

# Mediating Instructional Reform: An Examination of the Relationship Between District Policy and Instructional Coaching

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*Districts make and implement policies aiming to improve structures, practices, and outcomes. Instructional coaching has become a popular lever to catalyze instructional improvement efforts. However, many questions remain about the alignment between coaching and reforms. This article draws on coupling theory to analyze the relationship between district policy and instructional coaches' work. Using qualitative case study data from a midsized urban district, I illuminate how coaching reflected three reforms: data use, teacher evaluation, and the Elementary English Language Arts program. I argue that cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative mechanisms shaped the linkages between each reform and coaches' work in schools. I reveal that structures and routines of coaching matter for coupling policy with practice. These findings have implications for policymakers, scholars, and educators concerned with leaders' roles and responsibilities in enacting instructional reform.*

Keywords: *policy implementation, coupling theory, districts, coaching, instructional reform*

REFORMERS intend for the rules, ideas, and resources of Common Core State Standards, Next Generation Science Standards, special education regulations, and school choice policy, among other policies, to move from the federal or state levels to the district and school levels (Barnes, 2002; Honig & Hatch, 2004). Midway between legislators and classrooms, districts make and implement reforms (Barnes, 2002; Honig, 2006; Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010b), including math curricula, student attendance tracking systems, and teacher evaluation (Coburn, 2004; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Honig, 2008; Woulfin, Donaldson, & Gonzeles, 2016). District policy environments have become increasingly crowded, placing complex and sometimes contentious demands on teachers and leaders (Diamond, 2007; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Jabbar, 2015; Malen & Cochran, 2008). It is challenging for leaders and teachers to learn about and respond to these reforms (Coburn, 2001, 2004; Cohen, 1990; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Spillane, 1999; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

To advance instructional reform efforts, districts now use coaching as an implementation lever (Deussen, Cooke, Robinson, & Autio, 2007; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Campbell and Malkus (2011) articulate that coaches “break the culture of teacher isolation whereby teachers work in private without observation or feedback and to collaborate with other professional development efforts in order to increase a school’s instructional capacity” (p. 431). By providing contextualized, ongoing professional learning opportunities and engaging in reform-oriented activities

(Bean, 2004; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Joyce & Showers, 1980), coaches can alter the nature of instruction and student outcomes (Campbell & Malkus, 2011; Matsumura, Garnier, & Spybrook, 2013). Moreover, coaches can motivate teachers to engage in bottom-up reform that may resist district policy (Kersten & Pardo, 2007; Woulfin, 2015). However, there is a dearth of research on the alignment of coaching with the foci of district instructional reforms.

Drawing on concepts from institutional theory, this paper uses qualitative case study data to characterize the relationship between district policy and instructional coaching. This article begins with a review of the relevant literature on instructional coaching and coupling theory. Then I explain how I apply concepts from institutional theory to investigate the relationship between district policy and coaches’ work. After presenting the study’s methods, I share findings on the district’s structures for coaching and policy environment. I argue that coaches mediated district policy, with facets of their work more tightly coupled to particular reforms. I depict the cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative mechanisms that facilitated the coupling of district policies with coaching. The article concludes with recommendations for policymakers, district leaders, and researchers to improve intermediaries’ role in instructional reform.

## Literature Review

Over the past 15 years, districts have evolved to focus on teaching and learning (Honig et al., 2010b). District leaders now devote significant attention toward increasing educator



capacity and promoting particular forms of instruction (Honig et al., 2010a, 2010b; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). As articulated by Spillane et al. (2002), district leaders can apply pressures and supports to guide teachers' practice "in the segmented and decentralized American education system" (p. 379). In many urban districts, leaders have instituted instructional coaching to raise teachers' capacity and improve outcomes (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018; Wei et al., 2009). Coaches are intermediaries who engage with district leaders, school administrators, teachers, and non-system actors (e.g., facilitators from intermediary organizations) on instructional issues (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Marsh, McCombs, & Martorell, 2009; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Woulfin, 2016). Coaches' positioning provides them with access to a multitude of ideas and information regarding state and district reforms (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). To ground this article on coaches' enactment of instructional policy, I synthesize the coaching literature and then present coupling theory.

### *Instructional Coaching*

Researchers, reformers, and administrators proclaim that coaching is a promising lever for instructional improvement (Campbell & Malkus, 2011; Gunter, Hall, & Mills, 2015; Knight, 2007; Kraft et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2009). A variety of coaching models exist—from new teacher mentoring and curriculum-focused coaching to leadership coaching (Aguilar, 2013; Deussen et al., 2007; Taylor, 2008). The majority of these models are "predicated on the notion that change efforts cannot be successful without building capacity for change" (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015, p. 180). Bridging the fields of psychology, adult learning, organizational development, and systems theory, coaching theory leans on the proposition that applied learning affects both individual and organizational change (Williams, 2012). It also accounts for the policies and organizational conditions shaping coaches' work. In this vein, scholars declare that organizational factors influence the coach-teacher relationship in ways that enable or impede teacher development (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Goldstein, 2004; Woulfin, 2015). For instance, while exploring the tension of coaching that supports teacher development versus holds teachers accountable, several scholars assert that coaching should remain nonevaluative (Goldstein, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011).

The scholarship on instructional coaching has answered questions about the effectiveness of coaching as well as coaches' educative and political roles in schools. In this way, it has surfaced findings on the outcomes of coaching as well as the features of coaching itself. First, the coaching literature reveals the effectiveness of particular coaching models and activities. Researchers have determined the impact of content-focused coaching on promoting teachers' adoption

of instructional practices and in increasing student achievement (Campbell & Malkus, 2011; Matsumura et al., 2013). Kraft et al. (2016) characterized the design and effectiveness of a teacher coaching model, and they found significantly positive differences for coached teachers' enactment of a set of effective teaching practices. Additionally, Teemant (2014) ascertained that coaching cycles positively impacted teachers' adoption of a new instructional model in an urban elementary school. In sum, there is mounting evidence that coaching models can contribute to improvements in various outcomes.

Second, the coaching literature delves into how coaching develops teachers' understanding of differing aspects of teaching (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Huguette, Marsh, & Farrell, 2014; Kersten & Pardo, 2007; Taylor, 2008). Scholars have revealed that coaches can develop teachers' understanding of instruction by co-designing units and lessons linked to curricula (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011; Bean, 2004; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Kersten & Pardo, 2007). For example, Kersten and Pardo (2007) portrayed coaches' role in developing teachers' understanding of a new reading program, including consultations on how to adapt instructional materials to meet the needs of students as well as the teacher. Researchers have also determined that coaches' data analysis activities are significantly associated with improvements in achievement and changes in classroom practice (Marsh et al., 2009). Marsh et al. (2009) discussed coaches' involvement in data-driven decision making and highlighted that "coaches appear to be situated in a critical nexus of data and action" (p. 900). In these ways, the literature clearly shows that coaching routines tied to curriculum, instruction, and data analysis provide opportunities for teacher learning.

Third, the coaching literature grapples with coaches' role in translating policy (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Kutash & Nico, 2010; Woulfin, 2015). There is evidence that accountability reforms define and elevate coaching. For instance, turnaround initiatives oftentimes provide funding and training for coaches, directing coaches to facilitate activities matching the principles of accountability-oriented reforms (Kutash & Nico, 2010). In addition, there is mounting evidence that coaches can catalyze implementation. For example, a coach can prioritize elements of a reform (e.g., specific ways of teaching phonics or monitoring student progress) and promote instructional practices in a manner altering teachers' classroom practice (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Huguette et al., 2014; Teemant, 2014). Although there is mounting evidence that coaches steer teachers' engagement with and responses to policy, the field lacks clarity on the conditions and processes tying coaches' work to district policy. That is, how does the instructional improvement infrastructure enable coaches' reform-oriented activities? And, how do coaches navigate and take up varied instructional reforms?

### Coupling Theory

Coupling theory provides lenses for analyzing the relationship between forces from the institutional environment and activities occurring in the technical core of organizations (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Spillane & Burch, 2006; Weick, 1976). Spillane, Parise, and Sherer (2011) declare that “coupling captures how organizations are made up of interdependent elements that are more or less responsive to, and more or less distinctive from, each other” (pp. 588–589). This theory enables scholars to understand when and under what conditions practices match, or are *coupled with*, policy messages (Coburn, 2004; Orton & Weick, 1990).

J. W. Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Weick (1976) advanced the idea that there can be tight and loose couplings between the broader environment’s ideas and rules and the activities occurring within an organization. On the one hand, H. D. Meyer and Rowan (2009) illuminated the relative tight coupling of the technical core of schooling during the standards and accountability era. It has become taken for granted that there are relatively tight couplings between state standardized test policy and schools—with educators in schools closely following most mandates to administer standardized tests in specified ways (Diamond, 2007). On the other hand, there appear to be looser couplings between state and district messages on reading comprehension and classroom practice—with teachers responding in superficial ways to aspects of the reading curriculum (Coburn, 2004; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012).

Many studies employ coupling theory to analyze education policy implementation (Coburn, 2004; Diamond, 2007; Gamoran & Dreeben, 1986; Hallett, 2010; Hopkins, 2016; H. D. Meyer & Rowan, 2009; Spillane et al., 2011; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014; Young, 2006). Scholars use coupling theory to interrogate persistent gaps between policy from the federal, state, and district levels and practices in schools (Coburn, 2004; Hopkins, 2016; Spillane & Burch, 2006). For example, Coburn (2004) determined that teachers’ instruction was more loosely coupled to certain aspects of a district reading reform and more tightly coupled to other facets of the reform. Relatedly, Diamond (2007) ascertained that the pedagogy of teachers’ instruction was more loosely coupled to the urban district’s accountability policy as compared to the content of their instruction.

*Mechanisms of coupling.* Scholars now emphasize the importance of treating coupling *not* as “a static organizational state (e.g., a school that is tight or loosely coupled, or even decoupled), but a process that organizations and their members engage in actively” (Hopkins, 2016, p. 576). This formulation of coupling encourages moving away from a dichotomous view on loose versus tight coupling, in which tight couplings are considered “good” for policy implementation, and toward analyzing how and why policies are

coupled with activities in particular settings. Therefore, it encourages attention to the dynamics of coupling, such as the mechanisms coupling a policy’s ideas to actors’ on-the-ground responses (Hopkins, 2016). Theorists articulate that regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive mechanisms enable and constrain coupling as a process (Hopkins, 2016; Scott, 2001). Associated with the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional pillars, the mechanisms are arrayed on “a continuum moving from the conscious to the unconscious, from the legally enforced to the taken for granted” (Scott, 2001, p. 51). That is, regulative mechanisms formally influence couplings while cultural-cognitive mechanisms tacitly shape couplings. The three mechanisms deploy regulative, normative, or cultural-cognitive elements to tighten—or loosen—couplings and in turn affect implementation (Hopkins, 2016).

Regulative mechanisms involve formal regulations that influence actors’ responses to a policy’s ideas (Hopkins, 2016; Scott, 2001). Specifically, regulative mechanisms rely on explicit rules, sanctions, or monitoring to promote coupling (Scott, 2001). For example, district leaders create guidelines, standardized procedures, and forms (e.g., observation rubric) for evaluating teachers that facilitate tightly coupled evaluation activities across different schools and educators. In contrast to regulative mechanisms of coupling, normative mechanisms place “pressure on policy actors to conform to official policies in ways that align with organizational norms or that afford them legitimacy in the eyes of authority figures” (Hopkins, 2016, p. 576). These pressures may include tacit norms for what is deemed appropriate and desirable in an organizational context (Scott, 2001). Normative mechanisms hinge on social obligation to tighten (or loosen) couplings (Scott, 2001). For instance, if a school has strong norms of collaboration, teachers and coaches may engage in discussions on how to teach math. These discussions would enable tighter couplings between a math reform and classroom practice.

Finally, by integrating ideas from policies into actors’ beliefs and daily work, cultural-cognitive mechanisms influence coupling (Hopkins, 2016; Scott, 2001). Cultural-cognitive mechanisms involve actors’ shared understandings or beliefs fostering policy-practice couplings (Scott, 2001). Interpretive and learning processes play a key role in these cultural-cognitive mechanisms. As such, actors’ sensemaking and framing of policy messages can facilitate (or block) couplings (Coburn, 2001; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Woulfin, 2015). For example, if a group of coaches engages with a new district math curriculum and makes sense of its approach to math instruction, they are more likely to conduct coaching cycles matching, or coupling with, the curriculum.

The literature on coupling and coaching points to the role of institutional factors in translating policy into practice. This article’s study adds to the literature by attending to the

cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative mechanisms influencing the coupling of district reforms with coaches' work. It pays particular attention to the cultural-cognitive mechanisms facilitating the coupling of district instructional reforms with coaches' work. This advances our understanding of the nexus of policy implementation, instructional leadership, and educator learning. Additionally, while most studies of coupling track the implementation of one policy or program, this research uses qualitative methods, including the card sorting technique, to attend to the variegated couplings of three district reforms. This type of analysis is beneficial for understanding the complexity of coaches' work in the crowded urban district policy environment. Finally, much of the coaching literature focuses on the impact of certain coaching models; however, this article wrestles with the district-level structures and norms enabling coaches' reform-oriented routines. This article answers the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* How does a district structure instructional coaching?

*Research Question 2:* What are the characteristics of dominant instructional reforms in a district's policy environment?

*Research Question 3:* How do cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative mechanisms influence the coupling of coaches' work with three district instructional reforms?

Using the institutional view, I illuminate the dynamics coupling instructional reforms with coaching.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Over the 2015–2016 school year, I conducted a qualitative case study of coaching in Beech District (Creswell, 1998).<sup>1</sup> Located in a postindustrial city in a Northeastern state, this urban emergent district (Milner, 2012) serves approximately 25,000 students in over 40 K–12 schools; about 90% of its students are eligible for free/reduced lunch, and over 40% are English Learners.<sup>2</sup> Beech was one of the state's lower performing districts, and it dealt with accountability mandates from the state department of education (CSDE, 2016). The state accountability system required that this district create and implement a plan to improve academics, including English Language Arts and math achievement as measured by standardized test scores, and tighten its approach to educator evaluation (CSDE, 2016).

I selected Beech because of its districtwide initiatives and its system of school-based instructional coaches (Woulfin, 2017). In 2015, the superintendent released a strategic plan, incorporating several reforms with the vision of excellent, equitable instruction for all students. The strategic plan concentrated resources on specific focal areas,

and I intentionally collected data during this policy window to capture coaches' enactment of the plan. I purposively sampled 10 instructional coaches from Beech's higher and lower performing elementary schools (Creswell, 1998). The sampling was guided by the notion that coaches from lower performing schools would be under greater pressure to follow accountability policy mandates from the state and district levels, while coaches from higher performing schools may experience looser connections to those mandates (Diamond, 2007; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007). Three schools in the sample were designated turnaround schools; they received additional resources to support the accelerated enactment of accountability reforms, including a standards-aligned math program and a consultant to assist with data-based decision making. Coaches had 6 to 18 years of experience in education, with three coaches holding greater than 12 years as a teacher or instructional leader. Most coaches (8/10 coaches) had previously served as teachers in their schools. Table 1 includes information on schools and demographic characteristics of sampled coaches.

### *Data Collection*

Using an interpretivist approach, I collected interview, observation, and document data on coaching and district policy. The interview data provided insights on coaches' beliefs and practices, while the observation and document data provided information on the district policy environment. In alignment with the case study method, I considered how qualitative data sources offered different perspectives to answer my research questions (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

First, I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with district administrators and coaches (Patton, 2002). In total, I conducted 26 interviews that were 45 to 60 minutes in length. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. I interviewed three district leaders about the history, structures, and practices of instructional coaching in Beech.

I interviewed 10 coaches about the nature of their work and district and school supports for instructional coaching. During the second round of interviews, I employed the card sorting technique to obtain information on coaches' prioritization of district reforms that were components of the superintendent's strategic plan (Cataldo, Johnson, Kellstedt, & Milbraith, 1970; Weller & Romney, 1988). The reforms listed on the cards were: (1) Data Use, (2) Elementary ELA Program, (3) teacher evaluation, (4) interventions for English Learners (EL), (5) restorative justice approach to student discipline, and (6) improving student attendance. I elected to collect data on the relationship between coaching and this set of reforms because during this school year, district leaders devoted resources and attention toward the superintendent's plan. For instance, principals were required to submit



TABLE 1  
*Sampled Coaches*

Coach	Experience level <sup>a</sup>	School	Performance level <sup>b</sup>
Carolyn	Moderately experienced	Elementary School A	High
Kate	Moderately experienced	Elementary School B	High
Leah	Veteran	Elementary School C	High
Ellie	Moderately experienced	Elementary School D	High
Dave	Moderately experienced	Elementary School E	High
Allyson	Moderately experienced	Elementary School G	Low
Ellen	Veteran	Elementary School H	Low
Maryetta	Moderately experienced	Elementary School I	Turnaround
Sandra	Veteran	Elementary School J	Turnaround
Mark	Moderately experienced	Elementary School K	Turnaround

<sup>a</sup>Experience levels refer to the coach’s professional experience as an educator: Moderately experienced = 5–11 years; veteran ≥ 12 years.

<sup>b</sup>Performance levels as indicated by results on district-mandated standardized test: High = top 25% of district schools; low = lower 40% of district schools; turnaround = lowest 10% of district schools, which partnered with a school reform organization

school improvement plans matching each branch of the superintendent’s plan. Additionally, districtwide professional development for teachers and coaches reflected branches of this plan. After presenting six index cards labeled with components of the superintendent’s strategic plan, (1) Data Use, (2) Elementary ELA Program, (3) teacher evaluation, (4) interventions for English Learners (EL), (5) restorative justice approach to student discipline, and (6) improving student attendance, I asked coaches to order them from highest to lowest priority in their schools. I instructed coaches to omit any cards with policies that did not apply in their context. Table 2 contains results from the card sorting activity. Then I asked coaches to explain why they ordered district policies in that way and to describe how, if at all, their work related to each reform. I followed up with questions on what coaches knew about the reform and how they learned about it.

Second, I observed nine, three-hour, district-sponsored coach professional development (PD) sessions that addressed how coaches should structure their work and enact the coaching cycle (Aguilar, 2013). These sessions provided learning opportunities on district priorities. Specifically, several sessions addressed district-mandated assessments and data analysis techniques related to Data Wise (Woulfin, 2017). While observing these sessions, I took ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) on the content and format of PD activities and coaches’ responses to various activities. Additionally, I collected documents distributed in PD sessions. The observational data yielded information on ideas advanced by district leaders plus coaches’ opportunities to engage with reforms.

Third, I obtained and analyzed over 40 documents with information on district instructional policies. These documents included: PowerPoint presentations from coach, principal, and teacher professional development sessions; handouts on instructional initiatives and program; and

websites. Providing data on district priorities, elements of instructional reforms, and expectations for coaching, the documents provided additional information on regulative and normative elements (Scott, 2001).

#### *Data Analysis*

After reviewing the full set of interview, observation, and document data, I carried out several phases of analysis. First, I wrote memos on each coach summarizing their beliefs, practices, priorities, and details on school context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, I conducted multiple rounds of deductive and inductive coding of the observation, interview, and document data in Dedoose, an online qualitative data analysis program (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I applied deductive codes, such as district policy, the nature of coaches’ work, and concepts from coupling theory. For example, I coded coach interviews for mentions of state and district education policies (e.g., standardized testing, teacher evaluation, and the district’s adopted math program). In addition, I engaged in inductive coding to follow themes surfacing from the data.

In the subsequent phase, I identified 74 reform-oriented coaching tasks from the coach interview data and reanalyzed those cases. I defined a reform-oriented coaching task as a coach’s reported activity, or task, associated with a specific reform (Stein & Lane, 1996). For example, I coded a coach mentioning carrying out a one-on-one consultation with a teacher about the district’s approach to phonics instruction as one reform-oriented coaching task. Each reform-oriented coaching task constitutes a work activity linked, or coupled with, a reform and therefore functions as the unit for studying policy-practice couplings.

I inputted the 74 reform-oriented coaching tasks into an Excel table and then coded their relationship to reforms, the format of activities, and institutional and organizational factors influencing activities. This round of coding enabled me

TABLE 2  
*Results of Coaches' Card Sorting of District Reforms*

Coach	Reform Priority 1	Reform Priority 2	Reform Priority 3	Reform Priority 4	Reform Priority 5	Reform Priority 6
Carolyn	Data use	Teacher evaluation				
Kate	Data use	EEP	Teacher evaluation	EL		
Leah	Data use	Teacher evaluation				
Ellie	Data use	EEP	EL			
Dave	Data use	Teacher evaluation	EEP	EL	Discipline	
Allyson	Data use	EEP	Teacher evaluation	EL	Discipline	
Ellen	Data use	EL	EEP			
Maryetta	Data use	EEP	EL	Discipline		
Sandra	Data use	EEP	Teacher evaluation	EL	Discipline	
Mark	Data use	Teacher evaluation	EEP	EL	Discipline	Attendance

*Note.* The superintendent's strategic plan including six components: Data Use, Elementary ELA Program (EEP), teacher evaluation, interventions for English Learners (EL), restorative justice approach to student discipline, and improving student attendance.

to determine patterns in coaching activities. Specifically, I calculated the percentage of reported activities reflecting each component of the strategic plan as a measure of the coupling of coaches' work with district policy priorities. To answer questions about connections between the district policy environment and coaching, I tabulated percentages for each coach and across the sampled coaches. After tabulating the proportion of cases in different categories, I returned to the qualitative data to analyze the context and conditions contributing to trends. This included coding for markers of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative mechanisms as delineated by Scott (2001). For example, if a coach mentioned a regulation influencing the nature of their reform-oriented work, I coded it as regulative; Appendix A includes additional details on codes associated with coupling theory. These analytic techniques enabled me to capture novel findings on the relationship between district reforms and coaches' work.

Third, I created matrices to analyze data on coaches' work, school contexts, and prominent reforms (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I summarized key information and quotes from multiple data sources in the matrices. For example, I created a matrix with a row for each coach and columns for evidence on their connections with district reforms. This helped me discern patterns across various reforms. I also wrote memos to construct meaning of the data and draft preliminary findings. Throughout iterative analyses of the interview, observation, and document data, I applied concepts from organizational sociology to answer my research questions.

### Findings

Using qualitative data and an institutional perspective, I characterize the couplings between the district policy environment and coaches' work. After presenting Beech's context and model for coaching, I describe salient aspects of

three prominent instructional reforms. Then I portray how coaches' activities reflected those reforms. I argue that regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive mechanisms influenced the couplings of district policy to coaching. In this way, I use the institutional view to explain coaches' role in implementing instructional reform.

#### *Instructional Coaching Context*

The district's conditions and model for coaching shaped coaches' work, including their engagement with instructional reforms. Since 2012, Beech administrators invested heavily in instructional coaching. Beech had over 50 coaches who were full-time school employees, without classroom teaching duties, and who reported to the principal. Coaches were part of the teachers' union and did *not* hold administrative authority. The district's 2015 instructional coaching framework set forth expectations that the coach

collaborates as a colleague with classroom teachers to drive student learning and develop teacher practice. The instructional coach uses various data sources to identify and facilitate individual and group professional learning. The instructional coach provides differentiated one-on-one support based on the goals of individual teachers. (p.1)

Thus, the coach's role centered on working with teachers—individually and in teams—to improve instruction and achievement. For example, coaches were responsible for supporting new teachers, leading data meetings, and assisting with assessment administration. A coach noted, “I’m doing all those different things in addition to or besides coaching. . . . Some of that is just logistical, because, if I’m not going to do the testing, who is?” This quote points to coaches' broad set of responsibilities and work tasks in Beech's schools.

To advance reform-oriented coaching, district leaders provided monthly professional development (PD) for coaches.

TABLE 3  
*Dominant Instructional Reforms*

Instructional reform	Aim	Actors responsible for change	Policy instruments
Data use	– Improve systems and practices for collecting and analyzing student data	– Administrators – Coaches – Teachers	– Monitoring by principals and district administrators – PD for coaches and teachers on data routines
Elementary ELA Program	– Standardize the content and pedagogy of ELA instruction in K–2 classrooms	– Teachers – Coaches	– Monitoring by district administrators – PD for coaches and teachers
Teacher evaluation	– Improve systems and practices for evaluating teachers to measure teacher quality and provide matching support	– Administrators – Teachers	– Monitoring of evaluation ratings by district administrators – High-stakes consequences for teachers and leaders – PD for coaches and teachers

Note. PD = professional development; ELA = English Language Arts.

Beech’s coach PD used a community of practice format in which coaches discussed readings and shared practices to develop their knowledge and skills. A district leader described that coach PD: “is a place for coaches to work together, learn together and get better at coaching so they’re ready to go, ready to lead in their building.” With the objective of building coaches’ capacity, coach PD addressed topics such as: creating a meeting agenda, collaborating with the school’s leadership team, forming a team vision, and the principles/practices of student-centered learning and the district’s core curricula. In PDs, district leaders shared facets of the superintendent’s strategic plan, explaining how and why coaches’ work should reflect district priorities. For example, during these PDs, the lead coach displayed a PowerPoint from the superintendent’s office summarizing the strategic plan. In addition, the director of assessment led two sessions on mandated assessments and the online data system. In this way, district leaders taught coaches about current priorities. A coach pronounced that coach PD “has been a huge support this year for all of us [coaches] to get together and have conversations and explore the work more.”

District leaders expected that instructional coaches, in tandem with principals and in light of school needs, would support the implementation of multiple improvement efforts. More specifically, district leaders relied on coaches to advance Beech’s pillar of “leading for learning” to accelerate schools’ progress. A district administrator in the department of curriculum and instruction shared that “We [district administrators] want them [coaches] to be the leaders, do the leadership work, and do this with teachers because they’re in the schools.” This points to the way in which district leaders counted on coaches to translate reforms in individual schools.

Although the district created a job description for coaches and organized coach PD, there remained variation in the conceptions and nature of coaching across schools (Deussen et al., 2007; Taylor, 2008). In some schools,

coaches functioned as quasi-administrators who assisted with logistics (e.g., bus duty) and discipline issues; however, in other schools, coaches’ work concentrated on in-classroom support of instructional improvement and new teacher mentoring. Moreover, in certain schools, principals and coaches collaborated in purposeful, strategic ways on instructional improvement efforts and in turn shaped the nature of coaches’ work (Campbell & Malkus, 2011; Woulfin & Jones, 2018). To more fully understand coaches’ role in implementation, it is necessary to analyze the district policy environment and mechanisms influencing the relationship between reforms from the environment and coaching occurring in schools.

#### *Dominant Reforms in the District Policy Environment*

In 2015–2016, Beech’s policy environment included an array of reforms (e.g., literacy and math curricula, interventions for ELs, evaluation system, discipline models, and student attendance). To bound this article, I ascertained dominant reforms from sampled coaches’ perspective. As shown in Table 3’s card sorting results, coaches’ highest reported priorities were: (1) data use, (2) Elementary English Language Arts program, and (3) teacher evaluation. Each reform relied on different levers (e.g., mandates, capacity building) (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987), targeted different portions of the instructional core (Hill & Celio, 1998), and placed different demands on administrators, coaches, and teachers. In the following section, I provide an overview of the three reforms.

First, the data use reform concentrated on data-driven decision making in schools. The superintendent prioritized data use in Summer 2015, with the strategic plan stating that district and school leaders as well as teachers will “broaden [their] use of data and teams” (Strategic Plan, 2015, p. 1). This reform emphasized that educators must engage in continuous inquiry processes at the district and school levels,

institute data teams in schools to regularly monitor data, and disaggregate data by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, EL and special education status. Matching the accountability-orientation, district leaders held conceptions that data teams would analyze data and discuss instruction to drive improvements in student achievement.

Second, the Elementary ELA Program (EEP) involved adopting a curriculum to improve kindergarten through second-grade literacy instruction. The majority of Beech's elementary schools adopted the curriculum. After multiple years of declining standardized test scores in English Language Arts, district leaders advanced this reform to "refocus on literacy and language . . . create the foundation for helping students read, write, listen, speak, think, and lead" (Strategic Plan, p. 3). EEP's Framework (2015) declared that: "All students will be engaged in rigorous literacy instruction through this student-centered, comprehensive and balanced literacy approach. All students will read rich, complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently" (p. 1). District leaders carried the theory of action that EEP would define a common approach to ELA and in turn shift teachers' pedagogy toward the rigorous, student-centered, workshop model.

Third, in accordance with the state's 2012 educator evaluation policy, Beech implemented a new teacher evaluation system that incorporated systematic observations of instruction with a rubric, feedback, and goal setting. As stated in the district's educator evaluation handbook (2014), district administrators framed evaluation as a tool for supporting and evaluating teachers:

To support our teachers, we need to clearly define excellent practice and results; give accurate, useful information about teachers' strengths and development areas; and provide opportunities for growth and recognition. The purpose of this evaluation model is to fairly and accurately evaluate teacher performance and to help each teacher strengthen his/her practice to improve student learning (p. 6).

District leaders regulated and monitored principals' activities associated with evaluation, including how often they observed teachers and how they scored teachers. However, district leaders did not set guidelines on coaches' involvement in evaluation.

### *Coupling of District Reforms and Coaching*

To understand the relationship between dominant district instructional policies and coaching, I characterize coaches' implementation activities. Coaches engaged in reform-oriented routines that ranged from facilitating professional development (e.g., teacher PD on EEP) to conducting operational tasks (e.g., printing forms related to evaluation). I describe the couplings of data use, evaluation, and EEP with coaches' work. For each of these reforms, I illuminate the cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative mechanisms

enabling or constraining the couplings of district policy with coaching. These findings explicate how and why coaching was more tightly coupled with data use and evaluation compared to EEP.

*Data use.* As represented in Figure 1, coaching was relatively tightly coupled to Beech's data use reform. All sampled coaches declared data use was their highest priority, and 57% (42/74 tasks) reported reform-oriented activities related to data use. More concretely, 9 of 10 coaches mentioned regularly leading grade-level team meetings in which they analyzed data and facilitated discussions on student progress and classroom practice. Ellie summarized her work matching the data use reform: "I've done some facilitation of data teams. I normally collect the data and then provide it to them, and then we have our own protocol of how you look at it." Serving as intermediaries, coaches actively coupled the data use reform while facilitating these types of meetings.

The cultural-cognitive mechanism of developing shared understandings facilitated the coupling of the data use reform with coaching. Specifically, coaches' routine of analyzing data and meeting with teachers enabled teachers and coaches to form shared understandings of and dispositions toward the data use reform. Furthermore, the activity of identifying patterns in achievement focused educators' attention on data, thereby encouraging teachers and coaches to develop common beliefs of the data use reform.

Cultural-cognitive mechanisms also shaped couplings in less formal settings. To build shared understandings of the data use reform, 7 of 10 coaches engaged in informal, one-on-one consultations with teachers around using data for instructional improvement. Ellen, a coach in a turnaround school, described how:

After the [data team] meetings, usually, they [teachers] will try to find me and say, "What was this about," or, "How am I supposed to do that?" They're processing, and so sometimes I'll just let them work it out, and other times I'll say, "Well, I don't think you need to be so worried. . . . We're really looking for A, B, C . . ." And then they're like, "Okay. I can handle that."

This reveals that coaches clarified elements of data use to foster individual learning regarding data use, motivate change, and couple policy with practice.

*Normative and regulative mechanisms shaped couplings of data use and coaching.* In addition to these cultural-cognitive mechanisms, normative and regulative mechanisms enabled the couplings of data use with coaching. Normative mechanisms, including expectations for how coaches and teachers *should* engage with data during collaboration time, played a role in tightening couplings of the district's data use reform with coaches' work. First, grade-level team meetings held norms enabling coach-teacher collaboration on data. Principals reserved time and space for teachers and



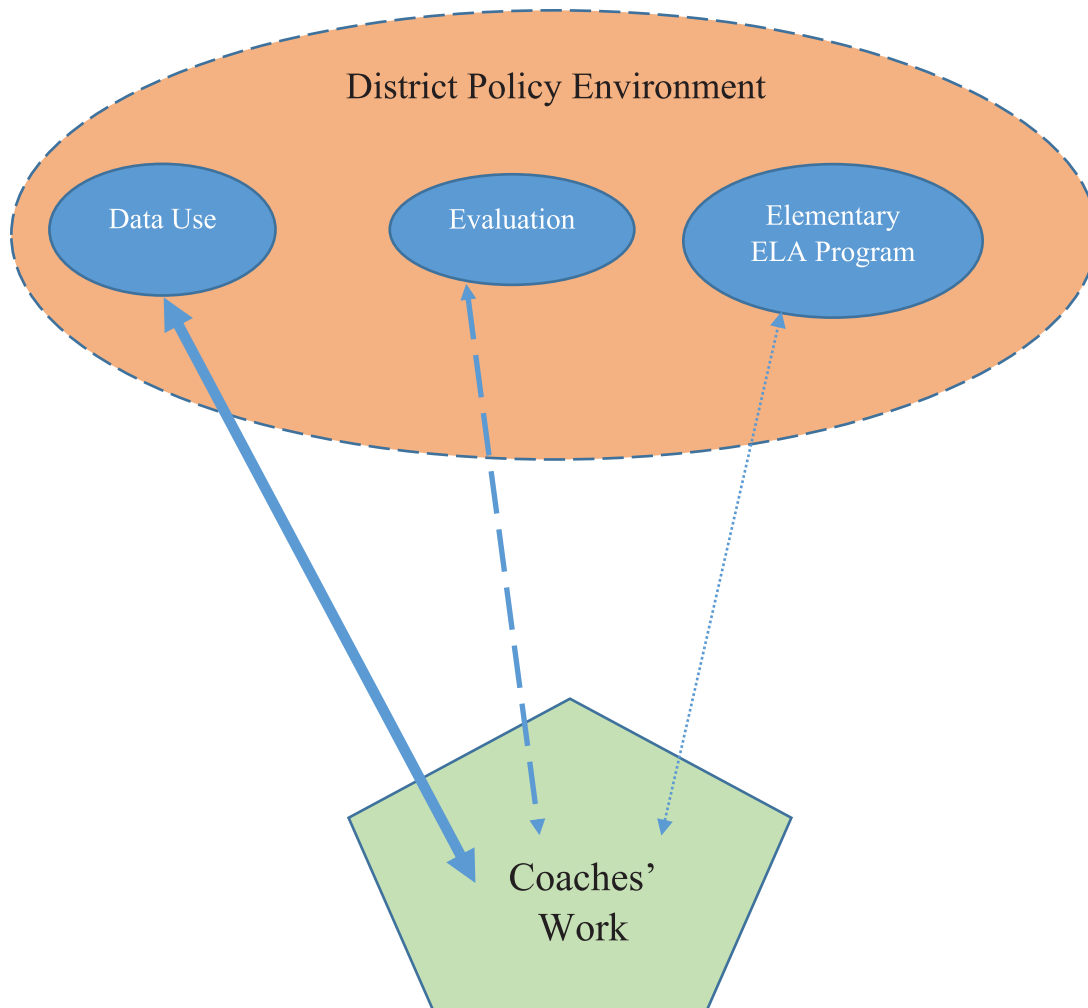


FIGURE 1. *Couplings between district instructional reforms and coaching.*

coaches to analyze and discuss a variety of data on achievement and instruction. As a result, coaches consistently enacted practices associated with the data use reform. In contrast, collaboration structures were less commonly used for enacting other priorities, such as EEP, evaluation, or the student discipline reform. Second, coaches and other instructional leaders engaged in PD, typically led by district leaders, on assessment systems and protocols for using data, including Data Wise.<sup>3</sup> The PD laid out expectations regarding how coaches should conduct data use routines and how they should enact this reform. This normative mechanism linked the data use reform with coaching.

Regulative mechanisms, including formal messaging on data use from central office and systems designed by principals, also steered the couplings between this reform and coaching. Data use was squarely at the center of the district's accountability system, and district leaders issued relatively intense messages on the data use reform (Coburn, 2004). During coach PD, district leaders referred to the district's

data dashboard and coaches' role in monitoring it. During the card-sorting data collection activity, coaches expressed that data use was ubiquitous. As stated by Dave: "Data right now is at the top for us. I think we're really using data . . . whether it's in data teams or whether it's [leadership] team to really . . . analyze exactly where we're falling low in terms of instruction." Similarly, a coach from School B shared her perspective that data

really always needs to be at the top because it is relevant to all of these [reforms] and is how we address these. In order to address student attendance, we need the data. In order to address reducing suspension, we need the data. In order to support ELL, we need the data. . . . So this [data] I feel like is always gonna be somewhere at the top and, for me, is what drives everything else.

Additionally, most principals gave coaches the authority to lead data meetings for teams of teachers, monitored data and forms from these meetings, and communicated with district leaders about their school's enactment of the data system

and protocol. Several coaches declared that they build their weekly schedule around data team meetings. In this way, principals set school-level regulations supporting coaches' enactment of data use. Regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive mechanisms occurring at multiple levels of the system shaped the relatively tight coupling of coaching with the data use reform.

*Teacher evaluation.* In contrast to the relatively tight couplings between data use and coaches' work, there were looser couplings between coaching and Beech's teacher evaluation reform. Seven of the 10 coaches identified evaluation as a top-three priority (see Table 2). Moreover, 24% of coaches' reported reform-oriented tasks were associated with evaluation. These activities included assisting teachers with goal setting, planning for formal observations, and professional development on strands of the rubric.

Cultural-cognitive mechanisms enabled the coupling of the principles and procedures of evaluation with coaching. In particular, coaches reported simplifying components of the evaluation system for teachers to create shared understandings and common beliefs of evaluation (Scott, 2001). The simplification oftentimes involved coaches supporting teachers with the goal-setting stage of evaluation. For example, Leah described her tasks related to teachers setting Student Learning Objectives (SLOs): "I'm all about the SLOs. I'm the SLO lady. I figure out their SLO, I figure them out where they are, in the middle of the school year . . . if they met each [goal]." This coach calculated each teacher's goals and tracked their progress to simplify technical steps of evaluation. Another coach shared that: "The most stressful time is the beginning of the year, when all the teachers have the pressure of getting their SLOs written. And nobody knows how to write their SLOs." In both of these reported cases, coaches worked with teachers to clarify goal-setting procedures, advancing educators' common understandings of this reform, and had the potential to encourage positive responses to the evaluation system.

Coaches also fostered shared understandings of the observation phase of evaluation. Four of 10 coaches reported that teachers requested support on areas of weakness identified on the rubric during formal observations. In these cases, coaches clarified aspects of the district's evaluation policy, thereby teaching teachers about the policy itself. A coach explained that teachers chose to consult with coaches after receiving a low rating in an evaluation cycle:

When they [teachers] came in, "This is an area where I had a 1 or a 2, and this is something I want to improve on." So that's another area where our paths have crossed when teachers are open to sharing that. So that's been helpful . . . for teachers to come to us and be able to tell us the areas where either [Assistant Principal] or [Principal] have seen need for growth.

In the aforementioned case, by fostering shared understandings of feedback on instruction and how the teacher should

change his or her practice, individualized consultations recoupled evaluation and coaching. In sum, coaches' support of teachers related to evaluation was a cultural-cognitive mechanism linking this reform to their activities.

*Normative and regulative mechanisms shaped couplings of evaluation and coaching.* In addition to cultural-cognitive mechanisms shaping the ties between evaluation and coaching, normative and regulative mechanisms shaped those couplings. In terms of normative mechanisms, professional norms helped define the appropriateness and desirability of coaches' involvement in various facets of evaluation reform. To bolster the enactment of the new evaluation system and set expectations for enacting evaluation, district leaders provided PD for school administrators, coaches, and teachers on the structures and activities of evaluation. These PD sessions advanced ideas on professional norms for how educators in differing roles should enact the evaluation system.

However, variable norms existed among Beech's schools for how coaching should tie to evaluation. In some schools it was legitimate, or viewed as appropriate and desirable, for coaches to work with teachers on aspects of evaluation. One coach reported that some teachers requested the coach's assistance in preparing for a formal evaluation: "Once in a blue moon, someone might come to me before their pre-observation, like, 'Hey, here's what I'm thinking. Do you have any feedback?'" In other schools, however, connections between coaching and evaluation were not deemed appropriate by teachers or even coaches. For instance, a coach in a turnaround school explained that their principal "wanted us [coaches] to do walkthroughs in the beginning of the year based on the Danielson Framework. We pushed back. 'They already say we are mini-administrators.' So, we didn't wanna go that route with evaluation." After rejecting the request to observe teachers with the evaluation form, the coach reported telling the principal: "I don't think we should be using the same form as admin." It is apparent that the professional norm that coaches should be divorced from evaluation was present in this school (Goldstein, 2004). These examples foreground how norms of both teaching and coaching shaped couplings of coaching with evaluation.

Regulative mechanisms played a role and influenced the dynamics coupling the evaluation reform to coaches' work. Formal regulations permitted coaches to facilitate goal setting with teachers. For instance, Beech's evaluation system stipulated that teachers "may collaborate in grade-level or subject-matter teams to support the objective setting process" (Educator Evaluation Handbook, 2014, p. 10). However, other regulations from the collective bargaining agreement blocked coaches from engaging in other aspects of evaluation. As such, formal guidelines, or regulative mechanisms, also played a role in steering the decoupling of coaching and the evaluation reform. This serves as a reminder that regulations can tighten—or loosen—the relationship between policy and coaching.

*Elementary ELA program.* Relative to the relationship between coaching and either evaluation or data use, EEP was loosely coupled with coaches' work. Zero coaches ranked EEP as a top priority, yet 8 of 10 coaches identified EEP as a second or third reform priority. The looser coupling of EEP and coaching is illustrated by Figure 1's dotted line. Nineteen percent of coaches' reported reform-oriented tasks were associated with EEP. Beech's coaches reported occasionally enacting routines, including facilitating professional learning sessions on EEP and conducting coaching cycles, associated with EEP.

Cultural-cognitive mechanisms, such as efforts to develop shared understandings of EEP as a curriculum, influenced the couplings of coaching and EEP. Coaches reported engaging in educative activities, including communicating messages about EEP, to construct common understandings of the new approach to literacy instruction. Four of 10 coaches reported transmitting ideas about EEP while facilitating professional development in their schools. These coaches led whole-staff and grade-level team professional development sessions on aspects of EEP. For instance, Leah led a session on differentiating literacy instruction in accordance with EEP. Another coach led sessions for grade-level teams on developing lesson plans related to the program's units. However, coaches generally led fewer educative activities reflecting EEP as compared to evaluation or data use.

Additionally, 3 of 10 coaches reported engaging in coaching cycles targeting EEP's instructional routines and methods. Specifically, they reported modeling, observing, and providing feedback aligned to EEP. These coaching cycles could further the development of shared understandings of how to enact EEP in classrooms. Although coaches reported fewer instances of EEP-aligned activities as compared to activities matching other reforms, coaches still played a role in increasing teachers' access to messages about the curricular reform and creating common understandings of this approach to literacy instruction. In this manner, cognitive mechanisms enabled couplings of coaching with EEP.

*Normative and regulative mechanisms influenced couplings of EEP and coaching.* Normative mechanisms shaped the linkages between EEP and coaches' work. It appears that several coaches strove to create positive norms for coaching cycles on EEP (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). A coach noted that

while everyone's gonna be going through the coaching cycle just as a way to grow as a school, we also let them know that they could still come to us if they had a question . . . I think just having that transparency and keeping the open door type of a situation really made it a positive thing for them. They saw it as more of a help—instead of an “I’m-watching” kind of thing.

In another school, a coach admitted that some teachers did not perceive that coaching on literacy instruction was desirable. She shared that

It's something we still struggle with because we do have some teachers who would benefit from, “No, you have to work with [the coach].” But what does that do culturally when some people are mandated and others are not, and how do we handle that?

This indicates gaps in trusting coach-teacher relationships, with tensions related to coaching possibly reducing the degree to which coaches carried out in-classroom coaching activities aligned with EEP.

Finally, regulative mechanisms contributed to the loose alignment of EEP and coaches' work. In particular, EEP's low degree of regulation and monitoring constrained couplings of coaches' work with this reform. The analysis of district policy documents and interview responses from district leaders and coaches revealed that EEP had limited formal rules. District and school leaders did not set guidelines on how schools should implement or even adopt EEP. As such, there were weaker accountability pressures attached to this district reform compared to the two other instructional reforms. A district administrator expressed, “We're still working on inviting and engaging all schools in [EEP]. . . . Our literacy team is really working with the movers who're adopting and who're building and revising [EEP].” Coaches reported receiving messages on aspects of EEP from district leaders, but most were normative in nature. Moreover, several elements of EEP were framed as optional. Thus, coaches learned about EEP's approach to literacy instruction but received little guidance as to encouraging its enactment in schools. A coach noted,

I've had a lot of ideas about wanting to use it [EEP]. But, again, I don't know if we're there, or if we don't wanna use it. It would be nice to get some writing ideas out of there, but it's just, again, a guide.

In this case, the weak regulations and expectations surrounding EEP shaped this coach's decoupling of the curricular reform with their routines.

## Discussion

This study of the relationship between district instructional reforms and coaching contributes to the field of education policy implementation. First, the article portrays the district policy environment that included data use, EEP, a new math program, teacher evaluation, student discipline reforms, plus other initiatives (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Malkus & Hatfield, 2016). The analyses of three instructional reforms from the superintendent's plan provide insights on the complexity of change in urban districts. Further, although scholars have mapped the terrain of national and state policies (Hodge, Salloum, & Benko, 2016; Porter, Polikoff, & Smithson, 2009), this article advances the field's understanding of district policy ecosystems. It also points to the need for scholarship on how district and school leaders

simultaneously catalyze multiple reforms and prepare coaches, principals, and teachers to enact the guidelines and protocols associated with current priorities.

Second, this study grapples with the couplings of district policy and coaching. Previous research revealed that coaching can promote the implementation of certain strands of instructional policy (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012), but this article breaks ground in explaining how coaches' work is bound to policy priorities. It helps us see that coaches engaged more frequently—and more deeply—with certain branches of the district's strategic plan, with consequences for teachers' implementation. It also uncovers how structures, regulations, and norms push coaches toward or away from particular reforms. That is, district regulations promoted coaches' involvement in data use, yet union stipulations divorced coaching from evaluation. Additionally, this article shows that reforms were not solely decoupled versus coupled to coaches' work. Instead, as illustrated in Figure 1, coaches formed variegated couplings with district policies (Coburn, 2004; Orton & Weick, 1990).

Extending the coupling literature, I describe how district reforms were loosely/tightly coupled, decoupled, and recoupled to coaches' work (Hallett, 2010). First, the ELA reform was loosely coupled to coaches' work in comparison to data use or evaluation (see Figure 1). That is, reported coaching activities less commonly reflected EEP's principles and practices. Second, there were diverse couplings of evaluation and coaching—with coaches addressing certain elements of evaluation (e.g., goal setting) while decoupling other elements of evaluation (e.g., teacher ratings) from their work with teachers. It appears that coaches engaged in certain activities related to evaluation while also constructing boundaries between the supportive and supervisory roles. Finally, there were tighter couplings between the data use reform and coaching. Rules, monitoring, and protocols shaped the coupling of coaches' work with data use. This signals that district leaders co-opted coaches' developmental role so that coaches would fulfill administrative duties associated with data use. Furthermore, professional norms increased the taken-for-grantedness of coaches implementing the data use reform.

After presenting the degree of coupling between three district reforms and coaches' work, the article depicts cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative mechanisms shaping those couplings. In so doing, it applies and extends Hopkins's (2016) institutional perspective on implementation. In particular, I draw out how coaches' activities to form shared understandings and common beliefs on reforms functioned as a cultural-cognitive mechanism to couple policy with practice. Thus, coaches' communication and collaboration with teachers regarding elements of data use, evaluation, and EEP linked the district policy environment with coaches' routines in schools. I also ascertained that structures and regulations facilitated coaches' enactment of data

use, while professional norms colored their enactment of evaluation.

This article augments the scholarship on coupling in the field of education (e.g., Coburn, 2004; Diamond, 2007; Hopkins, 2016) by concentrating on the practices of coaches, rather than teachers, in implementation. Specifically, this article homes in on the work activities of coaches as instructional leaders related to specific reforms and encourages additional research on the couplings between different types of leaders and policy. At the same time, there are methodological and conceptual drawbacks to using coupling theory in implementation research. First, there are challenges in measuring the strength of couplings. For this reason, this study's findings are not absolute on couplings; instead, they are relative characterizations of reform-coaching couplings. Second, coupling theory devotes less attention to issues of authority, power, or the nature of actors' profession and work. For this reason, future scholarship should use political lenses (Malen, 1994) to expose educational leaders' formal and informal power to advance instructional reform. Future scholarship should also use the concept of organizational routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003) to concentrate on actors' repeated activities reflecting instructional policies.

Finally, this article extends the coaching literature by illuminating how coaches' activities tie with district policy priorities. First, I contribute by explaining how district structures, regulations, and professional norms color coaches' reform-oriented work. Thus, when district leaders design regulations or supportive professional norms associated with an instructional reform, this contributes to coaches carrying out activities reflecting it. However, further research is needed on how coaches, in collaboration with district and school leaders, make decisions about prioritizing certain reforms in their work. Second, I advance the field's understanding of *where* coaches bridge policy and practice by showing that coaches' individualized consultations and facilitation of team meetings afforded opportunities to raise teachers' understanding of specific reforms. Further, coaches' reform-oriented activities unfolded in multiple settings, ranging from staff PD and formal coaching cycles to informal conversations in the hallway and work room (Spillane, Shirrell, & Sweet, 2017).

### *Limitations*

This study surfaced findings on the alignment of coaching with district instructional reforms but has several limitations. First, qualitative data were collected in a single district over a 10-month period. The in-depth data collection captured policies in one midsized urban district, yet instructional reforms and coaching systems vary considerably across districts. Thus, while findings apply to coupling theory and concepts in the implementation literature, they are



not generalizable to all contexts. Second, documents were the primary data source on the district policy environment. Future research should incorporate additional interviews of district leaders on their decision making related to various reforms. Third, as a step to interrogate the alignment of coaches' work with district reforms, this study relied on interview data on coaches' belief toward reforms as well as their self-reported practices. Future research should use observation data on coaches' activities, including their interactions with teachers, principals, and district leaders related to reforms. Fourth, I labeled cards with policies from the superintendent's plan as opposed to taking a more emic approach that could reveal coaches' enactment of a broader set of reforms.

**Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research**

These findings on the relationship between district reforms and coaching have implications for policy, practice, and future research. First, particularly within urban districts, the accretion of reforms with competing demands presents obstacles for educator learning and organizational change (Cuban, 1990; Honig & Hatch, 2004). The busyness—and messiness—of the district policy environment necessitates much translation by coaches and other instructional leaders to ensure that teachers respond deeply to particular reforms (Coburn, 2004). Therefore, while remaining cognizant of a district's mix of initiatives, policymakers should design policies so their ideas can entwine with educators' preexisting beliefs and practices.

Second, the findings on coaches' mediation of reforms have implications for district administrators. First, district leaders should clarify coaches' role in promoting specific reforms to school leaders and teachers. This would ensure that coaches allocate appropriate amounts of time to district priorities to promote implementation. At the same time, district leaders should exercise restraint in delegating administrative tasks to instructional coaches and determine who in central office or school buildings will bear responsibility for those tasks. Second, district leaders should develop coaches' capacity so that coaches understand instructional reforms plus strategies for accelerating their enactment. It is

particularly important for coaches to possess competencies in: (1) articulating reforms to teachers, (2) understanding similarities and differences of programs/initiatives, and (3) motivating individuals and teams toward change in a particular direction. If district administrators raise coaches' knowledge and skills in these areas, coaches could more effectively couple district priorities with their daily coaching activities. In turn, this would deepen the implementation of district instructional reforms.

Third, the study's findings suggest implications for future scholarship on coaches' role as intermediaries. Researchers should investigate how coaches serving in different types of systems and schools couple instructional reforms with their work activities. This line of research would consider the system-level infrastructure for coaching plus instructional improvement efforts. For instance, do coaches in lower performing schools devote more time toward data analysis routines? This research should also track teachers' responses to various routines of coaching. Finally, this scholarship should draw on the institutional perspective, attending to the cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative dimensions of change efforts. This would permit us to better understand the enactment of instructional policies as they move from the wider education policy environment and central office to schools and teachers' classrooms.

**Conclusions**

This study fills a gap in the education policy research by exploring the alignment of an urban district's instructional reforms and coaching. Taking an institutional perspective, I applied coupling theory to uncover the relationship between three reforms and coaches' work. My findings depict the cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative mechanisms influencing the coupling of coaches' work with data use, EEP, and teacher evaluation. In this way, the article advances our understanding of the dynamics of couplings within an urban district. It illuminates the interplay between district policy and instructional leaders' work—with consequences for implementation, leaders' work, teacher learning and change, and student outcomes.

APPENDIX A

*Sample Codes Aligned With Coupling Theory*

Mechanism	Central elements (Scott, 2001)	Examples
Cultural-cognitive	Shared understandings, common beliefs	– Shared understandings of quality writing instruction – Common beliefs on appropriate ways to use data
Normative	Norms, appropriateness,	– Professional norms for how coaches and teachers collaborate – Desirability of participating in in-classroom coaching cycles
Regulative	Rules, sanctions	– Regulations on how teachers teach reading – Monitoring of forms and agendas from data team meetings

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### Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Numbers are approximate to maintain anonymity.
3. <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=datawise>

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