



Parents' perspectives on their children's school lunches in primary schools

H. Abbotts-Holmes^a, M. Homer^b, H. Ensaff^{a,*} 

^a Nutritional Sciences and Epidemiology, School of Food Science and Nutrition, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

^b School of Education, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

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ABSTRACT

School lunches play an important role in children's dietary intake, and in primary schools in the UK, children and/or parents (on children's behalf) select school lunches from several options on a menu. Schools that utilise an online pre-order system enable pupils and/or parents to choose school lunches via a website or mobile application. This study aimed to understand parents' perspectives and perceptions of their children's school lunches and online pre-ordering. Semi-structured focus group and individual interviews were conducted with parents of children at primary school. Discussions were recorded and transcribed before reflexive thematic analysis was conducted. Four core themes were identified: choosing school meals, children's food choice parameters, impressions of school lunch, and packed lunches vs. school lunches. When deciding between a school lunch or a packed lunch, key considerations for parents were cost, children's food preferences and convenience. Choosing the specific school meal was primarily a child-led activity, where food choice parameters included taste, texture, peer influence, and familiarity. Parents received sparse feedback from their children about school lunches, and were keen to know more about their children's school meals and the school food environment. Opportunities to share detailed information on meals and children's choices should be explored; this could enhance home-school partnership and help to engage parents in supporting better choices by children.

1. Introduction

In the UK, children aged 4–10 years are exceeding recommended intakes for saturated fats and free sugars, whilst failing to meet guidelines for fibre (Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, 2025). Dietary intake is related to cardiometabolic and neurodevelopment outcomes, as well as adiposity, overweight and obesity (Liberati et al., 2020; Mou et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2025). Addressing these nutritional shortfalls is critical, both for individual children during their growth and development, and for mitigating longer term risk, where children consuming energy-dense diets high in fat and low fibre, are more likely to live with obesity later in life (Ambrosini, 2014). In considering children's dietary intakes, food choice behaviour and underlying influences are pertinent. Intrinsic drivers of food choice, such as personal food preferences and habits, as well as interpersonal relationships, primarily with parents and later with peers (as children start school) have a role to play.

Children's food choice can be considered within Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which emphasises the relationship between individuals and their environment, and how

behaviour is influenced at multiple levels. The more proximal levels of influence relate to a child's immediate setting and interactions, such as those with parents, while more distal influences can include national food policies and cultural customs. Individual factors interact with the wider social, environmental and policy context, with, for example interactions between a school's food policy and parents. Ultimately, children's food choice reflects the interplay of multiple influences.

Children spend approximately 190 days a year in school (Long, 2023) and school food can contribute almost a third of their daily energy intake (Prynne et al., 2013). Schools therefore can play an important role in children's food choice. The school food environment – encompassing all aspects of food, respective physical spaces, social and cultural contexts – is of prime importance. Shaped by many factors including school staff, parents, and the physical infrastructure, the school food environment can be assessed according to physical, economic, socio-cultural and policy dimensions (O'Halloran et al., 2020). An important component of the school food environment is the provision of school lunches (sometimes referred to as school dinners) – and in primary schools in England, this can be through the local authority catering service, an independent company or in-house. Typically,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: h.ensaff@leeds.ac.uk (H. Ensaff).

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children will choose lunch from various options every day, which can include a meat or fish-based meal, a vegetarian meal, a sandwich, a jacket potato with a filling, a halal meal (to cater to Muslim children). Pupils select a meal (e.g. chicken curry, vegetable stir-fry, cheese sandwich, jacket potato with beans, halal chicken curry), perhaps with sides (e.g. mixed vegetables, potato wedges, broccoli), and a dessert (e.g. sponge and custard, flapjack, yoghurt, fresh fruit).

In primary schools in England, 60% of children are estimated to consume a school lunch on at least four days in a school week (ParentPay et al., 2024). The alternative to a school lunch provided by the school catering service is a packed lunch from home, typically in a lunchbox or bag. A substantial proportion of children (estimated at 25%) alternate between school and packed lunches (ParentPay et al., 2024). The price of a school lunch is typically £2.50–3.20 per meal (approximately US \$3.30–4.20). The Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) scheme provides free school lunches for all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 (4–7 years old); in addition, the means-tested Free School Meals (FSM) programme provides free school lunches for eligible pupils.

Analysis of UK dietary data from 2008 to 2017 found that among primary school-aged children, a larger proportion of school lunches (compared to packed lunches) contained vegetables and protein-rich foods, while a smaller proportion contained fruit, wholemeal products, dairy products, savoury and sweet snacks. In addition, whilst a larger proportion of school lunches complied with recommendations for fibre, sugar, salt and saturated fat, the need for improvements to both school and packed lunches was highlighted (Haney et al., 2023).

When considering children's eating behaviour and food choices, parental food habits and feeding strategies are key determinants (Scaglioni et al., 2018). For example, parents modelling healthy eating and food enjoyment, the home food environment and exposure to a range of foods can be important in shaping children's experiences with food and the development of eating behaviours (Scaglioni et al., 2018).

In addition, food choices can be shaped through a process of negotiation between parents and children, with children playing an active role (Roberts, 2006). Previous work has also reported how children have the potential to act as agents of change within the home food environment (Ensaff et al., 2015), and, according to parents, can be key decision makers when it comes to packed lunches, both in terms of the decision to opt for one (instead of a school lunch) and its contents (Ensaff et al., 2018). Another UK study examining parental decision making related to packed lunches in primary school highlighted how this was influenced by personal circumstances, societal norms, peer pressure, as well as the quality of school lunches (Crossley et al., 2025). Other work with pupils (7–11 years) found that older children experienced higher levels of control over food choice and access to healthy or unhealthy options across multiple settings, i.e. home, school and eating out, whilst younger participants exercised less control particularly at home and school (Warren et al., 2008). Another study, from Australia, examined families' perspectives on packed lunches and highlighted how external factors, such as school structures, influenced family practices around packed lunches, including contents and what children consume, whilst parents and children prioritised personal preferences and convenience to meet children's food needs at school (Lalchandani et al., 2025).

School lunches in primary school can be selected in advance from the school menu. For schools with an online pre-order system in place, pupils and/or parents choose school lunches remotely via a website or mobile application. Depending upon the school, pupils may also be able to select their school lunch (for that specific day), during morning registration in class at the start of the school day, with selections made using a laptop, tablet or interactive whiteboard. The selections are then shared digitally to the catering team to prepare meals ready for lunchtime service. Lunchtime tends to be around midday and lasts approximately 45–60 min, for children to queue, collect their school lunches, eat and clear away. Meals (including packed lunches) are typically consumed in shared dining spaces with adult supervision, creating opportunities for commensality and social interaction.

Whilst limited research has been conducted on online pre-order systems for school meals, work has shown how such platforms may facilitate independence in children's choices, particularly among older age groups, with varying degrees of parental and peer influence (Alkhunaini et al., 2022). The use of these systems in primary schools in the UK has substantially increased, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and schools fast-tracking the implementation of pre-ordering software (CRB Cunninghams, 2022). Given the expansion of such systems, the importance of children's food choice behaviour, and the limited literature base, this study aimed to explore parents' perspectives and perceptions of their children's food in primary school and online pre-ordering of school lunches. This work is related to a larger mixed methods study investigating children's food choice behaviour in primary schools and complements other analyses of data from non-participant direct observation, focus group discussions with children, and pupils' food choice data.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

The study was informed by an interpretivist epistemology, seeking to explore parents' perspectives and lived experiences of their children's school lunches and food choices (including using online pre-order systems) and to understand how these are shaped by their experiences and broader social contexts. A qualitative methodology was adopted because it is particularly suited to exploratory studies relating to individuals' experiences (Malterud, 2001). Focus group interviews were selected to allow a wide range of views to be discussed, facilitated by group interaction (Dilshad & Latif, 2013); individual interviews were offered as an alternative if parents experienced difficulties attending a group session. The interviews were semi-structured to promote conversation within the group and capture participants' lived experience (Henriksen et al., 2022). Reflexive thematic analysis of data supported an inductive approach, which suited the exploratory nature of the study and enabled rich insights into participants' perspectives. Specifically, this approach helped capture participants' perceptions and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as it related to their children's school lunches. This study followed guidelines from the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007). Ethical approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds was received (BESS&FREC/1248) and all participants provided informed consent.

2.2. Schools and parents

All participants were recruited via four primary schools in a metropolitan borough in North West England. The schools had the same local authority catering provider and online pre-order system. The schools varied in size, ranging from approximately 250 pupils in the smallest, to just over 300 in the largest; the average for primary schools in England is 272 pupils (Department for Education, 2025). The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) also differed across the study schools, ranging from less than half the England average of 24.7% (Department for Education, 2025) to almost 40%. The FSM programme is a means-tested benefit that can act as a proxy indicator for socioeconomic disadvantage (Office for National Statistics, 2022). School lunches at the study schools cost £2.60 per lunch. Lunchtime lasted 1 h, with pupils arriving at the dining hall in a staggered manner, with younger year groups first.

During an initial meeting with the school's senior leadership team, the research team outlined study objectives, requirements of participation and answered any questions. Once schools had agreed to participate, information sheets (providing important details of the study and inviting parents to participate) were distributed via the schools, to parents of all pupils (4–11 years old) at each school. Recruitment of

parents was planned to continue until sufficient depth and breadth of perspectives were captured. Recruitment was discussed with the school and promoted according to their preference and recommendations, e.g. communication application/portal, parent and teacher association, word of mouth, conversations with parents at the school gate. Parents were not offered a financial incentive. To promote participation and inclusion, parents who had difficulty attending a focus group session, were invited to an individual interview, also offered online for flexibility and convenience.

2.3. Development of the interview guide

A guide, comprising the topics and associated questions and prompts, was developed. This was based on the study aim and existing literature, and was written to support rich dialogue, with non-leading, open-ended questions based on recommended practice (Krueger, 1998). The guide had four broad sections. The first related to an ice breaker for participants to share their child's name, age and favourite food. This was to engage parents in the topic and develop rapport with the researcher and other participants. The second section explored perspectives on using the online system for selecting meals, and the third focused on children's food choices. Questions included *How does your child/you choose the lunch? Can you talk me through what happens? What are the typical meals that your child/you choose for school lunches? What do you think are the main reasons that your child/you choose these for their school lunch?* The final section provided a summary of what had been discussed, with participants then asked about any other important aspects that had not come up. Once the guide was drafted, it was reviewed by three external experts: two public health practitioners and an academic, who provided expertise in school food, public health and children's nutrition. The feedback informed revisions including making the language more user-friendly. The guide is available upon request from the corresponding author.

2.4. Data collection and analysis

Data collection, during January – March 2025, took place at participating schools during school hours or immediately before or after. Focus group interviews lasted 45 – 60 min, with the individual interviews shorter at 20 – 30 min; all included only participants and members of the research team. For the minority of sessions conducted online, video conferencing software (Microsoft Teams) was used. All discussions followed the same format to maintain consistency, and sessions were audio recorded using a digital voice recorder (Olympus MS-853) and via Microsoft Teams. Discussions were facilitated by one researcher (HA, Research Officer, trained in qualitative data collection methods, female) with a second noting non-verbal communication and key insights. Researchers were unknown to participants and at the start, researchers introduced themselves, described the study and its focus, and explained the format of the session.

Audio data were transcribed using Microsoft Teams' transcription feature and subsequently checked in detail against the original audio recordings for accuracy. Transcripts were edited following a protocol using a denaturalised approach, focusing on the content of the discussions rather than specific linguistic features. Transcripts were then deidentified; content that could identify individuals or places was replaced with pseudonyms.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis with an inductive approach. Transcripts and reflexive memos were reviewed in detail several times to support familiarisation with the data, with initial observations and standout concepts noted. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 software (Lumivero, Denver, CO, USA), where several iterations of coding were undertaken (HA). Following each iteration, codes and coding structure were reviewed and discussed in detail by the research team, defined and refined. Researchers reflected on their assumptions, preconceptions and potential influences on data

interpretation to support methodological rigour and critical engagement with the analysis. Differences in interpretation were explored through discussion and reflexive engagement with the data, leading to refinement of codes and themes. Discussions and analysis continued throughout the process, until the final codes and derived themes were refined and researchers came to a consensus that these represented the data well.

Reflexivity was practised during data collection and analysis to support methodological rigour. This included writing memos after each focus group and individual interview, to document emerging insights, reflections and questions. This approach allowed researchers to critically reflect on how assumptions, preconceptions and potential biases may influence data collection and interpretation. Coding and theme development were discussed during meetings with the research team to facilitate critical reflection and consideration of alternative interpretations. Data were considered sufficient for data saturation, with similar points being discussed and no substantial new insights emerging in the later interviews.

3. Results

Across the primary schools, 41 parents (Table 1) participated in

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of parents (n = 41) participating in focus group and individual interviews.

		n	%
Age	30-35 years	6	14.6%
	36-39 years	12	29.3%
	40-45 years	19	46.3%
	46-49 years	3	7.3%
	60-65 years	1	2.4%
Sex	Male	1	2.4%
	Female	40	97.6%
Employment	Working full time	20	48.8%
	Working part time	14	34.1%
	Homemaker	2	4.9%
	Caregiver	2	4.9%
	Retired	1	2.4%
	Self employed	1	2.4%
Education	Student	1	2.4%
	Degree or equivalent	24	58.5%
	A-level or equivalent	11	26.8%
	GCSE/O-Level/CSE	4	9.8%
	No formal qualifications	2	4.9%
Ethnicity ^a	White (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British)	33	82.5%
	Asian/Asian British	4	10.0%
	Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups	1	2.5%
	Other ethnic group	2	5.0%
		5	12.2%
No. adults in household	2	32	78.0%
	3	4	9.8%
	1	8	19.5%
No. children in household	2	25	61.0%
	3	5	12.2%
	4	3	7.3%
Household income ^a	£1-£14,999	4	11.8%
	£15,000-£29,999	2	5.9%
	£30,000-£49,999	5	14.7%
	£50,000-£74,999	5	14.7%
	£75,000-£99,999	13	38.2%
Household IMD ^a	£100,000 +	5	14.7%
	Quintile 1	5	12.8%
	Quintile 2	6	15.4%
	Quintile 3	10	25.6%
	Quintile 4	8	20.5%
	Quintile 5	10	25.6%

^a Not all parents provided a response. IMD: Index of Multiple Deprivation, a measure of deprivation based on income, employment, health, education, crime and living environment (McLennan et al., 2019); quintile 1 represents the most deprived and quintile 5 the least deprived.

eleven focus group and four individual interviews. All parents except one were female, and most were over 40 years old, with the largest group aged 40–45 years (46%). Most participants who provided ethnicity data identified within the White ethnic group (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British) (83%), with smaller representation from Asian/Asian British, Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups, and Other ethnic groups. Most participants (59%) were educated to degree level or equivalent, and approximately half of parents (49%) were in full-time employment, with a third (34%) working part-time. Most households had two adults (78%) and two or more children (80%). Household income varied and almost half who reported this (47%) had an annual income of up to £75,000; mean gross household income in 2024 was estimated to be £55,200 (Office for National Statistics, 2025). Participants were distributed across quintiles of Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), with representation from both the most deprived (13%), least deprived areas (26%) and quintile 3 areas (26%).

Analysis provided four main themes: choosing school meals; children's food choice parameters; impressions of school lunch; and packed lunches vs. school lunches. These are provided alongside their constituent sub-themes in Table 2. Each subtheme is considered and described below, alongside illustrative quotations, with participants denoted by unique identifiers, e.g. P1.

3.1. Choosing school meals

3.1.1. Parents and children choosing together

Most parents discussed how they would navigate to the website for ordering school lunches, and then together with their children, they would review the options on the menu and select meals. Some parents explained how they supervised the process to avoid their children making mistakes; others emphasised wanting to know what 'they're having', which partly influenced their level of involvement.

... we would sit down and do it together, so we'll just read it together and we'll pick for the half term. (P2)

We normally sit on the armchair together and go through [the meal options]. I don't like her [child] pressing it herself, because she's made a mess of the system sometimes. (P1)

He [child] doesn't have his device, like a phone or anything, to log on [to website for online ordering], and you've got to pay for it [school lunch]. So, it's not something that he's getting control over ... so yeah, we'll do it together. (P5)

For me, I like to know what he's had as well, whereas if he picked it: he's murder for saying, "I forgot" – I know he's not [forgotten] ... [he] just means he don't want to tell me. (P4)

Table 2
Themes and subthemes from analysis of interviews with parents.

Theme	Subthemes
Choosing school meals	Parents and children choosing together Children choosing independently Parents choosing for children Parents encouraging variety
Children's food choice parameters	Choosing based on taste Choosing based on texture The relevance of peer influence The importance of familiarity
Impressions of school lunch	School food talk Portion sizes Meals on the school menu Pupils rushing their school lunch
Packed lunches vs. school lunches	Financial considerations Convenience of a school lunch Choosing a packed lunch

3.1.2. Children choosing independently

During discussions, some parents explained how their children would select their school lunches on their own, independently. They elaborated that despite this independence, certain rules or guidelines still applied.

She just chooses [on] her own really. Yeah, just chooses what she likes. She knows what she sort of isn't so keen on. (P6)

I'll just say, "Pick what you want," ... they can pick what they want, but they're not allowed to pick the sandwiches, because, I say that, "If you're having a sandwich, you can have a packed lunch". (P19)

At two of the four schools, children were able to order their school meals in class during morning registration. Parents explained how, despite school encouraging remote ordering at home, many children were keen to select at school.

... she [child] goes, "Can I pick it at school?" and well, "No, because you're supposed to do it at home, 'cause it takes time up". But she always asked if she could do it in class – and I'm like, "No", but she likes doing it in class. (P8)

... if they [children] feel more comfortable doing it in school, then it should be an option, shouldn't it? For them to do that? (P7)

3.1.3. Parents choosing for children

In a minority of cases, parents described how they always or usually chose school meals on behalf of their children. This was commonly attributed to saving time and because parents felt that they knew what their children would want to eat.

If I'm rushing to be honest, I will pick it [school meal] 'cause I know what he'll want. (P4)

... my boys are not going in to choose it; for me, I do it on my phone. (P13)

I'd say I'm quite involved most days with it. It's more me than him [child] really. I just pick things I know he's going to like. And by Year 4, we know what they like and don't like, don't you? They've been doing it since Reception. (P22)

Parents also reported consulting with their children regarding any uncertain choices or when a 'brand new menu' was introduced – with the process remaining 'child-led'.

So now, what tends to happen is: I pick it first, and then we go through it, and I tell him, "This is what's on; this is what I picked – is it ok?" (P35)

I used to sit down with him [child] quite a lot, and he'd choose what he wanted, but now ... it was a pattern: he chooses the same thing. Like if pizza's on, I know it's pizza, so I just tend to do it. So, I'll just kind of do it, normally two weeks in advance. I'll just whip through and choose most of his meals. If it's a day I'm not sure what he'd have or there's ... I'll ask him then, and then, he'll choose what he'll want. (P17)

3.1.4. Parents encouraging variety

Parents described encouraging their children to try a wider variety of school meals, for example recommending and describing options that they thought would appeal.

I might say, "Right, you've got enough of those this week. Let's try and choose something else." You know, even if it's a sandwich or something like that, because she [child] literally chooses the same thing every day. And I just think that [she] should try and maybe choose a pizza one day or just mix it up a little bit. (P19)

So, I was like reading it [menu] to him and I was like, “You’ll really like this. It’s got cheese in it. It’s got this, that and the other in it.” So, he said, “I’ll give it a go.” (P16)

Many parents mentioned, that adding images of the meals could help encourage greater variety in their children’s selections, especially for new or unfamiliar meals. One parent suggested that displaying information about pupils’ selections could act as a comparator and encourage children to try different options when ordering.

... So, who knows, you know, what is a cobbler [meal name]?... If they’re going to change the menu, I think that [images] potentially could change your child’s choice because they know what the vision of it is. (P7)

It’d be nice to know, I suppose, as part of the app, if it was kind of possible ... what other people are picking. You know, so you could see like, top choice, like is the vegan cottage pie, sausage rolls. Just like having that bit of a dashboard, you can sort of ... I feel like I could then sit with Lena [child] and be like, “Oh look, but like, this is really popular.” And you know, “Loads of your friends are choosing it, do you fancy giving it a try?” (P2)

3.2. Children’s food choice parameters

3.2.1. Choosing based on taste

Parents highlighted various parameters relevant to children’s meal selection; in particular, taste was ‘100%’ a key factor for their children. In many cases, parents reported that children simply chose specific meals that ‘taste nice’ and emphasised how taste could also deter selection of certain foods.

... he just said it tastes nice. He doesn’t go into any more depth than that really. (P18)

If something tastes weird, like feels funny in her mouth, she won’t eat it – and she didn’t have school dinners [school lunches] for the whole of school [because of this]. (P20)

She’s [child] not a fan of, like, the Bolognese and things like that, she says they have a funny taste with them. (P22)

3.2.2. Choosing based on texture

Alongside taste, parents talked about texture as an important factor influencing children’s food choices, particularly for foods they disliked or specific school meals. Several parents explained how their children preferred dry foods, and how for example, sauce or food with sauce ‘are a no’.

She’s [child] a fussy eater as well. Like, if it’s got bits in, she won’t have it. Like majority of times, she’ll just pick jacket potato with beans. (P8)

But you see, Josh [child] won’t eat the burger [at school] ... because he didn’t like the texture. (P39)

... she’s [child] still in that phase where – she probably needs to grow out of it, to be fair – but she’s a dry food fan. So, you know, she’d have, like, sausage and mash with vegetables, but don’t put gravy on it, because that just ruins it for her. (P2)

3.2.3. The relevance of peer influence

Parents discussed peer influence in depth and expressed a range of perspectives on its relevance to children’s meal selections. Some parents emphasised its importance and felt that, for example, children were more likely to try a meal that was ‘trendy’ within their children’s friendship circles. Parents also discussed how children can be influenced by friends to try foods from different cultures, and noted that peer influence may also lessen as children get older.

But if their friends try something, you know, they’ll happily try it then. (P10)

I think if the friends are picking it, like it’s fashionable ... it’s like, oh, you know – ‘sweet and sour chicken’ that’s not trendy, pizza is – kind of thing and it’s quicker [to eat] ... that kind of, like, my mates are having pizza, let’s all have pizza. (P4)

I thought he [child] would never eat a vegetable samosa. But his friend is halal [selects halal menu options]. So that’s what he [child] was picking. He was like, “Oh, it’s really, really nice.” So, there is that peer influence there. (P39)

But he was definitely influenced by what other people would say to him when he was younger. Not now, absolutely not now, he wouldn’t bat an eyelid about what anybody else was eating. (P15)

The younger they are, the more likely they’ll be like: “My friends eat it, so I’m going to eat it.” (P12)

In some cases, parents also talked about children wanting school meals (instead of bringing packed lunches) because of their friends.

Because I know when Jared [child] first started it on dinners [school lunches], he wanted to be on dinners because his friends were, the people that he likes. He’s like, “I want to be on school dinners because my friends are, and I get to sit next to them”, and stuff like that. So, I think that it’s definitely a social aspect of it. (P33)

Conversely, other parents reported that their children were not at all influenced by their peers.

I don’t think they’d eat something just for the sake of it, because all the friends were having it. I don’t think that goes on. I know my two wouldn’t. I think she [child] wouldn’t feel like she had to eat a roast dinner because everybody, because all [her] friends were having it. She’s not like that. She wouldn’t feel that peer pressure to do that. (P18)

And he [child] wouldn’t be bothered if nobody else in the class was having school dinner. You know, he wants a school dinner, he will have a school dinner. He’s not bothered if his friends are having it or not. (P15)

3.2.4. The importance of familiarity

In all discussions, parents talked about how familiarity was ‘really important’ in children’s choices. Parents explained how this was especially the case when children had positive prior experiences with certain foods – and emphasised that choosing familiar foods did not ‘mean it’s a poor choice’.

And like the roast dinner: they’ll eat that because that’s something they would have at home, so they’re used to that. But, for example, that ‘minced beef cobbler’: I’ve never heard of that, so that’s just not something that they’re familiar with. (P18)

Parents also reported that their children preferred to try new foods at home, as there was less pressure to finish meals they did not like, and may also prefer some foods due to ‘better quality things at home’.

I think because there’s that pressure at school to eat something, whereas at home, if he [child] doesn’t like something, our rule is you have to try it three times and if you don’t like it, that’s fine, we’ll come to [it] again at another time. (P30)

The concept of ‘challenging dishes’ and foods that children would struggle more with, was raised in several interviews. Parents discussed that when multiple challenging dishes occurred on the school menu in a single week, children often opted for the jacket potato option or a packed lunch from home.

I think sometimes the menu's a little bit skewed, because sometimes you get a menu that's quite a lot of, maybe 'challenging' dishes, and they're all in the same week, and then all the kind of 'safe' ones [meals] end up in the other week – and those end up being the jacket potato, packed lunch weeks. And sometimes it feels like it takes a long time for those [safe meals] to come round again. (P35)

3.3. Impressions of school lunch

3.3.1. School food talk

Across schools, parents described conversations with their children about school food, which generally took place directly after school when parents checked in with children about their day and what they had for lunch.

As soon as they get in the car, like you'll ask, it's a general question: "How's school been?" Like, "What did you have for dinner?" Or "Did you enjoy dinner?" And then you, more or less, get ... from how they're acting, how that meal's gone down. I think it's generally a topic that you would speak about every day really – well it is for us anyway. (P7)

Often, the only specific feedback that parents received from their children about school meals was if 'they did not like it, if it was a bad day'. Parents reported that these experiences influenced children's subsequent meal choices for school lunches.

... I think probably if I was asking them, like at home, if we're eating food and they say, "Oh, I don't like that!", [then] they'll be able to tell me why. But by the time they've left school, like, a million things have happened in the afternoon. (P19)

Although she did come home after the shepherd's pie and say, "Don't give me that again: it was disgusting." But at least we tried it. (P22)

Parents revealed that they were keen to know more about school lunches, including side options; some also explained that they were unaware of the salad bar at lunchtime.

... it's like the sides ... even though it just puts it down as a 'burger' [on the menu/website], I have no idea what they get it with. (P15)

Yeah, it [app] doesn't always give you that sort of explanation about what... So, Naomi's [child] come home before and said like, "There's been a salad bar at school." And I've been like, "What? Is that a thing?" Because that's never anywhere on the app. (P11)

3.3.2. Portion sizes

During the interviews, parents referred to portion sizes for school lunches and how they were unsure whether these changed to reflect children's age and growing appetites. They reported that sometimes their children would be 'starving when they come out' of school, which was attributed to 'pretty small' portion sizes of meals. One parent described how, when choosing school lunches, the priority for their child was simply to select 'whatever's the biggest' meal available.

I'm not sure on the portions. I'm not sure what they're like at all... like you just see it's a burger with ketchup, but what goes with that? Do the infants get the same as the juniors? Because, like, a little girl in the infants is not going to eat the same as my lad in Year four. (P3)

I don't know what portion sizes to go off... but it seems to be the same all the way through. So, it's not accounting for age. They [children] have growth spurts, don't they? (P26)

3.3.3. Meals on the school menu

Parents' discussions of the school menu largely focused on the variety of meals available. A few parents were satisfied with having 'lots of options', whereas others felt it was 'the same old stuff every week'.

Overall, most expressed a desire for more variety, including more seasonal changes. Parents also suggested including 'a healthier option', 'more vegetables, or 'better fish' dishes.

Yeah. I think [I'd like] probably more variety on the menu. So, because, I think you do get stuck in a rut ... (P25)

I don't know how much the menu reflects that [the seasons] ... It's like a summer menu, so expect more salad-based stuff – wouldn't you like to think? Yeah, it all feels saucy and too [many] hot meals. (P4)

3.3.4. Pupils rushing their school lunch

Parents described how their children often recounted rushing to eat their meals so they could 'eat quick and get out' to play, which parents felt might influence the foods that their children chose for their school lunch.

I thought in my mind, Lena [child] picked things that are quite quick [to eat] as well because ... not because it's [the dining hall] loud, but she wants to get out. (P2)

... [child] wouldn't bother [rushing] on a rainy day because they're not going out. So, it wouldn't bother him, and he will take his time. But if it's dry, they're going outside, then he wants something he can eat quick. That's why it's usually yoghurt for pudding because he knows he can get that down him. (P15)

Parents also described children having to rush lunch due to lunch service, with the constant movement of pupils in and out, and limited space available.

Sometimes I've had feedback from mine [children] that they like, had to rush or they've not had enough time to eat the dinner. So, it's not to do with the food being provided or the [school lunch ordering] system – but I think in terms of the structure of how dinners are, sort of managed – I think sometimes kids aren't given enough time to eat the meals. (P9)

They [children] said sometimes it can feel quite rushed. Especially Dylan [child], he's a bit of a dawdler and a bit of a slow eater, and he's, I think sometimes, I don't know whether he picks things that he can eat quickly. (P18)

3.4. Packed lunches vs. school lunches

Parents spoke extensively about packed lunches and the factors influencing whether their children brought a packed lunch from home or chose a school meal. Many children alternated between school meals and packed lunches, and parents valued this flexibility where they 'don't have to have all dinners or all packed lunches'.

3.4.1. Financial considerations

When deciding between a packed lunch or a school meal, parents referred to cost and value for money, favouring packed lunches, especially where they would be able to provide the same for cheaper from home.

I would prefer him [child] to be on school dinners, but it's driven by cost for me, because there's two of them in the juniors and it's expensive. And I'm on my own with one wage. (P3)

If I think, right, well, we can't afford it this week – January is a bit tight. Maybe do some more packed lunches. So that does influence, I think, my choices. (P33)

I was paying £2.60 a day just for him to have a ham sandwich – so he's now on packed lunches and he has a ham sandwich every day now. (P31)

Well, this is it, I thought I'm not paying £2.60 for a sandwich when I can get a full loaf for that, so I'll just make him it. (P34)

In comparison, some parents mentioned how the availability of UIFSM (Universal Infant Free School Meal scheme, which provides free school lunches to all children in reception to Year 2, regardless of family income) influenced decisions around school food, including for example keeping their children on school lunches.

They would have packed lunches every day and they asked for packed lunches, and I said to Dylan [child], "No, not until you're in Year 3." (P18)

3.4.2. Convenience of a school lunch

When discussing children being on school lunches, parents highlighted convenience as a key factor, especially when parents could not be 'bothered with packed lunches' and the added pressure of ensuring they were nutritious.

Yeah, it takes the pressure off, as a parent for a little bit as well; thinking that even if you're sending them in for a hot dinner, that they're going to get what they need, right? Like nutritionally as well. (P12)

It makes me feel a bit better if we've got a full-on day, and then I could just do – like I don't do it very regular – but I could just do them like a butty [sandwich] for tea, if they've had like a hot meal [at lunch]. Then it's not as much pressure on me delivering, if we've got really full-on activities going on, me delivering a full cooked meal as well. So, I like that it makes me feel like the nutritious diet is like, more rounded. So yeah, I do like that they're getting a proper meal in school. (P21)

And it's also kind of helpful if I'm a bad parent and I forget to get stuff in for packed lunch, she [child] can then go on and order [a school meal for] one of the gaps [where she has no packed lunch]. (P2)

3.4.3. Choosing a packed lunch

Parents discussed reasons why their children had a packed lunch and reported how this was closely related to what was on the school menu and how a dislike of the options would lead to 'a packed lunch on that day'.

If I know that he [child] won't like [any meals], obviously there's always a jacket potato and a sandwich which he will eat. But on those days, rather than [a school lunch] I'll do a packed lunch that I know he'll really enjoy, more than just the sandwich or a jacket potato for that day. (P4)

Parents also referred to peer influence, observing that as children got older, they were more inclined to prefer a packed lunch in line with their friends. Likewise, parents noted that during the summer, children often wanted packed lunches to 'eat outside and then play' with friends.

That has caused us an issue in the past when it would seem Henry [child] wanted to be on packed lunches because his friend had packed lunches. (P12)

I think there is more of them [children] gone to packed lunches and things like that. So, I think when you see others, you think, "I can do packed lunch as well. I can do that." (P22)

Also in the summer, I think because they're allowed to take the packed lunch outside and eat, a lot of them don't want school dinners in summer. (P1)

It's a big thing in summer. That's what he [child] used to struggle [with], because those who are on packed lunches can have their lunch outside in summer when it's warm. (P15)

When discussing packed lunches, parents recounted the contents of

packed lunches and how they would oversee these, whilst considering their children's preferences. Several parents also referred to the packed lunch policy at their child's school, and the restrictions or expectations communicated regarding contents of the packed lunch.

... I will supervise these [packed lunches] because he always gets a little sweet treat in his [packed lunch]... and I will supervise whatever that is. (P5)

I know the school has a policy, doesn't it? Where there's no crisps or chocolate in the packed lunches. So, I won't send them in. (P18)

3.5. Influences at multiple levels

The subthemes generated from the analysis aligned with various domains of socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and illustrated how children's food choice behaviour is influenced by factors operating at multiple levels. Specifically, children's food choice parameters of *taste*, *texture* and *familiarity* corresponded to individual factors. Another parameter, *peer influence* aligned with interpersonal influences, alongside *parents and children choosing together*, and *parents encouraging variety*, as well as *school food talk*. Organisation-level factors were also clear with subthemes relating to *portion sizes*, *meals on the school menu* and *pupils rushing their school lunch*. More distal policy-level influences were evident with, for example, the subtheme of *financial considerations* and discussions relating to UIFSM (providing free lunches for 4–7-year-old pupils) and a packed lunch policy at school (communicating restrictions or expectations about children's packed lunches brought in from home). Collectively, these highlight the interconnected nature of influences on children's food choice behaviour across multiple levels.

4. Discussion

This study explored parents' perspectives and perceptions of food choice in primary school and their use of the online pre-order system. Findings provided insights into the factors influencing children's decisions about school meals, critical to designing future school-based interventions to promote children's dietary health. Parents considered the process of selecting meals from the school menu to be a child-led activity, with choices made by children shaped by several factors. In cases where parents ordered on behalf of their children, selections remained driven by children's preferences. When deciding between packed lunches and school lunches, parents highlighted the cost and variety of options on the school menu as prominent factors. Parents engaged children in conversation about school food, however remained keen to know more about school lunches.

For parents, the selection of school meal options was child-led and this held true regardless of how parents and children pre-ordered (i.e. together, children independently or parents on their own). Most parents reviewed the school lunch options together with their children; for some, this was to avoid mistakes on the system, but for many parents this was to know their children's food choices. Additionally, other parents discussed how children ordered meals online independently, without any support from them. Parents referred to certain agreed rules when this was the case, e.g. avoiding the sandwiches option for school lunches. To some extent, this reflects how food choice is influenced by negotiation between parent and child, and that children assist in making decisions via these negotiations (Roberts, 2006). In a few cases, parents would choose for their children without involving them directly, explaining how they knew their children's preferences and would check in with their children where necessary, e.g. if they were unsure about a selection or with a new menu. Children's pivotal role in school meal selections, as found in this study, corresponds with previous research looking at parents' perspectives on school packed lunches, where children were found to be key decision makers (Ensaff et al., 2018). Other

research on online pre-order systems found that online ordering allowed pupils (especially older children) to choose their school meals independently, and that children selected school meals with varying levels of external influence from peers and parents (Alkhunain et al., 2022). More generally, work has highlighted children's growing autonomy in food decisions and how they can act as agents of change for their home food environment (Ensaff et al., 2015). Children's role in the selection of school meals, as observed in this study, should be taken within the context of the role of the family and home food environment – which will have been influential to the formation of children's food choice parameters. Specifically, parents as gatekeepers to the home food environment play a fundamental role with this respect.

In the present study, parents discussed familiarity at length and its influential role in their children's food choices; children were more likely to select a meal because they were familiar with it from home. Interestingly, parents noted that when 'challenging dishes' were on the menu, children opted for 'safe' choices, and these commonly included jacket potatoes or a packed lunch from home. Jacket potatoes, with various fillings such as baked beans, tuna or cheese, were available daily and were familiar to pupils, which may have contributed to their designation as a 'safe' option. According to parents in this study, children preferred to try unfamiliar foods at home, without the pressure to finish, and with the option of an alternative if they did not like the new food. This corresponds with previous research acknowledging the importance of familiarity to children's dietary intakes and the benefit of autonomy, with child-led attempts to try new foods associated with more positive experience (Aldridge et al., 2009). Further, in considering intrinsic and extrinsic influences on food acceptance, repeated food exposure improves food acceptance and familiarity in children (Aldridge et al., 2009; Lakkakula et al., 2010).

Parents discussed packed lunches from home in relation to school lunches. For many, the initial decision to have a school lunch or a packed lunch was influenced by cost and convenience. Parents perceived a packed lunch as better value for money, particularly in the case of a sandwich (as the school lunch option) – as one parent put it, a loaf of bread was a similar price to the cost of a school meal. This emphasis on cost may reflect the ongoing rise in the cost-of-living in the UK (Harari et al., 2024). Previous research has also revealed how children from low-income families who did not meet eligibility requirements for FSM and were outside the age range for UIFSM, opt for a packed lunch over a school lunch (Hart, 2016). Parents also reported how their children might request a packed lunch, and that this was attributed to the opportunity to eat outside or with friends. Additionally, the menu options were reported to be a strong determinant; when children were dissatisfied with the options, then they were more likely to request a packed lunch. Previous research on children's packed lunches in primary school has highlighted children as active decision makers in the initial decision to have a packed lunch, as well as its contents (Ensaff et al., 2018). Other work has emphasised how packed lunches are important to almost half of pupils' usual school arrangements (Department for Education, 2026), and the role of peers and children wanting a packed lunch to sit with friends at lunchtime (Hart, 2016). Findings in the present study reflect the complex and negotiated nature of decision-making around school lunches for families. One market insight report found 39% of decisions on whether to be on a packed lunch or a school lunch made jointly, 32% made solely by the parent and 28% made independently by the child (Veg Power, 2024).

In the present study, parents emphasised peer influence, both in terms of opting for a packed or school lunch and the school meals selected from the menu. According to parents, peer influence could decrease with age, as children become more certain about food likes and dislikes. One study with primary school pupils in Wales and exploring children's preferences and practices, reported peer influence to be strong, with conforming behaviour, and children copying each other at school with individualised choices at home (Stewart et al., 2006). Other work from Germany investigating the impact of peers on children's

snack purchasing found that the company of a peer, strongly influenced decisions, with authors highlighting conformity to the group's decision and the role of social influence (Landwehr & Hartmann, 2024).

Most parents reported that all lunch selections were completed remotely at home. Although two schools provided the option for children to choose their school lunches during morning registration at the start of the school day, parents indicated that schools generally encouraged selections at home (to save time in school). Ordering at home (vs school) amplifies the potential of parental influence over meal choices and also alters the temporal context of the decision (with orders for multiple days in advance). Both factors are important considerations in decision-making dynamics and the relevance of home vs school ordering warrants further examination.

Key findings can be considered with respect to socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and illustrate how children's food choices within primary school are shaped by interacting influences at multiple levels. Parents' accounts in the present study highlighted how individual factors including children's own preferences and choosing based on taste and texture, the importance of familiarity with foods, and developing autonomy were central to the selection process, with children typically leading choices regardless of who placed the order online. Interpersonal influences also played a role in shaping food choices, and these included parent–child discussions and agreed rules, as well as peer influences, where some parents noted how their children might be influenced by peers' decisions. At the organisational level, aspects of the school food environment, such as the school menu structure and the availability of certain options (e.g. jacket potatoes), parents' perception of the appeal and variety of the menu, and school expectations to complete pre-ordering at home, were all important factors. Wider contextual factors, such as financial considerations and the relative costs of school meals and packed lunches, school policies around packed lunches, national policies around school meals (UIFSM), interacted with other influences and shaped decision making. Taken together, findings illustrate how children's food choices derive from dynamic interactions between influences at multiple levels, and according to the socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

4.1. Implications

The findings from this study have implications for caterers, school leaders and policy makers. Schools and catering providers may have opportunities to enhance communication around menus, food choices and the lunchtime environment, while policy makers play an important role in shaping the resources, school food standards and the broader infrastructure that supports school food provision. All changes should consider the constraints within which schools and catering providers operate.

Implications for practices influencing the food environment in primary schools primarily relate to the menu and the school lunch options. Whilst children acted as key decision-makers, parents were keen to encourage their children to try different meals. This was particularly the case if parents felt that their children were consistently choosing certain meals, often the jacket potato or sandwich option. Parents also discussed how children can become accustomed to the same meals, as the menu cycle repeats. Whilst a small number of parents expressed satisfaction with the level of variety on the menu, most shared that they would prefer greater diversity and, for example, seasonal changes with fewer hot meals in the summer. In considering changes and adaptations to the school menu, it is critical to acknowledge potential difficulties not only with the feasibility of such endeavours but also the staffing, financial and operational constraints within which schools and catering teams operate – which may themselves be prohibitive. Further, any changes would substantially benefit from input from a range of stakeholders, with the engagement of both parents and children being particularly important. In this way, the influence that individual families' home food environments may have on their perspectives on the menu can inform

appropriate changes. Previous research exploring stakeholders' views on the school food system in UK primary schools also reported mixed opinions among parents and varying levels of satisfaction with the options available and their variety, as well as highlighting issues including the cost of school meals (Spence et al., 2024). Further, findings from the present study highlight the relevance of family expectations, children's food preferences, and multiple perspectives, as well as the broader food environments, when considering lunches on the school menu.

Despite frequent conversations between parents and children about school food (e.g. during meal selection, feedback about lunch), parents felt ill-informed about their children's school meals and had a strong interest in knowing more. Specifically, they wanted to understand aspects of the school food environment, for example, the sides provided with meals and the salad bar. This was also reflected in discussions about typical portion sizes in school and whether these changed with age. Given the critical role that parents play as nutritional gatekeepers, moderating food availability and consumption (Briggs & Lake, 2011), efforts to provide additional information to parents on the school food environment should be considered. This could, for example, entail providing further details (e.g. photographs of the salad bar, plated meals) on the school website, school newsletters or via the online pre-order website. Incidentally, parents reported that providing images may also encourage their children to try different foods. Other efforts to raise parents' awareness and knowledge of school lunches include invitations for parents to have lunch at school, an approach within recommendations for optimal primary school food environment (Moore et al., 2023). Such endeavours would respond to parents' desire to know more and may also provide the opportunity for parents to be more involved in their children's school lunches. Previous work has found how positive parental perceptions about school meals were associated with greater student meal participation (Zuercher et al., 2024).

Wider aspects of lunchtime within the school day, the organisation of school meals and the school food environment more broadly should be considered. For example, parents' reports that their children sometimes rushed their lunch, reflects other studies that have reported children keen to consume lunch quickly to maximise time in play (Ensaff et al., 2018; Lalchandani et al., 2025). Further work to examine the time available for lunch, as well as its scheduling and convergence with playtime is recommended.

4.2. Limitations

It is important to consider the limitations of this study, and findings should be considered within the context of parents; specifically, all participants apart from one were female and although household income varied, almost half had an income up to £75,000 (higher than mean gross household income in the UK). Although the schools had varying characteristics, including differences in FSM profile, school size, and meal ordering modes (i.e. at home only, at school and at home), all schools were in the same metropolitan borough and with the same catering provider and online pre-order system. Future research should include parents with different sociodemographic characteristics, as well as schools from different regions of England, catering providers and ordering systems. In addition, limitations associated with the data collection are acknowledged, including social desirability bias and the influence of dominant participants. Further, researcher bias influencing data collection and interpretation is relevant. To mitigate against this and support the robustness of the work, reflexive practices were adopted, including memoing with frequent discussions among the research team to debrief on interviews, discuss potential sources of bias and researcher experience.

5. Conclusion

This study provides insights into parents' perspectives on food choice parameters relevant to children's selection of school lunches, and their

experiences when utilising online pre-order systems to select meals. Findings indicate that decision-making around school meals is largely child-led and according to children's preferences, including when parents pre-order online on their children's behalf. Familiarity was an important factor, influencing the decision between a school lunch and packed lunch, as well as the specific school meals chosen. For parents themselves, the variety of meals on the school menu and also those selected by their children were important considerations. Parents reported that they would like to be better informed about school lunches – and improved communication with parents may enhance home-school partnership and engage parents in supporting children as they choose school lunches. Future research should explore how parental engagement initiatives may influence parents' perceptions, knowledge and practices regarding school lunches, and whether such approaches lead to changes in children's food choices and uptake of school meals.

Data availability statement

The datasets related to this study are not openly available because of ethical restrictions. Consent from participants to share data was restricted to the research team.

Ethics statement

This study received ethical approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds (BESS&FREC/1248) and all participants provided informed consent.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

H. Abbotts-Holmes: Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **M. Homer:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **H. Ensaff:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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