



Original Research Article

Balancing acts: Unpacking mothers' experiences and meanings of school lunch packing

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Abstract

While Canadian policy makers are considering expanding school food programs in Canada, parents remain primarily responsible for packing lunches. Although women perform disproportionate amounts of foodwork, including feeding their children on school days, little research has investigated mothers' experiences of packing school lunches in Canada. Drawing on fourteen interviews with mothers of elementary-aged children in British Columbia, this study explored how mothers experience and make meaning of packing school lunches. Mothers described lunch packing largely as an individualized responsibility for children's nutritional health and general wellbeing. Mothers strived to enact largely unattainable ideals about packing a "good" school lunch and engaged in diverse forms of physical, mental, and emotional labour to do so. When mothers were

perceived to fall short of these elusive lunch packing ideals, mothers judged themselves and other mothers, and they also reported feeling scrutinized by other parents, teachers, and their children. While assuming the bulk of labour related to school lunch work, mothers also forged connections with their children through lunch packing, which they viewed as emotionally meaningful and a symbol of their care, love, and parental responsibility. These findings show that mothers' experiences with lunch packing are complex and wrapped up in notions of "good" mothering and feeding ideals. For mothers, a "balanced" lunch requires not only a nutritionally adequate meal but also involves balancing various forms of labour and contradictory emotions about foodwork. Understanding mothers' experiences of lunch packing is pivotal for successfully developing

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school food programs that meet the complex expectations of Canadian families.

Keywords: School lunch; lunch packing; foodwork; carework; mothering; parental perceptions

Résumé

Alors que les décideurs politiques canadiens envisagent d'élargir les programmes d'alimentation scolaire au Canada, les parents sont encore les principaux responsables de la préparation des lunchs de leurs enfants. Bien que les femmes effectuent un nombre disproportionné de tâches alimentaires, y compris veiller à l'alimentation de leurs enfants durant leurs journées à l'école, peu de recherches ont porté sur l'expérience des mères en matière de préparation des dîners pour l'école au Canada. S'appuyant sur 14 entrevues avec des mères d'enfants d'âge primaire en Colombie-Britannique, cette étude a exploré la façon dont les mères vivent la préparation des repas pour l'école et y donnent un sens. Les mères ont décrit la préparation des repas en grande partie comme une responsabilité individuelle vis-à-vis de la santé nutritionnelle et du bien-être général de leurs enfants. Elles s'efforçaient d'appliquer d'inatteignables idéaux concernant la préparation d'un « bon » repas pour l'école et s'engageaient dans diverses formes de travail physique, mental et émotionnel pour y parvenir. Lorsque les mères étaient perçues comme n'atteignant pas ces idéaux inaccessibles, elles se jugeaient elles-

mêmes et jugeaient les autres mères ; elles ont aussi déclaré se sentir surveillées par les autres parents, les enseignants et leurs enfants. Tout en assumant la majeure partie du travail lié à la préparation des repas pour l'école, les mères ont également tissé des liens avec leurs enfants à travers ces tâches, ce qu'elles considéraient comme émotionnellement significatif et comme un symbole de leur attention, de leur amour et de leur responsabilité parentale. Ces résultats montrent que les expériences des mères en matière de préparation des repas sont complexes et s'inscrivent dans des notions de « bon » maternage et dans des idéaux en matière d'alimentation. Pour les mères, non seulement un lunch « équilibré » exige une qualité nutritionnelle adéquate, mais il implique aussi de trouver un équilibre entre diverses formes de travail et des émotions contradictoires concernant les tâches liées à l'alimentation. Il est crucial de comprendre l'expérience des mères quant à la préparation des lunchs si l'on veut concevoir avec succès des programmes d'alimentation scolaire qui répondent aux attentes complexes des familles canadiennes.

Introduction

Canadian children consume approximately one third of their total daily calories at school on weekdays (Tugault-

Lafleur et al., 2017). Regardless of socio-demographic background, very few Canadian children meet national

dietary recommendations either during or outside of school hours (Garriguet, 2007; Tugault-Lafleur et al., 2019). While recent estimates suggest that up to one in five Canadian students accesses some kind of free school breakfast, snack, or lunch (Ruetz & McKenna, 2022), Canada has been an outlier among wealthy countries, having no publicly funded national school food program (Koc & Bas, 2012). Parents are largely responsible for feeding children, who mostly eat school lunches and snacks brought from home (Carbone et al., 2018; Tugault-Lafleur et al., 2017). Yet, families across the socioeconomic spectrum report barriers to provisioning healthy school meals, including affordability, children's preferences, and time scarcity (Bauer et al., 2012; Engler-Stringer, 2009; Hawthorne et al., 2018; O'Rourke et al., 2020; Slater et al., 2012; Verdun, 2015).

Despite ongoing calls for upstream policy changes, including expansion of school meal programs to increase access to healthy food for children (Black et al., 2024; Hernandez et al., 2018; The Coalition for Healthy School Food, n.d.), Canadian strategies largely focus on parental responsibilities and feeding behaviours. For example, Canada's food guide (Government of Canada, 2021) and guidance from provincial governments and health authorities provide recommendations for improving parents' food skills to better nurture children's eating habits (HealthLink BC, 2017; Vancouver Coastal Health, 2020). Parent-focused media articles also commonly cultivate discourse on packing "healthy" or "perfect" school lunches (e.g., CBC News, 2012; Ross, 2019; Van Resendaal, 2020).

Framing mothers' school lunch packing as foodwork

Foodwork, which includes planning, shopping, preparation, cooking, and managing family eating experiences (Valentine, 1999), has historically been performed primarily by women. Feeding children has long been conceptualized as a principal component of mothering (DeVault, 1991), and women in North America continue to disproportionately perform foodwork (Beagan *et al.*, 2008; Koch, 2019; O'Connell & Brannen, 2016) and shoulder the expectations, pressures, judgements, stigmas, and emotional strain of feeding families (Beagan et al., 2008; Bowen et al., 2014, 2019; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; DeVault, 1999; Hochschild, 1989; Oleschuk, 2020). Women remain responsible for "the mental and manual labour of food provisioning" (Allen & Sachs, 2007, p.1) as part of the "second shift" at home, often following other paid work outside the home (Hochschild, 1989). But mothers' foodwork is not simply work. It is a way of

performing femininities and classed notions of "good" mothering and child rearing (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Cappellini et al., 2018; O'Connell & Brannen, 2016; Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al., 2010).

Mothers in neoliberal societies are deemed responsible for teaching their children to "eat right" and protecting children's current and future health through individual consumer choices and feeding practices (e.g., Brenton, 2014; Patico, 2020; Power, 2016). Scholars have described how mothers are positioned as "guardians of health" (Beagan et al., 2008) or "the moral and physical guardians of the next generation" (Burman & Stacey, 2010, p.229), and health interventions often target mothers as foci of health education and behaviour change (e.g., Amend, 2018; Gruber & Haldeman, 2008; Lindsay et al., 2006). Neoliberal ideology places responsibility for health on the individual and emphasizes privatized market

solutions to social problems, increasing parental expectations and pressures around feeding. This intensified what Hays (1996) coined “intensive mothering,” an approach that is “child-centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive” (p.8). Intensive mothering ideology constructs the “good mother” as one who is “selflessly devoted to her children and who expends substantial resources, time, and emotional labour toward their nurturing and development” (Cairns & Johnston, 2015, p.69). Lareau’s (2011) work reveals class distinctions, showing that middle- and upper-middle-class parents adopt “concerted cultivation,” which views child rearing as a project, reflects middle-class ideals of good mothering, and entails financially- and labour-intensive approaches to inculcate children with specific tastes, habits, and skills. Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of habitus explains how different class backgrounds produce different tastes, habits, and preferences, and theorizes that middle-class socialization involves raising children who embody “good taste.”

Research aims

While most Canadian children rely on school lunches packed at home, little is understood about how mothers of elementary school-aged children experience and make meaning of this foodwork in a society that places

Methods

Participants were recruited primarily through school- and parenting-related social media groups in a suburban school district in British Columbia, Canada’s westernmost province, where a new district-wide school lunch program was recently introduced (in 2019).

North American research finds that middle-class parents in particular, motivated by concern for health, make efforts to socialize their children into a habitus of “good,” diverse, and sophisticated tastes through concerted cultivation and intensive feeding practices (e.g., Backett-Milburn et al., 2010; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Patico, 2020; Wills et al., 2011). Previous research on the practical, moral, and emotional aspects of mothers’ foodwork (e.g., Brenton, 2014; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Graham et al., 2021; Oleschuk, 2020; Patico, 2020; Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al., 2010; Slater et al., 2012; Wills et al., 2011) finds that the weight of perceived personal responsibility for children’s health, body size, and nutrition outcomes can result in feelings of anxiety, shame, self-blame, and frustration for mothers across different social classes who struggle to live up to elusive feeding ideals (e.g., Bowen et al., 2019; Brenton, 2014; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Friedman, 2015; Patico, 2020; Wright et al., 2015).

responsibility for children’s feeding and nutrition on parents, and on mothers in particular. Therefore, this study explored mothers’ experiences, perceptions, and meanings of school lunch packing.

Parents or primary caregivers to at least one child in kindergarten through grade five in the school district of interest were eligible to participate. Parents of children in this age range were prioritized as parents of elementary school-aged students play a significant role

in making decisions about school lunch and are more actively involved compared to parents of older children, but they have received little empirical research attention in Canada. An online screening survey determined participants' eligibility. Eligible participants were contacted by email with study information, consent forms, and interview scheduling details. While study recruitment was open to parents of all gender identities (as well as all ethnicities, household compositions, and ages), all participants identified as women. Thus, our initial focus on parents shifted to mothers, aligning with existing literature about the gendered nature of foodwork. Ethics approval was granted by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

An interview guide was developed based on relevant concepts from the literature and emerging findings from related research about this school district's lunch program (Black et al., 2020; Elliott & Black, 2020). The guide was refined based on insights from three pilot interviews (data from which were not included in the analysis) and as data collection and analysis ensued. Interviews opened with an introduction to the study, described as a study about parents' experiences and perceptions of school lunch and the school meal program in their children's schools. Upon obtaining active consent, questions were asked about participants' children (*e.g.*, *Can you tell me a little bit about them? How would you describe them as eaters?*), then about lunches their children eat at school, the lunch packing process, factors considered in making decisions about lunch, challenges they face packing lunch, and how they feel about lunch packing (*e.g.*, *Can you tell me what your kid(s) had for lunch today (or yesterday/the last school day)? Can you walk me through the process of deciding what they would have for lunch? In your opinion, what is an ideal lunch during the school week for your kids? Can you give me an example of a time you*

felt it was really challenging to provide lunch for your child(ren)? How do you think your experiences with feeding your kids lunch during the school week compare to other parents and families?). Additional questions focused on the school lunch program in their children's schools and opinions about school food programs more generally. Questions were posed in a semi-structured manner and were interspersed with probing and follow-up questions, aiming for in-depth understanding, illuminating meanings, and contextualizing parents' experiences with lunch packing and school lunch. Interviews concluded with closed-ended demographic questions.

After each interview, initial insights and emerging themes were documented in interview sketches, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, pseudonyms were assigned, and all potentially identifying information was removed from transcripts. Data were collected until saturation, where conceptual themes and categories were well defined and no new relevant information emerged. Fourteen interviews lasting one to two hours each took place over Zoom or telephone in English between October 2020 and May 2021.

Three transcripts were read closely and coded line-by-line (Charmaz, 2014) by hand. Initial codes from line-by-line coding were organized into broad coding categories to form the coding framework used to code all transcripts in NVivo 12. This article focuses on findings related to school lunch packing from focused coding (Charmaz, 2014; Emerson et al., 2011) of the following codes: FOODWORK, HEALTHNUTRITION, IDEALS, STIGMAJUDGEMENT, RESPONSIBILITY, EMOTIONS, and PARENTING, and it represents patterns of commonality and differences in the data. Member checking was conducted at two points. First, transcripts were verified by three participants (all other participants declined to review transcripts). Second, a

summary of findings was shared with all participants following analysis. Half (n=7) of the participants provided feedback on the summary findings via a brief online survey. Analysis of this feedback is integrated into the findings and discussion.

The first author undertook data collection, transcription, coding, and analysis independently, with discussion and feedback from the second author and other research team members; thus, the lead author's

positionality as a mixed-race and mixed-class woman with no children could have influenced data collection and analysis in a more significant way than if multiple researchers collected and analyzed data simultaneously. The second author's positionality is shaped by her experience as a parent of school-aged children, chiefly responsible for school-lunch packing, with socio-demographic similarities that overlap with many of this study's participants.

Findings

Table 1 summarizes the sample characteristics (n=14), which included mainly white (n=12) participants and one participant each identifying as Middle Eastern and Punjabi. All identified as female between thirty-two to forty-seven years old (mean 39.3) and had between one to three children (median=2; mode=2), with at least one child in kindergarten through grade five attending a school in the school district of interest. The estimated 2016 median annual income for one family households of this city was \$90,000 CAD, based on the most recent census data available at the time of data collection. Just over three quarters of participants self-identified as lower- to upper-middle-class (n=11), while eight participants had household incomes between 75% and 200% of the city's median income. Three participants had household incomes in the low-income category (0% to 75% median), and two participants had household incomes greater than 200% of the median income but self-identified as middle- or upper-middle-class. All participants completed high school, and eleven completed Bachelor or graduate degrees. Just under half of participants (n=6) were employed full-time in paid work outside the home, and approximately one quarter

(n=4) were employed part-time. Four participants were either looking for work, keeping house or raising children full-time, or a combination thereof. The majority of participants (n=10) lived with male partners, while two were single mothers, one lived with a female partner, and one lived with her husband and extended family in a household with seven total adults. The participants' children attended six different elementary schools within the same school district that had recently introduced a district-wide school lunch program available to all students and staff, cost-shared, and subsidized for families in need (Black et al., 2020; Elliott & Black, 2020). Most participants packed school lunches regularly, with only two participants ordering from the lunch program daily (including one who received a subsidy to participate in the program), three who participated one to two times over the past month, and nine who had not ordered from the lunch program at all in the past month. As such, lunch packing was the primary way that participants in this study fed their children lunch during the school day, and thus this was the focus of this article.

Table 1: Characteristics of study participants (N=14)

| Characteristic | n | % |
|---|----------|----------|
| Ethnicity/Ethnic origin¹ | | |
| White | 12 | 86 |
| Middle Eastern | 1 | 7 |
| Punjabi | 1 | 7 |
| Household income² | | |
| Less than \$45,000 | 3 | 21 |
| \$45,000 - \$67,499 | 1 | 7 |
| \$67,500 - \$89,999 | 0 | 0 |
| \$90,000 - \$134,999 | 7 | 50 |
| \$135,000 - \$180,000 | 1 | 7 |
| More than \$180,000 | 2 | 14 |
| Class identity³ | | |
| Poor/Low income/Working class | 3 | 21 |
| Lower-middle-class | 1 | 7 |
| Middle-middle-class | 8 | 57 |
| Upper-middle-class | 2 | 14 |
| First language | | |
| English | 12 | 86 |
| Other | 2 | 14 |
| Immigration status | | |
| Born in Canada | 11 | 79 |
| Established Immigrant (>5 years) | 1 | 7 |
| Recent Immigrant (<5 years) | 2 | 14 |
| Education | | |
| Some College | 2 | 14 |
| Technical College Degree/Certificate | 1 | 7 |
| Bachelor's Degree | 3 | 21 |
| Master's Degree | 6 | 43 |
| PhD | 2 | 14 |
| Employment Status⁴ | | |
| Employed full-time | 6 | 43 |
| Employed part-time | 4 | 29 |
| Looking for work | 2 | 14 |
| Keeping house or raising children full-time | 4 | 29 |

¹ Participants responded to "In your own words, how would you describe your ethnicity or ethnic origin?"

² Participants selected one of six options: Poor (<50% median), Working class (50-75% median), Lower-middle-class (75-100% median), Middle-middle-class (100-150% median), Upper-middle-class (150-200%), and Upper class (>200% median). Income brackets were defined by the OECD and calculated from census data.

³ Participants self-identified as Poor/Low-income/Working class, Lower-middle-class, Middle-middle-class, Upper-middle-class, or Upper-class

⁴ 2 participants were both looking for work and keeping house or raising children full-time

Mothers' narratives showed that they experience and assign meaning to lunch packing in diverse, and sometimes conflicted, ways. As part of the broader work of raising their children, mothers simultaneously perceived and experienced lunch packing as individualized responsibility, diverse forms of labour and foodwork, and a source of judgement and scrutiny.

Responsibility to pack “good” lunches

Mothers described lunch packing as part of their parental responsibility to set their children up for proper development, academic performance and behaviour in school, and current and future health, wellbeing, and success. Identifying childhood as a foundational period when habits and preferences form, mothers saw providing nutritious lunches as a way they could, and should, foster children's optimal growth and development. Many identified meeting high nutrition standards as a requirement for packed lunches, and some discussed the important role of childhood diets in preventing future excessive weight gain. For example, Kristen made efforts to limit processed foods high in sugar and fats in packed lunches, concerned that they could “lead to obesity.” Nadine discussed how starting kids off on a healthy eating regime could carry over into their future lives and help with the “problem with obesity.”

Participants also expressed a sense of responsibility for providing a nutritious, filling meal during the school day to keep their children “fueled” and help them focus, learn, and behave properly in class. As Nicola said, “if you're not eating properly, you can't learn properly.” Stacey described limiting the sugar content of her daughter's lunches to avoid triggering behavioural issues in class:

I don't want her to have a chocolate chip cookie at lunch, and then be acting like that and get sent in the hall. I'm sure they don't send kids out in the hall anymore, but, you know, her teacher's going to call me and say oh, Julia was really angry this afternoon and having burstouts. And I don't want that.

Mothers also described lunch packing as an opportunity to set an example of healthy eating and to help children develop healthy food skills, habits, and dispositions. When Jolie described her efforts to pack a balanced meal, she emphasized the importance of limiting packaged foods because “I just want [my daughter] to develop healthy eating skills.” Sophia, on the other hand, includes small “treats” in her son's lunches to teach him about portion control. Despite their differing approaches to packing treats, Sophia and Jolie both demonstrate how lunch packing practices are informed and motivated by their sense of responsibility to cultivate their children's healthy eating habits and behaviours.

In line with scholarship on ways parents navigate pressures of feeding children in contexts that increasingly place responsibility for health on the individual (e.g., Brenton, 2014; Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2022; Patino, 2020; Power, 2016; Oleschuk, 2020), participants' narratives suggest that they perceive lunch packing as means to take personal responsibility for their children's health and wellbeing. While some discussed the roles of schools and governments in filling gaps where families were not able to provide lunch, the responsibility of cultivating health and habitus through feeding children, and through lunch packing more specifically, was primarily discussed as an individual and private duty of parents, rather than that of the school, government, or public. As one mother said, “you can't

not [pack lunch] because I have this responsibility. Like I just can't pawn it off on the school."

While the types of food packed were diverse, mothers commonly described the "ideal" lunch as "healthy," "balanced," and "well-rounded," including a variety of food groups, emphasizing fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and containing homemade, minimally processed, and unpackaged foods that minimize waste and limit sugar. Many emphasized the desirability of fresh, organic, and local foods and deemed convenience and packaged foods "unhealthy" and inappropriate for packed lunches, with the exception of occasional or small "treats."

Concomitantly, the ideal lunch was also described as appealing to children's preferences and needs, packing well in a lunch bag or box, and being eaten and enjoyed by the child:

An ideal lunch? I guess something that has a kind of like a balanced, well-rounded lunch. So has the different food groups in it. And will give her energy to keep going throughout the day. Then, it would have stuff in it that we know she'll enjoy so that she doesn't like dread lunchtime or anything.

This kind of gold standard lunch reflects intensive parenting ideals which centre children's needs and desires and require parents' investment of resources, time, energy, knowledge, and skills. It reflects expert-guided notions of "healthy" eating, following official nutrition guidance such as Canada's food guide which emphasizes eating a variety of food groups and home cooked meals, limiting highly processed foods, and enjoying your food (Government of Canada, 2021). By describing the ideal lunch in this way, participants constructed the ideal mother as one who is caring, capable, and committed to providing such a lunch, one

that skillfully manages time, money, food, and their family's needs and preferences to provide "good" lunches that cultivate "proper" development and health. Such ideals were commonly contrasted with mothers' realities, in which several factors, most notably time limitations and children's food preferences, made these feeding and mothering ideals largely unattainable. Yet, mothers made significant efforts to enact them through diverse forms of labour.

Lunch packing as diverse forms of foodwork and labour

Physical labour: More than just packing lunch

Mothers often described packing lunch as a chore, characterizing it as a fairly quick, mundane, and menial task that was boring, but not overly burdensome or challenging. And yet, that it is required on a daily basis during the school week often made it feel like an unending and constant demand. Tara described it as a household task akin to laundry—a perpetual chore with no getting around it—while Shannon described it as "kind of like this treadmill that you're on." Many mothers relished mornings or evenings they were relieved of lunch packing. "Friday nights, I rejoice because oh, I don't need to make lunches for tomorrow!" Kristen exclaimed. Sophia described packing lunch as a relatively quick and straightforward process:

[Y]ou open up the [lunch box] and you've got your five compartments. There's your cheese, there's your ham, there's your vegetable, there's your crackers, you know? And that's it.

However, participants' narratives revealed that packing lunches was hardly ever as straightforward or effortless as Sophia's comment suggests. While parents typically spent fifteen to forty-five minutes a day packing lunches, significant time and energy were spent planning, budgeting, shopping, preparing, and cleaning lunches. Every Sunday, Heather creates a weekly meal plan and grocery shops for the week, while Kristen spends Sunday afternoons meal prepping, slicing vegetables, and baking muffins for her children's lunches for the week. After school, lunchboxes are unpacked and emptied, leftover food or packaging composted or disposed of, containers washed, dishwashers run, and cleaning done. Thus, school lunch packing entails physical labour, not only in packing lunch but also in all the tasks preceding and following it. Moreover, it requires significant mental and emotional labour, which participants often identified as the most burdensome aspects of lunch packing.

Cognitive labour: "So much mental load!"

As Stacey walked through her lunch packing process, she listed both direct tasks and the cognitive load involved. She described "budgeting for groceries, planning the meals, and cooking," plus "thinking through like what pieces will be part of lunch, what pieces will be part of snacks in the future," and thinking "so much about what we have." She offered an example of deciding how many bananas to buy while grocery shopping, which illustrates the mental work of planning and managing school lunches:

Like how many bananas should I buy? Because they're going to go brown. Like is anybody going to eat these bananas or are they going to have to become muffins? Or am I going to even have time to make muffins? Because then they're

going to have to just get composted, and that's not what I want to do.

While mental labour is often an implicit process that goes unacknowledged and unnamed by those who perform it (Robertson et al., 2019), some mothers, like Stacey, explicitly identified the mental load required to plan, budget, shop, prepare, pack, clean, remember, worry about, and monitor lunches. Others shared examples of the cognitive labour they performed as they described planning and strategizing for lunches so that everything was accomplished within the time constraints of their busy lives. Even Sophia, who described lunch packing as a quick and straightforward task, runs through a mental checklist of the types of food to pack in the lunchbox. By distilling tasks into mental checklists or regular routines, she and other mothers demonstrated efforts to minimize their cognitive load.

While some mothers stated that lunch packing required little thought, such as Heather, who noted that "we're a little bit gone on autopilot," their descriptions of thought processes behind planning and packing lunches revealed significant amounts of cognitive labour. For example, mothers kept abreast of children's often evolving food preferences, monitored what foods came home uneaten, and tried to remember when their children declared that they were "off" of sandwiches or were "tired" of eating mandarin oranges in their lunches. Nadine, for example, described trying to keep ahead of her son's vegetable preferences, as "he goes through spurts of what vegetables he likes." Remembering to pack lunches, and making sure children left home with them and that lunches were unpacked after school, lingered in the back of mothers' minds, often while performing other foodwork and housework such as cooking dinner or getting their children ready for school. One mother described this as

part of the “mental gymnastics” of morning routines and busy schedules revolving around work, school and daycare drop offs and pickups, extracurricular activities, and other parenting duties.

Emotional labour: Labour of love and carework

Many mothers emphasized wanting their children to not only be nourished by their lunch foods but to also feel happy, cared for, and loved through the lunches they packed. Through note writing, providing treats or special lunches, and accommodating children’s

preferences, participants made efforts to show care and affection for their children, demonstrating the emotional labour and caring work involved in lunch packing. For example, Jolie started drawing hand-written notes for her daughter’s lunch when she began kindergarten to help her daughter feel connected with her while she was at school. She explained, “and then the note writing was just like “I love you,” “I’m thinking about you,” “I sent 100 kisses to the playground” type of thing. So then we just started doing it every day.”



Others reported packing special lunches, including treats, and accommodating their children’s likes and dislikes to make lunch enjoyable. Mothers described doing this not only to get kids to eat their lunch but also to avoid children getting bored or resentful of their lunches, showing how mothers were attuned to, and sought to manage, their children’s emotional responses.

For example, Evelyn allows her daughter to choose the granola bars for her lunch so that “she doesn’t like dread lunchtime.” Similarly, Stacey tries to “add a little touch of fun” by including two-pronged pricks with different animal characters on them. Whether through handwritten notes, special lunches, treats, or putting careful thought, time, and energy into planning,

preparing, and packing them, lunch packing was understood by mothers as a way that they send messages to their children that they are thinking about them, that they are loved, and that they are cared for.

Emotional labour: Managing contradictory emotions about lunch packing

The emotional labour of lunch packing entailed how participants felt about this carework and how they managed a range of both positive and negative feelings about it. Many mothers reported feeling stressed by the cognitive burdens of packing lunch and a lack of time to get things done. For example, Tara explained how she “hates” lunch packing because “it’s the thing that takes the most time in the morning in terms of devoting time to something that I get worried about. Because I always worry that I’m going to forget to do something.” She went on to describe her feelings when her lunch packing efforts resulted in uneaten lunches:

[O]ne of the things that’s always struck me about packing lunches is the psychological impact it has when they come home, and it’s not eaten....[W]hen they come home, and how oddly weird it feels—like devastating—when they haven’t eaten their lunch. And I’m like, I put so much effort into it!

Other mothers similarly reported feelings of worry, anxiety, and frustration when lunches went uneaten. And when mothers felt they were not living up to feeding ideals, feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy were common:

I feel a lot of guilt [about sending packaged foods]....But it’s also in the waste of the world.

Like our recycling bin. I was talking to my husband, like how is it always full?

[T]his is a point of contention for me, where I feel like I’m not doing a good job if my kids aren’t eating lunch.

These narratives reveal how mothers experience negative emotions when dealing with the stresses of packing lunch amidst pressures to safeguard their children’s health (and that of the planet) and high expectations of the “gold standard lunch.”

Still, some mothers described trying not to worry or feel bad about uneaten lunches or packing “unhealthy” foods, or feeling as if they should not feel this way. Stay-at-home mothers shared feeling unjustified in being stressed about time, as they perceived themselves having more time for household tasks compared to mothers working in paid employment. Mothers who described their children as more adventurous eaters qualified that lunch packing is likely more frustrating for parents with picky eaters. Some middle-class participants reflected that their relative financial resources make their lunch packing experiences less challenging than for those with lower incomes. These mothers expressed “trying” to not feel guilt or shame and actively working to manage or minimize negative feelings they experienced. As Tara said, “[I have] to step back and be like yeah, okay, it’s not about me.”

Though much less frequently described than negative emotions, mothers also reported positive emotions related to lunch packing. When they packed lunches they were proud of or when they perceived themselves as successfully enacting ideals or fulfilling responsibilities, mothers expressed a sense of pride, accomplishment, or satisfaction:

Being able to know that he's going to have something hot in his system at lunch time to keep him warm makes me feel good as a parent.

I know if I'm feeding her good things in the day, it makes me feel good.

Others described emotional attachments to lunch packing and the connection it fosters. For example, one mother fondly described the morning lunch packing routine as “a bonding time for the family.” Another mother, despite feeling burdened and exhausted by it, shared she likes packing lunch to connect with her daughter during the school day, demonstrating how lunch packing can simultaneously evoke both positive and negative emotions.

Household division of lunch packing labour

In line with scholarship that shows women disproportionately bear the brunt of household labour and foodwork (e.g., Allen & Sachs, 2007; Beagan et al., 2008; Hochschild, 1989; Koch, 2019), participants in heterosexual relationships described performing the bulk of the labour of packing lunches as well as the foodwork within their home more generally. Most participants were their family's primary lunch packer. Some participants reflected critically and expressed discomfort with enacting gendered norms, speaking explicitly about the importance of fairly dividing household labour or sharing responsibility for foodwork with their partners. However, even when participants' male partners often or always packed lunch, mothers had extensive knowledge about lunch packing and performed much of the physical, emotional, and cognitive labour. In heterosexual partnerships, fathers primarily functioned as mothers' helpers, rather than as equal partners in managing

school lunch processes. For example, Jolie explained how her husband helps pick up groceries, cook dinners (which she plans and preps), and unload the dishwasher, but that she carries the “emotional baggage” and “thinking” involved in packed lunches:

My husband is amazing, but all of the planning or all the things—all the little things, all the emotional baggage, it's all on me.... And like actually filling her up is something that we always are thinking—or I'm always thinking about. My husband doesn't have to think about it.

Her correction of the term “we” to “I” mid-sentence is revealing. It illustrates a common sentiment among mothers that even when fathers performed physical tasks, such as picking up groceries, making sandwiches, packing lunches into backpacks, cutting fruits or vegetables, and cleaning dishes, mothers almost always carried the cognitive and emotional labour and bore the brunt of the planning, decision making, worrying about, and managing of food and lunch.

Delegating physical labour created added mental labour for some mothers, who described giving instructions and supervising their partners to ensure lunches were packed to their standards. Farah's husband contributes by packing the fruit portion of their daughter's lunch; yet, she manages the process by making decisions and supervising to ensure her instructions are followed:

Farah: I pack the lunch. And my husband generally packs the fruit tiffin as per my instructions.

Interviewer: And what kind of instructions do you give him?

Farah: Like what is to be given in the fruit tiffin. Because Mina will be like don't give me fruits, I don't have time to eat, I want to go out to play. That means a really, really small fruit tiffin, which I'm not okay with. So I will tell him to just make sure that one whole apple is there. And that another fruit is there....Sometimes he will get influenced by her, but I am there to correct him.

Similarly, Stacey, who plans and prepares lunches for her husband to pack in the morning, expressed frustration about lunches not being executed as she carefully planned:

[O]ccasionally little things will happen where he won't realize that I put the yogurt in a new spot, and he'll be like I didn't see yogurt, so I gave her two muffins. And I'm like ugh! What is going on? It's right there!

These examples illustrate how, even when male partners were portrayed as helpful, collaborative, or even equal partners in packing lunches, mothers bore the brunt of the cognitive and emotional labour. They carried the responsibility of decision making and ensuring that, regardless of who packed lunches, their children had nutritious, appropriate lunches for school. Delegating labour required cognitive load to ensure fathers packed lunch properly and emotional labour to manage frustrations when they did not.

Participants rationalized unequal divisions of labour, framing it as their choice and emphasizing that they were better equipped to pack lunch and perform foodwork more generally:

[M]y husband, when he is in charge, is a little bit more like softy on like—okay, well maybe I'll just send you a grilled cheese then if that's what you want. And I'm like no! [Laughs] She has to have what's there. We can't just send a grilled cheese every day. There has to be a variety. She needs sustenance.

I think my husband probably gives them more treats than I would....So it's been a balancing act for us to figure out, you know, how much is too much sugar. And how many treats are too many treats.

As these examples demonstrate, mothers commonly portrayed themselves as more skilled, knowledgeable, or simply caring more about food and health, making them better fit to make decisions about and pack school lunch. Concomitantly, they described shouldering much of the labour, pressures, and judgements associated with these roles.

Lunch packing as a source of judgement and scrutiny

Consistent with research on how intensive parenting ideology creates scrutiny of individual mothers' consumption and feeding practices (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Kennedy & Kmec, 2019; Patico, 2020), participants described not only judging themselves, but also feeling judged and themselves judging other parents for their lunch packing practices. Social judgement was common when parents were perceived as either insufficiently or excessively invested in lunch packing.

Participants' narratives revealed that mothers judged themselves when packing lunches perceived as sub-par or when perceiving themselves as not putting enough effort, time, care, or planning into lunch packing. For

example, Nicola sheepishly shared that she mostly makes sandwiches for lunch because “it’s easy to put a sandwich together,” then quickly reflected that this must make her sound “really lazy.” Another mother expressed feeling she could “do better” when packing her daughter’s lunch. She explained, “even when I’m packing her lunch, like I’ll judge whatever I put into her lunch. Or I’ll be like okay, I need to like think about this more and plan more.” Simultaneously, many judged other parents’ lunch packing as they compared the perceived healthfulness of their own children’s lunches to others’. For example, Shannon scrutinized parents who put sweetened yogurt in their kids’ lunches and differentiated herself from them by stating that her kids “don’t ever eat sweetened yogurt.” Kristen similarly criticized another child’s lunch:

[T]o my horror, she’s got barbecue chips and the Caramilk squares for her snack, and then her lunch, I swear to God, was five bottles of Yop and some cheese strings and some crackers. And so, I’m horrified.

Participants also reported feeling judged by others, including other parents, teachers, and their own children. Tara, aware of potential judgement from teachers, told her son’s teachers “don’t judge us for the foods we send to school,” while Kristen, a teacher, described how she might judge lunches in the classroom:

I think like oh, if I glanced as a teacher and looked in at this lunch kit, would I be thinking like oh, that looks like a healthy lunch or would I be thinking oh my God, what the heck is in there?

Implicitly through uneaten lunches or more explicitly, participants also experienced judgement and scrutiny related to lunch packing from their own children:

Well, I always want to make sure I’m providing [my daughter] with a balanced meal. [I]f I’m not—well, she would tell me. But I—yeah, I would feel like okay, this isn’t good enough.

While judgement of insufficient care and commitment was more common, participants also scrutinized themselves or others for excessively caring or investing in lunch packing. For example, Kristen felt scrutinized by others for her “commitment to making lunches.” She explained, “I think people in general might be somewhat alarmed by the commitment I have to making lunches.” Other mothers similarly described how one could be perceived as too committed or overly invested in lunch packing:

I have one of my good friends in class—one of her daughters is in my class. And she’s like stop making us look bad! Daisy keeps asking why I don’t send her notes. [Laughs]

[T]here’s this one mom who does this sort of like bento box thing where she cuts everything up into cutesy things and does all that. And then you just sort of hate that person because it’s like how do you have the time and energy to do that?

As these comments suggest, the bounds of what is considered “appropriate” were quite narrow for some mothers, with a fine line between doing or caring too little versus too much. They reported making efforts to not only enact feeding and parenting ideals, but to simultaneously avoid overly controlling or investing in lunch packing, seeking a moderated approach where

appropriate, but not excessive, amounts of control, time, money, care, emotion, and effort were devoted to their children’s lunches. For example, Kristen lets her children choose their own lunches on Fridays because she “can’t control everything.”

These forms of judgement reveal that lunch packing carries not only emotional but also social weight. Mothers were evaluated by themselves and by others,

Discussion

This study aligns with and expands on previous work about the complexities of lunch packing, the various ways parents perceive lunch packing as social and emotional experiences, and how the foodwork of feeding children during the school day are intertwined with gendered identities and classed notions of “good” feeding and mothering. While previous Canadian research largely focused on parental barriers to packing healthy school lunches (Hawthorne et al., 2018; O’Rourke et al., 2020; Verdun, 2015), current findings resonate with studies from other industrialized countries, including the United States and United Kingdom, finding that mothers experience lunch simultaneously as labour and as an expression of love and care for children (Harman & Cappellini, 2014; Metcalfe et al., 2008), a way classed feeding and mothering ideals are performed (Allison, 1991), and a potent source of judgement, stigma, and shame for those who do not conform to dominant understandings of healthy lunches (Karrebaek, 2012). This study contributes to the body of scholarship on intensive mothering, feeding children, and school lunch as one of the first qualitative studies to shed light on the diversity of ways mothers experience and make meaning of lunch packing in the Canadian context.

and they evaluated other parents based on their perceived care, capability, and commitment to packing lunch. Participants conducted a balancing act of determining, then enacting, an appropriate level of investment, with the risk of potential judgement and scrutiny for either doing or caring too much or too little.

Previous scholarship demonstrates that narratives of individualized responsibility for children’s health and intensive parenting ideologies place high expectations and pressures on mothers related to feeding their children (e.g., Brenton, 2014; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Patino, 2020; Power, 2016). Mothers interviewed here similarly reported high expectations and pressures surrounding packing lunch. For them, lunch packing was not simply a logistical task but also an important means of nurturing their children’s growth and development, cultivating their health, wellbeing, and success, and socializing them into a habitus of healthy and responsible food preferences and practices. These findings align with previous research (e.g., Brenton, 2014; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Patino, 2020) on middle-class mothers’ efforts to socialize their children to make “good” food choices reflective of middle-class ideals. The mothers in this study seemed to embrace the neoliberal rhetoric of individualized responsibility by holding themselves, and other mothers, accountable for packing lunch “properly.” In doing so, they further reflected previously reported notions of fatphobia, including fears of contributing to or being held responsible for their children’s body size (Friedman, 2015).

This study adds to scholarship regarding how mothers navigate pressures of feeding children in sociopolitical and economic contexts that place responsibility for health and body size on the individual (e.g., Brenton, 2014; Oleschuk, 2020; Patico, 2020; Power, 2016). Participants reported devoting significant resources, time, and energy to lunch packing and navigating complex emotional and social effects of being the primary person to carry the weight of this responsibility and labour in their families. Like previous studies (e.g., Allen & Sachs, 2007; Beagan *et al.*, 2008; Hochschild, 1989; Koch, 2019), women interviewed here disproportionately bore the brunt of the labour and emotional effects of foodwork.

Despite shouldering physical, mental, and emotional labour, mothers forged connections with their children through lunch packing and saw it as emotionally meaningful and a symbol of their care, love, and responsibility. Notions of the “good” mother as one who is caring, capable, and committed to lunch packing resulted in both negative and positive feelings and judgements. Consistent with research on how intensive parenting ideology creates scrutiny of individual mothers’ consumption and feeding practices (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Kennedy & Kmec, 2019; Patico, 2020), we found that mothers not only feel judged, by themselves and by others, but also judge others for their lunch packing practices and decisions. Judgement and scrutiny were not reserved for those perceived as insufficiently enacting lunch packing and good mothering ideals but also extended to those perceived as excessively invested or committed to those ideals. Thus, the calibration of food femininities that Cairns and Johnston (2015) observed among middle-class white women was also apparent among mothers here who worked to calibrate their lunch packing practices and navigate the bounds of acceptability.

These findings indicate that, for these mothers, a “balanced” lunch does not simply mean a *nutritionally* balanced lunch. Lunch packing requires mothers to perform balancing acts of various forms of labour and contradictory emotions. Entwined with complex and sometimes competing meanings, it is simultaneously a burdensome task to be dreaded but also a pleasurable one, something mothers must care deeply about and yet be cautious to not overly invest in. It is a seemingly simple and menial chore that, upon deeper examination, entails considerable work and holds significant social and emotional weight. Together, these findings demonstrate the complexities of packing lunch and the many and varied meanings mothers assign to it in an era of intensive parenting and neoliberalism.

Limitations and future research directions

Triangulation with previous research conducted within the school district, including parent surveys and classroom ethnography conducted by our research team (Black *et al.*, 2020; Black *et al.*, 2022; Elliott & Black, 2020) along with discussion with researchers involved in those projects, supports the relevance and validity of many of the major themes and findings; however, additional qualitative and quantitative studies are warranted for further validation. It is important to note that this predominantly white, middle-class sample with relatively high levels of formal education is not representative of this school district nor of Canada. Study participants were selected from a convenience sample, and all interviews were conducted in English, which limits the generalizability of these findings. Additionally, many participants expressed interest in food and health and were able and willing to spend one to two hours participating. Moreover, the lack of class and racial diversity among participants prevented a fulsome exploration of how mothers’ lunch packing

experiences intersected with class or racial identities. While some indications of class and ethnic differences were identified in these data, analyses did not focus on them. Existing literature suggests that class, ethnicity, and other contextual differences (e.g., employment status) are related to mothers' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of feeding their children and the meanings they ascribe to feminine ideals (e.g., Bowen et al., 2019; Brenton, 2014; Elliott et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2015). Future studies should explore lunch packing experiences and meanings in different class, ethnic, and geographic contexts to see whether these findings hold, paying specific attention to differences or similarities between groups. The literature (e.g., Cairns and Johnston, 2015) shows that there are multiple femininities that differ by class and race; thus, future analyses of lunch packing should interrogate the ways in which white, middle class lunchbox ideals and practices set standards and how those standards are policed in order to reproduce hegemonic femininity.

While our study explores some of the gendered division of lunch packing labour from mothers' perspectives, future research could explore fathers' lunch packing experiences to provide more insight into

relationships between gender, lunch packing, labour, care, and responsibility. Future quantitative studies could also explore the labour involved in lunch packing to better understand the scope and value of mothers' unpaid labour currently devoted to lunch packing, especially in a country like Canada where the majority of children eat packed lunches at school and parents are primarily responsible for providing school lunches.

This research is especially timely given the federal government's recent release of a national school food policy (Government of Canada, 2024) and work towards a national school meal program (Prime Minister of Canada, 2021), as well as provincial governments' recent actions to expand school meal programming (e.g., Government of British Columbia, 2022, 2023). While this study focused specifically on school lunch packing, it did not delve into mothers' perceptions of school lunch programs nor the facilitators and barriers to participation, which may be affected by myriad other considerations including household composition, resources, cultural expectations, or diverse expectations around the roles of mothers in foodwork.

Conclusion

This article examined mothers' experiences and perceptions of school lunch packing. Analyses of semi-structured interviews demonstrated that mothers view lunch packing as an individualized responsibility to cultivate their children's health that requires diverse forms of labour to enact intensive feeding and mothering ideals. This foodwork is a potent source of emotions for mothers, who scrutinize themselves and

other parents and, in turn, feel judged by others. This research suggests that there is potential for high quality school food programs to better support parents and caregivers of school-age children, and mothers in particular, by reducing or relieving them of the time, energy, and labour required to feed children lunch during the school week. Yet, findings also indicated that lunch packing is a meaningful and rewarding experience for some families. Parents are key stakeholders in the

feeding practices of children, who both influence and are impacted by the diverse forms of foodwork required to provision school meals. Hence, understanding and addressing parents', and especially mothers', experiences

and engaging them in planning and reform will be pivotal for future school food policy programming in Canada.

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