CHAPTER 7

Plays Well with Others: The Discourse and Enactment of Partnerships in Public Pre-K

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Introduction

The recent expansion of public pre-kindergarten (pre-K) has been accompanied by calls for its provision through partnerships between school districts and private early childhood education (ECE) providers (U.S. Department of Education 2014; Wat and Gayl 2009). School district-ECE provider partnerships in pre-K have been promoted as a mechanism to "share resources and expertise. . .to expand access to and increase the quality of all programs, no matter where they are housed" (Wat and Gayl 2009, p. 1). As such, pre-K partnerships have the potential to benefit families, school districts, and ECE providers. This chapter examines pre-K partnerships in the context of Wisconsin's public pre-K program, known as four-year-old kindergarten (4K). School-community partnerships are considered a cornerstone of 4K in Wisconsin. In this discursive analysis of data from an ethnographic study of pre-K policy implementation, I demonstrate the ways a local pre-K partnership reflected but also diverged from state-level partnership discourse.

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Wisconsin's pre-K partnership model, the 4K Community Approach (4K-CA), emerged in the early 2000s in response to concerns from local ECE communities that new public pre-K programs would negatively affect the childcare industry by channeling four-year-olds out of private childcare sites and preschools and into public schools (Bulebosh 2000). From its beginnings in La Crosse, Wisconsin, the 4K-CA model took root and spread across the state. In the 2014–15 school year, nearly all Wisconsin school districts provided 4K, and about 25% of those districts implemented 4K through the community approach (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2015). The state has prioritized 4K-CA through 4K start-up grants, which provide districts with funding to explore the implementation of 4K; priority consideration for these grants is given to districts that propose providing 4K through a community approach (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2016). Reflecting its support for 4K-CA, the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) recently hired a storyteller to travel around the state collecting stories about the "unique benefits" of 4K-CA (Kann 2013). Most recently, the State Superintendent's Advisory Committee released a proposal to create additional incentives for adopting 4K-CA, with a goal "to support traditional school-based models moving to community approaches and to support existing community approach districts to maintain the model" (Forces for Four Year Olds 2016, p. 1).

In Wisconsin 4K, an emphasis on providing pre-K through partnerships is clear: There is an established state vision for pre-K partnerships through 4K-CA, financial support for the development of partnerships, and a local literature that supports partnerships, including case studies of districts that have successfully implemented 4K-CA (Anderson 2015; Bulebosh 2000; Rhyme and Eilers 2005). While pre-K partnerships hold much potential for all stakeholders involved, they can also be fraught with tension, because they bring together the previously separate and distinct ECE and K-12 systems (McCabe and Sipple 2011). Partnerships require institutions with historically different approaches to teaching and learning, that are subject to different pressures, and which have access to different types of resources, to establish new mechanisms for working together to implement public pre-K.

This chapter presents an analysis of the discourse and enactment of pre-K partnerships in Wisconsin in order to highlight the complexity of partnership. In this investigation, I examine the discourse of partnership at the state level, through an analysis of documents and stakeholder perspectives. This discursive analysis reveals how the state positions partnerships within the 4K

landscape, producing a "discourse of partnership." I then set this discourse against evidence from one Wisconsin school district—Lakeville—where 4K was enacted through a partnership between the school district and local ECE providers, demonstrating the limits of a partnership in which a clear differentiation between ECE providers and the school district is articulated.[1]

Key Literature

Access to public pre-K has expanded rapidly in recent years, with the percentage of four-year-olds enrolled in state-funded programs growing from 14% to 29% between 2002 and 2015 (Barnett et al. 2016). State pre-K programs are diverse and take different approaches to implementation (Barnett et al. 2009). While some states provide pre-K exclusively in public elementary schools, many states utilize a partnership model, in which local school districts collaborate with community-based partners such as ECE centers and Head Start (Wat and Gayl 2009).

There are many benefits to providing pre-K through partnerships. Partnerships can enable school districts to bring pre-K programs to scale more quickly by utilizing a community's existing ECE infrastructure (Government Accountability Office 2004; Schulman and Blank 2007). A steady stream of public funds can benefit ECE providers, who often operate close to the margin financially (Schilder et al. 2003; Wat and Gayl 2009). In addition, public funding can lead to improved program quality in ECE sites by supporting infrastructure improvements or increased teacher compensation. Such changes are thought to have a "spillover effect," resulting in benefits to all children at a given site (Schulman and Blank 2007). Pre-K partnerships may also be instrumental in helping school districts create greater alignment between ECE and K-12, leading to greater continuity across the two systems (Kagan and Kauerz 2012; Wat and Gayl 2009). Finally, pre-K partnerships support working families by addressing the need for full-day childcare. Implementing pre-K in sites that also provide care outside pre-K hours bridges an important gap for families who want to participate in pre-K but would be unable to manage the logistics of a part-day pre-K program (Schumacher et al. 2005).

There are also challenges to implementing pre-K through partnerships. Successful partnerships require a shift in the views of both ECE and K-12 professionals and a negotiation of markedly different approaches to teaching and learning in K-12 and ECE (McCabe and Sipple 2011; Takanishi 2010;

Wat and Gayl 2009). Pre-K partnerships can also lead to challenges in pre-K teacher recruitment and retention as a result of significant compensation differences for pre-K teachers in public versus private sites (McCabe and Sipple 2011). Decisions about which private sites are included in partnerships and the level of funding they receive to implement pre-K also affects communities and local ECE systems (Morrissey et al. 2007; Wilinski 2017). Finally, pre-K partnerships require a negotiation of divergent governance norms in the ECE and K-12 systems. Accountability and reporting mechanisms in ECE are typically related to health and safety, whereas accountability in K-12 is framed in terms of student achievement (McCabe and Sipple 2011; Takanishi 2010).

A discursive analysis of how partnership was envisioned at the state level in Wisconsin, examined in light of how one partnership was enacted locally, is an important step toward a deeper understanding of the complexity of bringing the K-12 and ECE systems together for pre-K provision. Takanishi (2010) noted that "Early education and K-12 education are now largely separate cultures with their own values and ways of operating" (p. 30). Thus, bringing ECE and K-12 together is as much a cultural project as it is one centered on funding and logistics. While state-level partnership discourse reveals one vision for how these cultures might be brought together, an investigation of local implementation tells a different story.

Methodological and Theoretical Perspective

I use Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism as a framework for understanding how pre-K partnership took on different meanings in state discourse and local implementation. Bakhtin understood the world as heteroglossic, or multi-voiced, where multiple and contradictory perspectives necessarily co-exist. In a heteroglossic world, meaning is created in context:

> At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions. (Bakhtin 1981, p. 428)

For Bakhtin, utterances are given meaning through dialogue, a notion he termed "dialogism." Because of the range of possible meanings and as a result of multiple languages and voices that contribute to dialogue, dialogue is necessarily "messy" and "unfinalizable" or open, with multiple different

meanings possible. Holquist (2002) explained the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism this way:

> 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)

This analysis explores the multiple interpretations of partnership that existed at the state and local level in Wisconsin. Here, dialogism provides a framework for understanding why the discourse of partnership that existed at the state level was not reflected in how Lakeville ECE providers experienced their relationship with the school district. The state-level meaning of partnership took a very different shape at the local level, where a new vision of partnership developed as ECE providers interacted with the school district around 4K. Through the interaction of these two "bodies," partnership was given new meaning.

This analysis is framed by an understanding of discourse as "type of social practice" (Fairclough 1992, p. 28). In the tradition of critical discourse analysis, discourse is assumed to be a productive practice that "both reflects and constructs the social world" (Rogers 2004, p. 5). I draw on policy documents, reports, and the perspectives of state DPI officials to construct the state's vision of 4K partnership. This vision conveys the "values, beliefs...and attitudes" of the state related to 4K partnerships, creating a normative discourse of partnership (Souto-Manning 2014, p. 159). By setting this discourse of partnership against the experiences and perspectives of ECE stakeholders in Lakeville, we can begin to understand how a divide between the school district and the ECE community was perpetuated despite the two systems coming together to provide 4K in this community.

Method/Analytic Approach

This chapter is drawn from a larger ethnographic study of 4K policy enactment in Lakeville, which focused on understanding how teachers in different institutional contexts made sense of and implemented 4K policy (Wilinski 2017). I conducted fieldwork in three 4K teachers' classrooms from October 2012 to July 2013. Fieldwork included 300 hours of classroom observation, 3 semi-structured interviews with each focal teacher

Table 7.1 Data sources

Data type	*Description*
Interview	Marty Jameson, former State Department of Public Instruction (DPI) official Helen Moyers, City of Lakeville Child Care official Annette Simons, ECE partner site administrator Melanie Gustafson, ECE partner site director Denise Sanderson, ECE partner site director Maura Evans, ECE partner site director
Document	*Stories Highlighting the Unique Benefits of the 4K Community Approach*, Report commissioned by DPI *Vision for Continuous Promotion of High Quality 4K and 4KCA in Wisconsin*, Report by the State Superintendent's Advisory Committee on 4K and Community Approaches *Sandbox Synergy: La Crosse Launches Innovative Preschool Partnership*, Article in Wisconsin School News sponsored by DPI *The Wisconsin Forces for Four-Year-Olds Community Initiative*, Report prepared for DPI and funded by the PEW Charitable Trust

(nine interviews total), interviews with administrators at each site (six interviews total), interviews with other ECE stakeholders in Lakeville (nine interviews total), and one interview with a state education official. In addition, I observed staff meetings (four) and planning meetings (four) at each focal site, district-wide 4K steering-committee meetings (three), and one school board meeting. I also collected documents from the state and school district websites pertaining to 4K and 4K partnerships.[2]

In this chapter, I use a subset of this data to examine the state-level discourse of 4K partnership, and how the state's vision for partnership related to the way stakeholders in the Lakeville ECE community experienced their district's 4K partnership. Table 7.1 provides an overview of the data analyzed for this chapter.[3]

I included these four reports in my analysis because they were all requested or sponsored by the state DPI. Although the DPI may not have influenced how partnerships were represented in these publications, the presence of reports that focus specifically on 4K partnerships reflects the DPI's commitment, investment, and promotion of these partnerships over the years.[4]

I used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA to analyze documents and interview transcripts. Analysis was conducted in two overarching phases: First, I coded state-level documents to construct the state's

discourse of partnership. Second, I compared this with how ECE stakeholders described their experiences working with the school district to develop and implement 4K. In the first phase, I used a process of open coding to look for themes in the state's discourse partnership (Saldana 2016). To do this, I read through each of the four documents included in my analysis, looking for elements that described aspects of partnerships, with a particular focus on passages that conveyed a rationale for partnering or a vision of what partnerships entail. After generating a list of 75 codes, I looked for themes across the codes and condensed them into four broad categories: process of creating 4K-CA, benefits of partnership to school district, benefits of partnership to ECE providers, and challenges of partnership. The first set of codes fell into these categories because the documents analyzed were primarily focused on describing how 4K-CA came to be, the types of support and collaboration needed for 4K-CA, and how 4K-CA benefits the institutions involved in its provision. I then organized these coded excerpts into a display (Miles et al. 2014). In the display, I listed the four categories derived from coding in the left-hand column. Then, I read through the data excerpts in each of these categories and copied and pasted the excerpts that best illustrated each category in the right-hand column. Once complete, I used this display to write the narrative of state-level partnership discourse.

In the second round of coding, I attempted to analyze interview transcripts using the codes created in the first cycle of coding. As I did this, however, I realized that most of the ways ECE stakeholders in Lakeville described the partnership contradicted the state's conceptualization of partnership. As a result, I used versus coding (Saldana 2016) to capture these competing visions of partnership. In versus coding, the researcher employs binary terms to identify salient divisions among individuals, groups, organizations, or processes. In this analysis, I applied versus codes to illustrate where local stakeholders' experiences stood in contradiction to the state-level discourse of partnership. Thus, in this cycle of coding, I read through interviews with ECE stakeholders and developed and applied versus codes that captured this contradiction. Codes included: top-down versus bottom-up, enhance versus detract from ECE ecology, economic benefit versus economic burden, us versus them, trust versus mistrust, and collaboration versus control. After creating versus codes, I went back to the excerpts created in the first coding cycle and collapsed them into the newly created codes. Then, I read through all coded excerpts and wrote an analytic memo for each versus code, in which I described how local experience

converged or diverged from state-level discourse. Through analytic memos, I sought to tease out "the reasons why the opposition exists. . .and to try to explain how the two oppositional characteristics may exist in the same empirical space" (Gibson and Brown 2009, p. 141, as cited in Saldana 2016, p. 117). In the process of re-reading excerpts and developing memos, I realized that the tension between state-level discourse and the experiences of local stakeholders was best captured in a phrase used by the former superintendent of La Crosse, where he described working in partnership as moving from a "we/they" to a "we/us" mentality (Bulebosh 2000). This became the central organizing feature of my analysis, and it is the theme that I use to demonstrate that Lakeville's 4K partnership, from the perspective of ECE providers, remained grounded in a "we/they" mentality instead of moving to the "we/us" mentality envisioned by state-level partnership discourse.

Findings

While the state-level discourse of partnership described an idealized vision of partnership, in which the school district and local ECE providers worked collaboratively to provide 4K, ECE stakeholders in Lakeville experienced an ongoing division between the school district and ECE providers as 4K policy was implemented. In this section, I describe how the partnership was envisioned at the state level, and then how it was experienced by ECE stakeholders in Lakeville.

State-Level Discourse of Partnership

State-level documents and reports about 4K create a vision of the form and function of 4K partnerships in Wisconsin. Within the DPI, and even among state legislators, 4K-CA is a point of pride; it is promoted as something uniquely beneficial to children, families, ECE providers, and school districts (Graue et al. 2016; Kann 2013). In this section, I demonstrate how state-level discourse about 4K-CA constituted an idealized vision of 4K partnership. The discourse of partnership focused on the policies and processes that facilitated partnership and on the relationships that characterized partnerships.

Policies and Processes that Facilitate Partnership

The state policy framework for public pre-K was positioned as critical to the establishment of local pre-K partnerships, called 4K-CA. Reporting on 4K included an emphasis on how the flexibility of state 4K funds enabled the development of unique partnerships. For example:

> One of the benefits of the 4K-CA approach is that each participating community can design the program to fits [sic] the needs of their specific community. There is no expectation nor mandate that one model will fit all communities. (Kann 2013, p. 22)

One report includes a quote from a DPI official, who similarly described the benefit of this flexibility:

> The [state] funding streams do have some specific requirements, but they actually give you enough wiggle room to put together a model that works for everyone, without getting hung up over things like titles and role responsibilities. (Bulebosh 2000, p. 10)

Former DPI official Marty Jameson similarly noted that the reason 4K-CA worked so well in Wisconsin was because of the state's emphasis on local control in education. He asserted:

> This thing works because, community by community, they discovered it themselves. Most states are much more top down in their approach to education. They have blue ribbon committees and when they come up with the latest new idea it's implemented and mandated. (July 2013 interview)

These excerpts express a sentiment that partnership was possible in Wisconsin because of the flexibility written into state 4K policy, which allowed local communities to develop a model of 4K that worked best for them. In the discourse of partnership, a state policy with minimal requirements was not enough to ensure that school districts and local ECE providers would collaborate to develop pre-K partnerships. A key ingredient to the type of partnering envisioned by the state was a bottom-up process that brought all stakeholders to the table and allowed them to play equal roles in developing 4K. The challenge with a truly bottom-up approach was that it required that stakeholders give up some control and be open to new perspectives. A 2005 report on 4K-CA underscored this idea:

> Communities that include all stakeholders in the planning process early on, and view them as equal partners are most successful in breaking down many of the traditional barriers that that impede start-up efforts. Missing from these communities is divisiveness that can be characteristic among collaborating agencies competing for scarce resources. (Rhyme and Eilers 2005, p. 20)

A quote from the former superintendent in La Crosse, the first district in Wisconsin to develop a 4K partnership, provides a concrete example of what this might look like in practice:

> We had monthly public information meetings for anyone who wanted to come. . ..It was a good opportunity for those with the deepest concerns to step forward. . . . And by going out and working with our child care providers, we really knew what the issues were. Nothing jumped out from behind the bushes at us. (Bulebosh 2000, p. 12)

In La Crosse, the pioneer and gold standard in Wisconsin 4K partnerships, the development of 4K-CA took six years, precisely because the district encouraged so much community participation and gave up some of its control over the process. The superintendent who led the development of 4K-CA in that district explained:

> We all had to give up something. . ..This is why we call collaboration the highest order. All organizations truly have to shift from a "we/they" mentality to "we/us." Over time it's been proven that we needed to have that understanding. (Bulebosh 2000, p. 8)

This shifting of perspective was critical, particularly because the school district had to be the one to initiate the development of 4K. Marty Jameson explained that, because of this, it was especially important for the school district to give up some of its power:

> [The school district] has to lead in all these communities. We've had no example of childcare ever leading. The superintendent has to be in the position of saying, "We understand what our role is, but I'm gonna organize the meetings, I'm gonna be the lubricant to pull it together." Childcare has no central organization, no central authority. . ..[Then], "Whatever the answer is – if it winds up in the public school, fine, but it will be created from the bottom-up by everyone in the room. And I won't heavy handedly dictate anything. You come up with the answer." (July 2013 interview)

Partnership thus required not only bringing all stakeholders together, but ensuring that the stakeholders with the most power (e.g. school district superintendents) were willing to give up some control of the negotiations and to accept the outcome that was determined by stakeholders to be most beneficial to children and families. In spite of the fact that the vision for stakeholders coming together with "no one in charge" was somewhat mythologized in Wisconsin 4K history, the discourse of partnership did include recognition that not all attempts to develop partnerships were successful. Marty Jameson described how "powerful people" such as school district officials and teachers' union leaders, if they were inflexible and unwilling to compromise, could "hijack" the process of developing a partnership. He explained:

> You just have to get enough people in the conversation so it doesn't get hijacked. . . .It's all been hijacked when it becomes top-down. . .(Pointing to a map of Wisconsin that indicates where large school districts are implementing school-based 4K)Yeah, this has all been hijacked by powerful people. It becomes all distorted and you can't get the power back. You gotta believe in distribution of power. (July 2013 interview)

The issue of power and control, and the perception among community ECE providers that they were not equal partners with the school district, informed Lakeville ECE stakeholders' perpetuation of a "we/they" mentality in describing their relationship with the school district. A recent report on 4K-CA addresses the challenges of collaboration, suggesting the development of "community collaboration councils," envisioned to "help to equalize the power among the districts and the community partners and ensure collaborative decision-making and policy development" (Forces for Four Year Olds 2016, p. 1). In the discourse of partnership, distribution of power among 4K stakeholders was envisioned as essential to partnership, even as it acknowledged the difficulty of accomplishing this goal.

Characteristics of Relationships Between Partners

Collaborative relationships formed during the development of 4K were envisioned to extend into its implementation. In state-level discourse, partnering entailed: re-defining the relationship between the school district and ECE providers, positioning the school district as a learner, and resource sharing. A report on the benefits of 4K-CA asserted that as a result of partnering, "School districts now see the community centers as an extension

of the school program and they act accordingly in terms of making their resources available to the centers" (Kann 2013, p. 26). This idea that a school district would come to see ECE providers as an extension of itself reflected the notion that partnership helped school districts and ECE providers overcome the historical separation of their two systems. Bridging the divide between ECE and K-12, according to the discourse of partnership, would also involve school districts learning from ECE providers:

> The 4K Community Approach program helps school districts gain a better understanding of the needs and challenges of the early childhood programs in their community. . ..With this knowledge, school districts are more committed and better able to work cooperatively with their community partners to provide quality early learning for children. (Kann 2013, pp. 38–39)

This characterization of the school district as a learner disrupts how school districts are typically positioned vis-à-vis ECE providers, where school districts are the education experts and ECE providers provide care (Takanishi 2010). Partnership in Wisconsin 4K was instead conceptualized as a mechanism to foreground the expertise of community providers, who would be able to share their years of experience with the school district, a relative newcomer to ECE.

Finally, the discourse envisioned that school-community partnerships would enhance ECE providers' access to resources. The logic was that if the school district viewed ECE partners as an extension of itself, they would make school district resources readily available to ECE providers. Examples provided in the *Unique Benefits of 4K-CA* report underscore this:

> The 4K Community Approach program has nurtured collaborative partnerships between school districts and the community child care and early childhood education programs. As a result, school districts commonly offer professional development training sessions which include 4K staff from the community sites. They also often invite the child care teachers from the community sites who work with children younger than four-year-olds to attend the training sessions. They sometimes even schedule the trainings during the evening or on Saturdays to better accommodate the scheduling needs of the childcare teachers. Both the 4K teachers and the teachers of younger children have improved their practices as a result of the training they've received. (Kann 2013, p. 28)

> The 4K Community Approach program has brought the curriculums and resources from the school district to the child centers in an unprecedented fashion. (Kann 2013, p. 26)

The expected infusion of school district resources, which ECE providers would most likely be unable to afford on their own, are positioned as both evidence of the strong functioning of the partnership and as a benefit to ECE centers for participating in 4K.

In state-level discourse, partnerships were developed through collaboration between the school district and community ECE providers, characterized by shared decision-making and a distribution of power. Such collaboration in the development of 4K would feed into a partnership that situated expertise within the ECE community, and in which school district resources could be leveraged to improve the quality of ECE centers. The reality of Lakeville's partnership, as I describe in the next section, did not fully align with the state's conceptualization of partnership.

Enactment of Partnership in Lakeville

In this section, I describe how the partnership imagined in state-level discourse looked very different in local implementation. Achieving the state's vision for a pre-K partnership would have required moving from a "we/they mentality to a we/us [mentality]," as described by the former La Crosse superintendent (Bulebosh 2000, p. 8). Evidence from interviews with Lakeville ECE stakeholders suggests that while a partnership technically existed in Lakeville, members of the ECE community continued to perceive significant differences between themselves and the school district, grounding the partnership in a "we/they" mentality. This mentality was characterized by the perception that the school district had more power in the setting up of 4K policy than ECE sites did, that K-12 and ECE were fundamentally separate systems, with different ways of operating, and that the school district did not have the expertise nor the appropriate structures to provide 4K at the same level of quality as ECE providers.

Power and Control

ECE providers' perception that, in spite of the pre-K partnership, their work was still very separate from that of the school district was informed an awareness that the school district was ultimately in control of 4K. Maura

Evans, an ECE partner site director, asserted that the Lakeville school district, because of its size, was not very good at shared decision-making:

> And I know some districts they really pair with the community, but they're smaller. I think that's part of the issue with Lakeville. They're big, they're used to being, and I hate to say dictate, but they are. And I think as time goes on they'll be more willing to give us the credit we deserve and maybe let some of the expectations fall on us, so to speak. (February 2013 interview)

From Evans' point of view, the school district dictated the terms of the relationship and of 4K, rather than drawing on the expertise of ECE sites in the way state-level partnership discourse imagined. One challenge that resulted from the school district making some unilateral decisions about 4K was initial uncertainty over how many 4K slots would be allocated to each ECE partner. Administrators described their worry that they would not be able to provide 4K to all of their existing families; this fear was compounded by the fact that they had no control over the allocation of 4K slots. Denise Sanderson explained:

> I think for year one [of 4K] the registration process and the number of slots and the number of families, lining all that up was a big fear. Initially, we weren't going to have enough spots to serve our current families. And we weren't getting direct answers at the time. (January 2013 interview)

Although the process of allocating slots eventually became more transparent and caused far less anxiety in the second year of 4K, the process remained out of ECE partners' control because the school district was obligated, per an agreement with the local teachers' union, to carefully control how many 4K slots were offered in ECE sites. As Sanderson described, "That takes the control of who is in our center out of our hands" (January 2012 interview).

Maura Evans experienced a different challenge in relation to the allocation of 4K slots. In the first year of 4K, although she was struggling to fill all of the 4K classes at her center, the school district opened a new 4K classroom at a nearby elementary school. This development meant there was no way Evans would fill all of her 4K seats. She explained:

> I had difficulty because they opened up Fieldstone Elementary 4K after. . .they hadn't even filled my center. So I'll be honest—I was kind of vocal, asking "Wait a minute, why are you opening up another school when you haven't even filled our slots?" (February 2013 interview)

The school district did not address this issue, and Evans' 4K slots went unused, yet there was nothing she could do about the situation; the nature of the 4K partnership in Lakeville meant that if ECE providers wanted to be part of 4K, they had to accept that there were some aspects of the program over which they had no control.

Another exemplar of power imbalance in the Lakeville partnership was how the nature of community-wide 4K meetings changed over time. Prior to the implementation of 4K, these regular meetings had been venues for stakeholder input and defining a shared vision for 4K. Once 4K was underway, however, the meetings became a venue for the school district to pass on information to ECE partners. City of Lakeville childcare official Helen Moyers explained:

> [Before 4K started], there was a 4K advisory committee. And that was really kind of cool, because it was the school district, and community representatives, and center directors. But [now]...it's just a meeting with directors. It's a way for the school district to pass on information. Which is very nice, but it does not at all play the role that the advisory committee did, in trying to figure out whether this is working well or not. (January 2012 interview)

After 4K began, the structure intended to facilitate critical discussion of community priorities for four-year-olds changed. The perception that 4K meetings were now perfunctory, a way to pass on information, reinforced a "we/they" mentality by underscoring that decision-making related to 4K was not shared equally among the school district and ECE partners. All the same, these meetings were viewed as essential by ECE stakeholders, who worried that in the absence of regular meetings, ECE partners would be "Out of sight, out of mind" (Denise Sanderson, January 2013 interview). Sanderson elaborated on this and explained that she felt the need to regularly remind the school district that ECE providers were also part of 4K:

> We sometimes have to wave our arms and say, "Hello! We're over here!" [The school district is] so used to not having to think about community sites...As we were winding down year one [the district said], "Well, now that year one is done, maybe we don't need a steering committee." And I said, "No nononononono!" We still need to be coming together and talking, because this is a collaborative effort. The players all need to be there and we need to see each other and communicate with each other. (January 2013 interview)

ECE stakeholders like Sanderson did not perceive their relationship with the school district as one in which ECE becomes an extension of K-12, as the discourse of partnership envisioned. Instead, they recognized that the power dynamic of the 4K partnership was skewed in favor of the school district, and they worried that they might be left out of decision-making altogether if they did not continually assert their presence.

Separate Systems and Expectations

Even as they hoped for a more collaborative relationship with the school district, there was recognition among ECE stakeholders that the school district was a very different and incompatible system. Annette Simons, an ECE partner site administrator, described it as a challenge of not speaking the same language:

> My vantage is that the district, like [our center] or any other institution, has its own language and its own. . .system. It's large, and we are small. And I don't know if the school district was ready or, it was ready and knew how to communicate and deal with. . .the small little off-sites and how to speak our language. And we didn't know how to listen to their language. (January 2012)

In this view, working in partnership would require each side to learn to speak the other's language. Yet, some differences between the two systems would be impossible to overcome. For example, administrators spoke of the process of creating 4K, which required a lot of people's time and effort to come up with a plan. Everything had to be cleared through the school district's legal department, however, which almost always resulted in changes to the agreed-upon plan. Because of the way it worked and the systems to which it was accountable, the school district would always have the final say in some matters. According to Denise Sanderson, coming to understand this reality was part of the process of working with the school district:

> I've come to appreciate the district for what it is. You know, early childhood centers tend to [think of it as] "the big bad school district." But, I've come to appreciate what [the school district's] process is. I understand how they operate. Sometimes I don't understand *why* they operate that way, but I understand their process, which makes it easier for me to figure things out. (January 2012 interview)

Sanderson acknowledged that the school district likely had reasons for doing what it did, even if she did not always understand. This view helped her make sense of decisions about 4K that puzzled her.

Beyond the fact that the K-12 and ECE systems had very different ways of operating, a significant challenge to the partnership was that the school district, because it was not a state-licensed ECE provider, was exempt from complying with regulations associated with the provision of high-quality ECE. The result was that public school 4K classrooms and ECE center 4K classrooms were held to a different standard. There was some contradiction in the structure of Lakeville's 4K policy: In order to qualify to partner with the school district, ECE centers had to be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the city of Lakeville, which had standards and regulations designed to ensure the provision of high-quality programming. For example, accreditation standards limited teacher–student ratios to 1:8 and maximum group size to 16. In addition, accredited centers were required to employ certain practices aimed at promoting children's development and socialization, such as the requirement that meals and snacks be served "family style."

As 4K was developed, it became clear that, although the teachers' union had stipulated that ECE partner sites be accredited in order to ensure quality in 4K, public school 4K sites would not be held to the same standards. Helen Moyers explained:

> [You need to understand] that [public school 4K classrooms] don't have to follow state licensing [regulations]. Especially they don't have to follow ratios. And we know that student-teacher ratios is one of the primary indicators of quality. So, [ECE centers would need] an assistant to have 15 children, and the school district said, "Oh well, we always have an aide assigned." And you're going, "Really?"[5] Or when [the district] wants to have 18 or 20 kids [in one 4K class]. And you're going, "We can't have that. Licensing forbids it." And city standards and NAEYC standards are even stricter. And for [the district] to say, "Yes you have to do that, but we don't have to follow those ideas of quality", that was difficult during those planning meetings. (January 2012 interview)

Moyers described being surprised by the school district's unwillingness to comply with state licensing regulations and accreditation standards. This reinforced a separation between the school district and the ECE community, at least in the eyes of ECE providers, because the district was able to

make claims about quality and enforce quality standards for ECE providers while simultaneously not holding itself to those standards. Adhering to maximum group size and teacher-student ratios would have made 4K more costly for the district to provide, because it would require hiring additional teachers.

That the school district distinguished itself from the ECE providers when it came to complying with rules related to quality fueled a more general suspicion of whether the school district and public school 4K teachers were qualified to provide 4K. Moyers, for example, was concerned that an unwillingness on the part of school district 4K teachers to adhere to relatively simple regulations related to quality might manifest itself in other aspects of 4K teaching. She explained:

> So, I'm meeting with a [school district] 4K teacher yesterday and she's telling me how when she does lunch they just serve all the kids. And I work with an early childhood program in the same space that I have a required change saying, you need to set up your meals so that self-serve, so the children are learning how to use utensils. And the [school district] 4K teacher said, "Oh it takes too much time." And I said, "Absolutely. It takes more time—you are right!" And she said, "Well we can't do that." I let it go, but at the end I said, "I'd ask you to rethink that. In terms of your goals for these children, we want them to be able to do that." I can find 10 things that they're learning during a snack or during a lunch. But I was caught because [she just said] "We're not doing that. It takes too much time." And if that's true about snack, can we talk about what that must be like with language or literacy? Math? Open-ended art activities? (January 2012 interview)

If this interaction had taken place in an accredited center, Moyers would have been able to enforce her request. However, because she was speaking with a school district-employed 4K teacher, she could only suggest the change, but had no power to enforce it. That this teacher appeared unwilling to harness important opportunities for learning by allowing children to serve themselves at lunch and snack led Moyers to question the teacher's practice more generally. As I describe in the next section, this suspicion—that public school 4K teachers and the school district were not well-positioned to provide 4K—was shared by other ECE stakeholders in Lakeville.

Appropriate Environments and Expertise

A final element of the relationship between the school district and ECE providers that defined the partnership was a belief on the part of ECE partners that the school district was not well equipped to serve four-year-olds. Two sub-themes animated this perspective: infrastructure and expertise. First, ECE providers questioned the appropriateness of public school buildings for young children, a perspective that grew out of an understanding that ECE centers were purposefully designed for four-year-olds while public school buildings were not. Denise Sanderson explained:

> I'm not bashing the district, it's just—our center was built for four-year-old children. The school district buildings, some of them were not, and they're having to be retro-fitted. [They have] bathrooms down the hall [and not in classrooms], that kind of thing. The children are probably going to be absolutely just fine. But [our center is] just so purposeful and accommodating to the age that we're serving. (January 2013 interview)

From Sanderson's point of view, school buildings constructed with older children in mind created a structural limitation to the school district's ability to provide high-quality 4K. In a separate interview, Sanderson said that if she could change anything about 4K, "I would have 4K completely in community sites *that were designed for early childhood education*" (January 2012 interview). This perspective, which was echoed by other ECE stakeholders, drew clear distinctions between ECE and K-12 and perpetuated a "we/they" mentality.

Second, beyond structural concerns, ECE providers expressed mistrust in the school district and public school 4K teachers' understanding of young children and ability to teach them effectively. For example, Helen Moyers said, "The truth is, I believe that we are much better positioned, even than the school district is, because they're new at this" (January 2012 interview). The "we" in this assertion was childcare providers. This we/they binary was based in an assumption that ECE providers had greater expertise in teaching young children, given their understanding of developmentally appropriate practice and significant experience. Denise Sanderson's concern that, "Teachers who are teaching [4K in public schools] may not have ever touched a four year old before" (January 2012 interview) grew out of this perspective. The logic was, if 4K teachers had never "touched a four-year-old," it would be hard for them to provide 4K that was as high quality as what was provided by the ECE community. Moyers explained:

> Early childhood care and education people are very committed to children and families. . .They also know what is developmentally appropriate and. . .they know what a four-year-old can handle. . .and needs to learn. So they have worked very hard to look at their own curriculums and the [state early learning standards] to make sure that those are connected. Personally, I'm not so sure that it's as connected to those teachers in [public school 4K classrooms]. . .[4K teachers in ECE sites] are under a great deal of scrutiny, and I don't get the sense that the 4K teachers in the public schools are. (January 2012 interview)

Moyers' articulated her belief that not only did ECE teachers have a better understanding of what and how four-year-olds learned, they were also more motivated to do a good job at 4K, perhaps more so than public school 4K teachers. In addition, the stakes may have been higher for ECE providers, where losing a contract to be a 4K partner could put a site's economic viability in jeopardy.

Summary

As ECE partners in Lakeville interacted with the school district to provide public pre-K, they created a new meaning of partnership that differed significantly from the state's idealized vision of partnership. Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, which asserts that meaning is made through interaction, provides one framework for making sense of local variation in policy implementation. Although Wisconsin's state 4K policy was designed with variation in mind, the state's conceptualization of pre-K partnership was relatively monolithic; it articulated a clear vision of how districts and community ECE providers would work collaboratively to develop a 4K program to meet the needs of children and families. The state envisioned this as a bottom-up process, characterized by a distribution of power. Moreover, 4K partnerships were supposed to create new linkages between ECE and K-12, leading to a shift from a we/they mentality in which the two systems were viewed as separate, to a we/us mentality in which each system was seen as an extension of the other.

In Lakeville, however, even as they partnered with the school district, ECE stakeholders continued to view their work in opposition to the school district. The perspectives of these stakeholders demonstrate that this perspective grew out of a recognition that, despite the partnership, the school district retained more power and control over 4K than ECE providers, that

the ECE and K-12 systems were fundamentally different, and a belief that the school district and its teachers were not well equipped to provide high-quality 4K. Whether the differences between ECE providers and the school district were real or perceived, they informed the way ECE providers came to conceptualize partnership.

Although this was a study of one school district, the findings are applicable in contexts beyond Lakeville. While pre-K partnerships are widely promoted, there is a limited body of research that investigates the nature and complexity of such partnerships (Casto et al. 2016; Wilinski 2017). Yet, as the findings from this study underscore, the way different stakeholders conceptualize partnership matters because it has implications for how partners work together to provide pre-K. In the case of Lakeville, even if the school district perceived that they were working collaboratively with ECE providers, the fact that ECE stakeholders saw a divide between the two is significant, and likely had an effect on the way the partnership functioned. Remaining rooted in a we/they mentality likely prevented Lakeville from achieving the type of collaborative partnership envisioned in state discourse.

Key Connections to Policy Research

1. Bringing together ECE and K-12 systems for the provision of pre-K is a complex process. There is a need to better understand the nature of pre-K partnerships in order to reconcile differences between discourse and enactment of partnerships.
2. Stakeholders involved in pre-K partnerships may have diverse interpretations of partnership. These perspectives must be reconciled in order for collaboration to occur.
3. Creating new linkages between ECE and K-12 may require state-level support. In Wisconsin, collaboration councils are being promoted to help facilitate the development of partnerships.

Notes

1. All names of people and places are pseudonyms.
2. A limitation of this study is that I was unable to interview any school district officials, despite repeated requests to speak with them.

3. I only included data from 4K administrator interviews, as these were the stakeholders who worked most closely with district officials in the development and implementation of 4K.
4. In a different study, we found that state legislators and DPI officials cited 4K partnerships as a key feature of Wisconsin 4K and a point of pride in the state's educational landscape (Graue et al. 2016).
5. Moyers' skepticism of the district's commitment to have a teacher's aide in public school 4K classrooms was not unfounded. For the public school 4K teacher who participated in this study, having a consistent aide was a struggle over the two years she taught 4K. At least for this teacher, being assigned an aide was not a given.

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