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**Transition to School: In Relation to the Aims of 4K and Kindergarten**

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine how policy actors describe a goal of 4K and kindergarten and transition practices. In early childhood settings, teachers constantly negotiate their own beliefs in teaching with policy imperatives in their practices. Especially, understanding the aims of 4K and kindergarten is important for school transition practices since relevance of aims helps children’s smooth transition. Through the interviews with policy actors in three public schools in Madison, Wisconsin, we analyze the goals of 4K and kindergarten and enactment of transition practices. We argue that policy actors employ their discretion in their practices by negotiating the value of social-emotional development with academics. Finding relevance in the aims is important in understanding transition practice and collaboration among policy actors. Given the ambiguity in family involvement and transition practice, we argue that multi-level collaborations among families, teachers and schools should be accompanied to promote successful transition.

Keyword: 4-year-old-kindergarten, kindergarten, goal, educational policy, transition practice, street-level bureaucracy, teacher collaboration, family engagement/involvement

**Policy Problem**

Over the past decades, there have been strong demands for accountability in the K-12 system, which has pushed kindergarten to become the new 1st grade (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Graue, 2009) and 4-year-old-kindergarten (4K) programs to be more focused on academic activities. However, considering 4K as the continuum of the K-12 system (Graue, Ryan, Nocera, Northey, & Willinski, 2016) is problematic because the initial goal of the 4K program is not getting children ready for kindergarten by benchmarking and following the narrowed curriculum but supporting developmental continuum and progressive levels of performance.

Often, the issue of school readiness is interrelated to the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2013) since parents and teachers feel pressured about their children not being ready for school. Therefore, the existing studies have focused on school readiness and school transition that focuses on the need of partnerships among families, schools, and communities (Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2005). However, in spite of the close relationship between school readiness and transition, limited research has paid attention to aims of 4K and kindergarten in relation to the issues of school transition.

Understanding the aims of 4K and kindergarten is important in school transition because the relevance of the aims would help children’s smooth transition. “Relevance is more likely to be perceived if sufficient similarity exists between the two settings so that the children understand how the knowledge and skills developed in one can be applied in the other” (Timperley, McNaughton, Howie, & Robinson, 2003, p.33).

Therefore, this study asks: “How is transition practice enacted by teachers and principals in relation to their understandings of aims of 4K and kindergarten?” The findings of study will help practitioners to better support children’s transition by understanding relevance of aims and focus of 4K and kindergarten. This study also will help policy makers to understand practitioners’ voices and reflect them in policy making.

**Literature review**

This study draws on literature in aims of 4K and kindergarten, roles of teachers’ perceptions and beliefs in policy enactment, and issues in transition practices in early childhood education.

First, we identified the aims of 4K and kindergarten by searching through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) website and academic literature with the keywords, ‘preK/kindergarten goal, expectation, learning, and development’. According to the DPI and a number of studies, preKindergarten (PreK) aims to provide quality early learning experiences through play-based program and a whole child approach for four-year-old children (Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford, & Early, 2005; Locasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Barnett, Friedman, Hustedt, & Stevenson-Boyd, 2009)**.** However, public preK is becoming a place where standardized academic content is introduced since the district officials, administrators, and teachers need to prepare 4-year-olds to join the K-12 education race (Graue et.al., 2016). In this vein, the way preK is implemented can look different in terms of motivation of the state, school district and communities (Casto & Sipple, 2011).

Within the context of a K-12 system, the most noticeable aims of the kindergartens are to prepare children to meet the academic standards (Goldstein, 2007; Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007; Stipek, 2006). That is, there is less focus on whole child development (Graue, 2008). Rather, the focus is subject based knowledge and skill learning mandated by their state (Goldstein, 2007). This is due to the “accountability shove down,” the demands that NCLB created have pushed kindergarten teachers to prepare children to meet academic expectations (Hatch, 2002, p. 457). This finding will help us to examine how 4K and kindergarten goals are defined in the era of accountability.

To better understand a role of teachers’ beliefs, we reviewed the academic literature and books using the keywords, ‘early childhood teacher’s interpretation’, ‘perceptions’, ‘beliefs’, ‘understanding’, ‘standards’, and ‘policy’. Several studies (Maguire, Ball, & Braun, 2012; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977) argue that teachers interpret a different range of policies through their lens, such as beliefs, values, and cultures, and then make street-level education policy in daily practices (Goldstein, 2008; Lipsky, 1980; Spillane, 2004). This makes enactment diverged (Ball et. al., 2012). Specifically, teachers constantly negotiate mandated policies, the guidelines for DAP, and their professional expertise (Goldstein, 2008). Therefore, it is pivotal to understand how the same policy could be differently laid out in practice depending on who interprets the policy and how it is translated. This finding will help us to deeply examine how the state and district policies are transformed as they move from the state, district, school administrators, to the teachers.

When it comes to beliefs of teachers in early childhood centers and schools, the existing study found that teachers in two different settings hold different perceptions of transition arrangements and expectations, which affects the focus of program (Timperley el.al., 2003). Having different expectations of each other is likely resulted in poor transition support due to a lack of understanding of child’s previous experience. This finding will help us when examining how 4K and kindergarten policy actors in Wisconsin describe expectations in 4K and kindergarten.

In the search of literature in school transition, our team used keywords such as ‘transition to kindergarten/school’, ‘school adjustment/adaptation’, and ‘starting school’. The school transition in early education mostly refers to the time when a child enters formal schooling — kindergarten — from childcare. According to Timperley et.al. (2003), the issue of transition has focused on “creating linkages and continuity between the different social environments children experience” (p.32). Therefore, having relevance helps children apply the knowledge that they acquired in one setting to the other setting (Timperley et.al., 2003). This will help us to look for relevance in the aims of 4K and kindergarten.

Social connections between families, schools, and communities have been perceived as the key to support the transition to school – especially to better help children adjust their school routines (Kraft -Sayre & Pianta, 2000). This is aligned with the goal of 4K – providing equal educational opportunities (Cooper et.al., 2010; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). However, previous studies have shown numerous barriers surrounding transition to school. La Paro et. al. (2003) investigate that preschool teachers actively facilitate various transition activities, such as visiting kindergarten classrooms, attending orientation, and sharing children’s information as opposed to kindergarten teachers due to summer workload. This will help us to deeply examine how 4K and kindergarten policy actors do transition practices across settings.

**Objectives of the research**

The goal of our study is to have a better understanding of the transition practice in relation to the aims of the 4K and kindergarten. Therefore, we carefully examined the policies around the aims of the 4K and kindergarten as well as transition; we also interviewed teachers and principals to explore how they interpret and enact the policies in their schools and daily practices.

By reviewing the policies and its enactment, the study intends to contributes to teachers, school administrators, and Madison Metropolitan School District’s (MMSD) understanding of how the goals of 4K and kindergarten and the transition practice are shaped in Federal, State, and local level in the era of accountability. Identifying the goals and how transition is prescribed in the policy is critical because the rationale behind transition planning and practices is influenced by what is written in the policy. By interviewing teachers and principal, this study aims to understand how the policy actors interpret and enact the policy set by the Federal, State and MMSD through their own sense-making process. We believe that our study will give a rich explanation on transition practices that are implemented by schools and teachers.

Lastly, our study is interested in identifying the challenges that might be present in school transition. Given that transition is often characterized by discontinuity across the areas of relationships, pedagogy, curriculum, resources, and support (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Podmore, Sauvao, & Mapa, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), children and their families are likely to experience challenges when they are moving from 4K to kindergarten. In this vein, we hope that the findings of our study will help practitioners, school administrators, and the school district understand what causes the challenges and what support is needed to facilitate children’s transition process.

**Theoretical framework**

Theoretical framework that we used is the concept of street-level bureaucrats’ policy suggested by Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) and Lipsky (1980). Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) emphasize street-level bureaucrats’ discretions in policy enactment by arguing, “[street-level bureaucrats] develop practices that permit them in some way to process the work they are required to do” (p.172). Moreover, we believe that street-level bureaucrats are also policy makers by constantly negotiating the needs of students with imperatives at the front line in practice; this aligns with the framework that Weatherley and Lipsky suggested. Therefore, the concept of street-level bureaucrats’ policy is our theoretical lens in the data collection and analysis.

**Methodology**

This study is a comparative case study of three different elementary schools located in Madison, Wisconsin. Our case study helped us to examine the similarities and differences of policy actors’ perceptions on the goal of 4K/kindergarten and its connection to transition practice across three contexts. Our initial plan was to recruit three policy actors in one school and conduct a case study using the school as a unit. As we ended up having participants in three different schools, we decided to go wide so that we could collect the data from various settings. We note our acknowledgment here that we interviewed one policy actor from each school; therefore, we may not be able to produce more generalizable knowledge with the given data. The purpose of study is to have a better understanding of phenomenon of our interest.

To better understand the policy actors’ rationale behind their practice, we conducted semi-structured interviews in April 2017 in three different elementary schools located in MMSD. The participants were Ms. Robinson (4K teacher), Ms. Brown (kindergarten teacher), and Ms. Johnson (principal). All participants’ names are pseudonyms. A recruitment email was distributed to teachers and principals working at the five nearest elementary schools from the UW-Madison with the goal of identifying voluntary participants. Their e-mail addresses were found in the staff directory on MMSD website. We scheduled the interviews through emails once interested participants replied. Each interview lasted about 30 to 45 minutes at the time and location of their choices.

The interview protocol contains three sections. At first, the participants are asked to share their educational background, teaching experiences, and their roles in school. The next section is about how the participants perceive the aims of 4K and kindergarten. The questions in the ending section aims to get a sense of transition practice in their classrooms or schools. Each member of our research group conducted an interview with one policy actor and transcribed the conversation. We first read the transcripts multiple times to understand what the data tell us. We then did initial open coding of any explicit connection to the goal of 4K/kindergarten and the transition practice. This process helped us cycle back and forth between recurring patterns in the existing data and its connection to the fundamental meaning of the whole. Given the initial codes, we developed a list of code to categorize, synthesize and conceptualize the data. The examples of the codes are: teacher’ belief, standard, goal of curriculum, policy recognition, transition events, teacher collaboration, family involvement, resources, necessity, expectation/intention, challenge etc. Each of us coded the three different transcripts based on the code list by using comment function in Word. Then we merged the documents to find particular excerpts that were stood out to make a meaning of the contexts. Having member checks was done in order to find out if “categories make sense and whether the overall account is realistic and accurate” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.127).

**Findings**

Finding 1. Dilemma in the goals of 4K and Kindergarten

We explored teachers and administrators’ understanding of 4K and kindergarten aims because “teaching and studying are activities that aim toward a goal […]” (Lampert, 2001, p.329).

We found that 4K teacher’s value aligns with what is expected by principals and policy. To elaborate, 4K teacher’s belief in importance of social-emotional development is respected by 4K standards and principal’s expectations that focus on a development continuum. For example, the 4K teacher highly values children’s social emotional regulation and development to learn academics. Moreover, in the implementation of her curriculum, the 4K teacher does not get pressured by assessment and standards because the assessment is not required in 4K.

On the other hand, we found dilemmas in the goal of kindergarten. Although the kindergarten teacher believes in the importance of social-emotional development through play-based learning, the expectations imposed on her are mostly the outcome set by the standards. Here, the aims to meet academic standards are observed, which is a similar finding with Goldstein (2007), Pianta, Cox, & Snow (2007), and Stipek (2006) literature.The kindergarten teacher emphasized that children should socially and emotionally be ready to learn. However, in the era of accountability, she is pressed for time to teach to standards without much room for her to help child’s social-emotional development through play in daily schedule. She thinks that it is important for administrators to consider what truly needs for children in contexts rather than expecting children who are not ready to learn to meet the standards. Despite the limits that she has, she tries to focus on social-emotional development and play based learning. In this sense, our team found that the goal of kindergarten could be differently defined depending on who defines it. Negotiation between performance based standards and teacher’s discretion is constantly observed, which is a similar finding from the literature (Goldstein, 2008; Lipsky,1980).

Lastly, we found that the principal put a heavy focus on social-emotional development in 4K and kindergarten although she acknowledged that academics are more emphasized in kindergarten. She differentiated kindergarten from 4K, as there are more demands put on kindergarten teachers largely due to the national standards. Further, there is a more emphasis on observing and learning processes in 4K as opposed to kindergarten that has more summative assessment. Hence, standards put pressure on kindergarten teachers to produce results or meet expectations rather than genuinely guiding the teachers in the design of curriculum. In addition, although the principal explained the goal of 4K and K, she shared her confusion of the goal of 4K and K. Specifically, she hoped that the goals of 4K and kindergarten could be more spelled out since she does not have a clear understanding of what children should be able to do to be successful in kindergarten by the time they leave 4K.

Based on the analysis of data, policy actors seem to perceive the goal of 4K and kindergarten with the reference to standards and their own beliefs.

For example, 4K goals that the 4K teacher described align with the main focus of WMELS that is developmental continuum and whole child approach rather than rigid sequence of accomplishment (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2013). The 4K teacher enacts 4K policy by considering her children’s development continuum and contexts by following a framework of WMELS. However, although 4K is designed to address equity issue, the evidence of equity in the goal of 4K was not observed from the data. To be specific, the Wisconsin constitution at section 1. 121.004 (7) (cm) specifies that “a pupil enrolled in a 4 year old kindergarten program that provides the required number of hours of direct pupil instruction.” However, the goals discussed in the interview were mostly about child’s development and learning.

On the other hand, the kindergarten’s goal is set by performance standards that “prepare children to equip academic knowledge and skills and [reach] benchmarks” (MMSD, n.d., p.17). The performance standards (Graue et.al., 2016) that focus on student outcomes narrow the goal of kindergarten by less focusing on a whole child development and continuum of child development. Therefore, the kindergarten teacher constantly negotiates what is the best for children with what is expected for them. In this sense, it seems that “there is a palpable tension between DAP’s progressive approach focused on children’s development and the expectation of school readiness – a common phrase in the early childhood standards movement” (Graue et.al., 2016, p. 8). Hence, there is relevance in social-emotional development focus in 4K and K; however, there is less relevance in terms of focus of academics and expectations imposed by policies in 4K and kindergarten.

Finding 2. The role of family in transition: “an active player or a recipient?”

The role of family in children’s transition is emphasized across the literature, at different levels of policy, and also among the teachers and principal. While social connections between families and schools is a key element in children’s smooth transition and reflecting family characteristics is critical in promoting positive transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2009; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000), the role of the family is often unclear or limited in the policy and guideline. Here, schools and teachers are often responsible for providing information and resources on what parents should know and be doing, whereas families are depicted as recipients of that information and resources. In other words, family involvement, which focuses on what school can *do to* family, is stressed rather than family engagement, which focuses on what school can *do with* family. This idea was especially salient in MMSD Transition Planning Exercise. However, regarding the transition practice, the principal and teachers recognized the importance of family engagement as well as family involvement in transition. While the principal, 4K teacher, and kindergarten teacher are all doing a transition practice that focuses on family involvement, they also acknowledge the importance of family engagement by having a feeling of the need to have bilateral hearing and interactions with families. In the following section, we will address how the policy and advisory guidelines on transition conceptualize family’s roles and explore how the principal and 4K and kindergarten teachers view family’s roles in transition practice in detail.

The Head Start Act, for example, acknowledges the importance of including families in children’s transition; however, it does not delineate how parents can engage in transition practice, leaving the role of family unclear in transition process.

Promote the continued involvement of the parents (including foster parents, grandparents, and kinship caregivers, as appropriate) of children that participate in Head Start programs in the education of their children upon transition of their children to school. (Head Start Act, 2007)

On the other hand, the MMSD’s Transition Planning Exercise, a recommended transition guideline written by the Department of Family, Youth, and Community Engagement, illustrates how transition practice could look like in school settings by laying out what are the things that teachers and schools can do for supporting students and their families. Although this document is not a policy and does not address transition from 4K to kindergarten in detail, it still serves as a guideline that informs teachers and schools to decide what actions are necessary for transition planning.Throughout the document, they believe providing information to parents is a critical part for supporting families. Thus, the document guides schools to plan the transition practice by providing guiding questions, such as “What materials will be given to families transitioning into the school?”, “What information sessions might kindergarten families benefit from?”, “How will it be communicated with families that supports will be in place for students that are transitioning into kindergarten?” to plan the transition in the beginning of the year (MMSD, n.d., p.4). Although the school acknowledges the importance of family roles in children’s transition, the way the work with family is one-way rather than interactive.

When it comes to practice, the principal and teachers recognized the importance of family engagement as well as family involvement in transition. Ms. Brown, the kindergarten teacher, believes that knowing child’s family and communicating with them are significant in children’s transition. Instead of telling families about the expectation of a kindergartener in detail, she encourages families to come in class at the beginning of the school year, ask questions they may have, and share their concerns or challenges on their child. This finding aligns with Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2000)’s finding that knowing the family characteristic is critical in transition.

At the same time, she argues that parents can benefit from having a kindergarten invitation day, an information session on kindergarten, since “4K and kindergarten are very different”. She felt bad about the fact that the school no longer has this because the school thought children and family do not need this exposure after already being in school. However, Ms. Brown believes that providing parents with information on how kindergarten looks like and the expectations on kindergartners can “set a stage for children’s smooth transition.”

Ms. Johnson, the principal also strongly believes that family’s active role is critical in successful transition. To encourage the family engagement, her school facilitates Ready-set-go conference, a goal setting conference in fall. The purpose of this conference is not to share the curriculum but to build a two-way communication with the parents so that schools can learn about children. Prior to the conference, the school also offers a kindergarten invitation day in spring where two kindergarten teachers walk family through the information on “the day in the life of kindergarten”.

Unlike two schools, family engagement was not explicitly found in Ms. Robinson’s interview. However, when she was asked about the ideal transition practices, she mentioned that having a potluck with kindergarten teacher, 4K teacher, children, and family would be great so that they can talk about their children and share ideas on what it is like to be a kindergartner. Lastly, like other schools, the 4K teacher also has a parent/family night, where children spend time in the kindergarten classroom and parent get to talk and listen to the principal.

Finding 3: Cross-level collaboration as a key to promote transition to school

Regarding transition practice, the overarching idea found in both policy documents and literature is the critical role of relationships and coordination among policy actors. However, what our research team noticed from the data is the gap between how the policy is suggested and how it is enacted in the transition practice by policy actors. The data showed that the teachers have different levels of collaboration depending on how each school acknowledges the importance of transition and supports to work on it. The 4K and kindergarten teacher pointed out that there is little collaboration across grades in schools and that there are unclear protocols and responsibilities in transition practice. The necessity of coordination for the transition was also perceived differently between the teachers and the principal: while the kindergarten teacher has a doubt of the effect of transition practice, the principal (Ms. Johnson) actively encourages cross-level communication so that the teachers have an adequate time for working toward coordination.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) indicates that school must include its comprehensive schoolwide plan, which is a description of how to assist preschool children in the transition to school. In the ESEA section 1114 (b), it is stated “plans for assisting preschool children in the transition from early childhood programs, such as Head Start, Even Start, Early Reading First, or a State-run preschool program, to local elementary school programs.” Although the ESEA is only applicable to K-12, this excerpt clearly shows that the federal law acknowledges the need of a schoolwide transition plan for prospective students. Despite its recognition of the variance in the preschool programs, our research team could not find any evidence supporting the idea of building relationships between teachers and schools as a way to promote the transition practice (Hartley et al., 2012). On the other hand, the Head Start Act explicitly emphasizes the importance of coordination with the school district.

IN GENERAL.— Each Head Start agency shall take steps to coordinate with the local educational agency serving the community involved and with schools in which children participating in a Head Start program operated by such agency will enroll following such program to promote continuity of services and effective transitions (Head Start Act, 2007)

The idea represented here supports the argument that social connection between schools plays a positive role in helping children’s school adjustment (Kraft -Sayre & Pianta, 2000). In practice, however, building social connection requires a lot of work from policy actors (Early et al., 2001). Without the support that is largely structured in school level, it seems hard for teachers to work toward coordination. It was found that Ms. Brown does not fully support the work of collaboration with 4K teachers due to her uncertainty of its effectiveness. She believes that every 4K teacher has a different way in teaching; therefore, the transition practice would not be able to address those variances. She also indicated a lack of support for collaboration at the school level. The school used to have a kindergarten invitation day, but the school no longer holds that event once 4K housed into the school building. Transition policy on the description of DPI website explains benefits of housing the district's’ Title I preschool programs in early childhood facilities for smooth transition. According to Ms. Brown, the school also assumes that smooth transition would naturally happen because 4K and kindergarten are now located in the same building, but she indicated that is not how it works. Ms. Robinson, the 4K teacher, pointed out that cross-level communication is happened when it is needed but not much. She said that the teachers would love to communicate with each other to talk about alignments between 4K and Kindergarten, but it is hard to have regular meetings. In the process of transition, Ms. Robinson perceived her role as an informant to the kindergarten teachers. Therefore, if the kindergarten teachers do not request any information about the children, there is a lack of reason for her to proactively support the transition practice.

On the other hand, Ms. Johnson actively supports teacher collaboration from 4K to 2nd grade as a principal. This cross-level communication was initially encouraged by the district. However, there should be a school-level support to make it happen. Ms. Johnson believes giving time to teachers to work together is a big part of the transition. From her perspective, it is important for teachers to understand what is covered in 4K and what will be covered in kindergarten – so that they can promote successful transition and alignment in practices. Although we did not interview the teachers attending the grade-level team meetings, having the weekly collaborative time itself made the school differentiate from others. The principal recognized that a lack of alignment across grades may cause discrepancies and also expected that having a greater cohesiveness as a school would eventually help the transition practice; therefore, she keeps supporting the co-planning time.

**Discussion**

Our study aims to examine how transition practice enacted by teachers and principals in relation to their understandings of aims of 4K and kindergarten. Based on literature review and data analysis, the issues about relevance of 4K and kindergarten aims, policy actors’ perceptions on school transition, and collaboration are found.

First of all, a lack of continuity and similarity is observed in the examination of goals of 4K and kindergarten. Despite the relevance of goal in the area of social-emotional development, there was a conflicting goal and view on balancing DAP and expectations imposed by performance based standards in kindergarten. This lack of relevance would prevent children from having learning experiences that they could easily apply their knowledge and skills learned in 4K to kindergarten. Having a relevance in goals across grades through collaboration with stakeholders, administrators, and teachers will be helpful for children’s smooth transition.

Further, regarding transition practice, policy actors value family’s active roles in supporting children’s transition and stress a two-way interaction between school and family while they still view themselves as informants. However**,** the role of the family is often unclear or limited in the policy and guidelines. The policy and guidelines view schools and teachers who are responsible for providing information and resources, whereas child’s family is perceived as the one who merely receives information and resources.

Lastly, all of the participants recognized that the transition and aligned practices require continued communication and collaboration. Unlike how transition guidelines are presented in the policy, we have noted that promoting successful transition appears to be unattainable without support from school-level. In terms of a lack of collaboration, the perceived reason by teachers is a structural issue -- support between schools -- which requires integrating the preschool programs and elementary school services to enhance smooth transition.

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