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**Knowing and Interpreting Prekindergarten Policy:
A Bakhtinian Analysis**

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Citation: Wilinski, B. (2017). Knowing and interpreting prekindergarten policy: A Bakhtinian analysis. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(27). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2211> This article is in the second of a two-part Special Issue, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Education Policy and Discourse*, guest edited by Jessica Nina Lester, Chad Lochmiller, and Rachael Gabriel.

Abstract: Many state-funded prekindergarten (preK) programs are implemented through school-community partnerships, which has been promoted as a way to increase preK access, to meet the needs of families, and to ensure program quality (Schumacher, Ewen, Hart, & Lombardi, 2005). In spite of the potential benefits of such partnerships, there are also challenges to bringing together the K-12 and ECE systems (McCabe & Sipple, 2011). In this paper I use Bakhtin's (1981) notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse to analyze the discourse that staff members at a Lakeville, Wisconsin, ECE partner site used to situate their approach to assessment in opposition to state and district assessment policy. ECE partner site staff drew on their institution's long history and strong sense of best practice in early education to characterize required preK assessments as unnecessary, too aligned with the elementary grades, and a duplication of other approaches to assessment that they valued. Yet, even as they

resisted the assessments, ECE partners' internally persuasive discourse shifted slightly over time; staff members conceded that some aspects of the assessment policy had a positive effect on their program. This discursive analysis provides insight into some of the challenges associated with bringing together the ECE and K-12 systems. It points to the need for policy to address the particular challenges faced by ECE partners as they encounter new mandates in public preK and for the need to ensure that partnerships are characterized by mutual understanding.

Keywords: early childhood education; prekindergarten policy; discourse; assessment

Conocer e interpretar las políticas de jardín de infancia: Un análisis Bakhtiniano

Resumen: Muchos programas de pre-escolares (preK) financiados por el Estado son implementados a través de una escuela y una comunidad, que han sido promovidos como forma de aumentar la educación, para atender las necesidades de las familias y garantizar una calidad del programa (Schumacher, Ewen, Hart & Lombardi, 2005). A pesar de los beneficios potenciales de tales parcerias, también hay retos para los sistemas K-12 y de Educación Pre-Escolar (ECE) (McCabe & Sipple, 2011). Este artículo, utilizó como nociones de discurso autoritario e internamente persuasivo de Bakhtin (1981) para el análisis del discurso de los miembros de la unidad en el sector de la educación, localizado en Lakeville, Wisconsin, Estados Unidos, usará su enfoque de evaluación en la oposición a la política de la estadística y del distrital. A equipe baseou-se en la historia de la institución y no hay un fuerte sentido de las buenas prácticas en la educación infantil para caracterizar como las revisiones requeridas de “prek” como desesperadas, con un gramo de elementos y una duplicación de otras estrategias de evaluación que valorizaban. Sin embargo, cuando se resistiera a las críticas, su discurso internamente persuasivo mudou ligeiramente al largo del tiempo; un equipo de auxiliar que recibe la respuesta de la política ha tenido un efecto positivo no su programa. Este análisis discursivo presenta una visión de algunos de los desafíos con un conjunto de sistemas ECE y K-12. Aponta para una necesidad de políticas para enfrentar los desafíos que los países de la CEPE se enfrentan a la medida de los nuevos mandatos en el público y los esfuerzos para garantizar que las parcerias sean caracterizadas por la comprensión mútua.

Palabras-clave: La educación preescolar; jardín de infancia; la política; el habla; evaluación

Conhecendo e interpretando as políticas do jardim de infância: Uma análise Bakhtiniana

Resumo: Muitos programas de pré-escolares (preK) financiados pelo Estado são implementados através de parcerias entre a escola e a comunidade, que têm sido promovidas como forma de aumentar o acesso à educação, para atender às necessidades das famílias e garantir a qualidade do programa (Schumacher, Ewen, Hart & Lombardi, 2005). Apesar dos benefícios potenciais de tais parcerias, há também desafios para reunir os sistemas K-12 e de Educação Pré-Escolar (ECE) (McCabe & Sipple, 2011). Neste artigo, utilizo as noções de discurso autoritário e internamente persuasivo de Bakhtin (1981) para analisar o discurso que os membros da equipe em um sítio parceiro da ECE, localizado em Lakeville, Wisconsin, usaram para situar sua abordagem de avaliação em oposição à política de avaliação estadual e distrital. A equipe baseou-se na longa história da instituição e no forte senso de boas práticas na educação infantil para caracterizar as avaliações requeridas da “preK” como desnecessárias, muito alinhadas com os graus elementares e uma duplicação de outras abordagens de avaliação que valorizavam. No entanto, mesmo quando resistiram às avaliações, seu discurso internamente persuasivo mudou ligeiramente ao longo do tempo; A equipe de auxiliares admitiram que alguns aspectos da política de avaliação tiveram um efeito positivo no seu programa. Esta análise discursiva fornece uma visão de alguns dos desafios associados com a união dos sistemas ECE e K-12. Aponta para a necessidade de políticas para

enfrentar os desafios específicos que os parceiros da ECE enfrentam à medida que encontram novos mandatos em público e os esforços para garantir que as parcerias sejam caracterizadas pela compreensão mútua.

Palavras-chave: Educação pré-escolar; jardim de infância; política; discurso; avaliação

Introduction

As public prekindergarten (preK) has expanded over the past two decades, many state-funded programs have been implemented through school-community partnerships, in which school districts collaborate with community early childhood education (ECE) providers to meet local demand for preK (Schumacher, Ewen, Hart, & Lombardi, 2005). Partnerships benefit families, school districts, and ECE providers by expanding access to preK and leveraging resources and expertise to ensure program quality (Wat & Gayl, 2009). While the potential benefits of partnerships are many, there are also challenges to bringing together two different systems—K-12 and ECE—for preK provision. McCabe and Sipple (2011) describe public preK as a site of considerable tension because it is where the different philosophies, labor histories, and financing of the K-12 and ECE systems collide. Takanishi (2010) describes the ECE and K-12 systems as “separate cultures with their own values and ways of operating” (p. 3) PreK partnerships must bridge the gap between these separate cultures.

In this paper, drawn from an ethnographic study of preK policy enactment, I examine how staff members at an ECE partner site in Lakeville, Wisconsin’s preK partnership made sense of and responded to assessment requirements that came with the district’s new 4-year-old kindergarten (4K) policy.¹ Friendship Preschool had a strong institutional identity and, prior to the introduction of public preK, had been used to functioning with considerable autonomy. The preschool had a well-developed approach and philosophy, what staff members referred to as a “Friendship way” of doing things. Becoming a 4K partner, however, meant that the staff members’ beliefs about assessment were challenged by new requirements. In the past, Friendship staff had constructed their program to align with the school’s mission, philosophy, and beliefs about best practice in early childhood settings. The new preK partnership, however, meant that they had to adhere to assessment requirements imposed by the school district that deviated from “business as usual.”

Using Bakhtin’s notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse, I analyze the discourse that Friendship’s director and 4K teachers used to situate their approach to assessment in opposition to Lakeville’s district-mandated progress report. According to Bakhtin (1981), authoritative discourse is dominant and fixed. In contrast, an internally persuasive discourse is open and malleable—it is constructed in response to an authoritative discourse. Internally persuasive discourse challenges the “truth” of an authoritative discourse (Matusov, 2007). As they encountered an authoritative discourse of assessment that challenged their own beliefs and practices, Friendship staff members constructed an internally persuasive discourse that they used to voice their concern. Although their sense of best practice was firmly rooted in the preschool’s long history, this internally persuasive discourse was not static; instead, the discourse changed over time, as staff members’ stance in relation to assessment shifted. My analysis of the discourse Friendship staff used to position their beliefs about assessment in opposition to district and state requirements demonstrates how contested elements of preK policy can become sites of conflict in preK partnerships, and points to the need for policy and preK partners to carefully consider such differences can be negotiated.

¹ All names of people and places are pseudonyms. PreK in Wisconsin is called 4-year-old kindergarten, or 4K.

There are many benefits to partnering with school districts to provide preK, yet these arrangements may pose a challenge for ECE providers, whose work becomes subject to different regulations and accountability structures in the context of partnerships.² Assessment requirements may pose a particular challenge if they require ECE partners to reconcile the practices they use to inform day-to-day instructional activities with a state or school district's need for different types of data that can be used to inform programmatic decisions. This analysis provides in-depth insight into the experience of one ECE provider while also addressing a challenge that is likely to resonate with providers in other contexts.

Relevant Literature

Expansion of Public PreK

There is currently an unprecedented number of 4-year-olds—1.3 million—enrolled in public preK across 40 states and the District of Columbia. From 2002 to 2015, the percentage of 4-year-olds attending state preK programs more than doubled, increasing from 14% to 29% (Barnett et al., 2016). State preK is defined as “programs funded and administered by the state with a primary goal of educating 4-year-olds who are typically developing and who are in classrooms at least two days per week” (Barnett, Friedman, Hustedt, & Stevenson-Boyd, 2009, p. 5). Given its rapid expansion, preK has been touted “education’s biggest success story” of the past decade (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011). Positioned as a key intervention to close the enduring academic achievement gap and as a smart investment, with high-quality programs providing a \$7 return for every \$1 invested, preK has garnered bipartisan support and attracted significant attention from groups ranging from economists to the media (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2012; Heckman, 2011). PreK is widely acknowledged as an intervention that contributes to kindergarten readiness and that can help states and school districts avoid costly future interventions (Gormley & Phillips, 2005; Lowenstein, 2011).

PreK Partnerships

PreK partnerships, in which public school districts and private ECE sites (e.g. childcare centers, Head Start, preschools, home daycare providers) work together to provide state-funded preK, are widely acknowledged as beneficial to a range of preK stakeholders. At the same time, “attitudinal” and “mechanical” challenges to effective collaboration exist (Wat & Gayl, 2009). In this section I provide a brief overview of the benefits and challenges to this approach.

Benefits. States and local districts can bring preK to scale more quickly in a partnership model because they can utilize a community’s existing ECE infrastructure, eliminating the need for costly and time-consuming infrastructure development (Government Accountability Office, 2004; Schulman & Blank, 2007). ECE providers, many of whom operate close to the margin financially, may benefit from the consistent funding stream that comes with preK (Schilder, Kiron, & Elliott, 2003; Wat & Gayl, 2009). This funding can contribute to improving the quality of ECE partner sites by allowing providers to increase teacher compensation or make improvements to their infrastructure or resources. These inputs are thought to have a “spillover effect,” benefiting children throughout the ECE center (Schulman & Blank, 2007). PreK partnerships can also facilitate alignment of practices and expectations between ECE and the elementary grades, which contributes

² Partnerships undoubtedly pose challenges to public school districts, as well (Wat & Gayl, 2009), but for the purposes of this paper I focus on the challenges for ECE partner sites.

to systems-building efforts (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012) and creates greater continuity across age and grade levels (Wat & Gayl, 2009). Finally, partnerships can provide support for working families. Many public preK programs operate for only a few hours a day during the school year, creating a challenge for families who require full-day, year-round childcare. Offering preK in ECE sites can bridge this gap by making care outside of preK hours more readily available to families (Schumacher et al., 2005).

Challenges. While there are many benefits to preK partnerships, these collaborations also come with challenges. Successful partnerships require mutual understanding and may necessitate a shift in how ECE and K-12 professionals view each other:

Early educators must abandon their position that they are the only ones who know the right way to work with young children... There must be reciprocal give and take; both sides have much to learn from each other. K-12 educators must also change their ways, including how they see early educators. (Takanishi, 2010, p. 30)

Wat and Gayl (2009) similarly call for K-12 educators' increased understanding of child development and the philosophies that guide teaching and learning in ECE settings. Successful partnering, they assert, requires recognition that "early education is a discipline that calls for a distinct set of skills and practices" (p. 9). At the same time, ECE professionals must be open to the idea that they, too, can learn from the K-12 system, and that young children may benefit from the K-12 system's focus on academic skills and accountability. Public preK partnerships thus require negotiating markedly different approaches to teaching and learning that have long separated ECE and K-12 education (McCabe & Sipple, 2011).

PreK partnerships also create complex logistical realities. Differences in teacher qualifications and pay must be addressed to prevent teacher turnover and competition among partners for qualified teachers (McCabe & Sipple, 2011; Wilinski, 2017). PreK partnerships also have implications for communities (Casto, Sipple, & McCabe, 2016), particularly because decisions about who can partner and how much funding partner sites receive has financial implications for partner and non-partner ECE sites (Morrissey, Lekies, & Cochran, 2007; Wilinski, 2017). Non-partner sites may face enrollment decline (and, thus revenue losses) if four-year-olds leave to attend public preK in a different site. At the same time, ECE partner sites may struggle financially if preK reimbursements from the state or district do not cover their actual program costs (Government Accountability Office, 2004; Schumacher et al., 2005).

Finally, the different governance structures of the K-12 and ECE systems pose a challenge to partnerships. Each system comes with its own rules and regulations and accountability and reporting mechanisms (McCabe & Sipple, 2011; Takanishi, 2010). ECE providers may be more used to adhering to health and safety regulations than those related to teaching and learning, and school district officials may struggle to understand and monitor ECE partners, which have their own institutional norms and ways of operating.

Divergent Approaches to Assessment

Assessment is not new in ECE settings—a long-time role of the ECE professional has been to document young children's development (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2008). Assessment can, however, become a point of contention in the context of preK partnerships because of the different ways it has been conceptualized and used in ECE and K-12 settings. ECE professionals have a long tradition of using informal and observation-based assessments like work samples, portfolios, rating scales, and running records to track children's learning and development (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2008; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz,

1998; Snow, Van Hemel, & National Research Council of the National Academies, 2008). These assessments are typically conducted as teachers observe children in their natural environment, carrying out day-to-day tasks, an approach that has “proven effective for the purposes of chronicling children’s development, cataloging their accomplishments, and tailoring programs and activities within the classroom to meet young children’s rapidly changing needs” (Shepard et al., 1998, p. 4). Such observation-based assessment was considered the gold standard by Friendship Preschool staff.

Along with observation-based assessment, norm-referenced tests have played an important role in ECE settings, particularly in the identification of children with potential disabilities and the collection of large-scale data to inform teacher professional development and technical assistance needs (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Snow et al., 2008). Norm-referenced tests are “designed to provide both individual scores and aggregated data for large groups of children” (Ackerman & Coley, 2012, p. 10), for the purposes of comparing an individual’s score with a larger group of children. ECE assessment literature cautions that while norm-referenced assessments play a specific role in ECE settings, they should be used in combination with observation-based assessment practices. According to NAEYC, assessment is most effective when “assessments...use multiple sources of evidence gathered over time” and “use of individually administered, norm-referenced tests is limited” (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009, p. 2).

In preK partnerships, ideas about best practice in assessment put forward by professional organizations and ECE teachers come into contact with K-12 assessment norms (Snow et al., 2008). In contrast to the individualized, observational assessment typically used in ECE settings, assessment in the elementary grades is designed to evaluate whether students have met a set of universal academic standards (O’Day, 2002). In the current accountability context, assessment in K-12 has become increasingly high-stakes and test-based, with a goal of providing states and districts with school- and classroom-level achievement data (Snow et al., 2008). With ECE increasingly linked to K-12 through public preK partnerships, there has been concern that the accountability movement in K-12 will infiltrate preK, in an “accountability shovedown” (Hatch, 2002). Such concerns have prompted debate over whether developmentally appropriate practice and early learning standards are mutually exclusive (Brown, 2009; Goldstein, 2007, 2008). It is this terrain that preK partners like those in Lakeville navigated as they made decisions about how to evaluate program quality and student learning.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I describe the tools used to analyze how Friendship Preschool staff members encountered and responded to 4K assessment requirements. I begin by explaining the relevance of Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism to a discursive approach to policy analysis. I then describe how I operationalize the notions of discourse in this study. Finally, I explain Bakhtin’s notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse, and demonstrate how these concepts framed my analysis.

Dialogism

Though education was not the focus of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s work, a growing number of education researchers have drawn on his work to theorize phenomena related to education (Matusov, 2007), including parent-teacher relationships (Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001), interactions between teachers and students (Scott, 2013), language and literacy learning (A. F. Ball & Freedman, 2004), and questions of ethics and culture in education (Bender, 2000; Edmiston, 2010).

According to Bakhtin, meaning is made through dialogue in a heteroglossic, or multi-voiced world. As a result of the existence of multiple languages and voices “there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 426). Bakhtin used the term “dialogism” to describe this phenomenon. Holquist (2002) explained:

Dialogism argues that all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying simultaneous but different space, where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies, to political bodies and to bodies of ideas in general (ideologies). (p. 21)

The notion of dialogism is germane to this discursive analysis of how Friendship Preschool staff members’ negotiated 4K assessment mandates. While partnership brought together ECE providers and the school district to implement 4K, the two groups occupied “simultaneous but different space” because of their different histories and locations in the ECE landscape. It was in this space that authoritative and internally persuasive discourse came into contact, as Friendship staff and other ECE partners constructed new understandings about assessment in relation to 4K policy.

Discourse

This analysis is framed by an understanding of discourse as a “type of social practice” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 28). Following scholars in the tradition of critical discourse analysis, I focus on discourse above the level of words and sentences. Framed by the notion of dialogism, I conceptualize discourse as productive—discourse “both reflects and constructs the social world and is...constitutive, dialectical and dialogic. Discourse is never just a product, but a set of consumptive, productive, distributive, and reproductive processes that is in relation to a social world” (Rogers, 2004, p. 5). Discourse is always *doing* something. In Lakeville’s partnership, Friendship Preschool staff members used internally persuasive discourse to position themselves and their beliefs about assessment in relation to 4K assessment requirements that challenged their existing practices. Magalhães and colleagues described how language can be used to position oneself and others within a discourse community, writing: “...language is not just an instrument of transmission but the constitution of the self and of the other in social-historical inserted discourses” (Magalhães, Ninin, & Lessa, 2014, p. 143). Friendship staff used a discourse, which belied their “values, beliefs...social identities, and attitudes” related to assessment, to respond to 4K assessment mandates (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 159). In so doing, they constructed an internally persuasive discourse as they made ever new meaning about assessment practices in 4K.

This internally persuasive discourse was not just a collection of ideas and beliefs about assessment; it was formulated in response to a discourse. More than simply a text, policy has been conceptualized as a discourse that carries authority and gives shape to the issues it seeks to address (Bacchi, 2000). It is equally important to recognize that policies, as authoritative discourses, do not simply represent the intentions of a few policymakers attempting to exercise their power (S. J. Ball, 1990). Instead, they are embedded within a particular socio-political and historical context that legitimates them. State and district 4K assessment policy discourse thus responded to a broader national context that included a focus on student achievement and the need to evaluate program quality.

Authoritative and Internally Persuasive Discourse

In this paper, I use Bakhtin’s notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse to demonstrate how Friendship staff members’ positioned their beliefs about assessment in relation to

state and district assessment requirements. Authoritative discourse is a dominant discourse—it is fixed, powerful, and perceived as “truth.” According to Bakhtin (1981):

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it...it demands our unconditional allegiance (pp. 342-343).

In contrast to authoritative discourse, internally persuasive discourse is ever-changing or unfinalizable; it is an amalgamation of one’s own and others’ ideas. It allows for new ideas and change where authoritative discourse does not. Bakhtin writes, “The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean*” (1981, p. 346, emphasis in original). As Matusov (2007) pointed out, internally persuasive discourse is not simply the uncritical acceptance of new ideas that may challenge authoritative discourse; instead, it is a “critical stance in relation to a text: [Bakhtin] talked about experimenting with the text, questioning the author, imagining alternatives, evaluating diverse discourses, and challenging the text” (p. 230). Whereas an authoritative discourse cannot be challenged, “in internally persuasive discourse truth becomes dialogically tested and forever testable” (Morson, 1990, p. 319 as cited in Matusov, 2007, p. 230).

Policies can be thought of as authoritative discourses—they are handed down from above, with “authority already fused to [them].” Yet, a sociocultural approach to policy analysis emphasizes that policies are interpreted and shaped as they are enacted locally (Sutton & Levinson, 2001). It is, therefore, possible to understand policy enactment as a struggle between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. As diverse stakeholders engage with a policy, “authoritative and internally persuasive discourse co-occur in [these] negotiations of meaning production” (Magalhães et al., 2014, p. 140). Here, I analyze how Friendship staff members constructed and continually reshaped an internally persuasive discourse of assessment in response to the authoritative discourse of 4K assessment mandates.

Method

This paper is drawn from a larger ethnographic study of 4K policy enactment in Lakeville, Wisconsin, that asked: *How is 4K conceptualized at different levels of implementation, from state policy to local classrooms?* I conducted fieldwork from October 2012 to July 2013 in three 4K focal teachers’ classrooms in different sites where the program was offered. These sites included a private part-day preschool (Friendship Preschool), a for-profit childcare center (Bright Start Childcare Center (BSCC)), and a public elementary school (Forest Grove Elementary School). I conducted a total of 300 hours of classroom observation and two to three semi-structured interviews with each focal teacher (nine interviews total). Each interview lasted about an hour. I also interviewed representatives from the following stakeholder groups: co-teachers, administrators, and principals at each of the focal sites (six interviews total); 4K teachers, kindergarten teachers, and administrators who were not part of the focal sites (six interviews total); other influential stakeholders from the ECE community who were involved in Lakeville 4K (three interviews total); and one interview with a state education official. In addition to these interviews, I observed staff meetings (four total) and planning meetings (four total) at each focal site, district-wide 4K steering committee meetings (three total) and one school board meeting. A significant limitation of this study is that I was never able to interview any school district officials about 4K, although I made repeated attempts to speak with several officials involved in the design and implementation of the program. My understanding of the

school district's actions and perspectives on assessment are thus derived from policy documents and my observations of school district officials at district-wide 4K meetings.

In this paper, I ask: *How does an ECE partner with a strong institutional identity respond to new state and district assessment mandates in the context of preK?* Although assessment was not the exclusive focus of the larger study, it was a topic that emerged time and again in interviews with the director and 4K teachers at one of my focal sites, Friendship Preschool.³ In my first analysis of the data, I concluded that Friendship Preschool defined its role in the preK partnership largely in opposition to the school district (Wilinski, 2014). Although they worked closely with the school district, the school's administrator and 4K focal teacher positioned their work with young children as closer to best practice than what was happening in public school sites. This "us vs. them" perspective was informed, in part, by beliefs about assessment in early childhood settings.

For this paper, I reanalyzed transcripts from my interviews with Friendship Preschool 4K teachers and administrators (seven total), interviews with the 4K teacher and director from BSCC (three total) and my field notes from 4K steering committee meetings (two total) where ECE partners interacted with school district officials around the topic of assessment. I also reviewed and analyzed four documents related to assessment in Wisconsin and Lakeville 4K: Lakeville's 4K progress report from the 2012-13 school year, a district document outlining 4K learning benchmarks, a newspaper article from the *Wisconsin State Journal* that reported on the introduction of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS) in 4K (DeFour, 2013), and the report from the state legislature that proposed and provided the rationale for this change (Joint Committee on Finance, 2013). I reviewed the first two documents—the progress report and 4K benchmarks document—to inform my understanding of what was included in the progress report and how the district's 4K expectations related to other learning standards in the state and district. I analyzed the other two documents using the method described below in order to better understand the PALS mandate—what it responded to and what it was intended to do.

I used the software MAXQDA to facilitate analysis. In the first coding cycle, I read through all transcripts and field notes and applied initial codes, based on my interest how Friendship staff responded to assessment requirements and assessment requirements were represented in policy texts and by school district officials during district-wide meetings. I developed codes that captured the requirements and components of the 4K assessment in Lakeville, including: "district assessment requirements," "state assessment requirements," and "response to the PALS mandate." As I applied these descriptive codes, I also wrote memos about the themes that emerged from the data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). After this initial coding cycle, I used values coding to analyze "participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (Saldana, 2016, p. 131).⁴ My use of this approach to coding was informed by my understanding of internally persuasive discourse as something that entails "experimenting with the text, questioning the author, imagining alternatives, evaluating diverse discourses, and challenging the text" (Matusov,

³ Interestingly, the topic of assessment did not come up in interviews with the director and 4K teacher at BSCC, except for the times that I asked about it directly. I decided to include these interviews in my analysis to show the contrast between the two sites and their response to assessment mandates. I also read through transcripts from two interviews conducted with administrators and 4K teachers at an ECE partner site that was part of the pilot study, but the topic of assessment or progress reports was not raised during either interview.

⁴ Each of these elements has a different meaning, but they are also related. A value is the importance we ascribe to ourselves, others, and ideas, while attitudes comprise how we think and feel about ourselves, others, and ideas. Beliefs are part of a system comprised of values and attitudes, along with our "interpretive perceptions of the social world" (Saldana, 2016, p. 132).

2007, p. 230). I conceptualize internally persuasive discourse as something that is necessarily grounded in an individual or group's values, attitudes, and beliefs, situated in relation to an authoritative discourse.

All three of these elements—values, attitudes, and beliefs—are developed, reinforced, and changed in social and institutional contexts, as we interact with others and encounter pre-established institutional or cultural norms. This notion corresponds with dialogism, or the idea that meaning is constructed in dialogue. In the case of Lakeville, stakeholders sometimes made meaning of assessment requirements through actual dialogue at 4K meetings, for example. In other cases, Friendship staff members were constructing internally persuasive discourse in a more abstract way—in response to their understanding of policy requirements. Through values coding, I analyzed these responses to the authoritative policy discourse. As with descriptive codes, I applied codes that emerged from my reading of the data. Some of these codes were derived from participants' own words, while others represented broader themes. This cycle of coding yielded almost 50 codes. Values codes included: “play,” “developmentally appropriate practice,” and “setting up the environment.” Attitudes codes included: “doing the same thing we’ve always done,” “too much time,” and “nobody wants to do more testing.” Finally, beliefs codes included: “best practice,” “role of assessment in ECE,” and “there is a place for this.”

To condense these themes, I created two matrices with the following categories: institutional identity, values in approach to ECE, assessment practice, beliefs about assessment, beliefs about progress report, and reaction to PALS. I used one matrix to identify the state's and school district's approach to assessment, and the other to identify that of Friendship Preschool staff members. Within each of these categories, I included a column for “before 4K,” “year 1,” and “year 2,” in order to track changes in policies and perspectives. I then read through each data excerpt and placed it in the appropriate category based on theme and interview date. Because I did not have interview data from before 4K began, I used the “before 4K” column for excerpts in which participants described what they had done prior to 4K or when they described their current beliefs or practice in relation to the past. During this process, I also wrote memos to capture and expand on key themes that emerged from the analysis. I then coded these matrices for authoritative and internally persuasive discourses of assessment.

State and Local 4K Policy

Wisconsin 4K

Public preK has been a feature of Wisconsin's educational landscape since the state's founding in 1848, as a result of a constitutional provision that guaranteed access to public education for children age 4 through 20 (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2008). The Wisconsin state constitution states that district schools “shall be as nearly uniform as practicable, and such schools shall be free and without charge for tuition to all children between the ages of 4 and 20 years” (as cited in Stark, 1997, p. 185). Though 4K has a long history in Wisconsin, its popularity has ebbed and flowed over the state's history. In the 1996-1997 school year, only 72 school districts offered 4K. Ten years later, that number had risen to 257, and by the 2013-14 school year 93% of Wisconsin school districts, had 4K programs (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2012, 2014). Within this landscape, 4K partnerships are considered a hallmark of Wisconsin 4K (Bulebosh, 2000), so much so that the state Department of Public Instruction recently hired a storyteller to document the benefits of partnering (Graue, Wilinski, & Nocera, 2016).

At the state level, Wisconsin's 4K program is minimally regulated, with the state leaving much decision-making authority to local districts. Districts that choose to implement 4K are

required to: 1) make the program available to all 4-year-olds in the district, without cost; 2) provide a minimum of 437 hours of instruction per year; 3) provide transportation to 4K sites; and, 4) ensure that 4K teachers have a bachelor's degree and a teaching license that includes preK or kindergarten. School districts that commit to providing 87.5 hours of parent outreach programming can receive additional funding. These hours are documented and submitted to state education authorities annually (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2008). Any programmatic decisions beyond these requirements are made locally, and up until May 2013, this included decisions about assessment. In May 2013, Governor Scott Walker announced as part of his new budget a mandate for the use of a literacy screener, the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS), in 4K (DeFour, 2013).

Lakeville 4K

Lakeville 4K complied with all of the state 4K regulations noted above. The district also chose to engage in the parent outreach component of 4K. The responsibility for generating the required parent outreach hours was shared between the school district and 4K teachers. Lakeville's 4K program was provided through a partnership between the school district and the ECE community, with 4K classrooms located in a range of sites, including: public elementary schools, Head Start classrooms, and private preschools and childcare centers. In order to partner with the school district, ECE providers had to be accredited by the city of Lakeville or the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). This stipulation came from the local teachers' union as a means to ensure program quality. The school district also made a local determination to exclude religious institutions from the partnership.

4K was a part-day program across all sites in Lakeville. In public schools, 4K classes operated in morning and afternoon sessions, four days per week. Each session was approximately three hours long, and teachers had a 45-minute break between sessions. Mondays were reserved for teacher planning, professional development, and family outreach activities. ECE partner sites had flexibility to determine their own schedules, as long as the total 4K time provided equaled the state-mandated 437 hours. Many ECE partners provided 4K for about 2.5 hours, five days per week, but the timing varied from site to site. Like all 4K programs in the state, the funding for Lakeville 4K flowed through the school district. The district received funds from the state for each 4K student and passed on a portion of that to ECE partner sites. During the research year, ECE partners received about \$3,500 per 4K student. The school district did not regulate how these funds were spent, but suggested in its policy that "the funds be used to increase wages for teachers, purchase new or additional curricular materials, provide additional professional development for teachers, provide a tuition reduction for parents, or in other ways that increase the quality of programming for students." In reality, this reimbursement did not cover the full cost of 4K in many ECE partner sites, forcing administrators to come up with creative ways to make up the difference because they could not charge tuition for 4K hours (Wilinski, 2017).

Decisions about the 4K curriculum reflected the districts' stated commitment to play-based 4K that adhered to the tenets of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The policy stated:

4K curricula must be developmentally appropriate, align with the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (WIMELS) and accreditation criteria, be play-based, inclusive, research-based, inclusive of culture, race, social class, gender, language and needs, and be designed to promote partnerships with families.

The school district required public school 4K classrooms to use the Creative Curriculum and its accompanying observation and portfolio-based assessment, Teaching Strategies Gold (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002; Teaching Strategies Inc., 2010). ECE partner sites again had more leeway; they had to identify a research-based curriculum that aligned with their mission and philosophy as well as accompanying assessment tool. The ECE partner focal sites in this study chose to use the Creative Curriculum and their own developmental portfolio (Friendship) and the corporation's preK curriculum and accompanying assessment tool (Bright Start Childcare Center). In addition to this, all 4K sites—public and private—were required to administer the locally-developed 4K progress report in the fall and spring each year. At the time the research was conducted, there was no requirement from the district as to how the results of these assessments should be shared with families.

4K Progress Report

The district 4K progress report was developed by a committee that consisted of school district officials and ECE partner site administrators, including Friendship administrator Denise Sanderson and 4K teacher Linda Jenkins. Jenkins described the three school district officials on the committee as “really knowledgeable about their field and ECE.” From her perspective, these representatives were committed to “really trying to keep [4K] as play-based and developmentally appropriate as possible” (December 2012 interview). Sanderson said the committee had strict guidelines that they had to follow—the scoring had to be consistent with the district's kindergarten report cards—but that the committee also spent a lot of time identifying “which benchmarks we felt were a really good snapshot of helping a child be prepared to move into that next step in their education” (January 2012 interview). According to the school district, the benchmarks had been developed by the school district, from “an integrated review” of the Wisconsin Common Core Standards, the WIMELS, and the school district's kindergarten standards.

The progress report was a 1.5 page document that included five domains of development: social and emotional, health and physical, approaches to learning, language and communication, and cognitive and general knowledge. Sanderson explained that she and others were able to indicate their priorities for 4K by listing the “social and emotional” domain first and the “cognitive” domain last. This was important to because, from Sanderson's point of view:

The quote unquote academics is [sic] still a minute part of what 4K is. We can't lose sight of the social and emotional. And that's why on the progress report 'social emotional' is the first listed—because that's the most important part, and everyone on the committee recognized that. (January 2013 interview)

Each domain on the progress report included a set of anywhere from three to eight benchmarks. Teachers indicated children's progress toward meeting the benchmarks using a numerical score, from 1-4, that was identical to the one used for kindergarten report cards. The numbers signified: (1) “not yet” demonstrating a behavior or skill, (2) “beginning”, (3) “meets expectations”, or (4) “exceeds expectations.”

Friendship Preschool

Making sense of why Friendship staff members responded to assessment mandates as they did requires an understanding of the school's institutional context and approaches to assessment prior to the start of 4K. Friendship Preschool provides particularly interesting insight into the

challenges that may come with preK partnerships because it had a strong sense of history and its staff members were very involved in shaping the progress report. Friendship's director and teachers often expressed the belief that their program was "good, strong—one of the best, as far as play-based programming for early learning" (Denise Sanderson, January 2012 interview). Director Denise Sanderson's 20-year tenure at Friendship and the school's low rate of teacher turnover ensured its approach to play-based learning was carried out with a high degree of consistency. Even though she was new to the school, 4K teacher Melissa Stevenson was aware that the school had a particular way of doing things: "I think Friendship has been around for so long that there are ways of things happening and they just happen because that's how they've always been done" (June 2013 interview). At the same time, as she and others noted, Friendship staff members were open to change. This was evident in staff meetings, where Sanderson and the teachers might spend the better part of an hour deliberating over potential changes to school policy.

It was the anticipation of change that prompted Sanderson to take an active role in the development of Lakeville's 4K policy, with the rationale that if things were going to change in Lakeville ECE, Friendship should be part of it. Sanderson said her active involvement in 4K was "for the preservation of Friendship...I felt like this was something that could happen and could impact community centers, so I wanted to stay with it" (January 2012 interview). 4K—a tuition-free program—led to concern about the preschool's financial viability; Sanderson worried that if Friendship did not participate in 4K, families would leave. She explained:

Absolutely we were concerned about [losing our 4-year-olds]. Because [4K] is free! And people's budgets are people's budgets...Absolutely there was a concern that we'll lose our 4-year-olds if we don't provide [4K]. (January 2012 interview)

Becoming a 4K site, therefore "allowed us to continue to offer [our program] to children" (January 2012 interview). Because of the school's long history and status as a high-quality ECE provider, participation in 4K was viewed by Sanderson as a way to ensure that the preschool would not be put out of business. Although there were likely other ECE providers who had the same attitude as Sanderson, not all sites became 4K partners for this reason. Maura Evans, the director of BSCC, expressed a very different rationale for becoming a 4K partner:

Sometimes with large corporations and for-profit centers, sometimes we get that name, so to speak, that we're not as good as the rest of them. So I thought the only way we can prove that is by being in there. And getting our name out there and showing people are just as good [the others]. For profit, non-profit—it doesn't matter what you're doing, we're all doing the same thing for children. (February 2013 interview)

For Evans, becoming an ECE partner was a way to prove the quality of her program. In contrast, Sanderson saw 4K as a way to ensure that her program would be able to continue its good work in the face of changes to the ECE landscape in Lakeville.

Sanderson and her teachers' firm belief in the quality of Friendship's programming, which was rooted in the school's long history in the community, contributed to their perception that the introduction of 4K changed very little about how the preschool operated. 4K teacher Linda Jenkins said, "When people say things like 'How are things going [with 4K]?' it's like, 'We've been doing this for 60 years at Friendship.' It's not hugely different" (January 2012 interview). Sanderson reflected this "business-as-usual" mentality. She said: "As far as the functioning of the classrooms, it's still Friendship...So, someone walking in wouldn't say, 'Oh, this sure looks like a 4K class to me.' It's just a group of 4-year-olds playing, but with purpose" (January 2012 interview). A year later,

Sanderson still had the same perspective: “We are who we’ve always been, so there hasn’t been that much of a change” (January 2013 interview). The sense that 4K was something that was layered on top of their existing practice, rather than a policy that had led to a significant shift in their philosophy or approach was further evident in Sanderson’s explanation about Friendship’s choice of curriculum for 4K:

We’ve been around since 1949. That’s when our program started. And it started as a play-based program. So, it’s always been a play-based program. As part of 4K, you did have to identify a curriculum, and we most closely identify with Creative Curriculum, so that’s what we said. Because it’s so open-ended, and it’s just an outline. It’s not a “Today is Tuesday. This is what you do today.” And it is Friendship. I mean, it is absolutely who we are. So if we had to say what curriculum [we use], it would be Creative Curriculum. (January 2012 interview)

From Sanderson’s point of view, the school’s long history of a play-based approach was what guided teachers’ practice, not a particular curriculum or the 4K policy. Yet, when pressed to identify a curriculum, the preschool staff had chosen the Creative Curriculum because they believed it was the best representation of their existing practice.

Although they claimed that 4K had not resulted in many changes to the functioning of Friendship, Sanderson and Jenkins both noted that the district-mandated progress report *did* represent a significant change for the preschool. Prior to 4K, Friendship teachers had used a homegrown developmental portfolio to document children’s learning. Just before 4K began, Linda Jenkins and a colleague refined Friendship’s portfolio for 4K, incorporating state early learning standards and the 4K progress report benchmarks, so that the portfolio would “compliment but not necessarily duplicate” the progress report (Linda Jenkins, December 2012 interview). For Jenkins, the portfolio was a way to “show how the kids are meeting [the] standards.” Her focus was on what children could do, rather than what they could not, noting that her goal was “to show growth and progress” (December 2012 interview). When she began to use the district progress report, Jenkins, like the other focal teachers, experienced it as a significant demand on her time. She explained that doing the progress report and the portfolio felt like “double duty...I feel a little overwhelmed—there’s so much to do!” (January 2012 interview). Beyond this, Jenkins and Sanderson were skeptical of the necessity and, to some extent, the appropriateness, of the progress report. Yet, as I describe below, the internally persuasive discourse that they used to position their work and philosophy in relation to the progress report shifted slightly over time. This suggests that although they initially resisted the new assessments, Friendship staff also gradually incorporated aspects of the assessment mandate into their beliefs about best practice in ECE settings.

Authoritative Discourse of Assessment

The authoritative discourse of assessment conveyed by the school district and the 4K policy were connected to and must be understood within broader discourses about student outcomes and achievement data. Indeed, as they discussed assessment requirements with ECE partners, school district officials spoke of assessment as something necessary, part of the “changing landscape of education.” In this section, I describe the authoritative discourse of assessment in Lakeville 4K as it was constructed in policy and by school district officials.

State 4K policy did not require districts to use a specific assessment tool for 4K. A state policy document explained:

4K is not part of the Wisconsin Student Assessment System. To measure progress in 4K, Wisconsin school districts use a variety of curriculum and assessment tools. Best practice...includes authentic assessment methods that observe and record children's progress in typical activities throughout the program year... Assessment information is used to individualize instruction and plan next steps. (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2008, p. 10)

This document did not mention norm-referenced assessments as part of 4K, yet the policy changed in May 2013 when the state began to require the use of the PALS in 4K. Thus, in the year I conducted this research, the state's authoritative discourse of assessment shifted from something that very much aligned with ECE partners' beliefs about best practice to something they questioned and challenged.

Although Lakeville's 4K policy documents did not mention assessment, the required progress report was developed prior to the start of 4K. According to the district early learning coordinator Eric Stohler, the progress report was a subjective tool that was the first step toward a more systematic way of demonstrating the effects of 4K (Field notes, 3/4/13). At a March 2013 meeting, he described its importance for Response To Intervention, but said eventually the district would be able to compile standardized test scores of children who had been through 4K, leading to data about the long-term effects of 4K. He stressed to the ECE partners that in the "current climate," it was important to identify ways to "measure the great things that we're doing" (Field notes, 3/4/13).

The May 2013 district-wide 4K meeting provided additional insight into the school district's stance on assessment; it was a site where school district officials and ECE partners processed the news about the PALS requirement. While ECE partners bristled at the idea of adding another assessment to 4K, Stohler and his colleague Tracy Reed explained the need for such an assessment in terms of the broader context of education and the need for balanced assessment in 4K.

Reed explains that the country is moving away from a "wait to fail model" where you have to be doing poorly to qualify for help. She says that system was set up as a deficit model. Now, there is more thinking about "how to support kids at the earliest possible moments." She says there is a "need for balanced assessment to understand where kids are at. There's no one way to understand what kids are doing. You need to understand what's normal developmental growth and what's not." She says that kids who are "off track early will stay off track, and the achievement gap widens." (Field notes, 5/6/13)

Stohler further explained that the PALS could be used to "identify students that may not be performing. At some sites this isn't an issue, but at others, kids are falling through the cracks." Reed circled back to the discourse of assessment as a tool to identify and mitigate the achievement gap when she noted:

Our preliminary data shows big socio-economic differences in school achievement. We need to think about what's happening in areas with high poverty that kids are not demonstrating certain skills. (Field notes, 5/6/13)

While it was not clear from this statement whether Reed was referring to school achievement in 4K, specifically, in this example she invoked a common discourse of the accountability movement as a rationale for the new assessment—that data is a way to identify students in need of intervention in order to foster more equitable outcomes. Later in the meeting, Reed spoke about the PALS as a component of accountability in 4K. She said:

Schools are using it as an accountability piece, so we can sit back and look and say some programs are sending kids ready – how do we not have that be an island? What are the reasons some programs are sending kids ready [and others are not]?

In this statement, Reed positioned PALS as an accountability tool, yet literature from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction stated clearly that in 4K PALS was to be used as a diagnostic tool. The 4K PALS may have been intended as be part of a broader state goal to “[link] preschool and K-12 performance data through the state’s longitudinal data system...and [include] reading outcomes under and educator effectiveness evaluation and school and school district accountability system” (Joint Committee on Finance, 2013). Without knowing whether anyone at the May 6th meeting had information about the state’s intent for the introduction of PALS in 4K, it is significant that the assessment was at times discussed as if it was going to be used for accountability purposes. This may have informed ECE partners’ resistance to the assessment.

When ECE partners raised concerns about the assessment, Reed and Stohler explained that the new mandate was part of a larger movement, and that there was a place for this type of assessment. This exchange between an ECE partner site director and the school district officials illustrates this point:

Evie Linstrom: Is anyone telling the state that [the PALS] isn’t good?

Reed: I think I come from a different perspective. There is a place to do this in a balanced assessment.

Linstrom: The question is, “Are a variety of opinions being expressed?”

Stohler: This is bigger than 4K and Lakeville. It’s being done everywhere.

Throughout the meeting, Reed made similar references to the role of an assessment like PALS as part of balanced assessment. She explained that balanced assessment can include a screener like the PALS, as well as parent reports, observer reports, and direct child reports. She stated that there were developmentally appropriate ways for getting direct information from children, an approach to assessment that 4K teacher Linda Jenkins struggled with, as I describe in the next section.

At one point, Stohler acknowledged ECE partners’ concerns that there was too much assessment in 4K:

Denise Sanderson: I don’t think anyone at the table is assessment phobic. The concern is why it’s being done.

Eric Stohler: It’s a lot of assessment, and it’s ratcheting up every year.

Sanderson: And pushing down.

Even so, when Sanderson said, “We’re assessing the hell out of these kids. What can we give up?” Stohler asserted that the district assessment policy had not changed—they would still be required to use the progress report.⁵ Although these district officials conceded that PALS was flawed in some ways (for example, it did not have any modifications for English Language Learners), the authoritative discourse of assessment—that a norm-referenced assessment like the PALS was critical to achieving goals like closing the achievement gap—provided a rationale for the state’s mandate. At one point, in response to ECE partners’ concerns, Reed said: “Sometimes we have to do things that

⁵ Sanderson and others believed that teachers already spent enough time on assessment, between the portfolio and the progress report, which is why she exclaimed, “We’re assessing the hell out of these kids.” This statement may also have been grounded in her belief that any assessments in addition to observation-based assessments were unnecessary.

feel not good because we want data on all kids.”⁶ Although the norm-referenced assessment mandate came from the state, Stohler and Reed, acting on behalf of the school district, underscored the district’s support for the use of an assessment like PALS. Reed provided further evidence of the district’s stance on assessment when she explained that the district had spent the better part of the year piloting norm-referenced assessments, including the PALS; it was therefore likely that such an assessment would have been mandated in Lakeville, regardless of the state’s actions.

School district officials’ explanations about the rationale for the PALS mandate as part of a balanced assessment approach was part of the authoritative discourse of assessment to which Friendship staff and other ECE partners responded. The seemingly commonsense logic of this discourse was that data is needed in order for the purpose of intervention and to inform broader programmatic decisions (as opposed to day-to-day curricular ones) and assessments in preK must align with those in the elementary grades so that claims about program quality and student outcomes can be made. Within this logic, the portfolios and anecdotal evidence preferred by many ECE partners was valued not as a standalone assessment, but as part of a larger assessment scheme that included norm-referenced tools like the PALS.

Friendship’s Internally Persuasive Discourse of Assessment

As Denise Sanderson and Linda Jenkins responded to assessment mandates, they developed an internally persuasive discourse to position their beliefs about assessment in relation to policy requirements. In the first year of 4K, this resistance was grounded in assertions that the district progress report was: unnecessary, “not that appropriate,” and flawed because of its rating scale was the same one used in the elementary grades.

Denise Sanderson contended that the progress report was unnecessary because teachers were already using portfolios, which she believed was an adequate assessment for 4K. When asked what she would change about 4K, Sanderson responded:

I would eliminate progress reports. Because I just think that it's not necessary for a 4-year-old. Even though I was on the progress report committee, and it's very developmentally appropriate, I just think that the portfolio is enough. (January 2012 interview)

Linda Jenkins expressed her belief that the portfolio was enough, but for a slightly different reason; she experienced the progress report as doing “double-duty.” For Jenkins, the progress report also required more specific information than the portfolio about what children knew, which she said was not “all that appropriate.” She addressed this in the context of her concern that 4K would “turn into school,” noting: “Like trying to do these progress reports, where they want an exact number of how many letters they know—that's not really all that appropriate” (January 2012). Jenkins worried that she may have to use direct assessment techniques to ascertain exactly how many letters a child knew, or how high they could count by rote. Her former co-teacher explained that she typically tried to find ways to observe this while the children were engaged in some other activity. She explained:

So I've been trying to find ways to look at it, and thinking, ‘Oh, well, we play this game, or we read this story, or we do this activity that would lend itself to me to see this.’ So that's what I've been trying to do—to find things that we already do or

⁶ I do not know whether what Reed and Stohler said about assessment represented their own beliefs. As school district officials, they were responsible for ensuring that ECE and public school 4K sites complied with district and state assessment requirement.

activities that you would see, I hate to say, a skill set or knowledge. (December 2011 interview)

It was not the content of the progress report that teachers found problematic—it was the type of information they were required to supply, some of which was difficult to glean by observing children at play in their natural environment. For Linda Jenkins, sitting down and asking a child “how high [they] can count or how many letters they know” was not “authentic” (December 2012 interview). The need to provide specifics—how many letters a child could identify or how high they could count with one-to-one correspondence—was a departure from Jenkins’ prior practice:

Whereas I’ve always sort of known, “Oh, you know, this child has pretty good one-to-one [correspondence], or this one doesn’t. But [in the past, I could never] say, ‘Oh I know he can count up to 34 using one-to-one correspondence.’ So I think that really quantifying it with an exact number is kinda different...In the past, I kind of knew who was good at this or good at that. (Linda Jenkins, January 2012 interview)

The most troubling aspect of the progress report for Sanderson and Jenkins was that its rating scale mirrored the one used on elementary school report cards. Their critique of the rating scale grew out of questions about its appropriateness in a play-based program, how families would interpret children’s scores, and a general uneasiness about 4K scores becoming part of a child’s permanent record. Sanderson described her belief that the rating scale was not well-aligned with a play-based program, noting that she struggled to imagine how a child could “exceed” at play (January 2012 interview). When she raised this concern at a progress report committee meeting, she was told that the 1-4 scale was necessary for alignment. She explained:

We had to give ‘not yet, beginning, meets, or exceeds.’ Those were the grades. And I said, ‘Do we have to have an exceeds? Can’t we just have a meets or, you know, working on?’ [But they said] it has to be consistent. The scoring has to be consistent with what is done on other progress reports. (January 2012)⁷

This alignment with the elementary report cards led to further concern that the purpose of the 4K progress report would be misinterpreted by families, causing them undue concern and perhaps leading to unnecessary pressure for children. While kindergarten and elementary grades report cards indicated skills students should have mastered by the end of each quarter, the goals outlined on the 4K progress report were to be achieved by the end of the *school year*. In other words, it would be perfectly normal for a child to be “beginning” (2) or not yet demonstrating a skill (1) at the start of the year and only progress to “meets expectations” (3) by the end of the year. Sanderson worried that families may not understand this, and instead expect their child to earn a “4” in every category each time they were assessed. Jenkins was similarly concerned that parents at Friendship expected their children to get all 4s.

To address these concerns, Sanderson planned to write a letter to accompany the progress reports that would explain their purpose to families.⁸

And I think I will be creating a letter to go with the progress reports that says, “Take them for what they are; this is a requirement for 4K. Don’t look at the numbers too

⁷ In the March 2013 district-wide 4K meeting, district official Eric Stohler told ECE partners that the “4” was necessary for Response to Intervention—to identify children who needed additional challenges.

⁸ Sanderson did, in fact, write this letter. She also circulated it to other 4K sites. In one district 4K meeting, ECE partner site directors commended her for the letter, which they said they found very helpful.

hard...I just don't want parents to be thinking that their child is failing 4K or that our program is failing their child. Or that they're gonna go home and sit there and make their child zip their coat, zip their coat, zip their coat—so that they get a 4 on the progress report. Or make them sit down and do coloring books or workbooks or whatever because 'I want them to get that 4.' I want them to have a healthy perspective: that this is a requirement of 4K. If it wasn't a requirement, we wouldn't be doing it. Because our portfolios are very positively-based—we provide to parents what we have observed, not what we haven't observed. (January 2012 interview)

Sanderson worried that parents' desire to see their child earn high marks on the progress report might lead them to try to teach to the test (she had concerns that progress reports might lead teachers to do the same), which she believed was unnecessary. Part of the challenge, for Sanderson, was that the progress report listed skills that a child might not have demonstrated yet. Portfolios, in contrast, only documented what they had *already* observed.

Finally, Sanderson and teachers shared concerns over the fact that the progress report would become part of each child's permanent record. Linda Jenkins explained: "It's hard to assess children and think about, 'This is their permanent record.' It's always sorta hard to say what you really mean [because the comment boxes have a word limit]" (January 2012 interview). Sanderson said this led teachers to "agonize" over the progress reports. She provided teachers with this advice:

Be careful what you write on that progress report, 'cause it's gonna be on his permanent record...If you've had a challenge with the child, it's not the day to hit a zinger on someone's progress report. It's just not fair. (January 2012 interview)

That assessment would become part of a child's permanent record was only a concern in the context of 4K. With Friendship teachers' work linked to the school district, the practice of assessment became more complex and felt a bit more high-stakes, even though the progress report was not intended as such.

In spite of their reservations, Friendship staff said they understood the district's rationale for the progress report. In the second year of 4K, they also began to describe ways that the progress report had benefited their program. Sanderson explained:

I struggle a little bit with the assessment tool that we're required to use, because it's the same as the elementary school, with the same grades, if you will – 1, 2, 3, 4. And how does one excel at play? You know, I really struggle with it. I know that it's something [the district has] to do, and I understand from a research perspective they want to be able to track things and you know, they're looking to see, 'Is this gonna close the achievement gap?' So I sort of get it, but it's still a little painful to me. (January 2013 interview)

She also said a benefit of the progress report was that it had made teachers "a little more mindful" of the connections between the skills and competencies children were exhibiting and the types of activities they planned. She explained:

As far as the curriculum, we are who we've always been, so there hasn't been that much of a change. With the exception of making us perhaps a little bit more mindful. Like when we're doing that authentic assessment with children we may realize: This little guy doesn't understand rhyming words. We better make sure we're really using that language. 'Hey, those two words rhyme.' And giving them those opportunities. So that's been a really good benefit too. It's been a really good education. (January 2013 interview)

The mindfulness Sanderson described came from the fact that the progress report was linked to state early learning standards, which meant that teachers were much more aware of these standards:

[It comes from] being really, really keyed into the WIMELS, which ties into the benchmarks, which ties into the rubric, which ties into the progress report. You're using it more. You really are using it. Not to say that our program before was bad, but it's just, you know, being mindful of many things. So I think that's been really good. (January 2013 interview)

Linda Jenkins also expressed her belief that the progress report had been beneficial, particularly when it came to having conversations with families about children's development. In the second year of 4K, she planned to move away from using the portfolio as the central discussion piece during parent-teacher conferences. She explained that it was sometimes difficult to discuss concerns with families when they were looking at the portfolio, which she characterized in this interview as "basically a scrapbook of the child's year." Although she and parents liked the portfolio, Jenkins said "Sometimes it was nice to have the progress report as backup for something to talk about" (December 2012 interview). In a previous interview, Jenkins said that the progress report provided a more official way of showing parents what children were learning in 4K. When asked in that same interview how parents responded to the progress report, she said:

People seem to kinda appreciate that we're doing something. Now that 4K will become the norm, I think it's in some ways good to show that this is real school. It's not just preparing for school. (January 2012 interview)

While she continued to struggle with the progress report, Jenkins also believed that it lent some value and credibility to her work.

Although Jenkins and Sanderson each reported that the progress reports had its positive aspects, Sanderson was steadfast in her assertion that the progress report was unnecessary for 4K. Mid-way through the second year of 4K, Sanderson said that if she could change anything about 4K, it would be progress reports. She said:

Progress reports. Progress reports. I struggle with it. I really do. I really, really do. Parents, I think, starting from my generation and younger, we are so angst-ridden about our children and so worried that they're not gonna be okay. We struggle and worry and struggle and worry and all [the progress report] does is feed into that. It just seems like last year you were worried about your kid potty training and now you're worried that he doesn't have a 4 on the progress report. I think the progress report is the biggest thing [that I would change]. (January 2013 interview).

That other ECE partners were concerned about parent reactions to the progress report was evident in district-wide 4K meetings. In a March 2013 meeting, two other directors voiced their concern about this. One director noted that the children in her center did not receive 4s because they were English Language Learners. This posed a challenge because children's parents were highly educated and concerned about grades. Another director noted that she had similar difficulties assessing with students with special needs using the progress report.

When the PALS mandate was introduced in May 2013, Denise Sanderson and other ECE partners questioned its necessity and purpose in ways that largely echoed the aforementioned concerns about the progress report. There was some concern that the PALS would change teachers' practice. For example, one city childcare official asked, "So does pre-teaching become part of the

curriculum?” Along the same vein, Denise Sanderson asked, “So we just plug in the scores and print out a curriculum?” Other concerns revolved around the sheer amount of time (45 minutes per child, with all children tested in a two-week period) and human resources the assessment would require.

ECE directors expressed their interest in taking political action to contest the mandate. “Call your legislator” was a common refrain from ECE partners in response to concerns raised by their colleagues. In fact, after the meeting, 12 ECE partner site directors, led by Denise Sanderson, wrote a letter to the editor of a Wisconsin newspaper stating their opposition to the PALS, on the grounds that it was an “inappropriate tool for 4K.” Many of these concerns echoed Denise Sanderson and Linda Jenkins’ concerns about the progress report. For example, the letter listed among the characteristics of the PALS that made it inappropriate: “high quality centers will be trained to ‘teach to the test’” and “it will crowd out more authentic assessments that document learning across domains.” Both of these harkened back to concerns about the progress report.

Finally, the ECE partners in the room asserted that the assessments they already used provided the same information that the PALS would. As Reed demonstrated how teachers would read a PALS data sheet to see where children have fallen below a benchmark, several directors commented, “That’s what authentic assessment tells you!” and a city childcare official said, “Teachers are not going to wait to see this information from PALS. They know the kids from the first day.” Later, Linda Jenkins expressed a similar belief—that the information from the PALS was exactly what ECE teachers gleaned from observational assessments. When I asked about PALS in her final interview, Linda said she had just told Denise:

ECE people should just rule the world. All this [Response to Intervention] stuff—that’s basically what we’ve been doing all along. A good foundation, a little extra help for the kids who need it, so what’s the big deal? (May 2013 interview)

Like Sanderson’s response to the progress report—that it was unnecessary because they were already using portfolios—this assertion demonstrated Jenkins’ belief that existing assessment practices were sufficient, and that new practices would not add to teachers’ knowledge of their students.

Discussion

State and district 4K assessment policy can be understood as an authoritative discourse of assessment, representing particular “truths” about the role of assessment in 4K and about how data should be collected. The authoritative discourse of assessment that Lakeville ECE partners responded to reflected broader discourses of assessment and accountability in the K-12 arena. The discourse demanded compliance because it was woven into policy requirements. The discourse held that assessment in 4K was an important way to ensure goals of 4K were being met. As part of a larger paradigm shift in education, assessment tools like the progress report and PALS played a role in measuring children’s progress over time, which served the purpose of identifying students who were struggling and ensuring program quality. There was a theme of equity in the discourse—assessment would ensure that all children had high-quality experiences, and that no children would “fall through the cracks,” as Tracy Reed put it. Large-scale data from assessments could also yield program-level data, which would help the state and school district demonstrate the effects of 4K, or as Stohler noted, “measure all the good things we’re doing.”

When staff members at Friendship Preschool, a 4K partner site, came into contact with this discourse, they resisted many aspects of it and constructed an internally persuasive discourse of

⁹ The letter was never published, but the directors forwarded it to the Lakeville school board. The letter to the school board concluded, “We do not believe that the PreK PALS test is best practice for young children.”

assessment to position their own work in relation to 4K assessment requirements. While Denise Sanderson and Linda Jenkins' response was not necessarily representative of all ECE partners in Lakeville (or in any district, for that matter), the discourse provides important insight into how an ECE provider with a strong institutional history and mission experienced a preK partnership that newly linked their work to the school district and K-12 system. Friendship's case is particularly interesting because its staff members played a key role in creating the district progress reports. In spite of this, they found aspects of the assessment challenging and even inappropriate. Although their beliefs about assessment in 4K shifted slightly over time, Friendship staff for the most part positioned their stance on assessment in opposition to 4K policy.

Friendship staff's internally persuasive discourse of assessment was grounded in a belief that the progress report and PALS provided information that duplicated what teachers were able to glean from observation-based assessments. They questioned the need for a test that told them what they already knew. Further, Sanderson and Jenkins were concerned that the assessments would cause teachers to "teach to the test" and incite an unnecessary parental focus on children's performance in 4K. They also contended that the progress report rating scale was inappropriate for a play-based program. Their internally persuasive discourse rejected this method of aligning 4K with the elementary grades, with the rationale that the goals in 4K were fundamentally different from the elementary grades.

The reaction of Friendship staff to assessment requirements provides insight into the challenges ECE providers may face as they partner with school districts for preK provision. The interaction between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse in this example demonstrates the complexity of partnerships, which bring together stakeholders with different responsibilities and goals. Friendship and other ECE partners asserted they were not "assessment-phobic"—they were used to and valued using assessment for the purposes of informing teachers' daily classroom practice. In contrast, the school district and district officials thought about assessment on a larger scale; they were responsible for closing the achievement gap in the district, and needed data that would inform broader programmatic changes or technical inputs. As such, one component of the conflict over assessment was an issue of scale. While ECE partners were previously responsible for maintaining various certifications and accreditations, they had not been answerable to a larger entity like the school district, which needed different information to make program-level decisions than ECE providers needed to make classroom-level decisions.

In addition to this, preK partnerships may exacerbate concerns that ECE will become more school-like. In the context of concern that ECE will become too much like elementary school, assessment is an easy target. This was evident in Friendship staff members' response to the progress report rating scale; Sanderson believed it was simply inappropriate to align the 4K rating scale with the elementary grades. This was paired with unease over parents' mounting focus on grades, which Sanderson believed would only be fueled by the progress report rating scale.

Although Friendship staff members questioned aspects of 4K assessment policy, they were relatively powerless to change it. A challenge embedded in a preK partnership like Lakeville's was the significant impetus for ECE to be partners—maintaining financial viability. They could disagree with policy all they wanted, but in Lakeville, if ECE providers wanted ensure their financial viability, they had to become 4K partners.¹⁰ For providers like Friendship, this meant complying with assessment policies with which they did not fully agree.

¹⁰ In year two of 4K, several well-regarded ECE providers became 4K partners because they were losing 4-year-olds to other sites that provided 4K. To try to make up this lost revenue, the sites applied to be 4K partners. For more on this situation, see Wilinski, 2017.

Yet, even as they disagreed with aspects of the assessment policy, Friendship staff also came to see the progress report as beneficial to their practice, albeit in a limited way. Their changing views over time demonstrates how internally persuasive discourse can shift to accommodate new perspectives and experiences. This also highlights the reality that preK partnerships are likely to take time to coalesce, because they bring together such different stakeholders with different philosophies and approaches to early learning. ECE providers and school districts need time to negotiate what the new “business as usual” for both parties will look like in the context of a preK partnership. This negotiation requires each side to better understand the other, so that the challenges inherent in preK partnerships can be mitigated.

As the popularity of public preK continues to rise, there is a need to better understand how preK policies are enacted and their meanings negotiated, particularly when it comes to assessment; these negotiations will almost certainly shape what preK in the United States will become when it grows up. In addition, as school district-ECE provider partnerships in preK are increasingly promoted, there is an urgent need for more research that critically examines how bringing preK under the purview of public entities shapes curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Halpern, 2013; McCabe & Sipple, 2011; Morrissey et al., 2007). This discursive analysis, which examined how policies and policy implementers described assessment in preK, provides initial insight into the challenges of bringing together the ECE and K-12 systems in for preK.

By all accounts, it is a good time to be a 4-year-old in the United States. Growing bipartisan support for public preK has led to expanded access for children across the nation, with the potential for positive effects on children’s development across all domains. At the same time, there is a need for awareness of the challenges that come with preK partnerships and support for stakeholders as they negotiate the politics of partnership. PreK partnerships have the potential to benefit school districts, ECE providers, children and families, yet these benefits will only be realized if these partnerships are strong and function well. Given the dramatic differences between ECE and the K-12 system, enthusiasm for partnerships must be accompanied by careful consideration of how they are experienced by all stakeholders, particularly the ECE partners who play a critical role in preK provision.

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