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Local Control in the Era of Accountability: A Case Study of Wisconsin PreK

M. Elizabeth Graue

University of Wisconsin Madison



Bethany Wilinski

Michigan State University



Amato Nocera

University of Wisconsin Madison

United States

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Abstract: The opposing principles of local control and increased standardization are a prominent tension in the United States' education system. Since at least the early 1990s, this tension has taken shape around the accountability movement, defined by educational reforms that hold schools, teachers, and students accountable for performance on new standards, assessments, and curricula. While many scholars have examined the manifestations of the current accountability movement, few have looked at this phenomenon within the growing public preK movement. Drawing from interviews with state policymakers and district-level actors, this paper describes how the seemingly

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contradictory principles of local control and increased state and national standards (what we refer to simply as standardization) are shaping the policy and practice of Wisconsin's preK system, known as 4K. We argue that rational models of policy making fail to explain the coexistence and blending of the strands of local control and standardization we found in our data, and suggest that Deborah Stone's (2001) policy paradox provides a better theoretical framework for our findings.

Keywords: PreK policy; Wisconsin; early childhood education; local control; standardization; policy paradox; accountability

El control local en la era de la responsabilidad: Un caso de estudio de niños pre-escolares (preK) en Wisconsin

Resumen: Los principios opuestos al control local y el aumentado de exámenes estandarizados han causado bastante tensión en el sistema de educación en los Estados Unidos. Desde el inicio del 1990, esta tensión ha tomado forma alrededor del movimiento de responsabilidad, que se distingue por las reformas educativas que tratan de asumir la responsabilidad a las escuelas, los profesores y estudiantes sobre las nuevas normas, evaluaciones y planes de estudio. Mientras muchos han examinado las manifestaciones del movimiento de la responsabilidad actual, pocos han observado este fenómeno que va creciendo dentro del movimiento preescolar (preK). Usando entrevistas con diseñadores de políticas de estado y autores a nivel del distrito, en este artículo se describe cómo aparentemente se contradicen los principios de control local y se aumentan las pólizas estándares, nacionales y estatales (las que nos referimos simplemente como la estandarización) son mol-da la política y la práctica del sistema de pre-escolar (preK) de Wisconsin, conocido como "4K". Nuestro argumento es que los modelos racionales de la formulación de políticas fallan al explicar la convivencia y la mezcla de aspectos de control local y la paradoja política que encontramos en nuestros datos, sugieren que la política de Deborah Stone (2011) proporciona una mejor estructura teórico para nuestras recomendaciones.

Palabras clave: Política de preescolar para niños (Pre-K); Wisconsin; educación Infantil; el control local; normalización; paradoja de la política; responsabilidad

Controle Local na era de responsabilidades: Um caso de estudo de pré-escola infantil (preK) em Wisconsin

Resumo: Os princípios opostos de controle local e o aumento na padronização são uma tensão proeminente no sistema de ensino dos Estados Unidos. Pelo menos desde o início dos anos 1990, essa tensão tem tomado forma em torno do movimento de responsabilidade, definido por reformas educacionais que sustentam escolas, professores, e estudantes responsáveis pelo desempenho de novos padrões, avaliações e currículos. Enquanto muitos estudiosos têm examinado as manifestações do atual movimento de responsabilização, poucos têm olhado para esse fenômeno dentro do crescimento público do movimento pré-escolar infantil (preK). Tomando de entrevistas com formuladores de políticas estatais e autores de nível distrital, este artigo descreve como princípios aparentemente contraditórios de controle local e o aumento de padrões nacionais e estatais (o que nos referimos simplesmente como padronização) estão moldando a política e a prática do sistema de pré-escola infantil (preK) de Wisconsin, conhecido como "4K". Defendemos que os modelos racionais de formulação de políticas falham em explicar a coexistência e mistura dos fios de controle local e padronização que encontramos em nossos dados, e sugerem que o paradoxo da política de Deborah Stone (2011) proporciona uma melhor estrutura teórica para as nossas descobertas.

Palavras-chave: política de pré-escola infantil (PreK); Wisconsin; educação infantil; controle local; padronização; paradoxo da política; responsabilidade

Introduction

Public preK¹ represents a seismic shift in the delivery of early childhood services as growing numbers of districts and states implement public programs for children prior to kindergarten. This expansion comes as policymakers and legislators recognize early education's potential for enhancing children's academic, social and emotional development (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2012), reducing the need for later services (Puma, Bell, Cook, Heid, & Lopez, 2005) and long term costs (Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Savelyev, & Yavitz, 2010; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002). Many advocates suggest public preK is a way to level the playing field, given the large disparities in the access to high quality early education programs among children in different income, racial, language, and disability groups (Gormley, Gayer, & Phillips, 2008; Magnuson, Lahaie, & Waldfogel, 2006). It is hoped that with the support provided through public preK, children will be more likely to be ready for kindergarten.

The emergence of public preK also represents a merging of two distinct institutions—the early education and care sector, which is typically private and highly varied from community to community, and the K-12 system, which is largely public and increasingly standardized at the state and national level (McCabe & Sipple, 2011). With distinctly different philosophies of practice, financing, teacher requirements, and regulations, the early education and K-12 systems are coming into contact as preK policy moves to implementation. Added to this is a pedagogical rift between the early childhood community and accountability advocates. That conflict stems from the poor fit between the early childhood community's tradition of child-centered pedagogy, which builds curriculum developmentally, and the accountability discourse, focused on grade level benchmarks and readiness (Brown, 2007).

We contemplated these changes in a policy context where 43 states spend over \$5.3 billion for public preK, serving more than 1.3 million 3 and 4 year olds (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, & Brown, 2013). These program investments sit uneasily between institutions with very different cultures and histories. The context then of this research is an ongoing dynamic created by the merging of a traditionally local industry with public schools and a movement focused on standards; a dynamic which is at the heart of understanding the development of public preK programs across the United States. In this context, we address the following research questions: *In a state that traditionally favors local control, how is public preK interpreted and enacted in the wake of the standards-based accountability movement? How is this revealed through discourse at the state and local level?*

To answer these questions, we closely studied preK programming in Wisconsin, a state with a long history of local control that has worked to navigate the potentially treacherous waters of public preK during a period of increasing standardization. Wisconsin is a good example to consider in the rapidly evolving policy landscape because it represents a mature public preK program, funded in its most recent iteration since 1984, and serving children in 91% of the state's school districts (Barnett et al, 2013). Its unique design, which straddles public schools and community childcare centers, provides a window on the challenges of implementing a preK program in this political moment.

This paper also describes how these competing discourses play out in Wisconsin's public preK program, in state policy and district implementation. Drawing on interviews with state

¹ Public 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 2 days per week” (Barnett, Friedman, Hustedt, & Stevenson-Boyd, 2009, p. 5)

policymakers and district administrators, we first highlight the ways the opposing discourses of local control and accountability (or what we also refer to simply as standardization) are represented in policymaker discussions of 4K and integrated into 4K policy. We then move from the level of policy to implementation, closely examining one district's 4K program to show how the frameworks policymakers use to discuss 4K carry over into practice. We begin with an overview of the theoretical framework we used to make sense of this policy story.

Theoretical Framework

Traditional models of policy making suggest that the policy process is linear: an issue is defined, policy alternatives created, evidence considered, and the best policy option determined and implemented (Ball, 1994; Bridgman & Davis 2003; Honig, 2006). Following this model, a policy issue, like low quality schools, is identified and a policy solution, like the development of uniform educational standards, is implemented after evidence shows this to be the best solution. Working within this framework, scholars explain that policy battles like the one between advocates of local control and standardization do not fit nicely within their policy model because of the messiness of the “real world,” which is filled with irrational beliefs and reasoning not informed by evidence (Ball, Macguire, & Braun, 2012). An alternative model takes the role of ideology more seriously, framing the battle between advocates of local control and standardization as a struggle between distinct and coherent ideologies. In this view, policy issues are determined by ideological frameworks; political conflicts arise when opposing ideologies are represented by alternative policy options (Mouffe, 2000).

Deborah Stone's (2001) policy paradox provides a third option. Within Stone's framework, policy and policy issues are less a contest of alternative solutions than a battle over how political issues are defined and how policy solutions are represented. For Stone, political ideas are fluid and reflect power relations. Stone suggests that political reasoning is a process of “creating, changing, and defending boundaries” in a social world where those boundaries are rarely objective or cleanly derived from a larger ideological framework (p. 379). As Fischer and Forester (1993) explain, for Stone,

policy-making is a constant discursive struggle over the criteria of social classification, the boundaries of problem categories, the intersubjective interpretation of common experiences, the conceptual framing of problems, and the definitions of ideas that guide the way people create the shared meaning which motivate them to act. (pp. 1-2).

Based on Stone's theory, one would assume local control and standardization to be a contested yet murky terrain, where the boundaries of these perspectives are not always clear and policies often reflect elements of both.

We found Stone's (2001) policy paradox best represented both policy and practice of Wisconsin 4K. As we discuss in more detail, 4K has a relatively open regulatory framework and is subject to considerable local control at the district level. On the surface this seems to represent Wisconsin's history of local control, but our findings suggest that policymakers are increasingly influenced by trends in the national accountability movement. The manifestation of this influence was not generally a political fight between proponents of 4K standardization and proponents of locally controlled 4K, but rather an interesting blend of these positions in policy and political reasoning that did not always draw strict boundaries between them. As we will show in this paper,

actors often held contradictory beliefs and advocated for seemingly orthogonal values in their discussions of 4K. This was also reflected in the implementation of 4K programs.

Framing the Paper

Recent education reform in the United States has largely pushed for greater accountability and standardization in K-12. The 1983 federal report, *A Nation at Risk*, helped solidify an emerging political consensus on which these reforms have been built: low and ill-defined expectations—particularly in high school—were the central problem with America’s public schools. States became the early testing ground for what has become known as standards-based accountability reform. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of states with content standards grew from 20 to 49 in English/language arts, 25 to 49 in math, 23 to 46 in science, and 20 to 46 in social studies/history (Hurst, Tan, Meek, & Sellers, 2003, p. 9). Since the 2001 passage of No Child Left Behind, the Federal Government has situated itself at the center of the national push for school accountability. The Obama administration’s educational agenda, Race to the Top, Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, and the Common Core standards, are the newest manifestation of this ongoing trend.

Much of the educational research documenting state and federal accountability reforms have framed these policies as a move away from local education (Malen, 2003; Malen & Muncey, 2000; Sheldon & Biddle, 1998). Scholars have cast the “involvement of the state in local education [as] translat[ing] directly and proportionally to a loss of local control” (Fusarelli, 2009, p. 253). This zero-sum approach is countered by those who see “considerable wiggle room” within the system of state-level standards and accountability reforms, providing space for local decision-making (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Malen 2003, p. 200). According to this view, the authority of local actors cannot be completely removed by state-level policy because their decisions and interpretations are inherently linked to the implementation of such policy (Erickson, 2014; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990). This view does not deny that state and federal educational reforms have had a profound impact on district and school autonomy, but rather highlights the ways local authority continues to exist in the era of accountability.

This paper builds on this literature in several ways. For one, we look at preK, an area of public education that has been rapidly expanding and going through an accountability movement of its own. There has also been a growing literature that looks at accountability measures in preK (Ackerman & Coley, 2012; Meisels, 2006; Snow, Van Hemel, & National Research Council of the National Academies, 2008), but with the exception of Brown (2007), most of this literature has focused on states and cities with heavily regulated preK programs. That is not the case in Wisconsin. In addition, this paper helps to advance the literatures on accountability and local control by viewing them through the lens of discourse and using Stone to interpret the findings. We look at the accountability movement and increased standardization in preK not only as a question about the location of authority and decision-making, but also as a question about political ideas and their representation. Similar to the contention made by those who reject a zero-sum interpretation of the standards-based accountability movement—denying that such policymaking is directly proportional to the loss of local control—we contend that the rise of accountability-laden language in discussions of Wisconsin’s preK system has not crowded out the discourse of local control among policymakers and administrators. Drawing upon interviews with state-level policymakers, we argue that they have

found ways to hold these two discourses side-by-side in their approach to preK, letting context determine whether they frame preK within the aims of standardization or local control.

Wisconsin History Lessons

In this section we provide brief histories of the 4K program and of how accountability reforms have played out in Wisconsin. We highlight the recent history of accountability fights as illustrative of ideas of local control and standardization, and the complex tension between them that are central to this paper.

4K

4K has deep roots in Wisconsin's public education system. The state's 1848 constitution includes 4-year-olds in public education, stating 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). Although constitutionally included in the public education system, 4K implementation has varied over time in response to public interest, political will, and prevailing norms about appropriate environments for young children. The 4K movement that gained traction by the late 1800s all but disappeared from 1920 to 1980, with only six districts offering 4K in 1980 (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2010). The early 1990s saw a renewed interest in 4K as a result of the reinstatement of state funding and recognition of the importance of early development (Decker, McCoy, & Tipler, 1989; Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2010). Today, 91% of Wisconsin school districts have 4K programs serving 64% of the state's 4-year-olds (Barnett, et al, 2013; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2014).

The state imposes few regulations on 4K implementation. School districts that provide 4K must: operate programs for 437 hours per year, make the half day program available free of charge to all age-eligible four year olds in the district (making it a universal rather than targeted program), employ kindergarten-licensed teachers, and provide transportation to students. However, decisions about class size, additional staff, and the curriculum are made locally, at the district level. In addition to granting significant local control, funding sets Wisconsin's 4K program apart from other public preK programs; 4K is included in the state education aids formula, protecting it from being cut if political will shifts. Districts receive .5 reimbursement for each 4K student enrolled, representing a half day program. This increases to .6 for districts whose programs include a parent outreach component (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2008).

In addition, 4K's loose regulatory framework allows for different models of service delivery. Historically, 4K was school-based, with classes in local elementary schools taught by school district employees (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2010). In the early 2000s a new form of 4K emerged: the 4K Community Approach, or 4K-CA. In the 4K-CA model, providing 4K is a collaborative effort between the school district and the early childhood community. 4K classes in a 4K-CA district are provided in local childcare centers or Head Start or in a combination of school and community sites (Bulebosh, 2000).² 4K-CA is seen as an option that benefits both school districts and community sites. Using the existing childcare infrastructure to deliver 4K minimizes the school district's financial burden by allowing community sites to pay staff at the prevailing rate for community site teachers and use existing space and materials, and community sites can continue to respond to local needs and receive an infusion of funds that help defray costs in a business with very

² We use the term community sites to include both childcare and Head Start.

low profit margins. The state also incentivizes this model by providing start up grants for districts contemplating 4K-CA.

The unique development of Wisconsin's 4K program, which might be seen as a precursor to the rapidly growing public preK movement, occurred in a particular history. Its re-emergence coincided with the standards-based accountability movement. As we show later in the paper, 4K's evolution has been shaped by the collision of two policy impulses – local control and standardization.

K-12 Standards and Expansion to Early Childhood

In the 1990s, standards-based reforms landed in Wisconsin as it did in the rest of the nation, shifting the discourse from local autonomy to a concern about whether schools were adequately preparing students. Leading the charge to implement increased standards in Wisconsin's K-12 system was former governor Tommy Thompson. In his 1996 State of the State Address, Governor Thompson included a strong rebuke of the state's public schools:

Every year in Wisconsin, we graduate about 48,000 high schoolers, without really knowing what they've learned. We put them in robes, hold grand graduation ceremonies, play 'Pomp and Circumstance.' Yet the only thing we are guaranteeing is that they completed at least a minimum number of high school courses. We know how long they sat in their seats, but we don't know what went into their heads (*State of Wisconsin Senate Journal*, p. 567, 1996; cited in Brown, 2008).

During his tenure, the Governor proposed a number of reforms, including a high-stakes exam that every senior attending public school in Wisconsin would be required to pass in order to receive a diploma. Yet, reform efforts like this have inevitably come up against a history of favoring local control³ that is deeply imbedded in Wisconsin politics and governance (Brown, 2008). Despite almost a decade of reform advocacy, public resistance from parents' groups like "Keep Education a Local Issue" and scathing editorials in Wisconsin's major newspapers effectively killed all of Thompson's reforms (Brown, 2004, p. 127).

While struggles over accountability reform have primarily occurred in the K-12 arena, at least one reform directly addressed preK. George Bush's 2002 Good Start, Grow Smart (GSGS) initiative was touted as a reform to increase standards and accountability in early childhood education. Among the components of this initiative was a request by the Bush Administration for states to develop learning standards for children ages 3 to 5, "which were to include guidelines on pre-reading and language skills that align with that state's K-12 standards" (Brown, 2007, p. 637). States were required to provide detailed progress on the development of these standards to the federal government in any request for Child Care and Development Funds.

In Wisconsin, the result was the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (WMELS). Developed by the Early Learning Standards Steering Committee, the WMELS were created to signal alignment with K-12 standards that would satisfy GSGS without significantly disrupting Wisconsin's

³ In 1924 the Wisconsin constitution was amended to support local control through Article XI, Section 3, which states "Cities and villages . . . may determine their local affairs and government, subject . . . to such enactments of the legislature of statewide concern as with uniformity shall affect every city or every village." This provision limits the power of the legislature over local affairs by recognizing the spheres of city and village and permits local control. (Champagne, 2004)

local approach to education. This was achieved by using developmentally appropriate practice⁴ (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) as the framework for the WMELS. Rather than stipulate specific outcomes for children, the WMELS were intended to be used as a resource for early childhood professionals and communities to guide them “in their decision regarding approaches to the curriculum” and in “[determining] local benchmarks at the district level” (Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, 2013). The kind of developmentally-based practice outlined in the WMELS aligned with Wisconsin’s K-12 standards but left significant room for local communities to decide *how* they would be achieved. Furthermore, the WMELS were designed so that they could not be attached to a high-stakes assessment or act as a gate-keeper for entry into kindergarten. One participant in Brown’s study of the Wisconsin early learning standards noted: “Any time there was a statement that could be a yes or no, it was taken out, and that was a real clear directive from everyone that you cannot put statements [in the standards] that people would turn around into a checklist to see if you were ready for kindergarten” (Brown, 2007, p. 649).

The histories of the development of 4K, Thompson’s reform efforts, and the WMELS represent key elements of Wisconsin’s 4K that served as a foundation in many of our interviews. In Thompson’s case, we see the power of local control in the state of Wisconsin. As we illustrate later in the paper, Wisconsin’s policymakers are very aware of a popular ethos of local control and have made sure that 4K conforms to it. Yet, the history of the WMELS demonstrates that as accountability policy became more prominent nationally, increased standardization found its way into the state’s political context. Similar to what we heard about with more recent reforms, the WMELS signified a changing educational landscape that has led policymakers to adopt, rather than resist, some aspects of standardization.

Method

This paper comes out of a larger multisite case study (Stake, 2005) of preK policy designed to understand how it is enacted in policy development and political exchange, how it is constructed through administration, and how relevant stakeholders experience it. We sampled two states with mature⁵ preK programs, New Jersey and Wisconsin, to provide a window on these dimensions of implementation. This paper describes policy creation and implementation in Wisconsin, where the authors did fieldwork over 1.5 year period.

This multilevel study required data collection and analysis from different levels of the preK program, from the state to the local level. We developed semi-structured interview protocols relevant to varied stakeholder groups. We began in 2012, by interviewing 12 state actors, including three legislators, four state education officials, and five actors prominent in Wisconsin 4K history and we analyzed a sample of state education documents to trace the history of the program. These interviews were all done in person in a location chosen by the participant, with the interviewer taking notes as back up to digital recording. All interview recordings were then transcribed verbatim.

In consultation with state staff we identified rural, midsize, and urban districts that would illustrate mature program implementation in south central Wisconsin. Within the three sampled

⁴ The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) as: “an approach to teaching grounded in the research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education. Its framework is designed to promote young children’s optimal learning and development. DAP involves teachers meeting young children where they are (by stage of development), both as individuals and as part of a group; and helping each child meet challenging and achievable learning goals” (<http://www.naeyc.org/DAP>)

⁵ We define mature programs as being older than ten years old.

districts we interviewed seven district administrators (superintendents and 4K coordinators) who provided insight into the local implementation and helped us identify preK sites that represented the district's program.

In three sites, we interviewed four preK program administrators who identified classrooms for our case studies and potential focal children in each class. Though not directly part of this paper, we conducted ethnographic case studies of two focal children in each site, following them, their families, and teachers for the 4K year. This involved 20 interviews of 4K teachers, 24 interviews with six parents, and 24 interviews with six children. We also followed the children into kindergarten, interviewing their kindergarten teachers to get a sense of each child's experience. Finally, we interviewed six state actors identified in interviews as pivotal to the development of 4K-CA.

In addition, we completed two observations of 4K advisory groups at the state level, and over 100 half-day observations of 4K sessions, home to school transitions, parent-teacher conferences, kindergarten transition activities, and 11 observations in kindergarten classrooms. Finally, we analyzed documents at the state, district, and center/school level related to 4K and kindergarten.

Analysis was a recursive process that began with data collection and continued through the post fieldwork period. We began with the state level data, working to construct a framework and history of the program, then traced it into the practices of districts and sites. Our three-person team met on a regular basis, sharing illustrative coded segments and discussing shared and diverse meanings. This process involved both inductive and deductive coding. The deductive analysis was supported by literature on policy enactment and policy ecologies (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2008) and the inductive aspect developed from repeated readings of the data, the deductive analysis, and the field experiences of the researchers. A critical element of the coding process was the development of analytical memos (Maxwell, 2012) that took the typically concrete coded segments and suggested a more conceptual analysis. Themes in the memos were representative of more than one incident or their uniqueness made them analytically interesting. These analytical tools were shared among the team and we negotiated common meanings through these higher-level tools. We developed case descriptions of each community, starting by developing a within site story focusing on the local aspects of practice then moving to cross site descriptions sharing common elements.

In this multisite comparative case study two research teams generated data related to preK policy and practice. Our paper is an analysis of preK policy in one state, Wisconsin, and we illustrate policy implementation through an analysis of 4K implementation in a single district, which we call Belford. Why is description of the complete design, including participant observation in 4K classrooms in three districts, relevant for this paper that is primarily referencing policymaker and administrative actors in one district? It is relevant, and critically important, because researchers cannot *unknow* something when they are writing. The writing process relies on analytical knowledge and experience that serves to filter, enrich, and deepen particular data sources—they echo with the sounds, and strangely, the sights of the field. This paper pulls from our analysis across all Wisconsin sites and actors and the themes we present could have quite easily been swapped out with texts of interviews of actors whose words are not seen on the page. We rely on readers to ascertain whether we provide a rich enough analytical description of the issues relying on only data deployed in the paper.

Policy Discourse

In the sections that follow, we explore the tension between discourses of local control and standardization as they existed at the state level, through the voices of policymakers and state education officials. We illustrate how state-level stakeholders supported 4K-CA as a symbol of local control while simultaneously voicing the need for greater standardization and accountability in 4K. Employing the discourse of local control, policymakers spoke of 4K-CA's critical role as a more democratic approach to 4K and a way of ensuring that private childcare providers would not be negatively affected when 4K was introduced into a community's existing early childhood ecology. In spite of their commitment to local variation, the same stakeholders also spoke of the importance of standardization in 4K from an equity perspective (equal opportunity for all; standardized experiences that would close the achievement gap) and a quality perspective (the need to increase standards and implement assessments to ensure quality). After an analysis of state officials' endorsement of contradictory reforms—standardization and local control—we turn to the local level, where we present a concrete example of how the tension between local control and standardization played out in Belford 4K.

Local Control

One of the most prominent themes in our interviews with policymakers and administrators was the value placed on having the parameters of 4K determined at the local level. In particular, it was the openness of the 4K policy, which allowed 4K-CA to develop in response to local needs and concerns that exemplified the paradigm of local control. In our analysis of the discourse used by policymakers, it was clear that 4K-CA was a point of pride for most state policymakers and DPI officials. Two themes emerged in these discussions: 4K-CA as a local response that recognizes the value of existing early childhood providers and 4K-CA as a more democratic way of implementing 4K.

As interviewees recounted the emergence of 4K-CA, it became clear that policymakers and education officials were proud of 4K-CA, in part, because it incorporated the knowledge and values of private childcare centers that would have been left out if 4K were implemented through schools. As interest in 4K began to pick up in the early 2000s, many districts contemplated implementing the program in schools. In addition to the reality that many schools simply did not have space for 4K, a primary obstacle to 4K was finding its place within the larger early childhood ecology—one that included children not being served by any program as well as those already in full day childcare, part time nursery school, informal friend and family care, and Head Start. Inserting a new universal program for young children into existing economic, education, and care systems would have some kind of impact; one that was potentially detrimental to the childcare community. This became clear when many school boards encountered community resistance to 4K. As State Representative Kurt Sewell⁶ explained,

It was probably, maybe a decade [ago] already where a district decided it was going to implement a 4K program and without consulting with anybody, they said, “Here we go!” and the parents found out about it from the providers. Providers [were] saying, “Well we're going to close because the school cut us out, the school just killed us financially,” and the parents went to the school district and said, “No you won't.”

⁶ All names for individuals and sites are pseudonyms.

And they had to go all the way back to the drawing board and start over and then they came back with [4K-CA].

The catalyst for opposition—the economic consequences of crowding out existing businesses with a new program—was unanticipated by district leadership. District officials were unaware that most childcare programs subsidize care for the youngest children through programs for older children. As originally designed, 4K would be a double whammy for the childcare community—not only would they lose an important portion of their business (4-year-olds), but losing 4-year-olds would make it harder for programs to cover the costs of infant and toddler care.

4K-CA developed out of this problem. Brenda Stanton, Assistant Superintendent at DPI and former 4K teacher, explained that implementation was not a straightforward process and that one significant challenge was gaining the trust of private childcare centers:

The interesting thing is the part that is the most challenging to overcome is to make sure that it's not a situation where you're going to do damage to your childcare community, and I think it was a huge trust issue that need[ed] to be built up. . . [and] it is a very long process to convince them that the district is not trying to take over their stuff.

Yet, despite the challenges, Stanton was convinced it was worth it, explaining to us that 4K-CA provides several important benefits:

[4K-CA] increases parent involvement and really good things start to happen with that and it's truly seen as a partnership, and so I think it's trending more and more...in [the] direction of going to this community site . . . [In my district] [w]e said, you know, “You [childcare professionals] know this better than we do as a school district, and so [we] want to use your expertise and we want to be able to provide what we can to . . . bring this up for everyone.”

For Stanton and many of the other state and district level participants, 4K-CA enabled a partnership with parents that could only exist if 4K was provided by local childcare centers, rather than through schools. State Superintendent Eric Tollen echoed this point, noting that, “I think our community partnerships are clearly the unique piece that we have.” Acknowledging the varied benefits of 4K-CA, Tollen told us that it was part of DPI’s job to guard against districts changing their 4K programs to school-based programs: “[DPI has] to make sure that districts don't regress from [4K-CA] . . . and take all their kids in-house . . . that hasn't happened [yet] . . . [b]ut that’s something [DPI] always [has] to guard against.”

The second rendering of 4K-CA was that the model takes a democratic approach to administering 4K. Many interviewees used language about empowerment and representation to characterize 4K-CA and to frame it as being democratic, particularly compared to the alternatives. For example, Marty Jameson, a former consultant for DPI, expressed this view when he contrasted 4K-CA to school-based models of public preK:

There's 4K, meaning a school-based, school-driven, very traditional thing...that looks exactly like what 5K did when it was a half-day program 30 years ago. Nothing's different, all the same laws; it's just that the kids are younger now...It's all school based. And then there's 4K-CA...CA is using a Community Approach, which is these communities that simply said, “If you started all over and you brought all the

players into the room—all the childcare people, all the kindergarten people, all the special education people, all the Montessori people, private sector, public sector and said, ‘If we created one program for all the kids and all of us are players in this, what would it look like?’” And that creates something very different than a traditional program.

More than simply a partnership between public and private institutions, 4K-CA is intended to bring together community members, local institutions, and resources to support four-year-olds’ learning and development. In its purest form, 4K-CA symbolized a preK program that reflected the values and needs of each community. Implicitly, interviewees saw private childcare centers as an embodiment of the communities in which they are located. In addition, portraying school-based 4K as a clunky and bureaucratic way to run 4K (as Jameson did) helped to emphasize the democratic nature of 4K-CA. With an assumption that private providers represent the community and school-based 4K represented a bureaucratic and top-down approach, it is easy to see how 4K-CA was framed as democratic. Representative Kurt Sewell wove these elements together when he characterized 4K-CA this way:

They’re usually designed to accommodate specifically the community. So rather than pulling the rug out from underneath the infrastructure that parents rely on, they support it. Rather than cutting, drawing lines between the all-powerful school district and everyone else, it’s blended all together and everybody becomes part of the same mission.

Many of our state level conversations revolved around the unique characteristics of 4K-CA, and it was clear that 4K-CA reflected Wisconsin’s tradition of local control. As Marty Jameson noted, this type of community approach to 4K “could only happen in Wisconsin.” The state has been so proud of 4K-CA that it recently hired a storyteller to travel through Wisconsin documenting the benefits of the policy.⁷ While belief in local control is central to how Wisconsin policymakers conceptualize preK, 4K also exists in an evolving policy context; one that is increasingly characterized by accountability and a pronounced focus on standardization. In the next section we discuss how accountability and standardization intersected with this home grown system.

Standardization

When standards-based accountability arrived in Wisconsin in the mid-90s, most discussions were focused on the K-12 level, in part because there had been strong resistance in the early childhood community to testing that is typically a part of accountability systems (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998). In addition, there is a long-standing belief that early childhood education should be guided by a relatively open framework that allows for local variation and improvisation. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) guidelines—*Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009)—provides a broad framework for practice based on knowledge of child development. While not an “anything goes” document, it provides early childhood practitioners with significant leeway in program and curriculum design. As we described previously, this was reflected in the WMEELS, which were specifically designed to be a flexible framework for practice rather than a checklist for accreditation or a measure of child development.

⁷ These stories can be found at http://4kca.dpi.wi.gov/files/4kca/pdf/4kca_benefits_reports_kann-hoffman_2013.pdf

In our conversations with policymakers, we noticed that, without conscious contradiction, and without antagonism toward local control, many policymakers also favored standardization and accountability for 4K. For example, Representative Sewell, who lauded 4K-CA for its democratic approach and for enabling 4K to be tailored to the community's values also listed greater accountability at the top of his list of ways to improve 4K. He noted greater accountability would entail "on-site visits" rather than simply "relying on districts to say 'yeah we're doing this.'" Although Sewell did not cite the specific standards that would need to be enforced, he saw the quality of 4K programs as an issue that could not be left up to districts to self-report. During our interview, Sewell glided from pro-local control (specifically the ability to create the kind of 4K program each community saw fit), to support for measures that would increase standardization and accountability.

In our analysis of standardization discourse, we again found two distinct perspectives: equity and quality. For interviewees, equity meant providing opportunities for all children, regardless of home resources. Stanton asserted:

We see that kids are coming to kindergarten already with an achievement gap, and then the gap just continues to grow and grow and grow. And I think 4K is a great example where we're able to get in with kids that don't have as rich of preschool opportunities to be able to . . . intervene and have the readiness be a little bit more equitable as kids do enter the 5K world, both academically as well as socially, emotionally.

From her perspective, 4K was a way to standardize preK experiences with the ultimate goal of closing an enduring achievement gap. State Senator Oscar Larson also felt that 4K functioned as an equalizer, specifically for students from low-income homes, "Hopefully [4K] is a little equalizer . . . especially for kids who . . . don't have backgrounds where their parents read to them, and they know what words are, and they know their colors, and all those kinds of things."

Larson added that expectations about what students needed to know by the time they graduate high school were escalating and that the only way to achieve these heightened standards was to put children in school earlier. For Senator Larson, 4K would not only make it more likely that all Wisconsin children were ready for kindergarten, but that they were able to meet future standards as they progressed through school.

Conversations about quality were substantively different from the equity perspective. Rather than focusing on readiness or the achievement gap, quality was most often discussed in relation to a web of interrelated reforms aimed at increasing standards, implementing assessments, or providing uniformity to the 4K curriculum. One major reform discussed was YoungStar, a new effort to institute a system of incentives in relation to program standards. YoungStar is a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) that rates childcare providers on a scale of one to five stars based on points the provider earns for quality criteria, including: education qualifications and training, learning environment and curriculum, professional and business practice, and child health and well-being practice. Providers with a rating of four or five stars receive additional childcare subsidies through the Wisconsin Shares program.⁸ YoungStar is a measure of structural quality—it evaluates the inputs or characteristics of a 4K program that are thought to produce higher quality teaching and learning.

The state representatives we interviewed generally looked favorably on YoungStar and its potential to increase program quality. Representative Sewell asserted that YoungStar had been an eye

⁸ For more information on YoungStar, see <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/default.htm>.

opener for providers who thought they were doing everything right. Very few providers received five stars, and the majority scored in the two, three, and four star range. Sewell viewed YoungStar as an incentive for providers to improve the quality of their programs: “They would like to get more money, right? So if there are a set of things and some guidance and some opportunities for assistance to drive them in the direction of quality, why wouldn’t they do it?” Helen Jenkins, DPI’s early childhood specialist, saw YoungStar as evidence that the state was making a good investment, but also referred to a growing desire to be able to link quality-related inputs with student outcomes: “They would like to be able to have research that could show kids do better in a five star than a one star place.”

At present, YoungStar standards only apply to private childcare centers that receive state funding, however, a number of interviewees stressed the need for YoungStar’s standards to be applied to public school 4K programs. For example, Senator Larson and his education adviser, Dr. Amy Stevenson, recalled horror stories about Milwaukee 4K classrooms with more than 30 children and one teacher. Larson pointed out,

As we come up with the student-school accountability stuff and report cards, Milwaukee is not achieving at the levels it's going to need to be achieving. People are going to come in and say, “We’re going to turn this thing upside down.” And if they look at it and say, “Aha, well here's an obvious thing; you’ve got 34 kids in 4K”—that is ridiculous because you're not getting the benefit. You're sort of just warehousing these kids. And if we lower that number . . . we will get results that are where we need to be, especially with those kids; it will happen. I think the accountability is going to drive that. Either they're going to figure out on their own that they're just sort of giving it lip service, or somebody's going to come in and say, “You guys, this isn’t right. You're wasting the money and kids’ time.”

Senator Larson thought that pressure from an accountability system like YoungStar could lead school districts to make the changes to improve 4K quality that they would not necessarily make on their own. Borrowing from the accountability model, he hoped that this would force districts not taking school-based 4K seriously to rethink the way they structured their program. Policymakers did not mention how the imposition of this quality control lever was a major change in the business of childcare. Though most care settings operated with health and safety standards for licensure, standards tied to supplemental funding, with the aim of incentivizing childcare centers to increase quality, was something new.

Along with YoungStar, we were told about a cluster of initiatives that were changing 4K by drawing it into new education assessment systems in hopes of improving quality. These included new ways to identify learning needs, track student growth, and potentially, to evaluate programs. For example, following advice from the Governor’s Read to Lead Task Force (2012), the state recently mandated the use of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS) to assess children 4K to grade two. This individually administered screener was to be used in the fall and the spring each year. As Assistant Superintendent Stanton noted, PALS may only be the beginning; state and national initiatives had prompted discussion of more comprehensive and universal assessments for 4-year-olds. She explained that, “concurrently we have the [Governor’s] Early Childhood Advisory Council talking about a universal assessment and . . . Race To The Top requiring a kindergarten entry assessment that's comprehensive.” Stanton was clear that DPI had been heavily influenced by the incentives of Race to the Top and the early childhood focused Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, which provided money to states to develop challenging standards and assessments and develop data systems that would allow for sophisticated analysis of achievement at multiple levels.

Talk about standards and new assessment measures left some participants feeling that the current and most prominent evaluation tool, YoungStar, was inadequate. DPI Superintendent Tollen saw YoungStar as a model, but believed that future initiatives needed to expand beyond providing just a quality rating of programs and into the realm of student assessment:

The end analysis . . . is that [the] quality rating system has to move beyond the input type of ratings that they use now. And I understand why they use that now because there's not much output to measure and a lot of the input things are a problem, whether it's training for teachers, whatever. But as we get more sophisticated in assessing learning at a younger and younger age, that will hopefully drive [the quality] rating system to [include] outputs rather than just inputs.

On this point Representative Sewell agreed. Though he recognized that assessing four-year-olds was difficult, he lamented the lack of outcome-based data to judge the quality of 4K:

There's a big difference between just having a program, whether it's a day care program or preschool in private sector or whether it's 4K within the public sector . . . and having a quality program. [I]n Wisconsin up to this point, we haven't done much to monitor . . . we give helpful hints basically and there's no way that we know of yet, we don't have the information available that would tell us which programs are better than others through testing. You don't test 4-year-olds typically.

Falling in line with the logic of accountability reforms, we found that new 4K assessments were pitched by the policymakers as a step in the battle to improve quality. This is a very different concern than we found when policymakers talked favorably about 4K-CA. Those conversations focused on protecting the childcare community and establishing a more democratic approach to 4K, rather than improving quality or tackling the achievement gap. The paradox is not necessarily our interviewees' endorsement of these varied aims for 4K (democratic approach, utilizing community institutions, increased equity, and improved quality) but rather that by endorsing these aims they were led to support two contradictory types of reforms—greater standardization and assessment and maintaining local control.

The last manifestation of the quality perspective came in conversations about the curriculum. As noted earlier, Wisconsin has no mandated curriculum for 4K; but our discussions indicated that might change soon. Superintendent Tollen told us “there is an interesting political movement afoot to not only have universal 4K, but to have a universal curriculum for 4K.” Assistant Superintendent Stanton situated this movement relative to the new assessment initiatives:

It's started to come up because as people are pushed to start talking about . . . what would a comprehensive assessment look like at the end of 4K or the beginning of 5K, it starts automatically driving curriculum conversations because it's very hard to separate at that level, which is a good thing and we don't ever want to go to where it is being separated because assessment should look like curriculum at that age, and so I think that's partly where . . . people are saying, Well, I think we should use the assessment that's a part of whatever curriculum.

Helen Jenkins agreed that a new view of curriculum was on the horizon:

I think there's a lot of interest now, particularly as we're moving into the PALS reading screening and people are talking more about doing comprehensive kindergarten entrance assessment . . . there is a lot more interest in trying to be a little more standard in curriculum.

However, Dr. Stevenson argued that curriculum in and of itself would not improve quality. Speaking about the movement toward a universal curriculum, she recognized its novelty:

[A standard curriculum]...would be a leap for us, but we're starting to make some leaps...[and] then I think we would start to at least see a little more consideration of what takes place in the class. But, that said, just because you add Creative Curriculum (a published EC curriculum), if you had 34 kids in the classroom, and none of those support people, it wouldn't be happening anyway . . . [But] I hope that . . . [increased] accountability is going to drive a lot of positive change.

The appearance of standardization in preK is only one part of the story. What started as standards-based reform in 4K developed into assessment policy and has the potential to turn into a unified curriculum. These new developments suggest a significant shift occurring with Wisconsin 4K, changes that challenge a tradition of local control as well as early childhood practices more generally. This does not mean that Wisconsin is completely losing a local controlled system of preK. Instead, policymakers are blending together policy ideas derived from both accountability reforms and a strong history of local control to determine the future of 4K policy; a blending that is far more in line with Stone's policy paradox than other models of policymaking.

4K in Practice

Up to this point we have focused on discussions with state officials. Here we illustrate how ideas about local control and standardization came together in one district's 4K implementation. Though our project provided deep dives into 4K implementation in three districts, for this paper we focus on experiences in a district we call Belford. This narrative choice is in part related to the constraints of journal publication. Given finite page length, we chose to present more analysis in more depth for one community rather than trading on the comparative power of three.

In Belford we saw how a program that initially leaned toward local control—designed with significant community input and implemented solely in childcare sites—was pushed toward standardization by a new superintendent focused on creating closer alignment between 4K and K-12. With a policy shift on the horizon, it became evident that the district 4K coordinator and the superintendent had very different ways of thinking about continuity. This resulted in tension over 4K policy boundaries; as the structure of 4K began to change, mid-level administrators like the 4K coordinator found that they needed to defend boundaries.

Although the larger study included three focal districts, we chose to focus on Belford here because it is an example of how ideas about standardization in 4K were introduced in a district with a strong commitment to local control and thus enables us to clearly depict how the tensions between local control and standardization that emerged in state-level interviews played out in practice at the local level. While we rely on Belford to further illustrate our findings, our understanding of events in Belford is informed by analysis of our data from the other two districts, which we call Pickering and Dickson. Our findings in this section are inflected with references of these analyses, a strategy that enables us to highlight the areas of convergence and divergence among the three districts' 4K programs while providing the reader with an in-depth understanding of one focal district.

Belford 4K

Belford is a mid-size city with a population of about 24,000. Its quaint main street is lined with shops, restaurants, and small businesses. Several storefronts sit vacant, but there are also new businesses popping up, like a popular new book store/coffee shop.

About 12% of Belford residents live below the federal poverty line and only 20% hold a post-secondary degree. The district superintendent describes the community as blue collar. Poverty is on the rise in Belford and many families are struggling. Though its population is mostly white, the town's demographics are in flux, with the Hispanic population steadily increasing in recent years.

Belford's 4K-CA program exemplifies the paradox of standardization and local control evident in DPI officials' and state policymakers' discussions of 4K. Established in 2006 and housed in six childcare centers, the program was developed democratically and implemented with the childcare community in mind. DPI officials turned to Belford as a model for other districts developing 4K programs with a community approach in mind. Keith Deitsch, who was the district superintendent when 4K was developed, remembered: "We became a site that the state sent a lot of people to us. I can recall lots and lots of visitors."

A testament to the district's commitment to working with the community and the existing childcare infrastructure, implementation of 4K only began after a full year of research into the costs and benefits of establishing the program. Prior to this, the district 4K Coordinator, Erin Castell, spent five years building momentum and waiting for conditions to coalesce in favor of 4K. She knew that 4K would only work if it was a community effort. When the program finally came to fruition, it was the result of the type of democratic process Marty Jameson and others at the state level noted as a strength of 4K-CA. Castell explained:

When we pulled together the 4K team we made it very community-based. We brought in the nay-sayers, we brought in parents that wanted it, parents that didn't want it, we brought in school board members that wanted it and some that didn't . . . [I]t was open to anybody. We actually had a couple of 4-year-olds that came with their parents . . . We held forums; we had pie and coffee. We had forums with childcare providers at night that couldn't come during the day and said, "This is what we're thinking of doing." . . . And as we formed it our superintendent really said, "I want to keep it in the community. I don't want to put people out of work." (E. Castell)

Although this approach was time-consuming, the result was a program that the childcare community and school district could both be happy with. Castell noted, "We didn't have a lot of flak from the community because it was community-based. . . . I don't think it has made a big difference for [childcare centers] in terms of losing kids. That's not what I've heard from childcare." It is important to note that a long period of research and coalition-building was not necessarily the norm in Wisconsin 4K. Though Dickson's 4K program was established in much the same way as Belford's—after long-term conversations between the school district and the childcare community—4K in rural Pickering was pushed through quickly, and without regard for community dissent. When the only childcare center in Pickering opposed 4K, the district superintendent, intent on establishing 4K at the local elementary school, made it clear that the center's opposition would not derail her plans to implement 4K. Her approach was to establish the program and address the fallout later.

These elements of 4K-CA in Belford—a program created in dialogue with diverse stakeholders and with a desire to preserve the childcare community—reflect the ways state policymakers and DPI officials talked about local control. At the same time, the program was

infused with the discourse of standardization, particularly in terms of equity. Describing the goals of 4K when it was developed, former superintendent Keith Deitsch said, “[The goal of 4K was] school readiness more than anything else. Making sure that kids had those foundational skills to be able to enter kindergarten and be ready to tackle whatever the curriculum had been at that point in time.” In fact, Deitsch and other district administrators only agreed to move forward with 4K because Castell was able to show them that the program would help prepare children for kindergarten. Deitsch believed this goal had been realized in Belford, noting: “I remember hearing definite comments that our kids are better prepared, that the gap between some of them has been reduced.” Current superintendent Holly Patterson also used the discourse of equity and readiness to talk about 4K program goals:

[I]t’s a play-based program, but we really want to give the students the school readiness and put them in a position to be as successful as possible. Again, we know we serve a diverse population, we know we serve a heavily economically disadvantaged population as well. So we know that [4K] is really important for their success long term.

The equity perspective, seamlessly woven into the fabric of Belford 4K from the start, did not initially conflict with local control aspects of the program. As 4K coordinator, Castell ensured that all 4K sites had access to the same resources and used the same curriculum, but subscribed to the belief that children would benefit most if 4K sites were diverse, with flexibility to adjust their programming to meet the needs of their students. Castell provided instructional support and professional development for 4K teachers, with an understanding that the needs of teachers and students at each site would be different. One of the ways she encouraged diversity across the sites was to allow each 4K teacher to create her own professional development plan for the year. Teachers determined a focal area for the year (e.g. learning more about a particular curriculum or figuring out how to integrate writing across the curriculum) and were provided a small budget to pursue their learning goals. Castell’s oversight of the 4K program enabled her to ensure that all Belford 4K sites were high-quality while allowing for diversity across the sites.⁹

With Castell set to retire, however, Patterson began to reshape established boundaries that shaped 4K politics in Belford by calling for greater alignment between 4K and K-12. One way Patterson envisioned achieving this was to move 4K out of community sites and into elementary school buildings:

I love the community base we have for our 4K. I think it’s really nice in terms of building those community pieces, but I also like the idea of us taking a little bit more responsibility as a system for those students . . . I think my issue is when they’re offsite, they’re offsite and they’re run by people other than your people...I like the service that we provide to the community [but] I think there would be a greater level of continuity in programming if we had [4K] in our own buildings . . . [A]s a district and as a system we might be looking for something that’s a little bit different. So I would like to see more continuity in the programming . . . I know we don’t want to rock the boat with our community people so it’s really figuring out what’s the best balance and what makes sense there.

Aware that moving 4K into the elementary schools would not sit well with the childcare community, Patterson opted for incremental change. She started by redefining the 4K Coordinator position, splitting the responsibilities between Castell and an elementary school principal. Castell remained responsible for the technical aspects of the program and the principal absorbed administrative duties. This change contributed to Patterson's goal of aligning 4K with the district's K-12 mission.

I'd just like to see stronger continuity, our building principals more involved. . . . You know our building principals are absolutely aligned with our mission and core vision . . . and [moving into schools] would allow us to align with that through the 4K, which we really can't do now. Erin [Castell] does some of it, but if you're working at [a childcare center] you may or may not know the strategic plan and the things that we're working on as a system here.

When Patterson used the term "continuity," she was really talking about alignment—creating a more efficient system by making 4K and K-12 fit together more seamlessly with similar goals and practices. Her vision of continuity did not acknowledge what might be lost if 4K was moved out of community childcare sites—programs with the flexibility to meet the particular needs of the families they served. For Patterson, alignment and continuity was in the service of the demands of the accountability movement. Castell bristled at Patterson's initiatives because her focus was on the child, not the system. Though she also talked about continuity, Castell was concerned with continuity of care, not alignment of mission.

I'm rolling my eyes and stomping my feet. I just don't ever want [4K to be taken out of community sites]. But, our principals this summer were like—if there was room they'd just as soon bring it in because it's so much easier. And I don't know how in the world to explain to them, well I did, I said, "Well, we have 90% of the kids the parents bring to school. We have like 12 that are on buses. So what does that tell you? That they're in sites where they're using the [childcare]—over half the kids are in extended care. So doesn't that tell you that this is a smart thing for kids?" . . . [I]t makes sense [that 4K is in community settings] because that's one of the main things- is to give kids less transition. They have a much more cohesive day when they go to one place [all day].

For Castell, continuity meant children only having to go to one place for the day; this could be achieved through 4K-CA because children could come for the 4K session and stay in the childcare center for the rest of the day. Castell believed this was a much better arrangement than sending kids to an elementary school for a few hours and then busing them to daycare afterward. This notion—that 4K-CA was a program with more flexibility than school-based 4K and therefore one that could respond to family and community needs more easily—reflected state officials' framing of 4K as emblematic of local control and democratic values.

Just as ideas about the benefits of standardization in 4K circulated at the state level and in Belford, we saw evidence of the influence of standardization and the accountability movement in other districts. In Pickering, a commitment to alignment and pressure to raise test scores eventually led to the push-down of the kindergarten math curriculum into 4K. In Dickson, where a 4K-CA program housed in a combination of public schools and childcare providers had been forged only after much discussion, school sites had lower teacher-student ratios and were considered by the school district to be higher quality than the childcare sites. None of these programs, no matter how committed to local control, was immune to the accountability movement.

In Belford, Castell and Patterson's different ways of conceptualizing continuity created a tension that represents the fluidity of policy ideas and exemplifies how local control and accountability-influenced standardization have come to a head in Wisconsin 4K. While the program reflects the values associated with local control, ideas about standardization—creating a more uniform system in line with K-12—are challenging these long-held values. At one end of this pushmi-pullyu are the midlevel administrators, struggling to keep 4K in community sites. At the other is a superintendent with a desire to align 4K with the K-12 system by bringing the program into elementary schools. As in many other districts in the state, the story of Belford's 4K program is still being written and like a Choose Your Own Adventure novel, there are many potential outcomes.

Discussion

Through the idea of policy paradox Stone (2001) argues that policy is not defined by a linear or rational process, but rather by a contested, and constantly ongoing, battle to shape the political ideas at the root of policy. For Stone, discourse is central to the contested terrain of policy, which frames the way ideas are represented, understood, and put into practice. To recognize the importance of discourse, one does not have to look further than the discourses of standardization and local control. The discourse that we heard in relation to standardization was framed in very familiar ways to those who have observed the national accountability movement and the rhetoric that has accompanied it (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Hatch, 2002). For example, one way that policymakers and other political actors talked about standardization was as a means to increase quality in 4K. As we have noted, new standards and accountability systems are being put in place and praised in the name of quality. In addition, standardization of the curriculum is being discussed, largely stemming from the belief that this would help measure and ensure quality. While much of this is new to the 4K context, it reflects the ways educational discourse has shifted. The discourse of standardization, as we have labeled it, draws on a well-established nexus of ideas—such as quality, equity, standards, and accountability—that allowed us to understand our interviewees' point of view and follow the logic of the accountability reforms they discussed in the context of 4K.

However, when interviewees used a discourse favoring local control of 4K, accountability and standardization meant something quite different. In the context of 4K-CA, which symbolized local control, standardization was heard as a challenge to the program and a call to place 4K in schools, which was viewed as being a bureaucratic and top-down approach 4K. As interviewees praised 4K-CA, quality and equity took a back seat and the policy issue at hand was creating a 4K program that represented the community. In addition, among some critics of the accountability movement—though none of our interviewees— quality is situated within a discourse less defined by standards and accountability, and more defined by taxation and funding schemes (Ravitch, 2010). Within this framework, standards and accountability make little sense without increased funding and support for teachers to achieve the desired goals. If the quality of schools is not as closely linked to accountability, policy solutions stemming from this discourse favor increased taxes and equitable distributions of resources rather than tests to keep teachers and schools accountable.

This last point is notable. It suggests the way that policies are discussed and rationalized has real implications for policy and practice. Within a discourse that theoretically connects the ideas of quality, standards, accountability, and curriculum, an accountability system like YoungStar is a logical policy manifestation. Raising taxes to provide all pre-kindergarten students with equal educational resources, however, is a less likely outcome of this discourse. Given the practical consequences of any one discourse shaping 4K policy, it is not surprising that we found the discourses of 4K to be somewhat contested and an embodiment of the policy paradox.

Stone notes another practical impact of policy discourse and ideas, namely, the forging of political boundaries. Stone explains that

Every idea about policy draws boundaries. It tells what or who is included or excluded in a category. These boundaries are more than intellectual—they define people in and out of a conflict or place them on different sides. In politics, the representation of issues is strategically designed to attract support to one’s side, to forge some alliances and break others. (Stone, 2001, p. 34)

In many ways, we found that the story of 4K is all about boundaries—their definition, defense, re-articulation, and reorientation. Perhaps the best example of this was in Belford, where Holly Patterson, the new superintendent, seemed to be moving toward reforms that would shift this 4K-CA district toward a preK system more aligned with K-12 (even talking about bringing 4K classes into elementary schools). Patterson’s focus on alignment, which threatened the role Belford’s childcare community, was creating contested boundaries and discourses that formed more distinct political camps.

The boundaries between the idea of local control and standardization in 4K, however, were not always clear or in conflict with each other. State Superintendent Tollen, for example, was very supportive of 4K-CA and praised it for being democratic. Yet, in the very same conversation Tollen also embraced the quality perspective, even going so far as to show a hint of approval toward the movement to develop a more standardized curriculum. Representative Sewell also paired praise of 4K-CA with talk about the need for more accountability in 4K. Even in Belford, there was convergence around the ideas of local control and standardization that shaped 4K. While the inception of Belford’s 4K-CA was described as “very community-based,” the discourse of standardization, and in particular the equity perspective, was used when the former superintendent, Keith Deitsch, explained to us that the goal of 4K in Belford was “readiness” and closing “the gap” between children starting kindergarten. Thus, while local control and standardization stood in contrast to each other, the political actors we interviewed found ways to incorporate and embrace *both* discourses, rather than letting them demarcate political lines.

Although the idea that politicians would simultaneously accept political ideas of local control and standardization fit within Stone’s policy paradox, we found it significant. It stands in contrast to much of the literature on the accountability movement, which tends to paint a picture of either the dominance of accountability politics or else a clear-cut political struggle over ideas and influence from opponents on both the left and the right (Loveless, 2007). While the interviewees sometimes acknowledged an ideological tension, most seem to combine these two, seemingly contradictory discourses in their minds. While praising YoungStar or PALs, quality and equity framed the conversation. While talking about 4K-CA, the discourse quickly switched to the value of community childcare centers and democratically approaching 4K.

There are several ways that we believe this can be explained. In part, this is due to the particular position of preK at this historical moment. At present, preK straddles both the public and private spheres and is expected to provide both care and education to young children. Preserving the traditional private care aspects of preK may lead policymakers to embrace the discourse of local control, while the growing movement toward thinking of preK in terms of public education would lead it to align with the discourse of standardization. In part, however, we take this finding to suggest that the ways policymakers incorporate ideas of both of local control and standardization in their thinking is often overlooked in favor of focusing on the tensions within K-12 accountability politics. It is not a zero sum game—instead it is a wonky hybrid that draws inspiration and merit in locally significant ways.

In sum, we have argued that the conflicting pressures of standardization and local control are shaping not only 4K policy and practice, but also the political ideas and discourses that policymakers and administrators use to talk about 4K. Further we have suggested that Stone's (2001) policy paradox captures the policy dynamic of 4K—defined by the blending of contradictory discourses and policies—far better than traditional models of policymaking.

We feel that these arguments make a contribution to several important areas of study. For one, we add to a body of literature that makes an empirical case for Stone and policy models that recognize the importance of discourse. Second, while many scholars (e.g., Cuban, 2007; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990) have studied the politics of educational accountability, few have focused on the growing influence accountability in preK (with the exception of Brown, 2007). This article shed light on the influence of accountability in preK by describing how the discourse of standardization, and in particular, the ideas of equity and quality, have filtered into a traditionally local and private industry. Finally, we suggest that our argument helps to paint a more nuanced picture of accountability politics, showing that policymakers are actively bringing together elements of contradictory discourse in the way they think about preK, rather than simply splitting into contentious political camps. This point supports the work of Ball et al. (2012) who argue that through policy enactments:

School leaders and managers will sometimes consciously attempt to 'draw attention' to the substance of policy through the production of visual materials and resources that document/illustrate what has to be done, or what is desirable conduct. These are artifacts that 'mark' policy directionality; they circulate and reinforce and represent what is to be done. (p. 121)

In the case of our Wisconsin participants, 4K was a liminal space—simultaneously a local concern that represented the importance of care, community, and family for young children, and an element of the increasingly powerful K-12 system. The creation of 4K in Wisconsin today is a product of the artifacts actors use to mark and measure its utility. Tools like WMELS, designed to maintain a local and responsive conception of early education, were drawn upon to highlight a distinct and developmental foundation for practice. At the same time, policymakers had begun to reference specific notions of quality that were set to incentivize practice and eventually set the foundation for assessments of student outcomes.

Importantly, much of what we have described has received little attention from scholars because the politics of preK are still in their infancy. As public preK expands and matures in the United States, we expect to see political dynamics similar we found in Wisconsin's relatively mature preK program.

The early childhood community has advocated for public investment in preK for as long as we can remember. We recognize that these investments come with conditions—the engagement with K-12 history requires that K-12 actors use familiar tools and the tools de jour speak to accountability. The growing influence of the standardization discourse has the potential to push out the local elements of preK. This would mean a move away from the type of blended model that now exists in Wisconsin. We suspect that there will be a tipping point—and the trajectory seems to be in the direction standardization. Future studies of the politics of preK are needed to chart how discourse and politics take shape around the rapidly evolving public preK movement.

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About the Authors

M. Elizabeth Graue

University of Wisconsin Madison

beth.graue@wisc.edu

Beth Graue is the Sorenson Professor of Childhood Studies and Chair of the Department of Curriculum & Instruction. A former kindergarten teacher, Graue studies early childhood policy and practice, focusing on how policy and practice create each other.

Bethany Wilinski

Michigan State University

bethanyw@msu.edu

Bethany Wilinski is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Teacher Education. She studies early childhood policy in the US and Tanzania, with a focus on how diverse stakeholders make sense of and enact policies.

Amato Nocera

University of Wisconsin Madison

nocera@wisc.edu

Amato Nocera is a graduate student in the department of Educational Policy Studies.

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