

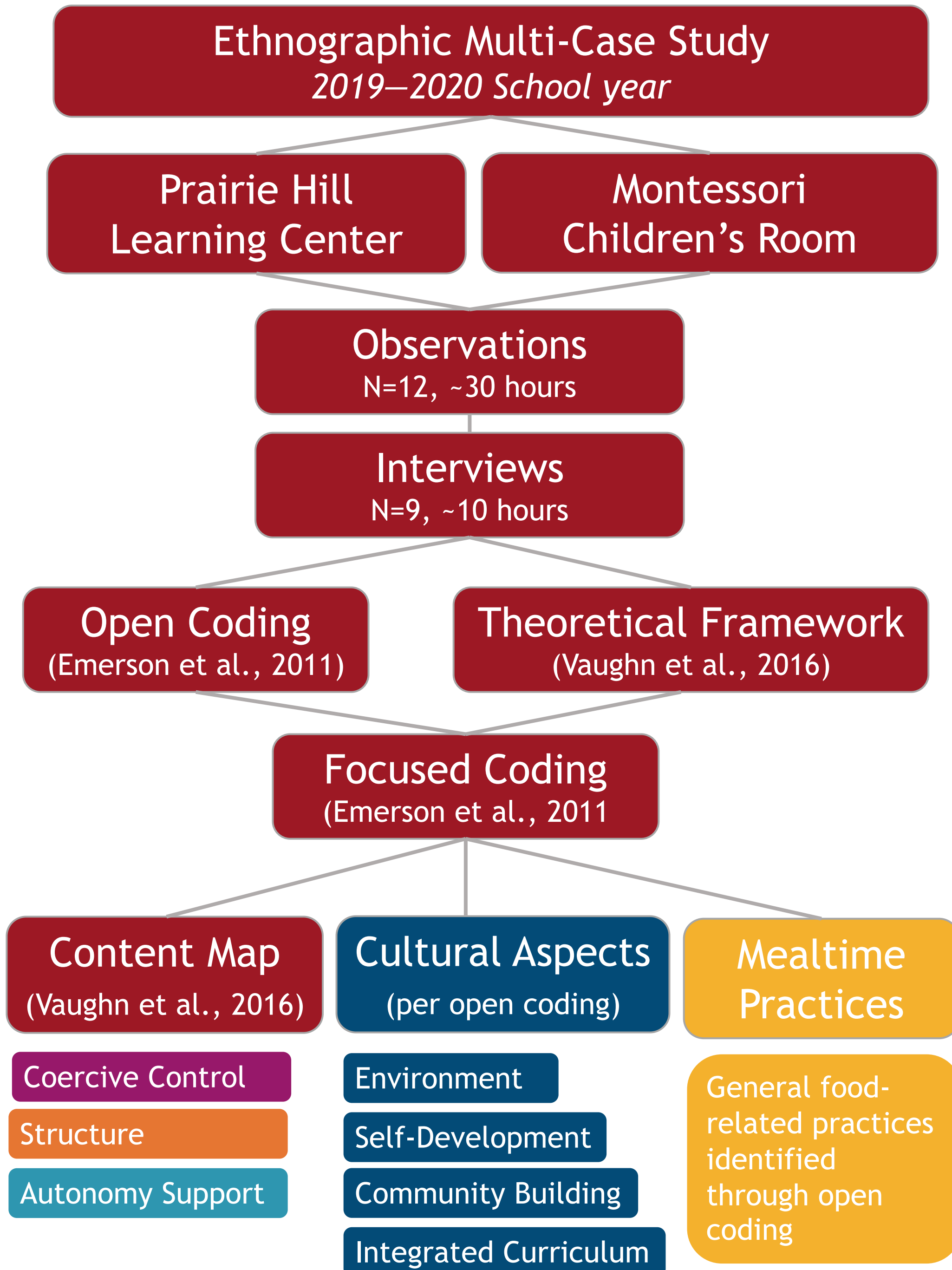
Exploring Mealtime Environments in Montessori Early Childhood Learning Centers

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Child, Youth and Family Studies



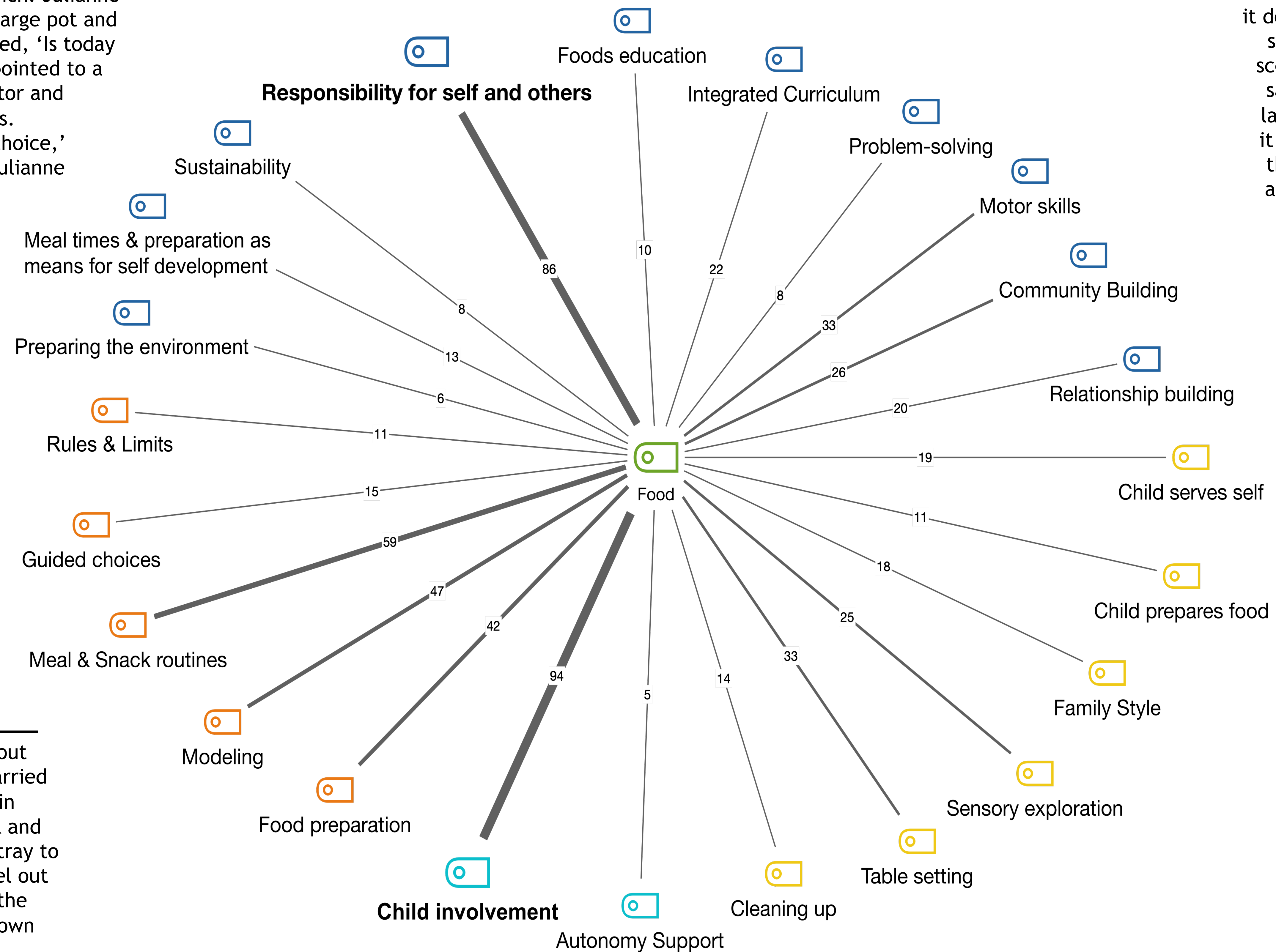
Methods



Code Co-occurrence Model (Code Intersection)

Vanessa followed Julianne (the guide) as she moved about the kitchen area, watching her as she continued preparing lunch. Julianne drained the carrots from the large pot and spoke to Vanessa. Vanessa asked, 'Is today Sunday?' 'Monday?' Julianne pointed to a paper posted on the refrigerator and they discussed the menu items. Vanessa asked about 'Cook's choice,' an item listed on the menu. Julianne offered an explanation. Vanessa asked, "Can we have [inaudible]? We haven't had it in a long time." Julianne responded in Spanish, then repeated in English, "Maybe you and I could plan it together." Vanessa answered, "I would like that."
-Prairie Hill, Farmhouse Community (3-6 years)

Nancy used the tongs to dish out pretzels onto the tray then carried it over to the table, checked in with a friend, then went back and added more. She carried the tray to the table and laid each pretzel out on a napkin before returning the tray to the shelf and sitting down to eat.
-Montessori Children's Room, Primary Room (3-6 years)



Ava spoke, "Peez pass the fruit salad." The fruit salad was passed and Ava took the dish, lifting it over to the left side and set it down. Holding the large spoon, she deftly scooped out one, and then another, large scoop of fruit into her dish. "Banana," she said aloud as she did so. Then she set the large spoon back into the dish and pushed it toward the middle of the table. Holding the fork in a fist, she stabbed at the fruit and lifted it into her mouth. -Prairie Hill, Youngest Community (18 mos. - 3 years)

"Who wants to have a veggie tasting party?" The teacher asked with excitement in her voice. The children responded with enthusiasm. The teacher then asked the children to name a vegetable they might have at the tasting party. Several children raised their hands. She called on one child near her, and he shared an idea. "Raise your hand if you've tried..." repeating the vegetable suggested by the child. Taking turns, the children offered ideas—radishes, lettuce, onion, spinach, cauliflower, green beans, brussel sprouts, carrots, mushrooms, beets, peas, eggplant, red peppers—after which all the children in the circle responds by raising their hand if they had tried it. "Can you think of an interesting vegetable?" she asked one child. He responded, "green beans." "Who has tried green beans?" She asked the group. Several hands shot up and with teacher and children murmuring, "soooo good," "my favorite!"
-Montessori Children's Room, Primary Room (3-6 years)

Participating Schools

Prairie Hill Learning Center

Location: prairies of southeast Nebraska
Years of operation: 42 years
Ages served: 1.5 to 15 years in 5 communities
Number of children: 100 (approximate)
Accreditation/Training: Guides are trained in Montessori practices; the learning center is accredited by the state of Nebraska

We gratefully acknowledge this school for their participation.

Montessori Children's Room

Location: urban city of southeast Nebraska
Years of operation: 43 years
Ages served: 2.5 to 12 years in 8 classrooms
Number of children: 152
Accreditation/Training: Teachers are primarily trained through the school's accreditation organization, the American Montessori Society

We gratefully acknowledge this school for their participation.

Summary & Future Directions

Prairie Hill Learning Center

Mealtimes and meal preparation constitute a vast part of the school's culture and daily interactions, with the greatest emphasis in the youngest community (18 mos-3 years) and becoming less prominent in the older communities. Food-related interactions are a conduit for relationship and community building, self-development (e.g., regulatory control, consideration for others), and—in the younger communities—curricular integration (e.g., language, math, motor development). Overall, the interactions demonstrate the school's high emphasis on promoting autonomy and interdependence.

Montessori Children's Room

Although taking responsibility for self, caring for others, and structure were important areas of emphasis in this school, food interactions were not a significant mechanism by which these characteristics were encouraged (approximately 8% of the coded segments were attributed to this school). However, this school also encouraged healthful eating practices by promoting child choice, child involvement and snack preparation, and directly linking meals to original food sources through a school vegetable and herb garden.

Conclusions & Future Research

This study illustrates unique cultural practices in Montessori environments that emphasize child involvement in mealtime practices and meal preparation. Importantly, these practices provided a means for holistic development among the children, in personal and social ways, beyond healthful eating practices. As this was part of a larger ethnographic study, food-related interactions were not intentionally studied during observations or discussed during interviews. Future research in these environments will provide additional insight into mealtime interactions between adults and children.