UNPACKING SCHOOL LUNCH:
WHAT LUNCH CAN TEACH US ABOUT THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF SCHOOL FOOD IN CANADA TO PROVIDE CARE, DIGNITY AND ACCESS TO NOURISHMENT

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

On the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people

Jennifer Black
Food, Nutrition & Health

Sinikka Elliott
Department of Sociology

PUBLIC HEALTH URBAN NUTRITION

PHUN LAB

Goals for Today's Webinar

- Describe two school lunch models and the rationale for the new approach

- Compare children's experiences to intended outcomes:

  - **Stigma, Cost & Access, Dietary Quality, and the Food-Care Gap**

- Discuss implications for improving school meal quality and experiences

THE COALITION FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD IS CALLING ON PROVINCIAL AND FEDERAL LEADERS TO WORK TOGETHER TO FEED SCHOOL CHILDREN

school works best when kids are fed, and politicians listen.

As Canadian Education Ministers meet in Toronto on July 7 & 8, the Coalition for Healthy School Food is calling on provincial and federal leaders to work together to feed school children.

Source: Food Secure Canada

Canadian Food Studies   La Revue canadienne des études sur l'alimentation

Perspective

The case for a Canadian national school food program

Kimberley Hernandez[a], Rachel Engler-Stringer[b*], Sara Kirk[c], Hannah Wittman[d], Sasha McNicholl[e]

FSC

Growing resilience and equity:
A food policy action plan in the context of Covid-19

Diverse Arguments for School Food Programs

- Healthier food for students, regardless of socioeconomic status

- Lower rates of food insecurity for households with children

- Improved school attendance and academic achievement

- Reduced family burdens

The Context of Our Work

June 2017: District motion: *"no child is hungry and every child eats healthy"*

Spring 2018: UBC - UofS - District – Health Authority research partnership established

February 2019: New lunch program launched at 3 schools

METHODS

Multiple Approaches for Capturing the Experiences of Children, Parents, School Staff and Project Partners

Documenting Children's Experiences

Fieldwork in 3 schools (2 classes each)
- Grades 3&4, 4&5, 8

January 2019 (pre-) & May 2019 (post-)

- 3 visits per class each time (pre and post)

- Brief series of questions about lunch

- Final visit: before- and after-lunch photos and written activity

Documenting the Program's Evolution

- "Process notes" taken during monthly meetings with partners
  - Documenting decision-making processes, resources and challenges to implementing the new lunch program

Documenting Insights from Parents and Key Stakeholders

- June 2019: Parent survey
  - Completed by ~25% of families in three pilot schools
  - Respondents represented children at all grade levels and diverse socioeconomic circumstances, languages spoken at home, and working statuses

- June - November 2019: Stakeholder interviews
  - 12 individuals who played key roles in the transition to the new school lunch program
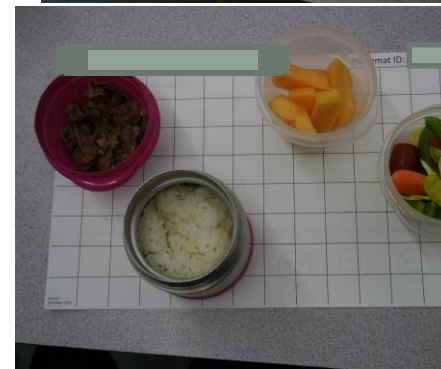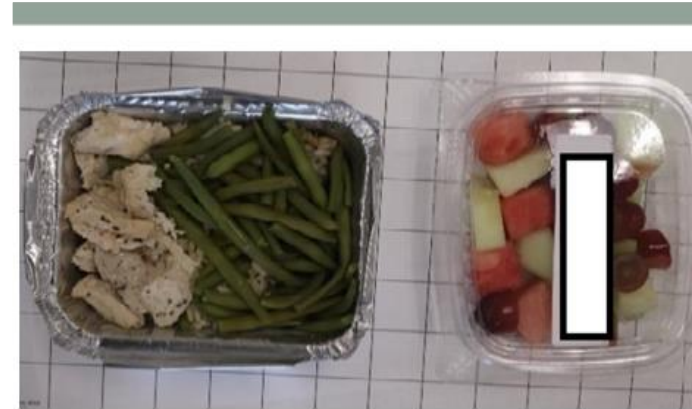
Overview of Former Food Program

- Monthly meals, limited menu options, envelope system for signing up, highly subsidized, primarily coordinated by two kitchen staff workers and a noon-hour supervisor, method of lunch distribution varied, limited number of lunches available, ~$54/mth

Overview of New Food Program

- Overseen by a nutrition coordinator, contract with external catering company, online ordering and payment system, open to everyone on daily basis, delivered by caterer, method of distribution varied, cost-sharing, online subsidy application, entrée cost $5.75

What the School District Hoped to Achieve

Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Student-level Improvements: • Food access & meal experience • Dietary quality • Achievement & engagement **School-level Improvements:** • Meal program participation • Cost structure & feasibility • School food environment	• Food literacy, health, & nutrition awareness • Reduced stigma & parent/family burdens	• Graduation rates • Nutrition for entire families • To reduce violence in the school and community

FINDINGS

Program Mismatches and Tensions

1) Reducing stigma

2) Cost and improved food access

3) Improving dietary quality

4) Narrowing the "food-care gap"

Reducing Stigma

- School food programs administered in a non-stigmatizing way are crucial for making sure all students have access to lunch at school (e.g., Hernandez et al 2018; Poppendieck 2011)

- But unclear how stigma actually manifests in programs

How Might Stigma Occur?

1) Through the subsidy application process?

Language from the 2019 subsidy application:

Subsidies are available for families who have significant financial need such that they struggle to provide a healthy meal for their child(ren) while at school. The Subsidy Form below requires that you provide a short statement of financial or other needs that impact your family in such a way.

Subsidy Form: Click on the icon

Stigma Reduction Was a Major Reason for the Transition to a New Meal Program

"…there's all these mystery kids that apparently are hungry, but nobody knows who they are. The numbers just don't match. You wonder whether it's **because you have a stigmatizing targeted program**. If you get rid of that barrier, will all these kids start to pop out of the woodwork?"

- Stakeholder interviewee, referring to former program

Tension Between Avoiding Stigma and Staying in the Black

- "The challenge is always, the program has to be fiscally sustainable, so you can't have people subscribe for a subsidy that don't need a subsidy, and just want to get a free lunch. Yet you don't want to create so much stigma that people don't apply."

  - Stakeholder interviewee, referring to the new program

How Might Stigma Occur?

1) Through the subsidy application process

2) Through students feeling visible as the "poor kids on subsidized lunch"
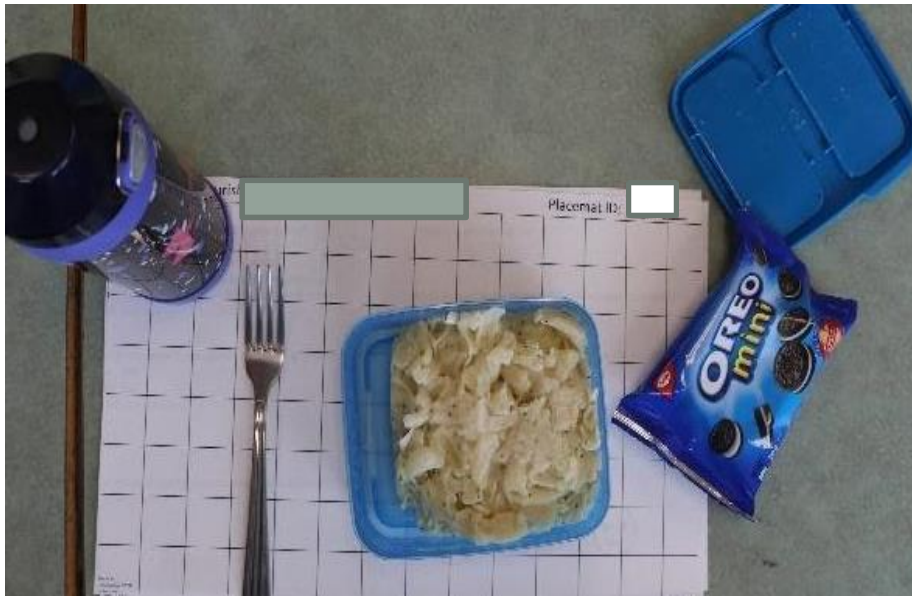
Blending In or Sticking Out?

Home lunch

Former program lunch

Blending In or Sticking Out?

Home lunch

New program lunch

Students Were Well Aware of Who Participated in the Lunch Program

- 'Students throughout the room seem to know who was (even used to be and [are] not now) on the program. Is this stigma or just observation? Is it admiration from the others or judgement?'
    - Fieldnote, School 2, Class 3, Observation 5

Children's Coded Language and Stigma

- Reading between the lines

  - E.g., A student told fieldworker, "I already ate", but teacher reported the student didn't have a lunch

Cost and Access

For a Universal Healthy School Food Program

Presented by the Members and Collaborators of the Coalition for Healthy School Food

Source: https://www.mothering.com/articles/lunch-shaming-motivates-dad-to-help-school-children-everywhere/

Cost Emerged as a Major Barrier to Participation in New Program

Parent survey

- Over half (54%) of parents surveyed who had not ordered from the new school food program agreed or strongly agreed that "the price is too expensive".

Many Parents Indicated Concern with Cost

- Few parents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the program "helps us save money" (13%), "is good value for the price" (34%), and "is priced fairly" (39%).

"…to taut [*sic*] this program as affordable for average (not low income) families is laughable. When our rent is double a mortgage payment, paying on average $10 a day per child for a lunch they don't like, is absolutely ridiculous. I've met numerous families who feel the same way…"

  - Open-ended comment on survey

Some Parents Indicated Resistance to the Cost-shared Model

- Among households not receiving a subsidy, middle income families were more likely than lower and higher income households to disagree with the statement "Part of a full priced entrée should go to support the subsidy program".
  - Open-ended comment on survey

Students and Resistance to the Idea of Free Lunch

- One student reported she had heard "good things" about the new school food program, like "you can get free lunch, but I don't think it's true".
  - School 1, Class 2, Observation 5

- A student said the new program should be "slightly cheaper, not free, not expensive, but [a] different price". Another volunteered that the new program should be "slightly cheaper, [but] not free".
  - School 1, Class 1, Observation 6

Stigma, Cost and Access
Mismatch between Program Goals and Impact

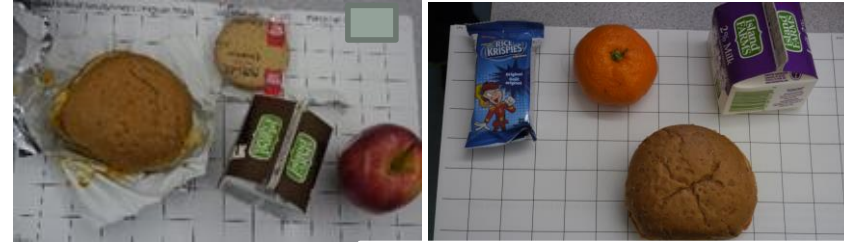- Core rationale for program was to improve access and make program "universally accessible"

But…

- Also justified program by trying to ensure that freeloaders using program for "convenience" did not abuse system or get subsidy without established "need".

- And students on subsidy program did not receive subsidies for side dishes, milk, or desserts.

Dietary Quality

- New meal program provided nutritious options and was perceived by parents as healthier

- No sugar sweetened beverages, and little processed meat found in program meals

New Program

- But need for continued monitoring to ensure variety, quality and access to "kid-friendly" whole grains, fruit/veg, milk and alternatives

Dietary Quality
Mismatch between Program Goals and Impact

- Core rationale for program was to ensure "all students eat healthy"

But…

- After the short term program pilot, school nutrition coordinator position left unfilled and food literacy curricula never implemented
- Expectation that caterer would ensure nutritional standards
- Milk & nutritious side dishes not accessible to students on subsidy

The Food-Care Gap
Mismatch between Program Goals and Impact

- Core rationale for program was to improve food access and meal experience

But…

- Food provided by external caterer and in-house food service staff were let go

- Students reported loss of social safety net and care

Invisible Care & Lunch Workers

- E.g., 'I don't see this student with any lunch, and he and his fellow students start talking about how challenging it is for students who don't have a strong support network. They say, "some kids don't have any food". These students were supported by the old program and felt like they could always go to old lunch staff if they didn't have time (or their parents didn't have time) to pack a lunch. "Now you just have to starve", they say.'
    - School 3, Class 6, Observation 6

Food as a Symbol of Care

Care Requires Time and Labour

- "We assist with ordering where we can, helping set up accounts where we can, advising about subsidies. On a daily basis, lunch comes in, there's always some things to work out, some details to work out."
  - Stakeholder interviewee, referring to the new program

Care Requires Time and Labour

- "We assist with ordering **where we can**, helping set up accounts **where we can**, advising about subsidies. On a daily basis, lunch comes in, there's always some things to work out, some details to work out."
  - Stakeholder interviewee, referring to the new program

Care Requires Time and Labour

- "We were on a previous lunch program where we could just make all those decisions. It's very different now. So it can feel a little frustrating because it was so easily done before and now there's hoops. We just want to help people; *we just want to feed the kids*."
  - Stakeholder interviewee, comparing the two programs

Ad Hoc Efforts to Fill the Food-Care Gap

- "A lot of us make sure our kids would eat. No school, I believe, has let anyone not have… every school has staples [on hand]."
  - Stakeholder interviewee

CHAPTER 3:

Hungry students in BC public schools and the adequacy of school meal programs to support them

This report is one of a series documenting the findings of the Poverty and Education survey. For additional information, see: http://www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx

A BC Teachers' Federation study. This survey was conducted by BCTF Research in collaboration with the Anti-poverty action group of the Committee for Action on Social Justice.

2015 BCTF Report estimated that nearly **$4 million** per year is spent out of pocket by BC teachers to meet the needs of hungry students

Summary of Key Insights

- Stigma – free lunches or freeloaders?

- Cost and access – universality in name versus practice

- The real cost of food and labour – supporting school food programs

- Recognizing the role of (invisible) care and the "food-care gap"
  - 'Lunch ladies' matter!

Thank You for Listening!

- And thanks to the parents who completed the survey, the stakeholders who were interviewed, and the families and schools who graciously allowed us to learn about school lunch as it happened

Questions? Comments?

- Contact us at Sinikka.Elliott@ubc.ca and j.black@ubc.ca