Fostering Greater Equity and Inclusion with Plant-Based Food Options in School:

A Critical Inquiry with Elementary Parents in the Lakehead District School Board

by

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Abstract

While there has been increasing attention to equity and inclusion in Ontario schools, school food and drink offerings have yet to be explicitly incorporated in most equity and inclusion policies and practices. With the growing number of vegetarian and vegan (veg*n) families and literature documenting the marginalization of veg*ns, this study sought to explore Thunder Bay parents' experiences with school food options available to their children who eat plant-based diets. Taking a narrative inquiry-inspired approach, interviews were conducted with 10 mothers and one father. In most schools, plant-based options were not available, and as a result, students felt socially excluded and, at times, were physically excluded, which negatively affected their feelings of well-being and interrupted their learning. Parents also reported feeling unsupported when advocating for their children and their attempts to mitigate their children's exclusion were time-consuming. Parents felt it was important that schools make more effort to learn about the dietary needs of their student population and provide appropriate options, and they recommended that an inclusive school food policy be created at the Board level. To normalize dietary diversity, they also wanted school staff to learn and teach about plant-based diets, including the different reasons people adopt these diets, including for health, animal welfare, sustainability, religion, and culture. Since some individual teachers and one school demonstrated inclusive school food practices, parents recommended that these educators could lead professional development workshops for other school staff. Additionally, that the participants were mostly women and all were White, illuminates mothers' responsibilization for food as well as raises a concern about whose voices were not heard in this study.

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My children, thank you for cheering me on. Even if you do not choose the plant-based options that may one day be mandated in your school, I relish the thought that another child will be free to so if they wish. If they opt for a food choice as a form of activism or in response to a physiological need, I know you will model acceptance and fiercely defend their right to eat how they please without discrimination.

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sharing with administration that you too saw the importance of creating a culture of inclusive food practices.

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Chapter One: Introduction

My research explored how plant-based school food offerings might be one way to improve equity and inclusion in elementary schools in the Lakehead District School Board (LDSB). The purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of parents of elementary children who eat a plant-based diet and to gauge whether families currently feel represented with the food offered in schools. I suspected demonstrating respect for diverse needs for plant-based food could help create a sense of belonging for more eaters, thus helping foster greater equity and inclusion in schools. In eight of the 10 schools where options were not offered, students and their families felt physically and socially excluded, as well as unsupported. Parents attempted to mitigate exclusion at school in a myriad of ways. The need to raise awareness regarding plant-based diets, animal welfare, and sustainable eating was clear, along with the inclusion of food choice in school policy.

Context and Rationale

The Ministry of Education (2014) in Ontario strives for equity and inclusive education that meets individual needs, identifies and eliminates barriers, and promotes a sense of belonging. The premise is that student learning is intricately connected to a sense of belonging. Based on her case study research on belonging and learning, Anne[1] Dyson (2018) argues that "a sociocultural and participatory view of learning must confront the issue of institutional belonging [as] without a sense of inclusion, there are no relationships within which … learning can unfold" (p. 236). The climate of the learning environment can be strengthened with a practice of "cultural care" in which support is given for a "person's social, emotional, mental, and physical well-being; while simultaneously recognizing and acknowledging race and culture as a significant part

[1] I am departing from APA by including the first name of every author the first time they are named in the body of my thesis as I find that writing style more engaging as well as respectful.

of a person's identity" (Allen & FitzGerald, 2017, p. 8). The supports students receive in school related to their identities can influence their academic success and overall well-being. Providing a one-size-fits-all approach for elementary students does not foster equity, which has been recognized by provincial policymakers:

> In reviewing, revising, or refining its equity and inclusion policy, a board…has the flexibility to take into account local needs and circumstances such as geographical considerations, demographics, cultural needs, and the availability of board and community support and resources [while] expected to consult widely with students, parents, principals, teachers, early childhood educators, and other staff as well as school councils. (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 14)[2]

The key areas of focus for equity and inclusive education pertaining specifically to food relate to religious accommodation and "school climate and the prevention of discrimination and harassment" (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 16). The Ministry of Education (2014) understands that "positive school climate exists when all members of the school community feel safe, included, and accepted, and [schools] actively promote and support positive behaviours and interactions" (p. 30). While the examples set out in *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (Ministry of Education, 2014) show many diverse ways to support students and staff in schools, there is no mention of food, although the LDSB does state religion/creed to be a reason for accommodation should individuals request alternative food or beverages. My research could be helpful to the LDSB as they need to make informed decisions regarding equity and inclusive education as part of their efforts to comply with The Accepting Schools Act that:

> requires boards to collect information by conducting school climate surveys with staff, students, and parents at least once every two years [which] can help identify inappropriate behaviours, issues, or barriers—overt or subtle, intentional or unintentional—that should be addressed. (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 30)

[2] I am departing from APA in single-spacing block quotations for readability.

Barbara Parker and Mario Koeppel (2020) assert that "there is a need to know or learn about food through a framework that includes the social, cultural, economic, political, health, and nutritional aspects of food" (p. 50). If we do not learn about what eaters want to be offered at school, "we overlook a mainspring of social, economic, and policy dynamics that create inequalities" (Weaver-Hightower, 2011, p. 20). When parents are choosing a school for their children or opting to homeschool, their decisions reflect their diverse needs, interests, and expectations (Carter, 2018; Ginott, 1998). For the increasing population of vegans and vegetarians (thenceforth referred to as veg*ns unless specificity is required), that decision may be influenced by whether a board offers appropriate food choices.

A board that states it is built on inclusion of all members of its student body, such as the LDSB, can demonstrate its commitment to equity by seeking out voices of the people it serves, including on issues related to areas previously overlooked, such as what food is offered in their schools and how it could be improved. My research thus aimed to help the Board determine what, if any, specific needs parents of veg*n children might have and to support families who desire veg*n options for their children for a variety of reasons. This matter is perhaps especially salient for parents of students in elementary schools, given the prevalence of special food days and the daily sales of dairy milk. When I started out on my thesis journey, I suspected that providing options that meet the needs of all eaters in schools, including veg*ns, could build parents' confidence that policies and procedures are indeed in place to help their children experience a sense of belonging in school.

Currently in the elementary division of the LDSB, the long-standing tradition of daily dairy milk sales persists, with no options for a milk alternative; thus, vegan and lactose intolerant students are unable to partake in this ritual. Families who do not support the dairy industry but

whose children could drink milk safely may feel pressure to allow their child the opportunity to join their classmates to avoid social exclusion. Special food days typically involve pizza, hot dogs, pancakes, or hot soup, all of which are typically composed of meat, egg, and/or dairy products, which is problematic for lactose intolerant or veg*n students. Further, most of these foods include ingredients that come from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), which raise ethical concerns related to animal welfare (Truman, 2016), labour conditions (Perrier & Swan, 2019), and environmental concerns (Hu et al., 2017), which are compounded given they are largely sourced far outside of our region, thus requiring transportation.

Special food days are typically perceived as joyful events, but because they only serve mainstream diets, exclude anyone not able or wishing to support the consumption of animal products. With the rise in numbers of veg*ns in Canada (Charlebois et al., 2018) and the more than seven million Canadians living with lactose intolerance (Canadian Digestive Health Foundation, 2021), schools can anticipate an increase in demand for choice. Further, some families may hope schools would offer food aligned with research that "suggests an effective link between healthier, meat-reduced diets and more environmental sustainability … as well as animal ethics" (Spannring & Grušovnik, 2019, p. 1190; see also, Allievi et al., 2015; Garnett, 2016; Foer, 2010; Singer & Mason, 2006; Stehfest et al., 2009; Tilman & Clark, 2014; Westhoek et al., 2014). Providing food options from which all students can choose freely, without discrimination and without an explanation required, is in line with Ontario schools' commitment to equity and inclusion.

The importance of cultural context also merits consideration given Thunder Bay is not a homogenous population and will continue to diversify, with more new immigrants making up the student body in Thunder Bay. Families who follow certain religions likely have dietary

guidelines they follow; for example, “Hinduism and Buddhism largely recommend vegetarianism, whereas Jainism mandates it” (Filippini & Srinivasan, 2019, p. 2). Some groups (e.g., East Asian, West African) have a high occurrence of lactose intolerance (Silanikove et al., 2015). These families may be reluctant to request accommodation of their food choices or needs out of fear of stigmatization. Further, although traditional Indigenous culture relied heavily on the consumption of animals, this may be shifting somewhat; Canadian Mi’kmak activist and scholar Margaret Robinson (2014) shares how her vegan diet—feasible due to the ample supply of plant-based foods available to her in the urban area in which she now lives—supports her cultural value of non-interference with animals.

The food choices of students can also intimately communicate their identity (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Caplan, 1997; Greene & Cramer, 2011; Lloro & Sidwell, 2020; Scholliers, 2001; Stapleton, 2015). Students are naturally inquisitive and may wonder about their peers’ food choices. As students socialize, they share many family traditions, including those around food. Having diverse food options may thus enable schools to encourage these conversations as a form of critical food education. It also capitalizes on the growing interest in food societally, which has trickled into schools. Sarah Stapleton (2015) notes, for example, how “slow foods, whole foods, local foods, farmers’ markets, and community supported agriculture [has] materialized as grassroots social movements and alternatives to industrialized agriculture” (p. 15) and are becoming more available to schools. Here in Thunder Bay, Roots to Harvest (www.rootstoharvest.org) is an example of a local community organization that works with schools and engages students in learning about where their food comes from, how to cook it, and how to enjoy fulfilling their basic need to eat. The partnership between Roots to Harvest and the

LDSB is an example of how local action can improve not only sustainable food practices, but also community engagement with schools and social inclusion (Dyen & Sirieix, 2016).

Another recent movement is the proposed legislation of Bill 216, currently with the Standing Committee after its second reading, which hopes to require boards to embed food literacy in the curriculum (Kramp, 2020). Prior to the Bills' enactment, the LDSB will need to critically consider how best to incorporate food literacy in a locally meaningful way and that could include what food is offered in their schools. Thus, my research is timely. Before I began the study, the Director of the LDSB indicated that he wished to be informed about my thesis research as it will give him a better understanding of what some elementary parents would like to have available to their children, which in turn could inform the Board's equity and inclusive education policy.

Personal Background

I am a White, cis-gendered female, born into a large middle-class French-Canadian family with multiple relatives who raise food animals, fish, hunt, and eat meat from CAFOs. For three decades, I was immersed in omnivorous eating and learned to prepare meals for my own family centred around store-bought meat, at least two to three times a day. As an educator, wife, biological mother, and foster parent, I pride myself in modeling lifelong learning. Out of sheer curiosity, I thought I would set a short-term goal of three weeks to see how I felt on a vegan diet as part of a lesson demonstrating the process of creating a vision board for my college students. Prior to embarking on this journey, I had no preconceived notion of what the life of a vegan entailed as I had no close relationships with any individuals who chose this lifestyle. Preparing for success required that I learned how to balance an appropriate amount of plant-based protein, carbohydrates, and fats to fuel my body for the energy I expended daily. My motivation for

attempting a vegan diet was solely related to experimenting with my personal health, even though I had no existing issues requiring that I eliminate meat or other animal products from my diet. I reassured my family that this was not going to affect them since I would continue to make their regular meals that they loved, with all the meats they were accustomed to enjoying.

In the beginning of my three-week experiment with veganism, I struggled with finding the time and patience to create new meals that were not readily in my repertoire of go-to meat dishes, making life seem exponentially busier. To remain motivated, I started to follow vegan groups on social media for food ideas, including numerous endurance athletes, to be regularly reminded that I could train for a marathon while eating a plant-based diet. What I did not expect to find was the abundance of information around where my food came from and the feelings that began to cascade in me when seeing images of beautiful beings held captive, suffering, and ultimately killed for human use. As a visual learner, I was captivated and watched numerous documentaries as well as read as much as I could, including materials from animal rescue organizations (Jenkins, 2018) and about the "how-to" of parenting vegan children (Lindstrom, 2018). Serendipitously, these explorations introduced me to Zoe Weil (2004, 2009, 2014, 2016) and her riveting publications and presentations on humane education. I shared my learnings with my spouse and was pleasantly surprised when he no longer wanted meat dishes at the end of my three-week trial, because he found the new plant-based meals he tried on his own accord to be delicious, and he wanted to see if he would feel just as energized as I did without any meat and animal products.

The element of surprise is embedded in my ongoing experience as a vegan, which has continued for over three years. I have received wonderful, compassionate reactions that embrace and support our family's new way of life, as well as an astounding number of hurtful and

defensive comments from loved ones and stakeholders in schools despite me always being careful not to offend or push our choices on anyone else. As a foster parent of school-aged youth for the last year, I love seeing how they embraced our vegan lifestyle, with their sentiments being that they can empathize with animals who have been oppressed.

We have been mocked for no longer eating the eggs from the chickens we originally acquired for laying but who have now become pets. Our hens are each adorned with a colourful ankle bracelet and individual charms, so that we can identify them appropriately and call them by their given names, and they now enjoy eating their eggs, getting sustenance from their own production. On challenging days, our hen Spider Chick is much like a therapy animal for our children; she seeks cuddles and receives them happily when the humans feel a little more stressed. Imagine the look on the children's faces, then, when friends and family joke about eating hens for lunch. The males in my family have also been told numerous times that "real men eat meat." Prior to my graduate studies, I was bewildered at how a love for animals could possibly be cause for such ridicule. The realization that no sentient being must die on purpose or be used for me to survive is liberating and yet, has led me down a path of great resistance. When asked why I do not eat meat, dairy, or eggs anymore, "because I learned that I do not need to" is rarely what others want to hear, at least in part because it deviates from the dominant Western diet (Judge & Wilson, 2019).

As a primary student, my son quickly and happily adopted this life of animal advocacy. At three years old, he exasperatedly asked, "Where's my salad?" when my partner and I did not offer him one with his dinner. Unfortunately, he has met his own challenges, even at his young age. Since he no longer wanted to eat meat, I inquired with his school and school Board about having plant-based options. In emails, I listed several reasons why the school might want to

consider offering more inclusive options, including religious and cultural considerations, human health, and environmental sustainability. The principal of the school responded, stating that the meals offered on special days were nutritious, have been done this way for years, and that my child was free to bring his own similar meals if he so chose. The Board only returned my messages once I became an MEd student and indicated my interest in conducting research on school food that could feed into a revised equity and inclusion policy.

The refusal to consider and include plant-based meals for my son and others who eat plant-based diets illuminates the anthropocentrism (human-centeredness) our education systems maintain (Bell & Russell, 1999). Schools and families are often looking for new ways to address other forms of oppression, yet many are actively upholding anthropocentrism and speciesism—even if unconsciously (Hawkins et al., 2017; Hepner, 1994). I agree with Jan Oakley (2009) who writes that the current hidden curriculum of "speciesism needs to be recognized as a product of hierarchical thinking and a form of oppression that, like others, demands critical attention" (p. 23). The idea that human animals are superior to all living beings is speciesist, as is loving nonhuman animals like dogs and cats as pets while pigs are appreciated only for supplying pepperoni on pizza or for contributing to hot dogs.

Because it is baked into Western culture, the anthropocentric and speciesist mindset can be challenging to overcome in all realms of society, including in schools (Noske, 1997). For example, at a parent council meeting that I attended in my previous role of secretary, a parent said, "Our kids need to be taught kindness" yet then blatantly refused to offer vegan hot dogs as a choice on hot dog days, explaining, "I'm not ready to talk about where our food comes from!" Another parent present declared vegans "weirdos," which was their grounds for limiting food

options. I cringed, knowing full well their children are hearing these messages and sharing such beliefs with their easily influenced peers.

Feelings of belonging in schools is part of inclusion (Ministry of Education, 2014) so I would argue that schools that promise inclusive practices need to consider school food needs with that frame in mind. Yes, my son is free to bring his own cold, plant-based lunch on special days, but that means he is not able to experience the sheer joy of the arrival of the warm hot dogs, chicken noodle soup, pancakes, or pizza with his classmates. Dairy milk delivered to classrooms also means lactose intolerant students sit on the sidelines with their pre-packed alternative. Currently, those eating a plant-based diet for any reason are pushed to the margins of their school community, which arguably negatively impacts their sense of belonging (Lindgren, 2020).

Fuelled by my frustrations trying to advocate for my son, I investigated ways in which I could take an active stance for justice for all plant-based eaters in schools. I turned to education and finding an MEd program in "Education for Change" has been exhilarating as I discovered like-minded professors, peers, and scholars who also want to nurture young minds and create a kind, sustainable world for both humans and other animals. Although initially dismayed at the growing body of literature on the marginalization of veg*ns (e.g., Horta, 2018; MacInnis & Hodson, 2019; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019), I realized that I could use my power for the greater good, motivating me to keep learning and advocating to raise awareness and create positive systemic change for equity and inclusion.

I am also incredibly grateful for the opportunity to learn about intersectionality and ecofeminism, which has broadened my perspective and strengthened my activism. I support

Annette Gough's (2013) words on the need for an interconnected analysis of multiple subjectivities:

> We have culturally, racially, socioeconomically, and sexually (and so on) different people with fragmented identities whose experiences and understandings can only be constituted through the lenses of subjectivity. Given there is growing recognition that there is no one way of looking at the world, no "one true story," rather a multiplicity of stories, then we should look at a multiplicity of strategies for policies, pedagogies, and research in environmental education. (p. 376)

Related to this, particularly important for me in my journey as a graduate student, was being given the opportunity to grapple with Indigenous issues and the ways in which settler colonialism has influenced education. I have been humbled to learn about aspects of Indigenous culture and history in Canada of which I was previously unaware, and now feel a sense of urgency that all educators receive these learnings (Oskineegish & Berger, 2021). I have been struck by the revelation of how beautiful Indigenous values are, with their sense of reciprocity towards the Land and other beings (Robinson, 2014), making me realize food menu decisions need to include the voices of the First Peoples who have been able to sustain not only themselves but the land and all living things (Maina-Okori et al., 2018).

To illustrate how a vegan lifestyle can be interpreted from an Indigenous perspective, Robinson (2014) explains that her Mi'kmaq culture "take[s] only as many animal lives as are needed for subsistence" (p. 676). With that in mind, she asserts, "Given my access to plentiful non-animal food [as a Torontonian], it runs counter to my cultural values to ask my animal friends to sacrifice their lives for me" (p. 682). That being the case, Robinson (2014) chooses to be vegan to uphold her Mi'kmaq value of non-interference with animal lives "to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our animal kin" (p. 684). Yet, her personal choice is seen as problematic as modern stereotypes classify "veganism as a uniformly White colonial practice [viewing] Indigenous people who refrain from eating animal products as culturally inauthentic" (p. 683).

The personal choice of how one eats can be challenging when it deviates from what is dominant. In his autoethnography, Mayukh Dewan (2017) shared his fears of adopting a vegetarian diet, mirroring some of my own struggles:

> The fear stems from the fact that I may get left out from my social groups as most of my friend circles consume meat and I stay in a predominantly meat-consuming country. My food choices may turn me into an outsider within my group of peers and this may negatively affect my life. (p. 26)

The challenges veg*ns face as adults in social groups today also apply to young elementary students. I have seen firsthand my son's disheartening experiences of not being able to partake in what are meant to be joyous, social meals. Recognizing this exclusion, we can move forward and innovate ways to create more inclusive spaces in schools for all eaters (Hamlin, 2018). My current stance is that if meat and animal products are to be offered in school, critical teachings about respect for animals, including in the traditions of Indigenous Peoples, would make for important curricular connections. It is time to replace anthropocentrism with Indigenous wisdom.

Further, students deserve to know where their school food comes from, including the lives and deaths the animals endured and how their meals are so intricately connected to other parts of our world (Russell, 2019). Doing so may encourage some students to make different food choices that not only affect them personally, but also other people and other animals, multiple times a day. According to Tony Weiss and Rebecca Ellis (2022), an important part of "critical food guidance" is unpacking the contemporary "meatification" of diets globally, which they suggest might lead some people to consider "conscientious omnivory (which has various hues, as in calls for 'green' or 'ethical' meat); vegetarianism; and veganism" (p. 196). Such critical food guidance needs to be developmentally appropriate, of course. As Michael Sloane (2016) cautions, such explorations can lead educators into emotionally fraught territory; learning about animal suffering is part of what he calls "dark veganism":

> Dark veganism is a necessary idea for thinking through limit cases and transgressions involving the lives and deaths of animals in one way or another. It is a means that works toward ending animal suffering; it dabbles and delves into what is dangerous when it comes to addressing animal pain and death in a cultural context. What dark veganism helps us to realize and think about are those objects, events, and institutions around us that engage or exhibit the idea of animal rights directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally. (p. 122)

Grappling with my own food journey, individually and as a parent, has enabled me to embark on my path as a researcher for and with other veg*ns in schools. In the words of Marion Nestle (2011):

> There needs to be one place in society where children feel that their needs come first—not their future as consumers. In…society today, schools are the only option. That is why every aspect of school food matters so much and is worth every minute spent to promote and protect its integrity. (p. 146)

As an educator and parent, I wholeheartedly agree with Nestle's view, especially regarding elementary students who are impacted by decisions of policymakers. I realize, however, that I must remain attuned to the ways in which my own knowledge of the world, including knowledge of food systems, is limited and thus I imagine this thesis as just one part of a lifelong journey of learning and unlearning. I will always be searching for ways to improve my praxis for the ongoing resolution of injustices I have yet to recognize or challenge.

For now, conducting research informed by an intersectional, compassionate approach to determine how schools can best support students through inclusive school food is my goal. As a parent member of the Equity and Inclusive Education Advisory Committee of the LDSB, after this thesis is approved, I will share my findings with policymakers, including the Director who has indicated interest in my research. My own experience as a parent of students in the LDSB and recognition of the growing number of veg*ns generally (Charlesbois et al., 2014) leads me to hypothesize that there will be a significant number of people who would like to see more plant-based options. The desire for plant-based food and drinks in schools may be related to health,

culture, animal advocacy, sustainability, affordability, creed/religion, dietary intolerances, and/or other reasons.

Reflecting on my positionality as I have done in this section is important. Roni Berger (2015) emphasizes that "because reflexivity is a major strategy for quality control in qualitative research, understanding how it may be impacted by the characteristics and experiences of the researcher is of paramount importance" since my own position is that of a researcher who may "share [some of the] experiences of [the] study participants" (p. 219). I wanted to find out what other veg*n parents have experienced, both their struggles and their positive stories. Rather than being limited to my own perspective, I wanted to paint a more holistic picture (Merrian & Tisdell, 2016) of what school food means for parents of veg*n elementary students in the LDSB.

Research Question

My research sought to give voice to parents of elementary veg*n students who are unable or unwilling to consume what is currently offered at schools in the LDSB. Specifically, I wanted to know: *What are Thunder Bay parents' experiences with school food options for their children who eat plant-based diets?* It is my hope that the participant responses shared in this thesis will help inform the development of a school food policy that supports diverse eaters. I also assume such a policy would uphold Nutrition Standards for Ontario Schools (Ministry of Education, 2010) as well as reflect the new *Canadian Food Guide* that recommends consumption of ample types of protein sources from plants, having half of one's plate comprised of vegetables and fruit, and water as the drink of choice (Health Canada, 2019). Further, I hope that my research can support and extend the LDSB's Equity and Inclusive Education policy that "builds on and enhances previous and existing initiatives [using] sound research and analysis of successful

policies and practices [to] form the basis for the development and sharing of resources" (LDSB, 2020, p. 1).

As noted earlier, as of yet, food is not recognized as a critical component to equity and inclusion at the LDSB, although there are glimmers of possibility. For example, the secondary division of the LDSB has plant-based options in their cafeterias; however, the elementary side has yet to make such food and drink available. Also, Appendix A of the *LDSB's 1020 Equity and Inclusive Education Policy and Procedures: Faith and Creed Accommodation Guideline* (2020) specifies that students of various faiths may request vegetarian options and the Board recommends that schools have them available, although as the literature review in the next chapter will demonstrate, fear of stigmatization may prohibit some families from making such requests. I am encouraged by the Director's interest in this study, so I am hopeful that this thesis may support positive change.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Schools throughout Canada are working to become more inclusive. Professor of educational psychology and special education, Dr. Jacqueline Specht (2013b) asserts, "settings that promote inclusion are more successful in achieving learning for all, the ultimate goal of education" (p. 1). As suggested in the previous chapter, the implementation of plant-based options in school food could support eaters who require plant-based options for a variety of reasons, thereby fostering a sense of belonging within the school environment. My research will fill a gap in what is known about parental experiences in relation to plant-based options in school food, which also could help inform inclusive food practices in schools. To build my case, in this chapter, I discuss literature relevant to my thesis. I begin with a focus on equity and inclusion in schools, followed by a discussion of the intricacies of food choices, including plant-based options for diverse eaters, to illustrate how a lack of options for veg*n students could affect their sense of belonging in the school food environment. I close with a discussion of parental views on food available in schools, voices that need to be considered when revising policies as outlined by the Ministry of Education (2014).

When conducting the literature review through Lakehead University's OMNI database and searches on Google and Google Scholar, I used the following search terms: elementary school food choices, school food equity and inclusion, vegan or vegetarian parent, vegan or vegetarian elementary parents, vegan or vegetarian elementary school food, vegan or vegetarian school food, vegan or vegetarian student sense of belonging, and variations of these keywords. These led me to scholarly publications as well as grey literature like government documents and materials produced by non-governmental organizations.

To date, the research on the perspectives and experiences of parents of veg*n elementary students is very limited, including that related to school food policies; the scholarly and grey literature available focuses mostly on allergy policies (e.g., Mustafa et al., 2018). There also are internet articles that give a sense of some parents' struggles in supporting the veg*n diets of their elementary children in school (e.g., Cartwright, 2021; Harris, 2016; Vegan Food & Living, 2021), which I reference below when it is helpful.

Equity and Inclusion in Schools

The Ministry of Education document, *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (2014) demonstrates a willingness of the Ministry to continually work towards equity and inclusion within Ontario schools; they acknowledge that:

> We have come a long way towards realizing our vision of equity and inclusive education in Ontario schools. However, realizing that vision must be understood as a journey, not a destination. The work must be ongoing to ensure that our schools continue to provide caring, inclusive, safe, and accepting environments that support the achievement and well-being of every student. Equity and inclusive education is an ongoing process that requires shared commitment and leadership if we are to meet the ever-evolving, complex issues and concerns of our communities and schools. (p. 5)

Locally, the LDSB (2020) echoes the commitment to equity and inclusive education, with equity described as "not treating all students the same way but rather, responding to the individual needs of each student and providing the conditions and interventions needed to help him or her succeed," and promising inclusion by promoting a "sense of belonging" (p. 1). This stems from a declaration in 2009 by the Ministry of Education that,

> Commitment to our students' well-being is the driving force behind everything we do in education. Parents want our schools to bring out the very best in their children and help them reach their full potential. Everyone who works in education—administrators, teachers, support workers, and the government—shares that same firm commitment. (p. 26)

When the Ministry of Education (2009) first created Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, it explained that its success in its commitment was dependent on drawing

> on our experience and on research that tells us that student achievement will improve when barriers to inclusion are identified and removed and when all students are respected and see themselves reflected in their learning and their environment. Everyone in the school community benefits from a school environment that is safe, accepting, and respectful. (p. 4)

In Ontario, inclusive education is defined as "education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students [who] see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected" and equity as the "state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people [that] does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences" (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 6). In both the 2009 and 2014 versions of the equity and inclusive education document, the Ministry of Education acknowledged the need for ongoing revisions to the policy, as issues are arising continuously that deserve attention (e.g., racial prejudice, homophobia, cyberbullying, religious intolerance). Delaying or ignoring equity issues denies students the sense of belonging most schools strive to foster.

One of the first lines of defense against exclusion involves teachers in the classroom observing issues as they arise and taking subsequent action to remove barriers. Anabel Moriña and Inmaculada Orozco (2021) explain that "inclusive pedagogy is part of the teacher's duty; a social justice that creates conditions of emancipation and transformation is required" (p. 138). While clearly not the only people responsible for ensuring equity and inclusive education within schools, students do spend much of their time in the classroom with teachers. Teachers actively planning for equity means ensuring any student can participate and modeling how to respect different ways of feeling, thinking, and acting (Brennan et al., 2021; Lawrie et al., 2017).

Enhancing inclusive pedagogies requires regular professional development to support educators in creating an equitable and inclusive learning space as well as grappling with how to be an accepting and inviting individual towards others who may differ in profound ways in any aspect of their lives (Florian & Camedda, 2020; Woodcock & Hardy, 2017).

Samantha Shewchuk and Amanda Cooper (2018) analyzed equity policies in Ontario and found "many topics remain under-represented in school board policy coverage" (p. 17), including those relevant to this study such as religious accommodation, ethno-cultural discrimination, and socio-economic status. Further, in the policies they reviewed, "there was no mention of parents or community members…being a target audience of equity programs or training" (p. 936), negating the Ministry of Education's (2014) explicit statement that parents be involved. Using data on parent perspectives, interpreted through an "equity lens" (Datnow & Park, 2018, p. 149), can help uncover who "is being left behind and how the school board can accelerate their progress" (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018, p. 940). Karen Mock and Vandra Masemann's (1990) report on equity policy in Ontario schools highlighted how parents advocating for their children aided in "program review or policy development" (p. 48). As Antwan Jefferson (2015) asserts, "involving the families is important to achieving the work of schools" (p. 68).

The importance of equity and inclusion cannot be overstated as a sense of belonging within "the school's atmosphere affects … antisocial and disruptive behaviours, as well as how well students learn" (Patton et al., 2006, p. 1582). Indeed, one way to assess the effectiveness of equity and inclusion efforts is to physically observe a classroom or school since inclusion and exclusion are often visible; an inclusive setting brims with happiness and social cohesion

whereas an exclusionary one can be filled with students struggling with behavioural problems and a sense of separateness (Mulvey et al., 2017).

As schools craft or revise policies intended to support equity and inclusion, it is also important to note that sameness is not fairness; serving the same food to all students, for example, does not consider the needs and wants of the diverse families who make up school communities. Indeed, a sameness approach gives families "the implicit message that their culture [is] not valued" (Rivalland & Nuttall, 2010, p. 30) in the school setting. Instead, the "inclusive education literature encourages educators to find strength in and embrace diversity" (Schnellert et al., 2015, p. 225). Further, as Roger Slee (2019) reminds us, "while inclusive education and the establishment of belonging for the diverse range of students who seek enrolment and successful participation in school is a challenging ambition, it is a first order requirement for sustainable futures" (p. 909).

An Argument for Food Choices

As Marcus Weaver-Hightower (2011) eloquently states, "food is a basic aspect of life, intimately tied to our survival, our sense of self, our beliefs, our connection to or disconnection from others, and our impact on the natural world" (p. 15). We require as eaters not only food of high nutritional value, but also food that allows us to connect to our identity (Stapleton, 2015) as beings who crave social cohesion (Galabuzi & Teelucksingh, 2010). Jessica Carey (2016) further suggests that when we choose food, often "we are really nostalgic for family, relationships, and happy experiences of our pasts [as well as] momentarily experiencing connections with other times, places, and people" (p. 249). We also make food choices in line with our values (Weil, 2009), and for some that can include wanting to contribute to a sustainable environment (Wilson

et al., 2020). The many aspects of food reveal why a multifaceted approach is needed when reviewing food policies that can support school boards' work on equity and inclusion.

Caring for people and place is crucial when thinking critically about how to modify school food systems in line with equity and inclusion (Schindel & Tolbert, 2017). I am inspired by Teresa Lloro's (2020) "intersectional cultural humility approach" (p. 145) with its three guiding principles of self-awareness, openness, and transcendence, and I believe it has much to offer my research. Related to self-awareness, she suggests that as educators, we must remain cognizant of and continually reflect on our own positionality within society, including within food systems, and to model such self-awareness for others. In terms of openness, Lloro (2020) explains that "in a traditional cultural humility approach, openness acknowledges that people can never know all that there is to know about the world and that we may consciously or unconsciously be influenced by aspects of the world outside of our awareness" (p. 152). Finally, related to transcendence, Lloro advocates individuals question what they have accepted as absolute truths and to "think about how their own cultural practices might contribute to human and animal suffering" (p. 155).

To truly support all diets, policymakers must be aware of and open to supporting who they are serving, which means collaborating with those who are part of the school communities; the more voices heard, the more likely the actual, current needs of eaters can be addressed (Levkoe & Sheedy, 2019; Stapleton, 2019, 2021). After all, eaters are "experts in their own lives and how they navigate their food environment to meet needs" (Fingland et al., 2021, p. 13). Opportunities to hear their unique situations can enable policymakers to identify and then remove barriers so that school food is attainable for all families. School food needs to be available to all groups, including, but not limited to, the growing populations of veg*n and food-

insecure students, as well as those with food needs associated with religion, culture, allergies, sustainable eating, and nutrition, which I will discuss below.

While veganism refers to a diet that abstains from all use and exploitation of nonhuman animals, vegetarianism is a related, broad term that encompasses many variations depending upon which animal products are, or are not, consumed. As defined by Vegetarian Nation (2021), the seven types of vegetarian diets, moving from most restrictive to least, are: vegan; lacto vegetarian (who do not eat red meat, fish, fowl, or eggs but do consume dairy products); ovo vegetarian (who do not consume red meat, fish, fowl, or dairy but do eat eggs); lacto-ovo vegetarian (who do not consume red meat, fish, or fowl but do eat eggs and dairy products); pescatarian/semi-vegetarian (who eat fish and seafood but not other animals); pollotarian (who only eat poultry and fowl but not other animals); and flexitarian (who have a mostly plant-based diet with occasional eating of animal products). A freegan is an individual who believes it is permissible to consume "animal-based foods going to waste" (Milburn & Fischer, 2021, p. 1). Of course, some individuals will deviate from these descriptive labels, meaning there are realistically far more than seven ways to categorize veg*ns. Further, Kenneth Shapiro (2015) reminds us that being vegetarian is not solely about the food eaten, but also can be a "way of experiencing and living in the world … associated with particular forms of relationship to self, to other animals and nature, and to other people" (p. 128).

Veg*ns are growing in number (Gheihman, 2021), with a global "exponential increase of the number of [veg*ns] in the last few years" (Martinelli & Berkmanienė, 2018, p. 507), including nearly half of Ontario participants in one recent study declaring interest in the reduction of meat in their diets (Charlesbois et al., 2018). Of the vegans in Dario Martinelli and Aušra Berkmanienė's (2018) study, 63% were under the age of 38 (i.e., Millennials and Gen Y).

Statistics Canada (2018) indicates the "average age of mothers at childbirth to be 30.8 years in 2016" (p. 5), which means that a percentage of those veg*ns are likely parents or may become one in the near future. If veg*n parents and their children are experiencing exclusion in schools due to diet choice/specifications, it is important to hear their voices. Otherwise, like veg*ns generally, they may be suffering in silence given the oftentimes oppressive treatment by those who do not embrace diversity in diet (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Horta, 2018; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019).

Donald Watson coined the term veganism in 1951 as: "The doctrine that man [sic] should live without exploiting animals" (cited in Martinelli & Berkmanienė, 2018, p. 513). Corey Wrenn (2019) notes, "Watson and his predecessors felt sure that the way to humanity's heart was through its stomach, and they leveraged veganism in hopes of revolutionizing social relations" (p. 193). Indeed, Martinelli and Berkmanienė (2018) explain that "the rise of veganism [has] coincided with an increased centrality of food in the social, political, and cultural discourses" (p. 502), with some veg*ns choosing food as a representation of their "anti-speciesist, anti-racist, environmental, or health-centric" beliefs (Wrenn, 2019, p. 190). That does not mean that all veg*ns take an intersectional approach and embrace social justice. Black vegan scholar and activist Breeze Harper (2012) is concerned about the ways in which mainstream veg*n discourse often reproduces racism, classism, and sexism, and she urges veg*ns to "start thinking about why and how their own privileges shape their conceptions of food, justice, and consumption and ethics in general" (p. 172). Veg*nism, simply put, is a complex phenomenon. I concur with Joshua Schushter (2016) in not naively thinking "that power and violence will go away in a fully vegan world" but, like him, I also think "there is no reason to relent on a desire for utopian ways of living together either" (p. 212).

Despite the worldwide growth of veg*nism, there remains significant hostility amongst some to this dietary choice. Seven decades is how long it took "the British Dietetic Association [to] officially recognize veganism as healthy and safe" (Wrenn, 2019, p. 196) and similar struggles prevail worldwide in a variety of ways. Vegaphobia, vegan stigma, bias, and discrimination are terms woven throughout the growing body of literature investigating veg*ns' experiences. Cara MacInnis and Gordon Hodson (2017) found veg*ns, particularly those motivated by animal rights and environmental concerns as well as male veg*ns, to be evaluated more negatively by others overall than those who adopt a plant-based diet for other reasons. Oscar Horta (2018) explains that the harassment of veg*ns who advocate for animal rights can be "characterized as a form of second-order discrimination, that is, discrimination against those who oppose another (first-order) form of discrimination" (p. 359). Unfortunately, "unlike other forms of bias (e.g., racism, sexism), negativity towards [veg*ns] is not widely considered a societal problem; rather, negativity towards [veg*ns] is commonplace and largely accepted" (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017, p. 736).

The term vegaphobia describes how vegans sometimes not only can find little vegan food available but can also suffer harassment and experience problems in the workplace due to the negative view of their dietary choice (Horta, 2018). Matthew Cole and Karen Morgan (2011) collated, coded, and interpreted nearly 400 articles in the media related to veg*nism, and found that 74% of the publications had a "derogatory portrayal of vegans and veganism" (p. 134). It is no wonder that Kelly Markowski and Susan Roxburgh (2019) suggest that "fear of stigmatization may be a barrier to avoiding meat consumption [given] individuals who avoid meat, especially vegans, are stigmatized for disrupting social conventions related to food" (p. 1).

Schools can reproduce oppression of veg*ns (Bivi et al., 2021) or they can be a gateway for normalizing plant-based diets (Harris, 2016). Simon Lumsden (2017) describes how when adopting veg*nism, "difficulties emerge when we are dealing with what might be described as emerging norms that challenge established conventions" (p. 7), such as omnivorous diets being the dominant way of eating in Western contexts. While teachers throughout Ontario receive resources to help advocate for oppressed groups, such as LGBTQ2S+, Indigenous, and other marginalized learners, to build a just society (ETFO, 2019), given the evidence of vegaphobia and discrimination against veg*ns, I argue that it is time to include them in such considerations as well. Either consciously or unknowingly, educational systems support or hinder the inclusion of students needing plant-based choices, whether through food options offered or refused to them or in how vegaphobia by peers is handled (Hirschler, 2011). As with other anti-oppressive work in educational contexts, educators will need to reflect on their personal biases (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), in this case related to veg*nism (Panizza, 2020). That might raise some resistance since it could necessitate pondering one's own food habits, which can mean grappling with difficult knowledge about meat and dairy production, which Constance Russell (2019) has found some teachers prefer to "not know" (p. 45). It also can be challenging given food is often wrapped up tightly with identity (Stapleton, 2015).

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's aphorism "you are what you eat" (Fine, 2021, p. 9) reminds us that food makes up a significant part of who we are and thus school food can be intimately connected to our sense of belonging within these institutions. In a recent study, participants "either overtly or implicitly affirmed their diets as part of identity, saying that it enhanced their personal psychological and/or physical self-view, and remained steadfast to their political diet, even in the face of friction or hardships in social interactions" (Chuck et al., 2016,

p. 432). Further, Stapleton (2015) argues that "distinctly regional food, nearly impossible to find elsewhere…fosters a collective regional food identity" (p. 21), which holds great meaning to cultural groups. As Alison Alkon (2018, 15:07) explains in her talk about "radical empathy" in relation to food, we need to "learn to see one another's learned experiences in their social and historical contexts [since] what seems to be the result of individual decision-making or individual abilities are often influenced by hundreds of years of history."

Identity is certainly wrapped up with ethical veg*nism, especially for vegans who embrace animal rights and aim to avoid discriminating against other animals (Braunsberger & Flamm, 2019). Thus, as John Sorenson (2014) asserts,

> veganism is not just a personal choice but a political one. It is the…outcome of the recognition that animals are not property but individual beings who have their own interests, which should be considered. It is an ethical commitment, a symbolic gesture and statement of principle, the rejection of hierarchy, domination and oppression, an acknowledgement of the inherent value of other beings. (p. 174)

It is also "emotionally loaded" and an important "factor in the formation of identity, social distinction, and social belonging" (Spannring & Grušovnik, 2019, p. 1191).

Learning about veg*nism and providing plant-based options in schools could generate class discussions about food choices and could form an important part of food literacy efforts, deepening children's understanding about their food. As Reingard Spannring and Tomaž Grušovnik (2019) suggest, educators could facilitate critical examination of students' beliefs and behaviours around food and identify the problems and benefits associated with different diets. That might mean some omnivorous students might want to experiment with veg*nism, although it is not necessarily the intent of all critical food educators (Lloro, 2020). Perhaps especially for those students who are part of families who have little experience with preparing plant-based proteins, this sort of critical food education could provide opportunities for students to try new

foods and understand their value. David Meek and Rebecca Tarlau (2016) have written about what they call critical food systems education (CFSE) and suggest that it offers schools:

> A theoretical framework, a set of pedagogies and pedagogical methods, and a vision for policy. Thus, through this tripartite contribution, CFSE is not simply a theoretical perspective for analyzing the relationships between education and food systems, but also a set of practices that can transform how food systems...are taught and a perspective that can suggest policies at the intersection of education and agricultural systems. (p. 241)

What Meek and Tarlau are advocating is not, then, a narrow approach that only advocates veg*nism (see also Lloro, 2020). Indeed, veg*nism is not a single prescription for a multicultural world with diverse needs in multilayered food systems. Options are key, as only having plant-based food would deprive some individuals from eating the way they have become culturally accustomed and could create inequalities for historically marginalized groups such as Indigenous Peoples who traditionally ate a diverse diet grounded in foraging for plants as well as hunting and fishing (Robinson, 2014).

Activists who push for veg*nism as the only means to move forward may in fact be hindering the very change they hope to enact, especially when pressuring individuals to "commit to a particular practice identity" (Kurz et al., 2020, p. 86). Narrow-mindedness negates the importance of considering the many other sustainable lifestyles that can be lived without labels while still contributing to the health and wellness of others. It is crucial to examine the "interconnections of social, ecological, and economic issues [that] can help to inform a critical and inclusive conceptualization of societal problems and to reveal just and sustainable solutions to these problems" (Maina-Okori et al., 2018, p. 293). While veg*ns activists may be engaged in well-meaning efforts for environmental justice, animal rights, human rights, and more, they must ensure they do not reproduce other forms of oppression in doing so. In collective efforts to achieve an inclusive school food environment, offering solutions shaped to include all social

groups and the spectrum of eaters is important. In the next section, I will delve deeper into why providing plant-based options in schools may be beneficial for a variety of reasons.

Plant-Based Options Serve a Diversity of Eaters

As I argued above, the freedom to choose plant-based options in schools would permit a range of eaters to participate more fully in the school food environment. As I will describe below, offering veg*n food and drink options are supportive of plant-based eaters who choose that diet not only on moral grounds such as animal rights, human rights, and climate justice (Beck & Ladwig, 2021), but also those who are motivated by religion, culture, or physiological needs. Below, I illustrate how plant-based food options can serve diverse students and their families, focusing on sustainability, food security, nutrition, religious and cultural considerations, as well as diets restricted due to allergies and food intolerances.

Sustainability

There are many environmental problems associated with food production. One issue is the sheer scale of feeding everyone on the plant; indeed, “humanity is facing a great challenge with regard to food: it is expected that by 2050, 9 billion people will need to be adequately nourished” (Oostindjer et al., 2017, p. 3942). In the critical food education course I took in the MEd program, I learned about Susan Rauchwerk’s (2017) simple, yet incredibly effective, lesson plan for students in grades 3-8 that raises awareness of the environmental impact food systems have on climate change by tracing the origins and pathways food takes to get to eaters. The growing of food itself, both animal and plant-based, requires land and water, with each having an impact on climate, and that is even before considering any processing, packaging, and transportation to reach consumers.

There are a variety of ways to lessen the environmental footprint of food, and veg*nism is often at the forefront of such discussions (e.g., Dal Gobbo, 2018; Karlsson & Röös, 2021). For example, Frank Hu and colleagues (2019) discuss how industrial meat production contaminates waterways and drinking water and how "the raising of livestock can lead to the loss of forests and other lands that provide valuable carbon sinks as well as the large amounts of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that contribute to the ongoing environmental and climate-related issues" (p. 1547). As Joseph Poore and Thomas Nemecek (2018) conclude in their study, "moving from current diets to a diet that excludes animal products has transformative potential" (p. 991) to reduce land use and freshwater demands as well as GHG emissions. Mesfin Mekonnen and Arjen Ysbert Hoekstra (2012) found in their global assessment that "the water footprint of any animal product is larger than the water footprint of crop products with equivalent nutritional value" (p. 401). Land and water widely being used for "food" animals and crops to feed animals destined to become meat (Dagevos, 2016) could instead be dedicated to growing plants for human consumption.

While a veg*n diet can support sustainability, it is not without its own potential environmental problems. It is important to consider that "vegans who consume a large amount of soya products, imported fruit or water-hungry crops such as avocados, do not necessarily have a smaller ecological footprint than omnivores" (Beck & Ladwig, 2021, p. 5) if their diet is largely reliant on these foods. Where possible, accessing foods, veg*n or otherwise, from close to home is one way of mitigating the impact of imported foods, and raising awareness, including in classrooms, about which crops are more water-hungry could create more conscious consumers. There exists a plethora of meat alternatives that are not as sustainable as whole foods and so any "development of principles and policies regarding the promotion of more sustainable

consumption practices—including the consumption of meat and meat alternatives—demands a dynamic approach, capable of critical self-reflection and constant course correction in light of less-than-ideal solutions" (Tourangeau & Scott, 2022, p. 185).

Jeremy Cherfas (2016) reminds us that "regions far from centers of agricultural biodiversity—such as North America, northern Europe and Australia—are most dependent on foreign crops" (p. 15), which is not only environmentally problematic but can be financially costly for consumers. While Thunder Bay is located in North America, which is generally rich in agricultural lands, we are on the edge of the boreal forest far from major urban centres, so much of the food we consume travels long distances. That is even more pronounced in remote Indigenous communities in northwestern Ontario (Loukes et al., 2021; Pal et al., 2013). Currently, the LDSB relies mostly on Loudon Bros. Wholesale to source food from outside of our region. When considering which food to offer in schools, "specific, local action [may help] address global concerns about food system sustainability, food security, and food sovereignty" (Orrego et al., 2011, p. 764).

Further, by offering CAFO products that are not local or sustainable (Barrett, 2006), schools unintentionally contradict the environmental education lessons that are supposed to be infused throughout elementary education (Breunig, 2013), since the Ministry of Education (2017) "has ensured that environmental education is included in all grades and in all subjects of the Ontario curriculum" (p. 5). Not critically evaluating the origin and treatment of how animal products end up on plates and in cartons in schools implicitly teaches that this is the norm that is largely accepted, contributing to the anthropocentric hidden curriculum (Rowe & Rocha, 2015). Facilitating critical thinking about how meat dishes are created (Wright-Maley, 2011) as well as the inner workings of the dairy and egg industries is increasingly being recognized as an

important part of environmental education (Lloro-Bidart, 2019; Oakley, 2019; Russell, 2019). Further, as Heidi Bruckner and Matthias Kowasch (2019) show, understanding where meat, eggs, and dairy come from allows eaters to know more about their food and make decisions accordingly.

In grade one, the curriculum states that students must ponder questions such as, "Where does your family go to buy food? What might happen if the store (farmers' market, farm) were no longer there?" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 22). If CAFOs and other farms raising animals were no longer operational, that could have an impact on families used to regularly including meat in their diets. For those who have access to land, they might be able to grow their own plants and learn from the First Peoples who have maintained vibrant relationships with the land and all living things for more than 50,000 years (Wilson, 2015). Well before the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (2020) was established to regulate the hunting and fishing of nonhuman animal populations, Indigenous groups were able to effectively self-govern and sustain life through their traditional practices. Thinking about a transition from procuring food from CAFOs also raises issues related to food security.

In their discussion of environmental justice, Julian Agyeman and colleagues (2016) suggests that understanding sustainability and acting accordingly is not a straightforward task, but rather requires grappling with a complex web of interconnected issues:

> We see a flourishing richness in the [environmental justice] EJ paradigm and the allied concept of just sustainabilities, with branches into food, energy, climate, urban planning, gentrification, and displacement, among others. EJ is employed to analyze existing injustices that, unfortunately, continue to impact the lives of the most vulnerable. The concept is also increasingly used to reframe new issues, concerns, and practices that can, we hope, help to bring attention to the crucial relationship between a functioning environment and the attainment of social justice for all. (p. 336)

Critical food education thus needs to acknowledge the complexity of sustainability as it relates to food practices.

Food Security

Food insecurity is more prevalent among households with children (McKenna & Brodovsky, 2016; Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020), and food-insecure students attend LDSB schools (Parker & Koeppel, 2020). This is a profound problem, not only because all children deserve access to nutritious food, but because food insecurity is associated with behavioural, academic, and emotional problems (Shankar et al., 2017). Schools can play a role in helping address food insecurity by, for example, providing school breakfast or lunch programs or having readily available food in the classroom (Fletcher & Frisvold, 2017; Spruance et al., 2020).

Access to food is currently the top priority of administrators in Thunder Bay schools who are already working in close partnership with the Red Cross Student Nutrition Program, Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program, Isthmus Program, community development programs, and alternative food access programs (Parker & Koeppel, 2020). Cost is a crucial factor when considering options for school food. Fei Men and Valerie Tarasuk (2021) confirmed in their study that the "high prevalence of food insecurity charted among Canadian households [has been exacerbated] with pandemic-related disruptions to employment incomes and that most food insecure households are also experiencing other major financial hardships" (p. 30). Indeed, "the ability to make food choices is ultimately [a] privilege" (Greenebaum, 2017, p. 355), so equitable and inclusive schools need to remove that barrier.

In efforts to improve school food for all socio-economic classes, the food available must be affordable and attainable (Ashe & Sonnino, 2013), and plant-based diets have been shown to be cost-effective and shelf-stable (Flynn et al., 2013; Mangels, 2016; Oliveira, 2015; Schepers &

Annemans, 2018; Tuso et al., 2013). For example, findings in a recent study by Andrew Aggarwal and Adam Drewnowski (2019) show that "plant-protein diets may be one approach to achieving higher-quality, nutritionally adequate diets with no or minimal increase in diet costs." (p. 458). Plant-based options, then, might be particularly helpful in supporting food-insecure families in schools.

Nutrition

In Ontario, public schools are supposed to adhere to specific guidelines when selling food and beverages, to ensure they meet the nutrition criteria (Ministry of Education, 2010). For example, the Policy/Program Memorandum No. 150 (Ministry of Education, 2010) dictates that the majority of food sold in school must be "healthy," which is defined in relation to the amount of sugar, sodium, and fats contained within the food items. The release of Canada's new food guide (Health Canada, 2019) provides recommendations for healthy eating. Seen on the suggested plate are many meat alternatives for protein and it is recommended that fruits and vegetables fill half the plate. Also noteworthy, all age groups are now encouraged to drink water rather than dairy milk. Providing plant-based options in schools, then, aligns well with Canada's Food Guide and makes good sense from a health perspective. Indeed, for both human health and the environment, "a sustainable food system that shifts the global population toward more plant-based foods and less animal-based foods is needed" (Hu et al., 2019, p. 1547).

Christopher Hirschler (2011) asserts, "the topic of nutrition provides fertile ground for the promotion of critical thinking because ethics, spirituality, environmental issues, and politics are central to this issue" (p. 170). While nutrition is inarguably necessary for good health, "the instrumental nature of school food messages, with emphasis on good and bad foods, compartments for different foods and no sharing do not make a contribution to the relational

ideas of health" (Maher et al., 2020, p. 92). Although healthy eating messages are prevalent in schools, "there are multiple points of contradiction and confusion about what this might [look like] in practice" (Maher et al., 2020, p. 82). Gyorgy Scrinis (2013) is concerned about what he calls "nutritionism" that "increasingly inform[s] dietary advice, food labeling regulations, food engineering and marketing practices, and the public understanding of food" (p. 2). He writes:

> Nutritionism—or nutritional reductionism—is characterized by a reductive focus on the nutrient composition of foods as the means for understanding their healthfulness, as well as by a reductive interpretation of the role of these nutrients in bodily health. A key feature of this reductive interpretation of nutrients is that in some instances…it conceals or overrides concerns with the production and processing quality of a food and its ingredients. (p. 2)

As part of a critical approach to food education, schools could provide a place for students to learn about both nutrition and nutritionism, deepening their understanding of food.

In many jurisdictions, there are policies in place to enable schools and families to work together to create a healthy food standard within schools (Baker et al., 2010), but nutrition regulations alone "cannot advance the healthy school food environment in its totality" (Bekker et al., 2017, p. 1265). Thus, Francette Bekker, Maritha Marais, and Nelene Koen (2017) recommend "a multi-pronged approach" that includes raising awareness "among all role players" (p. 1265), including parents. Nutritious food can only be consumed if families are convinced of its importance and if "freedom of choice is preserved [with] customization options for the food" (Ellen et al., 2019, p. 2063). Failing to consider the perspectives of parents and students may very well result in rebellion, such as students engaging in underground selling of junk food (Fletcher et al., 2014). This demonstrates once again how multifaceted food is; we cannot discuss nutrition in isolation and ignoring the desire eaters have for autonomy over their food choices may lead to unintended consequences.

Dietary Restrictions

The physical wellbeing of students and staff is ensured within schools when allergies are duly noted and safety protocols are in place. In Canada, one in two households are affected by food allergies (Food Allergy Canada, 2020). Lactose intolerance, which is of particular relevance to my study given that it can lead to some adopting a veg*n diet, is fairly common worldwide, particularly amongst East Asians and Africans (Silanikove et al., 2015). Dairy Farmers of Ontario (2021) offer students who purchase milk cartons two to five days a week "cool prizes" (p. 1), but lactose intolerant individuals cannot join in the daily joyous purchase and drinking of milk if dairy is the only option. An allergy or intolerance should not be a reason for exclusion. A mere modification mindful of allergens or intolerances would enable all eaters to enjoy their food together, contributing not only to physical wellbeing but also emotional wellbeing and a sense of community.

Religious and Cultural Considerations

Publicly funded school boards observe and respect some religious days as holidays. For example, Christianity is honoured during the Easter Break, with schools being closed on Good Friday and Easter Monday. The two-week break during Christmas also supports this religion. Food practices are also frequently steeped in cultural traditions, and oftentimes meals are incorporated into ceremonies and are used as a marker to help define a social group or identity (Block et al., 2011). Such ceremonies are less joyous for the eaters who cannot partake if the food that is available is comprised of ingredients that are discouraged in their religion or culture.

Schools are "heterogenous, multicultural [places] with cultural and religious blending" (Ayers et al., 2020, p. 124) and the food served needs to reflect that diversity (Nelson et al., 2018). The socio-cultural makeup of communities needs to be recognized and included in school

food as a gesture of respect and to avoid reproducing the oppression of minority or marginalized groups (Levkoe et al., 2020). The type of food offered in schools tends to reflect the dominant culture, and if there are insufficient alternatives, it will raise concerns amongst some eaters (DeLeon, 2011; Lindgren, 2020; Rice, 2017).

The introduction of alternatives is not a quick case for addressing the marginalization of some eaters, however, and schools need to listen closely to fully understand the religious and cultural concerns that might come up. For example, as a vegan Robinson (2016) reflects on how one alternative might still be problematic: "I am concerned about the impact that the consumption of in vitro meat might have on my culture, on our relationship with our traditional territories and the animals who live in them, and on the transmission of our culture, philosophy, and values to future generations" (p. 257). Still, providing students diverse alternatives to choose from in schools may help prevent unintended marginalization related to religion and culture.

Parental Views of Food in Schools

Most of the scholarly research related to parental perspectives on school food relates to supporting children with dietary restrictions, providing different options for students, and perceptions of food policies. Although this research has been mostly conducted outside of Canada, many of the findings are relevant to my thesis interests nonetheless.

First, when discussing school's accommodations of children's special dietary needs, parents have described negative consequences for their children when safe, and inclusive practices were not implemented. For example, Hannah Jones and colleagues (2021) gained insight into parents' experiences with schools in the UK who needed accommodations for their children with phenylketonuria (PKU), a dietary condition requiring individuals to limit their intake of protein and aspartame. Findings revealed:

> numerous barriers to school meals provided by school catering services including poor food quality, inadequate variety, requirement for extra parental organization and liaison, and operational systems in meal delivery (children having to ask for their special meal, wearing lanyards, child photographs) that brought unwelcome attention to the child. (Jones et al., 2021, p. 10)

Other studies described parents of children with food intolerances reporting problems with communication in educational settings (Golemac & Hallowell, 2015) and bullying of children with food allergies by both peers and school staff (Rocheleau & Rocheleau, 2019). Shahzad Mustafa and colleagues (2018) emphasize that these sorts of struggles simultaneously create "anxiety about safety" and note how "the potential for allergic reactions may negatively impact quality of life for students and their families and adversely affect school attendance" (p. 9).

Another area of research on parental perspectives of school food focuses on the provision of a variety of options. Emmanuel Obeng-Gyasi and colleagues (2020) conducted a qualitative study with U.S. immigrant families on their perceptions of school lunch, finding that:

> The children preferred to eat what their friends were eating at school [which] lifted the burden of not being seen as part of the mainstream. It also helped to prevent a situation where the other children, who were unfamiliar with foods from their countries of origin, labelled their children and made fun of their foods. (p. 245)

These parents expressed appreciation for the variety of foods available for their children to choose from so that they could enjoy lunch with their peers (Obeng-Gyasi et al., 2020). The elementary parents surveyed by Alisha Farris and colleagues (2016) also indicated the importance of variety, as well as how "saving time, convenience, … nutritional and food quality, and taste and food preferences" (p. 6) were important factors when deciding whether to allow their children to eat the school lunch or prepare one at home. What is served at school does appear to be of great interest to parents, as Elizabeth Golembiewski and colleagues (2015) demonstrate when they asked parents to reflect on U.S. school lunch mandates:

> Parents' awareness and concern about school meals are high. Future governmental and school efforts to promote school lunch should include communication components that provide parents with accurate information and feedback opportunities. At the local level, district professionals can harness family support for school meals in ways tailored to the unique contexts of their school community. (p. 1)

Another example of research on parental perspectives of school food focused on food policies. For example, in a study with Australian parents, Simone Pettigrew and colleagues (2014) found school food policies to be most successful with the following factors: "consistent food categorization systems in schools and other food choice environments, disseminating family-friendly information materials about the policy, and ensuring schools have access to the facilities and expertise needed for full policy implementation" (p. 325). Their research indicates well that developing and implementing a school food policy requires input from those eating and supporting it.

The only study I could find about veg*n parents' perspectives on school food was "Raising Children on a Vegan Diet: Parents' Opinion on Problems in Everyday Life" by Daisy Bivi and colleagues (2021). Experiences with schools was only a small part of the survey of vegan parents in Italy, but Bivi and colleagues found that "school was the most unlikely place to find vegan meals for children… about one third (33.5%) of children were not provided with vegan lunches at school" (p. 7). The Italian system is quite different from Canada's given we do not have a national school lunch program, but it nonetheless illustrates the frustrations parents can face in ensuring there are options available for their children who need plant-based diets.

Thus far, glimpses of veg*n parents' perceptions of school food are more commonly found in non-academic publications and even these are fairly limited in scope, mostly reporting on individual parents' efforts to secure plant-based food options for their children (e.g., Cartwright, 2021; Hamlin, 2018; Harris, 2016; Vegan Food & Living, 2021). For example, one

article shared news that a parent in the UK won a legal case to have plant-based alternatives for his dairy-free daughter and a lactose-intolerant peer, describing how he felt helpless at his daughter's continual feelings of being left out when dairy milk was served and the stress he experienced over having to battle with his daughter's school (Vegan Food & Living, 2021). Like the parental advocacy described by Stapleton (2019, 2021) in her analysis of a decade-long effort by parents to replace a large corporation that was providing inadequate food in their school, the grey literature illustrates that veg*n parents can face struggles when trying to change school food options. Their efforts can make a difference, however. As vegan parent Ashlee Cartwright (2021) shares in reference to the national school lunch program in America:

> It is encouraging to see schools realizing the importance of serving vegetarian and vegan options every day. Let's hope the number of schools doing so continues to rise and us vegetarian and vegan parents don't have to fight so hard to ensure our children are being served nutritious and plant-based meals at school. (p. 9)

That there is next to no scholarly literature on veg*n parents' perspectives on school food does not help those parents who may be struggling alone in trying to advocate for plant-based food for their children or those who may feel reluctant to advocate, and it also reveals a significant gap in our knowledge.

Summing Up

As this literature review has revealed, there is no "one size fits all" when it comes to school food. For example, only offering a low cost, nutritionally dense, plant-based diet may be embraced by veg*ns, while deeply offending someone who wishes to continue with omnivorous eating. Omnivores can eat veg*n food, so failing to offer meat is not exclusionary in the same way that only offering meat is. We thus need to move towards solutions that work for everyone (Weil, 2011), and providing a variety of options may create greater equity for the diversity of eaters in elementary schools. Acknowledging parents as a credible source and actively seeking

the perspectives of the growing number of veg*n families, as well as those with food needs associated with food insecurity, nutrition, religion, culture, allergies, and sustainable eating, is one way that schools can contribute to equity and inclusion. My thesis sought to do just that. In the next chapter, I describe the methodological details of my study.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

My research sought to give voice to parents of veg*n elementary students who cannot or will not consume what is currently offered in schools. Specifically, my research answers the following question: *What are Thunder Bay parents' experiences with school food options for their children who eat plant-based diets?*

Methodology: Inspirations from Narrative Inquiry with a Transformative Worldview

Inspired by narrative inquiry, I explore and describe veg*n parents' experiences with, and perspectives on, the state of food offerings in the school(s) their child(ren) attend and their ideas for improving existing policies related to food. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000) explain that narrative inquiry is "a way to study experience [and the] guiding principle in an inquiry is to focus on experience and follow where it leads" (p. 188). Following John Dewey's theory of experience (1938), some researchers such as Sean Lessard et al. (2018) describe their use of narrative inquiry as an opportunity to explore "the metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space with its dimensions of temporality, place, and sociality. Dewey's two criteria of experience—interaction and continuity enacted in situations—ground a narrative conception of experience" (p. 194).

Temporality is the dimension connected to the criteria of continuity and requires seeking to understand "ways in which the past, present, and future of people, places, things, and events are interrelated, that is always in temporal transition, always on the way, in the making" (Lessard et al., 2018, p. 194). The dimension of place refers to "the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 481). The dimension of sociality focuses on personal conditions such as feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions "of the inquirer and

participants and, simultaneously, to social conditions … within which people's experiences and events are unfolding" (Lessard et al., 2018, p. 194). I concentrated primarily on the personal dimension of the experiences participants shared with me, although the other dimensions were obviously at play given this study was situated in Thunder Bay and reflects social conditions in LDSB schools at this moment in time.

Narrative inquiry, and studies like mine that are inspired by that approach, "legitimize peoples' stories as important sources of empirical knowledge" (Bruce et al., 2016, p. 1). That aligns with my intent to provide Board members and policymakers with information on how one group of parents are experiencing the school food environment. By collecting, analyzing, and then sharing what parents told me about their experiences, particularly related to their feelings of inclusion and being treated equitably, I aimed to work in line with those who claim that "narrative inquiry [is] a social justice practice" (Caine et al., 2018, p. 135). That also puts my research in line with what John Creswell and David Creswell (2018) characterize as a transformative worldview because my research seeks to address inequities and is change-oriented. Narratives of social change "invite and motivate individuals to participate in democratic movements" (Squire et al., 2014, p. 85), such as the revision of policies that affect and support a greater range of members of the school food environment. Narrative inquiry has the potential to provide both researchers and readers the opportunity to learn of links between students, parents, and schools (Huber et al., 2013). While my study was not a narrative inquiry per se, my aims were similar in that I wanted to elicit stories from parents that would help me understand how some students and parents are experiencing school food, which might help shape equity and inclusive education in the LDSB.

Methods

There are different methods that could be used in a study inspired by narrative inquiry. I chose to use open-ended, semi-structured interviewing to gain insight into the lived experiences of parents of elementary children who require food that deviates from what is currently offered. Before turning to a description of these methods, I will first describe the research site and participants.

Research Site

The LDSB is comprised of 25 elementary schools, four secondary schools, and one adult education centre. The Board has a current enrolment of approximately 13,000 students in the Thunder Bay area. As a parent of students in this Board, I applied to become a member of the Parent Involvement Committee in 2018 and was accepted as an alternate. In 2020, I was voted in as the parent representative for a two-year term. My interests aligned with the Board's purpose, "to support, encourage and enhance parent engagement at the Board level in order to improve student achievement and well being Reg. 330/10 Sec. 27(1)" (LDSB, 2014, p. 1). In 2019, I volunteered to be the Parent Involvement Committee representative on the Equity and Inclusive Education Advisory Committee. Its scope is "deepening awareness and understanding of equity and inclusion; identifying current equity issues that adversely affect students, staff, parents/guardians/community partners; and information sharing about equity and inclusive climates at schools and Board" (LDSB, 2014, p. 5). Now familiar with my passion for equity and inclusion, the Director of LDSB expressed interest in my thesis and offered support to ensure I was able to access participants.

Participants

The Ministry of Education (2014) states that the equity and inclusive education policy is to be informed by "demographic [and] perceptual data [including] parents' perceptions of the learning environment, values and beliefs, attitudes, and observations" (p. 48). That being the case, I sought out interested parents who had a child requiring plant-based options while attending schools within the elementary division of the LDSB. Of the 11 participants, seven reached out to participate because of the invitation on the LDSB Facebook page and four responded to the email sent out to all elementary parents with the help of a staff member of LDSB. With restrictions in place during the pandemic, parents were not entering schools so I did not place posters in schools. That means those parents who were not regularly using technology in their homes would likely not have seen the email invitation.

I did place a poster (Appendix A) in Compass Foods, Thunder Bay's only vegan grocery store to potentially reach parents of veg*n LDSB students another way, although that did not generate any additional participants. Snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) was also employed, wherein I asked participants in the interviews to connect me with other parents they thought might wish to be involved in my study; that was successful in recruiting one additional parent.

There are diverging positions on what number of participants is ideal for narrative inquiry, with some scholars focusing more on depth and others more on breadth. For example, Creswell and Creswell (2018) claim that narrative research typically "includes one or two individuals" (p. 186), given the intense and in-depth nature of the inquiry whereas Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985) suggest sampling until redundancy or a point of saturation is reached. While not writing about narrative inquiry per se but about open-ended interviews more generally, Susan Weller and colleagues (2018) argue that "even small samples (n = 10) produced

95% of the most salient ideas [with the use of] probing to increase the amount of information collected per respondent to increase sample efficiency" (p. 1). In my research, I aimed to have some breadth of perspectives by speaking to more than just a couple of parents and I also wanted to have the opportunity to explore parents' experiences in some depth, which is how I arrived at the goal of striving for seven to 10. I slightly exceeded that goal when 11 participants agreed to participate. (Demographics of these participants are shared at the outset of the next chapter.)

Participants were given an official letter explaining the study in detail (Appendix B) as well as a consent form (Appendix C). These forms were exchanged via email. I also offered to have a conversation on the phone or on Zoom to answer any questions potential participants might have had; two participants asked clarifying questions through either Messenger on social media or text. I ensured they understood that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they would remain anonymous, that their responses would be confidential, and that they were able to withdraw from the study up until the point they approved the final transcript. Once consent had been acquired, nine individual interviews and one dyadic interview with a married couple took place, for a total of 10 interviews.

Data Collection

In accordance with the essence of a narrative approach, my chosen method was interviewing. I attempted to build "deeply human, genuine, empathic, and respectful relationships [with] participants" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 540) so that they felt comfortable sharing with me significant and meaningful aspects of their lived experiences as veg*n parents or parents of elementary students who required plant-based options in the LDSB. Participant stories were collected through in-depth interviews on Zoom. I chose to use Zoom because the program records interviews and offers an initial transcription. It also allowed me to conduct interviews in

the fall when there were pandemic restrictions still in place. The interviews were 20-90 minutes in length, with some participants clearly having more to say than others.

During the interview, I referred to a set of guiding questions designed to elicit their experiences as parents of elementary-aged students. I began with some demographic questions and then moved to topical questions, as can be seen in the list of questions below. My personal commitment to a vegan diet and interest in policy obviously shaped the development of my research question and the guiding questions for the interviews. I piloted questions with a friend before the study and selected from the list below as needed.

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- What is your gender?
- How do you identify racially and/or culturally?
- How long have you lived in Thunder Bay?
- What school(s) do your child(ren) attend?
- What grade(s) are they in?
- How would you describe yourself in relation to your consumption or use of animals?
- Are you veg*n / eating a plant-based diet yourself? If so, for how long have you followed this diet?
- How long has your child(ren) been veg*n / eating a plant-based diet?
- Why do you and/or they eat a plant-based diet?
- How, if at all, is refraining from animal products part of your identity?
- What is your experience of having a veg*n child in school?

- Are there any stories you can tell me that would help me to understand your experiences as a veg*n parent of a child in school?
- Please think back to a time when you had strong feelings in relation to your child's experience as a veg*n at school. Please describe that time and those feelings in as much detail as you can.
- Please tell me about any time(s) when the school supported your child(ren)'s veg*nism.
- Please tell me about any time(s) when the school hindered your child(ren)'s ability to participate because of their veg*nism.
- Have you ever requested plant-based food options be available for your child at school? If yes, please describe that experience. If no, why not?
- What sorts of food options would you like to have available in your child(ren)'s school?
- Would having a Board policy around providing plant-based options be useful to you? Why or why not?
- Have you seen the Equity and Inclusive Education Policy by LDSB?
- Have you seen the newest 2019 Canada's Food Guide?
- What are your thoughts on the Food Guide in terms of whether it supports your child's diet?
- What recommendations might you have for a policy that mandates plant-based food options?
- What are your thoughts on aligning special food days with Canada's Food Guide?
- What ideas do you have for helping policy change happen?

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me today?

A narrative inquiry approach does not demand the researcher keep to a strict interview guide (Mertens, 2015), but the questions can help direct the conversation, which proved particularly useful to me as a new researcher. I still needed to be flexible as an interviewer. For example, the questions were not necessarily asked in the order listed above as participants sometimes had already answered a question in response to an earlier question. Also, sometimes I asked follow-up questions for clarification and to gain more depth of understanding and I probed participants to add other things they might want to tell me about their experiences. While I answered questions about my own perspectives when directly asked, I tried to avoid adding my own perspective into the conversation as my goal was to hear participants' stories and learn about their perspectives. I was also careful with my intonation to avoid influencing the direction of participant responses (Seidman, 2013).

Data Analysis

The interview data were initially transcribed by Zoom. I then reviewed the transcriptions while listening to the interviews and corrected as needed to ensure accuracy. I engaged in member checking (Tracy, 2010) with all participants, asking them to review their transcript. Nine of the 11 also provided feedback on the first draft of findings organized by the themes I identified. Both checks provided "an opportunity for reflexive collaboration" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844) since 10 of the participants edited the transcripts and two added important information they had not thought of during the interview. I also compiled an audit trail to detail "how the study was constructed and how the data were analyzed" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 253).

I reviewed transcripts multiple times before coding to become intimately familiar with the data. Coding was conducted by hand. Analytical coding is a time for "interpretation and

reflection on meaning" (Richards, 2015, p. 135) of individual transcripts, and eventually, of the transcripts taken together as a whole when codes were combined into comprehensive categories that applied across interviews. I identified themes by looking for similarities between participants' stories and perspectives, and I was also on the lookout for discrepancies that might be revealing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In representing the data, I have tried to ensure that a range of perspectives are on display and that each participant is directly quoted in the findings. I also included excerpts from the participants' interviews that might draw the attention of readers, helping them to gain a sense of, and empathy for, participants' experiences (Josselson et al., 2007).

Trustworthiness

Prior to beginning interviews with participants, I piloted the first draft of the guiding questions with a friend who was not part of the study and adjusted wording of some items for clarity as a result. I also practiced probing for salient responses with my friend. I focused on being reflexive, conducting member checks, completing a thorough audit trail, and providing thick descriptions to contextualize the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I tried to heed Sharan Merriam and Elizabeth Tisdell's (2016) advice that "the quality and quantity of the evidence provided [should] show the reader that the findings are trustworthy" (p. 285). In interpreting the findings, I developed my discussion with an aim to "understand the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon of interest, to uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, and to present a holistic interpretation of what is happening" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 244).

Ethics

Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board (REB) and the Director of the LDSB granted ethical approval of my study. The letter of support from the Director included the name of the Board in the thesis title, indicating that the Board was fine with being publicly named in the thesis. As noted, potential participants were given an official letter explaining the study in detail (Appendix B) as well as a consent form (Appendix C). I explicitly stated that their participation was confidential and voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study up until the point that they approved the final transcript.

There was no foreseeable harm associated with participating in this research. All participants were adults and not considered part of a vulnerable population due to their age. There was no deception in this study as my intentions were clear.

All data were securely stored in password-protected files on my personal computer while completing the study. Additionally, anything linking names to pseudonyms was securely and separately stored in a password-protected file separate from the research data on my computer. Upon approval of the final thesis, a copy of the data will be saved to an external hard drive and passed to my supervisor, Dr. Russell, who will securely store it at Lakehead University in the Bora Laskin building.

Once my final thesis is approved, I will share an executive summary and/or the full thesis with any participant who requested so on their consent form. I will also share both the summary and the thesis with the LDSB Director and the Board. Participants will not be identified in these documents, nor in any other publications or presentations that might come out of this study.

Chapter Four: Findings

From 10 interviews with 11 parents about their experiences with school food options, or lack thereof, three themes emerged as particularly salient: 1) Feelings of exclusion; 2) The need to raise awareness; and 3) Food policy. The first theme focuses on the participants' lived experiences with their children attending LDSB and either needing or wanting plant-based options. The second theme arose as participants tried to make sense of their experiences and reflected on the stories they had shared. Finally, the third theme came from me asking participants their thoughts on, and recommendations for, policies in relation to food; that included discussion of the LDSB's Equity and Inclusive Education Policy and all participants sharing that they would like to see plant-based food and drink options mandated. They also offered ideas about how to support teachers, administration, and policymakers within the Board in implementing their suggestions.

Before I get to the themes, I want to provide information on the participants for context. One man and 10 women participated in the study, ranging from 36 to 48 years of age. All participants identified as White. They have resided in Thunder Bay and the surrounding area within the LDSB district between five and 43 years. Eight of the parents identified as veg*n, and have been so for six to 30 years, with five stating that it was an important aspect of their lives and identity. A summary of participant demographics can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Child(ren)	Personal Diet	Child(ren)'s Diet
Alexa	48	Woman	White	1	Vegetarian/vegan – animal, environmental health	Vegetarian – health
Brooke	41	Woman	White	2	Vegan – ethical	Free to choose

Claudia	40	Woman	White	2	Gluten and dairy-free	Gluten and dairy-free due to intolerance and being on the autism spectrum
Diane	37	Woman	White	2	Vegan – ethical	Vegan
Eva	43	Woman	White	1	Egg-free	Anaphylactic allergy to egg
Hailey	42	Woman	White	2	Vegan	Vegan
Hilda	N/A	Woman	White	4	Vegan – animal, environmental, health	Free to choose
Jamie	42	Man	White	2	Vegan – ethical	Free to choose
Louise	39	Woman	White	3	Vegan – health, animal, environmental	Free to choose
Olivia	36	Woman	White	1	Plant-based – health	Plant-based
Rosa	41	Woman	White	1	Omnivore – hunts and fishes	Vegetarian and lactose intolerant

In terms of the elementary schools the participants' children attended, none had cafeterias. All parents reported that their children's classrooms had special food days throughout the school year. For two of the parents, their children were offered plant-based options alongside meat/egg choices on these days, while parents with children attending the other eight schools reported their children were only offered food with animal products in them (e.g., hot dogs, pepperoni and cheese pizza). Three participants also noted that their children's classrooms had free food bowls that contained only dairy-based items such as yogurt, cheese strings, and Nutri-Grain bars, which did not support their children's dietary needs.

Theme One: Feelings of Exclusion

When asked about their experiences with food options available to their children in LDSB elementary schools, all but one of the parents shared stories of exclusion given the lack of options made available to their children. These happened within the context of the sale of milk,

free classroom bowls of snacks, occasional classroom treats, and on special days with hot meals. Ten participants described their children feeling excluded at school on more than one occasion due to their diet, and one parent felt bullied by other parents because their children could not have a particular food item due to the allergy policy in place for her child. In this section, I will describe the ways in which parents and children felt physically excluded, socially excluded, or unsupported by their children's schools, and the many ways parents attempted to alleviate exclusion in response to the numerous previous occasions of being marginalized.

Feeling Physically Excluded

Three parents described the ways in which their children were physically excluded because of their dietary needs, either with their child being physically removed from a classroom when other children were getting treats or parents feeling that they had no choice but to keep a child home on particular days. One parent moved their children to a new school in a different board due to the ongoing struggles around food.

Eva reported, for example, that her child and another student with a dietary restriction "were pulled out [of the classroom and] had to go sit by the principal's office while the whole class got cupcakes that some parent brought for a birthday." Her child expressed that the experience had made him "so sad." Another time, her son "had to sit there without [a treat] while everybody else had [one]," which also was challenging for him.

Louise is a parent who has a child in her care with a history of early neglect. She has been trying to help the child develop a healthy relationship with food, since the child struggles with binge-eating behaviours when packaged, processed items are readily available.

> Classroom treats and the packaged, dairy-heavy items available in bowls in each room [are problematic for my child]. We're trying to be so intentional about what we put in our bodies and trying to teach our kids that, and then it feels like the schools are kind of working against that. It's hard. Even on Halloween, there were a couple of years where

> we kept [our child] at home because it was too much for her. It's the whole idea of kids bringing in anything and other kids are expected to eat it.…Even the teachers look at me often, like, "Of course, you reward with food" and it's not helpful. Yes, it works for lots of kids but it brings up so much stuff and undoes a lot of the progress we try to do.

Claudia also had her child stay home on treat days at school on numerous occasions because it was causing "lots of tears." She recalls one incident when "they had to call me at the school because [my child] was just crying. He really wanted this food the teacher [made] and he couldn't have it and she offered him a piece of gum instead." On multiple occasions:

> There would be tears because all the families would just bring anything. I would give him a gluten [and] dairy-free cupcake but that's not the same as being able to go table to table to grab a snack. Foods at school would make him so sick when he came home.

Claudia recently moved her children to another board in Thunder Bay due to the continual conflicts she had with staff over the lack of support for her son's dietary restrictions. She did so not only to protect her son who was facing exclusion but also to be proactive for her younger child who was soon to follow her son into the school:

> Only a year apart, I feel like the teacher would almost hate me and then my daughter would go in her class next year, and I just feel like she was getting a fallout from that. You have to be such a strong advocate. You almost feel like you get avoided at school and I just felt like it was impacting her.

Feeling Socially Excluded

Stories shared demonstrated marginalization pertaining to those children who could not or did not partake in the food and/or drink offered in their schools. Olivia shared that her vegan son, at five years old, "knows he's different, and I think sometimes it's hard for him, particularly when he eats at school.…He doesn't think [having no options for him is] fair [and so it's] been a bit of a challenge for him." If a particular food is perceived as "normal" or "cool," it can be distressing for children who cannot partake for one reason or another. For example, with an intolerance to lactose, Rosa's daughter needs to avoid it:

> Because it gives her a tummy ache and makes her quite gassy, which is obviously not nice for going to school [and is] distracting in a school environment. There's a social coolness to get the milk with your lunch, right? Like, "I'm one of the cool kids - I get chocolate milk or white milk." And no, she can't do that. Same goes for when the kids do pizza.

Not being seen as "cool" can lead to social exclusion, as Louise shares:

> All three of our kids have said that they're teased and I go as far to say some of them were bullied about lunches because, yeah, it's different than other people's lunches. They are often feeling embarrassed just because it's not the normal. People make comments like, "This looks weird, why are you eating that? I've never seen anything like that before." And so then they feel like they're doing something wrong or that we're too extreme.

Olivia also worries about being portrayed as "extreme" so when describing the family's dietary choices she reports, "I usually say plant-based; I don't like to say vegan because I think there's a stigma attached to that, if you're quite strict." Hailey also stated that her children experienced "a bit of a stigma" around plant-based eating. Rosa described how eating something different to the mainstream omnivore diet presents a "social challenge." At the beginning of her child's transition to vegetarianism, her peers would ask, "Why are you eating that? Some of them think that, you know, hummus is weird."

Other examples of social exclusion shared by parents were related to school treats or rewards. Eva described a time when the teacher knew of her child's dietary restrictions, yet did not ensure the treat provided was one every student could enjoy:

> One time they handed out licorice on the school bus for when they went to Magnus Theatre on a field trip. The teacher gave it out to everybody but [wasn't] sure about the ingredients and [my son] had to sit there without one while everybody else had licorice.

Diane recalled how a well-meaning reward system equated to exclusion for her son:

> Your name would go into a draw and my child won once or twice for this and the surprise was a Persian [Thunder Bay's pink-frosted oval-shaped pastry]. He didn't take it or eat it because he said, "I don't eat this." But [the school] didn't make any attempt to give him something different, so he was just like, "I won nothing."

Using food as a reward in schools can be problematic. As Eva said,

> Schools should do something else other than give food, such as extra gym time or bringing students outside as a reward because some food can be dangerous to others, and it could exclude somebody who cannot eat it. Everyone needs being included. There's too much bullying nowadays and too much exclusion. And if you want to make a food event, that I technically don't think is the answer.… then it must include everybody.

It was not only these parents' children who felt socially excluded, but the parents themselves did as well. Indeed, four of the parents explicitly described feeling isolated, saying, for example, "It's overwhelming…when you feel like you're alone" (Claudia); "We just feel very isolated with our experience" (Brooke); and "It can feel a little bit isolating too" (Olivia). Eva shared her unique experience of feeling isolated as a parent when other parents with children who did not have food allergies voiced their strong dislike of not being able to continue with past traditions:

> It doesn't only affect the child; I have experienced bullying from other parents because they blame me for not being allowed to have a Persian Day. It's not just the aspect of excluding kids, it also affects the parents as well….[It] causes bullying.

As Hilda stated simply, "in a meat-based culture/economy, functioning as a vegan is difficult" and social exclusion is one of the main challenges her family faced.

Feeling Unsupported

Ten parents stated their schools and/or classroom teachers were aware that their children required or wanted accommodations, but were not consistent in supporting them, even when certain food posed a serious threat to the health and wellbeing of their children. Younger elementary students with severe food allergies pose a particular challenge due to their developmental inability to recognize the dangers or to advocate for their needs; that can be heightened if the child is neurodiverse. For example, Claudia, a parent of a young child on the

autism spectrum who has difficulties with gluten and dairy, explained how that was an issue that only improved:

> Once he was able to do it himself; I feel like that's when life got easier. Once he was able to identify, okay, I can't have [the gluten and/or dairy treat], but I can grab this out of my lunch instead. So, he had to learn.

Claudia described her ongoing efforts to communicate her child's needs with staff at the school and how accommodations such as alternative classroom treats were not provided, resulting in physical reactions that disrupted her son's life and learning. On numerous occasions, Claudia's child unknowingly ingested treats from the school that contained gluten and dairy:

> [It affected his] chronic GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) and he would be throwing up in his mouth constantly. It was just, like, you'd run off the bus when he was in kindergarten and have to run right to the bathroom. And it was night and day—so chronic.

Eva echoed how stressful it can be for a parent trying to keep their child safe when they have an allergy. In her child's case, even crumbs from cookies could be hazardous and trying to avoid them has affected her son's mental health:

> In grade one, even with the [school's] egg-free allergy policy, a classmate came with a whole cookie container of mixed cookies to school. The teacher allowed him to carry it around all day and eat cookies and share cookies. So, all day, my son had to watch kids eat cookies and watch for crumbs in the classroom. To a kid, that's devastating that he can't have a cookie like everyone else and gave him anxiety that he was around it. He was at that age that it really made him sad he has an allergy and was different.

From what Claudia and Eva have shared, it appears that LDSB schools sometimes seem to have difficulty even accommodating children who have health issues associated with particular foods, so perhaps it is not surprising that they can struggle to support those whose plant-based diet is perceived as "only" a choice. Hailey felt that since her family has chosen to be vegan, the school left the decision to her and her children as to how they would handle dairy milk sales and special food days:

> Why does it always have to be, "Oh it's okay, you can just bow out." How exactly is that equitable and diverse? It isn't really, it's just kind of saying "I see you" but that's sort of it. "I see you, but it's still our way."

Diane echoed this idea of being "seen" yet still not always included:

> The school environment hasn't always been great….They'd have hot dogs for everybody. They did start making an effort, having veggie dogs for the kids but it didn't really go beyond that, like that was kind of it. There's still, you know, we got the milk pamphlets brought home and kids can't participate with pizza days.

Brooke, whose family is ethically vegan, noted "no one would think of sending something with peanut butter or tuna fish, because that would exclude those kids [who have allergies to those] and it's a safety issue. In the sense of inclusiveness, it would be nice if you know there's a vegan child in the class, make all the treats vegan." As Alexa stated, the positive outcome of schools being more inclusive of different dietary needs is that:

> It's just sort of about the belonging and the being able to do what all the other kids or people are doing.…Food and meals [are] a really an important part of being a human society. It's all in sharing meals, breaking bread, whatever you want to call it. And that sense of inclusiveness, especially for kids, where you know, all the kids are eating one thing.

Parental Attempts to Mitigate Exclusion at School

In the face of exclusion and insufficient support from schools, parents tried to find solutions to help their children navigate the school food environment. Eight of the parents made plant-based food at home to send with their children, both for lunches and special food days, in efforts to ensure the food resembled the food their children's omnivorous peers were eating so that they could share in the experiences. For example, Brooke explained that school pizza days occur "very often, so we make her own vegan pizza … but it takes a lot of work. I try to schedule when I'm going to make our pizza so that our daughter can have her pizza on the same day, so she doesn't feel left out." Along the same lines, Olivia explained:

> I make pizza at home for when it's been pizza day because he wants to feel included—

> everyone else's having pizza. You know, if they had milk at school like oat milk, I'm sure he would want to participate. We don't like to feel excluded.

Hilda shared how plant-based options such as plant-based bologna allow her to make sandwiches at home that resemble what her daughter's peers are eating:

> It tastes better and nobody died for it. Sometimes she feels so different than the other children, but she hopes to change minds. She deeply cares what people think. But, on the other hand, she is extremely devoted to the care of animals and the environment.

She also noted that, "for my oldest kids, the school singled them out more, they made more of an issue. That made them feel bad, so I worked extra hard to send them beautiful and tasty foods." Hailey also provides her children with plant-based food made at home so they will "be able to have [special food day] experiences" but she noted how sometimes still "it was embarrassing, or it just wasn't the same experience, you know, everybody else gets like this."

Diane mentioned speaking directly with her children's teachers, trying to be as proactive as possible to ensure her children are not excluded: "I usually always have some sort of communication, each year, with the teachers, just to say, 'I'm happy to bring in anything [vegan]' because I don't want them not to be included if there's something happening." That did not always work, however. Similarly, Claudia expressed:

> It was so hard to get the teachers to just stop using food as reinforcement [and] my son and daughter wouldn't get anything. So it just felt like they were always excluded. [Teachers] would be like, "Oh well, here's a sticker instead," which I appreciate the effort, but at the end of the day, maybe if you gave me a heads up I could have supplied stuff so that my kids are not left out.

The challenges the parents had with schools revealed to them a gap in knowledge about plant-based diets and how to accommodate them—a gap parents would like to see addressed, which I will describe in the next section.

Theme Two: The Need to Raise Awareness

The second theme that emerged in my interviews with participants is what they perceived as a lack of awareness amongst many teachers, staff, parents, and students about the diverse reasons students may need or want plant-based options and how to consistently implement accommodations for these students. Ten of the participants raised this concern as they tried to understand why they and their children had the negative experiences depicted in the first theme.

Learning About Plant-based Diets, Animal Welfare, and Sustainable Eating

Parents wished that the teachers, staff, and other parents knew more about plant-based diets and the diverse reasons people adopt them. All parents indicated the need to raise awareness around plant-based diets and dietary restrictions requiring one or more plant-based options for better understanding within the school community as to why individuals and groups need or choose to eat a particular way and ultimately, to constantly provide those options. For example, Hilda spoke to the issue of how the treatment of animals, both human and nonhuman, is kept from the public eye, including in schools. She expressed that "so many people are stuck in an illusion, they do not want to believe what is happening" in factory farms and the fishing industry.

All parents in this study also believe that children need to be educated on how food ends up on their plate. Eight shared how they were pleased by the changes in Canada's Food Guide that included meat alternatives as protein sources and felt that the Food Guide could be one starting place for education. When I asked parents what they thought of aligning special food days with Canada's food guide, all thought it was a "great idea." Louise said it would "show that connection between an actual plate and what the food guide plate division looks like."

More generally, Hailey argued that all people in schools ought:

> To know and be aware of where their food comes from. So not just gardens but farms and to understand what happens, from start to finish, so that they can have an idea and have a full, well-rounded amount of knowledge to make these decisions. [It is important to impart] knowledge and understanding of sustainable living [including hunting and fishing]; how it's being caught is a more natural way and sustainable way because again people don't realize what happens to animals when they are processed.

For Diane, such awareness can lead to informed decision-making around food choices. Her children are free to eat how they wish and have come home questioning their vegan lifestyle from time to time after seeing the meat in their peers' lunches. She tells her children that, "You are welcome to eat [meat] if you would like, but I want you to be fully educated on what the processes are, what happens, and how the meat comes to you."

The actual food offered is not the only area that requires attention according to participants. Seven parents drew direct attention to how meat-eating is portrayed in schools, perhaps unintentionally, and a general lack of awareness about sustainable eating of animals. In the dyadic interview, Brooke and Jamie describe a long-standing tradition at their child's school they find offensive given their commitment to animal activism, a perspective that is not shared by school staff. Brooke said,

> There are some events at the school, like for Thanksgiving you dress up as a turkey and hunter. The hunting culture in this area is quite predominant and when you walk into a playground in the morning and there's all of these little kids, even the JKs, dressing in blaze orange vests with blaze orange baseball caps and lots of the teachers in blaze orange vests. It's so ingrained in the culture, but it's kind of offensive to us….You know what's going to happen to the turkey at Thanksgiving. You don't shoot your dog because that's reprehensible but celebrating shooting other animals—it's offensive.

Even for participants who do eat meat, like Rosa, she is concerned that students are not learning in schools about more respectful ways some people approach meat-eating. In contrast, she described how her daughter is learning about her father's respectful, sustainable, "Indigenous ways" of hunting and fishing and is becoming increasingly concerned about animal welfare:

> She has to pick off all the pepperoni and throw it out, which is wasteful and that is also one of her things; she doesn't want to throw food out and here she's throwing out this pepperoni….It would be so nice to sit and have a piece of pizza with her friends [but she's a] huge animal lover and she learned about the process of processing animals and how it can be done with respect, but often in the commercial environment, it's not. So she started cutting back on her meat, especially processed stuff. She will, once in a while, now have some fish [as] we have access to fish that's quite local and fresh and so she knows that it's done sustainably and respectfully to the animal. Stuff like that, she's okay with. She's read a lot about the sustainability, or I guess, lack thereof, of the whole meat industry. She's really interested in the effect of this industry on climate change. If people have options, they're going to take it and that would reduce everybody's [environmental] imprint.

Education of Adult Stakeholders

In this section, I describe participants' discussion of the need to raise the awareness of not only teachers and other school staff, but also of other parents. Olivia shared her perceptions as to why her child had experienced exclusion around food and how educating others might help:

> I don't think it's because the Board doesn't want to [offer options], I just think it hasn't been brought forward. [Parents constantly need to] advocate for kids…[and] a little bit of education and workshops around plant-based eating [would help]. People just have to have an open mind and learn a little bit more.

Hailey concurred and suggested:

> On all these great PD days that we have in professional development, bring people in on those days and reward our staff with healthy food, with healthy treats—expose them to what we want them to expose our children to. Make use of the resources that we have in our community, because they are plentiful and totally underutilized and provide what we want them to provide. Make it a priority that you're providing healthy food and it's, "Hey did you know?" And it's not just some food that's been thrown on the table. There's material that tells you how to access them, how to incorporate that into your learning, how to broach the subject, how to talk to people, how to help talk to parents, how to make it not so taboo to talk about. Just make it be that it's okay, we can talk about this, we can really know and celebrate. So and so is vegan, so today the theme of our staff meeting is vegan food. Show why this is important and how [it] correlate[s] to better health. Show people how sustainable it really can be and what that sustainability means on so many levels, so it really isn't that overwhelming anymore. We don't have to reinvent the wheel; people have done this. Rather than teach how to recycle dairy milk cartons, show students how to peel an orange. Equip every single solitary classroom with … fresh produce, fresh fruit, fresh plant-based delicious items.

Without more formalized professional development, it is left to parents and even children to educate teachers themselves. As Diane said, “My kids are pretty knowledgeable so they'll always speak up and be like, ‘I can't do that because there’s gelatin’ and it’s just a learning moment if the teachers didn’t know.” Having to self-advocate can be exhausting and frustrating, however. Eva shared that even though she has devoted much time to parent council meetings to raise awareness, she still struggles with whether her child will be safe at school:

> The parents need to be educated; a lot of parents don’t get it. They don’t get that something as easy as a cupcake or Persian or other food can exclude a child so much. I just think education is key. I think some teachers might not even be educated enough on the seriousness of allergies or just the exclusion part, the mental health part, on being excluded on something as simple as a food event. [Her son’s severe egg allergy] made more anxiety for us and [we’re] trying to educate people on it and trying to keep him safe. Every year it’s not knowing on September 1st what we’re going to walk into…if he’s going to be excluded from events or not, so it’s kind of an anxious time, every time.

Claudia also shared how she felt she needed to fight every year with teachers and other parents not knowing about how to support her children:

> So school. It was very difficult. I think that [parents and teachers] don’t understand where all these hidden sources of gluten and dairy are. It was just an ongoing battle and every year when school started it was a new battle because it was a new teacher. And, you know, every food day: pizza day, hotdog day; you know, it all had gluten and dairy in it.

For some of the participants, these ongoing battles point to a need for teachers and parents to learn how to accommodate the food needs of all students. For Olivia, she felt that the lack of support for her child’s dietary needs was not in fact due to a lack of awareness, but more about not having sufficient knowledge on how to properly accommodate:

> It can be difficult…because people overcomplicate it, I think. And [so] there’s not a lot of choice and there are not a lot of options. The school hasn’t quite gotten there yet and they knew he was coming so a little preparation for him to be included would have been nice. I think there’s this worry that they can’t accommodate [his plant-based diet] and I’m, like, well, it’s actually really easy.

Brooke echoed this sentiment that accommodations are not that difficult, suggesting that "people are just scared of it because they don't know how." Similarly, Claudia stated, "people just don't know about food, it's actually quite shocking." Raising awareness of all stakeholders would not only lend itself to equipping all to make more informed dietary choices on a personal level, parents suggested, but could also help educators better support students who need plant-based options. As I discuss in the next section, it also could lay an important foundation for the development and implementation of an inclusive food policy.

Theme Three: Food Policy

I asked parents about their desire for a policy related to having plant-based options mandated in their children's schools, perhaps through the Equity and Inclusive Education Policy. Seven of the 11 parents had already requested plant-based options for their children on an individual classroom/school level, and all participants were supportive of this idea of having a Board policy. None of the parents in this study had seen the current Equity and Inclusive Education Policy at the time of the interviews, including the two who were occasional teaching staff in the LDSB, but all were adamant of the need for consistency across schools when it came to food. All participants shared ideas about how to support such a mandate, with four parents describing what already was going well in that regard in their schools, indicating that the wheel does not need to be fully reinvented.

Moving Beyond Individual Requests for Accommodation

Having a policy that mandates providing plant-based food options would prevent parents from having to continually make requests on behalf of each of their children. As Diane stated, "I always felt like I didn't really want to impose or inconvenience anybody. I really like the idea of not having to request it but just to be accommodated from the get go." Rosa argued that such a

policy would be particularly helpful for parents and students who are not comfortable making requests for accommodations around food:

> There might be kids like my daughter, who will speak up for herself, but there are going to be other kids and maybe other families too that don't feel comfortable making that [request]. So if it's already written into policy and it's just no big deal, there's no pressure here, everybody has this option. And if you want to eat all the meat in the world, you can already do that, that's fine….You're looking at speaking up for the people who maybe don't have that that source of strength or ability to speak up for themselves easily.

Other parents echoed that thought. Brooke and Jamie explained that not bringing concerns forward to schools is in large part due to not wanting to be "oppositional" and Hilda felt that making individual requests for accommodation just results in a "fight." Louise was one of the parents who had never bothered even making such a request: "I never asked because I have this feeling that it wouldn't be accommodated."

There probably are other parents like Louise who did not volunteer to be part of my study who have never made requests for food accommodations. While Alexa has had mostly positive experiences with schools making food accommodations, if that was not the case, she said she would remind the school that, "You know what, I know my son's not alone….I know he had some kids in his class that were East Indian and they were vegetarian, and I think this is important." Finding out just how many children need such accommodations would be a good place to start. Diane thus recommended that the Board actively seek this information:

> Do a survey at the beginning of the year or just [have] more conversations with parents and the school as to how they could make the kids feel more comfortable [around food]. I think it would be fantastic if that conversation was initiated by the school and not have to be on the parents.

Brooke offered a similar, practical suggestion, with Jamie nodding in agreement:

> An option should just be there, like a check box on a form, then we can feel like there's a zone that has been made for us in advance and we just have to say, "Yes, we'd love to join that plant-based zone and feel accommodated from a system that's already recognized for all of the other reasons that it's worth doing." Then we can happily join

> that as opposed to feeling like we're kicking and screaming, and sort of making our own special case. As they grow older, there will be kids in our child's generation that become vegan on their own and if there is recognition for this option out there, it will allow them to follow their own pathway more easily as well. So it's helping kids before they even know it. There are actually a lot of people [who need options] and so it's only fair.

Brooke and Jamie's suggestion is already being implemented in at least one school. Alexa explained that on "pizza, hot dogs, pita pit days, [it's] no big thing, just on the form, you tick off if you want vegetarian." As the next section illustrates, there are already positive things happening related to food accommodations in some schools that could continue and be expanded to other schools.

Building Upon Previous Success

Parents of children going to two different schools that already offer plant-based food options were pleased to share their experiences as examples that could be built upon in shaping Board practices that could be carved into policy. Alexa shared:

> So we've been really lucky actually because [the staff have] all been really accommodating. It's actually been really surprising. Like whenever there's hot dog day or whatever, they have vegetarian dogs available and pizza days they always have a vegetarian. Any of the days that they have, they have a vegetarian option.

Alexa stated that because of the vegetarian options, her family has "never felt ostracized or weird," inferring that the opposite would have been the case had there been a lack of options. Eva also recognized that not "many schools are like this—I'm very fortunate" that the school has been willing to accommodate her child's severe egg allergy.

Even in schools where plant-based options are not the norm, individual teachers have made an important difference to some of the children whose parents spoke with me. Claudia shared that "every once in a while, I would have a teacher that would surprise me by offering Oreos that are gluten and dairy-free." Diane tried hard to not "make it more work" for the teacher regarding her family's choice to be vegan and shared how lovely it was when she found out that

"a teacher was at the grocery store and sending pictures, like, 'Is this okay?' It was really sweet." These parents were all very grateful when efforts were made to include their children in food-related activities. Seven parents suggested that if a Board-wide mandate was in place, those schools and teachers who are already implementing plant-based options could lead professional development for other schools and teachers.

How to Make the Policy Palatable

If the Equity and Inclusive Education Policy was revamped to include the mandating of plant-based options, participants felt there were a number of ways that the Board could promote this policy. They discussed making clear how such a policy change would support children's identities, cultures, religions, the environment, human and nonhuman animal rights, climate, and physical and mental health, and also that it would not necessarily cost as much as might be feared. As Hilda suggested, the policy must be seen as appealing and practicable: "If we are going to save our planet and species, being a conscious consumer must be made to look sexy, fun, romantic, and cool. But most importantly, sustainable and affordable."

Like all the other participants, Brooke stated that "it would be great if there was a plant-based milk, because there's dairy and that's it." Hilda echoed that, saying she would "like to see a high-quality oat milk or soy milk offered," going on to make the point that doing so would accommodate diverse students since, "there are some strong cultural beliefs regarding dairy." Louise explained from her own experience as an occasional teacher in the LDSB that she knows that what food we offer can honour students' identity and culture:

> As a supply teacher, seeing how much more multicultural our city is becoming…having [options] is a way of honouring that multicultural aspect of our city, since it's important to [newcomers'] lifestyle and a very important part of their identity. We do need to move forward and look at what's offered.

Diane made a similar point: “Students who are coming in, that have cultural differences, coming from somewhere else, [would] have options that make them feel more welcome.”

Hailey, who is also an occasional teacher, made a related point, describing the need for a policy that adequately addresses accommodations for religious students when fasting. She depicted one troubling scenario where siblings at the same school were left in separate hallways at lunchtime during Ramadan, essentially putting them on display and emphasizing their difference:

> How short we still fall with a little simple thing, [such as] religious choice [during Ramadan]. This is how they nourish themselves—their bodies, minds, hearts, and souls. Food does all of that and that is something to be celebrated and respected in way more of a fashion than how we are.

As another example, when Hailey teaches about food and cultural traditions, she described how “Aboriginal [children’s] eyes light up when you start talking about game…they know that stuff, you’re talking their language literally.” An inclusive food policy thus is about more than providing plant-based food options but also ensuring that all students feel included by having their cultures respected.

Another way of promoting the policy would be to emphasize how providing plant-based options can contribute to environmental sustainability and animal welfare. Hilda recommended a policy based on “high environmental health standards. We need to focus on regenerating the soil and eliminating animal cruelty, so having these values as a point of reference is valuable.” Brooke and Jamie also discussed environmental stewardship. For example, with Jamie verbalizing that he agreed, Brooke said,

> It would be nice if they took a leadership stance and said this is important because they understand the correlation between a plant-based diet and the environment. That’s not accommodation, that’s saving the planet. If a Board of Education mandates a policy about climate mitigation action…, then it doesn’t really matter what your personal

> preferences are—it's teaching and it would be great if the connections were made between the meat-eating industry and the impact on the environment, climate, health.

Three participants did recognize that there might be concerns expressed about the potential increase in cost for plant-based options. Hilda warned that the decision to move forward with plant-based options should not be taken lightly and factors such as aesthetics, taste, and cost need to be considered. Doing so would help ensure the policy did not backfire and reinforce some of the myths about plant-based food:

> Providing plant-based choices that are not as desirable as their meat-based options will sabotage [any] efforts right from the start. I will pay more for my kid to have delicious nutritious food that is healthier and more ethical. I know that there is this stereotype of vegans being upper-class, White ladies, but the truth of the matter is that some of the poorest cultures in the world have the highest rates of plant consumption. Meat consumption is traditionally highly correlated with affluence. Trying to make more food choices available in schools [is important], because powerful change happens when the children are taught early.

To combat this stereotype about veg*nism and challenge the idea that plant-based, healthy food must cost more, Hailey suggests schools "show people how to take a package of beans and show them you can feed a family for a month on a few packages of beans, a bag of potatoes, couple bags of carrots."

Such a policy could also benefit students' mental health, something that became even more clear to some parents during the pandemic. Diane stated that a silver lining to the pandemic was how it eased the difficulty of her child navigating veganism in the school environment because "you can't share anything and there's not [been] bringing outside [food into the school] in the past two years." Rosa reflected on how her daughter feels empowered in deciding for herself what to include in her diet, "When the pandemic really hit, that's when her reaction to the anxiety of that was, 'Oh, this is something I can control in my life when everything else is out of

control.'" Rosa argued, then, that mandating plant-based food choices could be beneficial to the mental health of students:

> Kids love choices and being able to make choices is very empowering. My husband and I are in the education field and as the kids are going through the trauma of this pandemic, it's going to be really important for them to be able to make safe and healthy choices in order to get through it as mentally and emotionally [strong] as possible.

Summing Up

Diane succinctly concluded that "equity ought to be for all." Although this study focused on plant-based food options, the data that emerged also highlighted other dietary needs that require consideration. When accommodations are not in place, it is apparent from the stories shared that those wanting or needing alternatives can be excluded both physically and socially. Without support, individuals experienced marginalization in the form of isolation, teasing, and/or bullying and so parents attempted to independently mitigate this exclusion. Parents expressed the importance of not only raising awareness about plant-based diets, animal welfare, and sustainable eating amongst teachers, administration, and all parents in the school community, but also providing support on how to offer options that would create a greater sense of inclusion. Having a school policy related to food options is highly recommended by all parents, and that could be informed by surveys or other methods to gauge students' dietary needs.

Chapter Five: Discussion

As a reminder, my research question was: *What are Thunder Bay parents' experiences with school food options for their children who eat plant-based diets?* As described in the previous chapter, participants included parents of children who ate a variety of veg*n diets as well as students who require egg- or dairy-free options due to an anaphylactic allergy or intolerance. The experiences shared by the parents of these elementary children in the LDSB who want or require plant-based options illuminate the ways school food practices support, or do not support, the Ministry of Education's (2009) Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy for improving student achievement and well-being. In this chapter, I discuss the findings critically by making connections to the literature I reviewed in the second chapter as well as new literature I found to help me better understand what I found, mirroring the themes from the previous chapter: 1) Feelings of exclusion; 2) The need to raise awareness; and 3) Food policy. I then step back to reflect on the demographics of my participants, first in relation to gender and mothers' responsibilization for food and, second, how the Whiteness of all participants not only reinforces stereotypes about veg*nism being associated with the White, middle-class but also raises a question of how much worse experiences of exclusion might be for non-White veg*n children.

Theme One: Feelings of Exclusion

As the Ministry of Education (2014) acknowledges, "equity and inclusive education is an ongoing process that requires shared commitment and leadership … to meet the ever-evolving, complex issues and concerns of our communities and schools" (p. 5). As my literature review suggested and my findings reinforced, it is apparent that a plant-based diet is indeed a good example of an evolving issue that is of growing concern. My findings also reveal that it is a more complex issue than many teachers, administrators, students, and parents currently comprehend.

Some parents in my study shared how learning about sustainability and animal welfare led them towards plant-based diets, which resonates with Wrenn's (2019) recent study. Other parents chose plant-based diets for themselves or their children to deal with intolerances or other health issues. The diversity of children's diets in this study, and the various reasons for them, demonstrates that "treating all students the same way" (LDSB, 2020, p. 1), which is what happened in most schools mentioned by the parents, is not tenable since doing so can lead to detrimental outcomes. Teachers' and administrators' gaps in knowledge about how to support students and failure to put necessary accommodations in place resulted in exclusion and affected these children's well-being. The implicit message in eight of the 10 schools, then, was that students should enjoy the food and drink offered or stay home, be an onlooker, leave the room and sit at the principal's office, or it was up to parents to provide their own homemade or store-bought alternatives (if they even had enough notice). As a result, students were physically and socially excluded and many parents felt unsupported, with many going to great lengths to try to mitigate their children's feelings of exclusion.

Feeling Physically Excluded

The stories parents told revealed that all but one of the children in this study were excluded at one point or another because of their diet because of the schools' and individual teachers' decisions around food and dairy milk. For example, students were moved to the principal's office to avoid exposure to foods that negatively affect them or were kept home and missed celebrations.

Writing about children with allergies, Janine Gaudreau (2000) depicted the challenges of making the school environment safe over 20 years ago and suggested that, "One needs to find another room for these children and make sure they wash their hands thoroughly before returning

to their classroom" (p. 7). Parents reported, however, that the sense of separateness (Mulvey et al., 2017) that ensued from moving children out led to tears several times. Writing about exclusion more generally, Mulvey and colleagues (2017) explain, "excluding behavior frequently causes psychological harm and can have negative outcomes for emotional and behavioral health" (p. 72). Being physically separated from peers during special food days thus does not create the "caring, inclusive…and accepting environment" (p. 5) the Ministry of Education (2014) strives for in schools. Further, as George Patton and colleagues (2006) remind us, the social atmosphere of schools affects "how well students learn" (p. 1582) and as the findings demonstrate, the lack of accommodations around food clearly disrupted the learning of these students, as some children were physically removed from the classroom, others were kept home by parents, or children stayed put but were then distraught.

Even students with health issues such as an anaphylactic allergy to eggs, an adverse physiological reaction to dairy and gluten, and a history of neglect that resulted in an unhealthy relationship with packaged, processed foods found themselves physically removed from their classroom or school. For one family, this became a permanent exclusion given their eventual decision to leave the LDSB altogether due to ongoing battles. Asking for support and not being accommodated created anxiety and stress for the parents in my study. Like the parents in the study by Prathyusha Sanagavarapu and colleagues (2016) who worried about how food allergies would be accommodated in their young children's schools, some of my participants too felt unable to "trust and transfer the responsibility for their children's safety to school staff" (p. 115).

The parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder continually struggled when advocating for his needs when he was young and unable to do so himself. Far too often, he would ingest dairy and gluten that would cause symptoms to flare, affecting his emotional and

digestive health, impeding his ability to learn. That resonates with Sheila Bennett and colleagues' (2020) writing on students with intellectual disabilities:

> Parent experiences of their child's success or failure at school were reported by participants as often being dependent on the school-based individuals (the people) who were in their child's life at any particular period of time. Even one significant advocate within the school (e.g., a principal, a teacher or an educational assistant) could impact the overall experience of the child. Sometimes, a transition from one school to another could make a positive or negative difference. (p. 150)

For the parent of the child with autism spectrum disorder, her decision to move her child from the LDSB to another school board proved positive as the people at the new board seemed better able to ensure her son's safety and inclusion.

Feeling Socially Excluded

Accepting and respectful are the opposite sentiments to describe all but one of the schools when it came to what parents witnessed of their children's school food experiences. Labels and phrases such as stigma, weird, isolated, teasing, left out, embarrassing, feeling bad, feeling different, unable to participate, bullying, difficulty functioning as a vegan, overwhelming, and a sense of aloneness peppered participants' stories. The parents shared incidents in which their children felt socially excluded or dreaded having to choose between eating to fit in or facing existential angst and/or negative physical consequences.

For example, consider the lactose intolerant student who wanted to be cool, so felt torn between the choice of either drinking the milk and eating the cheese on offer that would undoubtedly lead to physical challenges or suffering the social consequences of not being accepted by peers. This student struggled with whether to eat the pepperoni and cheese pizza that she knew would not agree with her system and she also did not want to waste food, and when she did choose to eat this pizza she then felt guilty given her love of animals. As Hank Rothgerber and Daniel Rosenfeld (2021) explain, "eating animals implicates emotion regulation, motivated

reasoning, cognitive dissonance, and moral decision-making" (p. 1). While some children (and adults) may struggle less with consuming meat and dairy either because of lack of knowledge or wilful ignorance that helps minimize cognitive dissonance (Russell, 2019), others, particularly those committed to veg*nism for ethical reasons, can find it very challenging to deal with the competing demands of living in line with their values yet wanting to be included by their peers.

Another type of social exclusion occurred when a single food item was used as a reward, leaving those children unable or unwilling to consume it without a prize. Having the same reward for everyone did not work. As Corine Rivalland and Joce Nuttall (2010) found in their interviews with educators, "one consequence of a sameness-as-fairness approach is that it can create…ambiguous understanding…not only for educators but also for children [which deprives] children of the opportunity to articulate and engage with differences in a critical way" (p. 31).

One contributing factor to this social exclusion, as suggested in the literature review, may be that veg*ns are portrayed in derogatory ways (Cole & Morgan, 2011). Even though there were diverse reasons why the children in this study ate a plant-based diet, it is possible teachers, administrators, and even other children associate veg*nism solely with animal rights and consciously or unconsciously have a negative bias towards veg*ns (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). That all but one child experienced social exclusion, not just the ethical veg*ns, contrasts with other literature that suggests veg*ns motivated by animal rights and environmental concerns face greater stigma and discrimination (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017). No wonder, then, that the vegan parents in this study themselves felt stigmatized, with one preferring to refer to her family as "plant-based" in order to avoid it.

This stigma is not merely perceived but experienced in a myriad of ways, including through outright discrimination (Horta, 2018) like the teasing, bullying, and social exclusion of

children as described by the parents in this study. Some parents also reported feeling socially shunned themselves when they were avoided by some staff and made to feel like pests because of their persistent requests for accommodations. One parent even felt bullied by other parents because her child's allergy inconveniences other families; that resonates with Sanagavarapu and colleagues' (2016) finding that parents were "concerned about other parents' negative attitudes towards food allerg[ies]" (p. 115) and a recent study in Ontario by Jennifer Dean and colleagues (2016) that involved "children, youth and their parents [who] described interpersonal and structural health-related stigma faced in school settings as a result of their health status" (p. e49).

The social exclusion created by a lack of veg*n options and acceptance of diverse diets shown in this study affected children's ability to connect with others in the school community and thrive with a sense of social cohesion. When considering their experiences through an "equity lens" (Datnow & Park, 2018, p. 149), it is clear that the limited options in school food and milk programs are indeed barriers to the "sense of belonging" the LDSB (2020, p. 1) is hoping to foster. As the LDSB (2020) says themselves, commitment to equity requires "responding to the individual needs of each student and providing the conditions and interventions needed to help [them] succeed" (LDSB, 2020, p. 1). Children's diverse diets need to be recognized and accommodated so that students are not made to feel different and socially excluded, because as humans, those of us "who do not have belonging needs met are more likely to experience … anxiety, depression, grief, [and] loneliness" (Specht, 2013a, p. 44).

Feeling Unsupported

Some of the parents expressed how they felt unsupported in meeting their children's dietary needs by not only teachers and administrators, but also by other parents who would bring in treats for classes to enjoy. What is especially concerning is that many of these adults were well

aware of the needs of these young students given their parents' advocacy efforts, yet it did not seem to matter. Still, these parents persisted in trying to mitigate their children's exclusion even without support. There are other examples of parents leading efforts to reshape school food environments. For example, Stapleton (2021) describes the efforts of a group of "noisy mothers" who tried to advocate for improved school food to little avail for nearly a decade; they persisted despite being repeatedly dismissed and did eventually succeed, but it was an uphill battle as they sought to shift the status quo.

Indeed, status quo ideas about what "normal" diets are likely feeds into the lack of support these parents felt. Hirschler (2011) explains that being vegan in North America requires carefully navigating social interactions, deciphering who might be supportive and where hostility may arise. The vegans in Hirschler's (2011) study described the need to employ what is known as "visibility management strategies" to carefully choose whom, when, and what to tell, a strategy used by others in minority groups trying to avoid discrimination (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). Parents needing to advocate for their children are in plain sight, however, and since veg*nism is still perceived as outside the norm by many in North America, that likely informed the behaviours of the teachers, administrators, and fellow parents, most of whom were unsupportive of my participants.

What my findings seem to say is that if one does not conform to what mainstream schools do, in this case related to food, then inclusion does not apply to you. Being unable and/or unwilling to conform has created enormous stress and anxiety for my participants, which echoes literature on the experiences of parents of children with food allergies (e.g., Lau et al., 2014; Sanagavarapu et al., 2016). For example, in their study, Roxanne Dupuis and colleagues (2020) found:

> Poorly defined and implemented policies disrupted students' social and educational experiences at school, families' relationships with school staff, and, ultimately, the safety and wellbeing of students with allergies. Given the high prevalence of food allergies among children, these findings demonstrate the need for multiple layers of support to facilitate safe, socially inclusive food allergy management at schools. (p. 395)

Supports within the school can be provided when staff are willing to listen to parents and work together for the safety and well-being of students.

Parental Attempts to Mitigate Exclusion at School

Given the lack of support and accommodations for their children, some parents found themselves trying to proactively mitigate their children's exclusion. That included carving out more time to make plant-based foods that resembled what the other children were eating in school, but that sometimes proved tricky if they were given little notice even after reaching out to teachers to say that they would provide an alternative. Much like the parents of children with intellectual disabilities in the study by Bennett and colleagues (2020), trying to lessen and ideally resolve issues can come at a time cost. While their attempts to send suitable food and drinks may help mitigate exclusion for some children, it is possible that other children still feel embarrassed about being different from their peers. It also relegates this problem to an individual rather than a systemic response, which resonates with a broader issue related to school food (Stapleton, 2019). These parents, then, wanted to see broader solutions such as policy changes as well as raising awareness in the school community, which I turn to next.

Theme Two: The Need to Raise Awareness

To move from tears and fears towards inclusion, parents asserted that raising awareness about food issues is key. They wanted others—teachers, administrators, other parents, and children—to know more about where food comes from and have different diets normalized.

They also had several ideas about how to provide professional development for teachers, although little to suggest about how to educate other parents.

Learning about Plant-based Diets, Animal Welfare, and Sustainable Eating

The elementary-aged students in this study are already aware, or becoming aware, of where the meat on pizzas and in hotdogs comes from, but that is primarily due to the efforts of their parents. Students who come from farming and hunting families may also be well aware, but other students may be less knowledgeable about how meat comes to be. In research with omnivorous Torontonian mothers, Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston (2018) found that "in the context of meat eating, [parents felt] teaching about food's origins conflicts with the notion that children should be shielded from difficult knowledge. The truth of animal slaughter is viewed as a threat to children's innocence" (p. 577). Students thus can be quite removed from the processes involved in transforming an animal living on a farm to a cut found on a plate.

As early as grade one, educators are expected to use Canada's Food Guide to teach healthy eating (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 104), and it is possible that some teachers raise these issues. The curriculum and the guide do not provide or expect the process of animal slaughter or dairy production to be explicitly taught, however. Parents in my study suggested that teachers could use Canada's Food Guide as a starting place for lessons on where the food on their plate comes from, and also on the vast array of diets around the world. In addition, others like Taylor Wilson and Shailesh Shukla (2020) have suggested a need to develop Indigenous Food Guides to ensure greater cultural relevance. They also applaud Brazil's guide because, as Nestle (2014) suggests, it is accessible and attainable for all classes and "consider[s] the social, cultural, economic, and environmental implications of food choices" (p. 1).

Unpacking the colonial past of Canada's Food Guide could also be an entrée for discussing Indigenous approaches to meat-eating, which is typically more respectful and far more sustainable than factory farms and the fishing industry (Kekiewic & Rotz, 2018). Not all parents are supportive of hunting—the vegan couple in my study, for example, find hunting of any sort offensive when an ample supply of plant-based foods are within reach, which aligns with Mi'kmaq scholar Robinson's (2014) decision that when she is living in urban centres where such food is readily available, her cultural value of non-interference with animals demands a vegan diet. Raising awareness that Indigenous peoples have diverse approaches to food—some that involve taking animal life and expressing gratitude for that gift (Islam & Berkes, 2016) and some that avoid taking animal life if not necessary for survival (Robinson, 2014, 2018)—also helps ensure that Indigenous peoples are not relegated to some distant past but seen as alive and well in diverse contexts, which supports decolonial Indigenous education (Carr-Stewart, 2019). An *inclusive* approach to critical food education means not demonizing anyone's diet, whether omnivorous or plant-based, as I mentioned in my literature review when discussing Lloro's (2020) cultural humility approach.

While Canada's most recent food guide now incorporates visuals of plant-based protein options, it still continues to normalize the eating of meat, and offers no suggestion that one might differentiate between meat sourced from CAFOs, family farms, hunting, or gleaning. As an educational resource, then, it therefore reinforces the hidden curriculum that eating meat or other animal by-products is normal and acceptable to all. Perhaps the Ministry of Education curriculum connections to the Food Guide purposely left out any mention of meat and dairy production due to a fear of children's innocence being taken away (Cairns & Johnson, 2018). Or perhaps it was avoidance of controversy, given responses to educational efforts to teach about

and/or limit meat and dairy can lead to negative responses, as with what happened with the Swedish secondary school students in Lindgren's (2020) study in which students were critical of vegan lunches being offered as it was seen as a "leftist" (p. 690) and "feminist" (p. 691) political move. Or perhaps the intensive lobbying of meat and dairy producers played a role, as it has in the creation of Canada's food guides (Vogel, 2018).

The parents in this study argue that students would benefit from knowing more about where their food comes from so that they can make more informed decisions. So too could teachers and other adult stakeholders. Indeed, teachers can hardly be expected to teach about plant-based diets if they know little about them themselves.

Education of Adult Stakeholders

Parents were frustrated with the lack of knowledge of some administrators, teachers, and fellow parents when it came to veg*n diets and allergies, given that it led to problems for their children. Parents thus recommended professional development to support the educators' knowledge of food as one way to encourage more equitable and inclusive learning spaces for their children. They suggested a multifaceted approach, including workshops where educators are also offered a variety of plant-based foods to expose them to foods they may not have tried before. Although teachers may have seen foods the parents' children brought to school, the opportunity to try them is limited, pointing to why such exposure in a professional development setting could be helpful. If the teachers were more open to new foods, perhaps they then could use the children's food as teachable moments to support inclusive education. As Ana Carvalho and colleagues (2022) argued in their study of plant-based food in university cafeterias, "If meat-eaters are wired to react negatively to measures that aim to curtail or reduce meat consumption in collective meal contexts, perhaps one way to minimize this resistance is to promote or increase

the consumption of plant-based meals instead" (p. 3). Providing tasty plant-based options might help.

Professional development workshops would not only be an opportunity to try plant-based foods, of course, but could be an enjoyable way to ground teaching about veg*n diets, the diverse reasons people adopt them, and their various benefits such as health and environmental sustainability. It also could be a space for the educators to "think about how their own cultural practices might contribute to human and animal suffering" (Lloro, 2020, p. 155), while recognizing that resistance to such learning can be strong since many seem to prefer to "not know" about meat, egg, and dairy production (Russell, 2019, p. 45).

I would suggest another aspect of these workshops could focus on how the teachers themselves could be critical food educators. While I am not suggesting all teachers should or can enrol in the MEd program at Lakehead University, where a newly developed Critical Food Education course is now offered online, perhaps some of the content could be adapted for shorter professional development workshops. In that course description, for example, it was stated:

> The environmental, ethical, health, and social justice implications of food education will be investigated. A critical examination of the ways we teach and learn about food in both formal and informal educational contexts will be facilitated by exploring topics such as hunger, food security and sovereignty, nutrition, culture, school food programs and policies, food animals, farming, foraging, gardening, labour issues, and water. (Russell, 2021, p. 1)

Such foundational knowledge is pertinent to Ontario's elementary teachers who are expected to deliver food education to students as early as grade one and every year thereafter.

When providing teacher education for inclusion, Lani Florian and Donatella Camedda (2020) highlight the need to engage the 3Hs: "the head (theoretical knowledge); the hand (technical and practical skills); and the heart (attitudes and beliefs) to…align with the values of respect for diversity and human dignity" (p. 6). Vera Ivanaj and colleagues (2014) found great

success in their sustainability-focused workshops with educators using aesthetic inquiry to convey emotional knowledge, engage the 3Hs, and provide a space for individuals to grapple with the complexity of the topic. School leaders have a unique role in creating inclusive environments and as Edda Óskarsdóttir and colleagues (2020) demonstrate, they need to ensure their staff have access to pertinent information and opportunities to build their capacity. Further, Stuart Woodcock and Ian Hardy's (2017) work demonstrates that when attempting to build such capacity, professional development appears to be more effective if issues are not presented in isolation, but rather when the focus is on inclusive pedagogies for all. Thus, it would seem that any professional development workshops on plant-based diets would likely be more effective if the connections to equity and inclusion are made very clear.

The parents also suggested that there were community resources available that could strengthen the support system to help educators feel confident and competent in teaching about plant-based diets and engaging in more inclusive food practices. An example in the Thunder Bay area is the aforementioned Roots to Harvest (www.rootstoharvest.org), with whom LDSB secondary schools are already collaborating. The Board also could procure food from local growers and learn from community members keen about foraging. There are also local entrepreneurs who advocate for vegan foods and would undoubtedly love to share their expertise and services, such as Compass Foods (www.compassfoods.ca) and Bliss (www.blissfoodsco.com); the latter offers catering and a menu that is 100% plant-based, gluten-free, free of refined sugars, and comprised of whole food ingredients.

The parents in my study also highlighted the need to educate other parents, particularly to reduce or eliminate instances when dangerous or unsuitable foods are brought into schools. They did not have particular suggestions for how to do so, however, so I turned to the literature for

insights. A challenge, of course, is that *students* are typically the focus of a board of education's mandate rather than adults. Discussing a project to make nutritious food available in schools, Bekker and colleagues (2017) suggested that success requires a "multi-pronged approach [where] all role players" (p. 1265), including parents, are aware of and supporting the project. Mary Hearst and colleagues (2017) suggest that providing "parent and family education [requires] offerings in a variety of ways including online [and] in-person" (p. 59). Since parents are more familiar with the nature of online learning now due to the pandemic, perhaps a similar program on inclusion in relation to food and other critical aspects could be developed by experts. Alternatively, perhaps a special day could be developed that could assist with parent education. I am thinking, for example, of Orange Shirt Day (Charleyboy, 2020) that has increased our nation's awareness about Residential Schools and hopefully has better equipped all adult stakeholders to move towards reconciliation. Other examples include Green Shirt Day every October 6th in support of cerebral palsy and Food Allergy Awareness Month that happens in May. Information about these dedicated days and months often reach parents via monthly newsletters, emails, and posters, and typically also contain links to additional resources to further their understanding.

Theme Three: Food Policy

While none of the parents in this study had read the Equity and Inclusive Education Policy prior to the interviews, all wanted the Board to mandate that schools offer plant-based options as well as other foods considerate of other dietary restrictions to remove barriers to equity and inclusion. They offered a number of suggestions for how to move beyond individual requests for accommodation to a more systemic response. These include conducting a survey of parents to get a better sense of children's diverse dietary needs, sharing best practices that build

upon previous successes within the Board, and making a policy mandate appealing to ensure there was sufficient support for it.

Moving Beyond Individual Requests for Accommodation

The parents in my study agreed that a Board policy on inclusive food would remove the pressure from parents who currently need to make individual requests but also could eliminate elementary students having to advocate for themselves on this matter. They felt that was especially important since it appears there remains a stigma attached to veg*nism, and perhaps other diets not perceived as mainstream, in Thunder Bay. As noted in the literature review, veg*n stigma is a widespread phenomenon (Horta, 2018; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019), so it is not a surprise that it is also a problem in a diverse city like Thunder Bay. Given that some parents found it difficult to make requests for accommodation to other adults in schools, children should not be put in this uncomfortable situation either.

Parents suggested that schools or teachers could have conversations with parents or, perhaps more efficiently, send out a simple survey at the beginning of the school year to learn what food and drink the children in their care can have. Imagine what we might learn about food-related needs by explicitly asking, which could be useful not only for veg*n students but others with specific dietary needs (e.g., Halal, Kosher, wild game, fasting, etc). Indeed, issues of food choice in schools cannot be discussed in isolation from issues of equity more broadly. Asking about students' food needs could be added to the recent "I Am Census" (https://iamcensus.lakeheadschools.ca/) already conducted by the LDSB for students in Kindergarten to Grade 12; its purpose is to collect information:

> To get an accurate picture of the composition of the student population…identify and address barriers to equity of access and outcomes for student achievement [and] enhance decision-making about programs and supports necessary for student well-being and success. (para. 2)

The survey parents suggested could also be a separate tool used by schools that wish to incorporate food and drink in their classrooms. While Sabrina's Law (Levac, 2005) states parents must disclose severe allergies to schools for a safety policy to be developed and adhered to, information on other dietary restrictions are not required.

Another possibility is to broaden what sorts of food are featured on special food days. We do not need to just habitually serve pizza or hot dogs, but instead could offer more diverse types of food. The student body likely would happily provide input, although some of their ideas might not be financially or practically feasible. Nonetheless, assuming milk programs and hot dog and pizza days persist, a few different options could be offered (e.g., oat milk alongside dairy milk, vegan hot dogs next to the meat option). A form with check boxes could be used to determine student preferences. By offering a more diverse menu, even students who do not have dietary restrictions might be tempted to try a different option otherwise not available to them elsewhere. The parents suggested that some businesses in Thunder Bay might be able to supply the alternative food and drinks. For example, Eat Local (www.eatlocalpizzapos.com) offers pizza made with plant-based cheese from the local company Meet the Alternative (www.facebook.com/meetthealternative).

As it stands, when a parent or student requests an accommodation for food, they are really asking, "Can I participate too?" Inclusive practices mean everyone can participate and if schools are to have special food days or use food and drink in other ways, all students ought to have access without feeling like they are asking for special treatment. Discussing barriers and facilitators associated with disability disclosure and accommodations, Sally Lindsay and colleagues' (2018) findings are relevant here:

> Barriers to disability disclosure and requests for accommodations…included stigma, discrimination, lack of knowledge of supports and how to access them…coping styles, and nature of the disability. Facilitators included supports and resources, coping and self-advocacy skills, mentorship, and realising the benefits of disclosure. Factors affecting the process and timing of disability disclosure…included the…mode of disclosure. (p. 526)

The mode of disclosure suggested by the parents in this study, like a survey of dietary needs or a form that allowed for a variety of food options, would allow students (or their parents) to share their food and drinks wishes easily and confidentially.

Building Upon Previous Success

One parent shared that they had received support from the school regarding her child's vegetarian diet, articulating how the staff's efforts to provide options were surprising and made her and her child feel very lucky, especially knowing there is no formal policy mandating such support. Her family never felt ostracized or weird, in contrast to the experiences of most of the children of other parents in my study. The parent of a child with an anaphylactic allergy also shared she felt fortunate her school had an egg allergy policy, stating that she knew not many schools were accommodating like hers. A few parents also acknowledged that some individual teachers had made efforts to find foods their children could enjoy with the rest of the class, for which they were grateful. These efforts are great examples of an inclusive approach to food. They also reveal how parents and their children felt cared for. It reminds me of Alexandra Schindel and Sara Tolbert's (2017) account of a teacher who expressed authentic care for his students, and what a difference it made to them and to their learning.

Schools can reproduce the oppression of veg*n students (Bivi et al., 2021) and marginalize eaters with allergies and intolerances (Dean et al., 2016), or they can be inclusive, caring places that respect and normalize plant-based diets (Harris, 2016). The stories a few parents told about their positive experiences in LDSB schools is encouraging, and parents

suggested that these successes could be built on. Indeed, parents suggested that administrators and teachers in the LDSB schools who are already implementing more inclusive food practices could lead workshops for others in the Board, since what they are doing is already celebrated by parents and enjoyed by students. These role models could share their own practices, including why they are providing options, and describe the logistics and offer practical tips. Having peers offer such professional development would align with the findings in Mhairi Beaton and colleagues' (2021) study that explains:

> Traditional approaches to professional learning to support teachers' inclusive practice have tended to focus on discrete courses which address specific learning needs such as autism, literacy difficulties, or behavioural issues… [But] professional dilemmas facing educators are complex and unpredictable and…educators require professional learning that is collaborative, interprofessional, and acknowledges that the challenges they face are multifaceted. (p. 1)

Engaging in collaborative professional learning with colleagues can strengthen equity and inclusive efforts in schools.

How to Make the Policy Palatable

Parents suggested a variety of strategies to help a policy mandating plant-based options be accepted by all, so that everyone affected feels seen and can celebrate the shift, rather than resist it. Lumsden (2017) suggests that advocating for plant-based options may be met with less resistance if it does not challenge established conventions. The plant-based milk that all parents would like to see available, for example, can be promoted for its nutritional content and health benefits (Craig et al., 2021) rather than vilifying the use of cows for dairy. A respectful approach steeped in an understanding of the cultural meanings dairy holds for many people is key to ensuring a successful change in policy (Daly, 2011).

Parents also suggested another way to sell the policy would be on financial grounds. Despite the stereotype that plant-based options are more expensive and a veg*n diet only

accessible to the economically privileged (Greenebaum, 2017), these diets can be affordable. The parents thus suggested that including low-cost plant-based options would be a good way to accommodate the diverse food needs of students. For example, if milk is to be offered, having an inexpensive plant-based option would be helpful, and having a nut-free one would also be safe for students with those allergies and intolerances. Of course, one could question why we are even having milk sales in schools given Canada's Food Guide recommends water as the drink of choice, which also happens to be much less costly.

Water is also more environmentally friendly if it comes from the tap, which also aligns with parents suggesting that the Board frame an inclusive food policy also on environmental terms. Doing so would align well with the provincially mandated environmental education curriculum that includes the study of how to lessen our environmental footprints (Ministry of Education, 2017). As Rauchwerk (2017) suggests, building awareness of the environmental impact food systems have on climate change is important, and schools are an ideal setting to learn about food and its social, ecological, and economic issues (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Increasingly, Boards of Education have environmental policies in place, so it is possible that an inclusive food policy could align nicely with those as well. For instance, the LDSB's Environmental Policy (2018) states that the Board:

> Is committed to deliver effective environmental education, to model environmentally responsible practices, and to raise environmental awareness for students, staff and the school community. Environmental issues, concerns and impacts will be considered in all decision making, and concern for the quality of the natural environment will be reflected in the daily operations of the Board. (para. 2)

The decision of what food and drink to offer in schools could simultaneously support both the Equity and Inclusive Education Policy (LDSB, 2020) and Environmental Policy (LDSB, 2018) already in place.

While such a decision would be a win-win scenario in terms of cross-curricular teachings, it could also offer an opportunity for students to make their own choices. Given the last two years of living in a pandemic meant much of students' young lives were not in their control, a parent expressed how important it is to give students options so that they can feel empowered. She argued that could improve students' mental health even it was a choice as seemingly small as what to drink and eat at school on a special food day. The power of choices for children cannot be overlooked (Leotti et al., 2010) and it can provide them with a sense of agency as well as given them opportunities to practice and strengthen their decision-making skills (MSU, 2020).

It is important to note that even with the successful development of a more inclusive policy, barriers may still come into play. That may be especially so when it comes to meat substitutes, as Eleanor Kerslake and colleagues (2022) recently explored. Discussing British Columbia's school-level implementation of a policy related to school food and beverage sales, Adrienne Levay and colleague's (2020) found it evoked a variety of responses:

> First, the mandatory nature of the policy triggered some actors' implementation efforts, influenced by their normative acceptance of the educational governance system. Second, some expected implementers had an opposite response to the mandate where they ignored or "skirted" the policy, influenced by values and beliefs about the role of government and school food. A third mechanism related to economics demonstrated ways vendors' responses to school demand for compliance with nutritional Guidelines were mediated by beliefs about food preferences of children, health and food. The last mechanism demonstrated how resource constraints and lack of capacity led otherwise motivated stakeholders to not implement the mandatory policy. (p. 1460)

As parents in the current study suggested, for an inclusive school food policy to be accepted and implemented successfully, the Board will need to think carefully about how to make it palatable to diverse stakeholders, some of whom might be initially resistant.

Implications of Participant Demographics

In this last section, I now turn to a topic I had not expected to discuss, but nonetheless was a striking element of my study. While participant demographics were not a theme per se, I think it is important for me to reflect on them and what they too reveal about school food and inclusive education. In this section I discuss mothers' responsibilization for food, as well as consider implications for students and parents who may find themselves in more than one minority group. It was interesting to see that all but one of the parents who participated in this study were women, leading me to speculate why that might have happened and to consider cultural norms regarding gendered parenting roles. Also noteworthy to me was that all my participants were White, fitting the stereotype that veg*ns are White and middle-class even though I am confident there are many veg*ns in Thunder Bay who are not. Upon reflection, the fact that the children of these relatively privileged parents experienced exclusion suggests to me that it could be even worse for students and parents who face exclusion related to race or class, or other identity categories that I did not ask about like religion or sexual orientation.

Mothers' Responsibilization for Food

As Table 1 highlights, all but one of my parent participants was a woman, with only one father volunteering to participate in my study. While none of the mothers explicitly stated it was primarily their responsibility to ensure their children were fed well, mothers in Cassandra Johnson and colleagues' (2011) study "shared how they felt responsible for the family's eating habits, diet, and health" (p. 225). The overwhelming number of mothers in my study also mirrors Olivia De-Jongh González and colleagues' (2021) finding that "mothers are typically the primary caregiver and assume the major responsibility of feeding the family and ensuring their children

become food literate" (p. 5). Similarly, in a study of gendered perceptions of children's food allergies, Jessica Hoehn and colleagues (2017) found:

> In general, mothers tended to rate their child's food allergy as more burdensome in several (but not all) domains of daily living. Mothers rated their child's food allergy as having a significantly greater impact on meal preparation, family social activities, and parents' stress and free time than fathers, and although only marginally significant, their ratings of impact on school or structured activities, caregiver-supervised activities, and autonomous social activities were also greater than those of the fathers. (p. 194)

The gendered expectations of mothers to feed their children persists, even as caregiving responsibilities becoming somewhat more balanced in modern families (Adamo & Brett, 2014; De-Jongh González et al., 2021; Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Johnson et al., 2011; Stapleton, 2021; Watterworth et al., 2017).

Kristi Adamo and Kendra Brett (2014) suggest that researchers themselves may also be reinforcing this bias towards mothers, suggesting that "in regards to children's eating habits, the behaviours and knowledge of mothers have appealed to researchers more so than that of fathers, as mothers continue to spend significantly more time caring for their children, specifically the physical care activities such as feeding" (p. 984). Perhaps another contributing factor is that fathers do not respond to researchers' calls for participants. In the case of my study, I wonder if the lack of response from fathers also relates to veg*n men being more harshly stigmatized (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Nath, 2011; Rothgerber, 2013), thus perhaps leading some men to be hesitant to participate? If the emerging trend of more men adopting veg*n diets persists, with some men rationalizing their choice in scientific terms (Mycek, 2018), researchers in the future may have better luck than I did in recruiting veg*n fathers.

Whatever the reason, not hearing the perspectives of fathers is a gap in the research. Even though fathers may generally report "lower levels of responsibility for food parenting as compared to mothers" (Pratt et al., 2019, p. 1873), the important influence of fathers on healthy

food relationships cannot be understated. As Watterworth and colleagues (2017) suggest in reflecting on their own research findings related to parenting and nutrition:

> Father modelling of healthy eating was also associated with lower child nutrition risk. These results also underscore the importance of including fathers in research and interventions focused on child feeding. Future research should include a larger, more diverse sample of families…for more generalizable findings. (p. 671)

A similar limitation of my research was that it was mothers who were predominantly the voice of parents in my study. I will revisit this in the next chapter when I make recommendations for future research.

Mindful of Multiple Minority Identities

If White veg*ns feel excluded, as did many of the children and parents in my study, what might that mean for veg*ns who are Black, Indigenous, or people of colour or those who are English language learners, 2SLGBTIA+, or living in poverty? Catherine Hands (2013) states, "the potential for exclusion exists for families if their culture or language differs from that of the majority of the faculty and families in the school" (p. 136), whether they are veg*n or not. When marginalized on the basis of more than one factor, especially visible ones, I can understand why veg*ns from these groups might understandably employ visibility management (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003), choosing to remain unseen when it comes to their dietary choices. Perhaps limiting who knows how their dietary choices differ from the norm alleviates some anxiety, especially if they are enduring other forms of discrimination.

This is another reason why normalizing diverse diets is an important aspect of equity and inclusion. Jessica Greenebaum (2018) advocates disrupting stereotypes about veg*nism because "associating veganism with whiteness and privilege is not only wrong, it marks and marginalizes vegans of color in the vegan movement" (p. 680). If veg*n parents with cultural capital by virtue of their Whiteness who are able to "advocat[e] on behalf of one's children with teachers or other

institutional gatekeepers [and] volunteer at school in a variety of capacities," (Kimelberg, 2014, p. 211) are facing exclusion, what does that mean for other veg*n parents who may also be struggling but feel marginalized because of their other identities (Nettles & Balter, 2011)?

Summing Up

The school food experiences of some of the elementary parents in this study demonstrate that equity and inclusion is possible for diverse eaters when schools and teachers take it upon themselves to listen and respond. Alas, the overwhelming majority of stories of these parents revealed the opposite has been happening. Students were physically excluded on many occasions when food and milk were involved, causing one parent to eventually decide to permanently move her children to another Board. Children also experienced social exclusion in the schools where dietary restrictions were not supported, leaving parents to attempt to mitigate the issue with a large investment of time in providing plant-based alternatives themselves. Parents suggested that awareness about plant-based diets needed to be raised, both in students and in adult stakeholders like administrators, teachers, and other parents. Parents also believed a school food policy that mandates plant-based and other options specific to the student population would create greater equity and inclusion and would enable a systemic response rather than the current need for parents and children themselves to request accommodations, often unsuccessfully. There were some success stories, however, and parents recommended that the schools and teachers involved could build on these successes as part of professional development efforts to support inclusive food practices. Implementing such a policy will take care given anticipated resistance, but parents had ideas for promoting the policy, including touting the health benefits of veg*n diets, emphasizing low-cost options, and making cross-curricular connections to healthy eating and environmental education. Finally, I explored two aspects of participant demographics,

namely that they were primarily mothers and that they were all White. In the next chapter, I return to my research question, discuss the implications of this study for policy and practice, suggest future research possibilities, and close with a reflection on my personal journey.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

My research question, again, was: *What are Thunder Bay parents' experiences with school food options for their children who eat plant-based?* The stories they shared with me unfortunately described mostly exclusionary experiences and revealed a need for the LDSB to be more inclusive of diverse dietary needs. The dietary needs described by parents indicated that their desire for plant-based and other options were for diverse reasons, including health, allergies and intolerances, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability. Their experiences illustrated how the limited food and drink options available to their children is a barrier to equity and inclusion and impacts their well-being and learning. In contrast, a few individual teachers and one school did ensure that all students had the opportunity to participate in and enjoy special food days, milk sales, and classroom treats and rewards, which led to a sense of belonging within the school community.

Asking parents to share and reflect on their experiences also revealed how many of the parents felt unsupported and even excluded themselves. When school staff did not respond to their requests for accommodation or were even unwilling to work with parents by giving them advance notice of a special food day so that they could mitigate their children's exclusion by sending in food they made themselves, they were rightly frustrated. Their experiences undoubtedly shaped their perceptions of how to improve the school food environment for all. They attributed some of the problem to a lack of knowledge about plant-based diets and how providing options could support equity and inclusion. They thus suggested that food education was needed for students to help normalize diverse diets and they also made suggestions for educating adult stakeholders, including exposing them to tasty veg*n foods and learning about critical food education and community resources available. Further, having administrators and

teachers from other schools who were successfully offering inclusive school food lead professional development workshops was recommended by the parents who had good experiences. Parents also stressed that it was not only educators who needed to learn more about food, but also other parents to help prevent them from continuing to bring in foods that presented a hazard to their children.

Given their experiences, parents also unanimously advocated for a policy on school food options that accommodates all learners, arguing it would heighten equity and inclusion. Such a policy would remove the need for parents and children to make individual requests, which is important given even these relatively privileged parents disclosed how they were not comfortable making such requests or were frustrated when doing so. A more systemic response to the exclusion caused by a lack of food options was deemed necessary. Of course, providing plant-based options is not, by itself, going to eliminate the problem of bullying and discrimination in schools. Discrimination related to food choices is a symptom of a wider problem, so while providing plant-based options may allow for greater participation by eaters and begin to normalize diverse diets, schools still need to work on the root causes of barriers to belonging. An inclusive food policy needs to operate in tandem with other efforts to celebrate diversity and address marginalization.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As the Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2019) states, “what happens at school can have a significant influence on a student’s well-being” (p. 5). The stories shared by parents that describe LDSB schools and teachers neglecting to support student food and drink needs were mostly stories of exclusion. Fortunately, a few positive stories

were also shared, showing that the school food environment can be equitable and inclusive when care is taken by key players.

A policy that mandates food could be promoted and implemented in various ways, as parents suggested. Some recommended emphasizing the health benefits of a plant-based diet, which could align with Canada's new Food Guide and healthy eating curriculum objectives. A few recommend the Board take a leadership stance and frame the provision of plant-based options as part of their efforts to combat climate change in alignment with the environmental education curriculum. All felt that schools and teachers would benefit from learning more about the diverse reasons people adopt plant-based diets (health, culture, religion, animal welfare, human and animal rights, sustainability) in general, and about the dietary needs of their students in particular (which could be facilitated through a Board survey, inclusion of a food-related item on the "I Am Census," or school-level forms). Particularly germane to the framing of my thesis, they also recommended that all stakeholders (i.e., Board members, school staff and administrators, teachers, parents, and students) need to understand how intimately food is connected to students feeling included or left out and recommended explicitly tying a policy that mandated the provision of food options to meet diverse student needs to equity and inclusion. Looking to the food policies of other Boards of Education (in the area, including Indigenous ones, or more broadly in Ontario or Canada) could be helpful as the LDSB drafts and/or revises their own policy.

Future Research Needs

As noted above, there is Board-level research that needs to be done, namely to better determine the food needs of students by having students and parents identify what those are. I would suggest that the I Am Census (https://iamcensus.lakeheadschools.ca/) would be a great

place to start. The latter aligns with the Parent Engagement Policy by the Ministry of Education (2010) which states that

> Parents play a vital role in education. When parents are engaged and involved, everyone—students, parents and families, teachers, schools, and communities—benefit, and our schools become increasingly rich and positive places to learn, teach, and grow. (p. 5)

An obvious limitation of my study was the skewed demographics of my participants, with 10 of the 11 participants being women and all being White. Ideally, I would have liked to have heard from fathers as well as parents from diverse cultures and religions to gain a more holistic understanding of how the school food environment affects a range of parents and their children. As my findings and the literature corroborates, it is possible that mothers' responsibilization for food (Adamo & Brett, 2014; De-Jongh González et al., 2021; Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Johnson et al., 2011; Stapleton, 2021; Watterworth et al., 2017) and the compounding of other forms of discrimination with that against veg*ns (Horta, 2018; MacInnis & Hodson, 2019; Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019) may have prevented some parents volunteering to share their stories with me. Further, parents who did not see the invitation email (who might have been keen had they seen a poster in a school) or who would have preferred to participate in an in-person interview (which could not happen because of the pandemic) may have been excluded from this study, thus future studies in post-pandemic times might reach more diverse participants.

Another limitation was my positionality as a vegan researcher, which clearly shaped the focus of my thesis. While I investigated the experiences of parents with students with plant-based diets, other issues related to school food did arise in the interviews (e.g., intolerance to gluten), but I did not delve into these because they were beyond the scope of this thesis. That certainly is not to say that these other issues do not require attention. Indeed, there is a clear need

for other researchers, with diverse interests and working from other positions and in other contexts, to also contribute to research on food policy in relation to equity and inclusion.

Finally, if the LDSB does mandate a school food policy in the future, research on its effectiveness from the perspectives of parents, students, administrators, and teachers would be very useful. It could help the LDSB identify and remove any additional barriers with the goal of equity and inclusion in mind and determine any additional professional development needs. Such research would also be of broader interest to scholars interested in school food policy development and implementation, with the LDSB serving as an interesting case study.

Personal Journey

Reflecting on my thesis journey fills me with both joy and hope. When I became aware of a new online MEd program in Education for Change, I excitedly registered after carefully considering how it might impact our time and finances as a family and was mindful to not get my hopes up that I would be able to help make specific changes to benefit my own children's school food experiences. Having support of the LDSB to conduct this thesis research route enabled me to broaden my goal of supporting not only my children, but all students in the LDSB who have diverse dietary needs.

The process of working with decision-makers in the Board also gave me a window into the power dynamics associated with policy development and how my own privilege as a well-educated, professional, White woman gave me access others may not have had. I am incredibly grateful for the Director's support and his willingness to allow me to send the call for participation to all parents in the Board. I found it interesting how that decision alone was taken as a signal by my participants that the LDSB was open to change in relation to school food and drink options, which filled them with hope. I too hope, with every fibre of my being, that the

LDSB (and perhaps other Boards) will find my study helpful and that it assists others to recognize that school food and drink do indeed need to be understood as an important part equity and inclusion efforts.

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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Poster

Do your kids need plant-based food options at school?

Would you be willing to share your story?

I am a Lakehead MEd student and parent of children who attend Lakehead Public Schools, interested in hearing from other parents regarding having vegetarian and/or vegan options at school.

Are you?

- 18 years of age or older?
- A parent/guardian of an elementary student in a Lakehead Public School?
- A parent of a child who is vegetarian or vegan?
- Interested in sharing ideas for how food policy or practices could be changed to benefit children?

If so, for more information, contact:
Julie Morin, MEd Thesis Student
jcgossel@lakeheadu.ca
807-630-5914

Appendix B: Participant Letter of Information

Faculty of Education
Phone: 807-630-5914
Email: jcgossel@lakeheadu.ca

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Julie Morin and I am an MEd student in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University and a parent of children in an elementary school in the Lakehead District School Board. As the parent of children who eat a plant-based diet, I want to connect with other parents of children who are vegetarian or vegan (veg*n) for any reason to learn about your experiences with, and perspectives on, the state of food offerings in the school(s) your child(ren) attend. I also would like to hear any ideas you might have for improving existing practices or policies related to food options in school. The title of my study is *Fostering Equity and Inclusion with Plant-Based Food Options in School: A Critical Inquiry with Elementary Parents in the Lakehead District School Board*.

The Board has given me permission to approach you to see if you might be interested in participating in my study. You are under no obligation to do so – whether you participate or not is up to you. Before you decide whether you would like to participate, please read this letter carefully to understand what is involved. After you have read the letter, please ask me any questions you may have.

PURPOSE
My research seeks to give voice to parents of veg*n elementary students who cannot and/or will not consume what is currently offered in public schools (e.g., in the cafeteria, on special food days, etc.). My research seeks to explore whether parents perceive their children's plant-based diet affects their sense of belonging in school, what sorts of food options parents would like to have available in their schools, and what recommendations parents might have for a policy that mandates plant-based food options.

WHAT INFORMATION WILL BE COLLECTED?
I will collect data through one-on-one interviews. In the interviews, I will be asking for personal data such as your age, nationality, and food preferences and about your experiences with school food as a parent. I will provide you with the list of questions in advance so you know what to expect and can prepare if you would like.

WHAT IS REQUESTED FROM ME AS A PARTICIPANT?
We will arrange to meet for an interview on Zoom at a convenient time for you. I will ask you a series of questions about your experience as a parent of veg*n child(ren) attending school in the LDSB. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes. With your permission, interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcription. Once interview

transcriptions are complete, if you would like, I will give you the opportunity to review your own transcript to verify that it is accurate and, if not, I will make changes at your request.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A PARTICIPANT?
Please be assured that you are under no obligation to participate. You are free to withdraw from my study at any time. I will provide you with a consent form that makes clear that your rights include: the right to not participate; to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality; and to having safeguards in place to ensure security of data. Further, your decision to participate or not will not affect my academic status. Throughout the course of the research project, I will inform you of any information that may impact your decision to continue or withdraw from participation.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS?
There is no foreseeable harm associated with participating in this research. I will be asking you about your experiences and perspectives on the current school food environment as well as a possible policy that could mandate providing plant-based options for students. Should you make a comment that is critical of the school or the Board, please know that this will not be directly attributed to you and that you I will maintain your confidentiality and anonymity.
In terms of benefits, you may appreciate the opportunity to share and critically reflect on your experiences and perspectives. Your feedback also might influence future food practices and policy in the Board. If you would like, you will be given a copy of the research summary and/or my full thesis, which will also provide you with an opportunity to learn about the experiences and perspectives of other veg*n families.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE MAINTAINED?
Your name will be changed to a pseudonym in my thesis and any publications or presentations. Participants will not be identified in any documents that might come out of this study.

WHAT WILL MY DATA BE USED FOR?
Data from this study will be analyzed to look for commonly occurring situations or themes as well as unique experiences that shed light on the school food experience. I will share an executive summary and/or the full thesis with any participant who would like to see it as well as the LDSB Director and Board.

WHERE WILL MY DATA BE STORED?
During data collection and analysis, all information will be carefully kept on a password-protected external hard drive. Following the completion of the study, I will give the hard drive to my supervisor, Dr. Constance Russell who will have it stored in the secure data storage area in the Faculty of Education's Bora Laskin building for a period of 5 years, after which it will be destroyed.

HOW CAN I RECEIVE A COPY OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS?
In the consent form, there is a space to indicate whether you would like to be emailed a short summary of the research and/or my full thesis. If you do, I will send these to you when they are ready.

WHAT IF I WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?
You may withdraw from the study at any time up until the point that you approve the final interview transcript. If you do want to withdraw, you can do so by contacting me or my supervisor (see contact information below).

RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION:
If at any time you have questions or concerns regarding the research, please feel free to contact me by email at 807-630-5914 or jcgossel@lakeheadu.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Constance Russell by email at 807-343-8049 or crussell@lakeheadu.ca.

Sincerely,

Julie Morin, MEd Student
Faculty of Education, Lakehead University

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD REVIEW AND APPROVAL:
This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright of the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board at 807-343-8283 *or*
research@lakeheadu.camailto:research@lakeheadu.ca.

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Faculty of Education
Phone: 807-630-5914
Email: jcgossel@lakeheadu.ca

PROJECT TITLE: *Fostering Equity and Inclusion with Plant-Based Food Options in School: A Critical Inquiry with Elementary Parents in the Lakehead District School Board*

MY CONSENT:
I agree to the following:

- ü I have read and understand the information contained in the Information Letter.
- ü I agree to participate.
- ü I understand the risks and benefits to the study.
- ü I am a volunteer and can withdraw from the study at any time and may choose not to answer any question.
- ü The data will be securely stored at in the secure storage area in the Faculty of Education in Thunder Bay for a minimum period of 5 years following completion of the research project.
- ü I understand that the research findings will be made available to me upon request.
- ü I will remain anonymous.
- ü All of my questions have been answered.

By consenting to participate, I have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

I consent to audio-recording of the interview:
Yes □ No □

_____ _____ _____
Name (Printed) Signature Date

Please provide your contact email if you would like a copy of:
1) the research summary: Yes □ No □
2) the full thesis: Yes □ No □

_____
Email

Please sign and return this form to the researcher, Julie Morin. A copy of this consent form will also be provided to my supervisor, Dr. Connie Russell. For further information concerning the completion of this form, please contact:

Julie Morin, MEd Student, Faculty of Education, Lakehead University
Phone: 807-630-5914; Email: jcgossel@lakeheadu.ca
And/or
Dr. Connie Russell, Professor, Faculty of Education, Lakehead University
Phone: 807-343-8049; Email: crussell@lakeheadu.ca