MORE THAN A MEAL:

FOOD AS A PATHWAY TO HEALING, CONNECTION, AND COMMUNITY

by

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More than a meal: Food as a pathway to healing, connection and community

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Dedication

This work is dedicated first to my family, who have been the heart of my table throughout this journey. To my husband, thank you for your steady support, encouragement, and patience as I worked through the many hours of reading, writing, and reflection that shaped this capstone. Your belief in me made this work possible. To my boys, thank you for the joy, curiosity, and laughter you bring to our home. You remind me daily why creating spaces of connection and belonging matters. Together, you have created the table around which I continue to learn, grow, and be nourished.

I am also deeply grateful to my parents, who raised me within the Mennonite community where food, hospitality, and gathering were woven into everyday life. Those early experiences shaped the way I understand care, connection, and community. I offer special thanks to my mom, who patiently taught me how to cook and who woke early so many mornings to prepare fresh homemade food for our family. Through your quiet acts of love and service, you showed me that feeding others is never just about nourishment; it is about care and generosity. The lessons learned in your kitchen continue to guide my understanding of the meaning and power of food.

Finally, I would like to thank my counselling cohort. Walking through this program alongside each of you over the past two years has been an incredible gift. Your openness, encouragement, and willingness to share your own stories created a learning community that made this journey richer and more meaningful. Growing and learning beside you has been a privilege I will always carry with me.

Abstract

This capstone explores the growing sense of disconnection experienced by many young people and considers how communal cooking and shared meals might serve as relational practices that support healing, empathy, and belonging within school environments. Historically, preparing and sharing food together functioned as a daily rhythm of family and community life, offering natural opportunities for conversation, cooperation, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. However, modern western social structures, including increased busyness, changing family routines, and the industrialization of food systems, have contributed to a decline in shared meal practices and relational time. Drawing on interdisciplinary research from psychology, sociology, education, and food studies, the literature review examines the importance of social connection for human well-being, the developmental benefits associated with shared meals, and the cultural significance of food within Mennonite traditions, Indigenous food sovereignty practices, and other communal food systems. Research on cooking interventions and experiential learning further suggests that cooking can support psychosocial well-being by fostering confidence, collaboration, resilience, and a sense of shared accomplishment. Within this context, schools emerge as important environments where relational experiences can be intentionally cultivated. Building on both the research and the author's experience teaching a middle school foods program, this capstone suggests that foods classrooms can function as spaces where students learn not only practical life skills but also empathy, cooperation, and belonging through the shared preparation and enjoyment of food. Recommendations include reframing foods education to emphasize relational learning, creating opportunities for collaborative cooking and shared meals, and recognizing communal food experiences as accessible approaches to supporting youth connection and well-being within schools and communities.

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Chapter 1: Welcome to the Table

Introduction

I would like to invite you to my table.

As you approach, you notice there is a place set for you. The chairs are close enough to feel warmth, but not so close as to feel crowded. There is a quiet hum of welcome, an understanding that you belong here. Apprehension may rise at first. Perhaps you carry memories of exclusion, failure, or criticism. Perhaps tables in the past did not always feel safe. But here, those stories are not required. Here, you are received.

As you sit, dishes filled to the brim are passed freely from hand to hand. The food has been prepared by those at this table, not perfectly, but intentionally. Each dish carries effort, care, and the desire to nourish someone else. No one is asked to prove themselves before eating. No one is required to speak. Conversation moves gently, following the aromas and laughter, but silence is equally welcome. Participation takes many forms. It is enough to sit. It is enough to receive.

As the meal continues, something subtle begins to shift. Barriers soften. Shoulders lower. There is a rhythm to the passing of plates, the exchange of glances, the shared enjoyment of the fruits of one another's labour. Connection grows not because anyone was forced to engage, but because the environment allowed it.

When the meal ends, a quiet fullness settles in. Not only the fullness of food, but the fullness that replaces something unnamed - perhaps loneliness, perhaps stress, perhaps the silent

ache of disconnection. You rise from the table aware that this moment was small in the scope of your life, yet deeply significant. It was more than calories and nutrients. It was belonging. It was shared humanity. It was community forming in real time.

This table is the metaphor that frames this paper. Each chapter, like each dish, contributes something to the whole. Some sections will explore history and culture, others research and theory, and still others practical application. Together, they build toward one central idea: that cooking and eating together are not simply functional tasks, but relational acts capable of fostering empathy, healing, and connection.

I grew up in a Mennonite community where this table was central - not only for nourishment, but as a cultural and relational practice. Meals were expressions of care, tradition, and togetherness, and I learned early on that sharing food could be a powerful form of connection and communication. This upbringing taught me that healing often begins around a table, through the simple act of feeding and being fed.

Food and culture within the Mennonite community are deeply intertwined, with "feeding" representing far more than nourishment. It is an act of togetherness, care, and tradition. Whether in times of celebration or grief, such as weddings, baptisms, or funerals, the expectation was always to gather and eat. This act of coming together–sharing homemade dishes like zwieback, borscht, or rollkuchen–was not optional but essential, symbolizing unity, hospitality, and mutual support. The tradition of breaking bread together often took place around long communal tables, reinforcing intergenerational bonds and a sense of belonging. These meals were where stories were passed down, laughter mingled with prayer, and silence was held respectfully in times of mourning. Within Mennonite culture, feeding others is a sacred act, a tangible expression of love and faith, and one of the strongest threads holding the community

and family together. These times shaped the way I grew up and how I came to see food as a way to promote healing, as eating together was never just about meeting a basic level of nutrients.

Yet for many families, this table no longer exists in the way it once did. Shared meals were once woven into the daily fabric of home life. Cooking and eating together were privileged rhythms; expected pauses where stories were told, values were modelled, and bonds were strengthened. The table was not just furniture; it was the heart of the home. Today, busyness has taken its place. Activities, work demands, academic pressure, and screens compete for attention. Videon and Manning (2003) note that family meals have declined significantly, particularly as children move into adolescence. The result is not only a shift in eating habits, but a reduction in structured relational time.

At the same time, youth report rising levels of anxiety, depression, substance use, and loneliness (Cacciopo et al., 2009). Researchers have also raised concerns about declining empathy and prosocial behavior among young people (Silke et al., 2024). While these trends are influenced by many complex factors, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, it is worth asking what role relational spaces–like the dinner table–once played in shaping emotional development and community belonging. If the table was once a site of connection, modelling, storytelling, and shared responsibility, what happens when it goes silent? And more importantly, what might happen if we intentionally rebuild it, not only in homes, but within schools and counselling spaces?

This paper explores the possibility that cooking and eating together in community can serve as a method of healing. Like the meal described above, this work invites us to consider food as more than sustenance. It asks us to see it as a relational practice; one that nourishes empathy, builds belonging, and restores what busyness and disconnection may have eroded.

While current school food programs have had success in meeting outcomes to address hunger and academic performance (Colley et al., 2019), they often prioritize feeding and nutritional information over relational and community-building goals. There is limited emphasis on using cooking and shared eating intentionally as tools for emotional regulation, healing, and social development. In my own experience as an Applied Design, Skills, and Technology (ADST) teacher in Foods, I came to understand that what happens in a kitchen classroom can extend far beyond meeting curricular outcomes. While my courses were rooted in skill-based learning, nutritional information, and the learning standards set by the BC Ministry of Education, the deeper impact of the program was relational. More than a food program focused on measuring ingredients and following recipes, the kitchen became a safe space where students could take risks, collaborate, and grow together in community.

The process of cooking side by side required students to engage in ways that traditional classroom structures often do not demand. They worked in small groups–sometimes with peers they had never previously spoken to–negotiating roles, dividing responsibilities, and navigating differences in personality and ability to reach a shared goal. Success depended on cooperation. One student measured ingredients, another chopped vegetables, another monitored the stove. If something went wrong, they had to problem-solve together. In these moments, I often witnessed empathy developing naturally. Students who struggled in conventional academic settings frequently excelled in the kitchen, stepping into leadership roles or demonstrating creativity and initiative that shifted how their peers perceived them.

Equally important was what happened after the cooking was done. In my final two years of teaching foods, I replaced the institutional round tables with dining room tables to intentionally create a more communal environment. This physical change altered the atmosphere.

Students no longer ate quickly and dispersed; instead, they lingered. They passed dishes to one another, discussed flavors, reflected on what worked and what did not, and shared stories from their lives. I observed students forming connections with peers they might not have interacted with outside of that space. The shared labor of preparing a meal translated into shared pride as they sat together to enjoy the fruits of their work.

These observations reinforced my belief that foods programs have the capacity to nurture more than life skills needed to feed oneself physically. When structured intentionally, they can cultivate emotional literacy, cooperation, resilience, and belonging. Cooking and eating together provide natural opportunities for students to experience contribution, connection, and mutual care. Without intentional design, however, food programs risk remaining transactional, focused on consumption rather than community. Reimagining these spaces as relational environments opens the possibility for healing and social development alongside nourishment.

Purpose of the Paper

This capstone aims to highlight the growing sense of disconnection experienced by many young people and the gradual loss of shared communal food practices that historically helped cultivate empathy, belonging, and relational bonds. For generations, cooking and eating together functioned as daily rhythms within families and communities. Around kitchen tables and shared meals, children observed cooperation, learned practical skills, and experienced the relational foundations of community life. As family meal frequency declines and cooking traditions are less consistently passed down, many youth may be losing important opportunities to experience these forms of connection and relational learning.

At the same time, young people are growing up during a period of increasing concern about mental health and social disconnection. Many scholars have begun to describe

contemporary society as experiencing a “loneliness epidemic,” as patterns of social life shift and individuals report feeling more isolated from one another despite living in highly connected digital environments (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). A growing body of research, which will be explored further in Chapter 2, has examined the psychological and physiological consequences of loneliness, suggesting that persistent social isolation can significantly impact well-being and may even contribute to earlier morbidity (Cacioppo et al., 2014). Loneliness is not simply an emotional experience but a complex biopsychosocial phenomenon that can influence stress regulation, immune functioning, and long-term health outcomes.

These concerns unfold alongside rapid changes in the ways young people interact and spend their time. Increased engagement with digital technologies and screen-based environments has altered patterns of communication and social interaction for many children and adolescents. Research examining screen use among youth has found associations between higher levels of screen time and differences in mental health, academic functioning, and social outcomes in early adolescence (Paulich et al., 2021). While digital technologies offer important opportunities for connection and communication, these shifts raise important questions about how young people are developing the relational skills and experiences that support empathy, cooperation, and a sense of belonging within community (Vidal et al., 2020).

As communal structures that historically supported everyday connection become less common, it becomes increasingly important to examine how relational practices might help counteract these patterns of disconnection. Within this broader context, examining activities that

naturally bring people together, such as cooking and sharing food, offers a promising avenue for understanding how connection might be intentionally cultivated among young people.

This capstone explores the possibility that cooking and eating together can serve as meaningful practices for rebuilding connection among children and adolescents. The purpose of this project is to examine how communal food experiences, particularly within school and educational environments, can support emotional well-being, relational development, and a sense of belonging among youth. Rather than viewing cooking solely as a practical life skill or nutritional requirement, this project seeks to reframe shared food preparation and communal meals as relational practices that have the potential to foster empathy, resilience, and community.

To explore this possibility, Chapter 2 examines historical, cultural, and contemporary research on food practices. This literature review considers how communal food traditions have functioned across cultures, including Mennonite and Indigenous perspectives, as well as research on family meals, social connection, and psychosocial well-being. It also examines how modern social and educational structures have altered many of the relational opportunities historically embedded within food practices.

Building on these insights, Chapter 3 considers how cooking and shared meals might be intentionally reintroduced within educational environments. Drawing on both research and personal experience teaching a middle school foods program, the chapter explores practical ways that food-based activities, reflective assignments, and collaborative cooking experiences can create relational spaces where students develop confidence, connection, and community.

The intended audience for this project includes school counsellors, educators, administrators, and community program developers who are seeking relational, preventative, and

accessible approaches to supporting youth mental health and social development. By examining both the research and the lived experience of cooking with young people, this capstone aims to contribute to a growing conversation about how everyday practices, such as preparing and sharing food, can become meaningful tools for fostering connection and well-being within schools and communities.

My Privilege and Positionality

My belief that food can be meaningful and healing is deeply rooted in my own lived experience. As someone who experienced trauma during childhood, I found in cooking a sense of steadiness when much of my world felt unpredictable. Preparing food gave me something that I could influence and understand when other parts of life felt chaotic. When anxiety surfaced, I could focus on the rhythm of stirring, the careful measuring of ingredients, and the quiet chemical reactions that occur when flour, sugar, and heat transform into something nourishing. If I followed the process, something good would emerge. I could not always change what was happening around me, but I could trust that the work of cooking would lead to somewhere steady and tangible. In those moments, the kitchen became a place where calm was possible. It was meditative, grounding, and safe.

These early experiences shaped the way I understand food today. Cooking became more than a practical skill; it became a way of creating order, care, and connection in a world that sometimes felt unstable. Over time, this understanding expanded through my professional experience working with students in a foods classroom. What I noticed was that many of the same qualities that once helped ground me were also grounding in the lives of the students I

taught. Within the shared work of preparing meals, students found opportunities to slow down, focus their attention, and contribute meaningfully to something larger than themselves.

Because of these personal and professional experiences, I approach this work with a strong belief that cooking can function as both a relational and therapeutic practice. For counsellors, food-based experiences offer a practical and accessible intervention that supports emotional regulation, confidence-building, and social connection without requiring a traditional therapy setting. For educators and administrators, they open the possibility of reframing foods and life skills programs as environments where community formation occurs alongside skill development. For students, these experiences provide structured opportunities to contribute, collaborate, and experience belonging, experiences that may be increasingly rare in a fast-paced and digitally mediated world.

At a time when many young people report rising levels of anxiety, isolation, and disconnection, returning to communal understandings of food feels both grounded and hopeful. Around a table, barriers often soften. Around shared labour, empathy begins to grow. When nourishment is prepared and shared collectively, students experience the simple yet powerful truth that care can be expressed through action. In these moments, belonging does not have to be explained; it is felt.

At the same time, I recognize that my perspective is shaped by my own experiences and assumptions. My positive relationship with food may incline me to emphasize its healing potential. I am aware that not all individuals share these associations. For some students, food may carry memories of scarcity, instability, cultural displacement, or family conflict. For others, access to food itself may be uncertain. It is essential to acknowledge these realities and approach

food-based programming with sensitivity and care. My goal is not to romanticize food or present it as a universal solution, but rather to explore how, when intentionally structured and thoughtfully facilitated, communal cooking and shared meals can create opportunities for connection and healing within educational spaces.

Reflecting on this work also requires acknowledging the privilege embedded within my experiences. I recognize how fortunate I have been to spend years working in a classroom kitchen with young people, learning alongside them through the simple yet powerful act of preparing food together. The opportunity to observe these moments of growth, connection, and resilience is something I hold with deep gratitude. Not every school has access to foods programs, and not every educator has the opportunity to work in spaces where relational learning can unfold through shared activity. Being able to witness and participate in these experiences is a privilege that has profoundly shaped both my professional path and my understanding of education.

My upbringing within a Mennonite community also influences the way I understand food and communal practices. Within this cultural context, cooking and sharing meals were expressions of care, service, and hospitality. Gathering around food was not only a practical necessity but a way of reinforcing relationships and supporting one another through both celebration and hardship. At the same time, I recognize that my experiences within this community were shaped by social and cultural privileges that are not universally shared. Access to stable food systems, supportive community structures, and safe environments are not realities that all individuals experience equally. Acknowledging this privilege is important because it reminds me that the opportunities I have had, both personally and professionally, have been shaped by circumstances that extend beyond individual effort.

In a similar spirit of humility, I approach discussions of Indigenous food practices and traditions with great care. I am not of Indigenous descent, and I do not position myself as someone who can speak on behalf of those communities. The perspectives referenced in this capstone are drawn from the scholarship and teachings shared by Indigenous authors and knowledge holders, and my intention is simply to honor and acknowledge the relational wisdom present within those writings. Indigenous food sovereignty movements emphasize deep relationships between land, food, culture, and community, relationships that have been disrupted through colonization and systemic injustice. These teachings offer important insights into the relational nature of food, but they are rooted in histories, land connections, and lived experiences that are not my own. While I draw parallels between Indigenous food traditions and aspects of Mennonite food culture–particularly around shared labour, hospitality, and gathering–I do so with the understanding that these histories are not interchangeable. Instead, these parallels highlight a broader human truth: that food has long served as a medium through which communities nurture relationships, pass down knowledge, and care for one another.

Acknowledging both bias and privilege allows me to approach this work with greater humility and responsibility. It reminds me that the lessons I have learned through food are not solely my own discoveries but part of a much larger tapestry of cultural knowledge and communal practice. My hope is that this capstone contributes, in some small way, to ongoing conversations about how schools and communities might intentionally create spaces where young people can experience connection, care, and belonging.

For me, the kitchen remains one of those spaces. It is a place where work is shared, where mistakes are forgiven, and where nourishment, both physical and relational, is offered freely. Recognizing the privilege of having learned these lessons alongside my students deepens my

commitment to exploring how these experiences might be extended to others. Because sometimes the most meaningful learning does not occur through instruction alone. Sometimes it happens quietly, in the rhythm of stirring a pot, passing a dish across a table, or realizing that there is a place set for you among others.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to me not only because of what the research suggests, but because of what I have lived and witnessed firsthand. At a broader level, it also emerges within a moment when concerns about loneliness, declining shared family time, and youth mental health have become increasingly visible. Researchers have begun to describe social connection as a critical determinant of both psychological and physical well-being, noting that loneliness and isolation can have consequences comparable to other major health risks (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). At the same time, studies suggest that everyday relational practices that once supported connection, such as regular family meals, have steadily declined for many young people (Videon & Manning, 2003). When these small but meaningful spaces for interaction diminish, youth may have fewer opportunities to experience the kinds of shared activities through which empathy, cooperation, and belonging are naturally learned.

Over the years, I have come to see that a kitchen can become something far greater than a place where food is prepared. Within the walls of a classroom kitchen, I have watched moments of transformation occur in ways that are both subtle and profound. Students who felt overlooked in other academic spaces found confidence while measuring flour or seasoning soup. Quiet students, who rarely spoke during traditional lessons, found their voices when explaining the next step in a recipe. Reluctant learners took visible pride in presenting a finished dish to their

peers. Even moments of failure often became moments of connection, as tension softened through shared laughter when something burned or failed to rise because baking powder had been forgotten.

What continues to stand out most clearly to me is how failure is experienced differently in the kitchen compared to many academic spaces. In traditional classrooms, mistakes can feel permanent. They are graded, recorded, and often internalized by students as evidence that they are incapable or unsuccessful. In the kitchen, however, failure rarely carries the same weight. A sauce can be adjusted. A recipe can be restarted. Batter that has been overmixed becomes an opportunity to ask what might be done differently next time. Rather than reinforcing the idea that mistakes define a person's ability, the kitchen encourages experimentation, curiosity, and resilience. Students begin to understand that learning is a process and that growth often emerges through trial and error. The flexibility of the cooking process creates space for risk-taking and recovery, lessons that extend far beyond the preparation of a single meal.

Through these experiences, I began to recognize that something meaningful was happening in the foods classroom that went well beyond the intended curriculum. The kitchen was not only teaching students how to cook; it was creating opportunities for them to experience competence, cooperation, and belonging. Students worked side by side, dividing tasks, offering help, and celebrating small successes together. The finished meal became more than a product; it became visible evidence that collaboration and shared effort mattered. For me, this capstone is driven by a desire to better understand and articulate what I have observed in these moments. While food in schools is often framed primarily as fuel, necessary for focus, attendance, and academic performance, I have come to believe that it can also function as something deeper. Cooking and eating together can act as a form of relational medicine. Within the shared labor of

preparing a meal, students naturally practice communication, empathy, and cooperation. They experience what it means to contribute to something larger than themselves and to receive care from others in return.

A kitchen does not ask students to prove their worth before they belong. Instead, it invites them to participate in small, meaningful tasks that contribute to a shared outcome. Whether chopping vegetables, measuring ingredients, or washing dishes, each role carries value within the collective effort. The meal that emerges from that process becomes tangible proof that everyone's contribution matters.

It is this possibility that something as ordinary as cooking together can nurture connection, resilience, and community, that fuels my passion for this area of research. In a time when many young people report increasing loneliness and disconnection, spaces that foster shared work and shared meals may hold renewed importance. The kitchen offers a simple yet powerful reminder that belonging can still be created through shared effort, shared nourishment, and shared moments around the table.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In the first chapter, the table served as a place of welcome, a metaphor for belonging, nourishment, and shared humanity. It represented the kind of space where people gather not simply to eat, but to experience connection, care, and community. Yet before we can consider how such spaces might be intentionally created within schools and counselling environments, it is important to pause and look more closely at the ingredients that shape our understanding of food, connection, and well-being.

In many ways, this chapter represents the moment when the dishes begin arriving at the table. Each piece of research presented here contributes to something different to the conversation. Some studies explore the growing concern surrounding loneliness and social isolation in modern society. Others examine the relational benefits of shared meals, the cultural significance of food practices across communities, and the ways cooking and eating together have historically fostered empathy, identity, and belonging. Still others investigate how contemporary food systems and educational structures may have altered the opportunities people once had to gather, cook, and share meals in community.

Taken together, these perspectives help us better understand the broader landscape surrounding food and connection. They reveal that what happens around a table has rarely been just about nourishment. Across cultures and generations, shared food practices have functioned as relational anchors where stories are exchanged, skills are passed down, and community is strengthened. At the same time, the research also highlights how modern life has gradually

shifted many of these traditions, often reducing food to efficiency, convenience, or nutritional measurement rather than relational experience.

This literature review explores these tensions and possibilities. It examines how social connection influences human health, how communal food traditions have shaped identity and belonging, and how contemporary research is beginning to recognize the psychosocial benefits of cooking and eating together. It also considers how educational spaces, particularly foods classrooms, may offer opportunities to rebuild some of the relational experiences that have diminished in everyday life.

If Chapter 1 invites us to sit down at the table, this chapter invites us to listen to the voices gathered there. Through research, history, and cultural knowledge, we begin to understand more clearly why the simple act of preparing and sharing food together has long carried such powerful relational meaning. And perhaps, as the conversation unfolds, we begin to see that rebuilding connection may start with something as ordinary, and as profound, as setting the table again.

Review of Research Literature

The Importance of Connection in an Age of Isolation

To begin, it is important to first consider the broader context in which this discussion takes place: a world where many individuals are experiencing increasing loneliness and disconnection. This raises important questions about where and how meaningful human connection is formed. In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about loneliness and social isolation have intensified. Many people report feeling increasingly disconnected from those around them, even as digital technologies make communication more constant and

accessible (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). Recent global estimates suggest that nearly one quarter of people worldwide experience loneliness on a regular basis (Maese, 2023). While loneliness is often understood as an individual emotional experience, research increasingly shows that it is closely tied to the structure of social environments and the opportunities people have for meaningful interaction with others (Cacioppo et al., 2009).

The consequences of loneliness extend far beyond emotional discomfort. Neuroscientific research indicates that loneliness can activate stress responses in the brain and body, increasing vulnerability to both mental and physical health challenges (Cacioppo et al., 2014). As a result, prolonged social isolation has been linked to increased risk of depression, anxiety, and poorer overall health outcomes (Gosling et al., 2024). The implications also extend to long-term physical health. Longitudinal population studies tracking individuals over many years demonstrate that people who are more socially isolated tend to experience significantly poorer health outcomes and shorter lifespans (Cacioppo et al., 2009). Evidence from large-scale meta-analyses suggests that strong social relationships may increase survival likelihood by as much as 50% (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Social isolation and loneliness have also been linked to increased risk for major physical health conditions, including cardiovascular disease (Cacioppo et al., 2009).

For young people, the presence or absence of meaningful relationships can have especially lasting effects. Research shows that loneliness in childhood can predict depressive symptoms later in adolescence (Qualter et al., 2010), while persistent loneliness during adolescence is associated with increased risk of anxiety and depression in young adulthood (Parlikar et al., 2025). These findings highlight how relational experiences during early life can

shape emotional resilience across the lifespan, with early experiences of isolation potentially influencing well-being long into adulthood.

These concerns unfold alongside rapid changes in the ways young people communicate and spend their time. Increasing engagement with digital technologies and screen-based environments has altered patterns of social interaction for many children and adolescents. Research examining early adolescents in the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study found that higher levels of screen time were associated with differences in mental health, academic functioning, and social outcomes among 9- and 10-year-old children (Paulich et al., 2021). Similarly, a scoping review examining social media use among adolescents found consistent associations between heavy social media engagement and increased symptoms of depression and psychological distress (Vidal et al., 2020). While digital technologies offer new avenues for communication, these forms of interaction may not fully replace the depth and quality of in-person relationships. In some cases, reliance on digital communication may even intensify feelings of isolation, as online engagement can coexist with reduced opportunities for meaningful face-to-face interaction.

Understanding the impact of loneliness also requires recognizing the fundamental human need for connection. Human beings are inherently relational. From an evolutionary perspective, survival depended on belonging to a group, forming cooperative bonds, and maintaining social ties (Cacioppo et al., 2014). Although modern life no longer relies on the same tribal structures, the biological and psychological need for connection remains deeply embedded in human experience.

A growing body of research guided by Julianne Holt-Lunstad (2024) positions social connection as a central determinant of health and well-being. Holt-Lunstad (2024) argues that

strong social relationships are not simply beneficial but fundamental to human survival. Across social species, connection supports behavioural and biological processes that protect health, making it one of the strongest predictors of longevity. Her work also highlights increasing global concern about what many describe as a "loneliness epidemic," noting that social connection plays a critical role in preventing mental health problems, maintaining well-being, and supporting recovery from mental illness. In this sense, connection can be understood as a form of preventative care: when young people feel seen, valued, and supported within their relationships, they are better equipped to navigate challenges and develop a strong sense of belonging. Without these relational anchors, feelings of isolation may emerge early and continue to shape well-being over time.

The Need for Social Interaction

If connection is a foundational human need, then it becomes important to ask where young people have traditionally learned it, and what happens when those spaces begin to disappear. One of the most significant shifts in recent decades has been the decline in time spent together with family. Historically, daily routines included shared moments where family members gathered, spoke with one another, and participated in communal activities. Meals, in particular, served as important relational anchors within the day. Research consistently shows that eating together has positive effects, especially for children and adolescents (Harrison et al, 2015). Shared meals provide opportunities for conversation, emotional support, and routine. Freedman (2021) notes that historically, shared meals functioned as important social rituals where families exchanged stories, shared experiences from the day, and reinforced relational bonds. These moments allowed parents and children to connect emotionally while creating predictable structures that supported family cohesion.

The benefits of these shared experiences are well documented across multiple studies examining adolescent health and development. Harrison et al. (2015) conducted research examining family meal frequency and its relationship to adolescent emotional well-being and risk behaviors. Their findings demonstrated that adolescents who regularly shared meals with their families reported higher levels of self-esteem and emotional support compared to those who rarely ate together with family members. In addition, youth who participated in frequent family meals were significantly less likely to report depressive symptoms or engage in risky behaviors such as substance use and delinquency. These results suggest that the family meal may function as a protective environment where adolescents experience stability, communication, and emotional validation. Similarly, Walton et al. (2016) found that adolescents who regularly ate dinner with their families showed healthier dietary habits overall, including higher consumption of fruits and vegetables and lower intake of highly processed foods. Importantly, the researchers also observed fewer behavioural concerns among adolescents who participated in regular family meals, suggesting that the relational environment created by shared meals may support both physical health and behavioral development. Earlier research by Videon and Manning (2003), which examined the eating patterns of adolescents within the United States, found that youth who ate meals with at least one adult family member were significantly less likely to skip breakfast and were more likely to maintain consistent, healthier eating routines throughout the day. Their findings highlighted the importance of adult presence during meals, suggesting that shared eating environments can provide both nutritional guidance and relational stability for young people.

The benefits of shared meals extend beyond nutritional outcomes and dietary patterns. Increasingly, researchers are examining how the relational processes surrounding meal

preparation and consumption influence family dynamics and child development. Tani et al. (2021) explored the relationship between home cooking practices and caregiver–child interaction, finding that families who cooked meals at home more frequently also reported increased opportunities for communication and shared engagement between caregivers and children. In these households, cooking was not simply a functional task but a collaborative activity that allowed family members to interact, problem-solve, and spend time together. Children in these families were more likely to participate in meal preparation, which created opportunities for learning, conversation, and shared responsibility. In contrast, the study found that children who experienced less frequent home cooking and fewer shared meal preparation experiences were more likely to exhibit behavioral difficulties and lower levels of family interaction. These findings suggest that it is not only the act of eating together that contributes to relational well-being, but also the collaborative processes involved in preparing food. Cooking together creates moments of cooperation, communication, and mutual support that strengthen family bonds. As a result, the relational interactions that occur before, during, and after meals may be just as important as the nutritional content of the food itself.

Eating together also appears to influence emotional well-being more broadly. In a study measuring the rewarding values of foods and the potential impact of labeling, Huang et al. (2022) found that shared meals increase feelings of happiness and enjoyment, even when individuals eat with people they do not know well. Participants reported greater positive emotion and social bonding when eating with others compared to eating alone. These findings reinforce the idea that shared meals serve as social rituals that foster communication, connection, and a sense of belonging.

However, family meals have become increasingly difficult to maintain. Many households now face competing demands from work schedules, extracurricular activities, and time pressures that fragment daily routines (Harrison et al., 2015). These structural pressures often make it challenging for families to gather consistently around the table. As parents balance employment responsibilities and children participate in increasingly structured after-school activities, shared time within the home becomes more limited. Meals that were once predictable daily gatherings may instead be eaten quickly, individually, or at different times throughout the evening. Over time, this fragmentation can reduce opportunities for conversation, emotional connection, and the informal relational learning that often occurs when families spend time together around food (Fiese et al., 2006). This shift reflects broader societal changes toward individualism, busier lifestyles, and reduced shared time within families (Freedman, 2021).

In addition to time constraints, broader social determinants also shape family meal practices. A comprehensive research synthesis and policy report by Raphael et al. (2020) highlights how social and economic conditions, such as financial stress, food insecurity, employment demands, and access to resources, significantly influence families' ability to prepare meals and gather together. When families experience economic strain or time scarcity, the routines that support shared meals may become increasingly difficult to sustain. As these practices decline, families may also lose valuable opportunities for connection and relationship-building that traditionally occur around the table. Research suggests that these everyday moments of interaction play an important role in children's social and emotional development. Silke et al. (2023) explored how empathy and prosocial behaviour develop among young people through a qualitative study in which adolescents participated in interviews and discussions about the factors that support or hinder these traits. Empathy and prosocial behaviour, such as helping,

sharing, and showing concern for others, are key social-emotional processes that build social connectedness and overall well-being. In their study, adolescents described how everyday relational experiences, including shared activities and conversations with family members, helped to cultivate understanding of others' perspectives and encouraged caring behaviours. The researchers note growing concerns that empathic and prosocial responses among young people may be declining, making supportive relational contexts increasingly important. These interpersonal skills not only support positive relationships but also form the foundation for broader moral values such as care, justice, and selflessness. Moreover, higher levels of empathy and prosocial behaviour have been associated with stronger cognitive functioning and greater academic achievement among children and adolescents. Within this context, shared family meals can provide a structured and emotionally safe environment where young people practice communication, develop empathy, and strengthen the relational skills that support healthy social development.

The Impact of School

Beyond the home, other communal spaces have also shifted. As schools have increasingly prioritized efficiency and academic instructional time, opportunities for unstructured social interaction have been reduced. Recess periods have shortened, lunch breaks have become compressed, and time for students to simply exist together has diminished. Research on childhood development suggests that reductions in time for unstructured social interaction may have unintended consequences for children's social and emotional growth. Unstructured play and informal social time are widely recognized as essential components of healthy development because they provide opportunities for children to practice cooperation, develop friendships, and build emotional regulation skills (Bento & Dias, 2017). Studies examining peer interaction have

shown that children who regularly engage in cooperative play demonstrate stronger social competence, improved emotional regulation, and greater empathy toward others (Rubin et al., 2015). These experiences allow children to encounter challenges, misunderstandings, and conflicts in ways that help them build relational skills over time.

Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory also helps explain why time spent together is so important for social development. Much of children's learning occurs through observing others and imitating what they see. In shared environments such as family meals, play spaces, or collaborative activities, children are exposed to examples of patience, negotiation, and conflict resolution. These modeled behaviours provide a framework that children gradually adopt and practice in their own interactions. More recent developmental research similarly emphasizes that frequent interaction with peers and caregivers contributes to the development of social problem-solving skills and emotional resilience (Denham et al., 2018). Taken together, this body of research suggests that time spent together is not merely recreational but foundational for childhood development. When opportunities for shared interaction diminish, children may lose valuable spaces where relational skills are naturally learned and reinforced.

The Importance of Food: Culture, Identity, and History

Among the relational spaces that have historically supported connection, food and shared meals have played a particularly significant role. Food has always held meaning beyond simply keeping people alive. Freedman (2021) explains that food helps form memories and contributes to a person's sense of identity. Throughout history, meals have been central to celebrations, rituals, family life, and even survival during times of hardship. Although modern society often reduces food to calories and nutrients, historically food has been closely connected to relationships and shared experience (Freedman, 2021).

Within Mennonite culture, food plays a deeply meaningful role in shaping identity, faith, and community life. Epp (2023) explains that Mennonite food-ways reflect stories of migration, persecution, adaptation, and resilience. Recipes were often carried across countries and generations, becoming tangible reminders of shared history. Food preparation was not simply domestic labor; it was an act of preservation, of culture, language, and belonging. Historically, Mennonite communities relied heavily on farming, gardening, preserving, baking, and cooking from scratch. Food preparation required time, cooperation, and skill. Women carried much of the responsibility for sustaining family and community life through food. Meals were often eaten together, reinforcing bonds within households and across extended family networks. Church gatherings, funerals, weddings, and communal events were centered around shared dishes, reinforcing both faith and fellowship. Epp (2023) notes that food is "ubiquitous and omnipresent," yet it is often overlooked in its deeper meaning (p. 3). In Mennonite contexts, however, food is closely tied to values such as humility, hospitality, service, and community care. Preparing food for others becomes an expression of love and faith in action. The act of bringing meals to a family experiencing illness or grief, for example, is both practical and relational; it communicates solidarity and shared responsibility. As modern life has shifted toward convenience foods and busy schedules, some of these traditional practices have become less common. However, reclaiming traditional recipes and food practices can serve as a way for individuals to reconnect with their roots. For some, cooking traditional Mennonite dishes is not only about taste but about reclaiming identity and belonging in a more individualistic society (Epp, 2023). Food becomes a bridge between past and present, linking generations through memory, story, and shared experience.

Indigenous perspectives offer an even deeper understanding of food as relational, sacred, and inseparable from land. In *Drum in One Hand, Sockeye in the Other* (2022), Charlotte Cote examines the deep cultural and spiritual connections between food, land, and identity within Coast Salish traditions. Coté (2022) describes Indigenous food sovereignty as a restorative process that centers relationships between people, ancestors, land, and traditional foods. Food is not viewed as a commodity but as a living relative, gifted through reciprocal relationships and ceremony. Traditional practices such as hunting, fishing, berry picking, harvesting, and communal preparation involve clearly defined yet interdependent roles. Each person contributes according to their ability and knowledge. Elders pass down teachings, stories, and techniques to younger generations, ensuring cultural continuity. These practices reinforce identity and purpose; individuals understand themselves as part of a larger relational network. Coté (2022) emphasizes that Indigenous health is holistic, involving physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological dimensions. Traditional foodways nourish all of these aspects simultaneously. Harvesting and preparing food together strengthens family bonds and community ties. These shared activities create memories and reinforce belonging. For example, berry picking or fishing trips are not solely about gathering food but about storytelling, laughter, mentorship, and bonding across generations.

In a study conducted using *Etuaptmunk,* or Two-Eyed Seeing, to understand how Indigenous communities understand and practice Indigenous Food Sovereignty (IFS) and its impact on community health and cultural revitalization, Poirier and Neufeld (2023) further explain that IFS focuses on relationality as its foundation. Community leadership and intergenerational knowledge transfer are essential. Control over food systems is tied to autonomy, dignity, and well-being. When communities are disconnected from land-based

practices due to colonization and systemic barriers, both health and identity are impacted. Reclaiming traditional food practices becomes an act of healing and cultural renewal.

Food also carries ceremonial and spiritual meaning in many Indigenous traditions. First Foods ceremonies, for example, honor animals and plants for offering themselves as nourishment. These practices reinforce gratitude, respect, and reciprocity. In this way, food connects individuals not only to each other but to the land and to something larger than themselves (Coté, 2022). Importantly, Indigenous food practices highlight that everyone has a role and purpose within the community. Whether gathering, preparing, cooking, or sharing, each contribution matters. This shared responsibility fosters dignity, belonging, and collective care. Food becomes a lived expression of relational identity, something experienced, not simply consumed. Stajcic (2013) explains what we eat and who we eat with expresses identity, values, and belonging. Meals during holidays, gatherings, and even everyday dinners can symbolize love, grief, celebration, or connection. Food is woven into daily life in ways that are easy to overlook, yet it continues to shape how people understand themselves and their communities.

Food as Longevity

These cultural understandings of food as relational are not only historical or symbolic; they are also reflected in contemporary communities where food remains embedded in daily life. Recent studies into longevity have identified regions of the world where people consistently live longer, healthier lives. These regions, known as “Blue Zones,” include Sardinia (Italy), Ikaria (Greece), Okinawa (Japan), Nicoya (Costa Rica), and Loma Linda (California) (Buettner & Skemp, 2016). What researchers discovered is striking: only about 20% of longevity is attributed to genetics, while approximately 80% is shaped by lifestyle and environment (Buettner & Skemp, 2016). In other words, how people live matters far more than what they inherit. When

examining these communities more closely, food consistently emerges not merely as sustenance, but as relationship.

In Sardinia and Ikaria, food practices remain deeply connected to land, season, and family. Diets are largely plant-based, centered on whole grains, beans, garden vegetables, fruits, and moderate wine consumption (Buettner & Skemp, 2016). Meat is consumed sparingly, often reserved for Sundays or special occasions. In Okinawa, the practice of *hara hachi bu,* eating until 80% full, reflects not only portion control but mindfulness, patience, and communal rhythm (Buettner & Skemp, 2016). Meals are not rushed transactions, they are shared pauses in the day, as food in these regions has not been stripped of story.

Agriculture in these communities has evolved over centuries. Growing food is not solely an economic act but a cultural inheritance. Knowledge is passed down relationally; grandparents teaching grandchildren how to tend gardens, families gathering for shared meals, neighbors connected through reciprocal exchange. Even aging itself is embedded within community life. Research in the Sardinian Blue Zone found that older adults reported significantly higher psychological well-being and fewer depressive symptoms than national averages, alongside active engagement in gardening, leisure, and family life (Fastame et al., 2021). Gardening was associated with improved well-being, suggesting that food production itself contributes to mental health (Fastame et al., 2021). This is more than a nutritional phenomenon; it is relational living. In Blue Zones, Buettner and Skemp (2016) identify “Loved ones first” and “Right tribe” as core longevity factors. The elderly prioritize family meals and lifelong social circles; belonging is structured into daily life. Even children in Okinawa are placed into *moais (*small, committed social groups) at a young age, embedding relational accountability early in life (Buettner & Skemp, 2016). Food practices are interwoven in these networks.

In contrast, contemporary North American food systems have undergone significant change over the past century as agriculture has become increasingly industrialized and market-driven. Modern food production prioritizes efficiency, yield, and profitability, resulting in the widespread adoption of large-scale monocropping systems dependent on genetically modified seeds, synthetic fertilizers, and chemical pesticides. Scholars note that these industrial agricultural systems emphasize specialization and high-output production, often reducing ecological diversity and reshaping traditional food networks (Weis et al., 2016). As food systems have scaled up and supply chains have expanded, the distance between producers and consumers has also grown. Research examining urban food systems highlights a widening production–consumption gap, in which food production is increasingly separated geographically and socially from the communities that consume it (Jensen & Orfila, 2021). Writer and food systems scholar Michael Pollan (2006) argues that industrial food systems have fundamentally altered our relationship with food by shifting it from something grown and prepared within communities to something increasingly processed, packaged, and consumed with little awareness of its origins. While industrial agriculture has dramatically increased production volume, this shift has also reduced everyday proximity to food production and the knowledge embedded within it. As a result, what has been lost is not only nutrient density and food diversity, but also the relational connection between people, land, and the food that sustains them (Jensen & Orfila, 2021; Pollan, 2006; Weis et al., 2016).

In North America, the rhythm of shared meals has quietly shifted. Research examining adolescent eating patterns over time suggests that family meal frequency has declined for many youth reducing regular opportunities for shared connection around food (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2013). As meals become less routine and more fragmented, cooking traditions are less

consistently passed down between generations. What was once learned by standing beside a parent or grandparent in the kitchen is increasingly replaced by convenience, packaged foods, drive-through meals, and time-saving options that require little relational exchange. At the same time, environmental factors reinforce these shifts. Buettner and Skemp (2016) note that individuals living within close proximity to multiple fast-food outlets are significantly more likely to experience obesity, demonstrating how built environments subtly shape eating behaviors. When fast food is more accessible than fresh produce, and when schedules are crowded with competing demands, meals are more likely to be eaten quickly, individually, or in front of screens rather than around a shared table. Yet the implications extend beyond nutritional outcomes or body mass index. The deeper loss is relational and more difficult to measure. When meals disappear, shared time disappears. When cooking is outsourced, mentorship is interrupted. When food becomes convenience, it often ceases to allow for connection.

In Blue Zones, meals function as relational anchors. Elders are valued and included. Stories are exchanged. Children observe emotional regulation, conflict resolution, gratitude, and hospitality modeled around the table. Research in Sardinia suggests that strong social connectivity, community participation, and active engagement in shared life activities are associated with preserved psychological well-being (Fastame et al., 2021). In these communities, food is not isolated from mental health; it is intertwined with it. This reframes cooking and communal eating as far more than life skills. Cooking together requires cooperation, communication, and patience. Eating together creates space for eye contact, attunement, and shared experience. Gardening introduces children to the importance of care, responsibility, and interdependence. These are not peripheral outcomes; they are foundational relational capacities.

The industrialization of food in North America has created efficiency, but at a relational cost. When youth grow up without participating in food preparation, without witnessing intergenerational transmission of recipes or stories, and without experiencing regular communal meals, opportunities to build empathy and belonging diminish. What Blue Zones illustrate is that longevity is not achieved through isolated health behaviors alone; it emerges from environments where food practices sustain social bonds (Buettner & Skemp, 2016; Fastame et al., 2021). If these regions act as contemporary beacons of how humans thrive, then educational environments may have an opportunity to intentionally reintroduce communal food rhythms into youth spaces. School-based cooking programs, shared meals, and gardening initiatives may serve not simply as nutritional interventions but as relational restorations; spaces where empathy is practiced, belonging is cultivated, and community is experienced.

Food Beyond Nutrition: Rethinking "Healthy Food"

If communal food practices reveal one way of understanding food, it is important to contrast this with the dominant framework that has shaped food education in Canada. While many food programs within the education system continue to rely heavily on promoting "nutrition" as the primary lens through which students are taught to make "healthy" choices, this approach deserves deeper examination. When we ask what health actually means, and who has historically defined it, we are inevitably drawn back to one of the most influential dietary standards in Canadian history: the Canada Food Guide.

Canada's first food guide, introduced in 1942 as Canada's Official Food Rules, did not emerge simply from general concern for public well-being. It was developed during World War II, at a time when national productivity, military readiness, and wartime efficiency were paramount (Health Canada, 2019, p. 3). As Mosby (2014) explains in *Food Will Win the War*,

nutrition policy during this period was deeply intertwined with state priorities; food was framed not merely as sustenance but as a weapon of war. Canadians were told that eating properly was a patriotic duty, necessary to maintain strength for industrial production and military deployment (Mosby, 2014).

The historical context is critical. Following the Great Depression, Canada faced widespread poverty and malnutrition. Recruitment efforts during the war revealed that many young men were physically unfit for military service. Rather than addressing the structural inequalities that produced poverty and hunger, the federal government responded by standardizing what constituted a "healthy" body through national dietary rules. The 1942 Official Food Rules were designed to "improve the health of Canadians by maximizing nutrition in the context of food rationing and poverty" (Health Canada, 2019, p. 3). Yet these rules were also designed to align with food supply constraints and agricultural production realities of the time. For example, limited milk supplies meant that the Food Rules were initially based on only 70% of the established Dietary Standard (Health Canada, 2019, p. 3). In other words, health recommendations were shaped not solely by biological need, but by economic and political feasibility.

More troublingly, the scientific knowledge underpinning these policies was not ethically neutral. Between 1942 and 1952, nutrition experiments were conducted on malnourished Indigenous communities and children in residential schools without informed consent (Mosby, 2013). Researchers treated Aboriginal bodies as "experimental materials," using food deprivation and supplementation studies to test dietary interventions (Mosby, 2013, pp. 145–148). These experiments occurred during the same period that Canada was formalizing its national nutrition standards. While the Food Guide was presented as a universal path to health, its scientific

foundations were enmeshed with colonial policy, racially biased assumptions, and systemic neglect. Mosby (2013) argues that federal bureaucrats and nutrition experts increasingly viewed Indigenous communities and residential schools as laboratories through which to test theories of malnutrition and dietary reform. Yet these interventions did little to address the structural causes of hunger, including poverty, displacement, and underfunded social services. Instead, they reinforced a model of health that positioned nutrition compliance, not social justice, as the solution.

Over time, the Food Guide evolved in appearance and messaging, but its foundational structure, categorizing food into prescribed groups and portions, remained largely intact for decades (Health Canada, 2019). These standardized groupings were influenced not only by nutrient science but also by agricultural production and industry interests. Dairy, meat, and grain sectors played significant roles in shaping food availability and national policy throughout the twentieth century (Mosby, 2014). As such, what Canadians were taught to eat was never entirely separated from what Canada was positioned to produce and sell.

The influence of the Canada Food Guide extended beyond public health campaigns and into classrooms. Beginning in the 1940s, extensive educational materials, lesson plans, and national media campaigns were developed to reinforce the Food Rules (Health Canada, 2019). School-based home economics programs adopted these frameworks as foundational teaching tools. Generations of students learned to cook and plan meals according to food group quotas rather than through relational, cultural, or community-based food practices. Even in contemporary contexts, the legacy persists. The 2019 revision of Canada's Food Guide introduced new recommendations such as "Cook more often" (Laila et al., 2023), yet research shows that families face systemic barriers, including time constraints and cost of fresh foods, that

complicate this order (Laila et al., 2023). Despite decades of nutritional messaging, the structure of food education in many schools remains focused on nutrient literacy and compliance with guide-based standards rather than cultivating relational food skills or communal engagement.

This history raises important questions for educational food programs today. If the Canada Food Guide was born from wartime efficiency, shaped by agricultural economics, and informed through ethically problematic experimentation, then relying on it uncritically as the cornerstone of school food education brings reconsideration. Nutrition science is valuable, but when it becomes the sole framework, it narrows food to fuel. School food programs that emphasize portion sizes and food groups without cultivating shared cooking, storytelling, and collective preparation risk reinforcing the same limiting model that shaped the Guide's origins.

If early food policy framed eating as national duty and bodily productivity, perhaps it is time to reframe food education around relational health. Rather than teaching students primarily how to comply with food group standards, educational settings can teach how to cook together, how to gather, how to listen, and how to care through food. In this way, revisiting the history of the Canada Food Guide is not merely an academic exercise; it becomes a call to reimagine foods programs. Moving beyond a compliance-based nutritional model toward communal cooking and shared eating aligns more closely with the purpose of this capstone: to explore how cooking and eating together in community can serve as methods of healing and relational restoration for children and youth.

Cooking and Psychosocial Wellbeing

Once food is no longer viewed solely through a nutritional lens, it becomes possible to see how cooking and shared meals may support broader psychosocial and relational outcomes. Following the exploration of cultural food traditions, Blue Zone communities, and the growing

concerns surrounding social isolation, it becomes important to consider how these relational food practices translate into contemporary research. While many cultures have long understood food preparation and shared meals as activities that strengthen community bonds, recent studies are beginning to document the psychological and social benefits of cooking in more formal ways. Increasingly, research suggests that cooking is not simply a practical life skill but an activity that can support emotional well-being, confidence, and relational connection.

Farmer et al. (2018) examined these outcomes through a systematic review of cooking interventions that focused on psychosocial health. The review analyzed a range of studies in which participants engaged in structured cooking programs, often meeting regularly to prepare meals together, share food, and reflect on the experience as a group. Across these interventions, participants frequently reported improvements in mood, self-confidence, and social interaction. Cooking requires individuals to integrate cognitive, physical, and emotional processes simultaneously: planning tasks, coordinating actions, and adapting when challenges arise. These elements may help explain why cooking can support psychosocial development. As Farmer et al. (2018) note, cooking allows individuals to experience repeated opportunities for skill mastery, which can strengthen self-efficacy and personal confidence. In addition, the communal structure of many cooking programs allows participants to socialize, collaborate, and share meals, further enhancing feelings of belonging and connection.

In a later study, Farmer and Cotter (2021) further explored the relationship between cooking behavior and well-being through the lens of positive psychology. Using the PERMA framework (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) the authors found that cooking naturally incorporates many of the elements associated with psychological well-being. Preparing food requires focused engagement and creativity, while the

completion of a meal offers a tangible sense of accomplishment. Participants often reported improved mood and increased feelings of independence after engaging in cooking activities. These findings suggest that cooking may support well-being not only because of the nutritional value of food, but also because of the process of creating something meaningful through effort and collaboration.

Research involving children and youth demonstrates similar outcomes. Saxe-Custack et al. (2021) evaluated the Flint Kids Cook program, a six-week cooking and nutrition intervention designed for youth in Flint, Michigan during the city's lead-in-water public health crisis. The program combined hands-on cooking activities with nutrition education and aimed to improve children's knowledge, skills, and confidence in preparing healthy foods. Youth participants completed assessments measuring health-related quality of life before and after the program. The findings revealed significant improvements in several psychosocial domains, including emotional well-being, social functioning, and school functioning. These improvements occurred within a relatively short timeframe and were consistent across participants of different ages and backgrounds. The authors concluded that cooking programs may influence not only dietary behaviors but also broader aspects of psychosocial health among youth.

Cooking interventions have also shown promise within mental health contexts. Garcia and Privott (2023) examined the impact of meal preparation groups for an individual transitioning from long-term psychiatric hospitalization into community living. The researchers analyzed more than two hundred clinical records, including provider notes, occupational therapy documentation, and participant reflections. Across these records, participation in cooking groups was consistently associated with improvements in mood and engagement. Providers frequently noted that emotional distress observed earlier in the day improved after the participant attended

the cooking sessions. Perhaps most telling were the participant's own reflections. The participant described the cooking group as creating a sense of belonging and family, explaining, "We're like a little family…we all have our jobs to do, we all pitch in and help and then we sit down and eat together just like a family" (Garcia & Privott, 2023, p. 6). In this context, cooking became more than learning how to prepare food; it became a relational experience that helped rebuild identity, confidence, and social connection.

Recent research has also begun to conceptualize cooking more directly as a therapeutic practice. Hou et al. (2025) conducted a narrative review exploring the effects of art- and cooking-based therapies on mental health and well-being. Across the studies included in the review, cooking interventions were associated with improvements in self-esteem, emotional well-being, and mental health-related quality of life. Many of the interventions involved facilitator-led group sessions that included hands-on cooking activities, nutrition education, and communal eating. Cooking engages multiple senses simultaneously and requires focused attention on actions such as chopping, stirring, and assembling ingredients. These activities can encourage mindfulness and present-moment awareness, while the sensory qualities of food, its aromas, textures, and flavors, may stimulate positive emotional responses. According to Hou et al. (2025), cooking interventions often include "multi-sensory stimulation, increased interaction, and sharing," elements that may contribute to improved emotional well-being and social support (p. 2). Experiential learning also appears to play an important role in these outcomes. Cooking programs emphasize learning through participation rather than observation. Participants actively engage in preparing meals, solving problems, and collaborating with others to complete tasks. This process allows individuals to experience both personal accomplishment and communal

contribution. When the meal is finally shared, participants can see the tangible results of their collective effort, reinforcing a sense of competence and belonging.

Although many school food programs aim to improve children's nutrition and academic performance, they often prioritize the provision of food rather than the relational experiences that accompany food preparation. Research indicates that school food programs can increase nutritional knowledge, improve dietary intake, and support academic engagement (Colley et al., 2019; Quibrantar et al., 2025). However, when students are given opportunities to actively participate in preparing meals and eating together, additional benefits may emerge. Cooking and shared meals can create natural opportunities for communication, collaboration, and relationship building.

Failure, Learning, and Resistance

Beyond mood and social connection, cooking may also foster another important developmental capacity: resilience in the face of challenge and failure. An additional theme emerging in educational and psychological literature is the role that failure plays in learning and personal development. Although failure is often framed negatively within academic environments, research suggests that encountering and responding to failure can support the development of resilience, persistence, and adaptive learning strategies. Carol Dweck's (2017) work on mindset provides an important framework for understanding how individuals interpret and respond to challenges and setbacks. Dweck's research distinguishes between two belief systems: a fixed mindset, in which individuals believe their abilities are static and unchangeable, and a growth mindset, in which abilities are understood as qualities that can be developed through effort, learning, and support from others.

According to Dweck (2017), the mindset individuals hold significantly shapes how they respond to difficulty and failure. When people believe that their intelligence or abilities are fixed traits, failure often becomes threatening because it appears to confirm a lack of ability. In this perspective, challenges may be avoided to protect one's sense of competence. In contrast, individuals who hold a growth mindset tend to interpret setbacks as opportunities for learning and development. As Dweck explains, a growth mindset is based on the belief that "your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others" (Dweck, 2017, p. 15). Rather than interpreting mistakes as evidence of inadequacy, individuals with a growth mindset view them as part of the learning process.

Dweck's early research explored how children respond when they encounter difficult tasks. In one study, students were given increasingly challenging puzzles while researchers observed their reactions. Some children responded to difficulty with frustration and discouragement, while others appeared energized by the challenge. One student even responded enthusiastically by stating, "I love a challenge!" (Dweck, 2017, p. 12). These reactions reflected underlying beliefs about ability. Students who believed intelligence was fixed often interpreted struggle as evidence that they lacked ability, whereas students who believed intelligence could develop were more likely to remain engaged and curious. Dweck concluded that individuals with a growth mindset do not necessarily enjoy failure itself but recognize that challenges provide opportunities to learn and improve. These beliefs also influence how individuals interpret effort. Within a fixed mindset, needing to work hard may be interpreted as a sign that a person lacks ability. In contrast, a growth mindset frames effort as an essential component of learning and development. As Dweck (2017) explains, "the passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it's not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset" (p. 17). This

orientation encourages persistence in the face of setbacks and fosters resilience when individuals encounter obstacles.

Ajjawi et al. (2019) further explored how students respond to academic failure within higher education. Their study examined students who had failed at least one course but chose to continue their studies, focusing on how they adapted following the experience. Institutional data within the study indicated that academic failure is relatively common, with approximately 40% of students failing at least one course during their degree. Despite the potential discouragement associated with academic failure, many students persisted and developed new strategies for success. Through an online survey of 186 students who had experienced failure but remained in their programs, Ajjawi et al. (2019) found that students adapted through a combination of personal, relational, and institutional supports. Dispositional adaptations included changing study strategies, improving time management, and setting clearer goals. Situational adaptations often involved seeking encouragement from family members, friends, and peers. Institutional adaptations included accessing academic advising, counselling services, or learning support programs. These findings highlight that responding to failure is rarely an individual process alone; instead, it is shaped by social relationships and the support structures available within educational environments.

Relationships were particularly important in helping students reinterpret their experiences of failure. Many participants described relying on family or peers to help them regain confidence and motivation. One participant explained that their family reassured them that failure “wasn’t the end of the world” while continuing to encourage them to persist in their studies (Ajjawi et al., 2019, p. 87). This relational support helped students shift their perspective from viewing failure as a defining outcome to seeing it as a temporary setback that could be addressed through effort

and new strategies. The concept of resilience therefore emerges as an important component of learning from failure. Ajjawi et al. (2019) describe resilience as the ability to adapt and "bounce back in the face of risk and stress" (p. 89). When failure prompts reflection and adjustment rather than disengagement, it can become a catalyst for growth. Similarly, Peelo and Wareham (2002) suggest that experiences of failure may become meaningful learning opportunities when they encourage individuals to reconsider their strategies and develop new approaches.

These insights are particularly relevant when considering experiential learning environments such as cooking programs. In many traditional academic settings, failure can feel permanent because mistakes are documented through grades and evaluations. In contrast, the kitchen offers a learning environment where mistakes are expected and often easily corrected. A recipe that does not turn out as expected can be attempted again, ingredients can be adjusted, and techniques can be refined through practice. This iterative process reflects the principles of experiential learning, where knowledge develops through cycles of action, reflection, and revision (Hou et al., 2025). Within group cooking environments, failure is also often shared rather than individualized. When something does not work as expected, such as a dish burning or a recipe not rising, students can collaborate to identify what went wrong and determine how to fix it. This shared problem-solving process reduces the anxiety often associated with mistakes in academic environments and encourages persistence and teamwork. In this way, cooking activities can become spaces where resilience is practiced in real time. Students learn that mistakes are not endpoints but part of the broader process of experimentation and learning.

Seen through the lens of mindset research, cooking environments may naturally encourage growth-oriented thinking. Students can experience firsthand that improvement comes through practice, experimentation, and collaboration. Rather than confirming ability, the kitchen

becomes a place where abilities are developed. These experiences reinforce the broader themes explored throughout this chapter: that cooking and shared food preparation are not only cultural and social practices but also meaningful opportunities for learning, resilience, and connection.

Building Sites of Community

If cooking and shared food practices can support these relational and emotional capacities, then the next question becomes where such experiences might be intentionally fostered for young people today. As time spent with family members has declined and neighbourhood-based community life has shifted, schools have increasingly become central spaces where adolescents interact with peers. For many young people, school represents one of the few consistent environments where social relationships can be formed and maintained. Yet unfortunately, opportunities for meaningful connection within schools are also shrinking. Over the past several decades, educational schedules have increasingly prioritized maximizing academic instructional time. Bell schedules are carefully structured to optimize learning minutes, often leaving little room for the unstructured social interactions that historically occurred during recess, lunch, and informal gathering times. Recess periods have shortened, lunch breaks have become compressed, and time for students to simply exist together has diminished.

These structural changes are visible in everyday school experiences. In one middle school where I previously worked, the lunch schedule allowed only ten minutes for eating, followed by approximately twenty-five minutes outside. While this schedule may appear efficient from a logistical perspective, it leaves very little space for students to slow down, share meals, and connect with peers. Students rush through their food in order to maximize time outside, often eating quickly and independently rather than engaging in conversation or shared experience. Compared to earlier school structures where lunch periods allowed time for both eating and

socializing, this compressed schedule inadvertently erodes one of the few remaining daily rituals where students might gather together.

For many young people, school remains one of the few places where community can still be intentionally cultivated. This makes educational environments especially important when considering preventative and relational approaches to well-being. If schools are already central gathering places in the lives of youth, they may also be among the most accessible spaces for reintroducing communal practices that support empathy, communication, and belonging.

The Classroom as a Site of Relational Restoration

Within this broader educational context, the foods classroom emerges as a particularly promising site for reintroducing communal food practices in meaningful and accessible ways. Within this landscape of shrinking communal spaces, the foods classroom offers a unique opportunity to rebuild the kinds of social interactions that many young people are increasingly missing. As family meal times decline and opportunities for unstructured play become more limited, fewer spaces remain where children can regularly practice the relational skills that support healthy development. Foods classrooms can help fill this gap by providing a structured yet collaborative environment where students work together toward a shared goal.

Unlike many traditional academic environments that prioritize individual performance and efficiency, foods programs naturally encourage cooperative activity. Cooking is rarely an individual task; it requires communication, coordination, and shared responsibility. Students must divide tasks, ask for help, negotiate roles, and adapt when challenges arise. These collaborative processes mirror many of the developmental experiences that occur during unstructured play or family meal preparation. As students measure ingredients, chop vegetables,

and prepare dishes together, they engage in real-time problem-solving that requires listening, compromise, and cooperation.

In foods classrooms, students witness how peers communicate, negotiate disagreements, and support one another when difficulties arise. These interactions allow students to observe relational behaviours and practice them in a safe, communal space. When a group works together to troubleshoot a recipe that is not turning out as expected or coordinate tasks in a busy kitchen, students are engaging in collaborative problem-solving similar to the interactions that occur during play or family activities. In addition to providing opportunities for cooperation and modeling, the foods classroom also recreates one of the most significant social rituals that has declined in many households: the shared meal.

As students move from preparing food together to sitting down and eating as a group, the classroom temporarily becomes a communal table. These moments allow students to slow down, talk with one another, and experience the simple act of gathering around food. Conversation often emerges naturally as students reflect on the cooking process, share stories, or celebrate the success of a meal they created together. In this sense, foods classrooms can offer more than instruction in culinary techniques or nutritional knowledge. They create environments where students can practice empathy, patience, and collaboration while working toward a shared outcome. These experiences mirror many of the relational learning opportunities that historically occurred within families and neighbourhood play environments but are becoming less common in modern childhood.

Communal food practices within schools also have the potential to address some of the relational gaps created by the loss of shared family meals and reduced time for social play. By cooking and eating together, students are given opportunities to practice communication,

navigate challenges collaboratively, and experience belonging within a group. In a time when loneliness and social disconnection are increasingly recognized as pressing concerns, foods classrooms may serve as important spaces where young people can rebuild the social skills, empathy, and relational bonds that support both personal well-being and healthy communities.

Summary

The research explored throughout this chapter reveals that food has long held significance far beyond the role of physical nourishment. Across cultures, historical contexts, and contemporary research, food practices consistently emerge as relational experiences that shape connection, identity, and community life. Whether through the communal meals of Mennonite communities, Indigenous food sovereignty practices rooted in land and reciprocity, or the everyday shared meals found within Blue Zone regions, cooking and eating together have historically functioned as spaces where relationships are nurtured and social bonds are strengthened.

At the same time, this chapter highlights how many of these relational food practices have gradually shifted within modern societies. Increasingly busy schedules, industrialized food systems, and changing family routines have contributed to a decline in shared meals and communal cooking experiences. As opportunities for everyday connection diminish, many young people are growing up with fewer structured spaces where empathy, communication, and cooperation can naturally develop. Research on loneliness, social isolation, and youth mental health suggests that the absence of meaningful relational environments may carry significant consequences for emotional well-being and social development.

Within this context, cooking and shared food preparation begin to appear not only as practical life skills, but as meaningful relational practices. Studies examining cooking programs and communal food experiences demonstrate that these activities can support psychosocial well-being by fostering confidence, emotional regulation, collaboration, and a sense of belonging. The kitchen, when approached intentionally, becomes a space where individuals engage in shared work, practice communication, and experience the satisfaction of contributing to something larger than themselves.

Importantly, this chapter also raises questions about how food has been framed within many educational systems. Historical influences such as the development of the Canada Food Guide positioned food primarily through a nutritional and productivity lens. While nutrition education remains valuable, focusing exclusively on nutrient intake risks overlooking the relational and communal aspects of food that have historically supported connection and well-being. Reframing food education to include shared preparation, storytelling, and communal eating offers the possibility of restoring these relational dimensions within contemporary learning environments.

Taken together, the literature suggests that food practices have the potential to function as powerful relational tools. Cooking and eating together create opportunities for individuals to experience cooperation, empathy, and shared accomplishment in ways that are both accessible and meaningful. In a time when loneliness and disconnection are increasingly recognized as pressing social concerns, these everyday practices may offer simple yet profound pathways for rebuilding connection.

If the previous chapters have explored *why* food and shared meals matter, the next chapter turns toward *how* these insights might be put into practice. Drawing on both the research presented here and my own experience teaching a middle school foods program, Chapter 3 explores practical ways that cooking and shared meals can be intentionally integrated within educational environments. In doing so, it considers how the classroom kitchen might once again become a place where young people gather, contribute, and experience what it means to belong around a shared table.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary

As explored throughout the previous chapters, food holds significant power, not only to nourish the body but to connect people, build community, and support emotional well-being. Chapter 2 demonstrated that across cultures and historical contexts, food practices have consistently functioned as relational anchors. Whether through the communal food traditions of Mennonite communities, the relational food systems within Indigenous food sovereignty practices, or the shared meals that characterize Blue Zone regions, food has historically been embedded within social relationships and community life. These practices emphasize that food is rarely meant to be experienced in isolation. Instead, cooking and eating together have traditionally created opportunities for mentorship, storytelling, shared responsibility, and belonging. Through these processes, individuals learn to cooperate, communicate, and care for one another. However, as modern life has become increasingly fast-paced and individualized, many of these communal rhythms have shifted. Family meals have declined in frequency, and opportunities for unstructured social interaction among youth have decreased (Harrison et al., 2015; Videon & Manning, 2003). In many cases, food has been reframed primarily as fuel, something consumed quickly and individually rather than experienced collectively.

Schools have simultaneously become one of the few consistent environments where young people gather regularly. Within this context, foods classrooms offer unique opportunities to reintroduce communal food practices that foster relational connection and emotional well-being. The recommendations presented in this chapter are informed both by the research discussed in Chapter 2 and by my own experience teaching a middle school foods program. Together, these perspectives suggest that cooking and eating together within school

environments can provide meaningful opportunities for youth to build confidence, develop relational skills, and experience belonging.

Reimagining the Foods Classroom

Over the last seven years, I had the privilege of teaching an ADST Foods program for students in grades six through eight in Chilliwack, British Columbia. When I first began teaching the program, I had a clear idea of what I hoped the classroom would become. I wanted to create a safe space where students could learn about the importance of food and develop foundational life skills that would support them beyond the classroom. At its core, the program was intended to teach practical skills. Students learned about kitchen safety, nutrition, food preparation, and the processes involved in creating meals from scratch. These outcomes aligned with the curriculum expectations for foods education and reflected the traditional goals of many home economics programs. However, it did not take long before I began to realize that the foods classroom had the potential to be something far more significant.

For many students, cooking offered something that traditional academic environments often struggled to provide: a sense of agency. The act of preparing food required focus, patience, and cooperation. Students worked in groups to divide tasks, coordinate timing, and solve problems when recipes did not go as planned. Unlike many classroom assignments, the outcome of their work was tangible and immediate. When a dish turned out well, students could see and taste the results of their effort. Equally important, when something went wrong, it rarely felt catastrophic. If a recipe failed, it could often be adjusted or started again. Mistakes became learning opportunities rather than permanent marks on a report card. This flexibility created an environment where students felt comfortable taking risks and trying new things.

Over time, I began to intentionally shift the focus of the classroom away from simply producing a final product and toward valuing the process of cooking itself. Rather than emphasizing perfection in the finished dish, I encouraged students to pay attention to the relationships and interactions that occurred along the way. Students learned to communicate clearly with one another, share responsibilities, and support teammates when challenges arose. They developed patience as they waited for bread to rise or soup to simmer. They learned to listen to different ideas when disagreements emerged over how to complete a task. Gradually, the foods classroom began to feel less like a traditional academic space and more like a community. Students who had been told in other contexts that they were not successful learners often found themselves thriving in the kitchen. Some demonstrated creativity in adapting recipes, while others became natural leaders when coordinating group tasks. Many students discovered confidence simply through contributing to the shared goal of preparing a meal.

It was within this environment that my own aspirations to pursue counselling began to take shape. Students frequently opened up while we worked together in the kitchen. Conversations often emerged naturally while washing dishes, folding laundry, or preparing ingredients. Without the pressure of direct eye contact or formal discussion, students sometimes found it easier to talk about their experiences, concerns, and relationships. At lunch, many students chose to remain in the classroom rather than leaving immediately after eating. They stayed to help clean up, assist with preparations for the next class, or simply spend time talking with one another. Students from other classes occasionally stopped by and asked if they could help as well. What had begun as a foods program gradually evolved into a space where students felt welcome and connected.

Communication and Collaboration in the Kitchen

As the program evolved, I began incorporating reflective activities that encouraged students to explore their personal relationships with food. One activity (see Appendix A) asked students to consider the question: *What is your relationship with food?* Students were invited to express their responses through drawings, emojis, or written reflections. For some students, food represented comfort or celebration. Others described it as routine or necessity. A few expressed more complicated feelings related to family dynamics or cultural identity. This activity helped students recognize that food is not simply a biological need. It is deeply connected to memory, emotion, and personal experience.

Students later participated in a Food Story Assignment (see Appendix B), a pre-developed lesson that can be effectively integrated into existing foods programs. In this activity, students explored how family traditions, cultural practices, and childhood experiences shaped their relationship with food. Many students shared meaningful memories connected to specific meals or family gatherings. Some spoke about recipes passed down through generations, while others described foods that reminded them of particular people or events in their lives. These reflections echoed ideas discussed in Chapter 2, where scholars such as Freedman (2021) highlight how food plays a significant role in shaping identity and memory. Through storytelling and reflection, students began to understand that food carries meaning beyond nutrition.

Another assignment invited students to develop their own Food Philosophy (see Appendix C), a pre-developed lesson that can be meaningfully integrated into existing foods programs. In this activity, students reflected on how their values, experiences, and beliefs influenced the way they approached food. Some focused on cultural traditions, while others discussed ethical choices, environmental concerns, or personal health goals. These activities

encouraged students to think critically about food and recognize that the choices they make around food are often shaped by larger social, cultural, and environmental influences.

In addition to reflective assignments, I introduced activities designed to strengthen communication and teamwork among students. One activity (see Appendix D) focused on demonstrating how easily misunderstandings can occur when communication is unclear. Students worked in pairs and attempted to complete tasks by following verbal instructions from a partner. The exercise quickly revealed how important clarity, patience, and listening are when working together. Students often laughed at the unexpected outcomes of the activity, but the lesson was clear: effective kitchens depend on strong communication. Another activity, called the Kitchen Survival Challenge (see Appendix E**)**, presented students with common kitchen dilemmas. Working in small groups, students were asked to analyze scenarios such as forgetting an important ingredient, losing access to the oven halfway through cooking, or managing disagreements between team members. Each group identified the problem, brainstormed possible solutions, and decided together on the best course of action. Afterward, groups shared their ideas with the class and reflected on how their decision-making process unfolded. These exercises reinforced the idea that cooking is rarely an individual task. Success in the kitchen depends on collaboration, flexibility, and mutual support.

The skills students practiced through these activities align closely with the relational learning processes described in Chapter 2. Social learning theory suggests that individuals often acquire communication and interpersonal skills through observation and shared activity rather than direct instruction (Bandura, 1977). When students collaborate on meaningful tasks, they naturally develop abilities such as perspective-taking, problem-solving, and emotional regulation (Denham et al., 2018). Cooking provided an ideal context for these experiences.

Perhaps the most meaningful moments occurred after the cooking was finished. When students sat down together to eat the food they had prepared, the pace of the classroom changed. The rush of preparation gave way to conversation and reflection. Students passed dishes across the table, complimented one another's work, and shared stories from their lives. These moments closely resembled the communal food practices described in the research literature. Studies consistently show that shared meals provide opportunities for communication, emotional support, and relationship-building among young people (Harrison et al., 2015; Walton et al., 2016). Within the foods classroom, the shared meal became a daily ritual that allowed students to experience these relational benefits. Students lingered longer than expected. Conversations often continued well beyond the meal itself. What might have appeared to outsiders as a simple classroom activity gradually became something deeper: a space where students could gather, contribute, and belong.

Implications for Schools and Counselling Practice

The experiences described above suggest that foods classrooms hold significant potential as relational environments within schools. While traditional food education programs often emphasize nutrition or vocational skills, the process of cooking and eating together can also support important social and emotional outcomes. Collaborative cooking activities encourage communication, empathy, and cooperation. Shared meals create opportunities for conversation and connection.

For school counsellors, cooking-based interventions may offer an accessible and engaging way to support students who struggle with traditional talk-based therapy. The sensory and hands-on nature of cooking can promote mindfulness, emotional regulation, and self-confidence. Programs that incorporate cooking and shared meals into counselling practice may

provide valuable opportunities for students to experience belonging and develop relational skills in supportive environments.

Future Directions

While existing research highlights the psychosocial benefits of cooking programs, further studies are needed to examine how these interventions function within school settings.

Future research might explore questions such as:

- How do school-based cooking programs influence student mental health and well-being?
- What impact do communal cooking experiences have on peer relationships and empathy?
- How can culturally responsive food programming support identity development among youth?
- What role might cooking therapy play in trauma-informed educational environments?

Investigating these questions may help educators and counsellors better understand how communal food practices can be used intentionally to support youth development.

Returning to the Table

At the beginning of this capstone, I invited the reader to imagine approaching a table. It was a table where a place had already been set. A table where nourishment was offered freely and where belonging did not have to be earned before the meal began. Throughout this project, research and experience have pointed toward the same conclusion: food has always had the capacity to create spaces where people gather, connect, and care for one another. In many ways, the foods classroom began to resemble that table. Students gathered to prepare meals together. They shared responsibilities, navigated challenges, and celebrated successes. They sat down to

eat the food they had created and, in doing so, experienced something that extended beyond the recipe itself.

They experienced community.

In a world where many young people report increasing loneliness and disconnection, creating spaces where students can cook, share meals, and build relationships may offer a small but meaningful way to restore some of the relational rhythms that once existed around the table. Perhaps what young people need most is not simply instruction in how to cook. Perhaps they need an invitation.

An invitation to gather.

An invitation to contribute.

An invitation to belong.

An invitation back to the table.

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Appendix A

In a relationship with food ❤

Whether or not you realize it, you have a relationship with food that has been developed over the course of your childhood. Things that can have a dramatic effect on this relationship include: family, lifestyle, where you live and even social media. One of our main goals with this Foods class is to make sure that when you leave Mount Slesse, you have a positive relationship with food – and I understand that for some this might be difficult –but let's give it a go! (Remember that this is just a start...and your relationship will change as you change)

"Perhaps the most intimate relationship each of us will ever have is not with any fellow member of our own human species. Instead, it is between our bodies and our food."
Scientific American, September 2013

We have had a chance to talk about many things about making food, and even remember some of our earliest memories involving food. So now comes the big question: What is your own relationship to food?

Use the box below to try to answer this question (it's a BIG one) using whatever you feel comfortable using (drawing, emoji's, words)

Appendix B

My Food Story Package

Name: _____ Date: _____

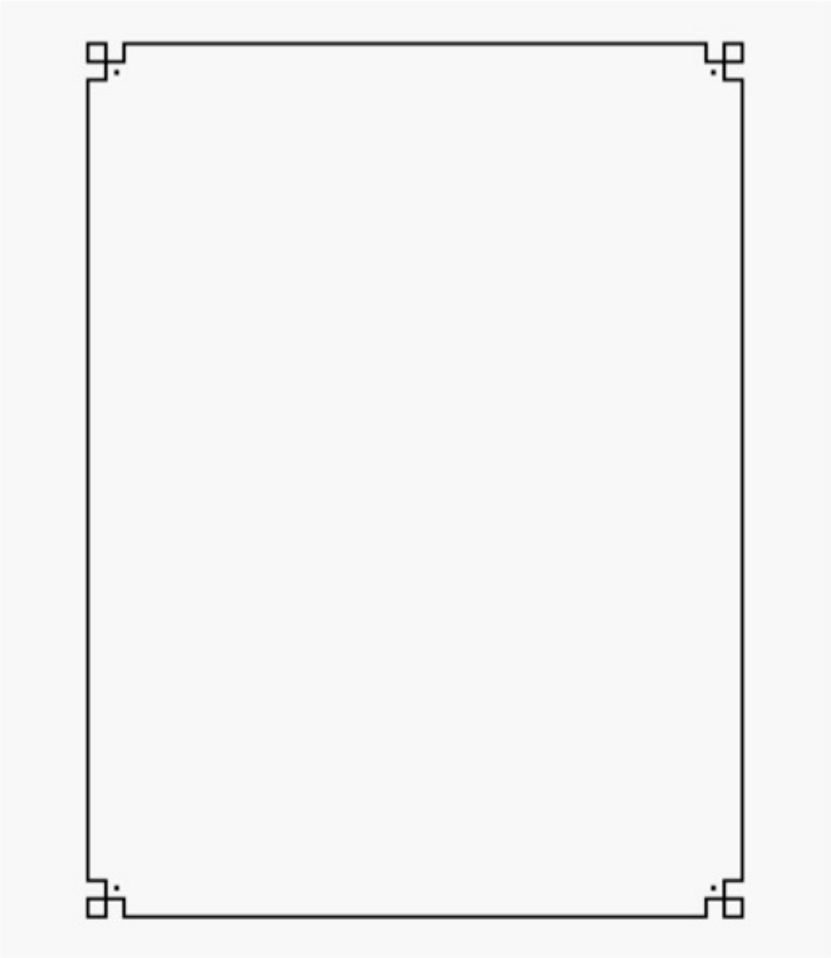
Everyone has a relationship with food, and it's through this relationship that we tend to make choices regarding what we eat and how much we enjoy it. This relationship is deeply defined by our own food stories: things that we remember from our childhood, food that is celebrated in our cultures, understanding our place and what that means for our food, and recognizing how our food even came to be in our favorite foods. This food story will change as you grow, but it's important to start to see how food is connected to us, and ensure that this relationship is a positive one in your years to come.

In this package we will be developing your food story. I encourage you to answer honestly and openly (which can be scary, I get it). Here is what you will be asked to do:

1. Create a title page (this can be anything in relation to food and you)
2. Complete the following Activities
    a. Food: What I think
    b. Connecting with Food: My Food Memory Bank
    c. Food Landscape
    d. Food and Culture
    e. Our Place, Our Growth
3. Create a Food Mural using the First Nations Medicine Wheel
4. Write/Print a favorite recipe
5. Write/represent your Food Story

At the end of this journey, I would encourage you to share with others in the class a little about what you might have learned, or even what you already knew in regards to your food story. We will have time on our final day in this unit to openly

share, and I would ask that you bring a food item that plays a part in your food story (it can be raw or cooked, a seasoning or sauce).



My Food Story:

Date: _____

Food: What I think…

Write down the first thing that comes to mind when you read the following words or sentences…

1. Food is: _____
2. Food grows:
   _____
3. Food gives: _____
4. Food allows us to:
   _____
5. Food tastes:
   _____
6. Food creates:
   _____
7. Food destroys:
   _____
8. Food costs:
   _____
9. Food smells:
   _____

10. **When I think of food, I think of:**

_____

_____

_____

Thoughts and Doodles…  

At the end of everyday, we will end off with a chance for you to draw, doodle, ask questions or just write words that you felt during the class.

Day 1: What is Food to you?	Day 2: Connecting with Food	Day 3: Growing Food

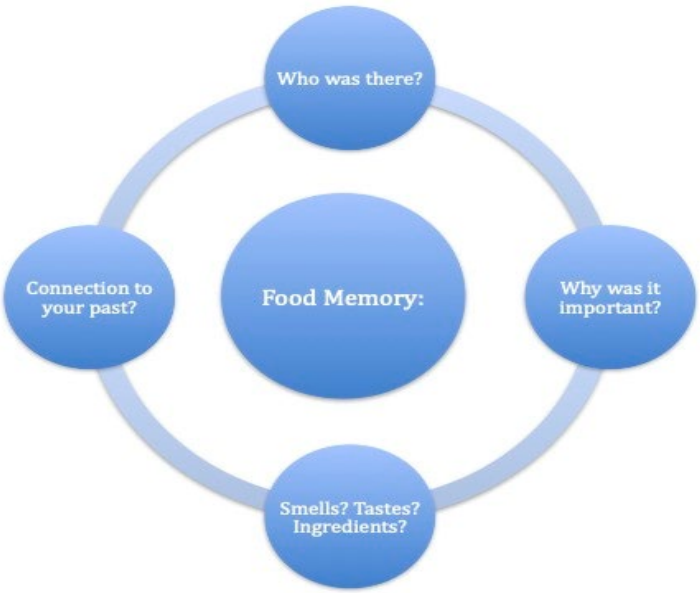
Day 4: Food & Culture	Day 5: Our Place, Our Food	Extra:

My Food Memory Bank:

Memory Description:

_____

_____



Appendix C

My Food Philosophy

A philosophy is a set of rules that guide your life. A food philosophy is an expression of how choose to eat what you eat, and what influences you have had on your opinion/behavior/attitude towards food.

Using the activities completed within this package, as well as your own experiences with food, you will now be asked to write out your current philosophy on food. Every philosophy will be different – as you are all unique, so I ask that you answer the following questions with honest responses. Remember that this story will change, so we are not aiming for perfection, just a start.

Please start with answering the questions below (point form)

You are welcome to represent your food philosophy in ways other than writing (poem, drawing, comic, etc.) but it must somehow connect back to you and what you believe.

****

Questions to start with:

1. What role does food have in your life (just for keeping alive, or something you enjoy):

2. Is food important to your family/home? (why or why not)

3. How do you choose what to eat?

4. How have you grown? Has food played a part in the journey to who you are now?

Still stuck?!? Come and see me!!

Appendix D

Activity 1 – "Drawing Directions" (Communication Exercise)

Time: 15 minutes

Purpose:

Working in a kitchen requires clear communication, patience, and teamwork. This activity will help you practice giving clear instructions and listening carefully, just like you would when working with a cooking partner.

Materials:

- 2 blank pieces of paper per pair & Pencils/Pens

Partner Roles:

Students will work in **pairs**.

- **Person A** – the **drawer**
- **Person B** – the **direction giver**

Each partner should have **one piece of paper**.

Round 1 – Eyes Open Drawing

Instructions

1. **Person A closes their eyes** while the teacher draws a simple picture on the board (for example: a star, heart, sailboat, or house).
2. Once the drawing is finished, **Person A opens their eyes**, but **must NOT look at the board**.

3. **Person B looks at the board** and gives instructions so Person A can copy the drawing.

Important Rules

Person B must describe the drawing using only:

- Shapes
- Line directions
- Position (top, middle, bottom)
- Size and spacing

**** **Do NOT say what the object is** (for example, do not say "draw a boat").

1. Person A draws the picture using only the directions given.

Switch Roles

- Now **Person B becomes the drawer**.
- **Person A becomes the direction giver**.
- The teacher will draw a **new picture** on the board.

Class Discussion

After both partners have had a turn, we will discuss:

- What instructions worked well?
- What made the drawing difficult?
- How did tone and patience affect communication?
- What strategies helped your partner understand you?

Round 2 – Eyes Closed Challenge

This time the challenge is harder!

1. Partners repeat the activity.
2. The **drawer must keep their eyes closed while drawing**.
3. Direction givers must use **clearer and more detailed instructions**.

Final Reflection

Think about these questions:

- Did communication improve the second time?
- What strategies helped the most?
- How did you change your instructions?
- Why is clear communication important when working in a kitchen?

Foods Class Connection

When cooking in groups, strong communication helps you:

- Follow recipes correctly
- Avoid mistakes
- Work safely in the kitchen
- Support your teammates

Good communication leads to successful teamwork — and better food!

Appendix E

Activity 2 – "Kitchen Survival Challenge" (Problem Solving Exercise)

Purpose: This activity focuses on **problem-solving together, listening to others, and valuing everyone's ideas**.

Time: 15 minutes

Instructions: Students work in **groups of 3–4**. Each group receives a **kitchen challenge scenario**.

Examples:

- Your group forgot an important ingredient for a recipe.
- The oven stops working halfway through cooking.
- One partner finishes their job early while another is overwhelmed.
- Two group members disagree about how to complete a step.

1. Groups discuss and decide:
    - What the **problem** is
    - **Three possible solutions**
    - The **best solution as a team**
1. Groups share their solution with the class.

Discussion Questions

- Did everyone in your group feel heard?
- What helped your group come to a decision?
- How do disagreements affect teamwork in a kitchen?

Foods Classroom Connection

Cooking labs require students to:

- Communicate respectfully
- Solve problems quickly
- Support teammates when challenges happen

Good teamwork helps the kitchen run smoothly.