, all of which may have strengthened their communication competencies.

Second, the symbolic and narrative structure of the *Shahnameh* stories likely facilitated children's social learning through identification with heroic and moral characters. Narrative learning theories suggest that children acquire social and ethical understanding by observing and internalizing behaviors represented in stories and symbolic narratives. Through repeated engagement with themes such as loyalty, cooperation, justice, courage, and helping others, children may gradually integrate these values into their own interpersonal behaviors. This interpretation aligns with previous findings indicating that expressive and creative interventions can enhance social engagement and interpersonal adaptation through emotionally meaningful symbolic experiences (Hu et al., 2021; Mehl et al., 2021).

The findings related to empathy were particularly notable, as the intervention produced a very strong effect on children's empathic capacities. Empathy involves both emotional resonance with others and cognitive understanding of others' experiences. The *Shahnameh* poems and stories appear to have provided emotionally rich scenarios that encouraged children to reflect upon the emotions, motivations, and struggles of literary characters. Such processes may strengthen both affective and cognitive empathy by promoting emotional imagination and perspective-taking. Previous research has similarly emphasized the importance of emotionally engaging interventions for developing empathy and social understanding among children (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019; Stiles-Shields et al., 2021).

The strong effect of the intervention on empathy may also be interpreted through the role of emotional immersion in literary experiences. Poetry and storytelling possess unique psychological properties that allow individuals to emotionally identify with fictional characters and situations. Unlike direct behavioral instruction, poetic narratives engage imagination, symbolism, and emotional reflection simultaneously. This multidimensional engagement likely allowed children to process emotional concepts more deeply and personally. Artistic and expressive therapeutic approaches have similarly demonstrated substantial effects on emotional processing and psychological adaptation (Hu et al., 2021; Kai et al., 2022). The present findings extend this literature by suggesting that ritual literary recitation grounded in cultural heritage can also function as a powerful emotional learning tool.

Another important explanation for the observed findings concerns the collective and ritualistic nature of the intervention. Ritual group activities often enhance emotional synchronization, interpersonal cohesion, and social belongingness. Children participating in shared recitation and storytelling activities may develop stronger emotional bonds with peers and become more attentive to others' emotional expressions and experiences. Group discussions and collaborative exercises likely further strengthened these interpersonal dynamics. Prior literature has emphasized that social-emotional interventions are particularly effective when they involve active participation, emotional engagement, and cooperative interaction (Moody & Laugeson, 2020; West & Silverman, 2021). The present intervention incorporated all of these elements through culturally meaningful poetic experiences.

The findings of the current study are also consistent with broader literature highlighting the psychosocial benefits of art-based and expressive interventions. Research on painting therapy and art therapy has demonstrated reductions in negative emotions, improvements in emotional regulation, and enhanced psychological adjustment among children and adults (Kai et al., 2022; Nazaire, 2020). Similarly, artistic interventions have been shown to facilitate emotional resilience and adaptive coping in medical and psychological contexts (Koom et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2016). Although the current study focused specifically on ritual poetry recitation rather than visual arts, both approaches share important characteristics, including symbolic expression, emotional engagement, imagination, and reflective processing. These shared mechanisms may explain why expressive literary interventions can positively influence empathy and social functioning.

The present findings also support theoretical perspectives emphasizing the relationship between emotional competence and social adjustment. Children who can recognize and understand emotions are generally

more capable of maintaining positive interpersonal relationships and engaging in effective communication. Previous research has shown that deficits in social competence are associated with loneliness, anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019; Wolstencroft & Skuse, 2019). By strengthening empathic understanding and emotional awareness, the *Shahnameh*-based intervention may have indirectly improved children's confidence and effectiveness in social interactions.

An important aspect of the present study is its emphasis on cultural relevance in psychological interventions. Many conventional social skills programs are derived primarily from Western educational models and may not fully reflect local cultural narratives or values. In contrast, the use of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* allowed children to engage with culturally familiar themes, symbols, and moral frameworks. Cultural congruence likely increased children's emotional connection to the material and enhanced the intervention's educational impact. The incorporation of indigenous literary heritage into psychosocial interventions may therefore represent an important direction for culturally sensitive educational psychology.

The findings also suggest that literary and artistic interventions may complement existing social-emotional learning programs within schools. Traditional educational systems often prioritize academic achievement while devoting less attention to emotional literacy, empathy, and interpersonal skills. However, contemporary psychological research increasingly recognizes that social-emotional competencies are essential for long-term academic success, mental health, and social adaptation. The present study demonstrates that literary-based interventions can effectively contribute to these developmental goals while simultaneously promoting cultural appreciation and ethical reflection.

Another noteworthy implication of the findings concerns the role of imagination and creativity in psychological development. The *Shahnameh* stories encouraged children to engage in imaginative thinking, role-playing, emotional exploration, and symbolic interpretation. Such experiences likely enhanced emotional flexibility and cognitive perspective-taking. Previous studies have similarly suggested that creative and expressive activities promote emotional awareness and social understanding by allowing individuals to explore complex interpersonal experiences in symbolic forms (Hu et al., 2021; Mehl et al., 2021). The current findings therefore reinforce the educational value of integrating imaginative literary experiences into child development programs.

Moreover, the findings may be interpreted within social learning theory. Children often learn social behaviors by observing models and internalizing observed interactions. The heroes and moral figures represented in the *Shahnameh* provided symbolic role models demonstrating courage, compassion, loyalty, and ethical responsibility. Through repeated exposure to these narratives, children may have gradually adopted similar interpersonal attitudes and emotional responses. This process likely contributed to the observed improvements in empathy and social communication.

The effectiveness of the intervention may also reflect the multidimensional structure of the sessions themselves. The program combined poetry recitation, emotional discussion, group interaction, role-playing, storytelling, drawing activities, and ethical reflection. Such multimodal engagement likely stimulated emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral processes simultaneously. Interventions that address multiple developmental domains are often more effective than narrowly focused instructional approaches because they allow children to integrate learning across emotional and interpersonal contexts.

Overall, the findings of the present study provide strong support for the psychological and educational value of ritual poetry recitation based on Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. The intervention not only improved children's communication abilities and interpersonal functioning but also significantly enhanced empathic understanding and emotional sensitivity. These results suggest that culturally grounded literary interventions may serve as effective tools for promoting psychosocial development during childhood while simultaneously strengthening children's connection to cultural heritage and ethical values.

One of the limitations of the present study was the relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of elementary school children. In addition, the study

was conducted within a single geographical region, and cultural, educational, or socioeconomic differences across other regions may influence the effectiveness of the intervention. Another limitation was the reliance on self-report and questionnaire-based assessments, which may be affected by response biases or social desirability. Furthermore, the absence of long-term follow-up prevented the evaluation of the stability and durability of the intervention effects over time.

Future research is recommended to examine the long-term effects of *Shahnameh*-based ritual poetry interventions on children's emotional and social development through longitudinal designs. Researchers may also compare the effectiveness of poetry recitation with other expressive and creative interventions such as music therapy, drama therapy, storytelling programs, or visual arts education. Expanding the sample to include different age groups, cultural settings, and clinical populations could provide broader insight into the applicability of this intervention. In addition, future studies may investigate the mediating role of emotional regulation, cultural identity, or moral reasoning in explaining the relationship between literary interventions and social-emotional outcomes.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that educational institutions and child development centers may benefit from integrating culturally grounded literary activities into psychosocial education programs. School counselors, psychologists, and educators can utilize *Shahnameh*-based poetry recitation sessions to promote empathy, communication skills, cooperation, and emotional awareness among children. Teacher training programs may also incorporate methods for using literary narratives and poetic activities to strengthen classroom relationships and emotional learning. Furthermore, parents and community cultural centers may employ storytelling and poetry-based activities to foster positive interpersonal values and social adjustment in children within both family and educational environments.

### **Moral standards**

In the present study, the ethical principles related to qualitative researches were observed.

### **Acknowledgments**

We hereby thank all those who contributed to this research.

### **Contribution of authors**

In this research, each of the authors had a share in collecting the theoretical and research background, and the author was responsible for the initial writing of the article, analysis, writing and editing of the final article.

Conflict of interest There was no conflict of interest in this research.

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