



Research Article

Feeding children while Asian: Immigrant families' experiences with school lunches in Canada

Yukari Seko^{a*}, Veen Wong^b, Clara Juando-Prats^c, Lina Rahouma^d, Jessica Yu^e, Nayanee Henry-Noel^f

^a Toronto Metropolitan University; ORCID: [0000-0003-3380-5190](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3380-5190)

^b University of Waterloo; ORCID: [0000-0003-2036-535X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2036-535X)

^c Lakehead University; ORCID: [0000-0002-3976-5911](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3976-5911)

^d University of Ottawa

^e University of Toronto

^f University of Galway

Abstract

In feeding children in a new country, immigrant parents engage in continuous and ongoing adaptation. Children's exposure to new food practices outside the home can sometimes conflict with parents' efforts to maintain traditional foodways. This qualitative study explores the factors that influence Asian immigrant parents' everyday decisions about packing cultural food in their children's school lunches in Toronto, Canada. Through arts-informed interviews, 19 elementary school children (ages 7 to 13) and 17 parents from Indian and Chinese backgrounds shared their experiences. Findings reveal that family's food identity and the convenience of cooking familiar recipes encourage the inclusion of

cultural foods, while direct and indirect experiences of lunchbox shaming and school food environments discourage it. Factors such as children's preferences, parental perceptions of healthy food, and classroom demographics influence parental decisions in both directions. These findings indicate that homemade school lunches communicate both immigrant families' cultural heritage and their changing food habits in Canada. We argue that the upcoming national school food program carries high stakes: if not thoughtfully implemented with cultural inclusivity at its core, it risks further marginalizing non-dominant foodways and undermining the cultural agency of immigrant families.

*Corresponding author: yseko@torontomu.ca

Copyright © 2025 by the Author. Open access under CC-BY-SA license.

DOI: [10.15353/cfs-rcea.v12i2.728](https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v12i2.728)

ISSN: 2292-3071

Keywords: Asian immigrants; family food practice; lunchbox shaming; national school food program; school lunch

Résumé

Pour nourrir leurs enfants dans un nouveau pays, les parents immigrés doivent continuellement faire preuve d'adaptation. L'exposition des enfants à de nouvelles pratiques alimentaires à l'extérieur de la maison peut parfois entrer en conflit avec les efforts des parents pour maintenir les habitudes alimentaires traditionnelles. Cette étude qualitative explore les facteurs qui influencent les décisions quotidiennes de parents asiatiques immigrés concernant l'intégration d'aliments culturels dans les boîtes à lunch de leurs enfants à Toronto, au Canada. À l'aide d'entrevues par l'art, 19 enfants fréquentant l'école primaire (âgés de 7 à 13 ans) et 17 parents d'origine indienne et chinoise ont fait part de leurs expériences. Les résultats révèlent que l'identité alimentaire de la famille et la facilité à cuisiner des recettes familières encouragent l'inclusion d'aliments culturels, tandis que les expériences directes

et indirectes de honte quant au contenu de la boîte à lunch et l'environnement alimentaire de l'école la découragent. Des facteurs tels que les préférences des enfants, la perception des parents de ce que constitue une alimentation saine et les caractéristiques démographiques de la classe influencent les décisions parentales dans les deux sens. Ces résultats indiquent que les repas scolaires faits maison manifestent à la fois l'héritage culturel des familles immigrantes et l'évolution de leurs habitudes alimentaires au Canada. Nous soutenons qu'il y a là des enjeux importants pour le prochain programme national d'alimentation scolaire : s'il n'est pas mis en œuvre de façon réfléchie en tenant compte de l'inclusion culturelle, il risque de marginaliser davantage les modes d'alimentation non dominants et de miner l'agentivité culturelle des familles immigrantes.

Introduction

Parents and caregivers of school-aged children often juggle numerous responsibilities as they navigate school routines. For many Canadian families, this includes tackling the daily task of packing school lunches. Canada is the only member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) without a nationally funded school food program (Black et al., 2022). Instead, a “patchwork” of programs exists across Canada, funded by provinces, municipalities, not-for-profits, donors and parent organizations (The Coalition for Healthy School Food, n.d.). Although one in five Canadian students have access to some form of school food program, including breakfast, snack, or hot lunch

programs (Ruetz & McKenna, 2021), parents and caregivers remain primarily responsible for feeding children during school hours. In April 2024, the federal government announced plans for a new national school food program, committing \$1 billion over five years to serve 400,000 students annually with a starting date marked for the 2024-2025 school year (Government of Canada, 2024a). Yet, until this initiative actually takes effect, most school-aged children will continue bringing home-packed lunches.

While providing children with healthy and nutritious food at school is vital for supporting their growth and development, this crucial task can sometimes feel

overwhelming for families (Shwed et al., 2023). Given that domestic foodwork—the multifaceted labour involved in feeding oneself and one’s family—is highly gendered (Beagan et al., 2008), mothers often hold disproportionately higher responsibilities to plan, prepare, and manage everyday lunch packing. Studies in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and Canada commonly indicate that preparation of “good” lunches is tied closely with moral accountability of “good” mothering (Brenton, 2017; Harman & Cappellini, 2015; Harman & Cappellini, 2018; Niimi-Burch & Black, 2024; Tanner et al., 2019; Seko et al., 2021). Mothers safeguard children’s health and well-being by holding themselves accountable for packing nutritious lunches. Some mothers feel scrutinized by the content of school lunches they pack for their children, while judging other parents who they deem to be less diligent (Brenton, 2017; Niimi-Burch & Black, 2024).

For immigrant families raising children in a new country, packing school lunches can involve additional complexities. Although some families may wish to preserve their cultural identities, adjustments are often inevitable as they experience financial, social, and cultural changes in the land of settlement. Moffat and colleagues (2017) emphasize the need to investigate cultural dimensions of immigrant food insecurity, particularly the role traditional foods and foodways play in maintaining one’s ethnocultural identity and supporting smooth adaptation to a new country. Through interviews with a group of newcomers and refugees in Canada, the researchers identified a prevalent concern among the participants over the access to culturally preferred or satisfying food. While general food access was not a concern for most participants, several of them faced challenges in accessing traditional food items due to financial, transportation, and language barriers. Many also noted limited availability of fresh and less processed food from their cultures, which leads to

nostalgia for food from their countries (Moffat et al., 2017). As food holds both material and symbolic meanings intricately connected to people’s identity, having access to food that satisfies hunger alone does not necessarily satisfy one’s psychosocial needs.

In the meantime, the degree to which immigrant families maintain traditional foodways varies. For some, integration of new food practices into their day-to-day life presents a unique opportunity for constructing new identities and expressing a positive marker of assimilation to the host country’s culture. This opportunity can be particularly salient among women, who are often the primary caregivers and nourishers within immigrant households. For example, a study with Arabic and South Asian immigrant women in Edmonton, Canada, highlights how these women, as important conduits of their family’s culinary acculturation, flexibly balance between keeping traditional food practices with adjusting to new foods and foodways (Vallianatos & Raine, 2008). Most of the study participants live in nuclear households post-migration, where they can take on a greater responsibility for daily food planning and have increased opportunities to incorporate their own and children’s preferences into family’s food practices (Vallianatos & Raine, 2008). In another study, immigrant mothers of African and Caribbean backgrounds express willingness to learn how to cook healthy Canadian meals and add them to their culinary repertoires for their children, as their children’s preferences shift from traditional foods to Canadian foods (Blanchet et al., 2018). Similarly, one Australian study revealed that Chinese immigrants have often adapted a “bicultural” eating pattern due to convenience, time, and personal health beliefs and food literacy post-migration (Lee et al., 2022). They tended to preserve elements from their Chinese culture while integrating Western-style meals and snacks in their diets.

In immigrant households, children often exert significant influence on their family food practices, as they bring home new food norms and values from school (Blanchet et al., 2018; Moffat, 2022). For many young children, school provides the first opportunity for learning dominant ways of thinking, acting, and eating in a public space. Some of them learn that their home food culture is not always congruent with dominant food culture at school. This “food culture mismatch” (Agaronov et al., 2019), a discrepancy between home and school food cultures, can have a considerable impact on children’s food identity, which then has reverberating effects on their family’s food practices.

Divergent food preferences can be a source of contestation between different generations in a household (Beagan et al., 2014). For parents and caregivers, traditional foods and foodways can be a platform for passing tradition down to children and maintaining material and psychosocial connections with “home.” In contrast, for children growing up in Canada, traditional foods can be a marker of difference that prevents them from fitting in with their peers and Canadian culture. Immigrant mothers have lamented that after settling in Canada their children became reluctant to bring home-cooked traditional foods to school for lunch due to a fear of standing out and concerns with food odours (Blanchet et al., 2018; Lane & Vatanparast, 2023;). Some children stopped eating traditional food at school, which forced some parents to learn about, purchase, and start packing “Canadian” foods, such as pizza, burgers, and packaged snacks in children’s lunchboxes to school (Lane & Vatanparast, 2023).

Prior to this study, we conducted a study with 25 Canadian young adult children of Asian migrant parents (ages 17 to 25) in Toronto, Canada, about their childhood experiences at school over homemade lunches (Seko et al., 2023). Many shared heartbreaking memories

of lunchbox shaming when they felt ostracized for bringing traditional foods that were perceived as deviant from Western food norms (Seko et al., 2023). Their favourite home food sometimes received repulsion from classmates. In response, they tried to hide their food under the table, throw away their lunches, or asked their parents to pack “normal” sandwiches or Lunchables (prepackaged snack) to fit in (Seko et al., 2023). The study illuminated complicated relationships young Canadians with Asian backgrounds have with their “home” food.

Lunchbox shaming at school stems in part from an intrinsic fear of unfamiliar food. When facing new food and foodways, some children may feel the need to validate their own food culture as “normal” by ostracizing unfamiliar foodways as “deviant.” But this fear may also arise from historically constructed stereotypes and discriminations against foodways of ethnocultural minorities. Williams-Forson (2022) notes in her book *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America* how anti-Black racism has operated in the practice and culture of eating. Gastronomic surveillance over Black foodways has often stemmed from systemic oppression and distrust of Black Americans. Similarly, Asian cuisines has long represented a distinct “Otherness” in the White imagination (Sugino 2021). Mannur (2006), in her analysis of a 1908 document authored by two American Federation of Labor members, identifies how the expression “you are what you eat” was employed to differentiate between White “hearty meat eaters” and Chinese “rice eaters.” This “Meat vs. Rice” metaphor fueled anti-Asian sentiment, portraying Asian workers as undermining the American labor force. In this context, food became “a metonymic index for understanding Asianness,” reinforcing the idea that Asians could not be considered American (Mannur 2006, p. 2). Mannur argues that from the early nineteenth century to the present, Asian Americans

remain closely associated with their food traditions, which continues to marginalize them.

In the present study, we shift our focus from young adults to children currently attending elementary school in Toronto, Canada, and explore how their school lunch experiences influence immigrant parents' everyday decisions about whether to pack foods from their culture (called "cultural food"¹ hereafter) in their children's school lunchbox. Specifically, we focus on families with parents who have migrated from two Asian countries, China and India, and have children currently attending elementary school in Toronto, Canada. Children's perceptions of their home-packed lunches were key variables of interest to us, as their school experiences would have considerable impacts on their family's food

practices. By examining feeding decisions of immigrant parents from a cultural perspective, we aim to understand how immigrant families navigate food practices while raising children in a land of settlement. This knowledge has significant implications for the upcoming national school food program, because such programs hold considerable power in shaping children's, and by extension, their families' understandings of which food practices are considered normal and acceptable in Canada. Our study seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations about how school food environments can respond to and reflect the cultural diversity of the communities they serve.

Methods

Study location: Toronto

The study was conducted in Toronto, traditionally known as Tkaronto [Tuh-kaRONto], Canada's most populous city. Toronto has been a popular immigrant destination, with 46.6 percent of the total population of Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) born outside Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Over the past 50 years, immigration from Asian countries (including the Middle East) has steadily increased, reaching a record 62.0 percent of newcomers between 2016 and 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Toronto's

public-school demographics closely reflect the city's demographic. In the most recent Toronto District School Board (TDSB) student census, 72 percent of students (JK to Grade 12) self-identified as non-White, with South Asian and East Asian groups being the largest category (Toronto District School Board, 2023). The proportion of TDSB students self-identifying with one or more racialized groups has increased since 2016.

¹ What should we call "food from immigrant families' cultural backgrounds?" Our team had an intense discussion over this mouthful and complicated concept. We intentionally avoided the term "ethnic food," as it often implies food associated with a group different from one's own, reinforcing a sense of otherness. "Traditional food" and "heritage food" were considered, but these terms did not always capture the full range of foods that are current and habitual choices for immigrant families. "Culturally appropriate" or "culturally preferred" food were the terms often used by public health institutions (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024), but these did not appear to us clearly communicating our intent. After a long discussion, we settled on "cultural food" as it reflects the diverse, dynamic nature of food practices tied to cultural backgrounds, without the implications of food being from the past or outside one's own community. We do recognize this is not the perfect terminology and hope to continue this conversation.

Recruitment

The study focussed on the first-generation immigrant families with children ages 7-13 (Grades three to eight), attending school in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).² We focussed on this age group because in most publicly funded elementary schools, students bring home-packed meals for lunch or go home to eat lunch during lunchtime. Most elementary schools do not allow young students to go out for lunch, while secondary school students (Grade 9 to 12) often have access to cafeterias or food vendors at school or are permitted to leave the school perimeter during breaks to buy food.

Our study inclusion criteria required parents to: 1) have immigrated to Canada from China or India; 2) have at least one child currently attending elementary school in the GTA; and 3) have ever packed cultural foods for their children's school lunch. We focussed on immigrant families from China and India, because these two countries represent Toronto's largest immigrant groups, comprising over 38 percent of all newcomers (i.e., immigrants who have been in Canada for less than five years) to the Toronto CMA in 2021. Between 2016 and 2021, 102,245 immigrants, or 26.6 percent of all those settling in the Toronto CMA, came from India. Another 44,770 newcomers, making up 11.4 percent of the total, arrived from China (Statistics Canada, 2022a). As we relied on participants' self-reports about their nationality, participants who self-reported to have immigrated from China included those from Hong Kong, although Canadian census data often treats Hong Kong separately.

Ethics approval was obtained from our institutional review boards before recruitment. Due to the study's

exploratory nature, we employed convenience and snowball sampling. Recruitment involved emails, the project website, posters, and outreach to Saturday language schools for children, faith groups (e.g., churches, temples), traditional dance schools, online family support groups, and the research team's personal and professional networks. To support informed consent for children, an animated recruitment video was created. Chinese-language recruitment materials were also created, and translation accommodations were offered upon request.

Data collection

An arts-informed approach was used to explore children's experiences around cultural foods and school lunchtimes. From June 2022 to May 2023, we conducted four in-person art workshops with children along with four focus groups with parents. Two research team members (CJ-P and YS) with expertise in arts-informed research methods designed and co-led the children's art workshops with research assistants (JY and NH-N) who share the same cultural backgrounds as research participants. At these art workshops, children created their lunchboxes using a variety of visual materials that included magazines, photographs, illustrations, as well as coloured and textured papers, stickers, and tapes. Along with drawing, the method of collaging was used to invite de-constructing, imagining, and re-constructing participants' school lunchtime (Graham & Gussak, 2023). During the workshops, parents joined focus groups in a separate room to share their experiences.

² In Canada, public education is a provincial responsibility. In the province of Ontario, education is divided into three stages: early childhood education for children from birth to age four; elementary school for students from kindergarten to grade eight (typically aged 4 to 14); and secondary school for students from grade 9 to 12 (typically aged 14 to 18). We focussed on families that have elementary school-aged children.

Within one to two months, follow-up online interviews were conducted with families to reflect on children's artwork and parental focus groups. Additionally, we conducted 14 online interviews with families (parent-child dyads) who preferred to join the study remotely. In those online interviews, parents shared photographs of their children's school lunches to stimulate discussion. Child and parent interviews were conducted separately to avoid undue influence. Two interviews were conducted in Cantonese with translations provided by bilingual researchers in our team (VW and JY). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English as needed.

Our choice to use an arts-informed method was epistemologically grounded in critical early childhood and youth studies (Lomax, 2015), which advocate for conducting research *with* children rather than *on* them. As others have noted (Leavy, 2015; Roberts & Woods, 2018), arts-informed methods not only invite expression, but also support young participants in shaping the research process itself. Unlike traditional adult-led interviews, which follow a researcher's structure and pace, art-making allows children to express themselves safely and comfortably at their own pace. It stimulates creativity and supports young participants in sharing their experiences through visual and narrative means. Our previous studies using collage and mixed-media—a pilot study with Japanese immigrant children aged 6 to 12 (Seko et al., 2021), and a research-creation project with youth aged 14 to 19 (Juando-Prats et al., 2024)—demonstrated how collaborative art-making fosters reflection, peer dialogue, and emotional engagement. Drawing and collaging were specifically chosen in this study to stimulate children's creativity, spark peer discussions, and promote their agency as active knowledge creators.

Analytic approach

For data analysis, we took a critical realist perspective, which views language as constructing social realities within the confines of the material world (Moore & Kelly, 2024). Data collected through art workshops, focus groups and online interviews were analyzed thematically, following Saldaña's (2015) open coding method. Our analysis focussed on finding patterns across data to identify factors influencing parental decisions about everyday school lunch making. First, two researchers (YS and VW) immersed themselves in the data by reading all interview transcripts three times each. The researchers independently engaged with inductive coding, generating initial codes relevant to parents' experiences with packing school lunches, children's lunchtime experiences at school, and families' perceptions of their cultural foods. The two researchers then compared their codes and discussed emergent patterns across the initial codes. The two authors then engaged in theming the data (Saldaña, 2015) by weaving initial codes into integrative themes. Instead of simply generating themes based on the frequency of codes, the researchers generated themes vis-à-vis perceived factors influencing parental decisions about everyday lunch making.

Throughout the analytic process, the two researchers regularly engaged in discussions to check the validity of interpretations, reflect on and refine the initial codes, and the developed themes collaboratively. Following Braun & Clarke's (2020) proposition that in thematic analysis researchers' subjectivities should be treated as a resource, a particular attention was paid to each researcher's positionality. One researcher (YS) brought her experience of migrating to Canada from Japan in her early 20s and raising a child born in Canada, while the other researcher (VW) brought her experience migrating to Canada from Hong Kong at a

young age and growing up in the Canadian educational system. Both researchers self-identified as Asian while being acutely aware of the enormous heterogeneity within “Asian” subgroups. Keeping our positionality intact during the analytic process was quintessential in treating the data as both unique products of interactive co-construction between the participants and us, the researchers, and as evidence for real phenomena (Moore & Kelly, 2024).

Findings

Participants

Table 1 presents the demographics of study participants. A total of 36 individuals (15 families) participated in the study, which comprised 19 children (ages 7-13, Grade 2-8) and 17 parents (14 mothers and 3 fathers). The 19 children included three sibling dyads, and 17 parents included two couples (father-mother dyad). All participants, except one child, were attending public schools at the time of the study. One child had transferred to a private school just before participating in the study. During the interview, the child shared their previous public school experience. All parents were first-generation immigrants to Canada, with six parents having migrated from India, five from China,

Member checking

Preliminary findings were shared with all participants via a newsletter-style summary, inviting feedback through an anonymous survey. The summary provided an overview of the project, demographic information about the study participants, data collection activities, and key findings from the study. Participants were given three weeks to review and complete the member checking survey. In total, six participants from three families (three parents and three children) responded and completed the member checking survey. Their reflections were discussed further by the two researchers (YS and VW) and incorporated into the final analysis.

and four from Hong Kong (all of the latter participants self-identified as Chinese). Among the children, ten identified Canada as their place of birth, followed by six born in China and Hong Kong and three born in India.

The majority of the participants had Canadian citizenship (11 parents & 14 children). There were two parents who held Permanent Resident (PR) status and four parents who were visa holders. Similarly, two children held PR status and three had visa statuses. The length of stay in Canada varied among participants. Seven out of 15 families had been in Canada for 16 years or longer, five families were recent immigrants³, two families had been in Canada between six to ten years, and one family had been in Canada between 11-15 years.

³ Following census data where “recent immigrants” are defined as individuals who have “obtained a landed immigrant or permanent resident status up to five years prior to a given census year” (Statistics Canada, 2017, p. 8), this study categorized the family’s length of stay in Canada in five-year periods.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<u>Place of Origin</u>		
	Parents	Children
India	6	3
China	5	2
Hong Kong	6	4
Canada	0	10
<u>Immigration Status</u>		
	Parents	Children
Canadian Citizen	11	14
Permanent Resident	2	2
Visa Holder	4	3
<u>Length of Time Parents have Spent in Canada</u>		
0-5 Year(s)	5	
6-10 Years	2	
11-15 Years	1	
16+ Years	7	

Frequency of packing cultural foods for children's school lunches

The families noted the frequency that they packed cultural foods for their children's school lunches. Seven

of the 15 families (46 percent) reported packing cultural foods for their children's school lunches five days a week. Four families (27 percent) noted that they packed cultural foods most of the time (three to four days per week) with the remaining four families (27 percent) reporting packing cultural foods some of the time (one

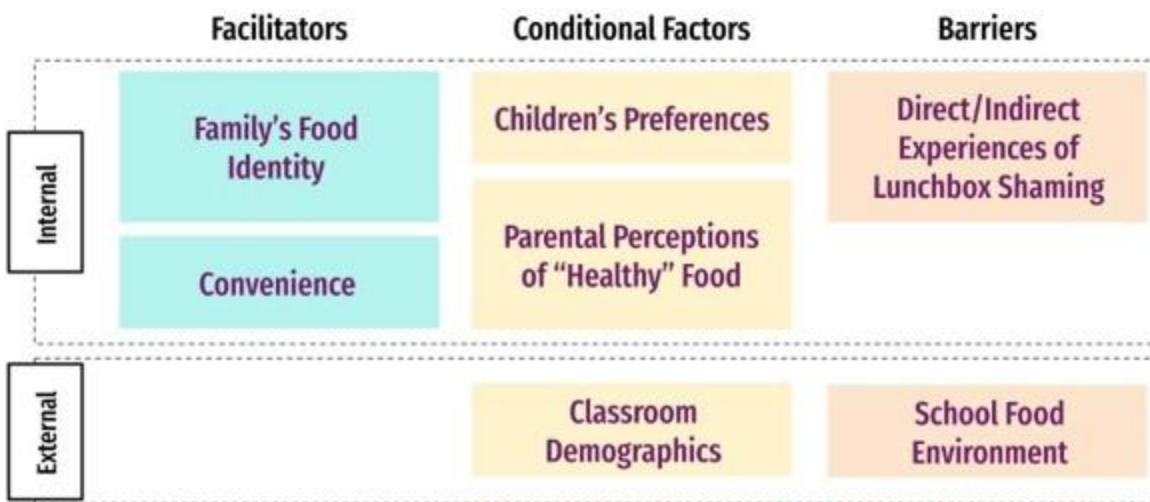
to two days per week). Notably, none of the families interviewed stated that they rarely packed cultural foods (zero to one day per week).

Factors influencing parental decisions regarding cultural food

Our analysis identified several internal and external factors that influence parental decisions around packing cultural food in their children’s school lunch. Internal factors refer to families’ perception, beliefs, values, and preferences, while external factors are the school food environments, systems, policies and other surroundings that are external to families’ control. Among the identified factors, some encouraged the inclusion of cultural foods in school lunches (“facilitators”), including the family’s food identity and convenience of

cooking familiar recipes. On the contrary, other factors deter parents from packing cultural foods in lunches (“barriers”), including school food environment (i.e., short lunchtimes, food regulations) as well as direct or indirect experiences of lunchbox shaming. There were also factors that worked in both directions (“conditional factors”), as in they could either facilitate or hinder parental decisions depending on the specific context. Notably, while there were two internal facilitators, two barriers (one internal and one external), and three conditional factors (two internal and one external), there was no external facilitator for parents that would encourage them to pack cultural food in school lunches. Figure 1 addresses the overview of these internal and external factors. In what follows, we provide detailed descriptions of each factor with quotes from participant interviews.

Figure 1: Factors influencing parental decisions regarding packing cultural food in their children's school lunches



Facilitators of parental decision to pack cultural foods

Family's food identity

Parental desire to maintain and pass their food tradition to their children is one of the salient internal factors motivating parents to pack cultural foods in children's school lunches. For these parents, everyday food, including school lunches, serves as a reminder of their cultural roots. It is also a conduit through which to transfer their cultural heritage to children growing up in Canada. Some parents expressed a strong sense of commitment to regularly feeding their children with cultural food:

"The food we cook at home... because my kids don't speak our language, and we don't have our community people... I feel like if they don't eat food, they won't know what's gonna happen to the next generation, right? They might not even recognize what Indian food is. What's important for us [is?] to keep that tradition flowing for the next generation, so they know what lemon rice is, they know what roti is, they know what the chicken biryani is, so my kids can teach their kids, right?" (Parent 04, from India)

Other parents echoed this view in stating that cultural food can connect their children with their grandparents and extended families when they visit their home countries:

"If [my children] didn't know what Hong Kong or Cantonese food is, when they come back to Hong Kong, they cannot connect with my family members, for example my father, my mother, my wife's father and her mother. I think the food is a connection for them, for my parents and for them." (Parent 17 from Hong Kong)

Additionally, for newcomer families who had recently moved to Canada, cultural food can help mitigate

hometown nostalgia during the initial phase of settlement in Canada. A father who immigrated from Hong Kong about ten months prior to the time of the interview mentioned that his son requested barbecue pork with honey to bring to school for lunch. The father thought this "Hong Kong cultural food" reminds his son of the taste of Hong Kong and alleviates his homesickness (Parent 17 from Hong Kong).

While for some families, cultural foods are vital to maintaining their food identity, for other families cultural food may also help construct and strengthen a bond among family members from different linguistic backgrounds:

"We don't speak Chinese at home because my husband speaks one dialect, and I speak another dialect. So, we speak English to each other. So, I find Chinese food brings us together. And it brings us closer to our family as well, like very typical Chinese." (Parent 14 from China)

In this household, homemade Chinese food serves as a symbolic connector that ties family members together. By sharing cultural meals as "typical Chinese" families would do, this family constructs—rather than maintains—their cultural identities through their Chinese meals.

Convenience

Parents' school lunch packing habits were often influenced by the convenience factor of cooking cultural food. For busy parents, packing leftover dinner straight into the lunchboxes is a tactic to save time in the morning. One mother noted that she often cooks fried rice in the morning by using leftover meat, vegetables, and rice and packing it in a thermal lunchbox ("thermos"), because it is the easiest way to

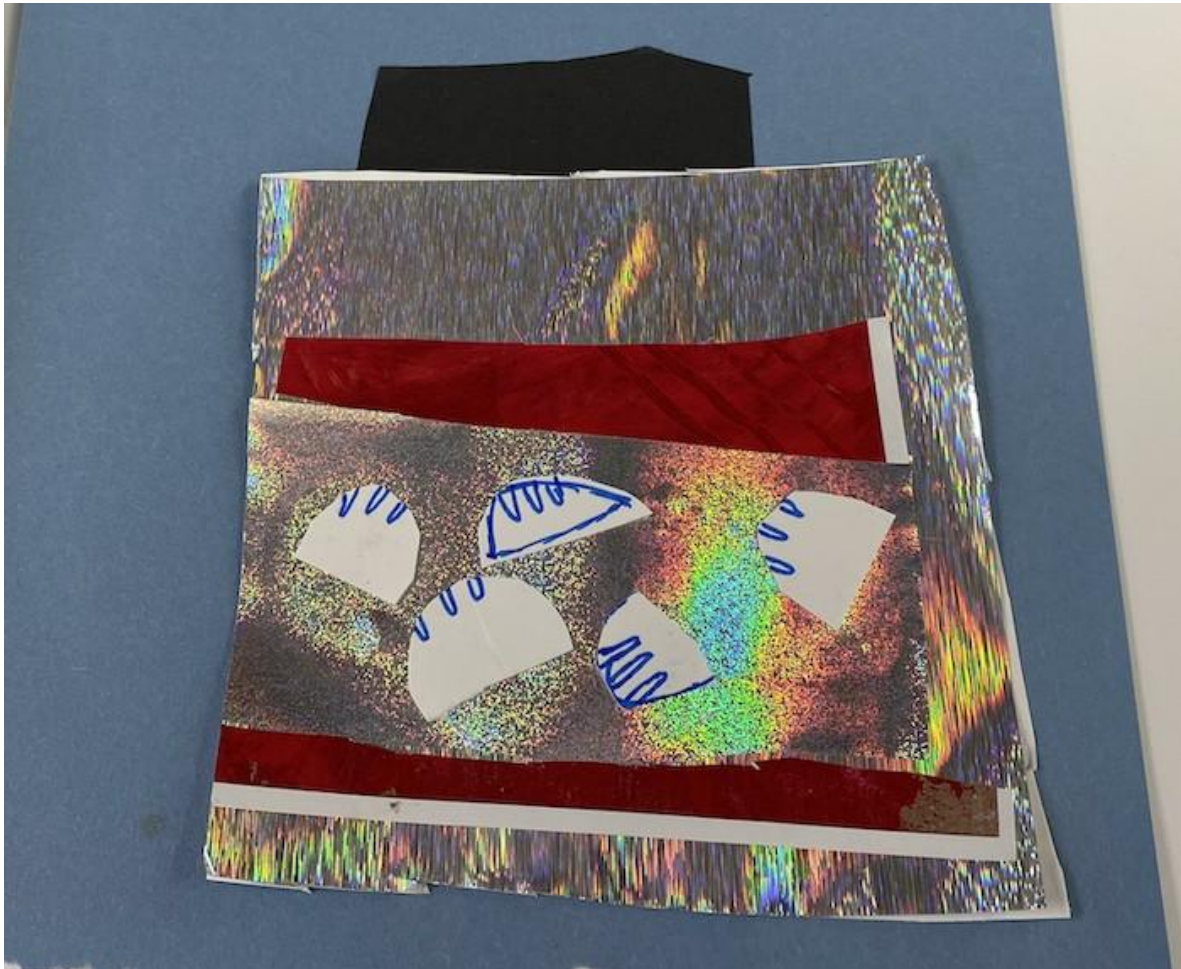
prepare a hot lunch for children (Parent 09 from Hong Kong).

Being able to make meals in a time-saving manner was also mentioned by many parents who leaned on recipes from their cultural backgrounds. Some parents noted that because they are already familiar with cultural recipes, they did not have to put additional time and effort into learning a new recipe or shopping for new ingredients. This familiarity of habitual foods helps streamline meal preparation for many. A mother reported that in their household, her father-in-law, who

is a former chef, primarily cooks meals for the family. Since the father-in-law knows Chinese recipes very well, they habitually eat Chinese meals at home and at school. Her son (grade 4) created a collage of dumplings in a thermos as his favorite lunch (Figure 2), while he occasionally asks the grandfather to cook different dishes for lunch such as sushi or pasta. The mother said:

“I don’t think it’s [bringing Chinese food to school] a must. It just so happens that we are Chinese and that’s the type of food that we cook and we send them to school.” (Parent 07 from Hong Kong)

Figure 2: A collage of dumplings in a thermos made by a grade 4 participant from a Chinese cultural background



Conditional factors influencing parental decision to pack cultural foods

Children's preferences

From both parents and children's interviews, it became salient that children are active agents of everyday lunch making. Parents regularly sought their children's agreement on what to pack in school lunch to ensure that the child would eat at lunchtime. While many parents attempted to provide what they believe are "good" and nutritious lunches, they often prioritized children's preferences to ensure their children consume enough food to sustain and nourish them during the day.

Children's preferences for cultural foods encourage parents to pack these foods in school lunches. Some children we interviewed reported that they prefer hot (warm) food (e.g., rice with stir fried meat and vegetables, dumplings) over cold, light lunches (e.g., sandwiches), and as such, they usually bring homemade cultural food to school. There was also a shared understanding, particularly among Chinese families, that rice is more filling than bread, pasta, or other starchy foods. One parent mentioned that because her son "easily gets hungry when he has a sandwich or spaghetti" (Parent 15 from China), she tends to pack rice-based cultural meals in her son's school lunch. Many of the children who prefer hot meals regularly bring a thermos to keep their meals warm. A few parents shared a similar routine of waking up at 5 a.m. to cook fresh food for their children's school lunch. They first warm the thermos with boiling water and then fill it with very hot food to ensure the temperature remains warm by lunchtime. These parents commented that their children complained that lukewarm/cold food is unappetizing.

Moreover, children's preferences reflect the degree of their culinary acculturation. One newcomer mother from India noted that her two sons have not yet acquired a "Canadian" taste and as such she had no choice but pack homemade Indian food that the children are familiar with:

"I think we still have not acquired so much taste for the food that is popular here...it's gonna take time for us to acquire that taste. [My two sons] still don't like mashed potatoes, the many things that they don't like still, because...they were not introduced to them earlier. Like, they are not into salads; they don't eat any green leaves." (Parent 06 from India)

On the other hand, children's preference could deter parents from packing cultural food. Some parents pointed to the challenge of balancing their desire to maintain traditional foodways with their children's desire to fit into the school food environment. Parents shared the compromises reached with their children to manage this dilemma. Many agreed to alternate the lunches between "Western" foods (e.g., sandwiches, pasta) and cultural foods. It is important to note that not all cultural food was welcomed by children, the preference laid with items that do not smell strongly.

"My preferred [lunch] menus are all Indian and healthy snacks. But since [my daughter] doesn't like all the time Indian stuff, so I combined it with our two days for Canadian stuffs, and two days or three days [for] Indian stuffs." (Parent 11 from India)

Other parents reportedly added a "Western spin" to their cultural food to adapt the recipe to children's taste and make it more acceptable at school:

"I also put like a little bit of a Western spin to it to make it a little more presentable or just a little more so ... so it doesn't look as ... as ethnic, right?" (Parent 02 from India)

This adaptation highlights how children's preferences can influence parental decisions around packing cultural food. In this case, this mother's effort to make the meal appear "less ethnic" not only reflects the child's preference but also the resultant pressure she internalizes to prepare a lunch her child feels comfortable eating at school. This type of effort was observed more frequently in Indian families than families from Chinese backgrounds. For instance, homemade "roti wrap" was frequently mentioned as a popular lunch item among Indian immigrant families, where sabji is wrapped in roti to resemble a sandwich wrap.

Parental perceptions of "healthy" food

Parental perceptions regarding healthy food worked as an internal conditional factor in their decisions around packing cultural food. Many parents reportedly pondered on everyday lunch making to provide their children with what they believe to be healthy foods. When asked to describe what healthy meals look like to them, most parents drew on a Western nutritional discourse that emphasizes a balance between carbohydrates, proteins, and fats, akin to official Canadian guidelines for healthy eating (Health Canada, 2020). However, whether and which cultural cuisines are considered healthy varies from one parent to another. Some noted that home-cooked cultural meals are healthier than store-bought highly processed "Western" foods, because they know the ingredients well and how to make a healthy twist by adding fresh ingredients. They were also concerned about children's post-immigration exposure to "junk foods" in Canada:

"Ethnic foods are healthier than Western food... mostly because it's home cooked. It's fresh. They're familiar. I am familiar with it. And I feel in my head I feel it's healthier." (Parent 01 from India)

On the contrary, others considered their traditional diet being less healthy than a Western diet. Some parents viewed traditional cooking methods, such as excess use of oil, spices, and overcooking vegetables (which can cause nutrient loss), as misaligned with their newly acquired Canadian understanding of healthy eating:

"The way we cook Indian food is definitely not healthy because it has a lot of oil in it. And the vegetables are completely well done cooked...back home the focus on food is the taste not the health. The way we grew up, nobody ever talked about healthy food. That's the first time I heard was from my husband complaining [about it] in Canada. Until then, I [had] never heard this concept of healthy food." (Parent 04 from India)

This perspective seemed to emerge after their exposure to Canadian nutritional discourses and through children's health education at school, leading some parents to question the healthiness of their cultural foods. Some parents mentioned that they have modified their cooking habits to align with their evolving dietary beliefs.

In this regard, some parents also welcomed the addition of healthy "Western snacks," such as vegetable sticks, fresh fruits, and yogurt, to their children's diets. They saw these snacks as convenient, nutritious, and complementary to their home-cooked cultural meals, helping to create a more balanced diet, both culturally and nutritionally. These additions were often framed as a tactic to ensure their children consume Canadian, socially acceptable, and school-friendly snacks while still maintaining elements of their cultural food traditions at home.

In relation to the conversation on healthy food, many parents further noted that they would welcome a national or provincial school meal program, given that cooking healthy meals every day poses challenges for busy families. They appreciated the idea of all students

eating the same meal together at school, which they believed could foster inclusivity and ease the burden of daily meal preparation. Some parents, while emphasizing the importance of passing culinary heritage to their children, also wished for their child to learn about diverse food cultures and practices within Canadian multiculturalism. However, several parents also expressed concerns about existing school meal programs such as breakfast and snack programs not meeting their children's cultural and dietary needs. A key issue raised was the lack of diversity in current school meal programs, which do not adequately accommodate cultural diversities thus do not meet their children's food preferences and their own expectations for healthy meals.

Classroom demographics

Children's classroom demographics, particularly the cultural backgrounds of classmates, worked as an external conditional factor for parental decisions around packing cultural food in children's lunches. Parents felt more comfortable packing cultural meals when their children's classmates largely shared similar cultural backgrounds and brought their traditional cuisines to school. However, when they were part of a noticeable ethnocultural minority group, parents often hesitated to pack cultural food, anticipating potential social discomfort or negative reactions from peers.

Classroom demographics also determine what type of food is perceived as "normal" in the classroom. In our arts-informed interviews, some children reported that while their classmates' cultural meals were not necessarily the same as their own, the overall diversity in lunchboxes made them feel comfortable eating their cultural food. On the other hand, when classroom demographics were less diverse and leaned toward a dominant Canadian culinary landscape, children felt

uneasy about eating their cultural meals. Intriguingly, this dynamic sometimes worked in reverse, when the norm in a particular classroom leaned toward home-cooked cultural meals, bringing "Canadian" food like sandwiches could make children feel self-conscious:

"At the beginning of the school year, we tried sandwiches, burgers... like that. And then my younger kid came back to me and then said, 'Mommy, I feel embarrassed if I bring a sandwich, like [a] cold lunch.' He thought it [was] strange to bring [a] cold lunch when everyone brings their hot lunch... That's why he stopped bringing any sandwiches." (Parent 16 from Hong Kong)

This mother also noted that she only started cooking Chinese homestyle meals after immigrating to Canada, as she had a domestic helper in Hong Kong who prepared the meals. To adapt to this new responsibility, she started learning recipes from the Internet and providing homemade Chinese foods to their children.

Barriers to parental decision to pack cultural foods

Direct or indirect experiences of lunchbox shaming

Understandably, children's firsthand experiences of lunchbox shaming at school served as an external deterrent for parents, making them hesitant to pack homemade cultural foods. While most children we interviewed regularly brought their cultural foods to school without facing peer pressure or negative comments, a few encountered hurtful reactions from their classmates that influenced both their own and their parents' attitudes toward school lunches. Upon facing lunchbox shaming, some children responded confidently, asserting pride in their cultural food, while others felt singled out and embarrassed. For instance,

one child participant recalled being told their food was “gross and disgusting” but responded assertively, saying, “It’s my food, not yours; why are you worrying about it?” (Child 02 - Indian background). Another child shared an experience of a classmate mocking their lunch by saying it “smelled like poo,” to which they replied, “I just told her to eat her own lunch” (Child 11 - Chinese background). In another case, a child’s grandparents packed red glutinous rice for lunch, prompting a classmate to question why the rice was purple and whether it was “diseased.” Although the child shrugged off the negative comments, the classmate reportedly insisted she is “weird” (Child 06 - Chinese background). Children’s lunchbox shaming experiences at school reinforced parental concerns about whether sending cultural food to school might subject their children to discomfort, leading some to reconsider their lunch-packing choices.

Along with shaming around cultural foods, a few parents of children in higher grades (Grades six and seven) also expressed a concern about size shaming. One parent noted that her daughter has been concerned about her lunchbox size, because she was teased by her classmates that her lunch was “too big” (Parent 04 from India). The daughter who joined our study confirmed this incident and noted that many of her classmates brought “tiny lunches and ten snacks” (Child 05), while she had a fulsome lunch and one to two snacks. She also mentioned that food has been a taboo subject at her school, because some of her classmates increasingly felt sensitive about their body size and eating habits.

Some parents also shared their personal experiences of facing lunchbox shaming when they were young or at work, which made them conscious about what to pack in their children’s lunch:

“When I was in high school (in Canada), I remember I didn’t bring any Chinese food at all. People would look at me strangely, right?... I think I was too scared

to bring rice or anything at that time.” (Parent 12 - from Hong Kong)

In addition to these direct experiences shared by child and parent participants, parents reported indirect experiences, such as lunchbox shaming that happened to their children’s older siblings when they were younger and how the memory of these incidents continued to shape their lunch packing decisions. Even if their younger children had not personally experienced teasing, parents remained cautious about packing cultural food, fearing that history might repeat itself. Similarly, other parents reported that they had heard about lunchbox shaming from other parents, family members, or even social media, both before and after immigrating to Canada. These rumored experiences heightened their awareness and made them more cautious about what they packed in their children’s lunches. One mother recalled being wary from the very beginning:

“When I first came [to Canada], when [my daughter] was little, in kindergarten, I had already heard enough stories of, you know... like ‘Be careful when you pack for school because kids, if they see something very, very different, they’ll make fun of it.’ And so I was mindful of that piece.” (Parent 02 - from India)

A couple who recently immigrated from Hong Kong (Parents 09 and 10) reflected on how widespread narratives about Western school lunch norms shaped their expectations before immigrating:

“[Before coming to Canada] we got so much news from social media describing how it is like to live as newcomers in England. Most of it is ...negative... especially what happens in British cultures... So, like, most students bring sandwiches... But so far, in Asian culture, students will have hot lunches or something like that. So that’s why sometimes for those different cultures, they have worries about what to bring to school.” (Parent 09 - from Hong Kong)

These preconceptions, shaped by second-hand stories and media portrayals, contributed to a heightened vigilance among newcomer parents, leading some to pre-emptively adjust their children's lunches to avoid potential lunchbox shaming.

School food environment

School food environments often served as an external deterrent to parents packing cultural foods. Some of the factors contributing to parental hesitance include short lunchtime duration, unsupervised lunchtime, and school food regulations. Most child participants reported that they have about 15 to 20 minutes to eat at lunch followed by 40 to 50 minutes outdoor recess, and two snack times: one in the morning and another in the afternoon. Some parents who had recently moved to Canada expressed surprise at the short lunchtime duration that requires that they pack foods that are quick and easy for their children to consume. Although these parents wished to pack a sizable lunch to nourish their children, the children do not always have enough time to finish food and prefer a smaller and quick-to-eat meal:

“Canadian people, they eat very light lunch. And then they're very fast. Yeah, so it's hard for my child. You know, you can't ask people to wait for you because they've already finished and they want to run outside, you know?” (Parent 10 from Hong Kong)

Discussion

This study revealed several determinants influencing immigrant parents' decision to whether to pack cultural food in their children's school lunches. Their choices

As a result, these parents felt pressured to adjust their lunch making routine by altering lunch contents, decreasing portion sizes, or excluding some food items to help their children complete their meals.

Parents also commented on the lack of teacher supervision during lunchtime. They believed that having a classroom teacher to monitor lunchtime, even occasionally, would be beneficial in preventing food shaming by intervening if necessary. Teachers can also deepen their understanding of students' culinary backgrounds and integrate this knowledge into teaching. Relatedly, a few parents wondered if schools could integrate food into the curriculum to educate children about diverse food cultures beyond nutrition and healthy eating. Educating children about the richness of their own and their peers' cultures in a multicultural city, like Toronto, could promote a culturally safe school food environment.

School food policies, particularly restrictions on food sharing and certain food items (e.g., nuts) due to allergy concerns, were a new concept for some parents. Some participants stated that food allergies were not recognized as serious problems back home, but now they felt responsible for abiding by the rules to protect other children. In addition to making sure their children's lunches are nut-free, some parents voluntarily refrained from packing cultural foods, such as using sesame oils and seafoods, to avoid potentially harming other children.

reflect a complex interplay between family's food identities, healthy eating discourses, school food environments, and the challenges of raising children

while Asian in Canada. Although prior Canadian studies portrayed lunch making as a burden on families (Shwed et al., 2023; O'Rourke et al., 2020), we found that for some immigrant parents, it is a labour of love and a tangible strategy to maintain their culinary heritage while fostering family bonds.

Although our primary focus was on parental decision making around everyday lunch making, using the arts-informed method of collaging and drawing was an essential research practice to elicit children's experiences and perspectives. While creating collages and drawings, children actively described their favourite dishes and snacks, the shape and colour of their thermos and lunch bags, the foods their peers bring, and conversations they had with their families and peers about school lunches. The art-making process provided children with the time and space to express their thoughts in a way that dialogue alone does not allow. These insights then informed our parent-child dyad interviews, and in follow-up sessions parents reflected that the artwork provided valuable windows into their children's thoughts and school experiences.

Our findings align with research linking lunch making to the ideologies of intensive mothering, where mothers internalize social pressures around feeding children (Harman & Cappellini, 2015; Harman & Cappellini, 2018; Niimi-Burch and Black, 2024). Many of the mothers we interviewed similarly hold themselves accountable for feeding their children "properly," to nurture their development, implement healthy eating habits, and teach them family food cultures. However, our study also complicates the intensive mothering discourse, as three fathers who participated in our study took primary responsibility for lunch making. Additionally, one mother noted that her father-in-law handled daily meal preparation, including school lunch making. Notably, all male caregivers in charge of lunch making were from Chinese backgrounds, whereas all

participating Indian parents were mothers. The length of time spent in Canada had little influence on these patterns, as two of the fathers had immigrated less than a year ago, indicating that these gendered divisions of domestic labor were likely established pre-migration. These findings suggest that gender norms surrounding food preparation may vary across Asian immigrant communities. While gender undoubtedly plays a powerful role in shaping food practices within immigrant households (e.g., Chapman & Beagan, 2013), future research should explore more fluid and evolving gender patterns of food preparation, considering how responsibilities may shift over time and across generations. Additionally, the distribution of foodwork within multigenerational households warrants further attention, particularly how caregiving roles and foodwork are negotiated among parents, grandparents, and children.

While wishing to preserve traditional foodways, many parents adapted their lunch making practices to accommodate children's evolving preferences, incorporating new food items or adding a "Western spin" to their cultural foods. Rather than rigidly preserving traditions, these families approached lunch making as a flexible, habitual practice responsive to family's evolving tastes. Here, homemade cultural meals were not necessarily framed as a conduit of heritage preservation. Instead, it was considered as quotidian, habitual, and taken-for-granted aspects of family life. This aligns with research suggesting cultural foodways are not always static but continuously shaped by everyday choices and interactions (Chapman & Beagan, 2013; Vallianatos & Raine, 2008). In other words, homemade cultural foods communicate both immigrant families' cultural heritage and their changing food habits in Canada.

Relatedly, school lunches also serve as a gateway for children to familiarize themselves with Canadian

foodways. Parents viewed Canadian-style “healthy” snacks promoted by schools as valuable opportunities for their children to learn about “healthy eating” and adapt to the Canadian diet. Newcomer parents also demonstrated a high level of adherence to school food policies, particularly regarding food allergies. This finding echoes Harrington et al.’s (2015) study with newcomers in Mississauga, Canada, where participants demonstrated strong compliance with school-based food policies to facilitate their integration to Canadian society and “enact good citizenship” (p. 136). However, these policies often discouraged parents from packing cultural foods.

Direct and indirect experiences of lunchbox shaming were salient deterrents to parents from packing cultural foods. Compared to young adult participants (17 to 25 years old) in our previous study (Seko et al., 2023), fewer children in this study experienced direct lunchbox shaming. Those whose lunches were subject to teasing were able to speak back to their classmates without feeling ashamed of their cultural food. Still, parental anxieties of lunchbox shaming were pronounced. Parents showed a higher level of concern than children themselves, because of their own experiences at school or work, the child’s older siblings’ experiences, as well as cautionary tales of lunchbox shaming that they heard through the grapevine and social media.

Parental concerns over lunchbox shaming were also shaped by their perceptions of healthy eating. For some, cultural meals were seen as healthier because of their familiarity with ingredients and preparation methods. For others, cultural foods were perceived as incompatible with their newly adopted Western ideals of healthy diet, leading them to modify recipes or avoid packing them altogether. This internal negotiation reflects broader histories of culinary discrimination, where non-Western foodways have been subject to

scrutiny and devaluation. As Williams-Forsen (2022) argues, gastronomic surveillance has long positioned Black foodways as “unhealthy” or “dirty” in the U.S., in contrast to dominant White dietary norms. This culinary racism shapes not only public attitudes but also the ways racialized communities, including Asian diaspora, perceive their own cultural food practices (Mannur, 2006). Similarly, some parents we interviewed may have internalized food-related microaggressions, which in turn influence their way of navigating school lunch preparation. The internalized microaggressions can be further reinforced by the school food environments. As our study indicated, there were no external facilitators actively encouraging parents to pack cultural meals. Without policies or initiatives that foster culturally inclusive food environments, parents may feel further discouraged from including cultural foods in their children’s lunches, especially when children are facing peer pressure to conform to dominant foodways.

Our findings have implications for Canada’s forthcoming national school meal program (Government of Canada, 2024b). While research suggests that a government-mandated school meal program could alleviate the burden of lunch packing and expose children to a variety of nutritious foods (Shwed et al., 2023), our study highlights the need to critically examine the assumptions embedded in such initiatives. Indeed, many parents who participated in our study expressed dissatisfaction with existing school meal programs, citing a perceived lack of culinary diversity and a mismatch with their home food culture.

A key concern here is the assumption of universality that all parents and caregivers would welcome a standardized “Canadian” school meal program. This perspective risks overlooking the ways in which many immigrant parents view home-packed lunches as an essential means of maintaining cultural food traditions

and exercising agency over what their children eat. Existing research on school meal programs often operates under the implicit assumption that parents often lack sufficient nutrition knowledge to pack a healthy lunch (e.g., O'Rourke et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2020; Shwed et al., 2023). Such a view could reinforce a deficit-oriented perspective that disregards parents' knowledge and diverse understandings of healthy eating, as well as their desire to feed their children in their own preferred ways. Therefore, our study serves as a reminder that national school meal programs, without intentional efforts to reflect diverse food traditions, can inadvertently perpetuate dominant foodways while marginalizing other foodways that do not conform to the norms (Moffat & Gendron, 2018).

Building on these concerns, it is also important to recognize that “Canadian cuisine” is not monolithic. Given the wide regional diversity of Canadian food traditions (Newman, 2017), implementing a culturally inclusive school food program would likely need to be tailored to reflect the unique demographic and cultural landscapes of different municipalities. While some areas may require broad representation of global cuisines, others might focus on regionally specific dishes tied to

local histories and food practices. This raises critical questions: What will “Canadian” school meals look like? Which cultural foods will be included in local school meal programs, and who decides? These are not just logistical questions but ethical ones, touching on equity, representation, and food sovereignty within the broader framework of national school food programming.

Our study has limitations. Our small sample of 17 parents and 19 children does not capture the full diversity of Asian immigrant families in Toronto. Additionally, our study's focus on two Asian communities, Chinese and Indian, excluded many other Asian and non-Asian ethnic communities with distinct food cultures and experiences. Future research should explore a broader range of immigrant communities to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how school meal policies impact diverse populations. Lastly, an intersectional approach to family foodwork can offer a more nuanced understanding of family food practices shaped at the nexus of transnational migration, gender, and family dynamics.

Conclusion

Migration to a new country requires ongoing adaptation to new lifestyles, culture, and food practices. This study highlighted lunchbox making as a key parenting task outside home for immigrant families through which they balance cultural food traditions, culinary acculturation, healthy eating discourses, and school food norms. The tension between maintenance of cultural heritage and adaptation to new foodways is evident, as parents address children's evolving food

preferences while navigating concerns over lunchbox shaming and school food environments. Our findings emphasize the need for culturally inclusive school meal programs that respect diverse food practices. Future policies must acknowledge immigrant parents' agency in shaping their children's food experiences and promote school environments that embrace culinary diversity. In this context, the upcoming national school food program carries high stakes: if not thoughtfully

implemented with cultural inclusivity at its core, it risks further marginalizing non-dominant foodways and undermining the cultural agency of immigrant families. A culturally responsive school meal program should not only provide nutritious meals but also affirm children

and families' food identities, foster awareness of culinary diversity, and create an inclusive food environment where all students feel a sense of belonging.

Acknowledgements: We wholeheartedly thank research participants for generously sharing their experience with us. We are also thankful to our two collaborators Drs. Jacqui Gingras and Jessica Mudry for their continuous support. This research was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Insight Development Grant (2020–2022, Principal Investigator: Yukari Seko).

Ethical statement: Ethics approval was granted by our institutional Research Ethics Boards. All research participants gave informed consent before taking part in the research project.

References

- Agaronov, A., Entwistle, T., & Leung, M. M. (2019). From the lunch table, to the family table: A grounded theory approach to understanding urban adolescents' experiences of food culture mismatch between school and home environments. *Ecology of food and nutrition*, 58(1), 23-44.
- Beagan, B., Chapman, G. E., D'sylva, A., & Bassett, B. R. (2008). 'It's just easier for me to do it': Rationalizing the family division of foodwork. *Sociology*, 42(4), 653-671.
- Beagan, B. L., Chapman, G. E., Johnston, J., McPhail, D., Power, E. M., & Vallianatos, H. (2014). *Acquired tastes: Why families eat the way they do*. UBC Press.
- Black, J. L., Mazac, R., Heckleman, A., & Elliott, S. (2022). Unwrapping school lunch: Examining the social dynamics and caring relationships that play out during school lunch. *Canadian Food Studies La Revue Canadienne Des études Sur l'alimentation*, 9(2), 276-298.
- Blanchet, R., Nana, C. P., Sanou, D., Batal, M., & Giroux, I. (2018). Dietary acculturation among black immigrant families living in Ottawa: A qualitative study. *Ecology of food and nutrition*, 57(3), 223-245.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative research in psychology*, 18(3), 328-352.
- Brenton, J. (2017). The limits of intensive feeding: Maternal foodwork at the intersections of race, class, and gender. *Sociology of health & illness*, 39(6), 863-877.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2024, March 29). Consider Cultural Food Preferences: FAQ. <https://www.cdc.gov/food-service-guidelines-toolkit/php/strategize-act/cultural-food-preferences.html>
- Chapman, G. E., & Beagan, B. L. (2013). Food practices and transnational identities: Case studies of two Punjabi-Canadian families. *Food, Culture & Society*, 16(3), 367-386.
- Government of Canada (2024a, April 01) *A National School Food Program to set kids up for success*. [News Release]. Accessed October 16, 2024. <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2024/04/01/national-school-food-program-set-kids-success>
- Government of Canada. (2024b, June 20). National school food policy. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/esdc-edsc/images/programs/school-food/reports/national-policy/4624-National_School_Food_Policy-E.pdf
- Graham, E. R., & Gussak, D. E. (2023). Collage as epistemology: Construction—deconstruction—reconstruction. *Visual Arts Research*, 49(1), 29-44.

- Harman, V., & Cappellini, B. (2015). Mothers on display: Lunchboxes, social class and moral accountability. *Sociology*, 49(4), 764-781.
- Harman, V., & Cappellini, B. (2018). Boxed up? Lunchboxes and expansive mothering. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 7(3), 467-481.
- Harrington, D. W., Dean, J., Wilson, K., & Qamar, Z. (2015). “We don’t have such a thing, that you may be allergic”: Newcomers’ understandings of food allergies in Canada. *Chronic illness*, 11(2), 126-139.
- Health Canada. (2020). *Canada’s Food Guide*. Accessed February 01, 2025. <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>
- Juando-Prats, C., Rodney, R., Hodwitz, K., King, C., Parsons, J., Gastaldo, D., and Sova, I. (2024). N(ArT)URE. When Words Are Not Enough: Playing with Art and Nature. [Exhibition Catalogue]. Toronto, Canada: OCAD University Gallery
- Lane, G., & Vatanparast, H. (2023). Immigrant families’ experience of the Canadian food and nutrition environment. *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, 48(6), 445-454.
- Leavy, P. (2015). *Method Meets Art. Arts-Based Research Practice (2nd ed.)*. The Guilford Press.
- Lee, S. D., Kellow, N. J., Huggins, C. E., & Choi, T. S. (2022). How and why diets change post-migration: a qualitative exploration of dietary acculturation among recent Chinese immigrants in Australia. *Nutrients*, 14(17), 3573.
- Lomax, H. (2015). Seen and heard? Ethics and agency in participatory visual research with children, young people and families. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 4(3), 493-502.
- Mannur, A. (2006). Asian American Food-Scapes. *Amerasia Journal*, 32(2), 1-5.
- Moffat, T., & Gendron, D. (2019). Cooking up the “gastro-citizen” through school meal programs in France and Japan. *Food, Culture & Society*, 22(1), 63-77.
- Moffat, T. (2022). *Small bites: biocultural dimensions of children’s food and nutrition*. UBC Press.
- Moore, A. R., & Kelly, D. M. (2024). Getting Real About Critical Realist Interviewing: Five Principles to Guide Practice. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23.
- Newman, L. (2017). *Speaking in Cod Tongues: A Canadian Culinary Journey*. University of Regina Press.
- Niimi-Burch, S., & Black, J. (2024). Balancing acts: Unpacking mothers’ experiences and meanings of school lunch packing. *Canadian Food Studies La Revue Canadienne Des études Sur l’alimentation*, 11(2), 171–193.
- O’Rourke, B., Shwed, A., Bruner, B., & Ferguson, K. (2020). What’s for lunch? Investigating the experiences, perceptions, and habits of parents and school lunches: a scoping review. *Journal of School Health*, 90(10), 812-819.
- Roberts A., Woods P. A. (2018). Theorising the value of collage in exploring educational leadership. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(4), 626–642.
- Ruetz, A. T., & McKenna, M. L. (2021). Characteristics of Canadian school food programs funded by provinces and territories. *Canadian Food Studies*, 8(3).
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3rd ed). London: Sage.
- Seko, Y. Rahouma, L., Takano-Reeves, C., & Wong, V. (2021). Unboxing the bento box: An arts-informed inquiry into Japanese families’ experience at Canadian school lunch time. *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue canadienne des études sur l’alimentation*, 8(3):21-44
<https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i3.492>
- Seko, Y., Juando-Prats, C., Wong, V, Rahouma, L., Yu, J., & Henry-Noel, N. (2023). Lunchbox Shaming: Asian Youth’s Recollections of Canadian School Lunchtime. *Food, Culture & Society*.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15528014.2023.2289238>
- Shwed, A., O’Rourke, B., Bruner, B., & Ferguson, K. (2023). Impact of COVID-19 School-Related Policies in Ontario on

Parents' School Lunch Packing Habits. *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research*, 84(1), 10-16.

Statistics Canada. (2017, August 31). Release and Concepts Overview, 2016 Census of Population: Immigration and ethnocultural diversity release.
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-501/98-501-x2016008-eng.cfm>

Statistics Canada (2022a). Focus on geography series, 2021 census of population: Toronto Census Metropolitan Area. Accessed May 12, 2025.
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/page.cfm?topic=9&lang=E&dguid=2021S0503535>

Statistics Canada. (2022b, October 26). The Daily: Immigrants make up the largest share of the population in over 150 years and continue to shape who we are as Canadians. Accessed October 16, 2024
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm>

Sugino, C. M. (2021). Foreign Intrusions: An Exploration of Asian American Historical Memory Through Food-Related Discourses.” *Liminalities*, 17(1/2), 1-19.

Sutherland, R., Nathan, N., Brown, A., Yoong, S., Reynolds, R., Walton, A., ... & Wolfenden, L. (2020). A cross-sectional

study to determine the energy density and nutritional quality of primary-school children's lunchboxes. *Public Health Nutrition*, 23(6), 1108-1116.

Tanner, C., Maher, J., Leahy, D., Lindsay, J., Supski, S., & Wright, J. (2019). 'Sticky' foods: How school practices produce negative emotions for mothers and children. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 33.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food (n.d.). Why It Matters. Accessed February 18, 2025.
<https://www.healthyschoolfood.ca/why-it-matters>

Toronto District School Board (2023). *2023 TDSB Student Census: Preliminary Results*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Toronto District School Board.

Vallianatos, H., & Raine, K. (2008). Consuming food and constructing identities among Arabic and South Asian immigrant women. *Food, Culture & Society*, 11(3), 355-373.

Williams-Forsen, P. A. (2022). *Eating while black: Food shaming and race in America*. University of North Carolina Press.