

# Reading Coaches and the Relationship Between Policy and Practice

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## ABSTRACT

Many educational policy initiatives use instructional coaching to accomplish their goals. Yet we know little about the role of reading coaches in mediating the relationship between policy and teachers' classroom practice. In this article, we investigate the role of reading coaches in mediating the relationship between Reading First policy and teachers' classroom practice. We conducted an in-depth, longitudinal case study of one urban elementary school in Massachusetts, starting the year before the onset of Reading First and continuing through the first year of its implementation. In our analysis, we focus on seven first- and second-grade teachers, two coaches, and two school administrators. We argue that, although reading coaches were only one of multiple sources from which teachers learned about Reading First policy, teachers were much more likely to make substantial changes in their classroom practice when they learned about the policy message from a coach than from other sources. Coaches influenced teachers by helping them to learn new approaches and to integrate them into their classroom. But, they also did so by pressuring teachers, shaping how they saw and understood Reading First, and by counseling them on which aspects of the policy to focus on and which aspects to ignore. Thus, we present a vision of coaching that goes much beyond its educational roles, to highlight the political roles of the coach as well. We close by drawing implications for research on coaching, policy implementation, and practice.

The last two decades have witnessed a dramatic upsurge in policymaking related to reading instruction in the United States. High-profile policy initiatives—from the standards movement in the 1990s to accountability policy in the 2000s—have placed reading instruction squarely at the center of reform policy. There are also an increasing number of initiatives at the federal, state, and district levels that have specifically targeted reading instruction (Coburn, Pearson, & Woulfin, 2010; Matsumura, Garnier, & Resnick, 2010). One of the chief strategies that many policy initiatives use to accomplish their goals is instructional coaching. Coaches are seen as a way to provide on-site professional development to assist teachers in making changes in their practice in the direction of the policy.

This raises an important question: What is the role of reading coaches in the relationship between policy and teachers' classroom practice? Research on policy implementation has typically been skeptical about the degree to which policy can actually reach the classroom. Legions of studies of school reform have provided evidence that policies and reform initiatives appear to rarely make a difference in classroom prac-

tice (Cohen, 1988; Cuban, 1993; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, recent research on the relationship between policy and classroom practice has raised questions about just how closed off classrooms are from outside influence (Coburn, 2004; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). This research has shown that instructional policy provides the raw materials from which teachers construct their practice, has set bounds for what is conceivable through taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning, and has pressured teachers to move in certain directions (Coburn, 2004; Coburn et al., 2010; Diamond, 2007; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; McDonnell, 2004; Spillane & Burch, 2006). However, this research has paid little attention to the role of instructional coaches in this process.

Research on reading coaches, on the contrary, has paid little attention to their role in policy implementation. Existing research has suggested that reading coaches play a range of roles, from working directly with teachers and supporting teachers' data use to managing student testing and working directly with students (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, &

Zigmond, 2010; Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003; Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, & Autio, 2007; Haager, Dhar, Moulton, & McMillian, 2008; Marsh, McCombs, & Martorell, 2010; Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008; Poglinco et al., 2003). However, few studies have actually investigated the links between these activities and teachers' classroom practice. Additionally, in spite of the fact that coaching initiatives frequently happen within the context of policy initiatives, few studies have explicitly investigated coaches' role in policy implementation. Thus, we have little information about how coaches navigate the twin pressures of supporting teachers' own learning goals and encouraging them to follow the provisions of the policy and make changes in practice in a specified direction.

This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the role of coaches in the relationship between reading policy and teachers' classroom practice. We do so by drawing on data from a longitudinal study of coach-teacher interaction from the year before to the year after the implementation of Reading First in one urban elementary school in Massachusetts. Enacted in 2002 as part of the No Child Left Behind legislation, Reading First was a comprehensive initiative focused on ensuring that "all children in America learn to read well by the end of third grade" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 1). To reach its goal, Reading First required schools to implement core reading programs, assessments, and professional development "based on scientifically based reading research" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 37). It also required Reading First schools to appoint a reading coach to support teacher implementation (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Reading First has been the subject of considerable debate in the United States, with controversy surrounding the approach to reading instruction that it promoted (Pearson, 2007; Stevens, 2003; Yatvin, Weaver, & Garan, 2003), the nature of student outcomes (Coburn et al., 2010; Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008; Pearson, 2010; Scott, 2007), and allegations of conflict of interest in awarding government contracts associated with the initiative (Manzo, 2007; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007). Additionally, some have vociferously debated the uses and implications of the widely adopted assessment under Reading First: the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills; Good, Gruba, & Kaminski, 2002; Goodman, 2006; Manzo, 2005). This article does not weigh in on these debates. Rather, we use Reading First as a case for understanding the relationship between reading coaches and change in classroom practice, as well as the tensions that emerge when coaching takes place in the context of a policy initiative.

Reading First provides a useful place to learn about these issues. Instructional coaching was one of the

chief strategies that many states used to accomplish Reading First's aims. Furthermore, in many states, Reading First was clear that coaches' roles were to provide on-site professional development and work with teachers in their classrooms to help them implement Reading First strategies (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Thus, in contrast to other coaching initiatives whose definition of coaching may be diffuse or may not involve sustained engagement with teachers on matters of instruction, Reading First provides an important opportunity to understand what happens when coaches work closely with teachers in the context of a policy initiative.

In this article, we argue that although reading coaches were only one of many ways that teachers learned about Reading First policy, teachers were more likely to make substantial changes in their classroom practice when they learned about the policy message from a coach than from other sources. Coaches influenced teachers by helping them learn new approaches and integrate them into their classroom. Yet, they also did so by pressuring teachers, shaping how they saw and understood Reading First, and counseling them on which aspects of the policy to focus on and which aspects to ignore. Thus, we present a vision of coaching that goes beyond its educational roles, to highlight political roles. In so doing, we acknowledge the complicated intersection between power and learning and argue that in order to understand the role of coaches in the relationship between policy and practice, it is important to attend not only to coaches' educative roles but also to their political roles.

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## Literature Review

There is increasing evidence that policy can and does reach within the classroom door to influence teachers' classroom practice in reading instruction (Coburn et al., 2010). At the same time, this research has suggested that policy does not do so all the time and does not always influence classroom practice deeply. For example, one longitudinal study of three teachers' responses to changing reading policy (Coburn, 2004) found that although 66% of policy messages found their way into the classrooms, the teachers responded by reconstructing their practice in fundamental ways only 9% of the time. There is also evidence that policy is more likely to influence the content of what teachers teach than the way they teach the content (Diamond, 2007; Firestone & Mayrowetz, 2000).

Still other studies have documented a consistent pattern of teachers responding to policy by changing surface features of their instruction (e.g., different materials, grouping arrangements) without changing underlying pedagogical features of their approach

(Coburn, 2004, 2005b; McDonnell, 2004; McGill-Franzen, Ward, Goatley, & Machado, 2002; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004; Spillane, 2000). This is especially likely in the absence of efforts to build teacher capacity to enact new practices (Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop, & Wixson, 2002; McGill-Franzen et al., 2002). Finally, with the rise of policy pressures on reading instruction, there is a rise in accounts of teachers rejecting policy messages (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Kersten, 2006; Kersten & Pardo, 2007; Sloan, 2006), although it is not entirely clear when and why teachers resist approaches they dislike and when they respond with compliance (Coburn et al., 2010). However, in spite of the increasing prominence of instructional coaching in policy initiatives, we know little about what role coaches play in teachers' responses to policy.

At the same time, there is a growing research literature on instructional coaching, especially in reading instruction. This research has provided an in-depth discussion of the range of roles that coaches typically play in schools. It has found that coaches serve as facilitators of reform by engaging teachers in ongoing and school-specific professional development (Bean, Draper, Hall, et al., 2010; Zigmond & Bean, 2006). Coaches do so by observing teachers' classrooms, providing feedback, conducting demonstration lessons, working with groups of teachers to examine student data, and facilitating professional development sessions (Bean et al., 2003; Deussen et al., 2007; Dole, 2004). Additionally, coaches provide general assistance to the school principal and work directly with children (Bean et al., 2010; Deussen et al., 2007; Marsh et al., 2010). In other words, this research has emphasized the educative roles that reading coaches play in their work with teachers.

However, there has been surprisingly little research about the relationship between these coaching activities and change in teachers' reading instruction. Only a handful of studies have investigated this relationship directly. These studies found that coaching leads to higher quality implementation of reform practices (Matsumura, Garnier, & Resnick, 2010; Walpole, McKenna, Uribe-Zarain, & Lamitina, 2010; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009), although individual coaching practices influenced different aspects of teacher instruction to varying degrees (Walpole et al., 2010), and one study found that coaching did not have an additional impact on teacher practice beyond the other professional development (Garet et al., 2008).

These studies had a number of limitations. First, nearly all are cross-sectional, so they cannot speak to whether coaching practices are related to change in teacher practice. Second, they focused solely on the learning interactions between coaches and teachers. We know much less about how issues of power, persua-

sion, and control emerge in coaching interaction, even though coaching in the context of policy implementation is often linked to the calls for teachers to move their practice in a particular direction. More generally, in spite of the fact that policymakers and district leaders have turned to coaching as a key mechanism to encourage instructional change, few studies have investigated the role of coaches in teachers' response to policy. Thus, we lack understanding of how coaches are involved in the relationship of policy to practice.

This study fills this gap by investigating the role of the coach in the relationship between reading policy and classroom practice. To do so, we draw on the cognitive approach to policy implementation. Drawing on sociological theories of sensemaking (Vaughan, 1996; Weick, 1995), researchers in this tradition have argued that how teachers come to understand and enact instructional policy is influenced by prior knowledge, the social context within which they work, and the nature of their connections to the policy (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002). Sensemaking theorists argue that the meaning of information or events—in this case, policy messages about reading—is not given but is inherently problematic; individuals and groups must actively construct understandings and interpretations. They do so by placing new information into preexisting cognitive frameworks, also called worldviews (Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Vaughan, 1996; Weick, 1995). Thus, teachers and others draw on their existing worldviews to interpret new instructional approaches, often reconstructing policy messages in ways that either reinforce preexisting practices or lead to incremental change (Coburn, 2001; Jennings, 1996; Schifter & Fosnot, 1993; Smith, 2000; Spillane, 1999; Spillane & Jennings, 1997).

Yet teacher sensemaking about instructional policy is not solely an individual matter: It is also influenced by the social and structural conditions of the workplace (Coburn, 2001; Gallucci, 2003; Siskin, 1994; Spillane, 1998) and patterns of social interaction with others in the school (Coburn, 2001; Hill, 2001; Spillane, 1999). This interaction shapes which aspects of policy teachers even notice, how they attend some policy messages and ignore others, and how they come to understand the meaning and implication of policy for their classroom instruction, all of which influences their enactment.

Recent scholarship has suggested that sensemaking is not only a cognitive process but also a political one. Two recent studies at the school level have shown that some voices are more influential in the social negotiation of meaning. Principals, by virtue of their positional authority, are able to provide interpretive frames that shape how teachers come to understand and enact policy messages. Principals do so because they have more resources that they can

bring to bear in support of their interpretations of policy, including the power to focus professional development and leverage the use of teacher leaders (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Coburn, 2005a). Another study of sensemaking among district leaders suggests that those with authority and status or status alone are more persuasive in negotiating understandings of new policy than those without status and/or authority. That is, when there were differences of opinions about the most appropriate response to policy, those with status (with or without authority) were successful at persuading others of their interpretation (Coburn, Bae, & Turner, 2008). In all of these studies, teachers and others were persuaded to make changes in practice in the course of social interaction rather than forced. Thus, sensemaking can also function in a political manner to mobilize support and coordinate action (Binder, 2002; Coburn, 2005b; Coburn et al., 2008; Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009).

This study extends this research in several ways. First, we examine the role of coaches in teacher sensemaking. Coaches, like principals, often find themselves trying to influence teachers' classroom practice. Yet coaches lack the positional authority that principals typically have. Here, we investigate how coaches influence the ways that teachers learn about and enact Reading First policy in their classrooms. Second, we more fully investigate the political aspects of sensemaking, investigating both the ways that coaches help teachers come to understand and enact new approaches and the ways that they pressure, persuade, and even discourage them from responding to some aspects of Reading First. In this way, we present a more complex and multifaceted portrait of the role coaches play in the relationship between reading policy and teachers' classroom practice.

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## Method

To study the role of coaches in the implementation of Reading First, we drew on data from a longitudinal case study of one Reading First school in Massachusetts, which we call Franklin Elementary. (The school and all participants' names are pseudonyms.) Our research design capitalized on a fortuitous event. In the 2002–2003 school year, we were engaged in a study of the role of school leadership (i.e., principals, assistant principals, coaches) in reading instruction at Franklin. By the end of our study year, the school was selected to be a Reading First school, beginning the following year. Realizing that we were in a unique position to collect in-depth data on leadership practices and classroom practice from the year prior to the onset of this major new reading policy, we quickly raised additional

funds to extend our study. We were then able to investigate the impact of Reading First by comparing evidence of leadership and classroom practice before and after the onset of the initiative. Thus, we drew on data from fall 2002 to spring 2004, which encompasses the year prior to Reading First and the first year of its implementation.

Reading First in Massachusetts was a comprehensive policy that targeted multiple aspects of teachers' reading instruction. Like Reading First in other states, the policy required teachers to use specific textbooks that were certified as scientifically based. It also required teachers to use new pedagogical approaches for teaching the material in the textbook, for example, teaching phonics and phonemic awareness in explicit, systematic ways rather than in contextualized ways (Massachusetts Department of Education [MDE], 2004). The policy required teachers to administer several assessments—the DIBELS and the Developmental Reading Assessment—multiple times in the year and use the results to target instruction and group students (MDE, 2005). It required teachers to organize their instruction in specific ways, including using homogeneous reading groups and learning centers (MDE, 2008). Additionally, the district-developed Reading First plan specified that all teachers must implement a 120-minute reading block and allocate time for teacher-directed reading instruction in various grouping formats, from whole class to small group (district document, 2003).

To support teachers in making these changes, each school was required to appoint a full-time teacher as a Reading First coach. (At Franklin, the principal used funds to appoint a second coach.) Teachers were required to attend a weeklong summer professional development seminar, as well as ongoing workshops at the school. Reading First schools were monitored several times a year by a team from the state's department of education to ensure that schools and teachers were implementing Reading First in the manner specified by Massachusetts's Reading First plan.

## Setting

Franklin is a large elementary school enrolling 618 students in a mid-sized urban school district. More than 80% of the school's students were classified as low income. Twenty-four percent of students were African American, and 56% were Latino. Furthermore, just over 18% were English learners, and nearly 29% were classified as special education. For the 2003–2004 school year, 31% of third graders at Franklin were proficient on the reading portion of the state test (the MCAS), and 31% of fourth graders were proficient in English language arts. These scores were significantly lower than the state's performance level at that time.

Prior to its participation in Reading First, Franklin had been involved in efforts to improve reading instruction for a number of years. Teachers engaged in approximately three years of training in guided reading, based on the principles outlined by Fountas and Pinnell (1996).<sup>1</sup> In the year prior to Reading First being implemented (year 1 of our study), the school ceased training in guided reading and began professional development in the DIBELS assessment as part of a partnership with an outside agency funded by the Reading Excellence Act. This training encouraged teachers to move away from assessment practices and approaches to foster phonemic awareness and fluency that they had been encouraged to use in their guided reading professional development.<sup>2</sup> The new training also encouraged teachers to use a structured intervention program that relied on direct instruction for the students who were deemed at risk according to the DIBELS assessment.

## Data Collection

We collected data at the district and school levels. Within the school, we focused on first and second grade because these grades were most impacted by the efforts to improve early reading instruction. Across the two years, we interviewed and observed four first-grade teachers and three second-grade teachers—all of the teachers at these grade levels except for one second-grade teacher who declined to participate in the study after doing an initial interview.<sup>3</sup> We also focused attention on the two literacy coaches, the principal, and the assistant principal. Table 1 provides information about the teachers and school leaders involved in the study.

Data were collected during seven weeklong visits to the school across the two years. Each visit, two researchers interviewed Franklin's first- and second-grade teachers and observed their classrooms during

reading instruction. Interviews focused on the teachers' beliefs and practices related to reading instruction; experience with professional development with a particular focus on trainings related to Reading First; and interaction with coaches, school leaders, and colleagues. We conducted a total of 40 interviews with teachers, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes; all were audiotaped and transcribed. We also observed teachers' classrooms during each visit (a total of 26 observations). We usually spent the entire morning in a teacher's classroom to be sure that we observed the different aspects of the teacher's reading program. We took ethnographic field notes but were guided by a semistructured protocol that prompted us to focus on teachers' talk, students' talk, the nature of the instructional tasks and materials, and how time and the learning environment were organized. We also collected documents—lesson plans, copies of lessons from textbooks, handouts, and photographs of charts and posters—for every lesson we observed. All field notes were typed up and entered into our database.

We interviewed and observed coaches and school leaders during each visit. We interviewed coaches about their beliefs about reading instruction in general and Reading First in particular; their professional preparation and ongoing professional development; and their work with each other, the principal, and teachers. We also observed as they provided professional development to teachers and led grade-level meetings. We interviewed the principal and assistant principal about similar topics and also about their leadership practices and attitudes toward teacher hiring and ongoing professional learning. In addition, we shadowed the principal for an entire day during each visit to the school (five full-day observations) to gain a better understanding of how the principal interacted with the coach and teachers related to reading instruction. We also

**Table 1. Demographic Background of Teachers, Coaches, and Administrators at Franklin Elementary School**

Actor	Position	Gender	Race	Years of experience
Tony	First-grade teacher	Male	Hispanic	7
Amanda	First-grade teacher	Female	White	11
Kara	First-grade teacher	Female	White	4
Lynne	First-grade teacher	Female	White	3
Nancy	Second-grade teacher	Female	White	8
James	Second-grade teacher	Male	White	6
Rebecca	Second-grade teacher	Female	White	1
Harriet	Coach (both years)	Female	White	2 as coach, 8 as Reading Recovery instructor, "many years" as first-grade teacher
Carol	Coach (second year of study only)	Female	White	3 as coach, 19 as classroom teacher
Susan	Coach (first year of study only)	Female	White	6 as coach, 21 as reading resource teacher, 11 as classroom teacher
David	Vice principal	Male	White	4 as vice principal, over 20 as classroom teacher
Patricia	Principal	Female	White	6 as principal, over 13 as classroom teacher

*Note.* The school and all participants' names are pseudonyms.

collected documents related to grants for reading professional development (past and present), school assessment data, and school improvement planning.

Finally, we interviewed four district leaders to learn more about the district approach to reading instruction in general and the district's Reading First grant in particular (for a total of five interviews). We also collected extensive documentation related to the federal, state, and district Reading First grant.

## Data Analysis

To understand the role of coaches in how teachers responded to Reading First, we began by considering the ways in which teachers were the recipients of Reading First policy. Thus, we analyzed the multiple ways that teachers learned about Reading First policy in year 2 of our study. Reading First used a number of mechanisms to encourage teachers to change their practice, including professional development, new curricular materials, periodic assessments, and monitoring. Teachers had many different opportunities (e.g., professional development sessions; staff meetings; interactions with district leaders, principals, and coaches) to hear about what they should or must do as participants in the Reading First program. To facilitate analysis, we identified messages about reading related to Reading First that teachers encountered in year 2 of our study. Messages included "specific statements or exhortations about how teachers *should* or *must* teach reading" (Coburn, 2004, p. 217).

To identify messages, we analyzed documents related to the reform effort that teachers came into contact with (e.g., Reading First professional development materials, curricular materials, district pacing guide), our observations of professional development and teachers' interactions with coaches and school leaders, and interview data with teachers about the messages they encountered about how they should or must teach reading. Reading First messages varied quite a bit in form and intensity. For example, teachers received a message from the presenters at the Reading First summer institute that they should teach comprehension strategies in an explicit manner. The school's instructional materials also carried messages, which teachers attended to as they planned lessons either alone or with their colleagues. Administrators and coaches promoted Reading First messages. For example, teachers reported in interviews that coaches told them that the activities in learning centers should reinforce the concepts and ideas that teachers were working on in other aspects of their instruction. Also, when state monitors visited the school to check on the implementation of Reading First, they met with a group of Franklin's teachers and told them that they must use the core reading program to a greater extent.

We identified the main message that a given vehicle (e.g., professional development, policy documents, discussion with the principal) was promoting in each element of instruction (i.e., decoding, comprehension, writing, assessment, classroom organization). Thus, if a professional development session focused on systemic approaches to phonics and phonemic awareness, we counted that as one message, even if the professional development provider repeated this idea multiple times during a professional development session.

We analyzed all of the data we had from each teacher—documents; interviews with teachers, coaches, and school or district leaders; and/or observations of classrooms or professional development—to identify which messages each teacher came into contact with through their interaction with coaches, principals, representatives from the state, and professional development, as well as reform documents and curricular material we saw them use. We identified 371 Reading First messages encountered by teachers during the second year of the study for which we had complete information; individual focal teachers encountered an average of 53 messages each. In many instances, more than one teacher encountered the same message. We analyzed each teacher's response to each message that she or he encountered and reported it separately.

After identifying the messages that each teacher encountered, we coded each message along several dimensions. First, we coded messages according to the instructional element it addressed: decoding, comprehension, assessment, writing, or classroom organizational structure (i.e., use of time, student grouping, or physical configuration of classroom).<sup>4</sup> When we found that teachers encountered no Reading First messages related to writing during year 2 of the study (in spite of the fact that writing played a prominent role in the state grant), we dropped that code. Second, mindful of prior work by Diamond (2007) that suggested that teachers respond differently to messages about pedagogy versus content, we coded each messages as dealing with content or pedagogy. Content messages told teachers what to cover while teaching reading. For example, one content message from curricular materials asked second-grade teachers to instruct the comprehension skill of cause and effect. Pedagogy messages focused on how teachers should or must teach reading. For example, school and district leaders encouraged teachers to have students do repeated readings of decodable text as an instructional routine to improve students' fluency. Because this message concerned an instructional strategy, we coded it as dealing with pedagogy.

Third, we coded each message for teachers' perceptions of its congruence. Here, we focused on an

individual teacher's perception of the extent to which a message about reading corresponded with their preexisting practices or beliefs about instruction. We drew on interview data to investigate if teachers characterized messages as inappropriate, inconceivable, or not fitting what they were already doing at one end (low congruence) versus consistent with their beliefs or fitting well with their existing practice (high congruence) at the other end.

Fourth, we coded whether or not reading coaches presented or discussed a particular message with a teacher to determine whether a reading coach was involved with a given Reading First message. For example, during a district training session, teachers were told to set up learning centers in their classrooms that address different components of reading. In subsequent interviews, several teachers described how coaches followed up and provided advice on how to set up centers related to fluency and phonics. In this way, the coaches reinforced the district's Reading First message about the nature of centers with some teachers. We also drew on observational data on coach-led meetings and training sessions as well as interviews with the coaches to determine whether coaches were involved in discussing, promoting, elaborating, or extending a given Reading First message. (See Appendix for definitions used in coding.)

Next, we analyzed changes in teachers' instruction from year 1 in response to these policy messages. To analyze change in classroom practice, we used the construct of academic task. Doyle and Carter (1984) defined tasks as having three components: the objective, the available resources or materials, and the activities that can be implemented with the resources to attain the objective's goal. We followed Stein, Grover, and Henningsen (1996) by operationalizing this concept as a classroom activity that focuses students' attention on a particular aspect of instruction. In this view, a typical lesson can and often does include more than one task. We defined the boundaries of the task as when the purpose of the lesson changed to focus on a different aspect of reading instruction. This is an example of an academic task from an observation in James's classroom:

During the literacy block, James led a whole-class lesson. Guided by the *Making Words* teacher's manual, the lesson targeted the /ai/ spelling pattern. First, James directed students to use their letter cards to make the particular words that he said and reminded students to add, remove, or switch letters to make new words. He used some words in sentences. Additionally, he supported a student by reminding the student to stretch out the word and listen for each of its sounds.

Depending on the teacher's instructional objectives for the day, there could be multiple tasks in each day

that we observed. We identified and analyzed 229 tasks across the two years, or roughly 33 tasks per teacher.

To investigate how an individual teacher responded to a given message, we identified the component of instruction that it related to: decoding, comprehension, assessment, writing, or structure. We analyzed all tasks that we observed for a given teacher related to this component in year 1 and compared them with all tasks related to this component in year 2. We then drew on interview data for information about how the changes we observed were related, if at all, to the policy message that teachers encountered.

For example, Amanda, a first-grade teacher, encountered multiple messages from Reading First telling her that she should teach decoding explicitly and focus attention on graphophonic cues. She was also told that teachers should not teach phonics and phonemic awareness contextually, nor should they encourage children to draw on context or semantic cues to decode text. Yet, in the years prior to Reading First, Amanda had been taught in her master's program and guided reading professional development that teachers should teach students to use all three cueing systems—graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic—and that children should learn to decode in the context of stories. Indeed, in year 1 (the year before Reading First was implemented), we observed Amanda teach nine tasks related to decoding, four of which involved phonics and phonemic awareness. One involved direct teaching of the "sneaky e" rule, but the other three involved guided reading groups in which Amanda encouraged students to use context cues to sound out words.

While attending the Reading First summer training and a district follow-up training, Amanda was repeatedly told by facilitators and district administrators that the most effective way to teach decoding was to rely on the adopted reading series' systematic and explicit approach to phonics instruction. In year 2 of our study (after the onset of Reading First), we observed her teaching 12 tasks related to decoding, 10 of which related to phonics and phonemic awareness. Six of these 10 tasks involved either guided reading groups in which Amanda encouraged children to use the three cueing systems or explicit instruction in how to use the three cueing systems. In addition, we observed four tasks, which often took place before or after guided reading groups, in which Amanda used the adopted reading series to teach phonics and phonemic awareness in an explicit, systematic manner, focusing attention on the graphophonic cues. In interview data from year 2, Amanda stated that she added new approaches to phonics and phonemic awareness emphasized by Reading First on top of her guided reading groups. She explained that in so doing, she did

not change the approach she used in guided reading but made it shorter so that she could fit the new phonics and phonemic awareness activities into her schedule. This report in interviews was confirmed by our observations.

One of the things that quickly became clear when we analyzed teachers' reading instruction in year 1 was that teachers were already doing many of the things that Reading First asked them to do in year 2. We found that 48% of Reading First messages (179 messages) that teachers encountered represented guidance to teachers on things that they were already doing in their classrooms. This is not entirely surprising. Many instructional approaches promoted by Reading First had been salient in Massachusetts for a number of years. Teachers at Franklin had received professional development on some approaches as part of the school's prior efforts to improve reading instruction. For example, nearly all teachers started using the DIBELS the year before Reading First after school leaders required it. Some teachers also learned about select approaches in university coursework or prior district professional development. Yet, importantly, different teachers had implemented these prior approaches in different ways and to different degrees. Thus, Reading First messages that represented existing practices to some teachers were new to others.

Because we were interested in learning about the factors contributing to teachers' inclination to change in response to policy, we focused the remainder of our analysis on the 52% of Reading First messages that required teachers to change their practice.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the analysis presented in this paper is of the 192 Reading First messages encountered by teachers that required them to change their reading instruction. To analyze the degree and nature of change in practice, we compared tasks in year 1 and year 2 and classified the nature of the change using a typology developed in earlier work (Coburn, 2004) that identified several distinct responses to policy: rejection, symbolic response, parallel structures, assimilation, and accommodation. (See Appendix and the Findings section for further elaboration of each of these categories.) Returning to our example, we classified Amanda's response to Reading First messages about explicit, systematic phonics instruction as parallel structures. She changed her practice in response to Reading First, but she did so by adding new approaches on top of existing ones without altering her existing ones. This change is consistent with our definition of parallel structures. We used the approach described here to analyze how each teacher in our sample responded to each message that they encountered during year 2 of the study.

After identifying how teachers responded to Reading First messages, we then investigated why teachers

responded to some messages with rejection and others with assimilation or accommodation. To that end, we examined the relationship between features of the policy message (i.e., its focus, congruence, participation of the coach) and changes in practice. When it became clear that teachers responded to Reading First messages in systematically different ways when coaches were involved than when they were not, we went back to field notes and interviews to investigate more closely. Working from the data, we used the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to inductively identify strategies that coaches used that appeared to influence how teachers responded to messages. We identified one broad educative strategy: practical support for implementation. We also identified three political strategies: pressuring, persuading, and buffering. We coded the data using the definitions in Appendix for these constructs.

To establish inter-rater agreement, we randomly sampled 20% of messages for each teacher. Each of the two authors coded the data separately, and then we calculated inter-rater agreement. We obtained this for the codes of content or pedagogy, normative persuasion, regulative pressure, congruence, coach involvement, and teachers' responses, ranging from 91.4% to 100%, with an average of 96.2% across all codes. A single analyst coded the remainder of the data, although the two authors met biweekly throughout the coding process to discuss challenging or ambiguous data, working together until consensus was achieved on the appropriate code to assign.

Once all data were coded, we created matrices to investigate the relationship between coaching practices and change in teachers' practice across teachers and across messages (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, we created a matrix that enumerated instances of pressuring, including information on who the coach was working with, the context of the coach-teacher interaction (e.g., grade-level meeting, one-on-one interaction), the content of their interaction (e.g., decoding, comprehension), and as indicated from observation and interview data, the teacher's response. We then used this matrix to discern patterns of teachers' responses to pressuring and how that varied by teacher, context, or content. We examined outliers for each of the patterns observed, in many cases returning to the data to understand teachers whose patterns did not match the overall trends.

Throughout, we checked alternate hypotheses to help verify our findings (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994). Several methodological features of the study ensured that the patterns reported here represent patterns present in the research site: intensive immersion at the research site (cf. Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Lofland & Lofland, 1995), systematic sampling of Reading First



messages (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994), triangulation across multiple sources of data for information about the messages themselves, teachers' responses to messages, coaches' roles in teachers' responses (cf. Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin, 1970), and systematic coding of data (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## Findings

Given the extensive professional development that teachers received, as well as interaction with state monitors, district personnel, coaches, and administrators, teachers had multiple opportunities to learn about the instructional approaches that they were expected to implement as part of Reading First. However, we found that teachers responded to different aspects of Reading First in different ways. They rejected some areas of the policy outright. At the same time, they made substantive changes in practice in response to other aspects.

Here, we argue that in spite of the fact that coaches were involved in only a subset of policy messages, coaches played a key role in influencing teachers' variable responses. Furthermore, coaches did so in ways that are not typically acknowledged in the research on instructional coaching. They supported teachers in making changes in their practice by helping them learn new instructional approaches and integrate them into their classrooms. That is, coaches played an educative role. Yet coaches also influenced teachers' responses by pressuring, persuading, and at times buffering them from Reading First. Thus, coaches also played a politi-

cal role. To understand what aspects of Reading First teachers implemented, and also what they ignored, it is important to understand the full range of ways that coaches interacted with teachers. To make this argument, we begin by illustrating the range of ways that teachers responded to Reading First messages. We then illustrate the role that coaches played in this variation, emphasizing both their educative and political roles.

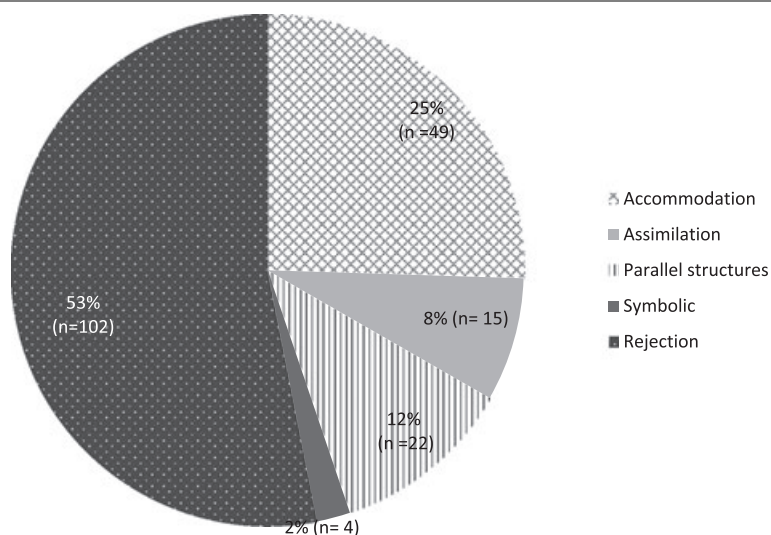
## Teachers' Responses to Reading First

Teachers did not have a unitary response to Reading First. Rather, they responded to different aspects of the policy in different ways. Drawing on a typology that we developed in earlier work (Coburn, 2004), we identified five responses that teachers had to Reading First messages: rejection, symbolic response, parallel structures, assimilation, and accommodation (see Figure 1). In the next section, we describe each response as well as its distribution across teachers and across kinds of Reading First messages. Then, in the subsequent section, we discuss the role of coaches in this pattern of responses.

## Rejection

Teachers at Franklin Elementary encountered multiple messages from Reading First about how they should or must change their approach to reading instruction during year 2. At times, teachers ignored, dismissed, or considered and rejected these messages. For example, teachers were required to use the core reading series to guide their reading instruction. Lynn, a first-grade teacher, was told this during a Reading First summer

**Figure 1. Teachers' Responses to Reading First Messages**



Note. *n* = 192 responses to messages.

institute and district trainings. The school principal also frequently emphasized that Lynn should fully adopt the core reading series. Lynn decided not to use the reading series for comprehension instruction because she felt that the stories and accompanying comprehension activities were too advanced for her students. She explained,

They wanted to see more from [the core reading] series, but the problem in that being that...there aren't a lot of little stories in there, and that's always been an issue that some of our kids...aren't ready for the [core reading series] or, if they can read, they can read the first few stories, but...it makes a fairly big jump, and they can't go from there.

In another interview, she explained that she did not do the comprehension activity in the text: "Because it's sort of been more at that point, [the students] were kind of a lower class; I didn't think they were quite ready to really get that deeply into things." Instead, in guided reading groups for comprehension instruction, Lynn continued to use predictable texts that were significantly different from those in the reading series. Furthermore, Lynn did not teach comprehension strategies like summarizing, clarifying, and previewing vocabulary explicitly, as instructed by the core reading series. Instead, she continued her approach from year 1 of sprinkling literal comprehension questions during and after the stories.

Teachers rejected Reading First messages for a range of reasons, including a sense that specific instructional approaches were not appropriate for their students, because the approaches did not fit with other aspects of their instruction, because they did not believe that an approach would lead to student learning, and because of philosophical differences. As shown in Figure 1, rejection was a relatively widespread response, accounting for over half of the 192 responses to encounters with new messages. Most teachers rejected between 45% and 55% of the messages they encountered. However, one first-grade teacher, Kara, rejected two thirds of the new messages she encountered (18 rejected messages). She was the teacher who was most committed to, and most skilled at, a guided reading approach to reading instruction consistent with the principles of Fountas and Pinnell (1996). More than other teachers, Kara frequently judged Reading First approaches to be incongruent with her existing beliefs and practices and therefore rejected many of them.

## Symbolic Response

Teachers occasionally responded to policy messages with symbolic responses. This type of response provided the appearance of shifting practice in response to

policy but did not alter instruction in any way. For example, Kara and her first-grade team attended a district-sponsored training on improving students' reading skills and were told that they should use decodable texts to develop students' oral reading fluency. In response, Kara put the decodable texts in students' book boxes but did not refer to them or use them in reading instruction at all. Instead, she continued using predictable texts to develop students' fluency. Kara explained, "I'm not going to stop using real, connected, meaningful texts [in my reading groups]. I'm not going to substitute that with decodable texts."

We also found that some teachers responded symbolically to messages about literacy centers. In this case, teachers changed how they labeled their centers to make them look like they were arranging centers in the manner prescribed by Reading First in Massachusetts but did not change the content of instruction that actually happened in the centers. Symbolic response was relatively rare among the teachers in our sample, accounting for just over 2% of teachers' responses (see Figure 1). Four out of seven teachers—Amanda, Kara, Lynn, and Nancy—used this approach one time each.

## Parallel Structures

When teachers encountered messages that conflicted with their preexisting practices, they sometimes responded by adding the new approach to their instructional program without changing their existing program, thus creating parallel structures for reading instruction. For example, Reading First asks teachers to teach phonics explicitly and emphasize graphophonic cues. The Franklin teachers were provided instruction on this approach to instruction at the summer institute and in multiple district follow-up trainings. Three teachers, including Amanda, as described earlier, responded to these messages by adding an additional component alongside their existing reading instruction. These teachers taught phonics skills in this manner during one part of the day but also continued their prior practice of teaching phonics implicitly through contextualized phonics activities that emphasized graphophonic, semantic, and syntactical cues at another time of the day.

For example, during one of our observations, Amanda taught a decoding activity during her morning meeting that involved the "guess the covered word" game, an approach to decoding that relies on context cues rather than graphophonic cues. In this activity, Amanda reviewed the three cueing strategies, encouraging children to repeat, "Does it look right? Does it sound right? Does it make sense?" She then covered words with an index card and encouraged students to use context clues to determine what word would make sense. Yet, later in the day, Amanda used the core

reading series to teach a decoding lesson on the /ow/ sound-spelling pattern in a lesson that exemplified Reading First guidance to teach phonics skills explicitly. She told students that today's chunk was /ow/ and asked them to write words on their whiteboards with the *ow* and *oa* spelling patterns, such as *row*, *show*, *soap*, and *boat*.

Thus, Amanda created two parallel approaches to teaching decoding that she used in tandem, one emphasizing explicit instruction focused on graphophonic cues from letter-sound relationships, and the other emphasizing contextualized approaches to phonics instruction and the use of semantic and syntactical cues explicitly discouraged by Reading First. In creating parallel structures, Amanda's and other teachers' reading programs became increasingly complex as they incorporated more instructional approaches into a fixed amount of time. To manage this parallel structure, teachers often reduced the amount of time that they spent on any one instructional approach, leading to lessons that felt rushed. Teachers who responded with parallel structures were also unable to engage in the full set of activities recommended by Reading First or the full set of activities they had used with their prior approach to instruction.

Twelve percent of the 192 teacher responses to new Reading First messages involved implementing parallel structures. Every teacher in our sample used parallel structures to some degree. Amanda, Lynn, and Kara, all first-grade teachers who worked closely with one another, used parallel structures a bit more than others: in response to 21%, 17%, and 15% of Reading First messages, respectively. Tony, a first-grade bilingual teacher, and James, a second-grade teacher, used this approach a bit less: in response to approximately 4% of messages that they each encountered. Importantly, teachers were most likely to respond with parallel structures to messages that implicated some of the most central elements of their reading program, including the structure and organization of their reading groups.

## Assimilation

As suggested by sensemaking theory, teachers drew on their tacit assumptions to construct their understanding of Reading First messages. In so doing, they often interpreted and enacted messages in ways that transformed the messages to fit with their underlying assumptions. Or, in the language of cognitive learning theorists, teachers assimilated new knowledge into existing schemata or ways of doing things (Fosnot, 1996; Piaget, 1978). When this happened, teachers tended to focus on the surface aspects of instruction, changing their materials, grouping, topics, or routines, rather than changing the instructional strategies they used with these materials, in these groupings, while

using these routines, or while teaching these topics. In so doing, teachers reproduced their existing pedagogical approaches even as they intended to change them (Spillane, 1999; Spillane et al., 2002).

For example, Nancy, a second-grade teacher, participated in the Reading First summer institute, during which she received professional development focused on explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. She responded with assimilation. In year 1, we observed six tasks in which Nancy taught reading comprehension. Five tasks took place in guided reading groups and followed a similar pattern. Nancy selected leveled texts and did a picture walk, asking students to predict what they thought was going to happen, and encouraging them to make text-to-self connections. She also previewed relevant vocabulary. She explained,

I try to [get them to] use [their] prior knowledge; they needed a lot of scaffolding about Antarctica, the cold weather [in this story]...and I [am] doing almost like predicting but using the pictures to kind of figure out what words they might come across in the story to help their comprehension...using the pictures to kind of help build up the vocabulary that they're going to need to read the story.

Nancy asked literal comprehension questions along the way and at the end of the story to check for students' understanding. She explained, "I just do a little quick check at the end...for comprehension. Comprehension is an issue...so we try to hit them with as much as we can and hope that something sticks."

In the summer between year 1 and year 2, Nancy attended the Reading First summer institute. The institute emphasized that effective comprehension instruction is "more than just asking questions to assess student understanding; effective comprehension instruction includes helping students to become more strategic, metacognitive readers so they will understand what they read" (University of Texas Center for Reading and Language Arts, 2002, p. 25). The training encouraged teachers to explicitly teach students comprehension strategies, to model such strategies for them, and to engage students in activities that help them use these strategies before, during, and after reading. This message was echoed by the instructions for teachers in the core reading series.

Nancy fully embraced the new approach and endeavored to incorporate it into her guided reading groups. Yet her classroom enactment suggested that she did not grasp the deeper aspects of explicit approaches to comprehension strategies. We observed 10 comprehension tasks in year 2. Analysis of these tasks suggested that Nancy made some changes in her instruction. She used the core reading series for comprehension instruction rather than guided reading books, as she had in the past. She also focused

instruction on the comprehension skill or strategy prompted by the textbook.

However, rather than explicitly teaching students the skill or strategy, Nancy asked short comprehension questions related to the skill at the end of the story, as she had with literal comprehension questions in year 1. For example, in one of six tasks we observed that occurred in guided reading groups, Nancy followed the core reading series' advice to use a nonfiction story about owls to focus on the concept of main ideas and supporting details. As she did the previous year, she began with a picture walk of the story. However, rather than asking students to predict what was going to happen next, as she did in year 1, Nancy asked students to discuss the details that they saw in the pictures: "What do you notice about owls?" and "Why is this picture of a mouse here?" She then told students that the main idea of the story was "owls are good hunters" and asked students to read the first chapter of the three-chapter story and "find three details to find out why owls are good hunters." Students read the story on their own while Nancy listened in. Once everyone completed their reading, she asked them to identify the key details in the story. After students listed a number of details, Nancy asked them why their details related to why owls are good hunters, a question that students were unable to answer.

In this example, Nancy used new materials (the core reading series rather than the guided reading leveled texts) and followed the guidance from the core reading series to focus on main ideas and supporting details. Yet, she did not explicitly teach the relationship between details and main ideas or how to leverage identification of details to build comprehension of the main idea as intended by the approach. Instead, she used her preexisting instructional strategies of picture walks at the front end of the story and brief questions at the tail end and focused these pedagogical strategies on the topic of main idea and supporting details. Thus, in this task and all other comprehension tasks that we analyzed in year 2, Nancy interpreted the new approach to comprehension through the lens of her preexisting understanding of comprehension. In so doing, she incorporated new materials and ideas about comprehension strategies into her classroom but maintained her underlying pedagogical approach.

All told, teachers responded with assimilation to 8% of Reading First messages that were new to them. All but one—Tony, the first-grade bilingual teacher—responded to messages by assimilating them into existing practices.

## Accommodation

In other cases, teachers reconstructed their instructional approaches in fundamental ways or altered their

core assumptions about the nature of reading instruction or student learning in response to Reading First messages. Or, in the language of cognitive learning theorists, teachers transformed their preexisting knowledge structures to accommodate new information or experiences (Fosnot, 1996; Piaget, 1978; Smith, 2000). In these cases, teachers attended to underlying epistemological or pedagogical assumptions rather than remaining concerned with the messages' surface-level demands. For example, most teachers (five out of seven) accommodated Reading First messages about using the results from the DIBELS assessment to inform instruction.

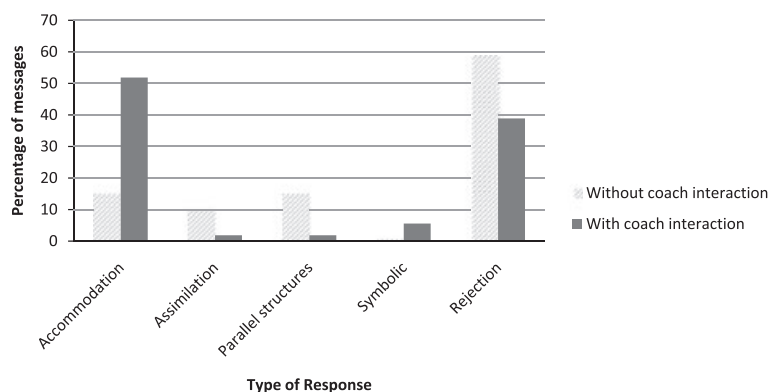
In year 1, all teachers in our study administered the DIBELS and supplied the principal with their assessment results but did not change any aspects of their instruction. However, after Reading First training and in discussion with their coaches, teachers began using the results from the DIBELS to guide their instructional decision making in year 2. They used the results to decide which students received what remedial services and supplementary materials, as well as which students would benefit from additional practice or instruction. Most teachers (five out of seven) also accommodated a message to incorporate phonics and fluency activities into their reading centers. They shifted their centers from activities related to a general classroom theme (e.g., wintertime, the ocean) to sets of literacy activities related to phonics and fluency. Just over 25% of teachers' responses to the 192 Reading First messages involved accommodation. All teachers responded to messages by accommodating them. However, three first-grade teachers—Kara, Amanda, and Lynn—tended to respond less frequently with accommodation than others, responding to only 11–17% of the messages in this way. The other teachers responded to 35–40% of the messages with accommodation. Thus, most teachers made substantial changes to how they structured reading instruction in response to Reading First.

Many responses, such as parallel structures, assimilation, and accommodation, brought Reading First's messages into classrooms in ways that influenced teachers' worldviews and practices, albeit at varying levels of depth. Teachers often enacted messages in ways that combined the new with the old (parallel structures and assimilation), leading to a pattern of incremental change. Yet, at times, teachers responded by rethinking assumptions and reorganizing routines in more fundamental ways (accommodation).

## Roles of the Coach

What roles did the coach play in these patterns? Teachers experienced Reading First messages from a wide range of sources: state and district professional

**Figure 2. Teachers' Responses to Reading First Messages With and Without Coaching**



Note.  $n = 54$  responses to messages with coach involvement and 138 without coach involvement.

development, state monitors, the textbook, and their principal, among others. Interaction with the two reading coaches represented only one source of messages about what teachers should or must do related to Reading First. In fact, coaches were only involved in 28% of the 192 messages that teachers encountered.<sup>7</sup> In some instances, a coach was the primary initiator of a message during professional development, a grade-level meeting, or while conferring with a teacher. In other cases, a coach reinforced a message emanating from other sources, including the state and district policy levels. Yet, as Figure 2 shows, when coaches were involved in presenting or reinforcing Reading First messages, teachers were much more likely to accommodate and much less likely to assimilate, have parallel structures, respond symbolically, or reject messages. In other words, when coaches were involved, teachers tended to have deeper forms of enactment of Reading First approaches.

Prior research has concentrated on coaches' work in helping teachers to learn about and integrate new approaches into the classroom (Garet et al., 2008; Marsh et al., 2010; Matsumura, Garnier, Correnti, et al., 2010; Poglinco et al., 2003; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010; Wei et al., 2009). That is, prior research has focused on coaches' roles in educating teachers about new instructional approaches. Indeed, the coaches in our study played an important educative role that influenced how teachers implemented some aspects of Reading First. However, we found that coaches also played a political role. Politics can be understood as "a diverse range of social practices through which people negotiate power relations" (Gregory, 1998, p. 13). This conception of politics acknowledges how power relations are established and enacted in the course of day-to-day social and professional relationships. In our study, we found that coaches negotiated power rela-

tions with teachers as they pressured them, attempted to persuade them, and coached them on ways to circumvent Reading First mandates. We discuss coaches' educative and political roles in turn.

### Coaches' Educative Role: Practical Support for Implementation

Teachers face many challenges when translating broad policy messages into specific classroom practices. At Franklin, the two coaches often worked with teachers, providing advice on how to integrate instructional approaches into their classrooms. The coaches sat with grade-level teams to help them analyze their data and discuss next steps for practice. They led professional development sessions. They provided classroom demonstrations and, less frequently, cotaught to model new instructional approaches. The coaches also provided one-on-one assistance with instructional planning, organizing the reading block, and rearranging the classroom to enable the reading centers promoted by Massachusetts Reading First.

Throughout these activities, the coaches were often able to support teachers in moving to deeper forms of implementation because they helped them negotiate technical challenges of enacting new approaches in their classrooms. The coaches also assisted teachers to push past their first, more superficial responses, where they typically transformed policy through their preexisting worldviews and practice (rejection or assimilation), toward deeper understanding, where they were able to reconstruct their practice in light of the new policy (accommodation). To illustrate this point, we turn to an extended description of Lynn and her efforts to incorporate assessment into her instruction as stipulated by Reading First.

In year 1, Lynn was a new first-grade teacher at Franklin, having previously taught for two years at

another school. When she arrived at Franklin, she found expectations for assessment that were considerably different from those at her prior school. Lynn had limited experience using assessment in an ongoing manner to inform her instruction. During year 1 (the first year of our study), she was trained to use the DIBELS assessments as part of the school's participation in the Reading Excellence Act. She administered the assessment as required by the school and used it to identify low-achieving students to participate in a pull-out reading intervention program, but she did not use it to inform her own instructional strategies or instructional grouping.

As soon as the school found out that it had received the Reading First grant, one of the first things Lynn and other teachers learned was that this meant that they were going to do a lot of assessment. At that time, Lynn told us,

That's the big piece, I guess. With this grant, the whole assessment piece is that...if you're not going to assess it, if it's not worth assessing...then it's not worth taking the time to teach it. Everything you teach, you have to assess and yada, yada, yada.

She encountered this message along with the message that teachers should use assessment to inform instruction repeatedly during the summer Reading First workshop, during school-year professional development with the service provider from the state, and from the principal and assistant principal. Yet, early in year 2, Lynn expressed confusion about how to manage all the new assessment and what it really meant to use it to inform her instruction beyond what she was already doing: "It really made me nervous...because I'm like, well, how are we going to do that, and especially with first graders and things like that?" She also was skeptical that the assessment would actually be useful for her students. She explained that gathering the data was not really meant to help her improve her instruction: "It's for the adults. They could come in and would know [how kids are doing] if they asked us, but they want to see it on paper."

Lynn and other teachers worked with the coaches both individually and in grade-level meetings to analyze assessment results and brainstorm instructional responses. The two coaches provided guidance that helped teachers see how they could use assessments to inform their instruction in quite specific ways. Harriet, one of the Reading First coaches, explained, "What I do like about the DIBELS is that it really sort of subdivides the area, segmenting and blending. That is a nice part of it, that it really targets the specific areas." For example, in one meeting, we saw Harriet look at a teacher's individual data from the DIBELS and lead a discussion about next steps for instruction. She explained, "The goals are understanding what are the

confusions that they have. You can see that [in this data] in the fluency. You get the kind of information to...support instruction." She went on to lead a discussion in which teachers brainstormed different ways to build fluency for students who scored poorly on the assessment of nonsense-word fluency.

As the year went on, Lynn began to get a better understanding of how she could use the results from assessments in the service of specific instructional decisions. By the spring of year 2, there was evidence that she was regularly using the DIBELS data to inform her instructional practice and student grouping. For example, when asked why she was doing a particular activity with a small group of students during an observation, she explained,

We've been doing a lot of making-words activities because it just helps with their segmenting and starting to recognize word families, and it seems to help them put it all together a little bit more and especially after not only this set of DIBELS results that you were there going over with us but the set from before. Segmenting was a big issue; had a lot of kids that were at risk for segmenting. So, [this activity] seems to help because they blend the sounds.

Lynn credited Harriet with helping her integrate assessment into her instruction: "She was part...of those meetings [in which we] discussed what did we need to be focusing on and using the DIBELS to plan our instruction or change a child's group or things like that. So, she's been a lot with getting the elements of Reading First incorporated and up and running in our rooms." Additionally, "[Harriet] has also been a huge help and a huge support...[She] has been very supportive in lending me books and materials, helping me set up my schedule so I can fit everything in."

By helping Lynn and other teachers learn how to analyze their data, pinpoint specific ways that they could use that information in their instruction, and organize their instruction to address the individual needs of children as revealed by the assessment, the coaches helped teachers integrate assessment into their practice in substantive ways. Indeed, we found that six out of seven teachers transformed their stance from administering assessment and never looking at the data in year 1 (prior to Reading First) to using it to inform their instruction on an ongoing basis in year 2. We considered this response to be accommodation. Teachers were much more likely to respond to a given message with accommodation when a coach was involved. Teachers responded with accommodation to 52% of messages that involved the coach (28 messages), compared with only 15% (21 messages) when coaches were not involved.

Teachers were also less likely to respond to Reading First messages with assimilation when they worked with a coach. Assimilation occurred when

teachers tried to implement a new approach but focused on surface-level features of instruction (i.e., grouping, materials, topics) rather than the underlying pedagogical approach. As Cohen (1990) illustrated in his oft-cited article about Mrs. Oublier's attempt to reform her mathematics instruction, teachers who assimilate policy messages often embrace new approaches wholeheartedly but lack the support to transform their instruction in deeper ways, resulting in assimilation rather than accommodation.

In our study, teachers rarely responded with assimilation when the coach was involved. Returning to the example of Nancy and comprehension strategies, Nancy learned about explicit instruction in comprehension strategies during a summer workshop on Reading First and by reading about the approach in the teacher's manual. When she experimented with the new instructional approach in her classroom, she had no assistance in seeing the difference between the approach promoted by Reading First and her understanding and enactment of it. In the absence of support, Nancy responded to Reading First's call to teach reading comprehension strategies explicitly by making only superficial changes in her instruction. Teachers were much more likely to respond with assimilation when there was no coach involvement. When the coach was not involved, teachers responded with assimilation to 10% of the Reading First messages they encountered (14 messages). In contrast, they responded with assimilation to only 2% of the messages they worked on with the coach (1 message).

### **Coaches' Political Role: Pressuring, Persuading, and Buffering**

Although most of the research on coaching has focused on their educative roles, we found that coaches also interacted with teachers in political ways; that is, they interacted in ways that involved asserting and negotiating power in attempts to push or coax teachers to respond to Reading First in specific ways. Coaches often find themselves in a difficult position because at the same time that they are asked to support teachers' self-directed learning, they are also responsible for getting teachers to implement specific instructional approaches that are advocated by the policy or school or district leadership (Ippolito, 2010). Furthermore, coaches typically have no explicit authority over teachers (Ippolito, 2010; Little, 1990)<sup>8</sup> and are often represented to teachers as peers. The two coaches in this study felt these tensions keenly. For example, in describing her efforts with one teacher, Harriet remarked,

He didn't want to give up control. There were certain things in his room that he saw that he thinks need to stay in place [even though I think they are problematic]. And I'm not his supervisor. I don't wear that badge.

Carol characterized the tensions more bluntly: "We're in a precarious situation...myself and Harriet, because we are pseudo-administrators, but we're not administrators. So, it's a very interesting balance just in itself in terms of power." In this study, coaches navigated these tensions by engaging in a number of activities that went beyond simply providing professional learning experiences for teachers. More specifically, coaches pressured teachers, attempted to persuade them to respond to some aspects of Reading First, and buffered them from others. In this section, we argue that these political moves played a role in how teachers responded to Reading First messages.

#### **Pressuring**

At the same time that they supported teachers' learning, the coaches also pressured teachers to implement specific Reading First approaches. That is, the coaches explicitly invoked power to get teachers to make changes in their classrooms. In most cases, perhaps because they did not have formal authority over teachers, the coaches invoked the power of others—the grant, the principal, or the state—to pressure teachers. Harriet explained how she often referred to the grant and the principal in order to encourage teachers to do certain things:

I'll...tell them what our goal is and if they have any concerns that they can take it up with [the principal], but *this is what I need them to do*. Most of them are very gracious. They know that I'm not just coming in to do anything that would be hurtful to them or the kids. They know that [the principal is] not sending me to do that. Like I said, the purpose of the grant has been made very clear to them along with the school improvement plan.

The principal also commented on how coaches, especially Harriet, pressured teachers to attend to the requirements of the grant:

Harriet...go[es] in and actually say[s] to a teacher, "Look, we need to change. This is the way we are going to do it." The teachers have the option. They all signed on for this grant, so we are going to fulfill all of the obligations of the grant, or you will transfer [out of the school]. That's not negotiable. Because with privilege goes responsibility, and there's a lot of money attached to this. So, the expectations are high...Harriet would...remind them that this is your responsibility.

Six out of seven teachers linked the coaches' messages about Reading First with the principal (asserting that the coach was acting on behalf of the principal) or the grant (asserting that the coaches were acting on behalf of the grant, which teachers had agreed to abide by as part of the grant application process). In this way, the coaches leveraged the authority of others to



support their efforts to pressure teachers to respond to Reading First.

For example, Reading First requires teachers to incorporate centers into their reading instruction. According to a presentation by the MDE (2007) on the Massachusetts Reading First Plan, all teachers are to “include literacy centers that target specific dimensions of reading based on student needs as well as time for independent reading” (p. 22). The MDE (2008) further stipulated that centers should include three to five students in a group; provide instructional activities that “match reading lesson and student needs; [provide] extra needed practice on taught skills...; [and include] skills and strategies from this week’s lesson” (p. 25).

Several first-grade teachers already used centers, but most second-grade teachers (and others in upper grades) did not, and some teachers did not use centers in the way stipulated by Reading First. For example, during year 1 of our study, James, a second-grade teacher, taught reading in a whole-class configuration. He knew that several first-grade teachers used centers and that the reading coaches were enthusiastic about them, but he was skeptical. He felt that centers would be challenging for classroom management and was not convinced that the work children did in them was worthwhile. He went so far as to observe first-grade centers, but this did not convince him to reorganize his classroom. He explained,

I was into seeing what it was all about and seeing if it could work, but when she did the centers, I thought there were too many, and I didn’t really like the tasks that they needed to complete in each center. I thought it was more fluff. There was learning there; it’s just I didn’t feel like there was a lot of substance to it.... If you’re asking if it’s for me, I would probably have to say no.

In year 2, the coaches spent a lot of time trying to get teachers who did not have centers to rearrange their classrooms. The coaches offered to help teachers physically set up the classrooms. They offered to help plan connections between center activities and other aspects of teachers’ reading program so they could use centers to reinforce the concepts they were working on in other aspects of their instruction. The coaches offered to provide activities for centers so teachers would not have to create new activities themselves. Along with these educative activities, the coaches also explicitly pressured teachers. Carol explained,

Reading First said you have to have centers. The walls have to look like this. It has to be a standard-based classroom. So, that pushed this into happening where people were resisting. So, we [are having to] pressure to get teachers who are either ancient and don’t want to move or young and don’t want to move. It’s “you need to move, and we’ll give you all the support you need to move, and we’re not even judging you about it.” It’s like, “here you go, let’s go.”

By midyear, when state monitors were planning to visit, the coaches went so far as to provide teachers with a checklist of expectations for what their rooms needed to look like, with centers clearly spelled out. One teacher explained,

[The checklist] was given to us at a staff meeting...and it said just go through your rooms and the days leading up to the visit; like after school they had a couple of staff members walking through rooms and checking through rooms and kind of looking for things or if there was anything glaringly missing or things like that.

The coaches also took pictures of classrooms that were already arranged in centers and did a PowerPoint presentation at a faculty meeting showcasing these rooms.

Throughout all this, James and other second-grade teachers were still hesitant to shift to centers. However, James eventually allowed the coaches to help him reconfigure his classroom. He worked with another teacher to develop new center activities, attentive to demands from the coaches and Reading First. He explained,

[The coaches] want a writing center, and because our room is very small, we came up with a mobile writing center, so [the coach] really liked that idea. She has come in at least two or three times...and [even] shown district coordinators. So, from that, we’re gathering that she likes that.

Ultimately, James was also pleased with the new arrangement. Midway through the year, he explained

Hopefully, as we’re able to develop more and more centers, it’ll just cover all of the curriculum that may not be able to be taught through direct instruction. Then, we’ll assess it as we go, and that will help to drive our instruction, too, through minilessons or whole-group instruction.

The coaches used pressuring in half of the Reading First messages teachers encountered that involved the coach (27 out of 54 messages). In addition to centers, the coaches explicitly pressured teachers to use the adopted text, move away from whole-class instruction, use assessments, use a specific approach to vocabulary instruction, and have the prescribed number of minutes for various components of reading instruction. Although explicit pressuring was sometimes influential in getting teachers to change their practice, as in the case of James and centers, it was not the coaches’ most effective strategy. Whereas teachers responded with accommodation to 36% of messages they encountered that involved pressuring by the coach (10 messages), teachers responded with accommodation to 69% of messages (18 messages) when the coaches did not pressure. At the same time, however, the coaches were more influential when they used pressuring than other



actors. Teachers accommodated 36% of messages that involved pressuring by the coach (10 messages), compared with only 12% of messages that involved pressuring by others in the school, district, or state (6 messages). Teachers were also less likely to reject messages that involved pressuring from a coach (which teachers rejected 46% of the time, or 13 messages) than messages that involved pressuring from others (which teachers rejected 56% of the time, or 28 messages).

### ***Persuading***

The coaches also acted in ways that involved politics when they attempted to persuade teachers to make changes in their practice. With persuasion, the coaches did not use explicit power to get teachers to change. Rather, they talked with teachers about Reading First to get them to want to respond to policy messages with classroom change on their own. One of the main ways that coaches did so was by persuading teachers that the new practices from Reading First were similar to what they already did or were consistent with their beliefs and values. In this way, coaches shaped how teachers came to understand the meaning and implications of a new message, which shaped their response. We call this strategy constructing congruence.

The coaches helped teachers see Reading First messages as being like their existing practice or see connections between Reading First approaches and other things that they valued and believed in, sometimes even when the approaches represented quite a departure. For example, one teacher described how the coach helped assuage her concerns about Reading First:

And talking to [one of the coaches]—because I have a few concerns—and I talked to [the coach] about it, and she said mainly “You’re already doing what the grant is going to be. Don’t worry.” So I was like “OK.”

Another explained,

And what we were told by [one of the reading coaches] was that we won’t have to change much because it’s primarily balanced literacy [the approach widely used in the school] ...I hope we take it to the next level, which is figuring out how to really get kids what they need within the classroom.

When coaches helped teachers see aspects of Reading First as being congruent with their preexisting beliefs and practices, they were often able to persuade teachers to engage with the ideas and approaches in the first place, in what researchers have called shaping teacher sensemaking (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Coburn, 2005a) or sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

To illustrate this phenomenon, we return to the example of James, this time to discuss his response to

messages about fluency instruction. In year 1, James drew on lessons from professional development in guided reading to promote fluency among his struggling readers. He focused on having students engage in repeated readings of familiar texts. He also modeled how to read with expression. He explained, “For fluency...I’m reading the Big Book to them, [modeling] how my voice changes, expressive language, how to not read word for word but have a flow.” Indeed, during year 1, we documented in our field notes the following fluency task, which was representative of the four fluency tasks we observed:

James conducted a lesson on reading fluency. He said, “We’re going to read aloud again and follow along. I’m going to read it, and you are going to follow along and pay attention to how I read, where my voice is changing, and then we’re going to read together a few times, and then you’re going to read it to me individually, one on one.” James read it out loud. He read with lots of expression, strong pauses. He varied his voice when the boy and the father talk. He sounded excited when there was an exclamation point. He raised his voice at the end when there was a question. There were some kids reading along out loud as James was reading it, but they end up stopping because they were kind of going too fast. James was very much taking his time in reading it with expression. When James finished, he asked, “What did you notice when I read?” One student said, “It sounded like the little boy.” James asked, “How did my voice change when the boy spoke?” The kid imitated the way that the little boy spoke; he repeated the sentence, imitating James’s cadence. James said, “That’s right. I paid attention to the exclamation point at the end.”

In year 2, a great deal of Reading First professional development emphasized instructional approaches to foster fluency, especially for students who scored low on DIBELS tests of oral reading fluency and nonsense-word fluency. As Harriet explained, “Reading First is all about fluency right now. That’s the big buzz.” Many of these instructional strategies had a different character than those that teachers had engaged with before. Rather than rereading familiar texts (often the predictable texts that students had used in guided reading groups), the Reading First professional development and coaches emphasized practicing fluency with text at a controlled reading level. Rather than emphasizing oral expression, as James and other teachers did with their guided reading training, these fluency drills emphasized speed. The main goal was for children to read as many words accurately as possible in a minute.

The coaches encouraged teachers to use these new approaches to fluency in school-level professional development and in grade-level discussions of DIBELS scores, emphasizing the similarities of this approach to fluency with what teachers were already doing. For

example, in one professional development session, we saw Harriet repeatedly tell second-grade teachers, “we’re already doing most of these,” while going through a list of different fluency activities provided by the state for teachers to use with students with low scores on the DIBELS.

Indeed, James resonated with the description of the approach as being like his existing practice. He took on Harriet’s way of understanding the new approach to fluency, explaining,

Like Harriet was saying, we’ll practice the task of becoming a fluent reader. Where we use programs that we’ve used in the past, we’ll just now use it to target those individual students who haven’t reached the goal on this one assessment. Where in the past it may have been more of a larger group of students...now we’re using the data that we have...to target it.

Consequently, James decided to try several of the new fluency exercises. By the spring of year 2, his approach to fluency had shifted in the direction of Reading First. During two spring observations, we observed James giving students the one-minute fluency drills given to him by Harriet.

We saw the coaches construct congruence with 11 Reading First messages that teachers encountered (22% of messages involving the coach). The two coaches took this approach most frequently with the new assessment requirements of Reading First, but we also saw them use it with centers and, as the above example illustrates, fluency instruction. The coaches’ efforts to construct congruence appeared to be effective. Every time we saw the coaches construct congruence, teachers subsequently reported that the messages were either moderately or highly congruent with their preexisting practice.<sup>9</sup> This compares to 51% of messages overall. (See Appendix for information about how we coded perceived congruence.)

Perceptions of congruence were important. When teachers saw Reading First messages as at least some-

what congruent with their beliefs and practices, they were more likely to try new approaches and activities. As Figure 3 shows, teachers were more likely to accommodate and less likely to reject and respond symbolically to messages that they perceived as being aligned with their preexisting beliefs and practices.<sup>10</sup>

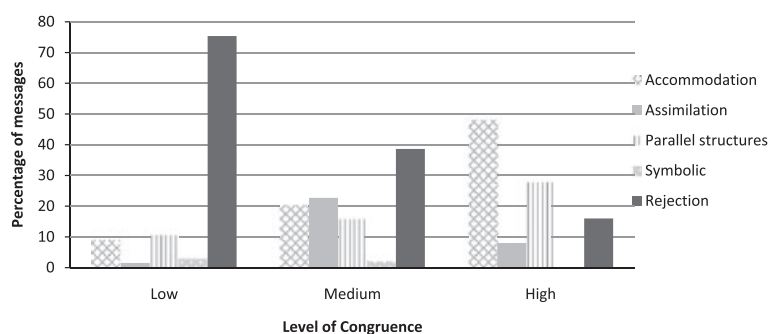
Thus, the coaches’ efforts to construct congruence, to persuade teachers to take up practices because they were not much different from what they were already doing, played an important role in influencing how teachers responded to Reading First messages.

### Buffering

At the same time that the coaches intensified some Reading First messages through pressuring and persuading, they also protected teachers from others by buffering them. The coaches provided guidance to teachers about which messages to ignore, counseling them to respond symbolically instead. To illustrate this point, we return to the example of Kara and decodable texts.

As part of Reading First, the school was required to adopt a new core reading program, and teachers were required to use it to guide their instruction. Several teachers adopted the core reading program and followed it quite closely, but some teachers did not want to use the core reading series, or any textbook, as the main text for their reading instruction. Kara, the first-grade teacher with extensive training in guided reading approaches, was perhaps the strongest in this resolve. She did not want to use the reading series for guided reading because the stories in the early part of the year were decodable text, and Kara felt strongly that children needed to learn to decode in the context of “meaningful, connected text,” like the predictable texts she used in her guided reading groups. As discussed earlier, rather than using the decodable books in her reading groups, Kara put the books in students’ independent book boxes, never referring to them or using them in any way.

**Figure 3. Teachers’ Responses to Reading First Messages by Different Levels of Perceived Congruence**



Note. *n* = 192 responses to messages.

However, when state monitors visited the school, Kara's room was selected for observation. The state monitor chastised Kara for not using the decodable texts in her guided reading groups. After the state monitors left, the coaches told Kara to keep her instruction as is but to use the decodable books and the teacher's manual for the reading series during the state monitors' visits. Harriet explained,

I believe in many of the things that are in Reading First, but they are not the only way to make all children read by grade 3. I'm not going to stand and profess to the teachers I coach that "you will follow this to the letter."...We're going to do what's right for the kids. That's not written in any document, but that is what I tell them...I have told my teachers that I've got them [the predictable texts that Kara uses], and we are going to use this to support [the adopted core reading series]...So that's how we're going to take care of our phonics and spelling because it makes sense and it's right. [But] we won't be doing it on the day of the state visit!

We saw eight instances when the coaches encouraged teachers to respond symbolically to policy, thereby buffering them from pressures from district and state administrators (15% of all messages that teachers encountered involving the coach). In half of these instances, teachers responded to the coaches' efforts by making symbolic changes in their classrooms to make it appear as if they were complying with Reading First. In fact, we saw only one instance when teachers responded symbolically when coaches were not involved.

Although we have discussed educative and political roles separately, in reality they were very much intertwined. As the coaches helped teachers understand new messages and integrate them into their classrooms, the coaches often also simultaneously attempted to pressure and persuade teachers as well. While coaches were helping teachers learn and deepen their understanding of new instructional approaches, they were also negotiating their position vis-à-vis teachers, the principal, and the state. This suggests that power and learning are perhaps more intertwined than either scholars of teacher learning or scholars of policy implementation have considered.

## Discussion

Now more than ever, policymakers have turned their attention to reading instruction. They are also increasingly relying on instructional coaching as a mechanism to encourage and assist teachers in changing their reading practice in the direction of the policy. Reading First was no exception to this trend. Coaching played a central role in Reading First's theory of change (Bright & Hensley, 2010; Deussen et al., 2007). Our study provides evidence that coaching did, in fact, play an

important role in how teachers responded to Reading First. When teachers worked with coaches, they were able to move toward deeper forms of implementation, as evidenced by the relatively high percentage of accommodation and the relatively low percentages of parallel structure or assimilation when the coach was involved. However, we also show that coaching worked differently than anticipated. Coaches helped teachers learn new approaches, as highlighted in the extant literature on coaching, but at the same time, they also pressured and persuaded teachers to make change. Moreover, they played a key gatekeeping role, providing teachers advice on which aspects of Reading First to embrace and which to ignore. It was by using both educative and political roles that coaches mediated between Reading First policy and teachers' classroom practice.

These findings have three main implications for research on coaching and policy implementation. First, this study contributes to research on reading coaches by providing further evidence of a link between coaching and change in teachers' classroom practice. Most studies of reading coaches have focused on describing what they do (Bean et al., 2003; Deussen et al., 2007; Dole, 2004; Zigmond & Bean, 2006). This makes sense because coaching is a relatively new and somewhat counternormative role in U.S. schools (Little, 1990), and it is important to understand just what coaches do when they work with teachers.

To date, however, few studies have investigated how coaches' actions, roles, and activities influence teachers' classroom practice. Our study builds and extends on the handful of studies that have (Garet et al., 2008; Matsumura et al., 2010a; Walpole et al., 2010). By comparing teachers' responses to messages when coaches were or were not involved, we provide evidence that teachers were more likely to make substantive change in their reading instruction and less likely to reject or have a more superficial response when they worked with a coach. Most notably, when teachers worked with coaches, they accommodated 52% of the Reading First messages they encountered, compared with 15% without. This percentage is striking, given that prior studies using this or similar constructs have reported that accommodation is a challenging and relatively rare response (Coburn, 2004, 2005b; Smith, 2000; Spillane & Jennings, 1997; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999). For example, in a previous study of teachers' responses to changes in state reading policy, one of us found that teachers responded to only 9% of policy messages with accommodation (Coburn, 2004).

Furthermore, our study suggests that coaching is especially effective in influencing aspects of teaching that are most difficult to change. Prior research has suggested that teachers are more inclined to shift the content of their instruction than their pedagogical

approaches (Coburn et al., 2010; Diamond, 2007; Firestone & Mayrowetz, 2000; Smith, 2000). Yet, in this study, we show that coaches were quite influential when working with teachers on policy messages related to pedagogy. Teachers accommodated 44% of messages they encountered related to pedagogy when they worked on them with a coach, compared to only 16% related to pedagogy when the coach was not involved. Thus, this study not only provides new evidence that coaching has an important influence on classroom practice but also shows that coaches' influence may be even greater for aspects of instruction that are more challenging to change.

Second, this study also uncovers political dimensions of the coach–teacher relationship. Prior research has focused almost exclusively on how coaching functions to help teachers learn new approaches (Bean, 2004; Bean et al., 2010; Deussen et al., 2007; Garet et al., 2008; Marsh et al., 2008; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). This work has paid little attention to issues of power that may be involved in coach–teacher relationships and the implications of power relations for changes in teachers' practice. To the extent that the coaching literature has attended to power, it focuses mainly on formal authority relations. For example, there are widespread calls to separate coaches' support role from principals' evaluation role (e.g., see Bean & DeFord, 2007; Knight, 2009; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). The argument is that teachers will be hesitant to discuss their practice openly if they fear there will be consequences for their employment; therefore, coaching and support functions must be kept distinct from evaluation functions so coaches can work more effectively in their support role (Goldstein, 2007). This argument implicitly acknowledges power, in this case, the way that power is encoded in principals' formal authority to hire and fire teachers as part of their evaluation role. The argument also assumes that power is not present in relationships focused exclusively on support.

However, our study provides evidence that power relations can also be present in support relationships, even when formal authority or formal evaluation is not involved. We show that coaches not only support teachers' learning but also engage in subtle and not-so-subtle efforts to influence how teachers respond to improvement initiatives. Sometimes this involves persuading or pressuring teachers to implement new instructional approaches. At other times, it involves discouraging teachers from implementing new approaches and protecting them from outside influence. Coaches sometimes invoke the power of the principal, the state, and the grant to pressure teachers to move in certain directions. Also, coaches sometimes position themselves between the state and teachers, exercising power as they buffer teachers from state and

district intervention. Most subtle, perhaps, coaches use power to influence teachers' sensemaking processes, as they did in our study when they persuaded teachers that Reading First was like their existing practice, shaping their inclination to try new approaches in the first place. In this way, teachers' sensemaking about policy, their efforts to understand the meaning and implications of new instructional approaches, is both assisted by the coach and shaped by the power relations between them.

We also show that some political moves are more effective than others in influencing teachers' practice in substantive rather than symbolic ways. For example, we show that although teachers were more likely to respond to explicit pressure with accommodation when coaches did the pressuring than when principals, district leaders, or representatives of the state did, pressuring was still not as effective in influencing teacher practice as other political strategies that the coach employed. Thus, our study not only shows that coaching relationships involve power relations but also provides preliminary evidence that different political moves influence practice in different ways and to different degrees.

It is possible that coaches' political roles may be particularly salient or particularly consequential when coaching occurs in the context of policy implementation. In this situation, coaches are asked to encourage teachers to move toward a particular vision of instruction rather than simply helping teachers get better at what they are currently doing. It is also possible that Reading First, with its emphasis on fidelity of implementation and extensive monitoring, created additional pressure on coaches to use the political approaches we identified, accounting for their salience in this study.

However, a careful reading of existing empirical literature hints at the presence of power relations in coaching in nonpolicy contexts. For example, Ippolito (2010) documented reading coaches' efforts to balance what she called responsive relationships (in which coaches respond to teachers' needs) with what she called directive relationships (in which coaches are assertive about what approaches teachers should do). Ippolito studied district literacy coaches, but coaching did not appear to be located in a specific policy initiative, and there did not appear to be a core set of practices that coaches were charged with encouraging teachers to implement. Similarly, Rainville and Jones (2008) reported that the coach in their study "wielded tremendous power in the teacher–learner relationship" (p. 444) by controlling coach–teacher conversations. Again, the coaching did not appear to be part of a formal policy initiative in this study. Finally, Camburn, Kimball, and Lowenhaupt (2008) reported that some literacy coaches in the

district they studied saw themselves as third in command in the school, after the principal and vice principal. All of these studies have provided evidence that issues of power play a role in coaching relationships, even when coaching is not part of top-down policy mandates.

This suggests the need for future research that attends to both the learning processes and the political processes in the relationship between coaching and teacher practice. Such research is necessary to understand when and under what conditions coaching involves political practices such as the ones highlighted here. Do coaches use different political practices if a coaching initiative positions them differently in relation to the district, school leaders, and teachers? What if the context is less high stakes? What if the initiative does not involve attention to fidelity of implementation of a specific set of practices as Reading First did? Further research is also necessary to investigate when coaches' political practices contribute to substantive change and when they contribute to compliance behaviors such as symbolic response or parallel structures. Understanding the interplay between coaches' educative and political roles and the consequences for change in teacher practice is important. It has the potential to inform professional development for coaches and may be useful for designing coaching initiatives, especially those in which coaches are asked to both support teachers' learning and ensure that that learning is in a particular direction.

Third, this study has methodological lessons for researchers studying teachers' responses to policy or reform initiatives. Prior studies of teachers' response to policy, including those focused on Reading First, tended to report on teachers' overall levels of implementation. However, this approach masks the fact that teachers rarely respond to policy in an all-or-nothing way. Reading policies are typically complex and multifaceted. There are multiple messages that target different aspects of teachers' classroom practice and that are delivered to teachers through varied means. Likewise, teachers respond to these different messages in a range of ways, from rejection and symbolic response to assimilation and accommodation. Methods for analyzing classroom practice must recognize the multidimensionality of instructional policy and classroom change. This study offers one approach that analyzes both different dimensions of policy and different levels of classroom change. There may be other research designs that meet these goals as well. The point here is that unpacking this multidimensionality is crucial, for it provides a foundation for understanding when and under what conditions teachers respond to policy messages in what ways.

This study also suggests the benefits of having strong baseline observational measures of teachers' classroom practice from before the onset of a new ini-

tiative. Because of a fortuitous set of circumstances, we had extensive classroom observations from the year before Reading First implementation. Having baseline data enabled us to assess the degree to which Reading First policy actually represented a change in teachers' classroom practice without relying on teachers' self-reports. Researchers and policymakers alike tend to assume that the instructional approaches promoted by policy are new to teachers. If teachers' classroom practice resembles the policy, researchers and policymakers infer that it is because teachers made change in response to the policy. However, we found that in the year prior to Reading First implementation, teachers were already routinely engaged in practices that they were later asked to do by Reading First. Drawing inferences about teachers' response to policy based on observations during the implementation year alone would have significantly overstated the impact of the policy and impeded our ability to understand coaches' role in this process.

Having fine-grained observational data on teachers' classroom practice from the year prior to the policy also enabled us to more accurately identify the different ways that teachers made changes in their practice. For example, knowledge of prior practice was critical for our ability to assess whether teachers' implementation involved transforming their preexisting approaches to reading instruction (accommodation) or whether teachers instead remade policy messages in the image of their existing instructional approaches (assimilation). Collecting data prior to the onset of a new initiative is difficult to achieve logistically, but this study suggests that it may bring considerable rewards analytically. At a minimum, studies without prior observational data must be more cautious about the conclusions they draw about the impact of policy on teachers' classroom practice.

As districts, states, and even the federal government increasingly turn to instructional coaching to support their efforts to improve reading instruction, it is important to understand not only if coaching promotes teacher improvement and student learning but also how. This study confirms and extends prior research on the educative features of coaching and also uncovers the political features. In so doing, it acknowledges the complicated intersection between power and learning. Additionally, it suggests that future studies of coaching should not only give greater attention to the relationship between coaching and teacher change but also the way that educational and political actions interact to shape that relationship.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Several teachers also had received master's degrees in reading instruction from a nearby university, whose faculty members

were national leaders in guided reading approaches to reading instruction.

<sup>2</sup> The DIBELS assessment is based on a somewhat different theory of how children learn to read than the Fountas and Pinnell (1996) approach to guided reading. For example, whereas teachers were taught during guided reading professional development to help students learn to decode by using graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic clues, the DIBELS assessment and accompanying instructional approaches instructed teachers to focus solely on graphophonic cues. Similarly, whereas teachers were encouraged to teach phonics and phonemic awareness in the context of stories in their guided reading professional development, the professional development they received in year 1 of the study focused on explicit, systemic instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness outside the context of stories. Thus, in bringing DIBELS and accompanying professional development in phonics and phonemic awareness into the school in year 1, the reform provider initiated a shift away from guided reading principles; this shift continued in year 2 with the introduction of Reading First.

<sup>3</sup> This teacher was subsequently removed from her classroom in the middle of the second year of our study because of performance issues.

<sup>4</sup> Forty-eight percent of messages addressed decoding, 18% addressed assessment, 18% addressed structure, 16% dealt with comprehension, and none addressed writing. No messages were double coded.

<sup>5</sup> Every teacher in our sample encountered some messages that represented practices that they were already doing, although some more so than others. For example, Amanda was at the low end of the spectrum; just over 40% of the Reading First messages were things she was already doing in her classroom. At the other end of the spectrum, just over 60% of the messages represented practices that James, a second-grade teacher, already did in his classroom. Across all teachers, messages about classroom structure (especially about the use of centers) and assessment were most likely to already be in place in teachers' classroom practice, followed by decoding and comprehension.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that this strategy—focusing only on messages that would require a change in practice—is unusual. More typically, researchers lack data on instructional approaches prior to the onset of a new initiative. Thus, they tend to assume that practice that resembles that sought by policy represents a change in response to policy, when it could simply mean a continuation of prior practice. In a sense, by focusing only on messages that were required teachers to change their practice, we controlled for teachers' prior practice, providing a more accurate assessment of the degree to which teachers actually changed their practice in response to policy.

<sup>7</sup> Teachers, especially those in high-need, low-achieving schools like Franklin, frequently experience pressure to improve their instruction from multiple sources and multiple initiatives simultaneously (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Coburn, 2004; Coburn et al., 2010; Fullan, 2001; Gallucci, Knapp, Markholt, & Ort, 2007). Because teachers rarely experience coaching in isolation, our study was explicitly designed to examine instructional coaching as it unfolded in the context of other efforts at the school. In so doing, it demonstrated how coaching was one of many things that teachers were encountering. Yet, because few other studies of coaching have mechanisms for distinguishing coaching from all of the other efforts that teachers experience simultaneously, it is impossible to tell whether 28% is a large or small percentage of all messages that teachers encounter. Thus, it is impossible to tell whether our study captured coaching at a high level of intensity. It is important to note, however, that coaches' involvement in a message could mean that they worked with a team of teachers iteratively

over the course of several months, as was the case with the coaches' work with teachers on reading centers. Furthermore, these 28% of messages kept the school's two full-time reading coaches very busy. However, it is still possible that this school is at the low end of coaching intensity relative to other initiatives as compared with other schools. Thus, the findings in this article should be treated with caution until further studies designed to investigate coaching in the context of other mechanisms for improving teachers' reading practice can help the field understand where this school sits in relation to others.

<sup>8</sup> Although most coaching models do not involve coaches having formal authority over teachers in any manner, there is one model that is experimenting with coaches having formal authority to evaluate teachers: Peer Assistance and Review. See Goldstein (2007, 2010) for more information.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth remembering that this analysis is done only with messages that are new to teachers. We excluded messages that represented practices that teachers were already doing. Thus, even though the coach told teachers that these practices were like what they already did, the messages required teachers to make changes in practice, at times substantially. This makes it all the more striking that teachers saw these practices as congruent with their pre-existing practice.

<sup>10</sup> In some ways, it is surprising that the coaches' efforts to construct congruence were associated with substantive responses such as accommodation. Prior research on sensemaking has suggested that when teachers see new approaches as being like their existing ones, they tend to focus on surface structures and thus see superficial similarities, especially when teachers have less-developed content knowledge. Furthermore, when they focus on surface structures, they are more likely to assimilate the approach into their existing ways of thinking or doing things rather than engaging in more transformative change (Spillane et al., 2002). However, in this study, teachers' substantive response may be due to the fact that the coaches' persuasion—their attempts to get teachers to see Reading First as being like their existing practice—was often accompanied by technical support from the coach that helped teachers make deeper change. In this way, the coaches' ability to construct congruence may have encouraged teachers to engage with the new ideas in the first place, but their technical support enabled teachers to recognize and address the deeper implications of the message, thus enabling more substantive changes.

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# Appendix

## Definitions Used in Coding

Code	Definition
<i>Content/pedagogy</i>	Whether a given message addressed the content or pedagogy of reading instruction
• Content	Messages that told teachers what aspects of reading instruction to teach or what objectives to cover versus ignore
• Pedagogy	Messages that told teachers how to teach reading instruction, including which instructional methods and materials to use, how to group students, and how to structure the classroom environment and instructional time
<i>Element of instruction</i>	Whether a given message addressed the elements of assessment, decoding, or comprehension
• Assessment	Messages about reading instruction that specified reading assessments to administer or analyze, as well as how to administer or analyze those tests of students' reading development
• Decoding	Messages that provided ideas and information about what and how to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency instruction
• Comprehension	Messages that provided ideas and information about what and how to teach the comprehension element of literacy, including vocabulary, comprehension strategies and skills, and analysis of textual features
• Structure	Messages that provided ideas and information about how to organize the classroom space and allocate time for reading instruction
<i>Perceived congruence</i>	The teacher's perception of the extent to which the content of a message about reading corresponds with preexisting worldviews or practices
• Low	The teacher characterized messages as inappropriate, inconceivable, potentially ineffective, or not fitting with what he or she is already doing.
• Medium	The teacher characterized messages as unfamiliar but plausible, appropriate in some respects but not others, or fitting with some aspects of classroom instruction but not others.
• High	The teacher characterized messages as something that he or she is already doing, as fitting with preexisting practices, or as consistent with beliefs about appropriate reading instruction.
<i>Coached or not</i>	Whether a given message involved one of the two Reading First coaches
• Coached	Messages about reading instruction delivered by a reading coach, where coaches supported teachers' actions related to enactment or talked about issues related to a specific Reading First message
• Not coached	Messages about reading instruction that were not delivered by a reading coach or supported by a coach; or messages where coaches did not address issues related to a specific Reading First message
<i>Coaches' educative role</i>	When coaches interact with teachers in ways that provide practical support for implementing Reading First
<i>Coaches' political role</i>	When coaches interact with teachers in ways that involve the assertion and negotiation of power in attempts to push or coax teachers to respond to Reading First
• Regulative pressure	Messages that involved rule setting, monitoring, or sanctioning; teachers mandated to teach in a particular way, to particular ends, or using particular curricular materials; when teachers are told they must, are required to, or are expected to teach in a certain way
• Normative persuasion	Teachers told they should teach in a certain way; includes statements about best practices or claims that certain practices lead to valued outcomes; also includes statements about coherence: Teachers should teach in a particular way because it is similar to what they already do.
• Buffering	Coaches telling teachers not to do practices required by Reading First, to close their classroom door to outside or unwanted pressure; or coaches giving advice to teachers about how to make it look like they are doing Reading First practices without changing existing approaches
<i>Teacher responses</i>	
• Rejection	The teacher did not implement the ideas and practices of a message in any way.
• Symbolic response	The teacher made changes to make it look like he or she was implementing the practice without changing instructional approach at all.
• Parallel structures	The teacher adopted the ideas and practices of a message while continuing to implement existing practices, thus layering the new approach on top of old ones.
• Assimilation	The teacher changed superficial aspects of practice (i.e., materials, activities, classroom organization, topics) but did not change deeper, underlying beliefs and pedagogical practices.
• Accommodation	The teacher changed deep, underlying beliefs and practices while taking on the message's beliefs and practices.