Nutrition policy in local discourse: A case study of food service work and policy

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Nutrition policy in local discourse:

A case study of food service work and policy

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Abstract

The rise of child obesity as a public health concern has instigated new nutrition policies in public schools. This study examines nutrition policy through policy text and the local discourse of two groups of food service employees at one elementary school. To expand on Weick’s sensemaking theory, this study engages work-life, sensemaking, and work identity in order to reveal what policy means to employees and their work. The study shows how policy shapes and is shaped by the organization through the relationship between work and policy. Furthermore, it compares two sets of local discourse, one from managerial employees and one from service employees, to find significant connections between work identity and sensemaking. The study employs qualitative research methods to collect data including participant observation at Columbine Elementary School and interviews with seven food service employees. The findings of this study provide insights into how nutrition policy functions through the work of employees and how policy discourses are interpreted by employees in local discourse. From these findings, the study identifies themes throughout local discourse to indicate what policy means to the employees. New understandings of the ways in which nutrition policy is at work in a public school setting could be useful in enlightening the policy creation and implementation process.
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The increase of childhood obesity in the United States has been well documented. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported in 2010 that over one third of children and adolescents were obese. The CDC also stated that for children born in 2000, one out of every three Caucasian and one out of every two African American and Hispanic children will develop type 2 Diabetes in their lifetime (Cooper, 2013). It has been shown that obese children are likely to become obese adults which affects health services, insurance and obese-related disease.

To combat child obesity, national and local bodies have created new legislation requiring public schools to adopt health and wellness initiatives. Nutrition policies which dictate school lunch menus have been identified as a means to change obesity trends. Studies have shown that what children are served in schools affects their overall health. In a collaborative study between the Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School and the CDC, researchers found that 80% of children and or parents at a New York school changed the way they cooked, ate or shopped because of the school’s food program. A study done by the Center for Weight and Health at University of California at Berkeley showed that children in the school district’s program ate three times as many vegetables when eating school lunch than those students who brought a packed lunch (Cooper, 2013).

With a growing understanding of the effects of childhood obesity and the potential of school meal programs to create positive change, it is not surprising that part of the Child Nutrition and WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Reauthorization Act of 2004 required schools to start focusing on nutrition. This policy applied to all schools that receive federal funds, but instead of establishing national or statewide nutrition standards, it required schools to create their own local wellness policies (Food Research and Action Council, n.d.).
These efforts were furthered in 2010 by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA). Through this legislation, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was given the power to reform school meal programs to improve nutrition policy, a task which had been historically left to Congress. These updates require school districts to meet new nutritional standards in addition to providing evidence of local wellness and nutrition policies in order to receive federal funding (“Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act”).

Based on this legislation, Boulder Valley School District’s (BVSD) Food Services Department developed a local wellness policy which addresses student nutrition and the school meal program. BVSD wellness policy is continually being updated in response to local desires as well as standards set by the USDA according to the HHFKA. The BVSD local wellness policy applies to many aspects of the Food Services Department including procurement, food production, and job skills and requirements. As a result, there have been many changes in individual roles and the organization of the department. Policy is the source for changes at Food Services. It also structures social actions within the organization. Policy provides a framework for food service employees to make sense of these changes. Following LeGreco (2012) I will treat policies as, “discursive guides to make sense of the material conditions of our organized lives.”(p. 45). Social actors in organizations rely on policy to make sense of their work. Due to the discursive nature of policy and to its role in organizational sense-making, policy discourse becomes interwoven with everyday, organizational discourse and can be expected to surface in organizational members’ everyday talk. This thesis focuses on how health policy discourse takes shape and enters into the everyday discourse of administrators and workers affiliated with Food Services in the Boulder Valley School District (BVSD). I will show that the relationship between
the letter of policy and everyday discourse is an intricate one that must be studied if we wish to understand how health policy affects food service operations and, in turn, public health.

The following section describes the site and builds a firm foundation in theory. It shows how literature and prior research shaped the approach to the project and finally introduces the research questions the study seeks to answer.

**The Communication Issue**

The wellness initiative of BVSD aims to ensure the wellness of its students and guide school personnel in the areas of nutrition and health. The policy reframes school nutrition and work in the school meal program. One group whose work is implicated by the new policy is the district Food Service employees, who work at a managerial level to oversee functions of school meal programs. Another group is the employees who work in school cafeterias at breakfast and lunch times serving food to students. This project focuses on the Food Service employees at an elementary school in BVSD, Columbine Elementary School, and a group of managerial employees.

I first entered Columbine Elementary as a volunteer nutrition educator for the Growe Foundation, a local nonprofit organization. Through the Growe Foundation I facilitated an after-school nutrition program for second and third graders which took place once a week in the cafeteria. In this program, I engaged students in hands on and garden-based activities to teach them about nutrition. Lessons covered topics such as food groups, local fruits and vegetables, sugar, and healthy snack foods. Through this experience, I became interested in how this after-school program fit in with other nutrition experiences children had at school. This interest led me to a volunteer opportunity with the BVSD School Food Project (SFP), a program developed to
support school meal program transitions ushered in by policy change. As a SFP volunteer, I assisted with nutrition activities in the cafeteria at lunch times twice a month.

After the local wellness initiative had been introduced in 2004, many things in the BVSD Food Services Department changed. Job positions were transformed and at times eliminated or created anew. This resulted in a restructuring of the organization of Food Services. (See Appendix 1, Figure 1 for an organizational chart of Food Services). This also instigated the SFP which the BVSD website describes as,

The School Food Project (SFP) is a fundraising partnership comprised of district employees, community members, and corporate sponsors. Their vision is that all children of Boulder Valley School District will have daily access to fresh, flavorful and nutritious food made with wholesome and, when possible, local ingredients, so that every child may thrive. The SFP is raising money to invest in employee training and kitchen equipment to help in the transition from processed food to scratch cooking (Boulder Valley School District, n.d.).

The SFP also organizes volunteers to promote changes in school meals to students at lunchtime. As a volunteer, I assisted with “tastings” at Columbine Elementary at which I sampled potential menu items to students in the cafeteria. I also assisted with “Rainbow Days”, an activity that engaged older students, fourth and fifth graders to count how many different colored vegetables they could eat each week in a competition between classes. I was instructed to “engage students in a conversation about the food” during my volunteer times. On some days, I was provided with bracelets that read, “I matter. Feed me well.” to present as a reward to kids for trying new vegetables during tastings. From 10:45am until 12:45 the cafeteria was bustling with
classes filing in and out. These were the circumstances under which I became familiar with the site. (See Appendix I, Figure 2 for a map of Columbine Elementary School’s cafeteria).

Through my volunteer experience I encountered Food Service employees who are responsible for serving meals to students each day. I became interested in how the efforts of BVSD to change Food Services were affecting the employees of this department. As I learned about the nutrition policies adopted by BVSD to accomplish these changes, I became interested specifically in the relationship between employees and nutrition policy and their everyday talk about policy.

**Columbine Elementary**

In 2012, 27 Boulder Valley School District elementary schools were awarded the HealthierUS Schools Award. Columbine Elementary was one of three to receive the Gold award in this category. The Qualifications are as follows:

To qualify for an award, a school must submit a formal application and meet basic criteria set forth by the FNS [Food and Nutrition Service]. The HUSSC [Healthier US School Challenge] criteria reflect the recommendations of the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) published recommendations (April 2007) for foods that should be served in schools, outside of the organized school lunch meals. HealthierUS Schools must also have a local school wellness policy, as mandated by Congress. Schools receiving a HUSSC award commit to meeting the criteria throughout their four year certification period (Briggs, 2012).

Columbine Elementary has one of the highest numbers of students in the district that qualify for the free or reduced meal program. Food Service District Managers (DM) reported that approximately 80% of kids received free or reduced meals. Elementaryschools.org, a website
that provides information on private and public elementary schools, lists Columbine Elementary at 88% for free and reduced meal students (ElementarySchools.org, n.d.). This statistic is significant because of effects on the development of the school meal program. Participation in school meal programs at schools such as Columbine is high because families with less income may have less choice when it comes to what kids will eat for lunch. Columbine provides lunch and breakfast at a free or reduced rate for students whose family qualifies, taking the burden off parents. DM’s describe the population of free and reduced students as a “captive audience”, which they contend makes it easier to reach goals set by nutrition policy.

The high level of free and reduced qualifying students is high at this site contrasts with the low level for BVSD at large. An interviewee of this project reported that only 20% of all BVSD students are free or reduced status. This status is depends on the income of students’ parents, reflecting the general socio-economic status of the region. This figure is consistent with other demographics, in a community in which the median per household income (2009) was $80,300. 66.9% of the population a hold bachelor’s degree or higher, and 30.5% hold a graduate or professional degree (City of Boulder Colorado, n.d., City-Data.com, n.d.). These higher than average income levels and education indicate that the Boulder area has access to knowledge and resources to improve health.

The combined circumstances at Columbine, including the Gold USHealthier School award frames the school as an organization that is effective at implementing changes according to policy. It also indicates that policy is prevalent at this site making it a valuable source for collecting data on nutrition policy.

**Discourse & Local Discourse**
The nutrition policy text created by governing bodies at the national, state, or district level is an example of what Communication theorists describe as is Big-D Discourse, or “a culturally standardized system that embodies power and knowledge relations of an organization” (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p.5). Contrastingly, local little-d discourses live in the “social interactions and the details of language employed by social actors”, or everyday talk (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p.4). It is valuable to study policy as discourse because of, (1) the capacity for policy as Discourse to shape local discourse i.e. everyday talk, and (2) and the capacity for local discourse to shape and transform Discourse. Discursive practices function as a production and reproduction of social systems (Giddens, 1984). From this approach, “little-d” discourse about the district nutrition policy is “both [the] medium and outcome of the social practices they recursively organize” (p.25). Thus, the policy Discourse at BVSD shapes how employees talk about what they do. In talking about improving the health of kids, employees rely on nutrition policy to understand how their job is related to this goal. At the same time, the way employees talk about these policies shapes how policy is valued in this organization.

LeGreco’s (2012) application of Weick’s model of sensemaking to the study of local nutrition policy construction was informative to this study. Her research examines the ways in which stakeholders talk about nutrition policy and how policy text emerges from a district wellness initiative committee in the Midwest. She claims that policy is not an abstract static set of rules; rather “policy is something that you do” (LeGreco & Canary, 2011). LeGreco’s research focuses on a committee constructing a school district wellness initiative. This project approaches policy from employee discourse rather than the process of policy creation, but the topic area and theoretical foundations of LeGreco’s study were useful in framing nutrition policy research at BVSD. Following the idea that social actors “do” policy, the following section describes how
social interactions in organizations are a part of “doing”. Theories of sensemaking and identity illustrate this process.

**Sensemaking & Identity**

The negotiation between Discourse and local discourse is ongoing, as members are constantly producing and reproducing meanings in their social interactions. Weick (2005) defines these acts as *sensemaking* or a “process of organizing” in which “people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively” (p.409). Accordingly, in order to make sense, policy is interpreted by social actors through communication practices that result in a local discourse of the policy. The local policy discourse of Food Service employees differs from policy text and varies between employees. This is a result of the process of sensemaking. Local policy discourse is shaped by how employees reflexively evaluate policy action, and how they relate their work to policy.

Policy as discourse organizes work and shape work identity. When new policies are created, they interrupt old systems of sensemaking. Weick (1995) states that “to understand sensemaking is also to understand how people cope with interruptions” (p. 5). Local discourse is shaped as social actors make sense of interruptions within an organization, such as new policy. When a change occurs in policy, existing organization and identities are reframed in the local discourse.

Sensemaking is consequential for identity construction. Weick (1995) points to the interconnectedness between sensemaking and identity when he says, “self, rather than the environment, may be the text in need of interpretation” (p. 23). In other words, when social actors make sense of an interruption, they also constitute their identity. Nutrition policy
discourse embodies the mission of Food Services, and employees are affected by any change in policy. Schools being a site of continual change in federal, state and local nutrition standards, employees are sensemaking and performing identity-work on a frequent basis.

Weick’s theory of sensemaking has been criticized by fellow scholars. Robichaud (1999) takes issue with Weick’s lack of attention to discourse and the social nature of sensemaking. Weinberg (1996) joins Robichaud in critiquing Weick’s theory when he says, “Weick envisions a process of organizing constituted by behaviors but devoid of people” (p.178). Based on these critiques, Weick’s theory doesn’t provide enough insight into the social processes that add up to sensemaking. His theory explains how organizations are affected by sensemaking, but doesn’t address the ways that individuals make sense. He neglects the process as embodied in social actors. This study seeks to expand on Weick’s sensemaking theory by examining the ways in which Food Service accomplish sensemaking.

Nutrition policy change at BVSD is an opportunity to examine the relationship between policy Discourse and local discourse, sensemaking and identity work, but it can also inform how work identities shape the process of sensemaking. By looking at two groups of employees, it becomes clear that sensemaking is shaped by work identity. Some employees, due to their work identity, will have access to organizational knowledge that others will not. Since sensemaking is a process of interpreting Discourse or organizational knowledge, the knowledge an employee accesses will affect how he or she makes sense. Therefore, the way an employee makes sense is part and partial to their work identity. The degree to which local discourse of different employees aligns will reflect work identity, and indicate orientation to policy within the social system of the organization.
Symbols

One key element of discourse that is used to identify significant terms, is symbols. Such terms emerge out of social interactions. They are symbolic because of their shared meanings between social actors. Symbolic terms are a useful tool in the process of sensemaking because they are co-constructed. They represent “truths” held by the social actors that use them. These “truths” are built on how organizational members understand the organization, which makes them a part of local discourse and sensemaking.

In his study of workplace identity formation, Carbaugh (1996) describes the importance of symbol: “The organization is viewed, from this perspective, as the expressive system of symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings that when used, constitutes a common sense of working self and work-life” (p. 63). Therefore discourse about policy is integrated into a system of symbols when social actors talk about policy at work in the context of their everyday interactions. Carbaugh (1996) calls attention to the language and meanings workers use and the organizing effect on their social contexts (p. 64). In his fieldwork with employees of a television production company he discovers the use of “over here” and “over there” in local discourse. In his analysis he shows the implications of these symbolic terms on organizing and classifying work, as well as work identity (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 80-81). Following the cultural approach of Hymes (1962) and Geertz (1976), Carbaugh says, “if one wants to understand the actions persons do, from their point of view, one should listen for the terms they use to discuss it” (p.64). The power of symbolic terms to shape social interactions and realities indicates the potential to uncover policy effects through symbols and local discourse.

I seek to extend LeGreco’s work on policy and sensemaking and bring to light how nutrition policy continues to be “done” after it is created. Moreover, I heed Carbaugh’s call to examine: “What local discursive resources are being used by workers? How do these order,
interpret, and motivate their work selves and lives?’ within the context of BVSD Food Services at Columbine Elementary (p. 64).

**Qualitative Research on Policy**

If policy studies aims to bring “clarity and understanding of the policy issues… and their solutions”, what is the best research method to employ (Rist, 1984, p. 154)? Rist says that although the co-presence of multiple methods in policy studies presents a “disarray among frameworks”, it also results in a variety of skills and strengths (p. 153). The skills and strengths of qualitative studies are relatively new to the “valuable” contributions category. In the past a quantitative approach based on the scientific model has been viewed as more valuable due to the notion that ‘what cannot be measured cannot be important’. Over the course of time this model fell short in three ways according to Rist (1984); (1) through its inability to address many pressing issues in education, health or employment training for example, (2) through its lack of respect for the fluidity and change in environments, and (3) through its inability to address the question of program processes instead of outcomes (p. 159). Employing qualitative methods of participant observation and interviews allows research to focus on the process of policy at work, rather than outcomes which tend to be central to quantitative studies.

It is important to address the purpose of communication research on policy to understand the value of a qualitative approach. Rist (1984) contends that the overarching goal of policy research is to influence policy decision making (p. 154). However, he argues that research would best serve an ‘enlightenment function’ in contrast to an “engineering function” for the process of policy making (p. 155). In order to enlighten policy decision making, it may be helpful to have information about how policy is functioning in organizations. This information would serve to reveal how policy operates in organizations, which determines the outcomes produced by an
organization. By applying qualitative methods we can understand how knowledge presented in policy is transformed by organizational members, and how it shapes the actions of these members, and ultimately the products of an organization. I acknowledge that the findings of this research or any related studies may not directly or immediately influence policy in BVSD. This is not my intent. My goal is to examine local discourses about policy, which may be useful in understanding how policy affects the workplace and worker identity and the relationship between work and policy.

**Research Questions**

Through examining local discourses about policy we can gain understanding about the nature of policy in the work place. This project will examine how nutrition policy impacts the work of school meal staff at Columbine Elementary. My study is designed to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ #1** How, if at all does nutrition policy as discourse shape the identity and work of school meal staff at Columbine Elementary?
  - **Sub Question #1** What discourses are immanent in policy?
  - **Sub Question #2** What discourses are immanent in the everyday talk of two groups of Food Service employees?
  - **Sub Question #3** How do the discourses in policy and of employees align?

**Methodology**

Over a period of seven months (September of 2012 to March of 2013), I conducted research at Columbine Elementary School in Boulder, CO. During this time I collected data in the form of interviews and participant observations. My participant observation took place over 15 weeks for an average of one hour per week. I was able to gain access to the site through two programs, the
Growe Foundation and the School Food Project, as discussed earlier in this paper. After each volunteer experience I recorded my observations in field notes. These experiences placed the research in conversation with the interworkings of Food Services. They also informed questions in the interview process that would follow. (See figure 2 for site map of cafeteria).

On January 7, 2013, I received International Review Board (IRB) clearance. In a letter I received from IRB, my project was assigned Protocol Number 12-0787, Exempt Category 2. At this time I began the interview stage of my research. I was able to recruit three Columbine Elementary Food Service employees as study participants after I encountered them as a SFP volunteer. Through the assistance of an informant to the project, the School Food Project volunteer coordinator, I was introduced to the BVSD Food Service management employees including the Director of Food Services. In the case of the Director I was introduced in person, and in the case of three District Managers (DMs), the introductions were made via email. The interview schedules used for interviews are found in Appendix II. In total the interviews amounted to 4.5 hours. Each interview was audio recorded and manually transcribed. Interviews with the DMs took place at the district office, in an office or conference room. Interviews with Columbine Elementary Food Service employees took place in the cafeteria before their work shifts. The difference in coordinating interviews with these two groups of participants was that the district managers and director had the ability to schedule interviews during their work day. However, my interviews with Columbine Elementary employees were restricted to their personal time before and after their work day. This was because the first group was salaried and the latter was hourly.

Thanks to the School Food Project coordinator I had easy access to Food Service employees who held managerial positions. With the coordinator’s assistance and the employees’
flexibility as salaried employees I was able to set up these interviews early in the project. In fact, I completed these four interviews before starting any interviews with Columbine Elementary employees. I believe the order of interviews had an effect on my project due to the nature of the questioning. In my interviews with the Director and DMs, I asked questions that directly implicated the work of Columbine Elementary employees. My perception of what Columbine employees did was influenced by the answers the Director and DMs provided and further prompted me to direct interviews with school meal staff in ways that I might not have done otherwise. For example, during my interview with the Director she indicated that Food Service employees who work in cafeterias did not have a lot of information about the nutrition policy, which caused me to adjust my Columbine employee interview questions to focus more on actions and behaviors related to policy rather than policy itself. Another instance was the emergence of the idea of the “cafeteria as another classroom” in managerial interviews, which prompted me to bring it up in the later interviews. It is important to reflect on the sequence and process of data collection and how this shapes the project and ultimately the data that gets collected.

Additionally, as a volunteer at the site I had interactions with the school meal staff before interviews took place. It wasn’t extensive, but they had seen me around the cafeteria as a SFP volunteer and I was a familiar face. In the case of the Director and DMs, except for the DM who oversaw the project site, I had never met them prior to this research.

Participants
Participants of this study all were employed by BVSD Food Services Department at the time of the study. Some participants had worked for Food Services over ten years and some less than two years. There were six female participants and one male participant. Each participant
was engaged in a one on one interview. The interviews ranged from about thirty minutes to almost two hours depending on the schedule of the participant as well as the flow of the interview. I developed and used two interview schedules for the two groups of employees, the Director and DMs, and the Columbine Food Service employees. Drawing from my interaction with the DM of my site, as well as information I gathered from interviews with DMs, Food Services went through a change in order to accomplish the goals set out in nutrition policy and the new local wellness initiative. As one DM put it, “the supervisor roles were changed to district manager roles and we went through a huge employee, not upheaval, reorganization would be a better word. Before we had hands off with the sites and kitchen managers running the show.” (Interview 2, February 13, 2013). Now DMs typically oversee a “zone” of kitchens in the district. In addition, each DM has a specialized area of duties outside of the common DM responsibilities. There are five DMs and four “zones”. One DM is responsible for procurement, but the other four DMs are in charge of a “zone” which includes managing about 40 to 50 employees. From one DM’s perspective DMs “…need to make sure things are running from every daily detail of do they have the food on site, how the food tastes … are temps correct, is food being handled properly, are temps being taken on the salad bars, is food being rotated out properly to making sure that we have what we need to serve for the day, enough of those items, a backup plan if we were to start running out of food.” They also stated, “We work with other school staff, the principles and lunch paras, making sure everything is copasetic [or completely satisfactory] in the school and the school is happy with everything going on with our program because we are part of the team of that school.” (Interview 4, February 22, 2013). And finally another DM adds, “From the best food quality we can possibly produce to the kids getting
through as efficiently quickly as possible… at the same time we are ambassadors of promoting healthy food choices…” (Interview 3, February 13, 2013).

I also interviewed the director of the Food Services Department who essentially oversees all that happens in this department, and in a self-description she told me that her job was to be, “in charge of all the food for all the schools”. When asked what her job looked like day-to-day she stated that, “I am mostly in meetings. I have 200 employees over 550 square miles. I oversee menus, food, ordering, procurement, human resources…” (Interview 1, February 4, 2013). I also gathered from descriptions by other participants that she was responsible for “pushing through” a lot of the changes around nutrition in the district. For example, one interviewee informed me that the district was in the process of introducing “harvest bars” – salad bars – into schools at a rate of about two per month before the new Director came on board. On the director’s first day she brought salad bars to every school in the district (Interview 2, February 13 2013).

The Kitchen Satellite Lead (KSL) and Food Service Assistants (FSA) at Columbine Elementary make up the other group of interviewees. These employees work for the school district, but their actual work takes place in the cafeteria of Columbine Elementary. The KSL described this group’s work in effect when she said, “So at Columbine we have a universal breakfast. We serve all the kids breakfast.”. She went on to talk about the various tasks involved with preparing, serving and cleaning up breakfast and lunch service. In describing her job specifically she said, “I input the breakfast number counts for who ate breakfast in the morning.” She also inputs numbers for lunch. This data is used for future orders and to make claims for reimbursable meals. Concluding her description she touches on aspects outside of lunch and breakfast by saying, “We need to put their student ID numbers in. We also have three snack
programs.” The FSAs interviewed added a variety of specific duties including, running the cashier stand, washing dishes, and setting up the salad bar.

These groups were divided due to their different job descriptions and their relationship to policy. The management group including the Director indicated some, although varying degrees, of involvement with local policy creation and implementation. KSL and FSA employees, in contrast with managerial employees, reported no direct involvement with policy and at times described themselves as unaware of such policies.

Participants were interviewed about their job and their experience with local district nutrition policies. The goal of the interview process was to gather information on how employees made sense of policy. By examining the ways they talked about policy (the type of talk I term local discourse), I hoped to discover the different ways the employees made sense of the relationship between policy and their work. The next chapter shares the local discourse used by participants to talk about their jobs in the context of local nutrition policy. It also reveals the findings of this study.

**Analysis**

First this section will address the communication process of transforming policy Discourse to local discourse. It also analyzes the data to show how employees make sense of policy and compares and contrast discourse between employees and the policy text. Through this analysis I hope to bring to light what policy means to the different employees and how it is functioning in the organization. This chapter lays out how I analyzed the data and then discusses the emergent themes in local discourses and their relationship to sensemaking and work identity.
Policy Text

The district-wide nutrition policy adopted by this organization is shaped by Federal and State regulations as well as more local pressures. The district Wellness Policy: Goal Statement for Nutrition guides the actions and practices of Food Services. An introduction to the policy states,

Part of the educational mission of the Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) includes enhancing the health and wellness of the entire community by teaching students to establish and maintain life-long healthy eating and physical activity habits. The mission shall be accomplished through nutrition education, hands-on experiential learning in cooking and gardening classes through community collaboration, the food served in schools, academic content in the classroom, and regular physical activity as part of the total learning environment (“Wellness Initiative”, 2012).

Later in the Wellness Policy text, the Goal Statement for Nutrition outlines the guidance for school personnel in 4 parts:

1. No student who attends BVSD will go hungry while in school
2. The nutritional value of the reimbursable meals and snacks by BVSD will meet and exceed USDA and State Dietary Guidelines and follow the Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) guidelines whenever possible, by providing nutritious, fresh, tasty, and when possible locally produced food that reflects BVSD’s cultural diversity.
3. A fresh, healthy nutritious lunch will be available to every student at every school so that students are prepared to learn to their fullest potential.
4. The district will also ensure that every student in USDA-approved after-school programs will have access to a healthy school snack (“Wellness Initiative”, 2012).
Thematic Analysis

After close reading data from field notes and interviews, I coded for salient themes in local discourse of nutrition policy. Anthropologist Morris Opler (1945) described the identification of themes as a key part of analyzing cultures. “In every culture,” he said, “are found a limited number of dynamic affirmations, called themes, which control behavior or stimulate activity. The activities, prohibitions of activities, or references which result from the acceptance of a theme are its expressions. . . . The expressions of a theme, of course, aid us in discovering it (p. 198-99). To discover what is at work in shaping the local policy discourse of employees I applied thematic analysis. By reading for “expressions” in the data, I was able to identify themes surrounding policy discourse, which inform how it was at work in this organizational culture. Themes or categories allow for analysis to focus in on phenomenon and discover what themes in the organization are indicated in expressions. Sorting data into categories enables research to compare and contrast data in a relational and coherent way.

Themes can be identified by researchers in a variety of ways. At the first stages of research, interview schedules already reflect the thematic inclinations of a researcher. (See Appendix II to review the interview schedules used in this study). From the outset, this study focused on local discourse about nutrition policy. This shaped my questions and the ways I engaged participants. I was interested in what policy meant to employees; therefore, themes around meanings, different orientations to policy and the effects of these differences became significant to this study.

To identify themes this project relied on repetition within and across interviews, or those “topics that occur and reoccur” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 83). In addition I also paid close attention to “indigenous categories” used to talk about policy. These include local terms that to an outsider either sound unfamiliar or are used in unfamiliar ways (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.89).
When these terms are used by social actors they become symbolic because they are invoking a meaning that is particular to that culture (i.e. symbolic terms, as discussed previously).

The following two sections will introduce the emergent themes which I identified in my analysis. It will also discuss the communication practices employees used in their expression of themes. First, I will discuss how employees express policy as a constraint through storytelling. Second, I will show how different symbolic terms employees invoke surrounding policy indicate their orientation and relationship with policy. (See Appendix I, Figure 3 for a web of communication practices and themes).

**Stories**

Stories are significant ways that organizations create cohesion. Stories get used across organizational members and serve to transmit organizational values by reflecting on past events. Stories also provide discrete units of talk through which employees frame their view of policy. These units make it easier to compare and analyze talk across interviews. In looking at stories that occur across employees we can examine themes around policy. In the following section I describe and analyze stories related by employees that involve local nutrition policies. Each story appeared in more than one interview or interaction in my research.

**Story #1: God and Chicken and the USDA**

“God and Chicken and the USDA” is a story about a procurement issue that arose due to a policy change instigated by regulations set by the USDA. This story gets at the heart of one conflict employees run into in trying to make sense of policy at work. The policy the district sets has to be in accordance with regulations set by the USDA in order for meals to qualify for
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federal reimbursement. This is an important aspect of work that is affected by policy because school meal programs depend on these reimbursements in order to remain operational. But what happens when a policy change doesn’t resonate with the local district wellness initiatives which aim to serve more “whole foods” and “cook from scratch”, as opposed to using processed foods? The story shows how the value of policy to employees can be produced in the stories that get told about policy. The repeated use of this story across interviewees shows its prominence in the social system. It also is a point of reference for employees, in understanding what makes a policy a positive or negative, or complicated. The following is part of one DM’s retelling of the story.

Interview 4, February 22, 2013

Have you heard the chicken and god and the USDA story? ... God didn’t talk to the USDA when he made chicken. You couldn’t get a bone in chicken that met their (USDA) specs because they didn’t grow that way. What its forcing districts to do is, go to huge processing facilities and say make me a chicken patty that meets the specs, so it just sends you right back into the processing world.

Another time when I heard this story, I was interviewing the District Manager who is also in charge of procurement for Food Services. She had been with the district over 10 years and held different positions including Kitchen Manager in the past. She starts by saying that, “there are just some rules that are just dumb!” The rule she is referring to is the USDA’s rule that school meal service can offer no more than 2 meat/meat alternatives a day. BVSD’s wellness initiative; however states that the district will strive to serve more “whole foods” and “cook from scratch”, which led the district to serve “bone in chicken”. She goes on to explain how this is in
conflict with the higher level policy. She says, “this is the direction we want our kids to go. We want them to be eating lean proteins … and not carbs so much… carbs are not good for you and the triglycerides in chicken nuggets which might be equivalent to the [USDA policy] because it barely has any chicken in it… it is mostly fillers and crap.” (Interview 2, February 13, 2013).

In one version, the policy is referred to as “just dumb”. This evaluation implies that when USDA regulations contradict local policy, local policy is seen as more valuable. It also shows the belief that policy is supposed to move the school meal program away from processed foods. In this story policy means incorporating more whole foods and this is demonstrated by the reaction to when that belief is violated in this story. The DM ties her work to the local policy when she says, “we want” kids to be eating in line with what the initiative states, “not fillers and crap”.

The tensions between the local actions and initiatives and higher level policy are visible in the “God and Chicken and the USDA” story, as well as how employees talk about the story. A DM commented on this issue when they said,

Interview 2, February 13, 2013

We are already there where they would like to see the rest of the country go…

The unintended consequences when the USDA has instilled these policies is they put everybody in a tail spin! We’ve been working at this non-stop for four years to make these changes for somebody to just say ok now you have to do this… When they did the new regulations that set back all of our work. We had to rework every menu.

Subject to regulations in higher levels of policy, employees express policy as a constraint. This instance shows the complex relationship between higher level policy and the desire of managerial employees to have control of their schools and their district. Through story telling
they create separation from themselves and national and state nutrition policy. Higher level policy is “dumb” because it undermines their local nutrition and wellness initiatives, which they feel more agency in, even though it is often undermined. In the district Wellness Initiative it states, “BVSD will meet and exceed USDA and State Dietary Guidelines and follow the Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) guidelines whenever possible.” (“Wellness Initiative”, 2012). This statement embodies a desire to improve the school meal program according to higher level policy, but also when possible going beyond those standards to reach what the local district views as ideal. This story demonstrates how at times, the higher level policy acts as a limitation or constraint to reaching what local policy aims to achieve and how employees identify with student nutrition improvement through local policy.

**Story #2: Pizza Crusts**

This story was relayed twice in the interview process, once by a DM and once by a FSA. The differences between these stories are an example of the different ways employees with different job responsibilities relate to policy change. The theme of policy as constraint in employee local discourse is reiterated through this story. It also introduces local policy discourse in relation to student participation in the school meal program.

This following description is an excerpt from an interview with a DM: She described the process of changing pizza crusts to align with new nutrition guidelines. This story explains how the change affected her as a DM and the job of service employees.

Interview 2, February 13, 2013

The rectangles preformed beautifully the kids love it. It was white flour… So this year we started off the year with a rectangle product that was proof and bake 51% [whole grain, per the new policy]. [Later in the story she adds that they had to
switch crusts a second time because the rectangle product was performing poorly. She explained, our pizza counts have been going down. It’s inconsistent.

Sometimes it’s good sometimes it’s not. Now we are going to a round pie and the way this is going to directly affect her [Columbine’s KSL] … instead of pulling 20 sheet pans in and out she is going to be pulling 50. Because participation, we live and die by participation. We had to get a better product the only one available in prebaked 51% is a round so it’s going to be hard but Columbine is probably going to be the hardest place so there is a policy change that is directly affecting the KSLs because the manufacturers have not kept up with the changes and (the food service director) will not stand for less than best quality.

This version indicates student likes and participation as a constraint, as well as the quality standards emphasized by the director. Participation is a consideration of the DMs, and is enough cause for the department to change pizza crust products to a better performing, but less convenient product. This story illustrates that student satisfaction with the meal program is a marker of a good program. Although student satisfaction affected procurement decisions in Food Services, it is not mentioned in any policy text. Through stories in local discourse, themes indicated unofficial constraints which emerged from what employees considered important.

This next excerpt is from an interview with an FSA. She described her experience with the pizza crust change and in doing so revealed her knowledge and orientation to policy’s roll in this change.

Interview 7, March 11, 2013
I've noticed the pizza changed.” [When asked if she had any information about why the pizza changed or if it was related to policy, she replied] No idea, no. I know the kids like the round one better. I don’t know if there were some problems or complaints with the other one. The only thing I can think of is the corner parts wouldn't have as much stuff on them. Maybe that’s why they changed it because now it’s all equal.

This version shows that the FSA did not have access to information about why the policy changed, but she was aware of the importance of student satisfaction. The expression of this theme in both groups of employees demonstrates importance across the organization. The difference between explanations reveals that although respondents acknowledge student satisfaction and participation in the school meal program as an important factor, they are sensemaking in different ways. The difference is employee access to knowledge, which affects how they make sense of the policy action. In the DM’s version she explicitly says that they had to change the pizza crust because kids didn’t like it. She talks about participation and how Food Services “lives and dies” by it. The FSA demonstrates her knowledge of participation when she indicates that how much the kids like a menu item could be a reason why it changed.

Participation can be seen as a theme that permeates the Food Service Department from the top down, and is translated at each level through local discourse. Student participation in the school meal program is a critical theme throughout local discourse, and one not specifically represented in policy Discourse text. Consider “participation” as a local discourse, which acts on the policy Discourse. First, because it affects actions within the school meal program, and second because it is used to make sense of policy at multiple levels of the organization. For DM’s participation affects menu planning and procurement. They make sense of policy through
participation due to their fiscal responsibility to manage a sound program. For FSA’s participation is important to sensemaking because it causes change in the items served at lunch time. FSA employees makes sense of policy and their work in different ways based on their translation of this theme.

**Symbolic terms**

A variety of symbolic terms were used by employees across interviews to talk about policy. They appeared in local discourse as proper nouns and pronouns. Interviewees used them to talk about policy without actually using the word “policy”. The uses of these symbolic terms reveal orientation to the policy. Such terms were often employed to refer to actions associated with policy exposing the second major theme, Responsibility. Symbolic terms were used to indicate who or what was responsible for policy changes. The symbolic terms used by employees were; “Pam”, “they” and “we”. (Pam is a pseudonym).

Symbolic term #1: Pam

A theme that became apparent in local discourse was indicating responsibility in relation to policy. Explanations appeared to be group specific. A prominent symbolic term used when referring to policy in the managerial group was actually a person, Pam, the Director of Food Services. The ways in which she was invoked framed her as the source of policy. She embodied a force beyond a single person, and was used as a reference point for almost all district policy changes in DM interviews. Crediting a single person for actions that occur as a result of policy distances employees from responsibility, but provides a common understanding of where policy action comes from.

One DM indicated Pam when they were describing the “Meal Wheel” which is a visual aid to help students make healthy selections in the cafeteria. He said, “[Pam] goes a step further
and has water and sweets in limited quantities and much greater details.” (Interview 3, February 13, 2013). At this point in the interview the DM compared the “Meal Wheel” to “MyPlate” a visual aid created by the USDA. Here the DM directly described a local policy that is demonstrated by the meal wheel, but attributes the responsibility for the policy to “Pam”. (See Appendix I, Figure 4 for images of both visual aids.)

One DM used “Pam” to define two periods of time. In this instance “Pam” is also used as an explanation for why a policy was able to be put into effect. “Prior to [Pam] I was in charge of putting harvest bars in schools… and then when Ann came in her first day… everyone who didn’t have a salad bar was getting a salad bar and we were just doing it and it was like what?! Are you kidding? O.K.! And we just did it.”. (Interview 2, February 13, 2013)

In this next example of how DMs used “Pam” in their local discourse, the DM said Pam caused the change, but he includes himself by using “us” and “we” later in the description of the action. “[Pam] has pushed for this for many years. And it has changed, so for us we looked at it as a victory.”(Interview 3, February 13, 2012). This example and the example before set the instigation of policy outside of DM’s work, but indicate that they take part in the actions that follow.

Framing policy as something that happens in the organization as a result of one person reflects the employees’ relationship with policy. They are involved with some aspects of policy implementation, but when change occurs it comes from an outside source: Pam. Through language use, “Pam” comes to represent more than just a person, but a force capable of things that alone the employees don’t believe could be accomplished. This reflects the leadership role Pam has in the organization. Furthermore, the distance between employees and policy shrouds
policy actions with an air of impossibility. This sense of wonder was also detectable in the way each employee got very excited when sharing the things Ann had made possible.

Symbolic term #2: “They”

Another term that became important to the responsibility theme that became apparent was the use of “they” by the KSL and FSA group. This group did not implicate themselves in relation to any policy actions or changes that happened. In Columbine employee local discourse “they” is indicative of their relationship with policy. It is employed to make sense of where action and decision comes from. “We don’t need to interact with kids too much. They like for us to be able to ask how [the students] are today”, one FSA stated when she was commenting on her capacity to talk to kids about food during lunch time (Interview 6, March 11, 2013). The same interviewee used the same vague “they” when she talked about relaying on conversation she had with her family about her work, “I told her what they’re doing now and how it works and stuff, and she was like wow.” Another interviewee affirmed that someone else was doing the action, “I think it’s good to keep encouraging the children to eat healthy. I think it’s good they are doing that.”

The difference in the ways service employees and managerial employees talk about what is responsible for policy change indicates the degree to which they are close to policy, and also reflects their work identity. The managerial employees know Pam, interact with her and rely on her for information on policy. In some instances this group of employees used the word “we” in talking about action related to policy. Such use of “we” in talking about policy indicates membership into a group responsible for changes. “We” lends a sense of empowerment and agency to workers that KSL and FSAs did not indicate. The use of “they” represents the
employees’ distant relationship with policy. Since policy is removed from their everyday work, talk about policy is framed as what other people do.

The use of different pronouns reflects organizational hierarchy indicated in Appendix I, Figure 1. The use of “Pam”, “they” and “we” all demonstrate how people within this organization look to others to understand policy changes and where it comes from. Invoking a person demonstrates a closer relationship to the policy source, whereas the third person “they” indicates a greater distance.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study attempted to discover how nutrition policy is shaped and being shaped in employees’ work. By collecting the local discourse in interviews of Food Service employees the study aimed to capture how, or what themes of sensemaking around nutrition policy were present in local discourse, and what these patterns indicate about what policy means to employees’ work and identity. Employee interviews did indeed reveal local discourse on policy and also showed how the local discourse is shaped by their experiences with the policies, how employees value policy, and their orientation to the policy.

Unpacking the ways in which policy is invoked by Food Service employees reveals the complex relationship between nutrition policy and work. Employee work-life is shaped by policy; however, the way employees talk about policy (i.e. local discourse) shapes the meaning and affect policy has in the workplace. If the way employees talk about policy reflects their relationship to policy, local discourse can be used to indicate how policy is at work in the organization, and how it affects an organization at different levels.

Returning to the research questions of this study, the talk and action of Food Service employees indicates that their work is shaped by nutrition policy. Specifically nutrition policy
dictates new and different responsibilities for employees, evident in the “reorganization” of the Food Services Department. Secondly, nutrition policy provides a new medium through which employees talk about work and produce work identity. As employees make sense of nutrition policy they make sense of their work in relation to policy. In part, Employees’ work is “doing” policy, or following the discursive guides that are policy. The ways in which they talk about policy indicate what they understand policy to mean and how it is valued in the organization. Local discourse also has implications on how work is valued and work identity.

The local discourse that emerges within these groups of employees was shaped by proximity to the source of policy. While the managerial groups’ local discourse included evaluation of policy and agency in parts of policy, the school meal service groups’ local discourse indicated a lack of responsibility and distant relationship with policy. Policy knowledge became an important factor which informed the ways employees made sense of policy. Access to policy knowledge is determined by organizational social systems and worker identity. Some work is seen as needing access to policy knowledge in order to perform work while others are not. Regardless of work identity, employees still make sense of policy and actions or changes in work related to policy. Absence or presence of policy knowledge shapes how sense is made. With access to less knowledge, service employees made sense of policy in different ways, which shaped their work-life and work identity. Without knowledge of policy service employees used “they” to characterize who or what was responsible for policy actions. Managerial employees employed a specific name “Pam” indicating a closer relationship to policy, but still creating distance from policy action. Both groups employed symbolic terms in discourse about policy actions framing policy as something that comes from without, and as something that doesn’t always align with local discourse on what policy should accomplish. The
dissonance between local nutrition policy and higher level policy could be used to make future policy more place-based.

As mentioned above service group’s local discourse lacked talk about policy specifically, but did invoke important elements of policy indirectly. This theme demonstrated how some parts of policy permeated throughout the organization while others did not. The presence of “participation” in the discourse of both groups indicates an important theme to the organization at all levels. The fact that managerial and service employees came to make sense of policy in relation to student participation in the school meal program makes participation a significant theme. Although participation isn’t mentioned in the local wellness policy, both groups invoked participation in sensmaking. Participation is a constraint on the organization and is experienced by both groups. The managerial sees participation as numbers on paper. And KSLs and FSAs see participation as faces in the lunch line. It is something they share across different work identities and use to structure local policy discourses. The way policy action occurs is stipulated by the effect it has on student participation in the school meal program. This theme frames their work as having the same purpose: have students participate in the school meal program despite difference in work identity. Though lacking in policy knowledge, Columbine employees can add value to their work through their relationship with participation. Their potential importance in participation was implicated when one FSA reported that DMs would like the employees serving in the cafeteria to ask kids in the lunch line how they are doing. If the school meal program “lives and dies” by participation, this places responsibility with the employees who interact with children each day. However, policy text and local discourse do not promote employees in the cafeteria to garner participation.
The differences between local discourses in the two groups of employees were related to their access to policy knowledge. However, the service group, with less access, didn’t seem disadvantaged in their day to day work. Their deficiency did, however, show in their attempts to make sense of changes and actions related to policy. Their work requires them to “do” policy, but not explicitly to understand it. In a work environment where policy is in constant flux perhaps the absence of policy knowledge serves a purpose. It provides an employee with an understanding of only what their work requires them to do and not a whole picture of what policy is trying to accomplish to improve nutrition at school. The lack of knowledge and, therefore, understanding of policy in everyday work produces an employee who is subject to change, and not part of change. Employees will follow instructions on how to serve a new item, but they won’t know that the item was introduced because it is 51% whole wheat instead of white flour. In contrast, employees responsible for making decisions and overseeing actions and processes to meet policy standards require a greater understanding of the policy. It is clear that the more policy knowledge work involves the more value the work has.

It would have been useful to triangulate my research with more participant observation, but unfortunately my experiences at the site involved so much participation that I wasn’t able to observe enough action to draw useful data from. However, my experience and presence at the site was extremely helpful with gaining access to participants and informing interview questions.

Future research could address the ways in which access to policy knowledge affects the work-life and work identity of a group of service employees. A correlation between employee access to policy knowledge and student participation in the school meal program would have implications on how policy knowledge operates in this system. These added perspectives would shed further light on how policy operates in the organization, but also show how access to policy
knowledge shapes sensemaking and work identity. In addition, research could examine participation and its ability to develop closer relationships between nutrition policy and Food Service employees in cafeterias.

The findings of this study could be used to inform policy bringing awareness and sensitivity to the workplaces policies operate in. Through this study we understand how policy shapes local discourse and how local discourse reveals employees relationship with policy. Armed with such findings, policy can be created with employees in mind. Employees are the frontline of student nutrition. Creating policy that supports and empowers their everyday work has great potential to bring positive change to student nutrition.

Policy is a form of communication, a Discourse, which embodies and shapes ideology. According to LeGreco (2012), “Policies serve important communicative roles in the organizing of everyday experiences” (p. 44). The more we can understand local discourse that develops in workplaces in the presence of nutrition policy, the more we can determine policies effect on work-life and work identity, and the potential of policy to shape an organization. The effects and effectiveness of nutrition policy have the capacity to ensure better nutrition to students in public school, which has been shown to positively impact the health of students and families (Cooper, 2013). To understand how such policy affects organization, gives insight into how nutrition policy is shaping work. A fuller picture on how policy is acting in the work place will allow for policy changes to be implemented in a strategic and sustainable way, impacting the health of generations to come.
References


Appendix I

Figure 1
Organizational Chart: Defines boundaries of case study - “casing” and visualizes cite hierarchy.
Figure 2
Site map of Cafeteria at Columbine Elementary.
Figure 4
Web of Communication Practices and Themes found in Analysis.
Figure 4

“MyPlate” and “Meal Wheel” Visual Aids.
Appendix II
Interview Schedules for Food Service Employees at Columbine Elementary

Service Staff:
How long have you worked for the Columbine Elementary School meal program?
How would you describe your job?
Who do you work with? And what do they do?
Is your job any different now than it had been before (when you started)?
If it’s different, why is that? What’s changed?
Can you think of district-wide nutrition policies that affect your work?
Has your job changed as a result of nutrition policies and initiatives?
Do the policies and initiatives affect/shape your job? Examples, stories?
Does the policy matter to you in your daily life or as a matter of principle? (Does it resonate?)
Did you know anything about nutrition policy and/or initiatives when you started? If so, what?
How did you learn about them?
If you could change nutrition policy, how would you or would you change it?
If you had one message for those who make the policy what would it be?
Do you think policy will be the same in 5-10-15 year from now?

Managerial Staff:
How long have your worked for the district?
How would you describe your job?
How is your job related to nutrition policies and initiatives in BVSD? Do you participate in the making of policy?
When did nutrition policies begin to be implemented? And what instigated it?

What is the purpose of the policy?

How did/does nutrition policy affect the daily operation of schools?

What can staff (all levels) do to effectively implement nutrition policy?

If you could change nutrition policy, how would you or would you change it?

If you had one message for those who make the policy what would it be?

Do you think policy will be the same in 5-10-15 year from now?