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TEACHER EDUCATION REFORM IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS OF STAKEHOLDER MEDIATION

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In the United States, 48 of the 50 states have adopted standards-based policies that attempt to reform teacher education and licensing from an input-based course and credit system to one based on outcomes and performance through their authority to approve preparation programs. This article draws from qualitative, collective case study research that examines implementation tensions between the new program approval policies and the program administrators, faculty, and students of teaching at three Wisconsin teacher-preparing institutions. The findings suggest that stakeholders' beliefs and sensemaking mediate the policy directives to the point that program completers continue to receive the same preparation despite reform efforts. The theoretical constructs to support this claim are presented and potentially shed light on stakeholder mediation in other education reform efforts.

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Over the past several decades, governments at all levels in the United States have addressed the need to improve student achievement by constructing teacher education as a policy problem. This construction assumes “policy makers can meet the challenges involved in providing a well-prepared teaching force by manipulating those broad aspects of teacher preparation . . . most likely to affect pupil achievement” (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005, p. 92). Most recently, national authorities mandated states to implement performance-based policies linking student content knowledge standards with teacher preparation accreditation, licensing, and career development. The new policies are designed to fundamentally alter what students learn, how teachers teach, and how teachers learn to teach (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1991; National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996). Congruent with this theory of action, 48 states, including Wisconsin, adopted standards-based policies that attempt to reform teacher education and licensing from an input system of courses and credits to one based on outcomes and performances through their authority to approve preparation programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

But as Zeichner (2005) explains, “Decisions about policy and practice are mediated by moral, ethical, and political considerations” (p. 739). Thus, stakeholder mediation of any reform effort can originate from a range of self-interests. Given the policies' intended outcomes and the potential for mediation, one has to ask, “How are teacher education stakeholders—administrators, faculty, and students of teaching—making sense of and responding to the new standards-based program approval policies?” This paper presents research-based findings from the state of Wisconsin in response to that question. The study examines implementation tensions between the new program approval policies' demands and various actors at three Wisconsin teacher-preparing institutions. Spotlighting the theoretical constructs that gird stakeholders' mediation of the directives calls into question the policies' potential to alter how teachers in the United States are prepared and efforts to improve student achievement levels.

I begin by situating the study within the national systemic reform effort to improve student achievement levels in the United States, then share the response in Wisconsin's teacher education program approval policies. Next I detail the theoretical orientation, methodology, and analytical



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design used to study the policies' impact on selected teacher education programs at each institution. A brief overview of the three institutions' programs is presented next. Then I describe administrator, faculty, and candidate responses to the new policy demands. My analysis of these collective rich points (Agar, 1996) renders the study's findings, which call into question the policies' intended outcome. The paper concludes with recommendations for teacher education stakeholders.

Policy Context of the Study

In the United States, historically, policy links among preparation programs, teacher knowledge, and pupil learning have been absent from legislated efforts to improve student achievement (Clark & McNergney, 1990; Earley & Schneider, 1996). Over the years, however, as public demands for quality teachers escalated, institutional, state, and national policymakers responded with efforts to reform how teachers are prepared (Bales, 2006; Earley & Schneider, 1996; Schneider, 1987). Today, nationally initiated systemic reform policies blanket the U.S. education system and attempt to align what and how students learn with what teachers know and are able to do. But the U.S. Constitution, by its silence, delegates responsibility for educating its citizenry to each state (Jordan, 1988). As a result, individual states are the reform's focal point:

All state policies guiding instruction would form "a consistent, supportive policy structure for school improvement. State curriculum frameworks would set out the best thinking in the field about knowledge, process, and skills students need to know in each core curriculum area. Instructional materials and high-quality assessments would be tied to these frameworks. *Preservice professional programs would shift from an emphasis on credit collection in subject areas to an emphasis on preparing teachers to teach the content expected of students* [italics added]. (Goertz, Floden, & O'Day, 1995, p. 2)

To create this alignment in the each state's teacher education policies, national authorities used amendments and funding streams attached to the 1994 Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) reauthorization, Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and the 1998 Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization. A restructured accountability system in the 2001 ESEA reauthorization raised the stakes for noncompliance. Today 48 of the 50 states have established performance-based teacher standards and mandated the desired changes in teacher knowledge through their

authority to approve preparation programs and license teachers.

As part of their compliance for ESEA and HEA funds, each state and its teacher-preparing institutions must publicly report the quality of their programs by delineating the certification and licensure pass rates of completers to the U.S. Department of Education. Teacher education programs are also held accountable for their performance through each state's program approval process; a process designed to assure the public that program completers can offer opportunities that support high levels of student achievement.

The state of Wisconsin responded to these national demands in July 2000 by adopting standards-based teacher education program approval and license policies similar to those in other states. The new rules and statutes written into Chapter PI 34 of the Wisconsin Administrative Code put forward 10 Wisconsin Standards for Teacher Development and Licensure, which mirror those recommended by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC).¹ Chapter PI 34 holds all preparation programs to the same set of teacher standards and program approval procedures, yet it also grants institutions the flexibility to develop programs that "reflect the unique missions, goals, and structures of their organizations" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2001, p. 2). To be in compliance, teacher-preparing institutions must provide candidates with the curricular pathway and learning opportunities needed to meet performances articulated in the Wisconsin Teacher Standards.

Success in this reform effort depends on a theory of action that explicitly ties the preparation and licensing of teachers to new standards of student learning. Within that theory, performance-based program approval policies are intended to improve teacher quality by altering the way candidates are prepared. Theoretically, then, programs moving through the new approval process should reflect that end.

Theoretical Orientation

Four theoretical lenses shaped the research design and analysis of the generated data: the theory of standards-based reforms; sensemaking; policy micropolitics; and a variety of teacher learning and development. The theory of standards-based reforms is foundational in this policy effort because it lays out three goals:

1. Standards set curricular goals and lay out instructional pathways.

¹ Wisconsin, like 23 other states, does not require external accreditation by an agency like the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) or Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC).

2. Standards “delimit the work of teacher [educators] and students to a manageable core of widely shared learning outcomes” (Sykes & Plastrik, 1993, p. 9).

3. Standards act as a catalyst to “change how teacher [educators] teach and children [candidates] learn by creating new visions of teaching and by developing assessments that parallel and call forth new instructional practices” (Sykes & Plastrik, 1993, p. 9).

The seven theoretical tenets of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) were used to tease apart participants’ nuanced actions and reactions to the policy demands. Each of the seven tenets contributes to our understanding of how people make sense of the demands. Table 1 provides an overview.

The theory of policy micropolitics focuses on the negotiations of implementation. According to Hoyle (1999), “a broad distinction can be made between ‘ideological’ conflicts, which arise from the basic social divisions of society, and ‘policy’ conflicts, which arise over matters of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, etc. . . .” (p. 214). Thus, it helped me explore how participants reconciled tensions among the policies’ demands, their personal beliefs about teaching and learning relationships, curriculum, and their work structures.

As themes emerged from the data, a collection of teacher learning and development theories were used to focus on how programs were preparing candidates differently. Teacher education programs may be a coherent structure or a conglomeration of fractured learning experiences, but they are not atheoretical. Stakeholders’ understandings of how students of teaching learn and develop a professional practice guide their curricular selections. Cumulatively, these selections, along with the program’s components and structures, amplify or suppress these beliefs.

Research Design

This project was qualitative, collective case study research. The secondary certification programs at Eagle Ridge Teachers College, City University, and Seaway College were selected as research sites for several reasons.² First, each represents one of three institutional types: a transformed state

normal school, a research university, and a private liberal arts college (Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik, 1990). Second, each institution offers a nationally respected, traditional, four- or five-year undergraduate certification program (Morse, Flanigan & Setoodeh, 2003). Finally, none of the institutions was seeking accreditation by an external agency, nor did they plan to do so in the foreseeable future. These common features, across three distinct institutions, support the use of collective case study research and may, in turn, lead to “better theorizing about a still larger collection of cases” (Stake, 2000, p. 437).

This project involved nine months in the field. Using the tools of document analysis, participant observation, and interview, data were generated with three specific groups of teacher education stakeholders—administrators, faculty, and students of teaching—because each group sits at the institutional, program, or candidate level of the program. As a result, each has a unique perspective of and interaction with the new policies. At the institutional level, document analysis included items related to the institution’s performance-based standards and assessment system. I was a participant-observer in program approval-related meetings

Table 1. The Seven Tenets of Sensemaking (Weick, 1995)

	Areas of Understanding
First Property	Explores the interchange between what someone is trying to make sense of and how that person constructs her or his identity.
Second Property	Is retrospective and wells from a person’s lived experiences, particularly those within the organization.
Third Property	Takes note of how a person enacts a sensible environment to rationalize and accommodate organizational change.
Fourth Property	Examines the organization’s social properties and the “network of intersubjectively shared meanings that are sustained through the development and use of a common language and everyday social interaction” (p. 39).
Fifth Property	Probes the ongoing nature of how people generate a sense of knowing by drawing on their past, integrating it with the present, and projecting it into similar future events.
Sixth Property	Attends to the clues people extract to support their sensemaking.
Seventh Property	Examines the “plausibility, coherence, and reasonableness” of those extracted clues (p. 61).

² As is standard in all research, any identifying markers have been removed. The names of the institutions and all participants are pseudonyms.

and interviewed the education dean or designee at each site. At the program level, data were generated through a review of program Web pages and documents from three core courses: teaching methods, multicultural education, and psychology of learning. I attended many programwide meetings as well as information sessions for students of teaching. I conducted one-on-one interviews with the program coordinators, department chairs, and education faculty at each of the three sites. Interview protocols included the following questions:

1. Why do you think the state opted for the implementation of standards-based performance assessment policies?
2. In what ways has the introduction of performance-based standards affected your work as a teacher educator?
3. How do you foresee this teacher education program changing over the next five years?

Interviews with students of teaching, along with my 8- to 10-week role as a participant-observer in each of the previously mentioned courses, allowed me to generate data from the candidates' perspective.

Analysis of the Data

Data generated from the three cases allowed me to analyze the policies' effects at two distinct levels: within each case and, more broadly, across the cases. The analytic process of abduction (Agar, 1996) helped me structure my coding and analysis of the data. I started by taking broad sweeps across each case and identified data passages that represented (a) attributes of the study's theoretical lenses, (b) characteristics of the institution, (c) program qualities, or (d) responses directly related to the new policies. I created coding nodes within these passages and entered each into the qualitative software, Nvivo. A review of these strips of coded data revealed constructs associated with the policies' implementation and bound to each program's institutional culture.

Several themes emerged: stakeholders' foundational beliefs about how candidates learn to teach shaped individual courses; steadfast program structures obstructed discussions about program change; and the absence of these discussions supported the institution's confidence in its ability to prepare teachers. Each of these themes was resituated in the data where I looked across the three cases for connections, similarities, and negative examples. This analytic process produced an evidentiary trail to the study's findings.

This study does not challenge the standards-based reform's proprietary position in each state's teacher education policies. Caution should be exercised when using these

data to speak about specific effects on other programs within the same institution or when addressing, more broadly, the impact of standards-based teacher education policies across the United States. Nevertheless, the findings are particularly salient given the current and very public focus on improving teacher quality in the United States, discussions about how teachers ought to be prepared, and which policy mechanisms facilitate that end.

The Three Cases

The case studies that follow explore tensions between the macro-level theory of action in standards-based teacher education policies and the ground-level negotiations that occur as individual actors make sense of and implement the new directives. These tensions, when viewed across the three institutions, highlight administrator, faculty, and candidate understandings of the new policies and the resulting effects on the institution's teacher education programs.

Teacher Preparation at Eagle Ridge Teachers College, City University, and Seaway College

Eagle Ridge Teachers College is a Wisconsin state university with a founding mission to educate students "for teaching in our public schools" (cited in Curti & Carstenson, 1948, p. 92). Approximately 35 full-time School of Education faculty prepare more than 800 teacher candidates in a variety of undergraduate and post-baccalaureate certification programs. Students complete 40 credits distributed across an academic major and minor, then apply to the College of Education. There, they earn 70–80 additional credits through a series of required education courses and field experiences. Learning to teach typically takes four years at Eagle Ridge.

Seaway College is a small, nationally recognized liberal arts institution. Like many liberal arts colleges, Seaway does not offer a major in education but prepares students who want to teach at the secondary level. Over 10 percent of each graduating class completes the college's teacher education program. Students complete a liberal arts "core" and discipline-related coursework in their selected major, then apply to the Education Department's certification program. Under the direction of two full-time faculty and three adjunct instructors, students complete a five-course education sequence and then student-teach for 18 weeks in a local school district. If tightly scheduled, third-year undergraduates can be certified to teach by the end of their four-year Seaway experience.

City University is one of Wisconsin's two doctoral-granting institutions. Its research mission shapes the School of Education's preparation of teachers.

Approximately 200 full-time faculty, academic staff, and graduate students across eight departments prepare more than 2,500 teacher candidates. Students apply to the School of Education after earning 54 credits in courses associated with their arts and sciences major. They are admitted in cohorts and move through a four-semester education course sequence that includes two semester-long practica and two equally long student-teaching experiences. Learning to teach is a five-year undertaking at City University.

Institutional Responses to the New Standards-Based Policies

When Wisconsin adopted the new teacher education program approval policies in July 2000, stakeholders at Eagle Ridge were already using the nationally supported INTASC Principles. According to the program dean,

We adopted the INTASC Principles in 1995 because they represented a national, performance-based model that aligned teacher standards with student learning standards. Here at Eagle Ridge we understood the importance of this alignment. (Sarah Armstrong, Eagle Ridge program dean)³

This level of professional commitment, however, was not shared by all administrators. An assistant dean stated:

The outcomes portion of PI 34 is so contrary to the existing teacher preparation culture. I mean, we're not throwing out credits or grades. The candidate's portfolio is key, but only if it accurately assesses the targeted performances and does so in an efficient fashion. (Tom, Eagle Ridge assistant dean)

Assessing candidate performance meant that specific course requirements in each certification area had to be aligned with Wisconsin's teacher standards. Course, standard, and performance task matrices were produced for each program and posted on the Eagle Ridge Web site. Table 2 illustrates one of these matrices. This type of display—an alignment of curricular goals with instructional pathways—exemplifies one predicted goal in the theory of standards-based reforms.

At Seaway College, the new policies prompted creation of the Seaway Teacher Standards. According to the program dean,

The Wisconsin Teacher Standards establish a minimum level of performance, and we expect our students to do far more when they leave our program. Our standards better reflect the teachers we prepare. (Margot, Seaway College program dean)

The program dean bolstered her confidence in the college's program with a critique of the policy:

It makes sense to hold schools of education accountable—make us provide evidence that our students' pupils learn—but no one has a clue whether that line of cause and effect can be drawn.

This level of confidence allowed her to engage in policy micropolitics even as she implemented the required standards.

The state's demand for a performance-based assessment of Seaway's teacher candidates also rendered a new form that broke the college's standards into 32 performances, each calibrated on a 1–5 Lichert scale. Its programmatic value, however, appeared to be minimal. As one faculty member explained,

That form was intentionally linked to our standards. It produces documental evidence that our students know and can do what we say they know and can do, and ultimately meet the Wisconsin Teacher Standards. But we don't buy into its reductionist approach. We were forced to create it because of PI 34. (Joan, Seaway College teacher educator)

Table 2. Secondary English Wisconsin Teacher Standards/Course Articulation Matrix

Secondary English Course/Standards Matrix										
Course/Standard	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
ENGL 123	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
ENGL 234	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
ENGL 345	•	•	•	•		•			•	•
ENGL 456	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	
ENGL 567	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
ENGL 678	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
E ED 780 or 850	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

³ As is standard in all research regarding human subjects, all participants' names are pseudonyms.

Despite an obvious contradiction to the dean's belief system, Seaway's institutional responses to the state's new policies were obvious.

Across the state, City University also crafted its own teacher standards. The three-year process engaged faculty across the School of Education in numerous dialogues about how teachers are prepared and, in turn, produced a common language around teaching and learning. The 12 City University Teacher Standards reflect that language. A School of Education associate dean observed:

Using a common language like standards provides a clearer expression of what was already present in the program. But no empirical evidence establishes any relationship among teacher standards, student learning, and success in PK–12 teaching. That, in combination with the standards' vague language, allows faculty to take a minimalist approach as to how they integrate a particular standard in their course and latitude in interpreting what performances students actually have to meet. (Brian, City University associate dean)

Vague language also helps faculty construct a sensible and plausible environment, both of which are characteristics of sensemaking. For example, the process of aligning the university's teacher standards with program courses was described this way:

We had to identify which of the 12 standards were met in our courses. Then we had to identify students' opportunities to learn a specific performance for each standard and name the corresponding assessment task. We sent around a form—kind of a grid that lined up where standards were met in each course. Then, we put all the grids in a big book and packed it off to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (Walter, City University teacher educator)

When I asked whether the process created any course or program changes, one faculty member responded confidently, "Having standards hasn't changed the content of my course. Without a doubt, they are embedded in what I have always taught." (Sally, City University teacher educator)

The new policies did, however, stimulate a new assessment system. At City University, candidates now provide evidence of their ability to teach by producing a standards-based electronic portfolio. The e-portfolio, which is housed on the Educational Career Services (ECS) server, provides "an instrument for performance-based assessment, a tool for career growth and job search, and a path for professional development." But program integration of this multipurpose assessment created a host of issues. At the core was

whether students should produce a career or developmental portfolio. Two associate deans discussed their concerns with me:

With a process driven by Career Services, we need to ask if a career portfolio can really demonstrate the messiness of learning to teach over time. (Ramona, City University associate dean)

On the other hand, if students produce a developmental portfolio, we have to assume it travels with the candidate throughout the program, from instructor to instructor and supervisor to supervisor. But really, who is going to be responsible for that "passing of the baton"? (Kay, City University associate dean)

As it did for their peers at Eagle Ridge and Seaway College, the policy demand for standards and portfolios created a flurry of institutional-level activity at City University. Despite several complicating issues, the three institutions' new focus on student learning, opportunities for a more coherent program, and development of new assessments are outcomes predicted by the theory of standards-based reform.

Faculty Responses to the New Standards-Based Policies

Program-level faculty displayed a range of responses to the new policy demands—from full acceptance to challenges and frustration. The root of this variation becomes visible when we examine their belief systems and sensemaking. At Eagle Ridge, one teacher educator tempered his reaction to the new requirements with the need for accountability:

It makes sense to ask, "What is good teaching?" I mean, I have a PhD related to testing, and I can safely say there isn't any good way to gather evidence about a person's performance in any situation. Still, creating a standards-based portfolio is better than using some number derived from a norm-referenced, privately owned test. (Robert, Eagle Ridge teacher educator)

Then he added,

But using standards in my course has complicated my work. There is an increasing emphasis that students must "do" x, y, and z [emphasis in original speech]. Now, when they complete x, y, and z, I tell them they have demonstrated their ability to perform the specified tasks.

In this situation, Robert made sense of the new demand for performance-based assessments by drawing on his identity as a psychometrician and filtering it through his beliefs about curriculum and pedagogy. This synthesis allowed

him to mediate the assessment requirement even as he implemented it in his course.

At City University, a faculty member's experience with previous teacher education reform efforts helped her build a sensibility around the new policy directives:

Under the old superintendent of public instruction, students had to meet 700 unrealistic, awkward, and arbitrary standards. Faculty and students were going crazy. In my opinion, the new law is an attempt to require things in more general terms, but the trade-off is more evidence of what students have learned. (Sally, City University teacher educator)

Other faculty, such as Jane at Eagle Ridge, openly questioned the standards' added value because they contradicted her beliefs about how teachers should be prepared. She reconciled the tension by holding tight to her beliefs and minimized the standards' role in her courses:

Are standards-based outcomes going to produce better teachers? No. We just assume using standards is better. Now I have to put those little things [standards] at the bottom of my syllabi. I do think standards help guide what we do in our courses, but how I use them and how someone outside education views them are very different. (Jane, Eagle Ridge teacher educator)

Jane's beliefs were very different from the Seaway College methods instructor, who welcomed students with, "These standards set out the performances we expect of teachers, which is how you will be evaluated" (Donna, Seaway College teacher educator). During her class, she explicitly tied the standards to students' coursework. But her sense-making was in sharp contrast with another Seaway teacher educator, who stated, "Standards attempt to normalize teacher education. The only effect they have had on our program is how we structure and finagle our paperwork." (Susan, Seaway College teacher educator)

Teacher educators with standards-based curriculum reform experiences offered more moderate responses to the new policy requirements. An Eagle Ridge science teacher educator shared this thought:

First we had the National Science Education Standards, and now we have the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards for grades 4, 8, and 12. When I look at the Wisconsin Teacher Standards, I understand how they fit into the larger picture. (Adam, Eagle Ridge teacher educator)

At the same time, he openly discussed the challenges in changing his classroom practice:

Judging students' performances with a "proficient," "not so proficient," and "really ugly" scaled rubric challenges me to think about each assignment and align it with the behaviors outlined by a particular standard. As difficult as that is, my students are better able to document their teaching for their portfolio.

The demand for standards-based portfolios created issues for faculty at all three institutions. At each site, faculty were charged with figuring out how to provide the learning opportunities candidates needed to document connections in their portfolio between the teacher standards and pupil learning artifacts.

At Eagle Ridge, faculty developed two 1-credit courses, which provide students with the time and technical skills needed to produce an electronic portfolio. But even within this setting, students did not understand the integrative role of standards and portfolios. My field notes report, ED 550 sessions focused on how to create tabs, links, and buttons. Little, if any, time was spent discussing the theoretical and pedagogical understandings in each standard or how artifact selection and candidate reflection might be used to represent one's teaching performance. (Eagle Ridge ED 550 field notes)

At Seaway College, students of teaching must now produce two portfolios: a degree-granting portfolio historically required by the college-at-large and a teaching portfolio in response to the new policies. When I asked about students' opportunities to learn about the new portfolio, one faculty member stated, "We hope people outside the department teach them what they need. Alternatively, they can learn it on their own. As a liberal arts institution, we assume our students are learning how to learn." (John, Seaway College teacher educator)

At City University, methods instructors set aside time so candidates could learn about their electronic portfolio. But, as one faculty member pointed out,

Developing a standards-based portfolio makes students explicitly reflect on particular aspects of their teaching, so I devote a few class sessions to that purpose. But it takes a lot of time to do the level of reflection required and learn the technical skills needed for an electronic portfolio. Frankly, there are more important things to teach. (Ted, City University teacher educator)

These notes about how candidates develop portfolio skills are important. The policy requires students to generate a standards-based portfolio, yet opportunities to learn both

the reflective and technical skills needed are not part of any program's curriculum. Furthermore, add-on courses or one or two meeting sessions within a course can exacerbate gaps in students' learning to teach development. One teacher educator summed it up this way:

By keeping the standards coursebound, we're saying when candidates complete a course, they have met Standard X. Isolating these experiences in individual courses rather than across the program doesn't reflect the developmental process of learning to teach. It also assumes teacher candidates develop at the same rate and time. (Carmella, City University teacher educator)

Candidate Level Responses to the New Standards-Based Policies

The lack of programmatic portfolio support frustrated students of teaching on each of the three campuses. At Eagle Ridge, candidates questioned—at times, outright challenged—the role standards and portfolios serve in their learning to teach. One student asserted,

Standards are just another set of hoops to jump through. It's frustrating that even with a master's degree and 20 years of program development experience I'm not qualified to teach until my portfolio is completed. (Clark, Eagle Ridge student of teaching)

Another concluded, "I hear portfolios aren't used in the hiring process anyway, so to me creating them is a joke." (Kyle, Eagle Ridge student of teaching)

On the Seaway College campus, students of teaching seemed unsure about what their education portfolio represented and how it could be used to improve their development practice. Three students shared the following:

Stacy: Standards are a good tool when we talk about being reflective teachers. I'll pick a few each week and ask myself, "How am I doing on these?"

Molly: I'll go through them twice a week to make sure I have them in my lessons.

Scott: I'm going to teach near Chicago, and I don't think portfolios are needed there. I would probably pay more attention if I was going to teach in Wisconsin.

Only Stacy's comments offered tenuous connections between her professional growth and the college's teacher standards; Molly seemed to confuse them with her pupils' content standards.

At City University, teacher candidates did not seem to understand why their courses had standards-based assess-

ments. When asked, one student (Tom) quipped, "Having standards requires you to jump through hoops and offers some kind of accountability for having jumped that high." This understanding for accountability, however, did not transfer to their school placement sites. There candidates were preparing pupils for the Wisconsin Core Knowledge Exams, exams designed to measure pupil progress in meeting the state's preK–12 Model Academic Standards. In effect, teacher candidates straddled two standards-based settings: a field placement site, where the purpose and stakes were explicitly stated, and their own campus, where standards appeared absent of explanation. The situation created confusion and questions. The following interview pinpoints a gap in three teacher candidates' understanding:

Amy: You mean teacher standards have something to do with science standards?

Mark: I don't know one standard from another.

Deme: I never really put those together. I'm not sure there is any relationship.

Teacher candidates on all three campuses seemed unable to make connections among their program's coursework, their classroom practice, and the larger teaching and learning policy environment. Their lack of understanding seemed to stem from an underdeveloped alignment between the teacher standards and program curricula and was aggravated by an absence of discussions about the theoretical foundations of a performance-based portfolio. This lack of candidate understanding spotlights a disjuncture in the policy's theory of action to improve student achievement levels by altering how teachers are prepared.

The Study's Findings

This study's many rich points suggest that stakeholders' beliefs and sensemaking gird their mediation of the policies' directives without disrupting the program's curricular, theoretical, and pedagogical elements. Three findings support this claim: (1) reform activity and attention diminish as the reform effort moves through the institutional, faculty, and candidate levels of the program; (2) reform activity is not indicative of program change; and (3) the absence of any explicit, sustained, or coherent teacher learning and development theory allows for eclectic program modifications based on policy demand. Each finding mediates changes projected by the theory of standards-based reforms to the point that programs are, for the most part, unchanged. This conclusion is significant since it implies that teacher candidate program completers continue to receive the same preparation despite the state's reform effort.

The first finding becomes obvious when we review the reform's effects at the institutional, faculty, and candidate levels of the programs. At the institutional level, the language of performance-based standards and portfolios is commonplace. Intricate matrices, now found on each institution's Web pages and other publicly available documents, detail candidates' opportunities to learn the performances associated with each standard. These documents illustrate the "network of intersubjectively shared meanings that are sustained through the development and use of a common language and everyday social interaction" (Weick, 1995, p. 39) and exemplify stakeholders' sensemaking.

At the program level, details of candidates' opportunities become muddled as teacher educators make sense of the demand for standards and performance-based assessments within existing curricular structures and individual courses. The following excerpt highlights this sensemaking:

The course syllabus says, "Here is your opportunity to learn and here is what we are asking you to do for your performance activity." But the issue is this: Whose responsibility is this? In a way, the program is taking responsibility but it also suggests that we are saying, "This is really another set of hoops you have to go through." (Carmella, City University teacher educator)

This situation creates a fuzzy picture for teacher candidates, who are ultimately responsible for understanding what the standards are, the expected performances each represents, the nature of pupils' learning artifacts, and how a portfolio embodies their abilities to teach. Few candidates could make these connections; most were unsure or confused.

These diminishing effects reveal the second finding: reform activity is not indicative of program change. Stakeholders across the various levels, at each of the three sites, talked openly about altering institutional and program documents to reflect the state's desired language. As one teacher educator noted,

Our program is already good. The only thing we needed to do was lift and highlight practices embedded in the program that met the new standards. (Adam, City University teacher educator)

We might have expected this type of faculty response at City University, because it reflects a research center's historical positioning of teacher education programs (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Schneider, 1987). But stakeholders at the other sites made similar comments. At Eagle Ridge, one teacher educator professed,

I prefer to look at the standards as guidelines and take what I already think is good practice and say, "Oh this fits in there like that." (Shelby, Eagle Ridge teacher educator)

Seaway's program dean offered this commentary:

The state's demand for standards can be reduced to a system of empty boxes on a grid. All we have to do is insert the appropriate program piece into the right box and complete the grid. (Margot, Seaway College program dean)

This level of policy micropolitics clearly suggests that stakeholders at each site mediate the policies' demands despite variation in each program's institutional culture.

At the same time, stakeholders' sensemaking also encouraged the enactment of sensible environments (Weick, 1995). Because of the new policy, some teacher educators were revisiting their courses, examining their instructional practice, and engaging in conversations with other program faculty. This attention to curricular goals, assessments, and a rethinking of instructional practice are expected outcomes of the standards-based reform effort.

However, any changes resulting from these conversations appear to create tensions when they are resituated within existing program structures—tensions between how a program structures candidates' opportunities to learn the performances identified with each standard and when students of teaching are developmentally capable of demonstrating those pedagogical behaviors. The lack of stakeholder conversations about how candidates develop a professional practice and how the program's curricular structure supports or inhibits that learning compounds these tensions. In the end, program structures remained steadfast, and efforts to implement any reform depth were minimized. A history of simply adding policy-mandated curricula suggests that current programs now sport an eclectic menagerie of responses to previous reform efforts and lack any thoughtful attention to teacher learning and development theories.

The third finding, which cut across the three institutions, was the absence of any explicit, sustained, or coherent teacher learning and development theory in the preparation programs. Historically, behaviorist and social learning theories have dominated our understanding of teacher learning and development (e.g., see Borrowman, 1965; Lucas, 1997). Theoretically, then, the implementation of a standards-based teacher education program should have brought forward conversations about how teacher candidates learn and develop a professional practice and which programmatic changes best support that learning (Sykes & Plastrik, 1993)—conversations that might have reflected current understandings about constructivist, situated cognition or social-cultural teacher learning theories (Grossman, 2001; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Richardson & Placier, 2001). Only once during this study did a stakeholder openly engage in this type of conversation with me.

Then it was because I asked, “In your opinion, how have performance-based teacher standards altered the programs’ components and structure”? A City University associate dean (Kay) offered the following:

When a standards-based program is thoughtfully implemented, students learn to think holistically about learning to teach in a way that just taking a course doesn’t. We want them to link what they learned in that psych course with what they learned last semester and what they will learn next semester. Unfortunately, many of the faculty think that synthesis will, somehow, magically happen.

Without these links, candidates viewed their portfolios as the following discussion among City University students of teaching indicates:

Mark: Standards? Humph! They’re on the syllabus but we don’t talk about what they mean or how what we’re learning connects to them.

Amy: Standards only affect me when I have to work on my portfolio.

Mandy: Yeah. When I need something for my portfolio, I look back at what I’ve done in my courses and then throw it in there.

Mick: Not me. If there’s a standard I haven’t fulfilled, I just change what I have on paper. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to change my teaching.

The findings in this study suggest stakeholders’ beliefs about how candidates learn to teach and develop a professional practice shaped their sensemaking about the reform and framed how they engaged in the micropolitics of implementation. Their sensemaking was reinforced by institutional structures that prohibited conversations about the intricate relationships between a program’s standards-based conceptual framework and the theoretical, curricular, and pedagogical foundations needed to uphold that vision. The absence of these challenging conversations, at each level of the institution, allowed program structures to remain steadfast and bolstered the institution’s confidence in its ability to prepare teachers. Cumulatively, these actions minimize any potential in this latest effort to improve levels of student achievement by changing how teachers are prepared.

An examination of these findings reveals the theoretical constructs that gird stakeholders’ sensemaking and mediation of policy. In this research, program administrators, teacher educators, and students of teaching claim varying degrees of expertise about how one learns to teach and how one develops a professional practice. Each stakehold-

er’s belief system draws from an array of teacher learning and development theories, which shape how they make sense of, interpret, and, ultimately mediated the policy’s demands. Stakeholders at the institutional, faculty, and candidate levels of each program engage in this process, which cumulatively erodes the reform’s potential. Figure 1 (page 11) illustrates the theoretical constructs for this claim.

An interview excerpt from a Seaway College teacher educator illustrates the constructs in this mediation of policy. It is important to point out, however, that evidence exists in each of the other cases as well. I asked how performance-based standards have influenced what and how she teaches. She responded as follows:

I haven’t touched them. I know what ought to be taught in my course; I don’t need to look at standards to do that. Standards limit my creativity. While I want to be in touch with them and make sure students are not shortchanged, I also don’t want to inhibit my own beliefs about what they ought to be learning and how to teach them what’s important when they teach. Nothing in my instruction has changed because of some state policy. I just won’t do it. (Susan, Seaway College teacher educator)

Conclusions and Implications for Teacher Education Stakeholders

This research sheds light on the implementation interplay and slippage in this particular policy’s theory of action. The findings suggest that stakeholder beliefs and sensemaking mediated the potential curricular, teaching, and instructional changes projected by the theory of standards-based reforms to the point that programs were, for the most part, unchanged. This implies that future generations of Wisconsin’s teacher candidates will inherit the same preparation as those who went before them. More important, the new vision of teaching and learning predicted by the theory of action in the standards-based reform effort will remain elusive.

The theory of action in any policy effort is predicated on assumptions that, if incorrect, can derail the reform’s intended outcome (Argyis & Schon, 1974; Fuhman, Clune, & Elmore, 1988; Majone 1989). The reform studied here—Wisconsin’s new standards-based program approval policies—was designed to improve student achievement levels by altering how teachers are prepared. This theory of action assumes teacher education stakeholders are not currently preparing candidates who adequately support student learning. Evidence of this assumption is found in a histor-

ical review of teacher education policymaking, which details how national efforts have changed from inducements to mandates and the stakes attached to noncompliance have increased (Bales, 2006; Earley, 2000; Royster & Chernay, 1981). Over time, these policy changes have “eroded the authority of teacher educators to determine the entry and exit requirements and course of study of teacher education” (Freiberg & Waxman, 1990, p. 622).

Depleting a group’s authority creates an obvious dilemma when a reform targets that same group. As Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) explain,

The use of policy as an implement of reform grows out of a fundamental distrust of professional judgment. But the dilemma that accompanies this use of policy is that the fate of reforms ultimately depends on those who are the object of distrust (p. 34).

Given the fact that Wisconsin’s institutions of higher education have a legacy of preparing teachers who help graduating seniors achieve some of the nation’s highest American College Test (ACT) scores, the new policies appear to be yet another effort to undermine teacher educators’ professional judgment. Without visible changes in teacher preparation and significantly better levels of learning for all students, teacher educators’ authority will continue to erode. Thus the challenge remains: How can teacher educators regain the authority to “ensure that the programs that prepare teachers provide them with the opportunity to learn those things that their students need for them to know?” (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 475).

Three recommendations would help reestablish teacher educators’ professional authority and position them as stewards of quality programs. Implemented together, these recommendations may change the accountability trajectory currently present in the policy spectacle that surrounds teacher preparation. First, stakeholders should engage in research-based, collegial conversations and refine programs so they con-

tain coherent theoretical, curricular, and instructional threads that support candidate learning and development. In this study, stakeholders’ beliefs about how students of teaching learn and develop a professional practice were reinforced by institutional structures that prohibited difficult conversations about the intricate relationships between and among learning theory, program vision, and curricular design. Trying to make sense of and implement any new policy directive within existing program structures limits a reform’s potential and the possibility of any resulting program upgrade. Yet, prioritizing these types of conversations among program faculty is difficult given their various faculty workloads and merit structures. Still, as the findings in this study suggest, without this dialogue teacher preparation reform remains superficial. We know, for example, “there are whole bodies of work about teacher learning in communities and the preparation of teachers for a diverse society that come from critical and multicultural perspectives intended to interrupt the norms of conventional teacher education” (Cochran-Smith, 2005, p. 15). How might these bodies of research challenge our beliefs and sensemaking and be used to improve the quality of program completers? How might research from other countries that have implemented standards-based policies inform teacher education program development in the United States?

Second, teacher educators need to critically examine the role of policy research in program reform efforts. We should not, for example, assume a causal relationship

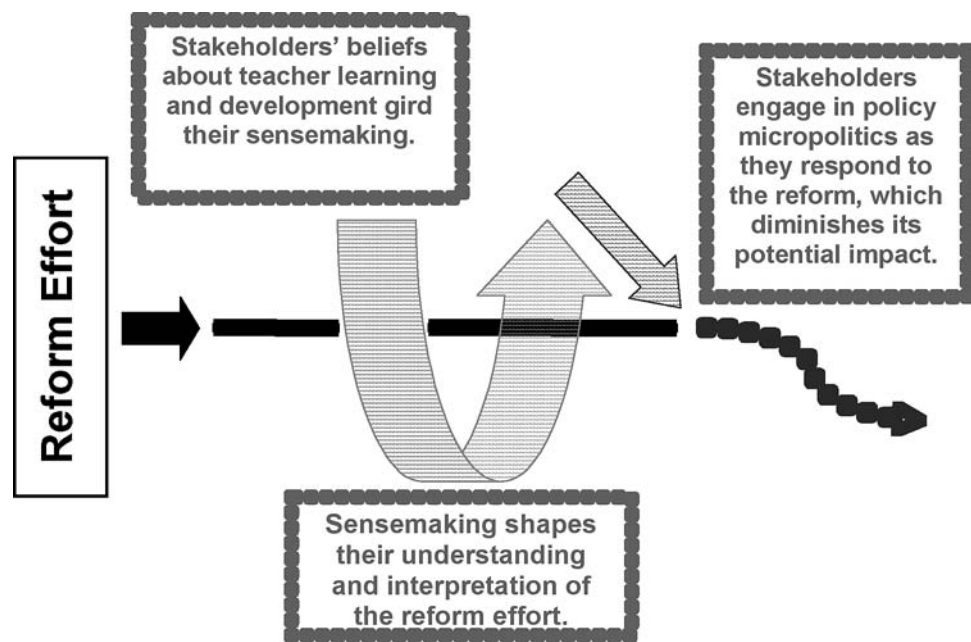


Figure 1. Theoretical Constructs of Stakeholders’ Mediation of Teacher Education Reforms

between teacher standards and pupil learning. Nor should we assume the mediation of teacher education policy is limited to the United States. A robust research agenda examining the complex interactions among policy directives, teacher education programs, and candidates' classroom performances should yield new understandings, particularly if we look beyond the western hemisphere. Weick's theory of sensemaking offers a useful tool for better understanding these complexities. Such an agenda brings forward policy research that establishes teacher educators' role and expertise in producing new knowledge.

Finally, teacher education stakeholders should explore better avenues for communicating preparation research to policymakers. How can current mechanisms for sharing professional knowledge be enhanced? Do other communication vehicles offer better venues? The challenge is clear: "Let's not let ourselves be ignored in policy debates about teaching and teacher education" (Sleeter, 2004, p. 6).

Taking up these recommendations would make teacher preparation program upgrades visible and force a shift in reform ownership (Colburn, 2003). This shift would bolster teacher educators' credibility and may mitigate policy conversations in the United States about improving teacher quality by circumventing preparation programs. Becoming stewards of program quality invites our participation in policy conversations about teaching and teacher education at all levels.

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