



Original Research Article

Unboxing the bento: An arts-informed inquiry into Japanese families' experience at school lunchtime in Canada

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Abstract

Bento, a Japanese-style boxed lunch, has a distinct cultural meaning for Japanese people as a medium of affective communication between children and parents. However, in Canadian schools governed by the dominant food norms, their culinary practices may stand out. This study employed an arts-informed participatory design to explore how school-aged children (6-12 years old) of Japanese origin and their parents describe their experience bringing Japanese food to school in Toronto, Canada. We conducted arts-informed workshops with 16 children who created artworks about their lunch boxes, and focus groups with 19 parents (all mothers). Children's artworks illuminated a common aesthetic about "good" lunch that closely reflected mothers' commitment to preparing nutritionally balanced and aesthetically appealing *bento*. Both children and mothers reported that the Canadian school food environment (e.g., short eating periods, snack times, built environment) sometimes misaligned with their food practices. Some families were compelled to modify their *bento* to accommodate children's needs to fit in at school. At the same time, participants' narratives indicate the prevalence of stigma toward "junk" food that may perpetuate food shaming at school. A more inclusive, diverse, and culturally appropriate discussion on "healthy eating" at school can embrace children's and their families' intercultural food identities.

Keywords: Bento; school food environment; food culture mismatch; family food practice; migration

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Introduction

With the growing public concern over the so-called “childhood obesity epidemic” (Moffat, 2010), children’s food experience at school has attracted increasing attention from nutrition and public health professionals. The school environment is recognized as an important site of intervention where healthy eating and physical activity are systematically promoted to protect children from the “obesogenic” environments to which they are exposed (Sanigorski et al., 2005). In schools across the world where many students bring packed lunches from home, the contents of their lunch boxes have become subject to increasing scrutiny. Nutrition research on home-packed lunches in Canada (Neilson et al., 2016; Tugault-Lafleur et al. 2017), the U.S. (Hubbard et al., 2014), the U.K., (Evans et al., 2010), and Australia (Sanigorski et al., 2005) commonly claim that children’s lunch boxes tend to contain energy-dense, nutrient-poor, packaged foods, and are generally less nutritious than school-provided meals (Rogers et al., 2007).

While public health and popular media discourses rely heavily on nutrition-based judgements that construct some foods as “good” or “bad,” “healthy” or “unhealthy” according to nutrient values, how people make their everyday food choices are much more complex than this binary logic. Critical food scholarship has demonstrated that families make their food choices according to their socioeconomic status, social and geographical locations, and unique “cultural logics” (Beagan et al., 2015, p. 9) shaped by their culinary traditions and local food environment (Chapman & Beagan, 2013; Sawyer et al., 2020). As part of these rich, immersive cultural logics, migration has considerable impact on what and how families eat and feed their children. Research has documented how food can be integral for migrant families in maintaining their emotional ties to home and sustaining culinary identities across generations (Chapman & Beagan, 2013; Beagan et al., 2015; Lv & Brown, 2010).

As a meal to be consumed outside the home, children’s school lunches occupy a unique place in migrant families’ food practices. Children’s lunch boxes are often “balanced culturally rather than nutritionally” (Metcalfe et al., 2008, p. 405) reflecting competing influences of family food traditions, household resources, personal tastes and intra-family dynamics. In their study with migrant parents in the U.K., Harman and Cappellini (2018) documented that some parents consider children’s home-packed lunches as a bridge between home and school, through which parents can expand their effort to preserve their family’s culinary identities. Yet other parents felt compelled to adapt to the foodways of the host country due to the limited availability of and access to food items from “home.” Blanchet and colleagues (2018) also note that the rigidity around Canadian school food environments—such as short eating periods, restrictive eating settings, and the absence of microwave ovens—does not accommodate diverse food practices, forcing some migrant families to abandon their preferred ways of feeding children.

Along with the experience of adults who pack children's lunches for school, it is reported that children sometimes experience "food culture mismatch" between home and school food environments (Agaronov et al., 2019).

Children whose home-packed lunches do not align with dominant food norms may feel conspicuous, embarrassed, or ostracized during school lunchtime (Blanchet et al., 2018; Tanner et al., 2019). Media anecdotes suggest the prevalence of lunchtime shaming in Canada among children from cultural minority backgrounds that propelled some of them to stop bringing their favourite foods to school (Kwong, 2018). Schools that promote mainstream food norms may also contribute to potential food culture mismatch that can fuel inequality. Karrebæk (2012) In her study of lunch boxes in a Danish primary school, Karrebæk (2012) observes that teachers' understanding of "healthy" food is closely intertwined with the ideals of the superiority of the dominant culinary culture. Treating a traditional Danish bread as nutritionally superior to other food items brought by students from non-Danish backgrounds, the school reinforces children's and families' acceptance of dominant food norms while ostracizing other food practices as the sign of cultural disintegration.

Culturally dominant foodways have a strong influence on school food environments. In the province of Ontario, where this study took place, school nutrition guidelines are determined at the provincial level, based on Canada's national Food Guide (Government of Canada, 2019). The Food Guide is also incorporated into the health and physical education curriculum in public schools across Ontario to promote healthy eating at school. As Canada currently lacks a national school food program, many children bring home-packed lunches to school every day. Encouraging families to involve children in packing lunches, the Food Guide provides a "Healthy School Lunch" video, in which a teenage boy prepares his own lunch for school (Government of Canada, 2020). His lunch consists of a chicken wrap ("main lunch"), yogurt with fruit, and vegetable sticks for morning and afternoon snacks. What the Food Guide alludes to is that at Canadian schools, lunch is generally considered to be a light, cold meal, such as sandwiches and wraps, that can be consumed quickly between classes. To ensure that children can obtain enough nutrients, it is recommended to add "healthy on-the-go snacks" to the main meal (Government of Canada, 2020). The lunch-plus-snacks routine, quick mealtime, and eating on-the-go are dominant food practices that govern Canadian school food environments.

To date, very little research has been conducted in Canada about children's food experience at school and how families from non-dominant cultural backgrounds maintain, change, or modify their everyday food practices in relation to their children's experience at school. As children's food environment at school can have strong, reverberating impacts on the entire family food practice (Blanchet et al., 2018; Harman and Cappellini, 2018; Tanner et al., 2019), exploring the experiences of children and their families around school lunch offers a meaningful contribution to the growing body of research focusing on the intersectionality of children's multiple food environments (Agaronov et al., 2019; Baines & MacIntyre, 2019; Hansen & Kristensen, 2017). This paper reports findings from our arts-informed qualitative study with Japanese children and their families in Toronto, Canada.

We were particularly interested in the meanings children and families ascribe to home-packed lunches for school, children's experience at school lunchtime, and how potential food culture mismatch experienced by the children may impact family food practices at home.

Bento and Japanese food education

In Japan, *bento* (boxed lunch) refers to a portable, packaged meal that is usually eaten at lunch. A traditional *bento* has multiple compartments to hold different types of food such as rice, vegetables, and meat or fish dishes to serve a wholesome meal on the go. *Bento* is often considered a medium of intimate communication between a mother and her child, especially for most preschoolers who bring home-packed *bento* for lunch. Allison (1991), in her ethnographic research into *bento* for Japanese nursery school children, argues that *bento* preparation is a form of ideological state apparatus for both Japanese mother and her preschool child. For the mother, preparing a nutritious and visually appealing *bento* every day for her child is interpreted as her active commitment to societal expectations that she be a 'good' mother. For the child, finishing the *bento* with no leftovers within the timed lunch period symbolizes his/her conformity to group rules and membership.

While *bento* has traditionally had a distinct cultural meaning for people of Japanese origin, its social function was revitalized around the turn of the 21st century with the surge of political interest in citizens' everyday food practices. In 2005, the Japanese government enacted *Shokuiku Kihon Hō* (the basic law on food education) to promote healthy eating habits, improve population health, and preserve traditional culinary culture through local food production and consumption (The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), 2005; Takeda et al., 2016). Along with the launch of the basic law of *shokuiku*, the MAFF (2005) created the Japanese Food Guide Spinning Top, a visual dietary guide that resembles a shape of a spinning top, a "well-known traditional Japanese toy," to "remind people of the importance of maintaining optimal balance in their diets" (MAFF, 2005, p. 6). The Food Guide presents a rotating inverted cone divided into four food category layers, with grain dishes on the top, followed by vegetable dishes, fish and meat dishes, and milk (dairy products) and fruits equally apportioned on the bottom-most layer. Snacks, confections and beverages are deemed "non-essential treats," (MAFF, 2005, p. 7) and are presented outside the cone as the string attached to the spinning top. The string carries the message: "enjoy snacks, confections and beverages moderately" (MAFF, 2005, p. 7). A salient characteristic of this food guide is that recommended servings are illustrated using specific dishes, mostly Japanese homemade cuisine, rather than individual food items or ingredients.

Within the *shokuiku* discourse, the home is depicted as an important locus of policy implementation along with schools and childcare facilities. MAFF (2005) wrote that "we believe *shokuiku* as a national movement will ultimately have achieved its goals when every individual takes proper dietary actions in his or her home, in the communities and in other places" (p. 3).

As Takeda et al. (2016) aptly contend, such policy discourses shape family meals and home-cooking as an ideal past that has been lost from contemporary Japanese society.

Through the *shokuiku* discourse, the link between home-cooking and ‘good,’ traditional eating at home was portrayed as a moral imperative (Mah, 2010). ‘Good’ Japanese citizens are thus obliged to discipline their eating at home to improve not only their own health but that of their families and the nation, while playing their part to preserve the national culinary tradition. The nostalgic idealization of family meals and home-cooking is highly gendered, in that it justifies the conservative image of the traditional, heterosexual, middle-class family, including the male breadwinner and female homemaker dyad. In her feminist analysis of the *shokuiku* campaign, Kimura (2011) suggests that the *shokuiku* discourse has revitalized a culturally scripted feminine ideal of ‘good’ homemaker (mother/wife) that normalizes women’s roles and responsibility in feeding, cooking, and preparation of food for their families.

As the *shokuiku* discourse has prevailed in Japanese society, *bento* for young children has become a site of public health intervention. Several studies have been conducted to improve mothers’ food literacy using the Spinning Top food guide and similar educational materials (e.g., Tatano & Yamada, 2012; Ogamo et al., 2014), to ensure *shokuiku* can be implemented at home even “in the absence of a school nutritionist” (Kigawa et al., 2012, p. 215). *Bento*-making is also recognized as one of the “superior examples of *shokuiku* activity” for students (MAFF, 2005, p. 10). In 2003, a local elementary school won the MAFF’s “Local *Shokuiku* Activity Competition” for the monthly *Obento* Day initiative, in which students prepared their own *bento* without help from their parents and brought their results to school once a month (MAFF, 2005). Within the *shokuiku* campaign, *bento* has become a symbolic cultural artifact that embodies lessons as to how food should appear, be arranged, and be eaten.

Given the established *bento* culture and recent political emphasis on home cooking in Japan, the experience of Japanese families in Canada offers an interesting case study to examine how migrant families navigate through school food environments that are different from that of their ‘home.’

Methods

This study employed an arts-informed qualitative interview as the data collection method to explore children’s experiences at school lunchtime. Collaborative art making through drawing and collage was chosen to stimulate children’s creativity, engage them in group discussion about their lived experiences, and promote their agency and autonomy as active knowledge creators and users. Our methodological approach aligns with critical early childhood and youth researchers (Clark, 2017; Lomax, 2015) in that we aimed to conduct collaborative research *with* children, as opposed to research *on* children.

The use of visual elicitation method was also inspired by recent food studies with children and youth that employed a variety of arts-informed methods such as photovoice (Tanner et al., 2019) and draw-and-tell (Blanchet et al., 2017) to acquire an in-depth understanding of children's and their families' experiences.

Participants and recruitment

All participants were recruited from the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (TCMA), which has the second largest population of Canadians of Japanese origin after Vancouver. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, those who self-identify their ethnicity as Japanese¹ comprise 0.4 percent of the TCMA population, which is approximately 20,650 people (Statistics Canada, 2017). There are two large Japanese groups in Canada, consisting of the generational Japanese whose ancestors immigrated to Canada before World War II, and *shin-ijūsha* (“new immigrants” in Japanese), those who settled in Canada during the 1960s and 1970s and their descendants. *Shin-ijūsha* also includes a small number of people who moved to Canada upon marriage to Canadians and those who came to Canada for work or study, and eventually settled as Canadian citizens or permanent residents (Sakamoto et al., 2016). It is worth noting that historically women have dominated the Japanese *shin-ijūsha* population² (Lindsay, 2007). For example, among the 5,715 *shin-ijūsha* who settled in the TCMA between 2011 and 2016, women comprised 67% (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Prior to the recruitment, the study received ethics approval from our institutional review board. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a convenience sampling strategy was employed. We posted the study flyer in an online parenting group for Japanese families in the TCMA with support from the group organizers. The paper version of the study flyer was also distributed at four Saturday Japanese language schools across the TCMA. Study participants were asked to share the study information with those who may be eligible for the research. In order to ensure that eligible children would understand the study and make an informed decision, we also presented the recruitment information through an animated video. Most child participants informed us that they had watched the recruitment video with their family members and understood the study requirements before making a voluntary decision to participate in the study.

¹ The Japanese population in Canada is known to have an “astonishingly high” mixed-ethnic/mixed-race marriage and civil unions rate, as high as 78.7% in 2014 (Sakamoto et al., 2016). This may contribute to the fact that Canadians with Japanese ethnic origins do not necessarily self-identify as belonging to Japanese ethnic group or the visible minority group.

² One of the potential reasons for this is the fact that a relatively large number of Japanese women have moved to Canada under the family class, sponsored by a Canadian citizen or permanent resident, and were granted their permanent resident status on the basis of their relationship with the spouse, partner, parent, child, or other family class sponsor. According to 2016 Canadian Census, between 1991 to 2016, about 60% of female Japanese newcomers who gained permanent residency were sponsored by family members (Statistic Canada, 2016).

While participation of a child-parent dyad was welcomed, it was not required that both child and parent from the same household take part in the study together. Children were included in this study if they: (1) were 6 to 12 years old (grades 1 to 6); (2) had at least one parent who is a first-generation or second-generation Japanese immigrant to Canada or a temporary visa holder; and (3) had experience bringing Japanese food to school for lunch. There was no criterion related to the birthplace of children. Parents were included if they: (1) had at least one child aged 4 to 18 (grades K to 12); (2) were a first- or second-generation Japanese immigrant to Canada or a temporary visa holder; and (3) had experience packing Japanese food in their child's lunches for school. Common eligibility criteria applied to both child and parent participants were residency in the TCMA and ability to communicate in English or Japanese. Informed written consent and assent were obtained from participating parents and children. Inspired by recent discussions around participatory visual research with children and youth (Lomax, 2015), we employed a two-stage consent process, in which participants consented to: (1) take part in the research prior to the data collection; and (2) allow images of themselves and their artworks to be used for knowledge mobilization. The secondary consent was sought during the member checking process described below.

Data collection

Participating children were invited to join one of two art workshops co-facilitated by the lead author (YS) and a visual artist from a Japanese background. Children were asked to create art pieces about their lunch boxes, focusing on the Japanese food items they brought to school. Coloured papers, tissues, textiles, magazine pages, coloured pencils, markers, and other arts-and-crafts supplies were provided to stimulate the children's creativity. At the beginning of the workshop, the artist briefly demonstrated a technique of collage and offered support to children with drawing, collage, or other artmaking throughout the workshop. The art workshops and children's artworks were photographed with participants' assent and parental consent. Prior to the art workshop, parents/guardians of participating children were asked to answer a short demographic questionnaire about their children.

Following artmaking, children were invited to join a group discussion to talk about the art pieces they made and their experience at school lunchtime. At each workshop, two group discussions with three to four children each were conducted in Japanese and English for children to choose the language with which they were most comfortable. A series of brief prompts for discussion were prepared to facilitate the discussion to explore how the children perceived their school lunchtime, the role of parents in [the making of] their lunch boxes, and what they considered to be a "good" lunch. A total of four group discussions (two in English and two in Japanese) were conducted and each discussion lasted about 30 to 45 minutes.

Along with children's focus groups, the voices of parents were captured via focus group interviews.

Parent focus groups were facilitated in Japanese as per participant preference by the lead author (YS) and a bilingual research assistant (CTR). Prior to the data collection, parent participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire about their demographic background. A total of four focus groups (one to one-and-a-half hours each) took place with four to six participants each.

Data analysis

All focus group discussions (both children and parent groups) were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in the language in which they were conducted by the research assistants who conducted the focus groups (LR and CTR) and cross-checked by the lead author (YS) against the audio recordings. The bilingual research assistant (CTR) translated Japanese transcripts into English and the lead author validated the translation. Three research team members (YS, LR, CTR) then individually viewed and/or read multiple data generated from this study, including focus group transcripts, photographs of art workshops and children's artworks, fieldnotes documented during the workshops and focus groups, and meeting minutes from research team debriefs. Children's artworks were analyzed as supplementary material to know better about the children's experience at school lunchtime. In children's focus groups, we documented the ways in which the children discussed their artworks and used that documentation as data.

A preliminary set of codes was inductively generated and revised as needed to assist with the analysis. During the analytic process, we also wrote and compared analytic memos (Saldaña, 2015) to reflect on our analytic process and discussed potential themes within the team. Through repeated engagement with visual and textual data, we moved across different data types to identify recurrent patterns and documented where there were resonances or contradictions (e.g., between children's artworks and accounts of the parents). Finally, the lead author consolidated the team's analysis and mapped conceptual links among codes into a thematic schema for member checking.

Member checking and secondary consent for image use

At the completion of the preliminary analysis, all participants received a short summary report of the findings along with an animated video that contained photographs of children taken at the art workshops and their artworks. All participants (both children and parents) in the photographs were asked to provide the secondary consent and assent to use the images for knowledge mobilization. Along with the written summary and video, participants also received a link to an anonymous online feedback form that asked their feedback on the preliminary findings.

Three children and five parent participants contributed their feedback, which was then integrated into the final analysis.

Results

Participant demographics

During the month of January 2020, we conducted two arts-informed focus groups with a total of 16 children, and four focus groups with a total of 19 parents. The age of participating children ranged from 6 to 12 years old (Mean=8.75 years old). Eleven were girls (68.8%), half of them were born in Canada (50%), and all were attending public schools in the TCMA. Among the participants, three sibling dyads were present. As for parent focus groups, all 19 participants were mothers, although we intentionally used gender-neutral terms during the recruitment process (i.e., “parents or guardians”). Among the parent participants, 11 joined with their children (57.9%). All parents were born in Japan, of which 16 (84.2%) were *shin-ijūsha* (first generation immigrants) and three were temporary visa holders (15.8%). The year of residence in Canada among the 16 immigrants ranged from 5 to 19 years with an average of 15.2 years. Ten of 19 participants (52.6%) reported co-parenting with a partner from a non-Japanese cultural background.

Thematic findings

Our thematic analysis generated two overarching themes related to children’s and their families’ experiences at Canadian schools: (1) **bento as a conduit of Japanese food values**; and (2) **food culture mismatch**. In what follows we describe each theme and subtheme along with illustrative quotes from focus group interviews.

Theme 1: Bento as a conduit of Japanese food values

When asked what foods they usually bring to school for lunch, many child participants reported their lunch boxes tend to reflect a Japanese ideal of a **nutritionally balanced and visually appealing meal** (subtheme 1) that consists of a staple (mainly steamed rice), main dish (mainly meat), and side dishes (vegetables). While some children reported bringing non-Japanese style lunches such as sandwiches or pasta, most of them said that their typical lunchboxes contained steamed rice and Japanese home dishes cooked just for lunch or the prior night’s dinner leftovers that are Japanese home meals. One mother described the Japanese school lunch program she grew up with as “the dream lunch”:

“The dream lunch would be the Japanese school lunch, but I can't copy that. Protein, carbohydrate, lots of vegetables. Balanced and different food items every day. [...] It allows kids to eat what they don't eat at home too. Such an ideal lunch.” (Parent 14)

In the absence of an “ideal” school lunch program, mothers strived to provide their children with adequate nutrients through homemade lunches. They described that at least four or five different food items should be present in an ideal lunchbox to ensure a balanced ratio of carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, and minerals. Mothers had a very clear idea of what they considered an unhealthy lunch. Foods that contain “salty and strong flavour” and “processed foods with preservatives” are considered “bad stuff” (Parent 13) that should be avoided from children’s school lunches, while sufficient amounts of vegetables must be packed every day. Children echoed this view and described a “healthy lunch” containing: “vegetables and just like balance. Not junk food, not too much of anything” (Child 04). Accordingly, what mothers considered unhealthy lunches included sandwiches, because “they don't have enough vegetables” (Parent 06) and thus lack basic nutrients that should be covered in a good lunch.

Along with the importance of nutritionally balanced meals, mothers placed a significant emphasis on colours and visual appeal present in children’s *bento*. For mothers, packing colourful food items signified not only serving children a balanced meal with proper nutrients, but also increasing the visual appeal of the meal, believed to boost their child’s appetite.

“The Japanese are said to eat with their eyes, right? That’s why I pay attention to colour balance when packing *bento* for my child.” (Parent 12)

Making a colourful lunch is also closely linked to mothers’ self-perception. Even mothers of children “who would eat anything” expressed their commitment to prepare colourful lunches every day.

“I try to prepare a colourful *bento* for my kids, quite frankly, for my self-satisfaction. Whenever I make a brown, monochrome lunch, I feel down... so I often add cherry tomatoes or (boiled) broccolis [to my child’s school lunches] for no reason but colour.” (Parent 09)

The children’s artworks (Figure 1) precisely reflected this value by presenting a variety of colourful Japanese food items, including white *onigiri* (rice ball) with black *nori* (seaweed), yellow *tamagoyaki* (rolled omelet), boiled broccoli or other green vegetables, and red cherry tomatoes that together indicate the prevalence of the lunch colour code.

Figure 1: Children’s artworks depicting their school lunchboxes



Along with the emphasis on nutritionally balanced, aesthetically appealing meals, another salient food value expressed by both children and mothers was the **no leftover** rule (subtheme 2). Many participating children commented that they were told by their parents (mainly mothers) to eat all foods in their *bento* and avoid throwing away leftovers unless there was a food safety concern or other justifiable reason.

While the rigidity of rules around lunch leftovers varied across families,³ most mothers mandated their children to eat their entire lunch before having an after-school snack or dinner.

“Mom says no snack without eating vegetables; no dinner without finishing lunch; no dessert without finishing dinner.” (Child 06).

One driver behind this rule is mothers’ determination to nip the bud of *sukikirai* (food fussiness) in their child. In the words of one mother, early childhood food habits “would impact one’s entire life, especially *sukikirai* (food fussiness)” (Parent 03) and as such, healthy eating habits need to be established during elementary school years through everyday food practice including school lunchtime. From this perspective, food items that a child does not yet like should be packed in school lunches, so as to eventually curb the child’s fussiness in food habits. This notion is closely associated with participants’ belief in the nutritional value of vegetables. Mothers reported making extra efforts to regularly pack vegetables in children’s *bento*; although many of them regularly consult with their children about which and how much vegetable should be added to their school lunch boxes, little resistance from children was tolerated at lunchtime. In focus groups, children named steamed broccolis and cherry tomatoes as two vegetables most frequently packed in their lunchbox. Although some expressed a dislike for these vegetables, they nonetheless eat them almost every day at lunch, eventually getting “used to the taste” (Child 03).

The no leftover rule goes in tandem with parents’ commitment to monitoring children’s nutritional well-being. Across all four parent focus groups, parents expressed that they felt appreciated when their children finished their lunches because this assures them that these last are receiving the planned-for nutrition.

“One day I packed a slightly big lunch for my older child who’s a picky eater, but she came home with an empty container. It turned out she threw food away... I was so shocked. I told her: ‘it’s okay if you can’t finish lunch, but don’t throw leftovers away. Make sure you bring it back home. I want to see how much food you ate that helps me understand how much food I should prep for dinner.’ Since then, she has brought lunch leftovers back home.” (Parent 08)

Additionally, the exhortation to eat all foods prepared reflects a Japanese cultural norm to avoid waste. One mother made reference to the *mottainai* (“it’s a shame to throw away”) mentality, to explain how she avoids wasting food by eating her child’s lunch leftovers (Parent 14). Many mothers expressed disagreement with “Canadian” norms around food waste.

³ During the member checking process, one mother anonymously commented that she does not ask her child to eat lunch leftovers at home. Although it is important to teach her child not to waste food, the mother noted that it is also concerning to make her child eat lunch leftovers that have sat in the lunchbox too long, which could pose a hazard to the child’s health.

“Canadians do not really care about food waste, right? They would tell their children things like ‘you can throw away foods if you don’t like them.’ I feel awkward about that.” (Parent 12)

From the focus groups, it became evident that both children and mothers considered **mothers as the guardians of Japanese culinary identity** (subtheme 3). All mothers took on the responsibility of family feeding and prefer to serve Japanese home meals to their family. Some mothers commented that they self-learned how to cook Japanese home meals after having children in Canada, so as to “feed [their] children properly” (Parent 05). A few mothers mentioned that their notion of “healthy” meals (i.e., nutritionally balanced and colourful meals) was informed by their mothers, as well as food education at school while growing up in Japan. Through everyday lunchbox making, these mothers hope to pass on Japanese culinary identity and a normative understanding of personal responsibilities for health to their children.

“[Through the lunch I pack] I want [my son] to get interested in eating, *shokuiku* and nutrition. I believe it helps him learn how to manage his health.” (Parent 13)

Accordingly, lunchbox making was almost exclusively the domain of the mothers. In parent focus groups, all but two mothers said they pack their children’s lunch every day, while these two participants reported they occasionally share the responsibility with the child’s father. One mother who co-parents with a non-Japanese partner commented:

“My husband sometimes packs children’s lunch to school, but he usually packs a hot dog in a bun, that’s all! I end up adding veggies [to my children’s lunchboxes], but kids only eat the hot dog and bun and don’t touch veggies at all... My husband doesn’t really care about nutrition. He says, ‘let kids eat what they want to eat.’” (Parent 10)

Most children endorsed that the food prepared by their mothers would always be more nutritionally balanced and “better” than that prepared by their fathers, and fathers tend to pack “unhealthy” food that would not please their mothers. In the words of one child:

“Sometimes daddy will be a bad boy and make spaghetti for lunch, even if we’re not supposed to eat it.” (Child 15)

A mother who co-parents with a European-Canadian partner mentioned that the partner supports her everyday effort to pack Japanese-style lunches for school, in comparison with his childhood experience in Canada.

“Because my partner grew up in Canada bringing typical Western lunches like sandwiches to school, he often tells my son that ‘you are so

lucky to have a mommy who really cares about you and makes a great lunch every morning.” (Parent 07)

Theme 2: Food culture mismatch

Participants reported that the Japanese food norms they embrace do not always align with Canadian school food environments. Both children and parents commented on the **limited available time and space** during Canadian school lunchtimes (subtheme 1), which is not conducive to children enjoying their meal comfortably. Most children in the focus groups reported that they often feel rushed to eat. As lunchtime is part of recess in many Canadian public schools—which includes time for traveling to the eating space, waiting in lines, and having to use the bathroom—children shared that their actual seated lunchtime was limited to 15 to 20 minutes. Some children also commented that lunch supervisors would punish students if they eat slowly:

“The slowest kid has to stay there [in the cafeteria] and take all the garbage home [...] If you don’t finish lunch on time, the whole class’s garbage becomes your responsibility to bring home.” (Child 10)

Another common challenge pointed out by many participants stemmed from a suboptimal eating environment at school. Some children commented that they eat lunch in a shared multi-purpose space such as a gymnasium that tends to be crowded, noisy and distracting. Others said they sometimes had to eat lunch in hallways using folding tables, due to the lack of dedicated eating space. Those children had to bring their chairs from their classroom and take them back after lunch, which further reduced their already short lunchtime. In order to adapt to the limited lunchtime and suboptimal eating environment, some children have requested that their mothers pack fewer food items in their lunch boxes.

“Sometimes my mom gives me huge lunches and all I think is ‘how am I supposed to finish this?’ I eat and eat and eat but it doesn’t go away and all I see is my friend with corn dogs who eats it so fast.” (Child 07)

A related theme around Canadian school food environments was the **dominant food norms** (subtheme 2) of cold lunches and the meal-plus-snacks routine. For Japanese mothers who wish to feed children through three wholesome meals, “snack” is not an essential component of the everyday diet and should not be prioritized over lunch. Many mothers interpreted “snack” as confections or treats, as expressed in the Japanese Spinning Top Food Guide (MFAA, 2005), rather than as light meals, as they are considered in mainstream Canadian food culture. From the mothers’ point of view, “healthy snack” sounds oxymoronic.

Although most mothers reported packing “healthy snacks” for children, such as sliced vegetables and fruits, the overarching contention was that snacks did not align with the Japanese ideal of a nutritionally balanced, wholesome meal, which would not require additional food to meet daily nutritional requirements. In this regard, some mothers unfavorably commented on food items served at snack programs in Canadian schools:

“My children’s school used to have a snack program that served kids a pack of chocolate milk every day. My daughters were happy, but I felt it was too much. Sometimes I was shocked to hear that [my older daughter] had two packs of chocolate milk in one day! That’s too much sugar and calories. I was glad when the school stopped the snack program.” (Parent 02)

Relatedly, pizza lunches at school frequently came up in parent focus groups as a contested topic. All mothers reported their children’s schools have monthly or by-weekly “pizza days” as part of schools’ fundraising initiatives. Some mothers did not mind their children occasionally enjoying a treat with their friends and were grateful for a day off from packing lunches. However, the general consensus was that a slice of cheese or pepperoni pizza from fast-food chains does not provide children with enough nutrients they need for their growth.

Some children and parents shared experiences of their lunchbox being subject to **food shaming** (subtheme 3). Japanese food items such as *nori* (black seaweed) or steamed rice sometimes received unwanted attention from classmates.

“When I brought *onigiri* (rice ball) to school for lunch, my friend thought I brought *sushi*. I told her it’s *onigiri*, not *sushi*, but she kept on calling it *sushi*. I don’t care, but my [Japanese] friend got teased for bringing *onigiri*, too. Kids in her class teased her like ‘*sushi, sushi*’ and her mom went to the school to complain.” (Child 06)

Children’s experience of being teased at school has varying impacts on family food practices. Some parents continued packing Japanese food regardless, while others acquiesced to their children’s requests and packed non-Japanese food items such as sandwiches and pasta.

“One day my daughter told me ‘Mom, rice is not good.’ One of her classmates told her ‘You are not allowed to bring rice [to school]’ and she believed that. We discussed this as not true, but it was bothersome and pitiful for her to be teased like that, so I asked her if she wanted to bring lunch similar to her peers. I think I have made less Japanese *bento* since then.” (Parent 08)

It is important to note that both children and parents also expressed negative views toward what others bring to school. When asked about their opinions of other children’s lunches, both groups frequently expressed **disdain towards “junk” foods** (subtheme 4).

“Junk” foods described by participants typically referred to foods that are high in sugar, salt, fat, and calories, and meals that are seen nutritionally unbalanced.

“My child recently asked me to buy a thermos (food jar). His friend brings *junk food* in a thermos, like canned soup or canned pasta, and my son thought he, too, can eat *junk food* if he gets a thermos.” (Parent 13)

Replicating parents’ concern about the lack of nutrients in non-Japanese style lunches, children discussed the lack of vegetables in the lunchboxes of their peers as well as the frequency of processed foods and sweets packed for lunch. Many children in the focus groups expressed puzzlement regarding their peers’ lunches, especially those who bring to school “unhealthy food like burgers, [...] like sandwiches that has a lot of junk in it” (Child 07), or those who “eat only chocolate croissant, pancakes, or yogurt for lunch” (Child 13). One of the children commented on the frequency of corn dogs in the lunch box of a classmate, which to him are not considered a proper meal, but instead as “junk” (Child 12). Intriguingly, children noted that their teachers would quickly intervene if there was culture-related food shaming in class, but comments on “junk foods” rarely attracted adults’ attention.

Discussion

Children’s home-packed lunches to school present multiple aspects of the family’s food traditions, social locations, culinary norms, values, and moral accountability. Our study revealed that children’s lunch boxes are a medium through which Japanese mothers pass on their culinary identity to their children growing up in Canada. Mothers in the present study described Japan as a place where healthy eating is intrinsic to their lifestyle and strived to preserve their culinary culture in the host land. They also considered that childhood food practice has a long-term impact on children and felt responsible for teaching their children “proper” eating habits and nutrition knowledge. By packing children’s *bento* every day, mothers are telling their children what makes up a “good” and “healthy” lunch, while continuing to teach “good” eating outside the home.

Concomitantly, most child participants internalized the mothers’ idea of a “healthy” lunch and moral imperative of not wasting food prepared for them. Their artworks and narratives eloquently suggested successful an intra-family transmission of the culinary values. The artmaking was invaluable to engaging children in focus group discussions. Through their artworks, the children made their experience palpable, supplemented their creation with their own words, and interacted with their peers and researchers, during which rich dialogues about school food environments took place. The arts-informed method also helped children contextualize abstract subjects such as healthy eating through their artworks.

We found it intriguing that children's narratives around school lunch, Japanese food culture, and healthy foods aligned very closely with that of mothers. During the member checking, one mother commented that it was rewarding to learn that her children understand and respect Japanese food values that she thinks are important.

In terms of parents' experience, our findings echo Harman and Capellini's (2015; 2018) study with mothers in the U.K., which illuminated lunch box making as a key aspect of mothering outside the home. All mothers who participated in our study, regardless of their employment status, reportedly played the lead role in preparing children's lunch boxes, while their partners (mainly the fathers of the children), from Japanese and non-Japanese backgrounds alike, left this role to the mothers. Within both mothers' and children's narratives, fathers were described as incapable of preparing a "good" lunch box that meets the mother's moral standards. In other words, children's *bento* at school is a cultural artifact that displays a gesture of "good" mothering (Harman & Capellini, 2015, 2018; Allison, 1991). Notably, more than half of the mothers (ten out of nineteen) reported co-parenting with a partner from a non-Japanese cultural background. Although the daily act of feeding children sometimes induces tensions in an intercultural household (Rogan et al., 2018), most mothers in our study continued Japanese culinary practices when packing their children's lunch boxes and generally received support from their partners.

In this regard, our findings differ from Blanchet et al.'s (2018) study with immigrant mothers from African or Caribbean origins, many of whom eventually stopped packing foods from their cultures in their children's school lunch boxes due to the lack of time, resources, and the children's preference for "Canadian food" (p. 231). Arguably, food security levels in the participants' household, availability of ingredients, affordability, and families' economic means to purchase culturally appropriate food items are among the significant determinants of whether migrant families retain their preferred food practices. But one potential factor unique to our participants is the culinary nationalism promoted by the *shokuiku* campaign, in which the Japanese dietary pattern developed in the 1980s is deemed scientifically validated, uniquely and constitutively Japanese, and superior to Westernized diets (Mah, 2010; Takeda, 2008). There was a strong alignment between the mothers' perceptions of "good" *bento* and food norms advocated by the *shokuiku* project, which focuses on consumer's food literacy and individual sense of morality. Many mothers deployed a rationale similar to *shokuiku* when describing how a colourful *bento* is not only aesthetically appealing but also nutritionally well-balanced and healthy, while prioritizing Japanese cuisine over a "Canadian" diet.

Nonetheless, both children and mothers reported "food culture mismatch" between home and school (Agaronov et al., 2019). The rigidity around eating time and settings, such as short lunchtimes and restrictive eating settings do not accommodate Japanese food practices that prioritize wholesome meals. Some participants shared a strong disagreement with the dominant Canadian eating habits, such as snack times and pizza days, which shapes Canadian school food environments.

Moreover, Japanese food items such as rice and *nori* occasionally received unwanted attention at Canadian schools, which compelled some mothers to stop serving their children Japanese-style *bento*.

Even though Japanese cuisine has been widely accepted in North America as one of “hallmarks of the contemporary American food culture” (Cwiertka, 2005, p. 256), Japanese home dishes are still conceived of as foreign and are Othered at Canadian schools. As food is closely tied to one’s identity, the experience of food culture mismatch, especially the bitter experience of lunchbox shaming at school, can have a substantial impact on children and their families’ emotional well-being (Tanner et al., 2019). Participant narratives alluded to factors such as family food norms, cultural demographics of schools, and classroom social dynamics, which could alleviate or aggravate the potential impact of food culture mismatch.

Migrant food experience in host countries have long been analyzed through the concept of dietary acculturation, the process by which migrants adopt or resist the eating patterns and food choices of their new environment (Satia-Abouta et al., 2002; Blanchet et al., 2018). However, recent works illuminate that existing conceptualizations of dietary acculturation might be too narrow to adequately capture the fluid and transnational experiences that migrants have in their host countries. Chapman and Beagan (2013) assert that culinary tradition is continually reconstituted, rather than remaining static, and individuals can hold attachment to and express the traditions of multiple national identities simultaneously (p. 381). Our findings add support to Chapman and Beagan’s discussion (2013) in that some mothers reportedly learned how to cook Japanese meals after having children in Canada. This turn to Japanese food practices has then more to do with *construction* of a cultural identity in Canada, rather than *maintenance* of traditional culinary identities. The meaning of “Japanese food” for migrant children and families is worth exploring further, in order to better understand how migrants develop their intercultural food identities.

It is also noteworthy that food shaming does not occur in one direction. The stigma toward “junk” food was prevalent across mothers’ and children’s narratives. The examples of “junk” food given by the participants included canned soup or pasta, corndogs, and chocolate, which are commonly packed in their schoolmates’ lunch boxes. The tendency among the children to pass judgment on what other children eat at school deserves closer attention, as shaming toward “junk” food reportedly resulted in fewer adult interventions than culture-related food shaming. Stigma associated with “unhealthy eating” may intersect with other stigmas associated with poverty, race, ethnicity, gender, obesity, among others, which can perpetuate food inequities (Earnshaw & Karpyn, 2020). As this study suggests, stigma toward “unhealthy eating” could be linked to a type of culinary ethnocentrism that prioritizes one food practice over the others. As Tanner et al. (2019) assert, the question of what and how food should be eaten at school is not just practical but also a political one, and thus requires careful interrogation.

Limitations

The small size and relative homogeneity of the participants should be noted as a study limitation. Despite our hope to recruit diverse adults who pack children's lunches for school, all participating parents were biological mothers raising children in nuclear families. Future study can take the method of maximum variation sampling to recruit diverse family members, for example, fathers, grandparents, or siblings who are responsible for packing children's lunch boxes for school. Relatedly, all participating mothers were *shin-ijūsha*, first-generation immigrants to Canada and temporary visa holders who grew up in Japan. The voices of generational Japanese were missing in our study, although food practices play a key role for Japanese Canadians in transmitting cultural legacy, despite the intergenerational trauma of wartime internment (Ikebuchi & Ketchell, 2020).

The demographic information gathered from the participating Japanese families was limited in scope. Some demographic data was asked of the participants, such as mothers' age, marital status, employment (i.e., full-time, part-time, unemployed), number of children, and co-parents' cultural background. However, other demographic data, such as household income, parental educational levels, and family social class, were not collected during the study. Subsequent studies may benefit from obtaining such demographic data to bolster the study results and deepen the understanding of participants' family backgrounds.

Moreover, it was beyond the scope of this study to examine family food practices outside the lunch box. Although most participants' narratives suggested that home food and food in lunch boxes generally fit together without major obstacles, further research would lead to a more nuanced understanding of how food is negotiated among family members, particularly in intercultural households. An in-depth, intersectional exploration into the impacts of food culture mismatch can help better understand children's experience at school and its potential impact on family food practices.

Lastly, it should be noted that the mothers' responses could have been influenced by social desirability bias. The researchers facilitating the parent's focus group were also women of Japanese background. The parental focus groups were facilitated in Japanese, as it was the language of preference selected by the Japanese mothers. As previously mentioned, Japanese societal expectations of a "good" mother particularly relate to her active commitment to providing balanced meals for her children. This could have influenced the responses of the mothers, as they may have felt that their responses should be consistent with the perceived expectations to avoid judgement from the researchers and other mothers.

Conclusion

Our study highlights the need for Canadian schools to acknowledge diverse food realities packed in children's school lunch boxes. Participants' narratives implied that Canadian school food systems do not always support their distinct food values. It is also evident that lunchbox preparation is tied closely with cultural norms of "healthy eating" and moral discourses of mothering. A more inclusive, intersectional, and culturally appropriate discussion on "healthy eating" at school can support children and families from diverse backgrounds to safely explore their food identities. At the same time, we believe that food should not become a taboo subject at school where children are afraid of offending one another. Instead, Canadian schools can offer an optimal space to help children be exposed to many different food cultures and learn how to negotiate social and emotional boundaries around their food identities. One potential starting point is to let children unpack their lunch boxes and explore how their lunches are prepared every day.

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