NEGOTIATING CHILDHOOD NUTRITION IN THE CLASSROOM:
PRESCHOOL TEACHERS’ NUTRITION EDUCATION STRATEGIES

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Anthropology

by
Elizabeth M. Herlihy
Spring 2012
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of Elizabeth M. Herlihy:

Negotiating Childhood Nutrition in the Classroom: Preschool Teachers’ Nutrition

Education Strategies

Elisa Sobo, Chair
Department of Anthropology

Frederick Conway
Department of Anthropology

Patricia Geist-Martin
School of Communication

12/7/2011
Approval Date
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all future graduate students who have no idea what they are getting themselves into.
Teachers play a crucial role in providing food-and-eating messages to children as part of nutrition education programs that have been instituted nationwide as a way to increase school accountability for the growing problems of childhood malnourishment, diabetes, and obesity. In crafting and conveying these messages, teachers must navigate, and bring together in a locally logical way, government and institution mandates, their personal beliefs and cultural backgrounds, student diversity, and the classroom food environment. This also includes the children themselves, who are of varied weights and sizes and come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and so have a variety of ideas about food. Educators therefore may teach healthy eating in environments that may complement or contradict, as well as call forth, particular messages. While various public health studies have explored the ramifications for child health of particular aspects of the classroom, little research has characterized the enacted strategies by which teachers navigate their complex work environments to actualize healthy eating mandates. For this, ethnographically informed methods are needed. By observing the preschool classes at the SDSU Children’s Center and conducting open ended interviews and a data review focus group with teachers and administration regarding nutrition education, this research will begin to fill this gap and it will do so in a way that will aid teachers elsewhere in addressing the contradiction that may exist between what is said and what is done in the classroom.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**PAGE**

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................... v  
LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................... ix  
LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................ x  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..................................................................................................... xi  

## CHAPTER

1  INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................... 1  
2  LITERATURE REVIEW .............................................................................................. 4  
   Childhood Nutrition Education ................................................................. 5  
   Government and Institutional Mandates ................................................. 6  
   Classroom Food Environments .............................................................. 7  
   Class Composition ..................................................................................... 8  
   Teacher Characteristics ........................................................................... 9  
   Hierarchy ........................................................................................................ 10  
   Negotiating Nutrition Education ........................................................... 11  
3  THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ............................................................................ 13  
4  METHODS ............................................................................................................. 16  
   Setting Overview ....................................................................................... 16  
   Participant Selection ................................................................................. 17  
   Children’s Center Description ............................................................... 18  
   Classroom Description ........................................................................... 21  
   Daily Schedule .......................................................................................... 25  
   Educators .................................................................................................... 27  
   Training ....................................................................................................... 30  
   Food and Nutrition Program ................................................................. 30  
   Formative Data Collection ..................................................................... 31  
   Healthy Messages Checklist .................................................................... 31  
   Setting Description Record .................................................................... 31
Initial Observation ..................................................................................................................32
Summative Data Collection ....................................................................................................32
Initial Interviews ......................................................................................................................32
In-Class Observation ...............................................................................................................33
Somatotype Assignment ........................................................................................................33
Document Review .....................................................................................................................34
Follow-up Interviews ..............................................................................................................34
Focus Group ...........................................................................................................................34
Data Analysis ..........................................................................................................................35

5 LUNCHTIME AT THE CENTER ..........................................................................................36
   The Experience of Lunchtime ..........................................................................................36
   The Meaning Behind Mealtime .......................................................................................46
   Tensions in the Data ............................................................................................................49

6 HEALTHY LIVING IN ACTION .....................................................................................51
   Experiments .........................................................................................................................51
   Home Living ..........................................................................................................................54
   Food Tastings ........................................................................................................................56
   Physical Activity ..................................................................................................................57
   Gardening .............................................................................................................................58
   Cooking Projects ..................................................................................................................60
   Tensions in the Data ............................................................................................................61

7 CENTER POLICIES .........................................................................................................63
   Nut Free Policy .....................................................................................................................63
   Celebration Policy ...............................................................................................................68
       Eliminating Consumption, Materialism, and Competition .............................................72
       Closing the Economic Gap .........................................................................................73
       Teacher’s Reflections ......................................................................................................73
   Tensions in the Data ............................................................................................................75

8 RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCES .....................................................................................76
   Self-Reflection .......................................................................................................................77
   Body Ownership ....................................................................................................................79
   Our Bodies at Lunch .............................................................................................................81
Food Restriction ................................................................. 82
Adult Perceptions .............................................................. 87
Tensions in the Data .......................................................... 89
9 THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL VIEWS ............................... 90
   Students ............................................................................. 90
   Teachers ............................................................................ 91
   Parents ............................................................................. 92
   Tensions in the Data ........................................................ 94
10 DISCUSSION ........................................................................ 96
11 CONCLUSION ..................................................................... 104
REFERENCES ........................................................................ 106
APPENDICES
   A RESEARCH Q&A NOTICE ................................................. 118
   B RESEARCH INVITATION LETTER ........................................ 120
   C CENTER MENU ............................................................... 122
   D INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE ............................................. 127
   E SOMATOTYPE EXERCISE ............................................... 130
   F FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS GUIDE ........ 133
   G NUT FREE POLICY NOTICE ............................................ 138
   H CELEBRATION POLICY NOTICE ..................................... 142
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE

Table 1. Dimensions of Empowerment ..................................................................................98
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The SDSU Children’s Center .................................................................17
Figure 2. Children’s Center lobby .................................................................19
Figure 3. Children’s Center kitchen area .........................................................19
Figure 4. Memory Park ..............................................................................20
Figure 5. Children’s Center community garden ........................................21
Figure 6. Preschool classroom announcement boards ................................22
Figure 7. Preschool classroom ....................................................................23
Figure 8. Home living area .........................................................................24
Figure 9. Circle time area ...........................................................................25
Figure 10. Children’s Center library ............................................................25
Figure 11. Childcare Center staff organization ..........................................29
Figure 12. Somatotype images ....................................................................85
Figure 13. Teacher identified student somatotypes ......................................86
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge everyone that helped make this thesis what it is. First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis committee. Dr. Geist-Martin, you encouraged me to look at my research from different angles and in doing so helped bring forth some of my richest data. Dr. Conway, you so skillfully walk the line between thoughtful criticism and unflagging support. You have encouraged me to make my work applicable outside of the field and have shown me the value of applied anthropology. Dr. Sobo, we have had a long and involved journey together. You helped me develop my understanding of and appreciation for anthropology, guided my research interests, and pushed me to do more than I ever thought myself capable. You have made me a better student, writer, lecturer, and anthropologist, and for all those things, I am eternally grateful. It is your collective support and guidance that helped me produce a thesis I am truly proud of.

I owe a huge thank you to the SDSU Children’s Center. The students, staff, faculty, and parents were all so incredibly welcoming and helpful. They dedicated their time and energy to helping me collect invaluable data and instantly made me part of their community. I can only hope that, as I move forward with this research, I can give back to them for everything they did for me.

I also want to thank my family for answering every phone call, no matter what time of day. From “What’s the word I’m thinking?” to “I want to quit grad school,” you were always on the other line with a positive word. Knowing you all had my back throughout this process helped me keep going. My behind the scene mentors; Kathy, Maren, Seth, Hailee, Shelby, and Trudi, you all let me have my mental breakdowns and were there to pick me back up. I will never stop being grateful for your support. Finally, I want to thank all my friends and fellow graduate students; your dedication to understanding the human experience through anthropology is inspiring. I am a lucky person to have you all as colleagues.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Rates of childhood obesity in America are rapidly increasing. Healthy eating education and the development of healthy living skills early in life is imperative; preschools are in a prime position to influence eating behaviors and spread healthy living knowledge as preschool aged children spend the majority of their day in childcare settings and thus consume the majority of their calories at these centers (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2002; Wechsler et al. 2001). Development of healthy eating skills in early childhood can produce lifelong eating habits that might stem obesity, thereby preventing the many diseases and illnesses associated with it. Teachers play a crucial role in delivering food-and-eating messages to children as part of nutrition education programs; they have the potential to provide children with the experience and knowledge necessary to empower them to make their own healthy choices.

In developing strategies and methods for conveying nutrition and healthy eating to children, teachers must contend with the multiple factors that affect childhood nutrition education inside the classroom. The government mandates what foods are offered and in what quantities; institutions require that certain messages of healthy eating be conveyed as part of their curriculum; factors of the classroom food environment support or contradict nutrition lessons; classroom composition and diversity affects educational interactions between teachers and students; and teachers’ personal or cultural views on education, food and nutrition, affect their teaching as well. Teachers must navigate between these aspects of nutrition education in order to develop methods of teaching healthy eating. While various public health studies have explored the ramifications for child health on particular aspects of the classroom, little research has characterized the enacted strategies by which teachers navigate their complex work environments to actualize healthy eating mandates.

Using an ethnographic approach, this thesis will look specifically at the strategies teachers employ in reconciling these often-conflicting views in nutrition education.
Additionally, this research will critically examine the contradiction between what is said and what is done in the classroom. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways do governmental and institutional mandates, the classroom food environment, teachers’ cultural viewpoints, the class composition and diversity affect nutrition education?

2. How do teachers communicate the varying aspects of nutrition education?

3. What strategies do teachers employ in reconciling the interrelated factors (i.e., government mandates, classroom food environment, varying personal viewpoints, classroom composition and diversity, the inherent hierarchical structure of institutional organization) of nutritional education?

This research will shed light on the scope of nutrition education and various local or classroom-based factors associated with its delivery. With rates of obesity rapidly increasing, especially among children, this research serves to illuminate the obstacles and issues teachers face in developing strategies and methods for nutrition education by highlighting the multitude of factors they may need to incorporate into their nutrition lessons. An understanding of this process and the challenges that arise has the potential to help educators develop more effective methods of teaching healthy eating to children in the classroom.

While this chapter introduces readers to the primary aims of the research, the next chapter provides a review of the existing literature on childhood obesity, childhood nutrition education, and teacher’s strategies for negotiating these factors. Chapter 3 explains the theoretical background in which this thesis is grounded. It explains how, by taking a holistic, systems approach, this research is able to accommodate the multifaceted nature of childhood nutrition education. Additionally, it discusses how childhood empowerment, as a form of health education in the classroom, equips children with the experience and knowledge necessary to develop healthy living skills, as well as build confidence in their ability to make healthy choices for themselves. Chapter 4 describes the ethnographic methods employed in this research including in-class observations, one-on-one interviews, a body size assignment exercise, and a focus group.

Findings are presented in Chapters 5-9. Chapter 5 explores the lunchtime ritual at the Center through the varied nutrition education methods employed by teachers. It also investigates the contradictions between what teachers say they are doing and what is actually observed in the classroom. Chapter 6 explores the nutrition education lessons that
occur outside of mealtime, while critically analyzing the ‘learn by doing’ approach preferred by many teachers at the Center. Chapter 7 explains the additional food and nutrition polices instituted at the Center including the Nut Free Policy that seeks to provide a safe environment for those with nut allergies, and the Celebration Policy that seeks to redirect classroom celebrations away from food and back onto the child. It also explores resistance to these policies from parents, students, and staff. Chapter 8 examines how teachers promote an appreciation for difference and ownership of self to encourage students to take responsibility for their choices. It also discusses weight bias in the classroom and its potentially damaging effects. Chapter 9 explores the way personal views and predilections give rise to points of contention within the hierarchal structure at the Center, as well as the affects these have on the success of the food and nutrition program.

The larger implications of the findings for understanding children’s agency are discussed in Chapter 10 that examines the different forms empowerment takes in the classroom and the degree to which the Center successfully instills children with the knowledge and experience necessary for them to confidently make their own healthy decisions. Finally, Chapter 11 concludes with suggestions for improvement of the food and nutrition program at the Center and recommends potential future research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anthropology has a long history with food and eating. Mary Douglas (1966) explores how culture defines food and meals by examining the rules of food acceptance; there is great variation in in what constitutes a meal. Food also has a symbolic role- group feasting and fasting can create social cohesion (Whitehead 2000). Food can identify status, gender, and age (Bourdieu 1984; Caplan 1997; White 1992). Others have focused on the way food reinforces religious and ethnic boundaries (Bahloul 1989). Eating can distinguish different social classes through the use of table manners (Cooper 1986). Food rituals may also create labor and economic divisous (Harris and Ross 1987).

Anthropologists have also explored the symbolic meaning of food and consumption as it varies across cultures (Gade 1999; Simoons 1991). Still others maintain that food rituals serve a material function to maintain ecological balance or assist in the redistribution of food sources (Harris and Ross 1987). Food reflects periods of social, economic, and political change (Lentz 1999), both in terms of social processes changing food ways (Levenstein 1993; Mennell 1985) and how changes in food and diet can foster social change (Matossian 1989). Food rituals and taboos can serve to reinforce or question systems or power and differential access to material goods (Aunger 1994; Tapper and Tapper 1986). In the last decade, research focus has shifted toward the dietary effects of globalization and the mechanization of food production and the rapid increase in instances of obesity that accompany globalization (Aguirre 2010; Chan 2010; Lewellen 2005; Mintz and DuBois 2002). All this begs the question of how people are enculturated into the particular food-related practices that typify their group. Importantly, enculturation does not occur in a vacuum; it is a process affected by a multitude of factors including the manifest strategies used to accomplish it.

The rate of overweight children in American is increasing rapidly, leading some to refer to this trend as the “epidemic of overweight among children” (Strauss and Pollack 2001). Childhood obesity rates have more than doubled in the past three decades among
preschool children, aged 2-5 years (Institute of Medicine 2004; Ogden et al. 2002). Obesity in childhood is a major predictor for adult obesity (Deckelbaum and Williams 2001). Studies suggest that healthy eating education during childhood plays a crucial role in long term weight control (Birch 1989; Westenhoefer 2002). Establishing healthy habits early in life makes it more likely that these behaviors will continue into adulthood (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2009). Children of preschool age spend the majority of their day in childcare settings and thus consume the majority of their calories at these centers (Dwyer 1995; Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2002; Wechsler et al. 2001). Pre-schools are therefore one major setting in which nutrition education can happen.

**CHILDHOOD NUTRITION EDUCATION**

Teaching healthy eating habits has long been assumed to be a parent’s responsibility to their children; they set norms within the family and encourage nutritious food choices (Birch and Fischer 1998). More recently, health professionals have come to recognize the vital role school teacher’s play in promoting healthy lifestyles (Prelip et al. 2006). It is crucial that schools implement nutrition education policies. With more than 50 million children enrolled in the nation’s schools, teachers have the potential to spread healthy eating messages to a large population (Lear 2002).

Research has shown that preschool children in particular are capable of developing healthy eating behaviors if given suitable opportunities and experiences (Davis and Christoffel 1994; Linebarger and Piotrowski 2008). Therefore healthy eating and nutrition education is imperative at this stage (Sharma and Romas 2011). Moreover, preschools are in a position to influence parents and the greater community as well, via the children (Swinburn et al. 2004).

For nutrition education to be truly effective, a minimum of 15 hours per school year is required to establish knowledge of healthy eating. Fifty hours per school year are required to elicit behavioral and attitude changes (Contento et al. 1995). A national survey conducted during the 2007-2008 school year concluded that on average, teachers spent 13 hours teaching nutrition in the classroom (National Center for Education Statistics 2008). The lack of time devoted to nutrition education in the classroom may limit its effectiveness (Watts 2009). Children need direct messages regarding eating habits to motivate them to make
healthy choices (Borra et al. 2003). These messages should be age appropriate, expressed in ways that can be easily understood and should focus on giving children nutritional knowledge so that they can make their own healthy choices (Perez-Rodrigo and Aranceta 2003). In developing effective nutrition education programs, teachers should act within the structure of the classroom (Ortner 2006) that includes government mandates, institution guidelines, the classroom food environment, class composition, student diversity, teachers’ personal nutritional views and cultural backgrounds.

**GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL MANDATES**

The federal government supports the classroom as an important means of teaching children health eating habits and proper nutrition (Perez-Rodrigo et al. 2001; Wechsler et al. 2000). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) suggest schools have formal nutrition policies that limit access to unhealthy foods and beverages (Marks et al. 1996). These agencies assert that implementing these policies is key to creating healthy food environments and improving school nutrition (Spence 2006).

In 1946, the National School Lunch program was established to provide subsidized lunches and snacks to qualified students at schools and child care institutions (Gunderson 2009). The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 was later implemented in order to meet the nutritional needs of children. These programs are designed to provide public non-profit schools and child care centers with nutritionally balanced, low cost meals for students that are in accordance with nutrition standards established by the United States Department of Agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2009). Schools that participate are given cash subsidies and donated commodities from the USDA in return for serving lunches that follow the recommendations made in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture 2005). As part of these programs, school food service staffs are provided with training to assist in the preparation of healthful meals and educational resources for helping children understand nutrition and healthy eating. In requiring schools to improve nutritional standards for meals served to students, these programs are working to combat childhood obesity by creating healthy opportunities for students.
CLASSROOM FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

While many schools have adopted federal programs similar to the ones mentioned above, often times the classroom food environment contradicts these healthy living guidelines (Bauer et al. 2004). The classroom food environment can include any social, institutional, or physical factor that has the potential to affect a person’s health and health-related behavior (Baranowski 1989) including, but not limited to, the quality of food that is available or stored within the school, mandates on food students can bring from home, classroom use of food in celebrations (i.e. holidays, birthdays), food advertisements within the school, classroom organization, and food-centered school fundraisers (Wechsler et al. 2000). Research indicates that the classroom food environment is important in influencing children’s understanding of nutrition and eating behaviors (Contento et al. 1995; Perez-Rodrigo et al. 2001; Wechsler et al. 2000) and largely controls or limits the behaviors that occur in it (Green et al. 1996).

Research suggests that nutrition education programs are most affected by the quality and quantity of food available in the classroom (Cho and Nadow 2004). Although many schools place controls on the food they provide as part of snacks and meals, many competitive foods exist that are not under the same nutritional mandates and compete with more nutritional school food (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2001). These foods include those sold in vending machines, as well as foods brought in for classroom celebrations, provided for school fundraisers, and offered as incentives or rewards in class (Fleischhacker 2007).

Foods are frequently used by preschool and elementary teachers as rewards or incentives in the classroom (Baxter 1998; Kubik et al. 2005) and play an integral part in classroom celebrations (Bowman 2007). The most prevalent foods used in these situations include cookies, candy, sweetened drinks, and pizza, all high in fat and sugar (Kubik et al. 2002). Schools should discourage teachers from using food as an incentive for good behavior or punishing students by denying them low-nutritive foods because it increases their preference for these foods (Baxter 1998; Wolfe and Campbell 1991). However, in a national study of elementary classrooms, less than 25% of schools had a policy prohibiting or discouraging faculty from using food as an incentive (Wechsler et al. 2001). Food also plays an important role in many social events in the US and the same holds true for the classroom;
holiday celebrations, birthdays and fundraisers are marked by their use of low-nutritive foods (Crooks 2003). Birthdays and holidays in the classroom are characterized by cake, cookies and sugary drinks, all of which fail to meet nutritional guidelines.

Further, studies suggest that at least 80% of elementary and middle schools provide vending machines that offer students a variety of fruity drinks and sugary snacks (Wadden and Stunkard 2004; Wiecha et al. 2006). Some schools, under constrained budgets, have resorted to selling control of food service to fast food companies (Kubik et al. 2005). Additionally, schools have become hosts for many food advertisers and thus children unwittingly become targets of advertising for unhealthy behaviors (Horgen et al. 2001). The obesogenic classroom food environment often stands in contradiction to messages of healthy eating (Ward et al. 2008) and should be considered in the development of effective nutrition education programs.

CLASS COMPOSITION

Just as influential in nutrition education as the classroom food environment is the composition of the classroom, including gender, culture, and body size. These demographic-specific issues are important to consider in the development of nutrition education programs. Although a great deal of research suggests differential treatment of boys and girls in the preschool classroom (Duffy et al. 2001; Saft and Pianta 2001), little research looks at the role of gender in nutrition education. Some suggest that both teachers and parents tailor their nutrition messages based on gender; Hart et al. (2002) reports that boys are more often told to finish all their food, whereas girls are more likely to report food restrictions.

Class diversity also plays a large role in the way nutrition education is taught in the classroom. Teachers should understand the cultural differences that determine what is important to children regarding health and eating. This cultural competence should inform the development of the strategies they employ when teaching nutrition to their students (Kleinman and Benson 2006). Food preferences, eating behaviors, appetite and perspectives on diet are acquired through culture (Birch 1999). Teachers should remain sensitive to cultural diversity when developing a nutrition education program; ‘one size fits all’ nutrition programs seem to be ineffective in the classroom food environment (Goody and Drago
2009). An effective nutrition education program should accommodate cultural differences and similarities among students (Bronner 1994).

Research also suggests class body size has an effect on how health messages are communicated, enforced, and received (Musher-Eizenman et al. 2004). Overweight children are highly stigmatized within the classroom (Latner et al. 2008; Neumark-Sztainer et al. 1999) and overweight children find less social acceptance from their peers (Zeller et al. 2008). A great deal of literature explores the stigmatization of overweight children by their peers and even more specifically, the presence of this stigma in preschoolers, the target subject group of this research. This includes the attribution of negative characteristics to overweight children (Harris et al. 1982; Harris et al. 1991; Ryckman et al. 1989) and a preference for playmates of normal weight over heavier children (Brylinsky and Moore 1994). These studies confirm that preschool aged children are aware of body size and its connotations. As such, it is important to consider the effect class diversity has on the way children perceive and understand the healthy eating messages they receive from their teachers and the meanings they make of these messages based on body size.

This stigmatization of overweight children has also been observed in teachers. Although it may be unintentional, some educators perpetuate weight bias through differential treatment of overweight students. In extreme cases, teachers have been observed giving preferential treatment to students of normal weight (Puhl and Latner 2007; Rothblum et al. 1989). Additionally, studies found that teachers have lower expectations for overweight youth (Greenleaf and Weiller-Abels 2005) and believe overweight children are less likely to succeed (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 1999). It is not unreasonable to suggest that these anti-overweight attitudes could influence how educators teach nutrition to children (Brownell et al. 2005). Educators should be aware of the potential bias these demographic factors pose on the development and implementation of nutrition education programs and policies.

**Teacher Characteristics**

Another variable impacting nutrition education is the different characteristics of teachers; it is important to consider how teachers’ prior nutrition knowledge, training, behavior and beliefs impact the healthy eating lessons they teach and methods they use. Nutrition training should focus on providing teachers with the skills and experience
necessary to develop and employ active, hands-on, non-lecture methods that are age-appropriate and engaging for students (Killen et al. 1988). Unfortunately, nutrition is not a traditional part of teacher training and thus teachers may have limited exposure to nutrition information. In fact, a report published by the U.S. Department of Education (2000) suggests that only 52% of teachers have received any sort of formal training to teach nutrition, and as a result teachers may have limited exposure to nutrition information (Stang et al. 1997).

This lack of training and knowledge may have a considerable impact on how teachers approach nutrition education. A study of New York state teachers reported that those who felt adequately prepared to teach nutrition taught an average of eleven more hours of nutrition lessons than those who did not feel prepared. The same study reported that teachers who felt nutrition education was supported by their school district, administration, and classroom food environment were twice as likely to incorporate nutrition lessons into their curriculum than those teachers who felt their institution did not view nutrition education as important (Watts 2009). Proper training and nutritional support in nutrition can increase teacher’s success for implementing health curriculums (Connell et al. 1985; Olson et al. 1993; Ross et al. 1991) and the likelihood of changing students’ eating behaviors (Connell et al. 1985).

A person’s health behaviors and attitudes may support or weaken their authority and persuasiveness in delivering health messages (Colon-Ramos et al. 2009). Teachers personal nutritional practices impacted their strategies for teaching nutrition; teachers who reported a high fat intake in their own diet and low personal health practices (exercise levels) were more likely to use vending machines and food as an incentive in the classroom (Rossiter et al. 2007). These results suggest that teacher characteristics, particularly as they pertain to nutrition, have a significant effect on nutrition education within the classroom.

**HIERARCHY**

Aside from all the governmental, environmental, and personal factors that affect the development of nutrition education strategies, teachers might also operate within an institutional structure that can potentially pose new problems and give rise to points of contention. The most prevalent organizational system in schools is hierarchical with distributed leadership and different levels of authority among its members, each with
different duties and responsibilities. In such organizations, leadership expects all members, as part of the larger body, to support and validate overarching philosophies (Hart 1995). However, the multifaceted nature of nutrition education and the sheer number of people involved may lead to mixed messages and potentially give rise to conflict. The distribution of power in schools has potential to seriously impact the degree of order and function in schools (Perrow 1986; Pfeffer 1981).

The impact of hierarchically distributed leadership is especially significant in school improvement program effectiveness (Wallace 2002). In these systems, the staff’s collective influence and the autonomy of individual teachers influence the degree of conflict among teachers, administrators, students, and parents (Gaziel 1998). Research suggests that a lack of teacher control over curriculum development and classroom strategies not only threatens the empowerment of teachers, but also weakens pedagogical effectiveness (Archbald and Porter 1994; McNeil 1988). This lack of power can often lead to conflict within this hierarchy that may affect the relative success of program implementation and organizational operation (Corwin 1969). Research indicates that as the amount of transparency and communication between levels of staff increases in a hierarchical organization, the amount of conflict between staff decreases. This is especially evident in issues of policy and administration; a more collaborative approach limits potential conflict in the classroom (Ingersoll 1996). These studies suggest that all ranks of the school hierarchy might work together to develop and implement policies in order to ensure message consistency and an effective program.

**NEGOTIATING NUTRITION EDUCATION**

While most research has focused on exploring these individual aspects of nutrition education as outlined above, little research explores the interaction of these domains of childhood nutrition education and their synergistic impact on nutrition education programs. Nutrition education programs are a function of federal and institutional mandates, the classroom food environment, class composition and diversity, and teachers’ personal nutritional understandings (Watts 2009). A systematic approach should be taken in order to evaluate the impact a multitude of factors have on teacher’s strategies and administrative choices. These factors all interact to create unique education environments that affect the
functionality of programs and policies (Watts 2009). Teachers must develop strategies for negotiating between these different factors in order to teach healthy eating in a way that is both effective and in accordance with these dynamics (Briggs et al. 2003).
CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Teaching nutrition is a dynamic process and its outcome is the function of many interacting variables including federal and institutional mandates, the classroom environment, class composition and diversity, and teachers’ characteristics. Often, curricular developers and educators fail to take a holistic look when designing nutrition education programs. By not examining these interrelated variables in a holistic way, a crucial aspect of the interplay is missed (Thornton 2000). A holistic, systems-oriented analysis considers these variables as they relate to one another; it shows that complex phenomenon, such as nutritional education, cannot be reduced to individual variables, but should be viewed both within the larger system (Lutz 1981) and as a system in its own right (Blocker and Freudenberg 2001). One cannot fully grasp the development of strategies educators employ for teaching nutrition education unless they understand the multitude of factors listed above.

As this example suggests, the dynamic interplay of the parts in a system leads to the emergence of features not found in any of the parts, but only in the system as a whole (Hoffman 2003). The holistic, systems approach draws attention to the greater whole of nutrition education and discourages reducing this phenomenon to its individual variables. This approach also highlights the capacity of non-mechanical systems to change (Amaral and Ottino 2004). Teachers interact with their physical environment, administrators, institutions, and their students, and as each element changes so too may the system; nutritional education is always evolving (Flores 2007).

This holistic, systems view of nutrition education that I take is informed by the critical-cultural paradigm. This theory understands ways of being, communicating, and acting as the enactment and embodiment of culture (Connell 1982; Simon and Dippo 2009). Culture is a complex, relational process (Doane and Varcoe 2005); this relational process suggests that all people enact culture differently and have choices regarding how it is actualized. They are enmeshed within political and social contexts, and through complex interactions, they produce and share knowledge (Browne and Varcoe 2006).
In order to highlight the unacknowledged biases, motivations, and agendas that play into the social performance of culture, reflexivity is necessary. Within ethnography, critical theory not only understands research subjects as products of environments, it also encourages the researcher to acknowledge their own biases that may impact their work (Bourdieu 1992; Geuss 1981; Sonyi 2005). Doing so may also highlight the sites of contradiction between what is said and what is performed (Geertz 1988).

Kline (2003) has applied this critical approach within health communication by exploring how the political, economic, social and cultural spheres affect health policy development and distribution. Reflexive engagement with nutritional programs calls for a recognition of the factors that influence our behaviors and actions, a questioning of the categories and boundaries we create, and an exploration of the interactive and other processes that form our ways of thinking (Davies 1999; Dutta and Souza 2008; Marcus and Fischer 1986).

Further, a critical reflexive view may help reveal what has come to be called the ‘hidden curriculum’ of the classroom, a concept first discussed by Jackson (1968) and later coined by Kohlberg (1970) to describe the indirect messages relayed to students in the classroom that convey social and personal expectations and the role they play in cultural and social reproduction (Anyon 1980; Schultz 1988). The influence of these messages is thought to be equal to or greater than the manifest curriculum (Erickson et al. 2008). Awareness that hidden curricula exist helps educators and administrators, as well as researchers, to reflect on their role in childhood nutrition education, as well as the motivations behind the development or strategies for teaching nutrition. In bringing to light hidden agendas, motivations, assumptions, and influences that constrain, influence, repress, and shape ways of thinking and acting, the role teacher’s play in the empowerment of children to take control over their own health may be illuminated.

Although many recent health promotion projects have included empowerment as a goal or objective, these efforts rarely define empowerment, make clear the role empowerment should play, or make explicit the methods for attaining it. Thus, it is important to establish a theoretical conception of empowerment as it applies to children, especially within the classroom setting (Moore 1999). Boomer (1982) defines the empowerment of children as their ability to exercise their own power and responsibility of
self. In this view, educators are responsible for sharing power with their students and providing opportunities for this empowerment to be exercised. Ashcroft (1987) noted that this empowerment cannot come simply from teachers sharing power, but that it should be grounded in the goals, beliefs, and approaches of the teachers and institutional structures they act within.

Kreisberg (1992) connected the empowerment of the individual student to the empowerment of all individuals in the class. He maintains that this empowerment is enabled in an environment in which the growth process of the child is supported by the group structure in which they learn, through the development of skills necessary to take control over their lives. Conger and Kanungo (1988) highlight a second important element of empowerment: enablement. He posits that providing students with the information necessary to take control over their own health is not enough; teachers should provide ample opportunities for students to exercise their empowerment by using the knowledge and skills they have learned to act on their own behalf. Although these theoretical definitions offer slightly varied perspectives, I propose an operational definition of childhood empowerment that encompasses them all. This research will view childhood empowerment as a responsibility for self, instilled by educators, supported institutionally in its goals and agendas, and enacted through opportunities to exercise their empowerment within the classroom.

For the purpose of this research, the holistic, systems approach will highlight the multifaceted and manifold nature of nutrition education, while encouraging critical reflexivity to uncover hidden motivations and agendas within curriculum. An understanding of these motivations will illuminate the contradictions between what is said and what is observed in the classroom, while also revealing the different manifestations of childhood empowerment in the classroom.
CHAPTER 4

METHODS

Through the use of anthropological methods and ethnographic data collection with teachers and administrators at the SDSU Children’s Center, I examined the strategies teachers employ in communicating healthy eating messages to their students. Over a period of four months (May-August, 2010), I used in-classroom observation, one-on-one interviews, a somatotype assignment exercise, and a focus group to explore the food and nutrition program. These methods allowed me to examine in fine, experience-oriented detail, how teachers navigate between the different factors of nutrition education including government and institutional mandates, the classroom food environment, composition and diversity, teachers’ personal views on nutrition and cultural backgrounds in developing messages of healthy eating. Experience-oriented data is necessary in order to reveal sites of contradiction that may exist between what is said and what is actually practiced; as well it provides insight into teachers’ perceptions regarding student responses to their strategies. These methods also encouraged my subjects to be self-aware and critical of their motivations and question assumed categories and boundaries. In doing so, it may uncover any potentially hidden curriculum in the classroom. My methods reflect recommendations from the CDC regarding school nutrition policy development as they emphasize the involvement of teachers, administrators and students in the process of nutrition education, as well as the impact of the classroom environment (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 1996).

SETTING OVERVIEW

My ethnographic fieldwork was carried out at the Children’s Center (see Figure 1) located on the eastern-side of San Diego State University campus and is fairly isolated as it sits between main campus and student dormitories. The Center opened at its current location in 2004, but has been in operation on campus since 1971. They provide daily childcare for families of SDSU students, faculty, and staff, as well as outside community members, Monday through Friday. The Center cares for approximately 230 children each year, with
approximately 200 attending per day during the academic year and 150 during the summer months. Children range in age from six months to five years and are divided into infant, toddler, and preschool ‘cottages’.

**PARTICIPANT SELECTION**

To examine the manifold nature of nutrition education among children at the SDSU Children’s Center, I chose to observe the four preschool classes. These classes were selected for two reasons: first, research has long reported that the first five years of life are the most formative and children in this age group learn the habits and behaviors they will use throughout the rest of their life (Birch 1989; Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2009; Linebarger and Piotrowski 2008; Westenhoefer 2002). Second, children in this age group, 3.5 to 5.5 years, are involved in their healthy eating education and are active participants in mealtimes at the Center, more than any other age group. At the Children’s Center, infants are fed by their teachers and toddlers have their place settings gathered and food served by their teachers. However, preschool children are expected to gather their own place setting and serve themselves food.

In addition, I solicited participation from all employees at the Children’s Center who are involved with the Preschool classes, both directly and indirectly, including all teachers and administrators. This population was selected as they were most able to describe their first-hand experience with nutrition education among preschool aged children. My population includes 16 adult individuals and consists of the teachers (Supervising, Master, and part-time teachers) of the preschool classes at the SDSU Children’s Center, as well as the
Center Director, Assistant Director, and kitchen staff. Each of these individuals plays a role in the development and implementation of the food and nutrition program in the preschool classrooms at the Center.

In order to solicit participation, I conducted a Q&A presentation of my research proposal and invited anyone at the Center who was interested in participating or who had questions (See Appendix A). An email was sent out through the Center listserv to promote the presentation. I provided all attendees with a handout outlining my research objectives and the time/energy commitment I would be requesting of them. Following the presentation, both Supervising and Master teachers from the two preschool classes and all administrators that work with the preschool classes were sent a formal invitation letter, placed in their Center mailbox (See Appendix B). If no response was received within two weeks, a follow up email requesting participation was sent to their campus emails. Part-time teachers were solicited through a Center-provided email list, through word of mouth, or in person during my observation. All participation was voluntary and subjects were free to discontinue participation at any time.

**CHILDREN’S CENTER DESCRIPTION**

When you walk into the Center you are immediately flooded with the sounds of laughter, activities underway, and the occasional emotional breakdown. On the right are the administrative offices and front desk where visitors must check in (see Figure 2). A large easel holds a display of recent projects completed by classes and the counters are littered with resources for families including workshop fliers and parenting magazines.

A long hallway runs the length of the Center; the walls are lined with colorful displays about faculty and staff members, collections of children’s art work, notices for upcoming events at the Center, and pictures of past activities. Large picture windows allow visitors to see in to each classroom. On the opposite side of the hallway sits the kitchen that is fully equipped with a refrigerator, stove, multiple sinks, dishwasher, and several warmers to store food once it is delivered by Aztec Shops, the dining service for the entire SDSU campus, Center children included (see Figure 3). Outside the kitchen is a large display board riddled with notices for nutrition seminars, bright posters illustrating fruits and vegetables, and the upcoming menu for the week.
The hallway continues through to the opposite end of the Center, eventually ending at the entrance to Memory Park, a large playground area predominantly used by the preschool classes (see Figure 4). It is home to a sailing ship inspired jungle gym, a sand pit, a bike path, seesaw and many other pieces of play equipment. The grassy area is riddled with scooters, bikes, trucks, balls, and other toys. Memory Park is also home to the Center’s
community garden where students help grow a variety of fruits, vegetables, and herbs (see Figure 5).

At the end of that hallway sit the two preschool cottages. The first preschool cottage (Preschool West) consists of the younger preschoolers including soon-to-be-four year olds and a few newly five-year olds. This cottage includes the Whales and Elephants classrooms.
Slightly older preschoolers (i.e. those moving to kindergarten next year) are in the second cottage (Preschool East) that includes the Giraffe and Dolphin classrooms. There is an average of twenty “friends” (the insider term for student) per classroom, although one classroom has twenty-five.

On the wall outside each cottage is a large board for each classroom (see Figure 6). Here teachers hang class announcements, pictures of the class, as well as notes about daily activities and conversations, diligently transcribed during class meetings by one of the teachers. These boards are updated on a near daily basis to keep parents abreast of the daily goings-on of their child’s class. The classrooms in each preschool cottage share a bathroom for the children, as well as offices for the Supervising and Master teachers. Despite being physically connected, each classroom conducts their own daily activities, meals, and class meetings. However, classes may occasionally join together for a large activity or field trip to campus.

CLASSROOM DESCRIPTION

Although each classroom is set up slightly differently and decorated uniquely, they all share the same basic components (see Figure 7). Each is equipped with a sink and large cabinets to store supplies and teacher’s belongings. Across from this area sits three long tables that transition from activity table to dining room to arts and crafts station throughout
Figure 6. Preschool classroom announcement boards.
the day. In an effort to promote a home-like feeling, large comfy couches line the walls, photos of students and their families sit atop every surface, and all the walls are covered with an assortment of projects and art, including full body self-portraits, family drawings, science experiments, and marble art.

In one corner of each classroom is the Home Living area, designed to look like a kitchen, complete with a play stove, sink, and dining table (see Figure 8). Here students and

Figure 7. Preschool classroom.
teachers play restaurant and take turns being the parent and making food for their children. Pots and pans sit on top of the stove and buckets of plastic carrots, burgers, doughnuts, bread and other assorted foods fill the cabinets. In another corner, a large armoire stores costumes of all types – dress up clothes, work uniforms, and colorful hats. One wall is lined with rows of wooden cubbies with student belongings spilling out. On top of the cubbies are binders for parents to review what their child did throughout the day, what they ate, and how they behaved. Another binder is filled with blank pages for parents to write notes to the teachers about their child needing to leave early, a lost belonging, or any other concerns they may have.

In the middle of the classroom is a large open area to accommodate the entire class when they gather together for “Circle Time” (see Figure 9). In most classrooms, a large chair is placed at the head of the circle where the teacher will sit to lead announcements or read a book to the class. Most classrooms have another large area dedicated to reading. Some are outfitted with a comfy couch or overstuffed pillows for sitting and lounging upon. A large bookshelf holds only a fraction of the class’s books. Others are scattered around the classroom in often overflowing wicker baskets. Each class also has access to a communal library located in the hallway outside the classroom (see Figure 10). This area contains
hundreds and hundreds of books on all subjects and for all ages. Classrooms can check these books out or exchange them for books they already have.

**DAILY SCHEDULE**

Although activities vary from day to day and between classrooms, the preschool classes follow a fairly routine schedule. Preschool classrooms open at 7 AM and parents may start dropping their children off, although most children arrive between 8 and 9 AM.
The early morning is spent in free-choice activities, as children are able to choose what they want to spend their time doing. Some read books on the couches, others play outside, and others take advantage of indoor play areas. Around 8:30 AM, the teacher sets out breakfast for those who are hungry. This meal is very informal, as children are free to come to and leave the table as they choose.

At some point during the morning, the Master teacher will convene the class in the middle of the room for Circle Time to discuss the day’s activities and make announcements. During this time, each part time teacher will introduce the activities she will be conducting after breakfast so students can choose what they would like to do. One teacher will lead a group outside to Memory Park, another will assist with group crafts at the activity tables, and another will utilize the play areas around the classroom. After 11:00 AM, the entire class will head out to Memory Park while the classroom is transitioned for lunchtime. One teacher will set out the food and place settings, while another prepares the mats for naptime. Just before noon, the class returns to the classroom in small groups, washing their hands and gathering the rest of their place settings, finally taking a seat at their designated table.

Lunch usually takes no more than thirty minutes and students are sent to their naptime mats once they are finished eating and have cleaned up after themselves. Students nap anywhere between one to two hours. When they wake up, they may quietly play around the classroom. By 2 PM, all students have woken, lunch has been cleaned up, and all naptime mats are hung up, returning the classroom to an activity center. A small snack, usually consisting of left over fruit from lunch, is provided. Students spend the next hour eating and playing inside the classroom. Afterwards another class meeting is called. Students gather in a circle and share what they have done throughout the day, as well as make any new announcements. Occasionally a book is read or a story is told by one of the teachers. The teacher will then introduce the activities available for the afternoon including Memory Park, an art or science project, and indoor play.

Around 4 PM, the class is called together for a final meeting where the day’s events are recounted and goodbye ceremonies commence, often celebrated in song or chant. The majority of students are retrieved by their parents over the next hour. As closing time for the Center approaches, those remaining students are placed in one classroom and the Center is
cleaned and closing procedures begin. By 6 PM, all children have been picked up and the Center is officially closed.

**Educators**

While children are naturally present at the Children’s Center, they are not the direct focus of this research. Rather, my focus was on the staff and how they managed nutrition education. Their strategies should be viewed against the strong commitment of the SDSU Children’s Center to empowering children to make their own decisions and choices in all aspects of life. They strive to build a strong foundation for students by providing the knowledge and experience necessary to develop their skills and abilities. This philosophy is guided by the Preschool Desired Results Development Profile (PDRDP), an approach to evaluating childcare services, developed by The California Department of Education (CDE) Child Development Division (CDD). These guidelines provide measures of child development that are expected of preschool aged children and include safety and health, motor and physical proficiency, effective listening, and personal/social competence.

Further, the Center’s Reggio Emilia pedagogical approach informs curriculum development by encouraging teachers to take direction from their student’s interests when developing activities and lesson plans in order to ensure that lessons are relevant, interesting, and engaging for the class (Caldwell 2002; Edwards 1998). This approach is centered on the belief that in their early years, children are forming themselves as individuals. To promote this development, curriculum is emergent and based on the interests of the children, fostered by the encouraging and enriching environment of the classroom. Teachers facilitate learning by planning activities that actively engage students and address their questions and interests in an evolving educational experience (Gandini et al. 2008; Hewett 2001; Lewin-Benham 2005). Center educators use these guiding approaches in the development of their teaching strategies. Each preschool cottage is governed by a Supervising teacher who oversees both classrooms. Her primary responsibilities are administrative including classroom management, curriculum development, and overseeing activities. She is also responsible for supervising Master and part-time teachers. Each classroom within the cottage has one Master teacher. She is responsible for planning curriculum, initiating activities, and
supervising part-time teachers and classroom volunteers. These teachers are all female and range in age from mid 20s to 50+.

Each classroom is staffed with at least three part-time teachers at a time, each on a rotating schedule. They are responsible for the execution of curriculum and activities in the classroom (under the direction of the Master teacher) and assisting parents and other classroom volunteers during their participation. These teachers are all female and are predominantly SDSU education or childhood studies students, although some are recent graduates or other community members. They range in age from 18 to mid-30s. Since most of these teachers are students, there is a great deal of part-time teacher turnover and schedules and classroom assignments change every semester. Throughout my observation I encountered over twenty different part-time teachers between the four classes, although I observed a core group of twelve on a regular basis.

Administrators also play a crucial role, both inside and outside the classroom. The Center is run by a Director, Assistant Director, and several coordinators. They are responsible for supervising all faculty, monitoring the development of programs and activities, and overseeing the daily operation of the Center. Despite often acting behind the scenes and in offices separate from the classrooms, these administrators were frequently seen interacting with students and parents, observing daily goings-on, and often times participating in activities and projects.

The administrative team also includes the Center’s kitchen staff, which consists of one full time Kitchen Director and Kitchen Assistant, as well as two rotating part-time assistants. The kitchen staff, in addition to their administrative tasks, are primarily responsible for overseeing the food and nutrition program, coordinating with federal food programs and food suppliers, as well as inspecting, preparing, and dispensing food served at the Center. In addition, the kitchen staff provides students and their families with information regarding the food program at the Center, and general nutrition information. The administrative staff is entirely female and they range in age from early 30s to 50+.

Due to the limited number of participants in my research and the general homogeneity of my sample, all further identifiers for subjects will be withheld to protect their anonymity. When referenced, all subjects will be given pseudonyms. Additionally, a
subject’s position (i.e. Master teacher, administrator) will not be revealed unless necessary for context.

This chart explores the hierarchical organization at the Center (see Figure 11). The Center Director controls all staff, both administration and teachers. The Assistant Director oversees Supervising teachers directly who oversee their Master teachers. Master teachers are responsible for overseeing all part-time teachers in their classroom, as well as occasional classroom volunteers. They also deal directly with student’s families. The Center Director also oversees the Kitchen Director and staff. The kitchen staff coordinates with the federal food program and Aztec Shops. It is with feedback from the Assistant Director and all teachers that the Kitchen Director, in cooperation with the Center Director, develops the food and nutrition program. All these people are involved, in varying capacities and to different degrees, with preschool children at the Center.

Figure 11. Childcare Center staff organization.
TRAINING

All staff are collectively trained on Center regulations, policies, and operations twice yearly. Part-time staff are trained each semester as those positions have a high degree of turnover. Master and Supervising teachers meet on a monthly basis and will often take these opportunities to refresh teachers on various training topics. Further, all teachers and administrators are trained in the food and nutrition program as part of larger trainings. Topics include meal requirements, serving sizes, family style meal service, dining area set up, and other Center-specific mealtime matters.

FOOD AND NUTRITION PROGRAM

The SDSU Children’s Center is optimal for studying childhood nutrition because, as a public institution, they must abide by government mandates on food quality and quantity. In addition, staff and faculty have developed specific guidelines for teaching healthy eating and managing the classroom food environment that teachers must incorporate into the classroom. The Center posits two main objectives in accordance with USDA recommendations; to provide good nutritious meals and to help children develop eating habits that will last throughout their lives (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2009).

In addition to regulations on food provided by the Center, the staff developed additional policies that serve to protect students with allergies (Nut-Free Policy) and improve nutritional quality of outside food brought to the Center (Celebration Policy). These policies and the reaction parents, students, and staff have to their implementation creates yet another factor teachers must incorporate in their nutrition education programs. Teachers are also given specific messages of healthy eating and nutritional curriculum, as part of the PDRDP (guidelines for measuring preschoolers development) that they must incorporate into their classroom lessons and activities.

The Center’s participation in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) also make it an ideal setting for studying childhood nutrition education. The CACFP offers enrolled students breakfast, lunch and a snack every weekday; the menu is on a four-week rotating cycle and is accessible online (See Appendix C). Through this program, meals are offered free or at a reduced-fee to families on a sliding scale and the Center receives compensation from the state for their participation (based on family outcome) (California
These meals should meet the federal nutrition guidelines for all children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture 2005), are prepared by food services at SDSU (Aztec Shops), and the kitchen staff is responsible for dispensing and delivering the meals to classrooms. It is in this environment that teachers have to develop strategies for negotiating these competing features of nutritional education to develop methods for teaching healthy eating.

These government and institutional programs, coupled with the unique classroom environment and the food and nutrition program, developed and implemented by a diverse team of teachers, staff, and administrators, makes the Children’s Center an ideal location to observe the often complex realm of childhood nutrition education and examine the methods educators employ for teaching young children about healthy eating and nutrition.

**FORMATIVE DATA COLLECTION**

A brief period of reconnaissance data collection was conducted in April and May of 2010 to familiarize myself with the research setting and participants, as well as to create a healthy eating messages checklist and develop a detailed setting description.

**Healthy Messages Checklist**

I observed lunchtime activity in both the Preschool East and Preschool West classrooms. I audio taped lunch times in each of these classrooms for a total of 16 days (4 lunch periods per classroom), until no new data were forthcoming. I transcribed the tapes and then, through iterative re-readings, I identified salient themes relating to messages of healthy eating that were being imparted to students from their teachers. This information was used to develop a checklist that included the most common healthy eating messages (i.e. You get what you get) or methods (i.e. Referring to superheroes as a tool of encouragement) employed by teachers.

**Setting Description Record**

During this time, I recorded a physical description of the Center and classroom environment at length. I described how each classroom was set up and documented it with photographs, with permission for use in this introduction. I also described the classroom food environments, or any area that had potential to influence the nutrition behaviors of
students or the healthy eating methods of teachers, including but is not limited to posters, books, play food, and availability of food not provided by the Center. Both of these formative exercises were intended to familiarize myself with the Center and mealtime procedures and discussion prior to beginning summative data collection.

**Initial Observation**

Initial classroom observations were conducted in the first three weeks of research. These consisted of eight full days of observation, two in each classroom, each during the Center’s normal operating hours, 7 AM to 6 PM. The purpose of full day observation was to determine the proportion of nutrition messages that were delivered outside of lunchtime so that I could adjust my protocol (that revolved around lunch) if it turned out that unique nutrition lessons also came up at other times. Using the healthy messages checklist as a guide, it was determined that the majority of nutrition messages were, in fact, delivered during lunch time and that those messages delivered outside of lunchtime were the same or similar to those delivered during lunchtime. As a result, full day observations were discontinued, as they yielded no new data. In-classroom observation continued, but only during lunchtime.

**SUMMATIVE DATA COLLECTION**

Upon completion of several weeks of reconnaissance or formative fieldwork, research continued for an additional four months. During this time, two rounds of interviews were conducted, as well as daily in-classroom observations. Additionally, teachers were asked to complete a somatotype assignment exercise and Center records and forms were reviewed. Finally, a focus group was convened of all available participants to discuss my results and preliminary conclusions.

**Initial Interviews**

Open ended individual interviews were conducted with one Supervising preschool teacher (the other was on medical leave for the semester), four Master preschool teachers, all willing part-time teachers (8 out of 12), the kitchen supervisor, Center Director and Assistant Director (N=16). These interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes (mean length = 70 minutes) and were held in the private conference room at the Center. The purpose of these
interviews was to familiarize myself with my participants; questions focused on personal views on nutrition, mandates on nutrition education programs, strategies for teaching nutrition in the classroom, the classroom food environment, contradictions between personal views and mandates, and teachers’ response to non-compliance and resistance from students (See Appendix D). These interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the subjects and transcribed in full.

**In-Class Observation**

I observed approximately 40 lunch times between the four preschool classes (average of 10 lunches per classroom). These observations occurred during the preschool lunch period, typically between 11:30 AM and 12:30 PM. I observed the entire lunch period (from set up to clean up) and collected ethnographic field notes. These observations focused on nutrition messages shared, interactions between teachers and students in regards to food and eating, student rejection or acceptance of teachers’ messages, the ways teachers utilized components of the classroom food environment, teachers’ response to cultural diversity in the classroom, the strategies teachers employed for incorporating mandated nutrition lessons, as well as their own personal nutritional views, lunchtime rituals, and the impact of student body size on the ways messages were delivered. While I did not interview students in my research, my observations focused specifically on the interaction sequences between students and teachers in regards to nutrition, including but not limited to, what prompts the initiation of healthy eating messages, resistance or acceptance from students, teachers’ strategies for overcoming resistance, response and lack of response from both students and teachers, the degree to which students and teachers actively listen to one another when discussing nutrition and the rituals they engage in when discussing nutrition. This observation allowed me to experience first-hand the implementation of the food and nutrition program, as well as the problems and frustrations that arise in its execution. I was able to draw on my observation and recall specific situations in follow-up interviews, providing my participants the opportunity to reflect on their choices and motivations.

**Somatotype Assignment**

Teachers were presented three body silhouettes ranging in size (Collins 1991) and were asked to anonymously assign each student in their classroom to one (See Appendix E).
A general class composition was compiled from these identifications. This instrument was also used to gage the impact of class composition on teacher’s healthy eating strategies, as well as their perceptions of and feelings toward body size in children. Although participants were questioned directly about these topics, this exercise allowed me to objectively compare data from each classroom with a class size composite in order to highlight any patterns or connections that did not come up in interviews.

**Document Review**

All documents pertaining to the food and nutrition program including, but not limited to, CACFP reimbursement forms, classroom meal counts, parent/teacher surveys, and training manuals were reviewed with consent from the Center.

**Follow-up Interviews**

After several weeks of observation had been completed and collected data had been reviewed, follow-up interviews were scheduled. These interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes (mean length = 60 minutes) and were held in the private conference room at the Center. The purpose of these interviews was not only to clarify data previously collected, but also address questions that arose from my observations or inconsistencies between my observations and my interviews. These interviews focused on the methods employed by teachers in the classroom, personal views on the food and nutrition program and policies, and the contradictions within the classroom. Questions were more open-ended than initial interviews and tailored to each participant so they could discuss topics they felt were important. This also helped me highlight the areas I may have neglected in my initial interview.

**Focus Group**

A focus group was organized upon completion of observation and interviews; this group consisted of all available preschool teachers and administrators (n=12). The discussion lasted one hour and fifty minutes. The major focus of this discussion was determined by my interviews and observations as participants were presented with a brief summary of my data prior to meeting (See Appendix F). The objective of this focus group was not only to examine the face validity of the data I collected from my subjects’
perspective, but also to allow my research community to openly discuss, as a group, my findings and preliminary conclusions, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the food and nutrition program at the Center. This not only provided me with richer data and an insider perspective on my research, it also gave the Center staff the opportunity to self-reflect and engage in a dialogue about their role in childhood nutrition education. Most importantly, this focus group created the opportunity to discuss the application of my findings in the improvement of the Center food and nutrition program.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed my data using an inductive grounded theory approach, in that I developed a theoretical viewpoint based on the data I collected. Upon completion of each period of research, I transcribed my ethnographic field notes and kept running notes about potential themes or codes. In grounded theory, data collection and analysis are an interrelated process and analysis begins as soon as data is collected and continues throughout the entire data collecting process (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Once I had completed all my fieldwork, I identified all key topics and categorized them according to larger underlying themes. I began this process with open coding; by reviewing my field notes line by line, I examined what my subjects were referencing, thinking, and doing. I identified recurring themes and developed codes for larger categories into which groups of themes fitted. While doing so, I created a code book that lists and describes these organizing principles (Strauss and Corbin 2008). I focused not only on what characterizes these themes, but also on the links between themes especially as they relate to the different factors of health education (i.e. government mandates, classroom food environment). I supplemented these themes with exemplars from my observations, interviews and focus group. These exemplars lead to greater understandings of themes and categories and their properties (Bernard 1998). I then formed theoretical explanations for these themes (Strauss 1987). These theories specified phenomenon in terms of conditions, interactions, and consequences that emerge (Glaser 1992). Once all these had been identified and thoroughly described, I proceeded to develop flow charts that connected interlocking and related topics. It is from these flow charts that my chapter discussions developed.
CHAPTER 5

LUNCHTIME AT THE CENTER

Lunchtime at the center provides an ideal opportunity to teach children how to function at the family dinner table, while encouraging healthy eating habits and good choices. While not every good habit or choice gets discussed or modeled at every meal, to illustrate the range of what might happen at a given lunch I offer, below, a lunchtime account representing a composite of the many incidents that I did witness during my time at the Center. The account is lengthy, but it exemplifies all the strategies teachers employ in the classroom for providing healthy eating knowledge, skills, and experience. During an actual lunch period, only two of three events like those I recount below may occur, but occur they do, in ways that allow teachers to teach healthy eating and empower children to take responsibility for their own choices. After presenting them, I offer a discussion and interpretation. But their significance is not limited to this chapter; subsequent chapters selectively reference them for a deeper consideration of the significance of what happens during the mid-day meal.

THE EXPERIENCE OF LUNCHTIME

It’s 11 AM on a warm summer morning. Outside I can hear the laughter of children as they run around Memory Park; about sixty four- and five-year old children are climbing the jungle gym, riding bikes around the path, racing each other around the yard, and taking turns on the see-saw.

After observing through the window for several minutes, I enter the Whale classroom. Ms. Maciel and Ms. Smith are alone in the classroom, preparing for lunchtime. Although Ms. Smith and I had met on several occasions, and she knew about my research, Ms. Maciel and I had only met in passing, so I introduce myself, explain my research and tell her I will be observing the class during lunchtime.

I sit my notebook down next to my usual seat near the dining area. I set my tape recorder on the middle table while I examine the newly posted art projects. Family portraits
line the walls with explanations written by teachers. One of the pictures portrays a Mom, two children, and a dog inside a house, colored yellow and green with a large tree outside that eclipses the house. The note by the portrait says, “Sarah said her Dad is not pictured because he is at work”. On the drying racks are dozens of colorful paintings made when students dipped marbles in paint and rolled them over white paper. On the counter are recently finished popsicle stick trolley trains, inspired by the class’s recent trip to the trolley station on campus. I look through the new circle meeting notes for the day – the recently released *Toy Story 3* seemed to be the hot topic of discussion, with a few mentions of visits to Disneyland and SeaWorld.

I take my seat between the tables, anxiously anticipating the students’ return. Ms. Smith takes the sleeping mats down from the wall, placing them in an orderly fashion around the room. She retrieves each student’s sheets and pillows from their cubbies, carefully making each bed ready for after lunch naps. Meanwhile, Ms. Maciel finishes cleaning up from the morning activities; she gets the disinfectant and sprays all three tables to transform the classroom from art studio to dining room. By this time, Ms. Smith has finished making all the beds and the floor is a sea of Buzz Lightyear, Disney Princesses, and Star Wars bedding. She retrieves the lunch food cart from the hallway that Ms. Dawson brought down from the kitchen. The cart is wheeled inside and, after checking to see if there is more she can do, Ms. Smith heads outside to play with the children.

As Ms. Maciel continues her mealtime preparation, she explains the significance of the classroom organization, specifically the lunchtime set up, saying, “We’re trying to create a home-like feeling, like the kids are having dinner with their family at their house. So we’ve got the three long tables close to one another and we make them look like a real table and serve the food family style.” As we talk, she drapes big red tablecloths over each of the three tables, evening out the sides and smoothing out the top. She then places a centerpiece on each – fresh yellow flowers on one, a colorful artificial arrangement on another, and a newly planted bamboo plant on the last. She then carefully arranges place settings at each table, being sure to give each seat a plate, napkin, cup, and silverware. Finally, she adds the finishing touch to the table, a large red "scrape bucket” for food remnants after the meal.

I hear the sound of children in the hallway returning to their classrooms as the younger classes convene for lunch: mumbled mutterings of who won the race and who
climbed the highest. A citrusy smell fills the room as Ms. Maciel begins cutting the fresh fruit into slices, placing a basketful on each table. She takes the food bowls off the cart, placing them in the center of each table, each bowl with its own serving spoon so children will be able to help themselves. A milk jug is placed on each table, and one table is given a smaller jug of soy milk for a lactose intolerant student. Finally, Ms. Maciel places a large gray "mess tub" by the door where students return their dishes at the end of the meal.

Just as Ms. Maciel finishes the lunchtime preparation, a small group of children begin to gather by the outside door. Ms. Smith organizes them in a line, ushering them in one at a time, some to the restroom and the rest to the classroom sink to wash their hands. Ms. Nunez and Ms. Sanchez, who had been in Memory Park with the class, continue bringing students back to the classroom in small groups. As each student finishes washing up, they sit at their assigned table, waiting for their entire group to be seated. While Ms. Maciel is staffing the hand washing station, Ms. Sanchez is assisting children in the bathroom, and Ms. Smith is helping move children to the tables. Ms. Nunez turns music on and the classroom is filled with the relaxing sound of soft instrumentals. She then dims the lights to help the children calm down and make a smooth transition from playtime to mealtime.

Ms. Smith joins the first group of students to return from Memory Park who have now all taken a seat at the table; she sits between two students at the center of the table and leads them in a song about being grateful for their food. Although the chorus is weak at first, it gains volume as students end their side conversations and join along.

As the song ends, Ms. Smith begins to remove the plastic cover off each bowl. The smell of chili and cornbread begins to rise from the table as the children’s approving hum of ‘mmmm’ fills the room. She then looks around the table to see who is most well behaved, and selects a child from the group to begin passing the bowl around.

“Harry, why don’t you start the chili? Can everyone smell that? Doesn’t it smell yummy?” Next she asks, “Sarah, would you please pass the cornbread around? And Jorge, why don’t you start the fruit. Kara, you’re by the peas. Would you please pass that around to your friends?”

As she begins pouring milk she adds, “Each of us gets one piece of cornbread and one scoop of chili. We need to make sure that we leave enough for the rest of our friends. I’m
sure we’ll have some left over, so if you’re still hungry, you can have more then. If you need help scooping the chili, please ask me.”

As bowls begin to move around, she reminds the students, “I’d like for everyone to take at least a little bit of everything. It’s important that you get a balanced meal so you should have a little of everything we have on the table. See how Tina has some of everything on her plate? She has a piece of cornbread, some chili, some yummy looking peas and two orange slices.” Ms. Smith turns to her right noticing that Michael had only taken chili and cornbread so she asks, “Michael, can I please put some peas and oranges on your plate. They’re both so good for you! I think you’d like them!” Michael shakes his head and says, “If you put it there, I’m not going to eat it.” Ms. Smith assured him, “That’s just fine. I just want to make sure that if you decide you want them, they’re there. I won’t force you to eat anything. That’s your choice. Can I put a scoop of peas and a few oranges on your plate?” “Yes,” answered Michael, “but I’m going to hide it with my milk”, as he moves his glass in his sightline.

As lunchtime gets underway at every table, the room comes alive with the chatter of children and teachers, laughter, and the occasional utensil dropping to the floor. Ms. Sanchez is helping students pass around food at her table when she noticed that Laura had not taken any chili. Although she asked her twice to put some on her plate, Laura still refused saying, “I didn’t like them last time. It tasted gross last time I ate it.” “I know you didn’t like it when we had it last month, but remember how your birthday was last week? Usually when we get older, our taste buds get older too. They change. So maybe now that you’re five, you’ll like chili.” Laura’s face lights up as she says, “Oh yeah! I’m five now. Do five year olds like chili?” “I don’t know,” Ms. Sanchez said, as she poured a spoonful of chili on her plate, “You tell me!”

“I need cornbread!” shouted Tanner, at another table. Ms. Sanchez said, “Tanner, is that how we ask someone to pass the food?” Tanner shook his head as she continued, “Did you hear how Chad asked for some milk earlier?” Turning to Chad she said, “How did you ask for milk politely, like you did earlier?” He answered, “I said, ‘Ms. Sanchez, can I please have more milk?’” “Exactly!” said Ms. Smith, “That’s how you ask politely for something.” She then gathered the attention of the whole table asking, “When someone passes something we ask for, what do we say?” In unison the table exclaimed, “Thank you!” With a look of
delight Ms. Smith said, “Perfect! So Tanner, will you please ask Sarah to pass the cornbread politely using your manners?” Tanner turns to Sarah and asks, “Can I please have the cornbread bowl?” Sarah passes the bowl to Tanner, to which he replies, “Thank you, Sarah!” With a big smile Ms. Sanchez gave Tanner a high five saying, “That was wonderful! Such a great use of your manners. Thank you for that!”

Ms. Maciel’s table was the last to be seated and begin eating. She asks her table if they would like to do good news/bad news, a common lunchtime activity where students share their news for the day. They all agree and Sarah started, “My good news is that I’m going to see Toy Story with my Mommy and Auntie Kim this weekend. My bad news is that my brother isn’t coming with us because he plays soccer.” The whole table takes a turn, including Ms. Maciel, sharing news about their weekend plans, family visits, what happened in Memory Park, and the art they made earlier in the week.

Ms. Smith’s table overhears Ms. Maciel’s table and decides to also do good news/bad news. When it came Fiona’s turn she said, “I only have bad news. My bad news is that it’s peas day.” “What do you mean?” asked Ms. Smith. Fiona answered, “I don’t like peas and that’s what we have for lunch today.” “What don’t you like about peas?” “They feel funny in my mouth”, answered Fiona as she shook her head and stuck out her tongue. “What about them makes your mouth feel funny?” Fiona shrugged, “They are fuzzy on the inside!”

As soon as the words left her mouth, nearly every student at that table developed an immediate disdain for peas. Some screamed “Yuck!” while others banished their peas to the outer rim of their plates. One student even spit his out, wiping his tongue with his napkin. Ms. Smith, anxious to dispel this food myth and keep the children eating said, “Why do you think that peas are fuzzy?” “When I bit one it tasted like it had little furs on the inside. That’s gross.” “Well, peas aren’t fuzzy on the inside and they are really, really good for our bodies. They have vitamins, not fuzz!”, countered Ms. Smith. “Nope,” Fiona said defiantly, “I know they have fuzz because my mouth knows.” Ms. Smith asked, “What if I show you that peas aren’t fuzzy. Will you try them?”

Fiona agreed and Ms. Smith grabbed a knife from the counter, cutting the pea in half. She showed the students at her table saying, “See! No fuzz on the inside.” She then passed the pea around, asking everyone to touch the center to prove that it was not, in fact, fuzzy. Once everyone had their turn she said, “Okay, now that we know that peas aren’t fuzzy, let’s
all take a really big bite.” She demonstrated, piling a mound of peas on her fork, eating them, and with a smile on her face said, “Mmmm! See how good peas are!” Every student proceeded to take a big bite of peas, most agreeing they were good. Even Fiona agreed saying, “They aren’t as bad as I thought. Maybe only the other peas had fuzz!”

At Ms. Maciel’s table, the conversation had changed from good news/bad news to most favorite-least favorite foods. Kevin said, “I love chicken nuggets and macaroni and cake and French fries and--” Ms. Maciel interrupted, “Are there any foods you don’t like?” Kevin thought for a moment and replied, “I really don’t like spinach. My Mommy knows and she still makes me eat. It looks like grass and doesn’t taste good.” Ms. Maciel said, “Have you heard of Popeye? You know he’s so strong and has big muscles because he eats his spinach. He loves his spinach!” Without skipping a beat Kevin said, “So? Popeye can’t even fly!”

Although her initial strategy failed, Ms. Maciel continued to encourage Kevin saying, “Well, that’s true, but it makes him strong because it has so many vitamins and antioxidants. Vitamins help make us healthy and antioxidants help fight off sickness. So if you eat spinach, you’ll get big, and strong, and healthy!” Kevin still seemed uninterested so she continued, “I bet your Daddy eats spinach! Does he eat spinach?” Kevin said, “He does. My Mommy makes both of us eat spinach.” “Well look how tall and strong your Daddy is. If you want to grow up to be like him, you should eat spinach!” Kevin thought about it for a few moments then said, “I’m gonna be tall like my Dad. Maybe I’ll try to like spinach now!”

The favorite-least favorite foods discussion continued when Stephanie announced, “I don’t like carrots. Carrots are cold and hard and taste like dirt.” Ms. Maciel asked, “How do you know what dirt tastes like?” Stephanie looked taken aback and replied with a shrug, “I guess I don’t, but I know I don’t like carrots.” Ms. Maciel came and sat by Stephanie and asked, “Do you know how many good things carrots do for your body? They have so many vitamins. Carrots have a very special vitamin that helps us with our eyesight. The more carrots you eat, the better you can see.” Stephanie responded, “I never eat carrots and I see everything!” Ms. Maciel shook her head and said, “That may be the case now, but when you get older, your eyesight can get worse.” Stephanie looked at Ms. Maciel and asked, “Old like you? Can you not see?” Ms. Maciel, who appeared to me no older than twenty-five, blushed
and with a laugh said, “Yes, old like me. I can see just fine, but that’s because I always eat my vegetables, and especially love carrots!” Stephanie said, “I want to see when I’m old.”

As food circulated between students at Ms. Sanchez’s table, Alejandra began to pick up her peas with her fingers and throw them into her mouth. One of her classmates, Evan, exclaimed, “Ewww!” Ms. Sanchez asked, “What’s the matter over here?” “Alejandra used her fingers and not her fork.” Ms. Sanchez looked at Alejandra and asked, “Is that how we eat peas?” she asked Alejandra. “No,” she replied, “but it’s easier with my fingers.” Ms. Sanchez handed Alejandra her fork saying, “Well remember, the more you use your fork, the better you will be with it. Watch how I eat my peas with my fork.” She gathered several peas on her fork and demonstrated the proper way to eat them. Alejandra watched, gathered several peas on her fork, and begrudgingly took a bite. “Well done, Alejandra!” exclaimed Ms. Sanchez, “I love to see you use manners at the table. Thank you for using your fork!”

At Ms. Smith’s table, the conversation was now focused on the giant bug some of the students found at Memory Park. This evolved into “bug news”, a new addition to “good news-bad news”. Students started talking about the different bugs they had seen around the Center or found at home or while out with their families. Out of nowhere, Jacob, a student who I had never heard say more than five words at a time for the past month began telling a story about the time he found a stick bug at his grandpa’s house. He talked about how he thought it was just a regular stick but then it started walking and he jumped. He then told the group how his grandpa helped him catch the bug in a jar and how they fed it until it died. After he talked for about five minutes, I looked at Ms. Smith whose jaw was hanging open and her eyes were wide with surprise. Astonished she said, “Jacob, I’ve never heard you talk so much! It’s so wonderful to hear your voice!” Jacob replied, “That’s because everyone can hear me at the table.” “I know that sometimes when we’re in a big group, it can be difficult to hear one another or be heard. Remember that your teachers are always here to listen to you, but if it’s easier for you to speak when there’s only eight of us, then please do! We loved your bug story!” Bug news resumed and Jacob continued contributing to the conversation; each time he did, Ms. Smith’s face lit up with joy.

After bug news ended and most of the table had refocused on their food, Ms. Smith looked at Brittany: she had only eaten chili, although she put some of everything on her plate. Ms. Smith said, “Brittany, would you please eat something more than chili? Maybe have a
few orange slices?” Brittany said, “No, I only want chili.” “Well that is your decision, but I want you to have a balanced meal. So not just chili, but some cornbread, some peas, some oranges.” “I said no,” Brittany exclaimed, “because I’m not hungry anymore.” “I understand that, but I want to just ask you one more time, would you please have just a few more bites?” Brittany thought for a minute and said, “I’m sure I’m done eating.” Ms. Smith responded, “Well that’s your choice and at least you thought about it. If you’re finished eating, you can scrape off your plate, take your things to the mess bin, and use the bathroom before your nap.”

While Ms. Sanchez was pouring milk for the rest of her table, she looked over at Traci who, since I had started observing the class, had not eaten her vegetables willingly even once. Each time she required encouragement and urging from her classmates and teachers. However, on this day, she was happily eating mouthfuls of peas. Ms. Sanchez said, “Everybody look! Traci is eating all of her vegetables without even being asked! Let’s all clap for her!” The class did and once the applause had died down, students began scrambling to show Ms. Sanchez that they too were eating their vegetables, also hoping for the same acknowledgement. Ms. Sanchez said to the table, “You are all the best vegetable eaters I know! I’m so proud of all you. Let’s all pat ourselves on the back for a job well done with our vegetables.” The class did and continued eating.

As lunch proceeded and children began to clear their plates, several students went back in for second servings. As Tori grabbed two pieces of cornbread, Ms. Maciel said, “Tori, before you take two pieces of bread, I want you to listen to your body. Is it really that hungry that it needs two pieces?” She replied, “I am hungry! My tummy said I was hungry.” “Well,” asked Ms. Maciel, “how about you have one piece of cornbread and a few more pieces of fruit. That way you’re getting a nice variety in your diet. And remember, what’s in that bowl is all the cornbread we have so we need to make sure that all of our friends who want more, get more. We have plenty of fruit and I can go get more from Ms. Dawson in the kitchen if we need more.” Tori took one piece of cornbread and two orange slices. Ms. Maciel thanked her saying, “It’s very nice of you to be so considerate of your friends and making sure they all get some cornbread.”

While Ms. Maciel was focused on Tori, she failed to notice Jose who was busy scooping chili onto his plate. By the time she saw him, Jose was about to put a fourth scoop
on his plate. She asked for the spoon saying, “Jose, are you really that hungry? Look at all the chili on your plate. I want you to have as much food as you need to be full, but I really don’t want you to waste food. If you decided you didn’t need all that food, that’s food that your friends could have had.” Jose said, “I know, but I like it. It tastes really good! I love chili day!” Ms. Maciel laughed and said, “I’m so glad you do, but sometimes you can have too much of a good thing. We can eat the things we like, but we should eat them in moderation. It’s important that you have a mixture of foods at every meal.”

Ms. Smith’s table was focused on eating and there was little chatter. However, Chun had only eaten three orange slices and a few bites of her peas, refusing both chili and cornbread. Ms. Smith asked, “Chun, can I please get you to take a few bites of chili or cornbread? Maybe dip your cornbread in the chili!” Chun shook her head saying, “I don’t want to. I only want more oranges.” Ms. Smith said, “How about we make this a game? What if we see who can take the biggest shark bite of chili? Like this!” Ms. Smith opens her mouth wide, taking a big bite of chili, making chomping noises as she chews. Chun looks at her puzzled and says, “Sharks don’t like chili. And I’m not a shark. And I don’t like chili either.” Ms. Smith laughs at Chun’s response, shakes her head and says, “You make a good point. Here’s some more orange slices.”

I then heard Ms. Sanchez exclaim, “Well, I guess that answers the question!” Curious, I came over to the table and saw that Laura had eaten all the chili she put on her plate. Ms. Sanchez said, “Laura! You ate all that chili after saying you didn’t like it. Does this mean five year olds do like chili more than four year olds?” “I did!” exclaimed Laura, “My five year buds like this better. Not a lot more, but a little bit more. Maybe when I’m six, I’ll like it even more than spaghetti. That’s my favorite thing to eat.” Ms. Sanchez got the attention of the rest of the class and said, “Did everyone hear that? Now that Laura is five, she likes chili more. We always should remember that sometimes we might not like a certain food, but our tastes change. You should always try foods, even if you don’t like them once.”

I glanced back over at Ms. Smith’s table, only to see her looking at Michael with a look of disbelief. Despite his adamant protests at the beginning of the meal over eating his fruits and vegetables, to the point that he placed his milk glass in front of his plate to avoid seeing them, had made some progress. She said, “Michael, you tried your peas and orange
slices. I’m so happy! What made you change your mind?” He then pointed to Kayla, the girl sitting next to him and said, “She liked them and eated them, so I did too.” Ms. Smith clarified, “You saw how much Kayla liked them, so you ate them?” “Yeah, and she told me they were good. I didn’t like them before, but now I do!” Ms. Smith asked the table to applaud Michael for trying foods again and Kayla for helping Michael.

Ms. Sanchez then noticed Annie, who had spent most of lunch time pushing her food around her plate, having only taken a bite or two. As most students were finishing up and cleaning their plates, Ms. Sanchez asked, “Annie, why aren’t you eating?” She replied, “I wanted Macaroni. My Mommy makes macaroni.” “Well, today we have chili and cornbread and peas and oranges. I know that isn’t macaroni, but won’t you please eat some more? It’s so tasty.” Annie continued protesting saying, “I said I wanted macaroni. Chili isn’t macaroni. And I had bites of cornbread.” “Well, that is your choice. But remember, your body needs food to be active throughout the day. Food gives your body energy so you should really listen to your body and see if it’s hungry or not.”

Ms. Sanchez got up to get paper towels for a student who had spilled his milk. While she was helping him clean up, Sarah and Kyle began trying to convince Annie to eat some more. Kyle said, “I liked the chili. Did you eat some, because it’s good?” Sarah agreed saying, “Yeah Annie, you should eat some because Ms. Sanchez said it’s for energy outside. When we go to Memory Park you should have food. Then we can race!” Although their conversation turned from a ploy to get Annie to eat more of her lunch to a debate over who would beat who at a race, Annie did start to eat her lunch. By the time their conversation ended, she had nearly cleaned off her plate. When Ms. Sanchez returned to her seat and saw the progress Annie had made, she exclaimed, “Annie! You almost ate your entire lunch! I’m so proud of you! Did your body tell you it was hungry?” Annie looked at her puzzled and said, “No! I need to beat Kyle racing.” “Well whatever it takes! I’m very happy you finished your lunch. As a matter of fact, I’m giving you the dream stick for a job well done. You can decide what book we’ll read after waking up from nap.”

As students finished eating, each scraped what little was left on their plates into the bucket on their table. They then emptied the rest of their milk, stacked their plates and cups on top of one another inside the mess bin. Teachers then escorted them to the restroom, and helped them find their mats.
While Ms. Maciel sat on the floor, rubbing Sarah and Kylie’s backs and Ms. Smith helped students in the restroom, Ms. Sanchez helped the last remaining students who were finishing eating. Although Tyler had not eaten anything in the past ten minutes, he refused to leave the table, instead wanting to socialize with Tommy and further delay his nap. Ms. Sanchez asked him several times to scrape his plate and get ready for nap, but he refused. Finally she asked, “Tyler, are you finished eating? Listen to your body. If it says it has had enough to eat that means it’s time for a nap. You’re body loves food and sleep. You need to give your body what it needs.” Although Tyler continued to resist, he was quick to leave the table once Tommy finished eating. Both went to the restroom and retired to their mats.

Once all the students were on their mats, Ms. Smith walked around to assist anyone who needed help. Ms. Maciel stayed at the tables, cleaning up food that had fallen to the floor, wiping down the tablecloths, and restoring the classroom for after-nap activities. She switched the music to soft lullabies and turned off all the lights, although the midday sun still streamed through the large windows. As she opened the door to roll the tray of dirty dishes down the central hall to the kitchen for washing, I saw my opportunity to leave the classroom without disturbing the students. I quickly gathered my notebook, turned off my recorder, and with a goodbye wave to Ms. Smith and Ms. Sanchez, I left the class to its gentle slumber.

THE MEANING BEHIND MEALTIME

Lunchtime at the Center provides an ideal arena for teaching children how to function at the family dinner table, while encouraging healthy eating habits and good choices through the methods just delineated. A central part of the food and nutrition program at the Center is the organization of the classroom. Designed to resemble an idealized family dining room, each table is laid out with real plates and utensils, and serving ware designed for more than single eaters. Moreover, each table is covered with a tablecloth and adorned with a center piece (flowers). The importance of this attention to detail was emphasized for me during my interview with Ms. Harris. As a Master teacher, she described her frustration with part-time teachers repeatedly forgetting to place a centerpiece on the table for mealtime. With a furrowed brow and a slight frown on her face she said, “I like to see people taking that time in that family style eating ritual to heart and going the extra mile to make the table look nice. Not just be efficient and get it all out. It has much more value beyond just looking nice. It
just says that this is an important part of the day. There is value in this. It’s not just a task oriented thing.” Adorning the tables like a family dining table transforms the classroom area from a playtime activity center to a place for mealtime. Additionally, this home-like feeling not only creates a welcoming, comfortable environment, it also conveys the importance and significance of mealtime.

Aside from the mealtime décor, the organization of the classroom during mealtime serves both a practical and meaningful purpose. The class that usually numbers near twenty-five students is split into three groups, typically with eight students at each table. Teachers sit among their students at the table, on child-sized chairs. This arrangement puts teachers in a prime position to assist children when needed, while modeling proper eating behaviors and dining etiquette; it also creates an opportunity for teachers and students to build relationships and engage in conversation that can be difficult to achieve in the larger group. Ms. Maciel explained, “You are getting to know kids on a level you can’t in the big group. And this set up really helps kids open up! You saw that! Remember with Jacob?” As she speaks about him opening up at the table, her face lights up just as it did that day. “I can barely get him to talk during circle time or outside at Memory Park, but in that small group, sometimes he just comes alive! He can be heard then and he’s got something to say!” This family style set-up allows students to develop an appreciation for mealtime, learn the skills necessary to function in a mealtime setting outside of the center, and build relationships between their fellow classmates and teachers.

Teachers guide children in ways that encourage healthy eating and support trying new foods by attributing positive characteristics like strength and ability to the diet of their parents and favorite superheroes. Telling a child their Dad is tall because he eats his vegetables or that Superman can fly because he eats a balanced diet can provide the motivation children need to try new or different foods. Teachers also used their own influence on their students to model proper manners and good food choices at the table. Children will often try food they normally would not eat in order to be like their teacher or make the teacher proud.

Teachers also take advantage of the importance placed on children’s birthdays as an opportunity to promote new food and eating experiences. In an interview with Ms. Fitzgibbon, while discussing this strategy, she leaned in and whispered, “I know it’s a little
manipulative, but if it works, go with it.” She sat back in her chair and her eyes lit up as she said, “Having a birthday in preschool is a really magical time and we use that to our advantage. They are so interested in getting older and all the trappings that being older brings them, that they are willing to try new things.”

While students were often responsive to motivation from superheroes, parents, and their teachers, perhaps the most effective tool was the peer relationship between students, or children’s innate sociality. During mealtime, peer relationships facilitate conversation regarding different foods and provide a supportive environment for trying new dishes. During one lunchtime, amidst the constant low rumble of countless student conversations, Ms. Nunez looked over at me and with a laugh said, “[They] sit at the table for the conversation, stay for the food.”

Teachers also play on a child’s desire for praise and acknowledgement to encourage healthful eating. Rewarding a student for trying new things or making good choices not only makes the student feel good, it encourages others students to follow suit. When asked about this method during an interview, Ms. Duncan said, “You know the students love being called out or singled out for doing something right. When you call out one, you’ve instantly got twenty kids trying to show you they did it right too.” She then put her hands to her head and rolled her eyes, demonstrating how frazzling the experience can be. As she returned to normal, she continued, “But if it works, it’s so worth it!”

Mealtime creates an ideal opportunity to engage children in a discussion of the food they are eating and its health benefits without the formality of a structured lesson. Teachers will often use this time to talk about why different foods are good for their bodies, the health benefits each provides, and the need for moderation and a balanced diet. While these discussions may run the risk of being incomprehensible for children, teachers feel that by letting students direct the conversation, their nutrition messages are both relevant and age-appropriate. In doing so, teachers strive to build a base of knowledge so that children can make informed choices about what they eat. These mealtime nutrition and eating messages serve to foster a sense of responsibility for oneself, especially at the dining table.
TENSIONS IN THE DATA

While many of the methods explained above were met with great success, it is important to note the areas in which these approaches were less successful or met with great resistance. There were several occasions during my observation in which teacher’s description of their methods (and the relative effectiveness of these methods) differed from what I observed in the classroom. These areas of contradiction occurred most often in the mismatch between nutrition message and audience and the degree to which students were responsible for making their own decisions.

During interviews, teachers repeatedly spoke of the need to tailor nutrition messages so that they are both interesting and comprehensible for four and five year-olds. Ms. Ramirez explained, “It is important for children to know that carrots are good for your eyes and milk builds strong bones. If you just tell them, ‘Here eat this because it’s healthy’, when they are left to their own devices to make food choices, they won’t have the knowledge or the motivation to choose healthy options. But it’s just as important to keep the specifics at an understandable level. You’re working with four and five year olds. A lot of stuff is going to go over their heads and then they won’t understand. You have got to make it appropriate for preschoolers for the message to really sink in.”

However, in the classroom, teacher’s repeatedly referenced topics that seemed beyond the mental scope of this age group (i.e. vitamins, metabolism, antioxidants). Although no overt confusion was noted, these messages were rarely, if ever, met with the same success or sense of understanding that accompanied other messages. As described in the above composite, although a discussion of the vitamins and antioxidants contained in spinach failed to convince Kevin to try some, reminding him that spinach helps makes you big and strong elicited a much more positive response.

As noted in the literature review, researchers agree that nutrition messages should be age appropriate, expressed in ways that can be easily understood and focused on giving children nutritional knowledge so that they can make their own healthy choices. It is important that teachers at the Center incorporate these nutrition messages in a way that is informative, as well as interesting and intelligible.

Another noted area of contradiction was in the degree of responsibility teachers give students for their own decision making at the table. In the classroom, students are repeatedly
told that decisions are their own to make and the Center prides itself on its commitment to instilling children with a sense of responsibility for their health. However, teachers would often question student’s decisions to the point that they would concede to the teachers will, without understanding the motivations for the decision. For example, if a student wanted another serving of the main course rather than having more fruit or vegetables, the teacher would repeatedly question his decision, sometimes in excess of four or five times. This would typically result in the student dropping the serving spoon dejectedly, after several minutes of one-sided discussion.

It is true that this was not always the case and occasionally a discussion between students and teachers or their peers would lead to a genuine change in opinion. However, more often than not, the teacher would speak at the child until they begrudgingly yielded. While it is important to question children’s unhealthy decisions and engage them in discussion about the motivations for their choices, it is equally important to allow them to have the final decision.

Part of learning to make good decisions is suffering the consequences of a bad decision; if children are rarely allowed to make the ‘wrong’ (i.e. unhealthy) choice at the table, they are less likely to appreciate the value of their ‘good’ choices. While young children should be given ample guidance and supervision, especially in regards to their health and wellbeing, teachers should also be wary of the potentially damaging effects of repeatedly forcing a child to make a healthy choice against their will. Relentlessly undermining their decisions does not allow them to enact the skill set teachers are attempting to build and may even limit their confidence in their own ability to make healthy choices.
CHAPTER 6

HEALTHY LIVING IN ACTION

Mealtime serves as the setting for the majority of all nutrition messages, and even those messages expressed outside of mealtime were very similar to those expressed during meals. However, it is important to highlight the non-mealtime activities teachers developed with the intention of actively involving students in their nutrition education. Several teachers claimed to prefer these more dynamic forms of learning; Ms. Dalpagetto said, “We’re talking here about four and five year olds. You can’t just sit them down and tell them to memorize the food pyramid. You have to make it interactive, exciting, and fun if it’s going to work.” Through the use of science experiments, in-classroom enrichment areas, the Center garden, and outdoor playing areas, teachers seek to provide hands-on experience with nutrition and healthy living.

EXPERIMENTS

Throughout my observation, teachers developed and conducted several experiments involving food. These activities, including cutting experiments, crunch tests, and ability trials, allow teachers to encourage healthy eating and teach nutrition while remaining fun and enjoyable.

One day during afternoon activities, Ms. Taylor gathered a small group of children and brought them to the activity table. She brought over a cutting board, knife, and several pieces of fruit left over from lunch, including a banana, an orange, and an apple. Ms. Taylor first picked up the banana and asked the students what the inside would look like. As they shouted out answers, she feverishly recorded their responses on a large notepad so everyone could see. Tommy said, “It’s going to look mushy!”, Angie said, “It’s going to have brown spots for the seeds.”, and Serena said, “It’s the same color as the skin.” She then flipped over the notepad and at the top wrote, ‘Taste Predictions’. She asked the group, “If I cut the banana diagonally,” showing them with her knife, “will it taste differently than if I cut it horizontally.” The students discussed the question, throwing out their opinions to the group.
Each student then voted, with two agreeing the banana would taste better cut diagonally, three agreeing it would taste better cut horizontally, and two agreeing there would be no difference. Ms. Taylor then cut the banana, providing several pieces of the different cuts. Students tasted each, and debated the difference. Tyler said, “When you cut it like a hot dog, it tasted like a banana, but the other one tasted mushier. I didn’t like it.” Fiona agreed saying, “Yeah, Ms. Taylor, at lunch can you cut them up like that because they taste better?” She agreed and moved on to the orange and apple, conducting the same experiment and asking students to make their own hypotheses. They discussed how each tasted, how the seeds affected their taste, and tested their predictions. By the end of the experiment, the group was both satisfied with their results and full on fruit.

Students were often intrigued by in-class experiments and were anxious to participate. These activities, although not always successful, created opportunities for students to try new foods and discuss these foods with their friends.

On another occasion, Ms. Fitzgibbon brought in some vegetables she had grown in her home garden including celery, carrots, bell peppers, and radishes. She gathered seven students to conduct a crunch test. She put all four vegetables in the center of the table, asking students to predict which would be the crunchiest and which would be the least crunchy. After recording their answers she selected four students to be official crunch testers, one each to test the different vegetables. Brittany would eat the celery, Laura would eat the carrot, Tanner would eat the bell pepper, and Ryan would eat the radish. She then explained that each crunch tester would take a bit bite of their vegetable and she would record their noise on her recorder. Then she would play them back for the class so they could vote as a group.

Brittany stood up, walked over to the tape recorder and with a loud crunch took a big bite of the celery. The class all commented on how loud her noise was, some already deciding that the celery was the crunchiest of all the vegetables. As she returned to her seat, Laura ran up to the recorder screaming, “My turn!” She took a bite of her carrot, whirling around to the rest of the group with big eyes of anticipation to see their reaction. Michael said, “That was loud, but I don’t know if you win. We have to listen again.” Next, Tanner stood up and got as close to the recorder microphone as possible. He took a large bite of his bell pepper, squirting juice all over. He hung his head low as he said, “You could barely even hear it. I definitely lost.” Ms. Fitzgibbon said with a smile, “Remember, we’re testing
the vegetables’ crunchiness. *You did a great job!*” Finally, it was Ryan’s turn. He hesitantly made his way to the recorder, staring at his radish. He looked up at Ms. Fitzgibbon with concern saying, “I don’t know if I want to be the radish anymore. It stinks.” “Well, you only need to take a little bite”, she exclaimed, “and radishes are very good for us. Won’t you try it for scientific purposes?” He agreed, and cautiously bit into the radish. A disgusted look covered his face as he shook his head back and forth. With a mouthful of radish, he asked Ms. Fitzgibbon, “It tastes so bad. Please can I spit it out?” She agreed, handing him a napkin to spit into saying, “Not everybody likes everything, but I’m happy you at least tried it. Thank you for volunteering!”

She then gathered the whole group around the table, rewound the tape to the beginning and asked everyone to vote. As she recorded their answers, she said, “See how fun vegetables can be!” She added up their answers and announced, “Our class determined that the celery was the crunchiest and the bell paper was the least crunchy! And now you all are official scientists!”

This activity proved very popular in this classroom and several other teachers created similar variations that provided children with opportunities to try new and different foods while sharing nutritional information.

Ms. Thompson gathered several vegetables and fruits that are known to improve certain abilities including carrots, spinach, and blueberries. She then had Rajesh test his sight before and after eating carrots by identifying numbers from up close and far away. Then Karen tested her strength before and after eating spinach by doing as many sit-ups as she could. Finally, Bobby tested his memory by trying to remember strings of words before and after eating blueberries. Although none of the trials produced great improvement, Ms. Thompson reminded everyone, “These foods are all much more helpful when we have them often. Rajesh might not have been able to see better today after eating carrots, but I’m pretty sure if he continues to eat his carrots like he should, he’ll have great eyesight later on. Vegetables and fruits help us stay strong and healthy so we should eat them every day!”

These experiments encourage children to try healthy options they may be less likely to try in different circumstances. They also present healthy living in an enticing way that may get them excited about healthy living and encourage them to continue these lessons later on.
HOME LIVING

The Home Living area creates an informal, supplemental arena for teaching children about healthy eating and nutrition by providing hands-on experience with food choices and healthy decision making. These playtime moments create ideal opportunities for children to enact the nutrition lessons they are learning both at school and at home. Children playing ‘house’ or ‘restaurant’ create opportunities for teachers to engage them in discussions about food choices and the health benefits of the food they are preparing. Staff also used the process of sorting the Home Living food as an opportunity to teach children about food choices and provide experience making healthy decisions.

On one occasion during free play, several girls were seated at the play dining table, while another was standing at the stove. Kara was stirring a large spoon around a pot, as the other girls made cries of “Mmm” and “Yummy”. Ms. Goodshaw came to the table and asked what they were doing. Kara said, “We’re playing Mommy!” “What is that?”, she asked. Laura chimed in, “It’s like our mommies do. She’s making dinner and we’re all the kids.” “Well that sounds like fun,” she says as she starts to take a seat at the table, “Mind if I join you?” Erin jumps up and runs to the sink, grabbing a plate and cup for Ms. Goodshaw. Laura pantomimes putting a tablecloth on the table and arranging a flower bouquet in the center. Tina asks Kara, “What’s for dinner, Mommy?” She whirls around, wearing a pink and yellow flower apron from the dress up clothes closet. With her hand on her hip and attitude in her voice she says, “Whatever I cook.” She laughs and whispers to Laura, “That’s what my Mommy tells my Daddy.” Mrs. Goodshaw asks, “What are you cooking in the pot?” “A turkey and cupcakes”, she exclaims.

Mrs. Goodshaw asks, “Is there maybe something else you could make instead of cupcakes that might be better for us. Remember, we’re kids and kids need more than sweets to grow up big and strong. What is something you could make that would be healthy but tasty?” Erin suggested fruit and everyone agreed that would be tasty and healthy. Ms. Goodshaw brought over two apples left over from lunch. As she cuts slices she said, “Remember, every meal we eat is a chance to eat something healthy. It’s okay to have things like cupcakes or cookies every once in a while, but we should try to have healthier options when we can.”
These opportunities allow teachers to engage students in discussions about food choices and healthy eating under the guise of playtime. The Home Living area also creates an informal arena for teaching children the basics of nutrition that may not be comprehensible in a formal lesson, but becomes more accessible in a hands-on activity.

One day, a small group of students gathered in Home Living for a food sorting activity. Ms. Duncan grabbed a roll of masking tape and created a pyramid shape on the carpet, designating six separate sections. She then wrote the different food groups on each section in black marker and spread the entire bucket of play food around the pyramid. After explaining what foods are in each group, she pulled different foods from the basket, asking students to decide in which group they belonged. After sorting almost all of the play food, Ms. Duncan pulled out a doughnut, cupcake, and cookie. She explained how these foods were not part of the food pyramid saying, “You see, food groups designate foods that we are supposed to have every day. Like, we’re supposed to have so many cups of fruits and so many cups of vegetables each day. We have to make fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy, and meats part of our diets. The things we have left are all ‘sometimes foods’. They aren’t part of any actual food group because we should not be eating them every day. We should have them in moderation and that means only from time to time.”

Ms. Scott used a similar sorting exercise to circulate some of the less healthy items out of the Home Living area. She dumped the entire basket of play food on the floor and had students help her decide which foods should be kept and which should go. Once they had finished, she gathered the now discarded foods saying, “These foods are ones that we should only have on a limited basis. They aren’t totally off limits, but they are ‘sometimes foods’. It’s much more important that we get our fruits and vegetables and beans and grains. However, that doesn’t mean we can’t have any of them. Just in moderation.”

The informal nature of the Home Living area creates opportunities for real experience with healthy living. While children may think that they are simply pretending to cook for one another or helping organize the play food, teachers are incorporating nutrition lessons that help students practice the skills they are learning and build confidence in their own ability to make healthy choices.
FOOD TASTINGS

Teachers also created many opportunities for students to try new and different foods; teachers and parents would provide foods that were not on the menu at the Center, and often unfamiliar to students, and classes would perform food tastings.

During circle time, Ms. Davis’s class read *The Stinky Cheese Man* (Scieszka 1992) that chronicles the plight of the Stinky Cheese Man who avoids being near anyone for fear of being eaten, while in reality everyone is avoiding him because of his smell. After lunch, Ms. Davis set out a collection of cheeses provided by teachers and parents, after requesting donations of pungent cheeses. As she uncovers plates of Stilton, Limburger, Roquefort, Brie, and Munster, the classroom fills with a nauseating, very strong cheese scent that was quickly followed a chorus of ‘Ewws’ and ‘Yucks’ from students.

Those students who were brave enough tried samples of the different cheeses and offered their feedback. After taking a bite of Munster, Kyle said with a wince, “That smells bad and tastes bad. But I guess that makes sense.” Therese said, “I like all these cheeses. They are tasty!” Carla sniffed around the table and said, “If this is what Stinky Cheese Man smelled like, that’s why he didn’t have friends.” After hesitantly walking around the table, scrunching her nose every time she got too close, Tiffany finally tried a wedge of Roquefort. While she stuck her tongue out and asked to get some water, she eventually returned to the table, asking to try another wedge. As students continue to try the different cheeses, Ms. Davis says, “See? Sometimes just because we might think something about foods, doesn’t mean that they are going to taste bad. Don’t judge a food by its smell!”

In another class, Ms. Troia brought in dates off her tree at home. She gave each student one and asked them to inspect it. The class poked, prodded, squished, and smelled their dates, some already refusing to try them. “It smells like a butt!”, said Jesse. “Yeah,” added Grant, “It looks like a poop.” After the laughter died down, Ms. Maciel reminded the class, “Remember how we talked about not judging a book by its cover? Well, food is the same way. Just because it smells or looks weird or doesn’t look like something you would normally eat, doesn’t mean it won’t be good.”

Although some still refused to eat them, most of the class at least tried their date. A mix of emotions came over the class; some spit their out, others swallowed deeply, tightly closing their eyes, still others enjoyed their dates, some of them even asking for another.
Although activities like these were not always effective in getting students to try new things, they do create opportunities to try something they may not otherwise have the opportunity to try.

**Physical Activity**

While interviewing one of the administrators, Ms. Peck, about these different ‘learn by doing’ activities, she asked me with a furrowed brow, “Aren’t you going to ask me about exercise?” Embarrassed, I explained that my thesis was focused on nutrition and teaching children how to eat healthy. She said, “Oh, well that is very important, but you can’t really have one without the other if you want to teach kids to be healthy.” This showed me that, although the core of my research is focused on food and eating as part of a healthy lifestyle, it would be negligent to disregard physical activity. Exercise is crucial for maintaining healthy body weight, cardio-respiratory fitness, and increasing immune function to fight disease and illness (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2009).

In fact, throughout my observation, teachers continuously referred to the importance of exercise either in discussions with students or in our interviews. Ms. Russell remarked, “A person must be physically active in order to be a healthy person. We need to make it just as important as diet. Exercise can balance out what we eat. We just need to get outside and move!”

The Center offers many opportunities for outside play throughout the day. Memory Park opens first thing in the morning, and during free choice activities, some students will play outside, while others will play inside. Before lunch the entire class moves outside and in the afternoon before pickup, students are free to play in the park until their parents arrive. At Memory Park, students run around the yard, play on the jungle gym, ride bikes around the path, and take turns on the seesaw. The yard becomes an endless sea of colors and sounds and teachers quickly join in on games and activities, organizing races and relays. Occasionally, classes will take walking trips to campus in the afternoon and often teachers also incorporated physical activity inside the classroom as well.

One afternoon during circle time, Gabby, who had been restless since the class sat down, waved her hand in the air when Ms. Anello asked who had announcements. After waiting her turn, she jumped to her feet and said, “My Mommy and me did exercise last
night and I want to show everyone!” She then began demonstrating the different moves her mother had taught her; shaking her legs up in the air, curling her knees up to her chin, and running in place.

Ms. Anello applauded her performance, and with an enthusiastic grin she said, “What a great idea, Gabby! Exercise is such an important part of our daily lives. We should always try to be active. How about we go around the room and everyone tell us their favorite exercise or activity that they do to be active.” Immediately, answers come from all parts of the circle; someone says they walk their dog, one says they take ballet, and another says they go hiking with their Mom. Ms. Anello interrupts and says, “You know, even Ms. Anello gets exercise. No matter where I go, I take the stairs instead of the elevator, even when I’d really rather take the elevator. It’s good to get the blood flowing that way, even if it makes me sweaty!”

The importance of being active was a common topic both inside and outside the classroom. By involving children in fun activities that get them moving and engaging them in discussions about exercise and its importance, teachers may foster their enthusiasm for living a healthy lifestyle.

**GARDENING**

Since they opened their doors at their new location, the SDSU Children’s Center has made their community garden an integral part of their commitment to teaching healthy living to students. Despite construction that forced the Center to reduce their garden, my time there saw the bloom of several vegetables, fruits, and herbs including beans, carrots, strawberries, peppers, cilantro, parsley, and basil. The garden allows students to learn about growing and maintaining plants, and creates opportunities for them to try different foods. Although only one class used the garden during my 4-month tenure, many teachers recounted their experiences with students; teaching them to plant, water, and pick their produce.

One hot morning, I arrived to the Center earlier than normal, and decided to walk around until my observation began. When I came around the corner, Ms. Vanderklught was standing beside what was left of the already diminished garden and with a big smile asked, “Don’t you just love it?” I smiled back and nodded. She sighed deeply, and without turning away from the garden said, “If only you could have seen this garden like it was before
construction. I think the garden is the gem of the Children’s Center. I can’t begin to tell you how wonderful it is to take kids out here and let them get their hands in the dirt. They can really just dig in, get dirty, and learn everything about gardening. It’s such an experience.”

She then talked about how she would bring groups of students out and help them water the plants, and how they would make activities out of picking the rippest fruits and vegetables and would occasionally use them for cooking projects in the classroom. With each story, her smile grew bigger and bigger. She continued, “You have no idea how willing a child is to eat something they helped grow. Being part of that process from garden to table is huge for them, not just because it teaches them about the value of food, it also gets them excited to continue these habits as they grow. They’re trying new food, their cooking their food, and we get to sneak little healthy eating tid-bits in here and there. They’re hearing it and their learning, but to them they’re just having fun.”

The garden creates opportunities for students to learn about what goes into planting and maintaining a garden in a fun, hands-on way. It also allows teachers to incorporate healthy eating and nutrition messages into these garden experiences.

One afternoon, Ms. Green’s class picked lettuce from the garden and after washing it, she invited students to enjoy the fruits (or vegetables) of their labor. Some quickly rushed to try the lettuce, while others were more hesitant. As they ate, the class discussed how it tasted and how their lettuce was different from others they had tasted (the general consensus being that theirs was better). Ms. Green leaned in toward me and said, “Being a part of the growing process really gets them excited to eat what they grew. I mean, look, they’re eating lots and lots of lettuce. How many kids do you know that do that? But since they grew it, they’re eating it, and their loving it.” In this situation, children were much more likely to try something they normally would not have because they helped grow it; being involved in the process makes them eager to taste the results of their hard work.

Later that afternoon, the same class took the several heads of lettuce they had picked, wrapped them in plastic wrap, and as a group, walked to campus. Once there, students sought out to sell their produce, inviting students and faculty to sample their food. Within minutes, they had sold all of their leftover lettuce and returned to the Center. On their walk back, Ms. Scott told them about the process of getting food from the ground to the table, and
how many people are involved in this process. She said, “We have to always be thankful for
the food that we have because a lot of work and effort goes into it.”

The Center garden creates opportunities for students and teachers to engage in
collection about the health benefits of different foods, as well as opportunities for students
to try new foods or foods they may normally not have eaten. While it is not known if these
experiences actually improve their taste for vegetables or make them more hesitant to eat
vegetables they did not help grow, students seemed significantly less resistant in these garden
experiences than on spinach day at the Center. By making them a part of the cycle from
garden to table, these experiences help students develop an appreciation for the value of food,
both nutritive and economic.

Although construction has forced the Center to move the garden, teachers have
already rebuilt two garden plots. Additionally, Center staff and families are currently
organizing a community garden project to improve and expand the garden in the future, and
make it an even more central part of the food and nutrition program.

**COOKING PROJECTS**

The Children’s Center prides itself on the opportunities it provides for students to
partake in cooking projects. During my observation, I witnessed numerous, diverse cooking
activities, and many teachers recounted stories of other cooking activities I was not there for
including guacamole, fruit salad, and vegetable juice. Although students most often
suggested cookies and cupcakes for cooking projects, teachers would encourage healthier
items or alternative recipes for their favorite foods.

One afternoon, Ms. Abele’s class was adamant about making cookies, so she found a
sugar and butter free oatmeal raisin cookie recipe. In small groups, the class took turns
helping mix, roll, and bake the cookies. Throughout the process, Ms. Abele repeatedly
reminded the class that cookies are a ‘sometimes’ food and should not be eaten every day.
Once the students had finished preparing the cookies, she took the tray down the hall to the
kitchen where Ms. Dawson, the kitchen assistant, would bake them for the class.

That afternoon, Ms. Dawson brought their now baked and cooled cookies to the
classroom with their afternoon snack of oranges and bananas. Ms. Abele asked each student
to first have a piece of fruit before enjoying their cookies. Once everyone had a cookie in
hand, they all tasted the fruits of their culinary labor. Cries of “Yum” and “Mmmmm” filled the room, while students discussed the parts they played in the cookie baking process. As they snacked on their creation, Ms. Abele again reminded the class how important it was that they eat their fruits and vegetables and only eat cookies occasionally, although this message seemed lost in the chatter and discussion of a successful cooking adventure.

Teachers would often use food grown in the Center garden as part of their cooking projects. Classes made fruit smoothies from their strawberries, salsa from their tomatoes and cilantro, and kabobs with a variety of their garden vegetables. These projects provide opportunities for classes to discuss the different ingredients – their healthy benefits, the food groups they belong to, and the vitamins and nutrients each provides. In the process they learn how to pick ripe produce, clean it, and prepare it for cooking. These projects foster discussions and conversations about food, allowing teachers to incorporate basic nutritional knowledge, while providing hands-on kitchen experience. In these activities, students may have the opportunity to enact the nutritional messages they are learning and practice the healthy living skills their teachers are attempting to impart.

**TENSIONS IN THE DATA**

In interviews, teachers universally claimed to prefer these hands-on, active learning activities as opposed to speaking to the children directly about nutrition in a formal lesson. Many believed that providing children with the opportunity to enact nutrition lessons was much more effective and more engaging. Under the guise of a game, experiment, or project, teachers are able to share the same healthy eating messages, but in a way that interests students; in this setting, children are learning how to lead healthy lives without being aware of it.

During an interview with Ms. Temen, she said, “I can talk myself blue in the face trying to explain what protein is, or nutrients, or how we are supposed to have so many servings of vegetables a day, and all that stuff. But these are kids. They don’t necessarily want to hear that. I’ll tell you what’s more effective – letting them experience it. Don’t tell them that apples are part of the fruit food group; make an activity out of it and let them come to that conclusion themselves. Don’t tell them they should eat their carrots because it improves their eyesight – show them that! They are going to remember it a lot more that
way.” She smiled, leaned back in her chair, and added, “And truth be told, those activities are a lot more fun for us too! I get to sit there and play restaurant with the kids and tell them all about making healthy choices. I’d much rather do that than stand in front of my class and just tell them about healthy choices. It’s the actual, hands-on experience that’s going to stick with them and keep them making these good choices.”

While theoretically this learn-by-doing approach seems both practical and effective in this setting, and most teachers echoed this sentiment, I found that many contradicted themselves in practice. Although these experiences did allow students to try healthy foods and learn about the basics of nutrition in a hands-on, engaging way, teachers insisted on vocalizing each intended nutritional lesson. In this way, they are doing quite the opposite of what Ms. Temen was describing. Children were rarely allowed to form their own opinions or ideas, nor were they given the time to pull the nutritional message out from their experience because teachers were quick to assert the point of the activity and then repeat it ad nauseam. Instead of letting students experience these activities in their own way, teachers talked at them, thus defeating the purpose of providing ‘real experience’ with healthy living.

These direct nutrition messages, perhaps because of their repetitiveness or the interruption they created in the activity, often seemed lost on students who were concentrated on the task at hand. While some students would engage in discussion with the teacher about health benefits and good choices, most were eager to return to the activity. In light of this, it may be more effective and in line with the Center’s goal to provide hands-on experience with healthy living if teachers refrain from narrating activities and allow children to experience them in the moment and form their own feelings and opinions about the activities. While it may occasionally be beneficial or even necessary for teachers to define nutritional lessons, these should be saved until the conclusion of activities.
CHAPTER 7

CENTER POLICIES

The SDSU Children’s Center recognizes the importance of the classroom food environment in supporting student health by providing children with nutritional knowledge and experience with eating healthy. As part of their food and nutrition program, all food provided by the Center is regulated. In an effort to further ensure nutritional quality and create curriculum consistency, faculty and administrators developed two additional policies to regulate food brought in by staff and families. The first of these policies is the ‘Nut Free Policy’ that mandates that all areas of the Center remain nut free to protect students and adults who are allergic to nuts. The second is the ‘Celebration Policy’ that encourages parents who wish to bring edible treats on a birthday (i.e. cupcakes, ice cream) to offer healthy alternatives and/or to provide non-food related forms of celebration. These policies have garnered support from staff and parents who appreciate the additional efforts being made to support nutrition and safety at the Center, and resistance from those who feel these policies create an invented reality that is discordant with what students experience in the real world.

NUT FREE POLICY

In 2002 the SDSU Children’s Center committed to being a Nut Free Zone to protect its students, staff and parents with allergies. This policy was developed to eliminate the perceived possibility of life threatening reactions to nuts that some of its patrons might experience. As part of this, all parents and staff are issued a letter outlining the guidelines they are asked to follow to ensure that the Center remains free of all nuts and nut containing products (See Appendix G), and the Center posts notices in all classrooms and common areas.

All menu items are guaranteed to be nut free and parents are asked to not send their child to the Center with any outside food. When parents need to provide their child with lunch, such as to accommodate a special diet (i.e. vegan), sent lunches are inspected daily to
ensure compliance with the policy. Although only one student in the classes I observed brought in his own lunch, it was always inspected by the kitchen staff before being brought into the classroom. All other foods must be consumed before entering the building. On multiple occasions throughout my observation, a parent would be outside with their child finishing a breakfast they had picked up before coming inside, having been asked not to bring it into the Center.

These rules apply to all staff, students, parents, and visitors to the Center. Included in this policy are all homemade and baked goods; the Center mandates this ban to prevent an inadvertent exposure to nuts or nut products. If a parent or teacher wishes to donate a packaged food for mid-morning or afternoon snack, they are required to immediately take it to the kitchen so that the kitchen staff can inspect it for nuts. While the potential risk in offering foods to children who may be allergic was the main and overt impetus for this policy, teachers and administrators also point to the psycho-social benefit that allergic children may gain in feeling included and protected and the psycho-social benefit that non-allergic children may gain in being protective of others and ensuring they are not left out. The Center strives to provide an inclusive, safe environment for all its students; attempting to eliminate food allergy risks, real or perceived, supports this goal.

Although the no-nut policy has been in place for nearly ten years, the Center still occasionally receives resistance from parents, staff and students. Although teachers were often open to discussion about the policy, students seemed unable to grasp the need for the policy and often viewed not being able to have nut-based products as punishment.

One afternoon during circle time, Ms. Smith’s class was discussing their favorite foods. Answers were being called out from all around the room. Tara’s hand shot up in the air and she said, “I like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches best!” With a pout she continued, “…but I can’t have any here.”

Ms. Smith asked the rest of the class to quiet down and said, “Tara, it’s perfectly fine for you to like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but do you know why we don’t have them here at the Center?” Still pouting, she pointed at Aaron, who she had been told was allergic to peanuts. Ms. Smith kneeled in front of Tara and said, “That’s not very nice of you Tara. It’s not Aaron’s fault we don’t have nuts in the classroom. The whole Center does not allow nuts because we want to protect our friends and make sure all our friends can play with
us and be safe. And remember, some of our teachers are allergic too. I think you should tell
Aaron you are sorry.” Tara lifted her head and whispered, “Sorry!” Ms. Smith reminded
her, “You can still pick peanut butter and jelly as your favorite food. We just choose not to
have it here.”

On another occasion, upon arriving to the classroom for a full day of observation, I
began putting my bag and lunch into the classroom cabinet. Marie came up to me, pointed
her finger at my lunch and said, “You better didn’t have peanuts in your lunch.” I laughed
and after explaining that my lunch was nut-free I asked, “Why is that important?” She
thought for a minute, shrugged her shoulders and said, “I don’t know. School just doesn’t
like nuts.”

Teachers address questions and concerns about the policy with students when they
arise; however, their confusion suggests that some still do not seem to understand the
motivations behind the policy or necessity for it. While I was most often witness to student
frustration, parents also took issue with the policy.

One morning, I overheard Ms. Smith and Ms. Goodshaw having a conversation with
a mother outside the kitchen. She had brought in homemade banana bread to share with her
daughters class, but was told she was not able to take it to the classroom. Ms. Goodshaw
said, “I’m sorry Mrs. Dorian, our No Nut Policy bans all homemade baked goods. We need
to be able to guarantee that all the food that comes through that door is nut free, so we had to
ban anything not prepared here at the Center. I’m very sorry.” Ms. Dorian threw her hands in
the air and as she walked to the door she said, “Unbelievable. I just don’t think it’s fair that
all the kids should suffer because one has an allergy. There should be a nut-free table or nut-
free room. You shouldn’t impose one kid’s allergy on everyone else.”

After the conversation ended, Ms. Goodshaw looked at Ms. Smith, both shaking their
heads. I began to walk back to the classroom with Ms. Goodshaw as she said, “You would
think they had never been told. They know about our policy when they sign up, they’re
reminded every year, it’s posted in the hallway, on the front door, and it’s available
online.” Clearly frustrated, her hands balled into tight fists she continued, “I just don’t
understand. We’re doing it to protect the kids. Who would have a problem with that?”

Just before we parted ways at the end of the hallway, she stopped me and
emphatically asked, “Do they really think we should separate the kids who have
allergies? Really? Can you imagine if we had a handicapped student and made them sit out of activities because it’s inconvenient to have a wheelchair there? It would be absolute chaos! And rightly so! We are trying to create an inclusive environment here, where everyone is able to participate if they choose to. If there is something you plan on doing with the rest of the class, it’s only right to make it so that every child can participate. An allergy, just like a disability, should not keep a child from participating.”

Although this was the only instance of direct resistance to the policy from parents that I experienced, several teachers recounted similar incidents, and a few parents expressed concern with the policy in the end of the year online survey I reviewed. These examples mostly centered on parents’ frustration with not being able to bring in home baked goods. Many resented that their personal guarantee that their food products were nut free was insufficient and disappointment that they are unable to provide baked goods for their child’s class.

The majority of resistance to this policy was from parents or students, and teachers were often quick to defend the policy during these experiences. However, teachers sometimes also took issue with the policy.

A mother was talking to Ms. Anello as parents were arriving to take their children home. She remarked, “Timothy is upset I can’t send in his favorite cookies for his birthday because of the nut policy. Is there any way we can bring them in and just make sure no one who is allergic has them?” Ms. Anello looked around, lowered her head, just peering over her glasses saying, “Trust me, I know how frustrating that is. Believe me. I wish we could.”

Although Ms. Anello may have just been attempting to empathize with the parent, incidences like these call staff support of the policy into question and in doing so undermine the Nut Free Policy.

Resistance was also clear during an interview with one of the teachers, Ms. Harris. After we discussed the history of the Nut Free Policy and the trials teachers experience in implementing the policy, Ms. Harris got up from her seat, slid the door to the conference room we were in closed, and pulled her chair closer to mine. With her elbows on her knees and hands folded in front of her face, she breathed in deeply and said, “I’m going to be totally honest with you. I just think that we’re setting up the parents to think that it’s the world’s responsibility to protect their child from things. Not that I expect them to keep them
home in a bubble, but I think it’s a fallacy. The world is not going to protect your child from that. I just have a conflict with it. It’s my job to support it, and I’ll defend it because of that, but on a personal level, I think the policy is damaging.”

Later, in a focus group, after discussing general themes that had come up in my interviews, I shared Ms. Harris’s feelings, though never revealing her identity, and asked the group to comment. After a few moments of silence, and several looks of uneasiness between teachers, Ms. Harris took qualified ownership of the statement, saying, “I said that. And I personally do have a problem with this policy, but it’s a personal thing. I have a food allergy and my son has the same food allergy. Growing up, we both learned to protect ourselves because there were no policies in place. I taught him to be vigilant of what he eats, always ask about what ingredients are used, and never eating something you are unsure about. I think the policy is nice for parents, it takes some of that stress off them, but at the same time, we’re not creating these opportunities for the children and the parents to learn how to protect themselves.”

Several teachers nodded, while others nervously avoided eye contact with me and Ms. Harris. Finally, Ms. Fitzgibbon, an administrator, said, “You know, I get where you are coming from. I think you raise a good point, but from an administrative view, this policy protects us as much as it does the students. We could conceivably allow peanuts into a classroom where no one has a nut allergy, but then we always run the risk of sending it somewhere where someone is allergic, or maybe there is a kid that doesn’t know he is allergic. Even if there’s only one or two people with an allergy, this policy is still necessary to protect us. Logistically, we just can’t take that risk. I think this blanket policy is the safest alternative for us and for them.”

While energies thus focused on risk management via the no-nut policy, no measures were taken to teach children how to protect themselves once they entered an environment that no longer provided these protections. Several teachers noted that this problem arose when students left the Center and began kindergarten. During the focus group, Ms. Lewis recounted, “I have had a few kids who were allergic to nuts who have gone onto kindergarten and first grade and they just don’t have the tools they need to watch out for themselves. They are so used to being able to eat everything that is offered. I’ve had a couple parents tell me they’ve had a few scares because they were no longer in this protective bubble.”
All told, the majority of resistance to the policy stems from differing perceptions about its origins and its necessity. In general, students blamed individual classmates for the policy, parents supported secluded areas for those with allergies, and teachers dreaded turning parents with goods away. Those in opposition to the ban also claim that it contradicts the situation outside the Center and in doing so creates a false sense of security for students and their families as it fails to provide the knowledge and experience necessary for students to learn to protect themselves. While the policy serves to support an inclusive environment that acknowledges the right of each person to be fully included in all activities at the Center, many doubted the need for a complete blanket ban on all nuts at the Center and teachers were sometimes unclear or inconsistent in their explanations.

**Celebration Policy**

As part of their commitment to supporting student health and providing a healthy environment, the SDSU Children’s Center implemented a Celebration Policy in 2005 (See Appendix H). This policy regulates any celebration held within the Center, including cultural celebrations, birthdays, and holiday parties. The Children’s Center views classroom celebrations that conform to the policy as unique opportunities to reinforce healthy eating messages and encourage students to make nutritious choices in an enjoyable environment that demonstrates that fun does not depend on food. In compliance with the Center’s Nut Free Policy and nutrition standards, the Celebration Policy restricts parents from providing homemade treats and also bans popular sweet treats including cupcakes, ice cream, and cake; all other foods must receive prior approval.

The Center provides a list of acceptable food choices that adhere to the Children’s Center food regulations including fruit, popsicles, and vegetables and dip. Although this list includes many non-standard celebration foods, parents most often brought in fruit popsicles to share with the class. On a rare occasion, parents would provide more unique food options. One mother brought in a large fruit bouquet with flowers made with bright red strawberries, honeydew, juicy watermelon, cherries, and oranges. When she brought the bouquet through the door, student’s jaws dropped and everyone anxiously rushed to get a closer look. Before she could even sit it down, students were pulling pieces off, eagerly enjoying the different fruits.
However, these less traditional alternatives were not always so well received. One afternoon during circle time, a mother brought in fresh strawberries and whip cream for the class. As she and Ms. Sanchez set them out on the table and the book Ms. Goodshaw was reading came to a close, students grew curious and began to venture to the table. As they looked on, many turned up their noses and walked away disinterested. Karla looked inside the bowl of fruit, crinkled her nose and asked, “Just fruit?” The mother, briefly taken aback, responded, “Well, yes fruit, but they are fresh strawberries that Connor helped me pick out. And we can dip them in yogurt!” Karla shrugged her shoulders in disappointment and returned to her friends, clearly unexcited for the birthday treat. Although healthier alternatives opened parents and students up to new and different celebration foods, students seemed, in general, to long for the more popular cake and ice cream.

In addition to restricting or limiting certain celebration foods in the classroom, the Celebration Policy asks parents to consider non-food related forms of celebration such as reading a book to the child’s class or donating a special item to the Center on the child’s behalf. For example, Mrs. Peck brought her daughter Megan’s favorite book, *Princess Smartypants* (Cole 1997), and read it to the class during circle time. On another occasion, Trevor and his family donated *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (Barrett and Barrett 1982), the book that spurred his favorite movie, to the classroom for everyone to enjoy.

Although some parents did seek out non-food related forms of celebration, the preference for food as part of celebrations still prevailed. For example, although Ms. Peck read Megan’s book to the class, she also brought popsicles to share for after. Moreover, on the one occasion I witnessed where a parent did not provide any type of food for their child’s celebration, students seemed thoroughly disappointed. When Ms. Harris announced that Trevor’s family had donated the book to the classroom in honor of his birthday, Tori asked, “We don’t get popsicles?” Although Ms. Harris attempted to explain how food was not essential to celebrating Trevor’s birthday, her explanation was wasted as most students lost interest at the thought of no celebration food and stopped listening to what she was saying.

Even students who were celebrating their birthdays at school resisted these healthier alternatives.

That afternoon, after the class had read Trevor’s donated book and sang ‘Happy Birthday’, I noticed him sulking on the couch in the corner. Eventually, several of his friends
also noticed and asked what was wrong. He stood up and with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face he said, “It’s my birthday. My Mom made cupcakes but said we can’t bring them with me. On my birthday I’m supposed to blow at candles and you’re supposed to watch me. I didn’t get to and it’s my birthday.” He slunk back in his seat, arms still crossed and continued to mumble under his breath, “It’s my birthday.”

Trevor’s disappointment not only reflects the cultural expectation for food at celebrations and the significant role food plays, it also confirms how early children become cognizant of these cultural norms and traditions surrounding food and celebration.

Many teachers pointed to this resistance as the impetus for the Celebration Policy. Ms. Anello said, “We teach kids from a young age that the only way to celebrate is to have cake and ice cream and candy. We are starting our kids off with the belief that it’s not a birthday until you’ve had cake. And in the classroom that means we’re having cupcakes or what have you all the time! You don’t just have birthdays, but all kinds of celebrations – Halloween, end of the year, Christmas.” In fact, a quick look at the birthday calendar in the Elephant classroom showed four birthdays in one month alone. With a year round schedule and nearly 25 students in each class, not to mention holiday celebrations, this expectation would quickly be fulfilled.

Despite student resistance, the Celebration Policy attempts to refocus classroom celebrations away from cake and onto the child by downplaying the role of food in celebration, often performing specific rituals that engage the class in a celebration of the individual, not of the food that is provided. For instance, Ms. Hudson explained how she has a birthday stick that she twirls the birthday children under and by the time they make a complete turn, they are one year older. Ms. Adachi leads her class in a song about the student whose birthday it is, where each person goes around and says something nice about that person.

Some parents and teachers also expressed varying degrees of resistance. Several parents felt that the policy was too stringent and limited the ways they could celebrate their child’s birthday.

On one occasion, a mother brought in Drumstick ice cream cones for her son’s class. After her child’s teacher and the kitchen staff explained that those were banned as part of the Celebration Policy and would not be allowed in the classroom, she angrily cried, “That’s just
ridiculous! These are popsicles. Everyone brings in popsicles!” Although Ms. Davis tried to explain that fruit popsicles were permitted whereas ice cream was not, the mother continued, “You make it too hard to bring stuff for his birthday. This is allowed, but this isn’t. How am I ever supposed to know?” She left the Center in a huff, taking the ice cream with her.

As the Mom stormed out, Ms. Davis turned to Ms. Thompson and whispered, “Sometimes I really don’t like this policy.” She threw her hands in the air and shook her head as she continued, “I just upset a parent over ice cream! You know, for parents, food can be the ultimate expression of love. Providing cupcakes on your kid’s birthday is such a tradition. I get it! Not commemorating their day with food is, I’m sure, hard for parents, but it’s just as frustrating for me to tell them no.”

Some parents felt that cupcakes were being targeted as a scapegoat for childhood obesity. In an annual online survey conducted by the Center, one parent wrote, “I refuse to believe that one cupcake is going to lead to childhood obesity. I understand the importance of having healthy food for mealtime, but what real effect are cupcakes having on these children. Are we really having that many birthdays that it poses a real risk? I doubt it.”

Teacher’s repeatedly remarked how they disliked having to turn parents away when they were not in compliance with the policy. Their displeasure was more to do with saying no, however, than with the policy per se: when I asked Ms. Davis about this situation in a later interview she said, “You know, I don’t know why they think [the Celebration Policy] is limiting. If anything, we’re actually providing them with more options. We are encouraging a rethinking of the ways we celebrate. We’re asking them to consider ideas that are outside of the box, that are not centered around cake and ice cream. There’s a big difference between limiting something and encouraging a new perspective on something.” With a look of bafflement and a slight laugh she continued, “We just want them to think outside the cupcake!”

I asked teachers to respond to resistance to this policy in interviews, expecting them to defend it on nutritional grounds by discussing how many classroom celebrations there are in a year and the excess calories these celebrations add, similar to the responses found in the literature. Instead, many emphasized the social and economic functions that the policy also serves including reducing consumption and materialism in the classroom, eliminating competition among parents, and reinforcing the classroom as a place for learning.
Eliminating Consumption, Materialism, and Competition

Indeed, birthday celebrations serve as a major source of consumption, especially in the classroom. The majority of items offered to children during classroom celebrations are high-fat, low-nutrient items that add significant calories. Further, childhood birthday celebrations are marked by expensive presents, toy-filled goody bags, and elaborate decorations. The material aspect of birthdays may potentially teach children to place emphasis on objects and associate positive social contexts with overconsumption.

In an effort to deemphasize consumption, the Celebration Policy seeks to restrict, although not eliminate, some of the material aspects of celebration. Teachers repeatedly expressed frustration with the consumption rituals that surround celebrations. This was especially evident in an interview with Ms. Fitzgibbon. While discussing the policy she said, “I had a parent that tried to bring in party hats and goody bags for her daughter’s birthday!” She looks at me with a shocked face, shaking her head. “I had to remind her that the Center is not Chuck E. Cheese and I’m not throwing your child’s birthday.” She laughed and sighed deeply saying, “I love your kids, but I am their teacher and this is a classroom. I am not your social director.” The Celebration Policy reinforces the classroom’s role as a setting for learning; although teachers agree that children should be celebrated by their friends and teachers at school on their birthday, they also believe the classroom is not the proper setting for a party.

In narrowing the material aspects of celebration in the classroom, this policy also aims to minimize competition among parents. Two of the teachers who worked at the Center prior to the Celebration Policy being implemented spoke of parents attempting to trump one another with extravagance and excessiveness, creating steep competition to always outdo the last celebration. Ms. Scott explained, “In the past, it seems that birthday parties for children have become a competition amongst parents. Even here in the classroom, we saw parents trying to outdo each other and that’s when we put the brakes on the whole thing. It’s not something you want kids experiencing at such a young age.” This consumption and consumerism teaches children that worth is measured in material goods and that it is imperative to express your value by competing with others.
Closing the Economic Gap

Further, the Center is sensitive to the fact that birthday celebrations can create social and economic exclusion for those who do not wish to celebrate their child’s birthday at school or who are not financially able to. By minimizing the material aspects of birthday celebrations in the classroom, no one is excluded or made to feel guilty for not providing goods to the class to commemorate their child’s birthday. For example, Ms. Temen explained how several years ago, she had a student’s mother tell her how much she appreciated the policy because, as Jehovah Witnesses, her family does not celebrate birthdays and neither they, nor their child, were ostracized at the Center because of this. She explained, “Some people have cultural or religious views against celebrations and other people simply can’t afford it. They shouldn’t have to feel bad about that”.

This is especially important at the Children’s Center because of the diverse range of personal, cultural, and religious backgrounds they accommodate. The Center presents an interesting demographic as its clientele come from very different social and economic classes; in addition, the Center caters to both students and professors/staff of the university, and the economic gap between these two groups can be very substantial. The elimination of consumerist competition in the classroom through the Celebration Policy serves to elide this gap by taking emphasis off the material aspect of celebration. Children will still be acknowledged on their birthday, but those who choose not to participate in the popular consumerism of the occasion will not be left out.

Teacher’s Reflections

Although it is generally accepted that improved nutritional quality is a positive thing and essential to combating obesity, especially in children, the backlash experienced is indicative of the connection our culture has to food and other consumer goods as central to celebration. This resistance suggests that the symbolic value tied to food as part of celebration may actually outweigh the nutritional value, or lack thereof.

This became especially clear in my final focus group. I asked participants to reflect on their experience with the Celebration Policy and consider ways to improve its success at the Center. With a loud laugh, Ms. Thomas yelled out, “At least this policy did better than the first one.” While some teachers looked around puzzled, those that had been at the Center
for several years chuckled knowingly. I too was confused and asked for clarification. Ms. Vanderklught explained, “Several years ago, we put a policy out that banned all food at birthdays and you would have thought we committed a human rights violation. Parents were adamantly against it. It completely failed.” Ms. Fitzgibbon added, “Yeah, that was a bit of a disaster. That’s when we decided to implement this new policy that ended up being sort of a happy median between our no restrictions, bring whatever you want times and this total ban. So parents are still able to bring food, but we just encourage them to not focus on the food and limit the unhealthy food.”

When asked why the initial policy failed, teachers pointed to two main reasons. First, the complete ban did not provide a smooth transition away from food-centered celebrations, because it abruptly banned all foods. Teachers believed that this was more than many parents could or would accept. Several recalled how parents came to them hopeless for ideas, many only knowing how to celebrate their child’s birthday with food. Others were outraged, believing the policy to be a violation of their rights as parents.

Second, teachers attributed this resistance to the emphasis our culture places on food as integral to celebrations. Ms. Scott described an encounter with a parent saying, “She just refused to accept the policy. She felt that not bringing food in meant that her child’s birthday would not be recognized. For her, and many other parents, celebrating with food is just what you do.” Celebration foods are part of the national consciousness that few are willing to part with.

While programs similar to the one implemented at the SDSU Children’s Center could potentially prove beneficial, educators should be conscious of these cultural attitudes (i.e., toward food as essential for celebrations and about a parent’s right to choose) and the receptiveness of the American public. Both teachers and administrators suggested that a more gradual transition away from fattening and sugar laden foods to more healthy options and non-food related forms of celebration, like the current policy at the Center, is more likely to be well received than a policy that eliminates all celebration food. By acknowledging the importance of food in our culture as part of celebrations, while introducing students and their families to less traditional and healthier options as well, teachers believe these policies may experience greater success.


TENSIONS IN THE DATA

While both the no-nut and celebration policies create a safer and healthier food environment for students at the Children’s Center, they also run the risk of constructing a manufactured microcosm that presents children with a false sense of security in a reality that is drastically different from the one they face in the outside world. When away from the Center, children can be confronted with tempting treats and nut-containing food; by micromanaging their environments rather than teaching them to make choices that are best for their bodies, these policies fail to give them options. It is important that children not just have the right to choose, but also the opportunity to choose. Teachers might therefore aim to prepare children to take responsibility for their health by providing them with a broad base of knowledge necessary to make safe and healthy choices rather than creating safety for them through center policy manipulations.

The No Nut Policy, in banning nuts from the Center, fails to give children with allergies experience in protecting themselves and the Celebration Policy, by only allowing healthy snacks as part of celebrations, fails to prepare children to make healthy choices when confronted with typical sugar and fat laden birthday fare. The time and energy that goes into implementing and enforcing these policies might more effectively be spent providing developmentally appropriate education to the children about how to make healthy choices when faced with unhealthy alternatives and providing awareness education about food allergies so that students are able to protect themselves when needed. These sorts of efforts might have a greater long-term effect as children may apply the skills and knowledge they learn when they eventually leave the Center’s care.
My first day of classroom observation at the Children’s Center had my stomach in knots. I was already familiar with the Center, having spent several weeks observing the kitchen staff and describing the classroom environment while the students were outside. The Center did not scare me; the children did. I have a great deal of experience with young children both as a loving aunt and devoted babysitter, so I had high confidence in my ability to interact well with them. I was not confident, however, about their perception of me. Children often make frank, uninhibited observations about what they see and how they feel. As a person well above average weight, I could not help but imagine the kinds of comments they might make in regard to me.

I entered the classroom while the students were still outside playing prior to being called in for their morning meeting. Around 10:30, the class was led back into the room from Memory Park. Each student gave me the once over, assessing me and talking amongst themselves about who I was and why I was there.

Eventually, after students found their seats and got comfortable, the morning meeting began. I joined the circle, as the teacher had previously instructed me to do. The teacher started by saying, “Okay everyone, this is Ms. Liz. You are going to be seeing her around the class for the next few months. She is going to be here watching what we eat, listening to what we say during lunch time, and learning about nutrition in our classroom.”

As soon as the last word left her mouth, one of her students, Jackson, raised his hand, stood up, and uttered the phrase I had most feared: “But, she’s so fat!” My face turned bright red as I frantically searched my mind for an appropriate response. The teacher quickly addressed the situation, reminding the student and the class in general that some words are hurtful and that you should be careful of what you say.

The teacher put a stop to what had the potential to be an even more mortifying and embarrassing situation (although even now, as I write, I can feel my face get flush and warm). But Jackson’s statement haunted me through the weeks of observation that followed.
What stood out to me was not that he had pointed out my size. He was not the first child in my life to do so, and surely will not be the last. In fact, throughout my observation, my size came up in conversation, either in overtures to me or in chatter between students, nine more times. These included sentiments such as, ‘You’re huge’, ‘I see a big fat lady’, and a personal favorite, “She’s so fluffy!"

It finally occurred to me that the original statement stood out so much because of the way Jackson introduced it: with a “but.” Having just been introduced to the class as someone who would be looking at nutrition, his statement—“But, she’s so fat!”—was steeped in judgment, both of my ability to study nutrition and my authority on the subject. “But, she’s so fat!” meant, however implicitly, that I was not fit to study a topic that is often connected to health and fitness. These concepts, my appearance suggested, would be unfamiliar to me. How could I, as a large person, possibly be qualified to study nutrition?

Although I knew that his statement was not meant to be hurtful, and was simply a very obvious conclusion of his observation, I soon realized that what Jackson said reflected the thorough reach of cultural connotations tied to overweight and obesity. Jackson, a five-year-old, had already become aware of these connotations and understood them enough to make a judgment call based on them. Many scholars and others have commented on how important body size is in our culture; more importantly in the context of my research is the way that Jackson and other children’s statements show how deep rooted these sentiments may be for them to already be present in a preschool classroom. It was clear to me then that I must explore, inasmuch as it was possible through my fieldwork, how children at the Center become so acutely aware of different body sizes, as well as the meanings and associations tied to them.

**Self-Reflection**

Teachers at the Center encourage students to recognize their own and their classmates’ uniqueness, and build an appreciation for difference. Teachers achieve this by providing activities that facilitate and encourage discussion between students about their similarities as well as what differentiates them. Prior (and unrelated) to my observation, the students had begun a series of body exploration exercises. This initial activity allowed students to explore the different eye colors of the class. Teachers recounted to me, in their
interviews, how students discussed their own eye color and their friends’ eye colors. Their conversations revolved around what brings about these differences in eye color, as well as differences in perception of eye color; what may be a green eye to one student is a brown eye to another. Teachers encouraged students to respect these differences of opinion and taught them to appreciate what makes them similar and what sets them apart. Once I began my onsite observations, students continued exploring different physical traits through these activities.

Classmates Michael and Stephanie, along with their teacher Ms. Grosserode, were engaged in discussion during a hair color exploration activity. Both students sat on the floor, looking closely at each other’s hair. Michael reached over and touched Stephanie’s ponytail saying, “You have yellow hair.” Stephanie defensively countered, “It’s not yellow! It’s blonde. My mommy says I have the prettiest blond hair.” They continued to debate her hair color and Stephanie became increasingly agitated. As their voices got louder, Ms. Grosserode walked over to see what the problem was. After hearing their stories, she said to Michael, “You might think that Stephanie’s hair is yellow, but she says hers is blond. Even if you disagree with her, you need to respect what she says.” She then asked both students to talk about Michael’s hair, both agreeing that it was brown. Ms. Grosserode said, “See sometimes we agree, but sometimes you [Michael] see one thing, and sometimes you [Stephanie] see another thing. There’s nothing wrong with that. You don’t have to agree, but you do have to respect one another.” Michael replied, “My Mommy has Stephanie’s hair too so she maybe isn’t yellow. She is blonde.”

Similar activities followed in which students examined everything from foot size to skin color, culminating in a body-tracing project where all students laid on the floor and a teacher traced their bodies. Students then decorated their body drawings as they saw fit using a mirror and crayons, beads, feathers, and a plethora of other art supplies and embellishments. Once they finished decorating, their cutouts were hung on the wall. This exercise sparked curiosity and interest in the class, creating lively discussion. Students pointed out how one body cut out differed from the next, be it in height, size, decoration, or pose. Students discussed their differences, saying, “Kevin’s body is bigger than mine”, “I colored my eyes brown and Sarah colored her eyes green because we look different”, “I’m
dancing but Kurt is smiling”, and “Tanner didn’t color his in because he’s white” [and so is the paper].

One particularly telling discussion occurred between Joseph and Tracy, whose cutouts had been placed next to one another on the wall.

Tracy turned to Joseph saying, “Your body is so big!” Joseph was taken aback and said, “No it isn’t. I’m just taller than you” to which Tracy responded, “But it’s bigger too.” Joseph looked around at his classmates for a moment, sizing up those that stood near him. After a few minutes he looked at Tracy and said, “Your body is just small.”

Ms. Temen overheard their discussion and joined them. She asked both, “Remember that your friends all have different body types. Joseph, every time your Daddy comes in, I have to look straight up to see him because he is so tall. You are probably going to be just as tall as him! And Tracy might be smaller than you now, but you both are going to grow. Remember that it’s okay to be different than our friends. That’s what makes us all so special. Wouldn’t it be weird if we all looked alike?” Several other students then joined in the conversation, agreeing that without differences, people would be difficult to tell apart.

Once the students all had a chance to view their friend’s cutouts, Ms. Temen read a story entitled “Why am I Different?” (Simon 1976) that explored the variety of ways people differ from one another - be it in appearance, aptitude, or preference – yet could feel that being unique was okay. As they discussed the story, Ms. Temen said, “It’s important for us to realize our differences and what makes us unique and special. And remember some things about us are the same. Kurt, Trevon, and Katherine talked about how they all have blonde hair. Students also explored the reasoning behind their differences. Erin said, ‘I’m different because I have a new baby brother!’ Mark said, ‘We’re both people, but I have light skin and you have dark skin Ms. Temen.’”

Teachers used these exercises and discussions to encourage students to speak openly and build comfort with discussing differences, while helping them develop their self-identity and an appreciation for what sets them apart from their classmates.

**BODY OWNERSHIP**

These exercises in self-reflection and appreciation for one’s uniqueness extended beyond physical traits. In the classroom, children are made acutely aware of their bodies,
and the actions, words, and decisions that directly affect their body by the way teachers talk. Teachers repeatedly used phrases like “your body” or “our bodies” when asking children to consider their actions and their repercussions.

Gloria, after not finding the art supplies she wanted to use, became agitated and started throwing the rest of the art supplies to the floor. Ms. Davis came over and suggested, “Gloria, you should take your body over to the bookshelf to calm it down. Your body is acting very disruptive right now.” After contesting for several minutes, Gloria removed herself, sitting alone by the bookshelf, her arms crossed with a scowl on her face. After several minutes, she had clearly calmed down, no longer appearing agitated and was now looking on longingly at what her friends were working on. Ms. Davis sat on the floor next to her and asked, “Can we talk about what just happened?” Gloria agreed, explaining why she became frustrated. “I wanted to use a red marker and there wasn’t one, but there were three blue ones. It made my picture ugly if I used blue.” “I understand that,” said Ms. Davis, “but that doesn’t require a tantrum. Your body was disrupting the entire class and your body threw all the markers on the ground. That made it so your friends couldn’t use them. You need to control your body, even when you’re upset.” Gloria agreed and returned to the table, apologizing to her classmates for her actions.

Teachers also use ‘our bodies’ in order to draw students attention to the repercussions of their choices.

One afternoon, Ms. Smith asked Dean, a student who had been lagging throughout the day and was particularly cranky, “You seem to be feeling very tired this morning Dean. Did you give your body enough rest last night?” “No. I’m tired. I want to sleep. I didn’t go to bed when my Mom turned off my light. I played video games in my brother’s room.” “No? Well now you realize how your body feels when you don’t let it sleep enough. You made the choice to not sleep last night and so you made the choice for your body to be tired today.” The next day, Dean seemed livelier and chipper when he walked in. Ms. Smith said, “You seem to have more energy today. Did you sleep more last night?” “I did!” replied Dean with a huge grin. “I didn’t like being tired so I told my Mom I wanted to sleep early. Does my body look more sleeeped?” With a chuckle, Ms. Smith replied, “It definitely does look more rested! I’m glad you listened to your body and I’m sure your body appreciates it too.”
Teachers at the Center agree that children should learn to recognize the physical impacts of their decisions and the body’s response to these choices. One teacher, Ms. Duncan, described how teachers used ‘our/your bodies’ to achieve this saying, “By referencing their bodies and asking them to consider what is best for their bodies, we are teaching them to take responsibility for themselves. We are trying to convey that the choices they make directly affect them and their body. In doing this, we hope to encourage them to make good and healthy choices, since they realize it will directly influence them.”

**OUR BODIES AT LUNCH**

These lessons of body ownership resonate at the lunch table and are an integral part of the nutrition education program at the Center. During mealtime, teachers encourage students to make their own choices based on what is best for their body; they are not forced to eat, nor are they restricted from what or how much they are eating. While teachers may ask students to really listen to their bodies and consider how they are feeling, the final decision is left to each child.

During lunchtime, Kyle was ravenously devouring his second serving of cheese ravioli. As he went to serve himself another helping, Ms. Duncan asked, “Kyle, before you put that on your plate, I want you to really think about if you’re still hungry. Is your body telling you it’s hungry? Do you really want to have more?” Kyle thought for a moment, shook his head affirmatively and continued serving himself. After he finished that plate he said, “See Ms. Duncan, I told you my body was hungry. It was really hungry!”

On another occasion, Emily had only eaten two bites. Ms. Grosserode encouraged her several times asking, “Are you sure your body isn’t hungry? You should probably take a few more bites. Food gives your body energy so you can run and play throughout the day.” Despite her encouragement, Emily refused saying, “I said I don’t want anymore.” An hour later during nap time, Emily got up from her mat, complaining she was hungry. Ms. Grosserode sat her down and said, “Remember when I asked if your body was hungry during lunch?” “Yes, but I didn’t want to eat then.” Ms. Grosserode reminded her that no matter what she is doing, she should always recognize how her body is feeling. She said, “This is why listening to our bodies is so important. Your body was clearly hungry and telling you that it needed food. You ignored your body and now you’re hungry. I can give you what
Asking children to listen and respond to their bodies is meant to instill a sense of responsibility for themselves and of ownership of their own bodies. Teachers believe that this approach encourages students to take charge of their health and make the choices that will benefit them. In addition, opportunities for self-reflection and decision making should help students build confidence in their abilities to make healthy choices for themselves.

FOOD RESTRICTION

Although teachers at the Center aim to encourage body ownership and responsibility for choices through self-reflection, these values are always at risk of being overridden by parents who ultimately have the final say in the care of their children. Although, as previously mentioned, the Center policy is to never restrict or force a child to eat, parents are allowed to request that their child be given a smaller portion or only be allowed one serving of food. While this restriction is sometimes accompanied with a note from the doctor identifying the child as overweight or at risk for overweight, teachers indicate that parents are also given discretion over their child’s food intake if they have a personal concern about the child’s weight.

Although I was only aware of one case like this throughout my observation, several teachers referenced past students who were under similar parent-ordered restrictions. These same teachers repeatedly expressed frustration at being required to restrict a child at the table. These feelings were especially evident in an interview with Ms. Riordan, one of the preschool Master teachers. When asked about being required to restrict a child on doctor or parents orders, Ms. Riordan looked around the empty room, ensuring we were alone, leaned in, and with a deep sigh said, “I don’t think it’s right to peg a child as overweight at such a young age. You know, some people have bigger bone structures, and that’s not something that should stop the child from getting more. Some of them have a slower metabolism. That’s just the way they’re built. I think if you start to put people in a box, especially when they are so young, well, that’s just not healthy in itself.”

Teachers were especially frustrated at being required to limit or restrict a child’s food intake when that child was left unsatisfied. Ms. Levy explained, “I have a student who is
only allowed one serving and sometimes she tells me, ‘Oh Ms. Davis, I’m so hungry! Please can I have more?’ and I’m forced to tell her no. I think that sometimes parents get overly anxious about a kid’s weight and don’t recognize that these kids are in transition. They are going through all these growth spurts, so sometimes they are going to be a little heavier, and then the next second they are going to be three inches taller and back to normal weight. I want to tell parents, sometimes when you’re more anxious with food, your child becomes anxious about it too. So if you relax about it and don’t make it a big deal, I think the child will eventually learn what a good portion is for them.” Teachers said that children need practice self-monitoring and recognizing their hunger and satiation cues in order to make their own healthy choices; mandated restriction and portion control rob them of this experience. Further, say the teachers, restriction can lead to the development of unhealthy eating behaviors and negative relationships with food. Also, teachers were not the only ones to express frustration with mandated restriction at the table; restricted students did too.

During lunch, Lourdes and David were discussing the day’s events while the rest of the table was sharing ‘Good News/Bad News’, a common lunchtime activity that gives children the opportunity to update the class on what they had been doing. During their conversation, David served himself a second helping of macaroni and cheese, a particularly popular menu item throughout the Center. As he did that, Lourdes looked down at her nearly cleaned plate and with a sigh said, “It’s not fair. My Mom says I can only have one and now school says so too. Why can’t I have more? I’m still hungry. It’s not fair. Everyone else gets more if they want it”.

Although that conversation quickly ended, I asked Ms. Smith for an explanation during nap time. She explained that Lourdes’s parents, on recommendation from her doctor, had put her on a diet that limited her to one serving of the main entrée. Although in this instance, no teacher actually told her she could not have another helping, Ms. Smith indicated that this restriction had been in place for well over a year and Lourdes now only occasionally needed a teacher to stop her. However, a few minutes after our conversation had ended and I was packing up to leave the Center, Ms. Smith came back over and said under her breath, “You know, usually she doesn’t even ask any more for a second helping, but when she does, you just feel so bad. Who am I to tell her no?”
On another occasion, later in my observation, Lourdes again was expressing discontent over being restricted. She asked her teacher, “Why can’t I have more? Ms. Smith, I’ve been good! Please can I have another?” Ms. Smith, with a sad look on her face, came and sat by Lourdes, reminding her, “You know we’ve talked about this before. Your doctor and your Mommy think that it’s best for you to only have one scoop. Your doctor and your parents think that one serving is what it takes for you to be healthy. You can have as much fruit and vegetables as you want. Okay?” Lourdes agreed, but as Ms. Smith returned to her seat, Lourdes said to the student next to her, “It’s not fair if I’m still hungry. I can be healthy with more food. I race you all the time and win sometimes.” After lunch, while cleaning up, Ms. Smith was chatting with another teacher and said, “I really don’t like having to be the one that tells her no.”

Although she quickly hurried off to finish cleaning up, it was clear that Ms. Smith was not comfortable restricting or limiting children, even at the behest of a doctor or parent.

The dissonance between how a child is feeling, what the parent is mandating, and what the teacher is observing in the classroom is problematic for all involved. Students may be left discontented and confused, and feeling singled out. Teachers are frustrated with being required to limit a child based on body size, given their experience with fluctuating weight of children at such a transitional age and daily interactions with children left hungry and wanting more. Parents, attempting to act in the child’s best interest, are not in the classroom to hear them complain of restrictions that leave them unsatisfied. The teachers I interviewed nearly all agreed that children develop healthy eating behaviors through trial and error; not having the opportunity to practice decision making situations, and learn their hunger and satiation cues, prevents them from developing healthy eating behaviors and confidence in their abilities to make good choices.

One month into my onsite observation, having witnessed several occasions of teacher frustration at being required to restrict or limit a student’s eating based on their body size, I began to wonder if these teachers saw each student’s size differently than the child’s parents or even myself. In order to look more closely at the role body size plays in nutrition education at the Center, especially at mealtime, I asked every Master teacher to complete a somatotype exercise. As part of this exercise, they ranked each child in their class as matching one of three illustrated somatotypes (Collins 1991): an underweight child, an
overweight child, and a child of normal or typical weight (see Figure 12). For ethical
dasons, and as per my IRB clearance, I asked each teacher to assign each of their students a
number, without telling me who the number represented. They then anonymously determined
which body type each numbered child was most like, providing me with a somatotype profile
of the class in aggregate.

Figure 12. Somatotype images. Source:
Collins, Mary Elizabeth 1991 Body Figure
Perceptions and Preferences Among
Preadolescent Children. International
The distribution of perceived types is shown in Figure 13. In comparing each exercise individually, approximately the same amount of students were identified as either extreme (smallest/largest). Because there was little variation across each class, all classes are combined in the figure. A medium-large category was not provided in the somatotype three-image set designed by Collins (1991), but two of the four teachers identified students as such by circling between the images. One of the teachers even noted on her exercise, “Not big like your picture, but not medium either.”

![Figure 13. Teacher identified student somatotypes.](image)

Though the raw data yielded limited information (and truth be told, little was expected), the discussions these exercises generated were invaluable. One of the most notable results from the exercise was that every teacher returned her assignment with an added caveat, either verbally or in writing on the assignment itself, noting that the children they identified as small or large were “in transition” and the results were likely to change. For example, when I asked Ms. Grosserode for her exercise, she motioned for me to meet her outside the classroom. She walked towards me, paper in hand, with concern in her eyes and a furrowed brow. As she handed me her exercise, I asked if she had any problems completing it. She replied, “This was especially difficult for me. I just can’t see assigning a child to one of these body types. It’s unfair.” I asked her to elaborate, and after looking
through the window at her class for a few moments, she said, “None of these students are on the extreme of either of these. Compared to their classmates they are larger or smaller, but overall they are quite normal. At this age, children are constantly growing out so that they can grow up. You need to have a little extra meat so you can grow taller. Their size is in no way a concern. I don’t want you thinking because I assigned someone as a 1 [smallest body size] or 3 [larger body size], I’m thinking there’s a problem or anything needs to change. I’m not concerned. No one should be; they’re kids.” Similarly, Ms. Smith wrote on her assignment, “Ask me again in a month. It’ll be totally different. ☺”.

The aforementioned accounts of my daily observation and the results from the somatotype exercises illustrate teachers’ frustration with labeling preschoolers as overweight during a period of transition in which their weights will fluctuate on a regular basis as they grow. More importantly, they suggest teachers feel that making decisions to limit children’s food intake based on these labels is potentially damaging.

After discussing this exercise in follow-up interviews with the Master teachers, it was clear that most agreed that parents were acting in what they deemed to be their child’s best interest when they requested they be restricted or limited. However, many teachers felt that doing so may rob children of the opportunity to listen to their body and respond to it as needed. One teacher said that this sends the message to the child that they are unhealthy and incapable of making good decisions for themselves—and by not allowing them to do so, may set them up for a problematic relationship with food in the future.

**ADULT PERCEPTIONS**

I began this chapter with a reflection on my experience as a larger person in the classroom, describing the way my authority on healthy eating and nutrition was called into question on account of my size. Not only the students but also the parents and teachers expressed discomfort in regard to my body. Although students were more overt about their feelings towards and opinions regarding my size, a review of my experiences with adults at the Center can provide a more nuanced illustration of the connotations associated with a larger body.

On one particularly illuminating occasion, Ms. Nunez mistakenly introduced me to one of the parents, Karen, who was volunteering in the classroom I was observing in, by
saying, “This is Liz. She’s getting her Master’s in nutrition.” Karen looked right at me, squinted her eyes, pursed her lips, and with a look that I read as bafflement replied, “Oh?” She quickly recovered, and with a smile continued, “Well it’s nice to meet you Liz.” This “Oh?”, though phrased as a question, seemed not a request for more detail, an interest in my research, or a desire to learn more. Rather, it suggested confusion over my position within nutrition. This did not feel like an “Oh?” of intrigue, but rather an “Oh?” of bewilderment.

Likewise, Center staff with whom I did not work closely (teachers in the younger classrooms) expressed confusion regarding my role in childhood nutrition education. Many times after lunch had ended and my observation for the day was over, I would go to the teachers’ lounge to type up my field notes and write in my field journal while the experience was still fresh in my mind. One afternoon, the lounge was nearly half full of teachers on their lunch break and one of the newly hired staff members was being given a tour of the facilities. Having met most of the faculty already, Ms. Pham who was conducting the tour said, “Well I think you know everyone in here except Liz.” As she pointed to me she continued, “She’s been with us for a few months looking at nutrition education with our preschoolers.” The new hire looked at me and quickly glanced at everyone else at the table, apparently assuming she had missed someone. When Ms. Carol redirected her attention to me, she looked at her quizzically, turned to me and asked, “You’re Liz?” Although she offered me a courteous hello and smile before continuing on her tour, it was clear that my body was not what she was expecting.

On yet another occasion, after a full day of observation, I was walking to my car with Ms. Smith. In the parking lot we came upon Ms. Bain, a teacher in the infant cottage. Ms. Smith introduced us saying, “Liz is hanging out in my classroom doing her thesis on nutrition and health.” She replied, “Oh. Why are you studying nutrition?” I am sure her question was not meant to sound as curt as it did, especially seeing her face flush with embarrassment. Although she was genuinely interested in my research and our conversation continued for well over an hour, it was evident that my zaftig appearance conflicted with the svelter image she had of someone who would be involved in health and nutrition.
TENSIONS IN THE DATA

These incidents suggest that the preconceived notions teachers and parents held about body size and health affected their perception of me, especially as an authority on or student of nutrition. It is then plausible to assume that these views towards body size may affect the way they teach nutrition and education to children. I feel it necessary at this point to acknowledge my own hypersensitivity about my size in the classroom; my humbling first day made me acutely aware of the precarious symbolic positions that my large body could place me in. However, my subjectivity notwithstanding, these stories illustrate the uneasiness people at the Center had with my role in childhood nutrition education. My body was not congruent with their vision of health and thus my qualifications as an authority on nutrition and healthy eating were doubted.

In addition, these stories capture the cultural mindset that equates a certain body size with health. Our culture shows a clear preference for a thin body; this body represents health, wellbeing, and fitness. This view stigmatizes all bodies that fall outside this ideal, deeming them unhealthy. This stigmatization has been noted in the classroom, both in teachers and students. As discussed in the literature review, young children and teachers show a preference for thinner children in the classroom, whether intentional or not.

These negative attitudes towards a large body, and the meanings applied to it, led many to doubt my qualifications as an authority on childhood nutrition. Further, the fact that Jackson, at a mere five years old, was able to make a judgment call about my qualifications to study healthy eating (as were many of his young friends) suggests that children learn these cultural attitudes that equate a large body with a lack of authority on nutrition early in life. These attitudes, coupled with forced restrictions placed on children based solely on body size in the classroom, sends the message that those who fail to fit into an ideal weight range are incapable of making their own healthy choices and contributes to the stigmatization of overweight bodies in the classroom. This contradicts the Center’s goal of allowing children to make their own choices in order to develop healthy eating skills. As a result, these restrictions limit the child’s experience in making food-related decisions for him- or herself, and, teachers believe, can potentially lead to food-related problems later in life.
CHAPTER 9

THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL VIEWS

Personal views—in this case the idiosyncratic beliefs about food, nutrition, body size, and what it means to be healthy—can lead to mixed messages that give rise to contention in the classroom. These views are shaped by the personal and differing experiences of people involved in childhood nutrition education; parents, teachers, and students are connected together in a mutual trifecta of influence, each allowing their views and predilections to influence the other, whether intentionally or inadvertently. Due to the overwhelming power of personal views to affect programs at the Children’s Center, it is important to examine how personal views on food, nutrition, and eating can challenge the food and nutrition program at the Center. If we understand the role that personal views play in the education of children, those involved may be able to leverage that role in a positive way.

STUDENTS

Although the influence of students in the classroom would seem minimal as they are lowest on the metaphorical academic totem pole, they play a large role in the direction of curriculum, the preferences of their classmates, and even their parent’s food buying behaviors. As discussed earlier, the Center’s Reggio Emilia pedagogical approach encourages teachers to take direction from their student’s interests when developing curriculum with the hope that lessons will be more relevant, interesting, and engaging.

For instance, during lunchtime one afternoon, Sarah was talking about a large bug she had seen while walking with her Dad. This seemed to interest many of the children so many of the activities the next week revolved around insects including drawing their favorite bug, reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle 1969), and creating bumble bees out of paper plates. Ms. Harris even tried to teach a small group of children how to do ‘The Worm’ dance move. I was able to trace many activities back to a lunchtime conversation, circle time
announcement, or a show and tell presentation. Teachers listened to what most interested the children and built activities from those topics.

The influential power of children on one another, especially at mealtime, was already discussed in previous chapters. On numerous occasions, children were able to influence their friends eating preferences and behaviors, sometimes encouraging them to try their vegetables and other times filling their heads with reasons not to eat their lunch. Both the negative and positive power of this influence was witnessed on multiple occasions to varying degrees of success. Students were very receptive to their friends’ food opinions and sometimes more likely to listen to their friends than their teachers when it came to mealtime.

In the middle of lunch one afternoon, Milo abruptly threw his fork down with a large clanging noise, drawing my attention to his table. He sat with crossed arms and a scowl on his face, avoiding eye contact with his teacher. It soon became clear that she had tried to encourage him to take some more squash before helping himself to seconds of the main course, telling him how delicious and fresh the squash was. After trying several times to convince him, Ms. Downum turned her attention to another student who was having trouble pouring milk. As soon as her back was turned, the boy to Milo’s right said, “Don’t listen. I eated it and it wasn’t good. She doesn’t know.” Milo quickly grabbed the serving spoon, heaping another large portion of the main course onto his plate.

Although Milos was already fairly determined to avoid eating more squash, his friend’s encouragement countered Ms. Downum’s attempt to positively influence his eating choices.

TEACHERS

Teachers’ impact on their students was observed on a daily basis in the classroom, but was perhaps most evident during mealtimes. Teachers influence students’ food preferences and eating behaviors through body language and sharing their opinions about certain foods, that children are often quick to adopt as their own. For instance, Ms. Scott once recounted how she told her students that her favorite day on the menu was cheese enchilada day. Every month after that, the entire class eagerly anticipated cheese enchilada day, even starting a countdown at the beginning of the month. In fact, only a few days after cheese enchilada day had passed, I overheard James ask her if they could start the next countdown.
Although this instance was a particularly positive experience, this was not always the case. For example, one afternoon during lunchtime, Ms. Thomas was sitting at the table, eating with her students. When she took the cover off the spinach, she wrinkled her nose up and with a look of disgust, quickly turned her face away from the bowl. Almost immediately, several students asked her why she made that face. After explaining that she did not like spinach, several students refused to put any on their plate.

Although spinach was never a popular meal item, children are very aware of teacher’s hesitance and aversion to different foods, and are often quick to take their teacher’s food preferences on as their own. Later when I asked Ms. Thomas about this instance during an interview she replied, “You know, as soon as I made that face, I knew I was in for it. You can’t say anything is gross or anything like that. You can’t even make a funny face while you’re eating something. They pick up on everything. Even if I don’t like something, I need to check myself and pretend that I do so that my opinion doesn’t influence theirs.”

Administrators are also very aware of the influence teachers have on students’ preferences. In an annual survey about the students’ food preferences, teachers are reminded that they are responding as to what the children feel, not the teachers. A statement at the top of the survey, written in bold and underlined, reads, “The survey is considering what the students like and dislike.” Ms. Adachi, who pointed this out to me while sharing the most recent survey results said, “They definitely know that there are some meal items that I would not like on the menu because I don’t like them. So they always remind us to answer for the children, not based on our own opinions. So maybe I don’t like something, but some of the kids do and that might be one of the hard things for me. That survey really reminds us to check our personal bias and leave our opinions at the door.”

Parents

Although the influence of children and teachers on one another was clear in the classroom, and one of the main subjects of my research, parents were also influenced by their children and teachers at the Center. Although I had little direct contact with parents, children would often mention their own influence on parents during class discussion, and teachers would allude to it in interviews. For example, during circle time, Tim raised his hand and said, “Last night for food my Mom was going to go to McDonalds and told me I could have a
hamburger and French fries. I said we don’t eat that at school anytime and Ms. Maciel said French fries are not good for our bodies. My Mom made spaghetti.” Ms. Maciel looked at her assistant teachers with wide eyes, trying to muffle their laughter and nodding to each other for what seemed to be a success.

On another occasion, I was introduced to a parent at the Center as I was entering the classroom. After a brief explanation of my project, she said, “You know what, there’s been a few times where I’m grocery shopping with Malik and I’ll be smack dab in the middle of the cookie aisle and he’ll say, ‘My school doesn’t have that stuff. It’s not good for you Mom.’ That’s when you run from the aisle embarrassed, but reminded how important it is for them to have nutritious options. I’m reminded that he should eat better, so then I buy better.” Children tell their parents about the experiences they are having at school and the food they are eating, and this may encourage parents to alter their own eating and buying behaviors.

However, this influence was not always well received. Several teachers and administrators noted that much of the contention they experience in the classroom is the result of parents feeling inadequate or that their parenting methods were being criticized by the Center. While discussing resistance from parents to food program policies, Ms. Goodshaw said, “You know, sometimes I think they feel like we’re saying they are bad parents by holding ourselves to such a high nutritional standard. But I’ve been there, I know it’s tough to make a healthy meal when you’re on a budget or working a lot. We’re able to do it and happy to provide that opportunity, but also know that some parents can’t. We’re not trying to make them feel like bad parents, we are just trying to provide the children with the best we can.”

I experienced this frustration firsthand one morning when a mother was turned away with ice cream popsicles for her son’s birthday because they did not comply with the Celebration Policy. While discussing the popsicles with her son’s teacher, Ms. Fitzgibbon, she held the box of popsicles up and says, “Well I think it’s absurd they can’t have these. I let Anjali have these all the time, but you’re saying kids shouldn’t have them. What am I supposed to make of that?” This rendered Ms. Fitzgibbon speechless as the parent stormed out the door, taking the popsicles with her. Her reaction reflects the conflict parents may have between their home life and the experiences their children have at the Center. Although
the Center attempts to provide a healthy environment for children, parents may resist some aspects because of this conflict.

It became obvious as my observation progressed that parents’ receptiveness to policies was often affected by teacher’s reactions to the same policies. For instance, in an interview, Ms. Thompson, an administrator said, “Most of the comments or complaints we get from parents about the policies come from classrooms where the teachers were less receptive to the policy.” She paused and with a laugh of frustration said, “If the parent thinks the teacher doesn’t support the policy, why should they?” Not long after this interview, I was outside the classroom organizing my field notes from the day of observation when Ms. Davis stepped out with a parent, continuing their conversation. The parent said, “Well it just doesn’t seem like a necessary rule, you know?” Ms. Davis shook her head and said, “I understand.” She leaned in and whispered out of the side of her mouth, “And trust me, I agree.” They both shook their heads with pursed lips and parted ways.

On another occasion, during an interview, I asked Ms. Anello about parent’s disapproval of Center policies. She leaned back in her chair and said, “Funny you should ask. I just had a parent in here this morning to discuss the Celebration Policy. She told me she only decided to come talk to me about it after her daughter’s teacher said she agreed with her disapproval about the policy. You know, I encourage teachers to share their opinions, but they should talk to [the administrators] about it. Telling parents you don’t support a policy makes it that much harder for us to enforce it.” The success of programs at the Center starts with teachers; it is difficult to garner parent support if teachers are undermining policies.

TENSIONS IN THE DATA

It became clear in my observation that the points of contention that arise out of personal views were often the product of the disconnection between those that develop the food and nutrition program at the Center and those that implement it in the classroom. The differing goals and motivations of these factions create a potentially contentious environment that can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the program.

The people who develop the food and nutrition program include all administrators and the Supervising teachers and their role is largely pragmatic and logistic. It is their responsibility to ensure that all federal regulations and nutrition education guidelines are met,
while maintaining eligibility for state reimbursement as part of the federal food program. Center policies are developed and decisions are made with these goals and necessities in mind. However, the program is enacted in the classroom by all Master and part-time teachers, as well as occasional student and parent volunteers. They are responsible for applying the food and nutrition program in the classroom by developing curriculum and activities that promotes the Center’s goals and serving food provided by the Center.

The lack of collaboration and transparency between these factions (administrators and Supervising teachers on one hand and master and part-time teachers on the other) leads to conflict and ultimately affects the success of the food and nutrition program. In discussions with both groups, it became clear that classroom teachers are unaware of the requirements placed on the Center by the federal food program, the limitations of Aztec Shops (the food provisioner), and the budgetary constraints on meal offerings. Likewise, administrators have limited experience with the challenges teachers face in the classroom regarding the menu, student preferences, and parent’s nutritional concerns.

All parts should empathize with each other’s experience in order to develop a program that is as effective in practice as it is in theory. Still, it is important that they work through their personal issues with policies and regulations and not allow those opinions to undermine the program at the Center. By using their influence in a positive way, all parts can work together to improve the quality of the menu, the efficacy of the nutrition education curriculum, and the success of programs at the Center.
CHAPTER 10

DISCUSSION

Prevailing Western ideology constructs children as a vulnerable group – both passive and innocent – partly because of their lack of life experience and economic dependence (Berman 2003; Cunningham 1991; Hegar 1999). This attribution of vulnerability is especially seen in terms of health; children are thought to be incapable of making decisions for themselves and are given little control over their health-related choices (Gibson 1995). There is an underlying rhetoric that children must be protected because they are perceived as socially and cognitively immature and not competent to speak on their own behalf. Therefore, they must be safely guided to healthy behaviors and decisions by the adults around them (Kalnins et al. 1992). However, in the past thirty years, a movement towards empowering children to control and improve their own health has worked towards countering this rhetoric. This view of children as capable of making their own decisions stems from the belief that children, when constrained by social factors (i.e. inadequate housing, limited access to resources), may not believe themselves able to take control (World Health Organization 1986). Therefore, it is important to equip children with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to advocate for themselves in their health.

Health promotion efforts undertaken in settings children frequent, such as schools, may however be interpreted as subverting the view of children as passive recipients of health decisions made on their behalf when they offer a form of empowerment through education and experiential learning. As part of this effort, the Children’s Center posits, as one of its guiding values, the desire to empower children to take responsibility for themselves. As part of this, the Center includes in its Mission Statement, as a core philosophy, the freedom of children to choose and explore, and the “need for a child to be responsible for themselves and their actions”. This philosophy states that “As children encounter difficult situations, it is the adults’ role to listen and clarify, not judge, so the children may evaluate the situation themselves” and that a “child should be responsible for themselves and their actions” so they
“develop feelings of competency and motivation for learning when provided opportunities for play and individual choice” (SDSU Children’s Center 2011).

Within the food and nutrition program, this goal guides curriculum development; all activities and projects are designed to instill children with the nutritional knowledge and healthy living experience necessary to make their own informed choices. Ms. Hayes, an administrator, explained these goals saying, “To empower a child, you need to not only give them all the information they need to function independently and act for themselves, you also need to give them the opportunity to practice that ability.” Teachers and administrators alike repeatedly echoed this rhetoric, holding the empowerment of children as the philosophy that guides their entire pedagogy.

However, despite the Center’s formal commitment to empowerment in theory, in practice there was a lack of consensus among educators at the Center in regard to what empowerment really entails and how it can be achieved in the classroom. This was apparent in the ways that lessons or messages of empowerment manifested in the classroom. These variations can best be understood as representing three distinct dimensions of empowerment, each of which was deployed in particular kinds of circumstances. They are shown in Table 1.

The first dimension positions empowerment as a right and involves empowerment at a purely conceptual level. Center staff say that they believe that children are capable of making their own choices and thus should have that right. This way of thinking is institutionally supported as a guiding principle and informs curriculum and policy development. In this view, all lesson plans and activities should foster a sense of responsibility for self and create opportunities for children to exercise their empowerment. This mindset shifts educators away from the paradigm of children as vulnerable recipients of adult’s health efforts on their behalf to viewing children as active participants in their health and directors of their own wellbeing.

This dimension was especially evident in interviews. The desire to empower children, especially in terms of healthy living, was a repeated theme among teachers and administrators. Teachers talked about how the goal of empowerment informed every aspect of their lesson plans; they sought to encourage students to make healthy decisions of their own accord with guidance and support from themselves and the student’s peers. Administrators discussed how the food policies and nutrition programs are developed with
Table 1. Dimensions of Empowerment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Manifestation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment as a right</td>
<td>• Theoretical/conceptual</td>
<td>• Empowerment as main goal in rhetoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Children have the right to be empowered in their health</td>
<td>• Teachers trained to incorporate lessons of empowerment into daily activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Empowerment as guiding principle</td>
<td>• Staff echo/support right of children to be empowered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Institutional support of all efforts to empower children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment as an ability</td>
<td>• Ground practice of conceptual empowerment</td>
<td>• Incorporation of messages of empowerment in daily activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Children need knowledge to make informed decisions about health</td>
<td>• Students instilled with responsibility for themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Encouragement of ownership/responsibility of self in students</td>
<td>• Teachers intersperse nutrition and healthy eating messages in lessons and activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment as an opportunity</td>
<td>• Occasion for children to exercise empowerment</td>
<td>• Ample opportunities to make own decisions regarding health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Development of healthy decision making skill set through real experience</td>
<td>• Sufficient opportunities to develop decision making skills through activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Development of confidence in ability to make decisions on own accord</td>
<td>• Teacher/administrative support of students in the exploration of their own empowerment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the goal of creating an environment that not only reinforces the healthy eating messages children are receiving, but also provides a supportive setting for them to enact this knowledge.

When this theoretical dimension of empowerment is put into practice in the classroom, however, we see the manifestation of the second dimension, empowerment as an ability. This involves on the ground practices aimed at instilling children with the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions on their own behalf through lessons, activities, and interactions. Children should have sufficient, accurate information about nutrition, food, and eating in order to make appropriate judgments or decisions that positively influence their health and wellbeing.

To this end, teachers inundate students with these messages throughout the day. Lunchtime allows teachers to model and instruct children on how to make healthy choices and function in a mealtime setting. Additionally, students are repeatedly reminded they have
ownership of their bodies, as well as the responsibility they should take for their decisions and their consequences. Further, teachers intersperse nutrition messages throughout healthy living activities, playtime, and class projects. It is through these experiences that students are given the knowledge needed to make healthy choices of their own accord.

The third dimension, *empowerment as an opportunity*, would seem to follow naturally from the previous two dimensions. However, this form was limited in, if not entirely missing from the Center. Empowerment as an opportunity involves the occasion to exercise one’s empowerment. Providing children with ample opportunities to put their nutritional knowledge into practice is an essential part of empowerment because it allows them to not only develop their skills, but also confidence in their ability to make healthy choices.

Although teachers endorsed children’s right to empowerment, and went to great lengths to provide children with the skills (i.e. knowledge) necessary to take control of their own health, the opportunities to put them to practice were often hindered by teacher interference. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 5 (Lunchtime at the Center), when decision-making opportunities were presented, teachers questioned student’s choices to the point that any actual change in judgment was likely the result of frustration, not persuasion. Teachers repeatedly echoed the need for children to take responsibility for their own decisions, but would undermine their authority by constantly questioning their decisions, robbing them of the opportunity to exercise their empowerment and develop their decision-making skills. Also, as discussed in Chapter 6 (Healthy Living in Action), teachers would often explicate the purpose of nutritional activities without allowing children the opportunity to experience and interpret the activity in their own way or come to conclusions for themselves, thus forcing the nutritional message and, in some cases, losing the message entirely. In doing so, they undermine the learn-by-doing approach that teachers often praised as a method for empowering children.

Additionally, some Center policies, including the Nut Free and Celebration Policies discussed in Chapter 7 (Center Policies) fail to provide healthy decision-making opportunities by creating a manufactured environment, free of potential health risks, which does not prepare students to make healthy decisions outside of the Center. Also, despite spoken efforts to encourage students to take charge of their own health by making them
acutely aware of their choices and the effects they have on their bodies, the Center contradicted these lessons by allowing parents to selectively restrict their children at the Center based on body size. Not only does this rob some children of the opportunity to exercise their nutritional knowledge and learn how to listen and respond to their own body, it also sends mixed messages to other children.

A full definition of empowerment, as explained in my theoretical framework (Chapter 2), posits that institutional support and knowledge sharing alone are not sufficient. To truly be empowered, children should be given ample opportunities to enact their empowerment by employing the skills and knowledge they have been instilled with in a supportive environment. Although teachers should provide guidance and encourage students to consider the motivations for their choices, students should be allowed to put the skills and knowledge teachers have instilled into practice.

This contradiction between theory and practice may create a false sense of empowerment for children. Students are routinely told to take charge of their health by making their own decisions; however, they lack the experience necessary to exercise their empowerment on their own. It is important that students are given ample opportunities to exercise their decision-making skills. Without this experience, it is less likely that children will attempt to exercise their empowerment, especially outside the protected environment of the Children’s Center.

These contradictions stemmed from several sources at the Center. First, teachers must operate within the confines of a multitude of factors in developing and implementing nutrition education strategies at the Center. In this way, their teaching strategies are not entirely their own, but rather the product of the interaction of these various parts. As such, teachers are disempowered within their own classrooms. Despite being equipped with the skills necessary to effectively form education strategies, they are forced to function within this manifold structure of nutrition education which influences, informs, and controls their pedagogy. They are unable to exercise their own empowerment in the classroom and make decisions that they deem best for their class, but instead are required to conform to standards established by the government programs, institutional structure, and the classroom environment.
This results in disempowered teachers attempting to empower children. This disempowerment of educators was exacerbated by the lack of transparency in the Center’s hierarchical structure. As discussed in Chapter 9 (The Impact of Personal Bias), there is a lack of communication between higher staff (administrators and Supervising teachers) and teachers in the classroom (Master and part-time teachers). This leads to a lack of consensus about what it means to be empowered and how it can be achieved in the classroom.

Although there was a strong, shared rhetoric that children should be empowered, staff varied in the degree to which they believed children could be empowered. Some committed to a very strong form of empowerment in which children should be solely in charge of their health, believing that it is through trial and error that children learn to appreciate the value of healthy living. Others felt that at their young age, children are incapable of making choices their own, requiring protection and guidance. This lack of consensus and understanding was most evident in the lack of understanding many of the part-time teachers, who make up the majority of educators in the classroom (three or four part-time teachers and only one Master teacher in the classroom typically), seemed to have of empowerment. When asked to describe how she empowers children at the dining table, Ms. Jackson shrugged her shoulders and said, “I don’t really know. I mean, I guess I kind of just do what I’m told to do. Make sure they eat well and use their manners. But I don’t think I’d have any idea how to empower someone. I mean, I’m just doing what I’m told as part of my job.”

This sentiment was echoed by the majority of part-time teachers, and even though most understood empowerment as a guiding principle at the Center, they failed to see how teacher’s lessons and activities contributed to this empowerment, most admitting that they were just doing as they were instructed by Master and Supervising teachers and other administrators. Most were simply performing the duties required of their job without recognizing the motivations and deeper meanings behind their actions.

Administrators and higher-level teachers agreed that helping children understand the motivations behind their actions and decisions is essential to empowering them to make good choices. Ms. Hayes said, “You can’t just tell them to do something, they need to know why they are doing it. Once they understand the motivation behind what they are doing, they may be more likely to do it on their own. Tell them why they want to [eat healthy], and this understanding will help them make that choice later.”
It is not only important that all teachers and administrators agree on a definition of empowerment and how that should be enacted in the classroom, but that they themselves feel capable of empowering students. Teachers, as much as the students they teach, need to be empowered within the structure of the Center in order to first realize, and then actualize the child empowerment principles of the Center. This involves guidance from administrators in understanding the goal of empowerment, being instilled with the skill set and information necessary to successfully fulfill this goal, and training in how to enact this goal as part of daily lessons and activities.

While this research notes a significant lack of opportunity to exercise empowerment, it is equally important to recognize the instances in which their empowerment efforts were successful. On occasion, a child would use the experience and knowledge they learned at the Center to not only make their own choices, but also influence the health behaviors of the people around them. As discussed earlier, students would learn about the consequences of their decisions from the lessons of body ownership and use that experience to make better decisions the next time including getting more sleep or making better food choices. Additionally, parent’s recounted instances where their children would remind them of the healthy lessons they had learned at the Center in the middle of the cookie aisle at the store or the fast-food drive through, ultimately convincing them to make a healthier choice.

However, despite these successes, it is difficult to determine the degree to which the class as a whole is not only receiving the messages of empowerment, but enacting them in their own lives due to this lack of consensus about empowerment at the Center. The goals of empowerment must be explicated in order to determine if the Center is successful in achieving its aims. This includes not only what empowerment means, but the degree to which the Center allows and expects their students to take charge of their own health. As part of this, Center staff must see their students as partners in the promotion of their health with an acceptance that children are competent to represent themselves, make their own choices, and be active participants in their own health.

Until all educators at the Center can come to a consensus and understanding of what it means to empower a child, and how that should be manifested in the classroom, contradictions and points of contention will continue to rise in the classroom and the Center.
will not be able to evaluate their efforts to empower children and work towards truly obtaining the goal of empowering children to take charge of their health.
CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

With rates of childhood obesity in America on the rise, early nutrition education is imperative. Preschool teachers serve a vital role in the development of food and nutrition programs and the spread of healthy living knowledge. Nutrition education involves the interaction of a multitude of factors including government and institutional mandates, the classroom environment, class composition and diversity, parents and students, and teacher’s personal bias. Teachers must negotiate between these factors in order to develop strategies for crafting and conveying nutrition messages for their students.

By using a holistic, systems approach, this thesis examined the multifaceted nature of health and nutrition at the SDSU Children’s Center and the effect these different factors have on nutrition education for children. It then explored the various methods teachers employed in the classroom to convey nutritional knowledge and develop healthy living skills, both at mealtime and throughout the day. It discussed how these strategies were the product of teachers negotiating the often conflicting factors of nutrition education, by taking a critical look at the Center’s guiding principle of childhood empowerment. In discussing the various manifestations of empowerment in the classroom, it challenged teachers to strive for consistency of message, and move beyond the production of nutritional knowledge by allowing children to enact their empowerment by taking control of their health and well being by developing their decision making skills with actual experience.

Although this research provides teachers at the SDSU Children’s Center with the opportunity to reflect on their teaching strategies, there were several limitations, both in research design and scope. Although the teachers, students, and administrators I interviewed and observed provided me with a wealth of data, a larger, and perhaps more diverse sample could strengthen this research. I had difficulty recruiting part time teachers to participate in interviews and focus groups and feel that more input from them would have resulted in a more critical look at the way these strategies are enacted in the classroom, as day-to-day goings-on are typically the result of their interpretation of administrators and
Supervising/Master teachers lesson plans. Also, the student body did not change during my observation, so perhaps with a longer study, I could gain a greater understanding of the impact of class diversity on teaching strategies. Finally, it would have been beneficial to conduct a focus group prior to beginning observation and initial interviews. In the final focus group, conducted after all data had been collected and analyzed, teachers expressed interest and sometimes concern in topics I had failed to fully examine.

Although limited, this research provides groundwork in the investigation of teacher’s strategies for negotiating the manifold nature of nutrition education, as well as the empowerment of children to control their health and wellbeing. Having provided a critical analysis of the manifestation of empowerment in the classroom, a study of the efficacy of these empowerment strategies could prove beneficial for a wide range of researchers including anthropologists, educators, and public health officials. Ideally, this research would look at the degree to which children enact their empowerment by taking charge of their own health after they have left the Center and are no longer in a controlled environment. This may shine light on the degree to which the empowerment of children is effective in a world in which they are inherently disempowered and may eventually contribute to the subversion of this national rhetoric and a paradigm shift towards seeing children as active participants in their health.
REFERENCES

Aguirre, Patricia  
2010  An Anthropological View of the Impact of Poverty and Globalization on the  
Emerging Epidemic of Obesity.  In Diabetes in Women.  Agathocies Tsatsoulis, Jennifer  

Amaral, L. A. N., and J. M. Ottino  

Anyon, Jean  

Archbald, Douglas, and Andrew C. Porter  
1994  Curriculum Control and Teachers’ Perceptions of Autonomy and Satisfaction.  

Ashcroft, Leslie  

Auinger, Robert  
1994  Sources of Variation in Ethno-Graphic Interview Data: Food Avoidances in the Ituri  

Bahloul, Joelle  
1989  From a Muslim Banquet to a Jewish Seder: Foodways and Ethnicity among North  
African Jews.  In Jews Among Arabs Contacts and Boundaries.  Mark Cohen and  

Baranowski, Thomas  
1989  Reciprocal Determinism at the Stages of Behavior Change: An Integration of  
Community, Personal and Behavioral Perspectives.  International Quarterly of  
Community Health Education 10(4):297-327.

Barrett, Judi, and Ronald Barrett  

Bauer, Katherine, Y. Wendy Yang, and S. Bryn Austin  
2004  “How Can We Stay Healthy When You’re Throwing All of This in Front of Us?”  
Findings from Focus Groups and Interviews in Middle Schools on Environmental  

Baxter, Suzanne Domel  
1998  Are Elementary Schools Teaching Children to Prefer Candy but Not Vegetables?  
Berman, Helene

Bernard, H. Russell, ed.

Birch, Leann L.

Birch, Leann L. and J. Fisher

Blocker, Deborah E., and Nicholas Freudenberg

Boomer, Garth

Borra, Susan, Lisa Kelly, Michael B. Shirreggs, Kerry Neville, and Constance J. Geiger

Bourdieu, Pierre

Bowman, Ruth A.
2007 Evaluating Experiential Nutrition Programs in Elementary Schools: A Multi-Site Comparative Case Study. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Educational Policy and Administration, University of Minnesota.

Briggs, Marilyn, SeAnne Safaii, and Deborah Lane Beall

Bronner, Yvonne
Browne, Annette J., and Colleen Varcoe
2006 Critical Cultural Perspectives and Health Care Involving Aboriginal Peoples.

Brownell, Kelly D., Rebecca M. Puhl, Marlene B. Schwartz, and Leslie Rudd

Brylinsky, Jody A., and James C. Moore
1994 The Identification of Body Build Stereotypes in Young Children. Journal of

Caldwell, Louise B.
2002 Bringing Learning to Life: A Reggio Approach to Early Childhood Education. New
York: Teachers College Press.

California Department of Education
2009 “California Department of Education: Child Care Component of the CACFP.”

Caplan, Patricia

Carle, Eric

Center for Disease Control and Prevention
1996 “Guidelines for School Health Programs to Promote Lifelong Healthy Eating.”
2009 “Center for Disease Control and Prevention: Childhood Overweight and Obesity.”

Chan, Lim
2010 A Brief Introduction to Anthropological Perspectives on Diet: Insights into the Study

Cho, Hyunyi and Michelle Zbell Nadow
2004 Understanding Barriers to Implementing Quality Lunch and Nutrition Education.

Cole, Babette

Collins, Mary Elizabeth
1991 Body Figure Perceptions and Preferences Among Preadolescent Children.

Colon-Ramos, Uriyoan, Audie A. Atienza, Deanne Weber, Melissa Taylor, Christina Uy, and
Amy Yaroch
2009 Practicing What They Preach: Health Behaviors of Those Who Provide Health
Conger, Jay A., and Rabindra N. Kanungo

Connell, Raewyn

Connell, David B., Ralph R. Turner, and Elaine F. Mason

Contento, I., F. I. Balch, and Y. L. Bronner

Cooper, Eugene

Corwin, Ronald G.

Crooks, Deborah L.

Cunningham, Hugh

Davies, Charlotte Aull

Davis, K., and K. K. Christoffel

Deckelbaum, Richard J., and Christine L. Williams

Doane, Gweneth Hartrick, and Colleen Varcoe
2005 Family Nursing as Relational Inquiry: Developing Health-Promoting Practice. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

Douglas, Mary

Duffy, Jim, Kelly Warren, and Margaret Walsh
2001 Classroom Interactions: Gender of Teacher, Gender of Student, and Classroom Subject. Sex Roles 45(9/10):579-593.
Dutta, Mohan Jyoti, and Rebecca de Souza  

Dwyer, J.  

Edwards, Carolyn, ed.  

Erickson, Frederick, Rishi Bagrodia, Alison Cook-Sather, Manuel Espinoza, Susan Jurow, Jeffrey J. Shultz, and Joi Spencer  

Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics  

Fleischhacker, Sheila  

Flores, Maria Timmons  

Gade, Daniel W.  

Gandini, Lella, Susan Etheredge, and Lynn Hill, eds.  

Gaziel, Haim  

Geertz, Clifford  

Geuss, Raymond  

Gibson, Cheryl H.  
Glaser, Barney G.  

Goody, Cynthia, and Lorena Drago  

Green, Lawrence W., Lucie Richard, and Louise Potvin  

Greenleaf, Christy, and Karen Weiller-Abels  

Gunderson, Gordon W.  

Harris, Mary B., Laurie C. Walters, and Stefanie Waschull  

Harris, Mary B., Richard J. Harris, and Stephen Bochner  

Harris, Marvin, and Eric Ross  

Hart, Ann Weaver  

Hart, K. H., J. A. Bishop, and H. Truby  

Hegar, Rebecca L.  

Hewett, Valarie  

Hoffman, Ingrid  


Latner, J., K. O’Brien, L. Durso, L. Brinkman, and T. MacDonald
2008  Weighing Obesity Stigma: The Relative Strength of Different Forms of Bias.  

Lear, Julia G.
2002  Schools and Adolescent Health: Strengthening Services and Improving Outcomes.  

Lentz, Carola

Levenstein, Harvey

Lewellen, Ted

Lewin-Benham, Ann

Linebarger, Deborah L., and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski

Lutz, Frank W.

Marcus, George E., and Michael M. J. Fischer

Marks, James S., Lloyd Koble, and Frederick Trowbridge

Matossian, Mary Kilbourne

McNeil, Linda M.

Mennell, Stephen
Mintz, Sidney, and Christine M. DuBois  

Moore, Henrietta L.  

Musher-Eizenman, Dara, Shayla Holub, Amy Barnhart Miller, Sara E. Goldstein, and Laura Edwards-Leeper  

National Center for Education Statistics  

Neumark-Sztainer, D., M. Story, and T. Harris  
1999 Beliefs and Attitudes about Obesity among Teachers and School Health Care Providers Working with Adolescents. Journal of Nutrition Education 31:3-9

Ogden, C. L., K. M. Flegal, M. D. Carroll, and C. L. Johnson  

Olson, Christine M., Carol M. Devine, and Edward A. Frongillo Jr.  

Ortner, Sherry B.  

Perez-Rodrigo, Carmen and Javier Aranceta  

Perez-Rodrigo, Carmen, Knut-Inge Klepp, Agneta Yngve, Michael Sjöström, Lynn Stockley, and Javier Aranceta  

Perrow, Charles  

Pfeffer, Jeffrey  

Prelip, Michael, Jennifer T. Erasmusquin, Wendelin Slusser, Stephanie Vecchiarelli, Heather Weightman, Linda Lange, and Charlotte Neumann  
Puhl, Rebecca, and Janet D. Latner  

Ross, James G., Russell V. Luepker, Gary D. Nelson, Pedro Saavedra, and Betty M. Hubbard  

Rossiter, Melissa, Theresa Glanville, Jennifer Taylor, and Ilya Blum  

Rothblum, Esther, Pamela Brand, Carol Miller, and Helen Oetjen  

Ryckman, Richard M., Michael A. Robbins, Linda M. Kaczor, and Joel A. Gold  

Saft, Elizabeth W., and Robert C. Pianta  

Schultz, Steven B.  

Scieszka, Jon  

SDSU Children’s Center  

Sharma, Manoj, and John A. Romas  
2011 Theoretical Foundations of Health Education and Health Promotion. Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett Learning.

Simon, Norma  

Simoons, Frederick J.  

Simon, Roger, and Donald Dippo  

Sonyi, Madison D.  
Spence, Marsha L.  

Stang, Jamie S., Mary Story, Barbara Kalina, and M. Patricia Snyder  

Strauss, Anselm L.  

Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin  


Strauss, Richard S., and Harold A. Pollack  


Tapper, Richard, and Nancy Tapper  

Thorton, Robert J.  

U.S. Department of Agriculture  


U.S. Department of Education  

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture  

Wadden, Thomas A., and Albert J. Stunkard, eds.  
Wallace, Mike

Ward, Dianne, Derek Hales, Katie Haverly, Julie Marks, Sara Benjamin, Sarah Ball, and S. Trost

Watts, Sheldon Oliver

Wechsler, Howell, Randolph S. Devereaux, Margaret Davis, and Janet Collins

Wechsler, Howell, Nancy D. Brener, Sarah Kuester, and Clare Miller

Westenhoefer, Joachim

White, David Gordon

Whitehead, Harriet

Wiecha, Jean L., Daniel Finkelstein, Philip J. Troped, Maren Fragala, and Karen E. Peterson
2006  School Vending Machine Use and Fast-Food Restaurant Use are Associated with Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Intake in Youth. Journal of the American Dietetic Association 106:1624-1630.

Wolfe, Wendy and Cathy C. Campbell

World Health Organization

Zeller, Meg H., Jennifer Reiter-Purtil, and Christina Ramey
APPENDIX A

FRESEARCH Q&A NOTICE
My name is Elizabeth Herlihy. I am a graduate student in the anthropology department at San Diego State University. I will be conducting research for my thesis at the Childcare Center, looking at nutrition education among preschool aged children. All parents, administrators, and teachers are invited to attend a Q&A session where I will present an outline of my research and answer any questions you have. If you are unable to attend, please feel free to contact me.

Contact Information
Elizabeth Herlihy
herlihy@rohan.sdsu.edu
(925) 628-2969
Dear ________________,

My name is Elizabeth Herlihy and I am a graduate student in the anthropology department at San Diego State University. I am conducting research that explores preschool teachers’ nutrition education strategies for my master’s thesis.

I am requesting your participation in my study. Beyond observing your teaching strategies in the classroom, I hope to also conduct two individual interviews with you. If you agree to participate, you will be asked questions regarding your experience with nutrition education, your personal views on nutrition, the factors that may impact nutrition education, and the strategies you employ in teaching nutrition. These interviews should last no more than one and a half hours and will be scheduled at your convenience. I also hope to conduct a focus group with all my subjects that will be scheduled at a convenient time for all participants. This focus group should last no longer than two hours.

I am including a more detailed outline of my research which describes the objectives of my research, as well as the time commitment I am requesting of you. I encourage you to thoroughly read through it before agreeing to participate.

Below is my contact information; if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. If you have read all the information and are interested in participating, please sign and return the attached informed consent form. Thank you for your time.

Elizabeth Herlihy
Herlihy@rohan.sdsu.edu
(925) 628-2969
APPENDIX C

CENTER MENU
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>Snack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Corn Cereal, Fresh Apples &amp; Oranges &amp; Bananas, Milk</td>
<td>Turkey Burgers, Buns, Baked Beans-Vegetarian, Bananas, Milk</td>
<td>Vanilla Wafers, Fresh, Oranges &amp; Bananas &amp; Apples, Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Rice Cereal, Fresh Apples &amp; Oranges &amp; Bananas, Milk</td>
<td>Cotttage Cheese, Whole Wheat Rolls, Steamed Broccoli, Pineapple Chuncks, Milk</td>
<td>Blueberry Muffins, Apples, Oranges &amp; Bananas, Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Waffles, Fresh Fruit, Milk</td>
<td>Chicken Quesadilla, Mexican Rice, Steamed Carrots, Apples, Milk</td>
<td>String Cheese, Apples, Oranges &amp; Bananas, Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>English Muffins, Fresh Oranges &amp; Bananas &amp; Apples, Jelly, Milk</td>
<td>Cheese Ravioli in Marinara Sauce, Steamed Spinach, Oranges, Milk</td>
<td>Ritz Crackers, Apples Oranges &amp; Bananas, Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Oat Cereal, Fresh Bananas &amp; Oranges &amp; Apples, Milk</td>
<td>Roasted Turkey, Small Tube Pasta, Alfredo Pesto Sauce, Peas, Fresh Fruit Salad, Milk</td>
<td>Graham Crackers, Apples, Oranges &amp; Bananas, Water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Week 2

#### Monday

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>Snack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oat Cereal</td>
<td>Chicken Salad</td>
<td>Yogurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oranges &amp; Apples &amp; Bananas</td>
<td>Wheat Crackers</td>
<td>Oranges, Apples &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Steamed Zucchini</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oranges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bananas I/T</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Tuesday

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>Snack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oatmeal</td>
<td>Macaroni &amp; Cheese</td>
<td>Cheese crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frozen Berries</td>
<td>Roasted Turkey</td>
<td>Fresh Oranges, Apples &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Green Beans</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apples</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bananas - as needed for infants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Wednesday

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>Snack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pancakes</td>
<td>Turkey Meatballs in Marinara Sauce</td>
<td>Cereal Bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canned Pears</td>
<td>Rainbow Rotelli</td>
<td>Fresh Apples &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Mixed Vegetables</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bananas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Thursday

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>Snack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raisin Toast</td>
<td>Chicken Teriyaki</td>
<td>Akmak Crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oranges &amp; Apples &amp; Bananas</td>
<td>Long Grain Rice</td>
<td>Apples, Oranges &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Steamed Carrots</td>
<td>Cracker Spread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandarin Oranges</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Friday

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>Snack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rice Cereal</td>
<td>Cheese Enchiladas-no sauce infants</td>
<td>Animal Crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apples, Bananas</td>
<td>Black Beans</td>
<td>Apples, Oranges &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oranges</td>
<td>Corn</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Oranges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bananas - I/T</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Week 3

### Monday

**Breakfast**
- Rice Cereal
- Apples & Bananas & Oranges
- Milk

**Lunch**
- Chicken Strips
- Celery-Ranch Dressing
- Steamed Broccoli (I/T)
- Apples
- Bananas - I/T
- Dinner Rolls
- Milk

**Snack**
- Cheese Sticks
- Oranges, Apples & Bananas
- Water

### Tuesday

**Breakfast**
- Cinnamon Toast
- Apples, Oranges & Bananas
- Milk

**Lunch**
- Flour Tortilla
- Shredded Cheddar Cheese
- Refried Beans
- Mixed Vegetables
- Oranges
- Bananas-as needed for infants
- Milk

**Snack**
- Pretzels
- Apples, Oranges & Bananas
- Water

### Wednesday

**Breakfast**
- Oat Cereal
- Apples & Bananas & Oranges
- Milk

**Lunch**
- Egg Salad
- Turkey Meatballs-Infants
- Whole Wheat Melba Toast
- Steamed Green Beans
- Apples
- Milk

**Snack**
- Pita Bread
- Sunflower Seed Butter
- Jelly
- Apples, Oranges, & Bananas
- Water

### Thursday

**Breakfast**
- Whole Wheat Bagels
- Cream Cheese
- Oranges, Apples & Bananas
- Milk

**Lunch**
- Vegetarian Lasagne
- Steamed Yellow Squash
- Garlic bread
- Bananas
- Milk

**Snack**
- Vanilla Wafers
- Apples, Bananas & Oranges
- Water

### Friday

**Breakfast**
- Corn Cereal
- Oranges, Apples & Bananas
- Milk

**Lunch**
- Chicken Chow Mein
- Snap Peas
- Steamed Carrots I/T
- Rice
- Oranges
- Milk

**Snack**
- Wheat Thins
- Oranges, Apples & Bananas
- Water
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monday</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Breakfast</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Oat Cereal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apples, Bananas &amp; Oranges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lunch</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Turkey Meatballs and Noodles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Steamed Broccoli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fresh Fruit Mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Snack</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Animal Crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apples, Oranges &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tuesday</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Breakfast</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Corn Cereal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apples, Oranges &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lunch</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tuna Salad Sandwich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wheatberry Bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Peas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Snack</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apple Muffins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apples Oranges &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wednesday</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Breakfast</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wheat Toast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apples, Bananas, Oranges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Jelly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lunch</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Chicken Foccacia Pizza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Steamed Carrots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bananas-as needed for infants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Snack</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ritz Crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apples Oranges &amp; Bananas or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thursday</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Breakfast</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Waffles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Frozen Fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lunch</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sloppy Joes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hamburger Buns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Corn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Oranges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Snack</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Yogurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Graham Crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friday</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Breakfast</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rice Cereal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fresh or Frozen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Blue Berries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lunch</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Vegetarian Chili</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cornbread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Steamed Zucchini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Oranges &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Snack</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trail Mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apples, Oranges &amp; Bananas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE
My name is Elizabeth Herlihy and I am currently conducting research on nutrition education in preschool aged children. I have asked you to come and share with me your experience in nutrition education as a teacher/administrator and the different variables that affect the way you teach.

This research will help me understand the different influences on nutrition education. I will take the information I gather to understand the motivations behind nutrition education. Once I have completed my research, I will share my findings with the Center and perhaps provide information on strategies for developing effective nutrition education programs.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked questions regarding your experience with nutrition education, your personal views on nutrition, the factors that may impact nutrition education, and the strategies you employ in teaching nutrition. This interview should last no more than one and a half hours.

I would like to request your permission to audio tape this interview. The data will be transcribed and coded. Upon completion of the study, the audio tapes will be destroyed. The information gathered in this interview will remain in a locked computer file during this project. I am the only person who will have access to the study data and information. There will not be any identifying names on the transcriptions and participants’ names will not be made available to anyone.

Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice. Do I have your permission to continue?

If yes, proceed with interview.
If no, terminate interview.

Questions are in bold. Italicized questions are to be used as probes.

1. **What role do you feel teachers have in educating children about nutrition and healthy eating behaviors?**

   *Do other people play a role in teaching children nutrition?*
2. What are your personal views on nutrition?

Describe foods you think should be eaten? Why? What are the best ways to teach nutrition?

3. What nutrition messages are you instructed or required to teach?

Government mandates? Institution requirements? Guidelines provided by the Center? Nutrition education lessons learned while earning teaching credential?

4. What control are there on food quality and quantity?

Does the Center’s participation in government programs effect what food is served? Who determines what is served? Are portions control? Are students allowed to request less or more? Are these requests met? Can students (parents of students) make special requests for their children’s meals?

5. What eating rituals do you practice in the classroom?

What rituals are involved in food preparation? Is the food prepared at the Center? Do students bring their own meals? How is it dispersed? Do students serve themselves? Do all the students eat at the same time? Do all students sit together? Is talking permitted/encouraged during the meal? What are the rules during mealtime (i.e. may students leave the table at any time, may students share food)?

6. What strategies do you employ in the classroom for teaching nutrition?

What are your motivations behind these strategies? How do you cope with resistance/non-compliance from students? Do you use the same strategies with all students?
APPENDIX E

SOMATOTYPE EXERCISE
Female Somatotypes:

1       2         3

Male Somatotypes:

1         2                  3

(Collins, 1990)
Please assign each child to the somatotype (body size) they most resemble. Do not include names or gender in your assignment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child 1:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child 2:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 3:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 4:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 5:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 6:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 7:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 8:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 9:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 10:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 11:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 12:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 13:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 14:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 15:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 16:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 17:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 18:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX F

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS
GUIDE
Building Foundations
- Teachers commitment to providing opportunities to live healthy lives and develop healthy skills and behaviors
- Use training and classroom experience to develop methods and strategies
  - Use food and mealtime, classroom activities, and impressionability of children to teach basic nutrition knowledge and make their own healthy choices in a fun, hands-on way
- Teachers value understanding that children, in their early years, are forming themselves as individuals; nutrition education is central to this development
- Providing students with nutritional knowledge and experience, teachers are not only getting children excited about healthy living, they are empowering them to make their own healthy choices

Lunch Ritual
- Center menu reflects commitment to encouraging healthy living in students
  - Menu is varied, nutritious, balanced and provides opportunities for new food experiences and increased fruit/vegetable consumption
- Family style dining is central to the lunchtime ritual
  - Opportunity to practice social skills, build relationships, creates opportunities for modeling/mimicking
  - Teaches children to function in eating situations
  - Serving themselves encourages children to be responsible for themselves and their food choices

Center Policies
- Nut-Free Policy
  - Protects students, staff, and parents with nut allergies and supports the centers goal of inclusion for all students by not limiting what activities students with allergies can partake in
  - Resistance
    - Parents: can’t provide baked goods to the class, restricts students without allergies
    - Teachers: creates false sense of security for students and parents, children do not learn skills to protect themselves
- Celebration Policy
  - Established to ensure nutritional quality of food brought from outside the Center
    - Also in compliance with Nut-Free policy
    - Parents provided with list of healthy alternatives (fruit, veggies and dip)
      - Teaches parents and children that there are nutritionally responsible ways to celebrate
  - Parents encouraged to explore non-food centered forms of celebration
    - Still not a popular option; even non-food forms of celebration accompanied with food (i.e. read a book and bring popsicles)
o Eliminates commercialism in the classroom, competition among parents, and decreases the economic gap between parents
  ▪ In doing so, redirects celebration away from material aspects and places the emphasis back on the child

o Resistance
  ▪ Connected to emotional attachment to food at celebrations, may actually outweigh nutritional value
  ▪ Resistance to cupcake bans and the like was experienced on a national scale
    • Students: Don’t like not being able to celebrate their birthday in traditional way – blowing out candles in front of friends
    • Teachers: Miss having cupcakes in the classroom; difficult dealing with parents frustrated with the policy
    • Parents: Not able to acknowledge their child’s birthday at school in the traditional sense; policy too stringent

o Response
  ▪ Only asked to honor the policy at the Center; can celebrate at home as you see fit
  ▪ Policy is not stringent, just asking parents to think outside the cupcake; policy actually provides a long list of non-traditional alternatives
  ▪ Students still acknowledge on special day, just not with cake

• Contradiction
  o Difference between environment provided at the Center and real world
    ▪ Food may contain nuts and children aren’t prepared to protect themselves
    ▪ Celebrations, especially in classrooms once they get to grade school, are characterized by fattening, sugar-laden foods; policy doesn’t teach them to make healthy options because it does not provide both options and encourages healthy choices, only provides healthy options
  o Policies can be seen as disempowering in the false sense of security they create; children need to be made aware of all the options available in the real world, both good and bad, if they are going to be able to continue making safe and healthy choices outside of the Center

Body Size Difference and Recognition
  • Explores my experience as a heavy person in the classroom; body size stigmatization and children’s assumptions about body size
    o Children assigned meaning and authority to my size
  • Center encourages students to recognize the uniqueness students and encourages exploration of and appreciation for differences
  • ‘Our Bodies’
    o Children are made acutely aware of their bodies – the actions, words, and decisions that directly affect their body
• Encourages them to take responsibility for and ownership of their bodies and in doing so take charge of their health and learn to make the choices that will benefit them

• Parental/Doctor restrictions
  o Despite Center’s position to never restrict students, parents/doctors have final say
  o Teachers expressed discomfort in restricting students based on body size because of fluctuating weight of children and variability of size in children
    ▪ Also noted in Somatotype Assignment exercise; teachers hesitant to assign a child to one body type because children are always growing and thus their bodies are always in transition
  o Parental restriction suggests negative connotations with body size; can also be expressed in body language and verbally (Me=Dietitian)

• Required food restriction and negative attitudes towards size from parents take away children’s ability to critically think about food, eating, and body size; counters the empowerment to make healthy choices and confidence in their ability to do so that the Center strives to instill in children through appreciation of difference, body ownership, and personal responsibility

Contradiction

• Hierarchical organization of Center staff
  o Different motivations and goals between those that develop the food and nutrition program (administrators) and those that implement it (teachers)
    ▪ Program developers
      • Must develop a menu and nutrition curriculum guidelines which can be put into practice in the classroom, while incorporating federal requirements to maintain funding
    ▪ Program implementers
      • Must execute the program put in place by Center administration in the classroom, while dealing with issues from students and parents
  o Limited transparency between developers and implementers
    ▪ Implementers unaware of federal/government requirements and budgetary constraints; developers unaware of issues implementers experience in the classroom with parents/students

• Personal bias
  o Personal proclivity and bias create mixed messages
  o Parents, teachers, and students connected together in mutual trifecta of influence
    ▪ Each allows personal bias to influence the others, both intentionally and inadvertently
  o Must be aware of bias and degree of influence; impact can be both negative and positive
Using influence in positive way, all can work together to improve the quality of the menu, the efficacy of the nutrition education curriculum, and the success of programs at the Center

**Conclusion**

- Explore empowerment/disempowerment in each chapter
  - Building Foundations: empowerment through knowledge and experience; develop healthy eating behaviors and confidence in abilities to make own healthy choices
  - Lunch Ritual: empowerment of children as social actors; capable of functioning in a mealtime setting, in and outside the classroom
  - Center Policies: false sense of empowerment through healthy eating and decision making; hidden/unintentional disempowerment through lack of choice/options
  - Body Size: empowerment through control over one’s own body and arbiter of one’s own health; disempowerment through parent-mandated restriction
  - Hierarchy: teachers as source of empowerment in a system in which they themselves are essentially disempowered; hierarchical structures and lack of transparency gives teachers limited control over their choices in the classroom
- **Contradiction**
  - Center is empowering children in a world in which they are inherently disempowered
    - Children have little control over their being because ‘they are just children’
APPENDIX G

NUT FREE POLICY NOTICE
Dear Parents and Staff:

This letter is written to request that each family and staff member assist us in providing a “NUT FREE ZONE” within the lobby and classroom areas. Not just peanuts but all nuts. We have been made aware of the tremendous risk children and adults who are allergic to nuts can face from even the smallest taste of peanut butter or a piece of nut. The consequences are life threatening in many cases and require immediate intervention with medication, hospitalization or even life support. We want to do all we can to eliminate the possibility of such an occurrence in our center in the future. We need your help to do this. We are asking you to assist us in implementing guidelines to provide a NUT FREE ZONE in the lobby and classroom areas:

1. Please do not allow your child to bring any food items into the center in the a.m. or store them in their cubby for after school consumption. Consume all foods before entering the building. Parents choosing to bring their food for their child to eat at mealtime are asked to honor the no nut policy as well. Please keep this in mind when planning and packing your child’s food for the day. We ask that no foods containing nuts or nut products be brought into the lobby or classroom areas under any circumstances.

2. We ask that no food items be brought to school for children’s consumption under most circumstances (parents bringing their child’s mealtime food is one exception. Please refer to food policy in Parent Manual for specific information on this policy). This may disappoint many families who enjoy baking and cooking treats and goodies to share with their child’s class. However, it does help prevent a possible risk of inadvertent exposure to nuts or nut products. In addition, there are increasing requests by families that children not be exposed to high sugar items as well as religious or personal beliefs against birthday party celebrations with the typical cake, cupcakes and/or ice cream. By not making food the focus of special events such as these in the classroom, all children can feel comfortable honoring classmates in more non-traditional but just as meaningful ways that honor the uniqueness of each child. Each
classroom will honor children on their birthday with a special classroom acknowledgement unless parents request this not be done. For more specific information, please talk with your child’s Master Teacher.

3. We encourage families who wish to do so, to donate their child’s favorite children’s book to the classroom on their child’s birthday. The teacher will read the book to the class at circle time and acknowledge the gift from the child to the class. Parent and child can write a special inscription or the teacher will do so, to include the date and the child’s name on the inside cover of the book. This is a wonderful way to encourage literacy and share something special about each child with their classmates. Parents are welcome to invite classmates to their child’s birthday events outside of school by leaving invitations in parent mail files. Remember that it has always been our policy to personally check with the Master Teachers in the classroom before bringing anything into the classroom. Please continue to honor that policy.

4. If you would like to donate food items for the mid-morning or late afternoon snack, please leave all foods in the kitchen immediately upon entering the building, prior to entering the classrooms. There is a red crate labeled: FOOD DONATIONS placed just inside the door to the kitchen for your use. There is a clipboard asking you to sign in your donation and to verify that it is NUT FREE. Please specify in which classroom you wish the item to be used. All donations must be unopened and in their original container/package with a list of ingredients on the package. A staff member will re-verify that the item is nut free. The Master Teacher will sign out the item to her classroom and sign off that she has verified the item is nut free as well. Items not signed in or properly labeled will be disposed of in the trash. Please be sure to sign in all items on the clipboard. A list of suggested donations is available from the Master Teacher in each classroom who requests special snack items.

There are special events throughout the year when food items are brought to school for special center wide events. Generally, the food brought is not for children’s consumption.
Special events will be handled on an individual basis and families will be informed as to appropriate guidelines.

Your understanding and support in helping us to provide a “NUT FREE ZONE” within the lobby and classroom areas is greatly appreciated. The center continues to work toward an inclusive environment that supports and acknowledges the right of each person to be fully included in all activities that occur at our center.

Please feel free to discuss with us your ideas, suggestions and to ask questions about this subject or others. We value your input.

Sincerely,

AS Children’s Center Administrative Staff and Master Teachers
APPENDIX H

CELEBRATION POLICY NOTICE
LET’S CELEBRATE!

My child _____________________________________________ will be celebrating _____________________________________________ on _________________. I, ___________________________________________________ would like to celebrate _____________________________________________ in the classroom by bringing the following:

Please check the one item listed below that you will be bringing.

_ Fruit Popsicles  
_ Fresh Fruit  
_ Yogurt or Go-Gurts  
_ String Cheese or cheese cubes with apples or other fruit  
_ Vegetables and dip (be careful of nut exposure)

Please discuss your celebration request with your classroom Master Teacher before completing this form. Turn in the completed form to the Front Desk for review and approval by the Cottage Supervising Teacher. Please submit no less than ONE WEEK in advance of any approved celebration.

Supervising Teacher’s Approval

_______________________________________________________________

Date _________________

Front Desk Notified

_______________________________________________________________

Date__________________
**SDSU Children’s Center Celebration Policy**

Celebrations often play an important role in the lives of children and their families. We welcome the opportunity to collaborate with families in sharing meaningful celebrations that are complementary to our daily programs. This policy is meant to provide opportunities for children and families to share their cultural traditions and celebrations with their peers in the classroom.

**Prior Approval** – Prior approval for any in classroom celebration is required. Families are asked to talk directly with their Classroom Master Teacher to discuss their interest and collaborate in making a plan for a celebration. The next step is to fill out the “Let’s Celebrate” form and turn it in to the Front Desk. The Supervising Teacher will review the form, talk to the classroom Master Teacher with any questions and approve the form. You will be notified by the Master Teacher if your request has been approved with any changes in your original request. Families must request at least one week in advance of any planned celebration to be held in the Center. Those who do not get prior approval will be turned away and asked to schedule their celebration at a later date.

**Times** – Celebrations will typically occur during the afternoon snack in your child’s classroom, generally between 2:30 and 3:30 p.m.

**Food/Drink** – The Center works hard to promote healthy eating for all children and this includes food choices for celebrations and events. Some food choices include: fruit that we serve infrequently during meals such as strawberries, watermelon, cantaloupe, grapes, berries, or a combination; fruit popsicles; yogurt/gogurt; string cheese; veggies & dip or any food to dip is always a hit! All food and drink items must adhere to the Children’s Center Food Policy, including the Nut-Free Policy. (See Appendix F of the Parent Manual.) If you would like more ideas on what to bring, Laurie Buffington, the Food Services Supervisor, would be happy to answer any questions.
Where to Sign-In Food for Special Celebrations or Events:
Please sign in all food items at the Front Desk and notify them that the item is for a special event in your child’s classroom. If the food is perishable, please let them know that as well. Also notify the classroom teacher that food has been left at the Front Desk for the celebration.

No Homemade Treats – Due to the challenge of ensuring that homemade treats are completely nut free the Center must insist only items packaged with labeling reflecting no nut exposure are used within the Center. Cross contamination with utensils, ingredients and cooking surfaces are a potential hazard and hard to control in homemade treats.

Storage – Space is very limited in The Children’s Center kitchen so please keep this in mind when making food choices. If the food item you bring needs special storage, simply sign it in at the Front Desk and notify them that a perishable item has been left. Also notify your child’s teacher so that someone will be sure to come to the Front Desk to verify the items and place them in proper storage area. Be sure to discuss storage of your item(s) when planning for your event with the classroom Master Teacher.

Inclusion – Please keep in mind, that we are aware that some children have certain food allergies. If a treat for snack time is brought in that your child cannot eat, the Center will provide the regularly scheduled snack for that day.

Toys, Presents, Trinkets, Goodie/Gift Bags – The Children’s Center does not allow any toys, presents, trinkets, or goodie/gift bags to be passed out to children for any celebrations or to be left in cubbies or parent mail files.

Other Ways to Celebrate – Families are encouraged to enjoy celebrations in ways other than food as well. This may include reading your child’s favorite book to their class on a special day, donating a favorite book or providing some other special item that the children in the Center would enjoy having in the classroom.
Checklist for Celebrations:
— Choose a date to celebrate
— Decide on food/drink—remember our NO NUTS POLICY!
— Obtain prior approval in writing from Master and Supervisor Teacher one week before the intended celebration

Items to decide with the Master/Supervisor Teacher:
— Date and time
— Food and drink
— Storage/cooling requirements
— Family member(s) attending – yes or no
— Carefully check all food labels for nuts or cross-contamination of nuts.
— Celebrate!!