

Integrating Cultural and Indigenous Food into School Food Programs: Findings from Hamilton and Peel Region



Tina Moffat¹, Rachel Engler-Stringer², Debbie Field³, Katerina Maximova⁴

¹McMaster University, ²University of Saskatchewan, ³Coalition for Healthy School Food, ⁴MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions, St. Michael's Hospital, Unity Health

Study Aim

- To explore elementary school parents' perceived barriers and desires for promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in School Food Programs (SFPs)

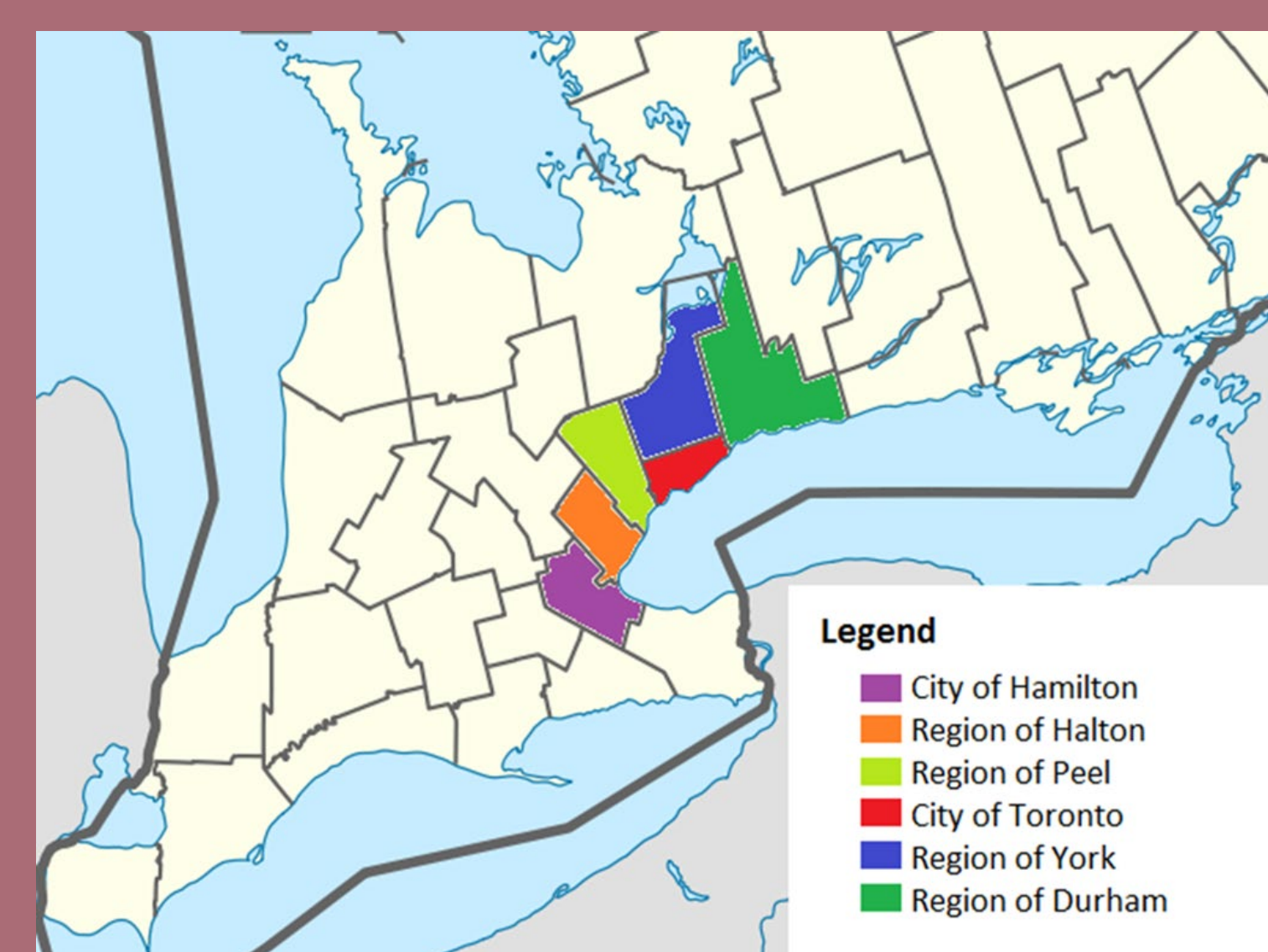
Definitions

Indigenous food:

- ❖ Cultural, spiritual and medical importance
 - ❖ Reflects diversity of Indigenous peoples, geographical resources and food traditions
 - ❖ Supports Indigenous food sovereignty
- ### Cultural Food:
- ❖ All food is shaped by culture
 - ❖ Popularly understood as dishes and cuisine that are not Canadian mainstream food
 - ❖ Reflection of identity, traditions & heritage specific to region or group

Methods

- Data collection: Feb-June 2024
- Parent online survey (N=267)
- Zoom focus group discussion with parents (N= 27 in 6 groups)



Study Locations: City of Hamilton and Peel Region

Findings*

Parent Survey

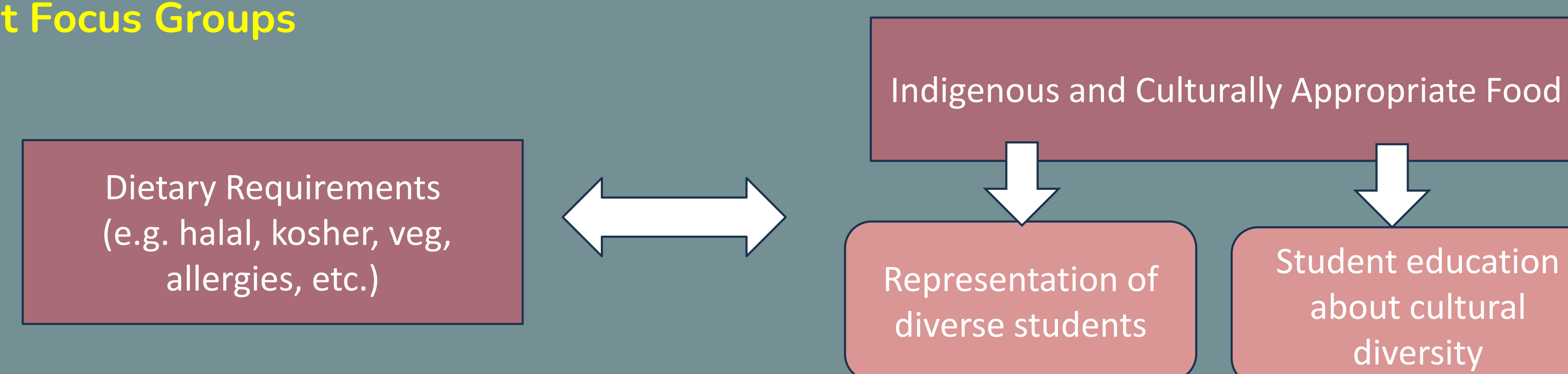
- 48% of parents agreed/strongly agreed with the inclusion of “culturally appropriate” food in SFPs
- 68% agreed/strongly agreed that “dietary needs are respected”

- Respondents were asked to express their agreement with the statement: “It is very important to me to keep connections to my family's cultural heritage”
- Those responses were compared to proportions of parents who thought that “it's important/very important that “food in SFPs is culturally appropriate for my kids

	Cultural food Important	Cultural food Not Important
Value family heritage Agree	55%	45%
Value family heritage Disagree	36%	64%

Fig. 1 Proportion of respondents who value family heritage versus importance of serving culturally appropriate food SFPs. (Stat. sig. different: Pearson chi2=8.3, p<0.005)

Parent Focus Groups



Positive Comments:

I would actually welcome it to have a very diverse menu of foods; let's invite all cultures and let's have an experience.

I think there's probably also a way to integrate in Indigenous foods more as well and Indigenous cuisine. So, would this be a way of maybe making kids feel included if their heritage is represented?

I'm thinking if there's going to be like a lunch that has meat, they could just make it halal anyways, right? Like it doesn't taste any different. Then everyone just has that same meat and then there's no mix up of oh you ate non-halal meat...

Questions and Concerns:

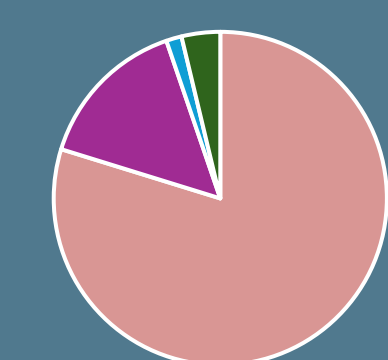
I would recommend like not for the food program to incorporate a lot of cultural food, they could just stick to the normal meals that most kids are familiar with.

And so, there's just a lot of the question of what does it mean to have genuine authentic, culturally appropriate food that's not being misrepresented when you mass produce it.

But when it comes to more diverse food then there might be complaints about the aroma or the smells ... complaints about the spice level....we should not experiment with a lot of diversity about cultural food.

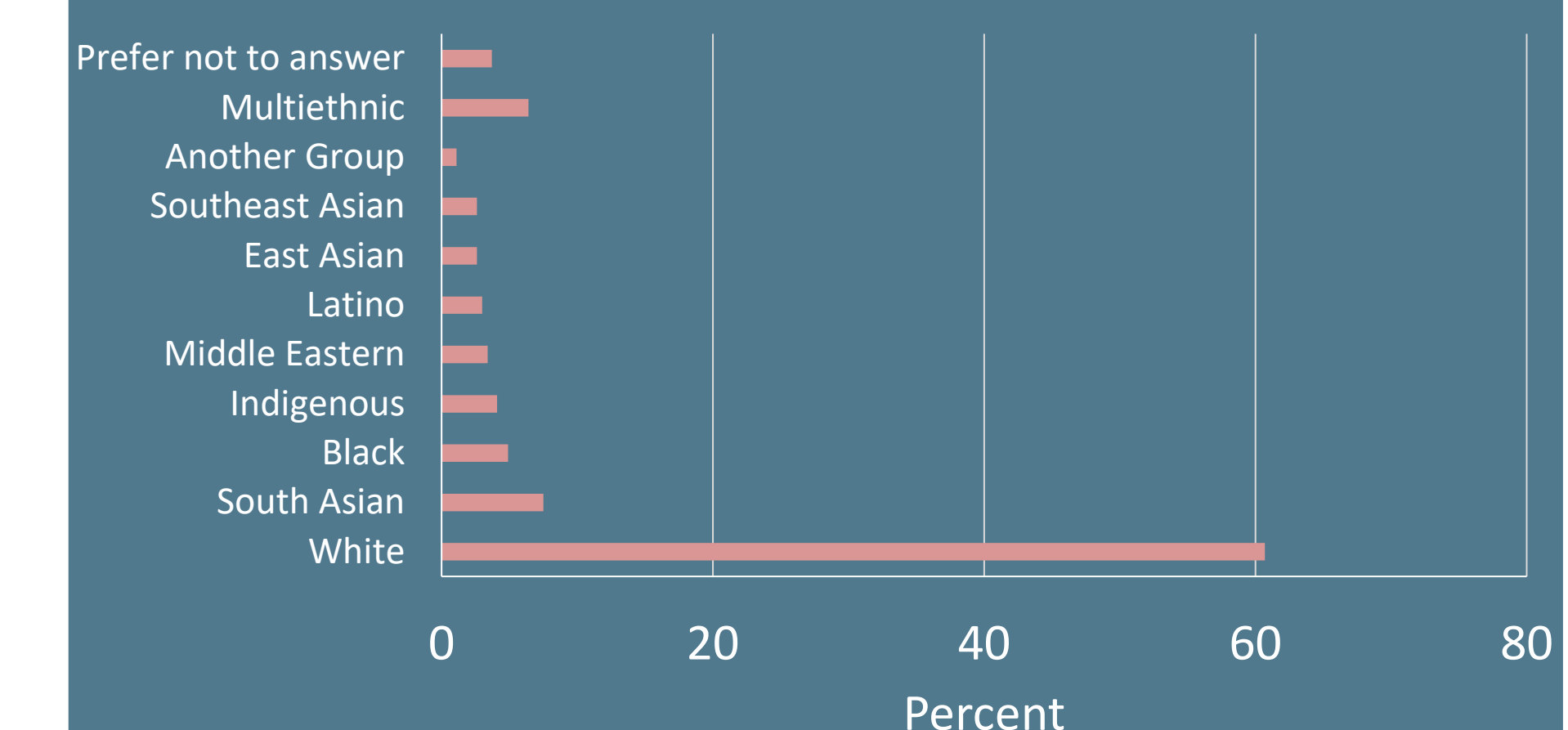
Survey Sample Profile

Respondent's Gender



Woman Man Non-Binary Not Stated

Self-Reported Ethnicity



Conclusions

1. Less than 50% of parents wanted cultural food in SFPs; increased to only 55% among those who valued their family's cultural heritage.
2. Must distinguish between cultural food and dietary requirements for cultural/religious reasons.
3. Inclusion of cultural food requires meaningful school parent and student consultation .

Acknowledgements

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*From Moffat, T. et al. (2026). Parent and educator perspectives on the development of a National School Food Program in Canada related to equity, diversity, inclusion and access (EDIA). *Appetite*, 221, Article 108488.