The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches in U.S. Policy Contexts

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Abstract

In recent years, instructional coaching has emerged as an important policy lever for districts to improve instructional practice. Yet, there is little conceptual agreement in educational research on the role of instructional coaches in the current policy environment. This article attempts to address this gap in the literature by synthesizing existing policy research on instructional coaching and providing a conceptual framework for understanding the multiple roles of instructional coaches. I begin with a discussion of the policy roots of instructional coaching in U.S. contexts before turning to key themes in the current policy literature on instructional coaching. I find that coaches play at least three important roles in education policy implementation: a cognitive role, an organizational role, and a reform role. I discuss these three themes before concluding with a discussion of some of the gaps in the literature and directions for future research.

Keywords: *instructional coaching, standards-based policy, teacher leadership, educational policy, policy implementation, professional development*

Standards-based state and federal reform efforts, like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have emphasized the need for teacher policy learning around academic standards. In relation to the increased demands that federal initiatives have put on local school districts to improve teacher practice, policymakers continue to revamp and expand statewide teacher evaluation systems that hold teachers accountable for student learning (Anagnostopoulos, Jacobsen, & Rutledge, 2013; Galey, 2015; McDonnell, 2013). Consequently, district leaders are under constant external pressure to improve teacher practice in order to produce student achievement growth. But how to do this is largely underspecified, leaving districts scrambling for ways to prove that they are making a difference (Elmore, 2004). In response, a rapidly growing number of schools and districts are turning to instructional coaching an important policy lever for improving teacher quality and implementing instructional reform. Recent research

shows that the popularity of instructional coaching has significantly increased in the era of standards-based reform with the staffing rate of coaches doubling over the past 15 years (Domina, Lewis, Agarwal, & Hanselman, 2015).

In this context, instructional coaches are playing an increasingly important role in district-level policy implementation as "professional sense-makers" that develop expertise in academic content standards to help administrators and teachers translate them to classroom practice (Domina et al., 2015). Sometimes referred to as instructional strategists, instructional coaches mediate standards-based policy implementation by, for example, helping districts coordinate textbook adoption, developing curricula, and providing professional development and mentoring to teachers. For district and school leaders, the theory of action behind instructional coaching provides a clear way forward as a promising new form of professional development that is "content-based and intended to support teachers in meeting the aims of school- or district-based instructional reform" through "embedded and situated work that includes observations of classroom teaching, demonstration of model practices, and cycles that includes pre- and post-conferences with practitioners" (Gallucci, Lare, Yoon, & Boatright, 2012, p. 922). In practice, coaching often involves striking a balance between mentoring individual teachers and engaging in whole-school, system-wide improvement (Knight & Cornett, 2008; Knight & Nieuwerburgh, 2012).

Despite the increasing prevalence of coaching, however, and the abundance of literature based on practical experience (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Knight, 2007; Marzano & Simms, 2013), there is surprisingly little peer-reviewed research on the role of coaches or their work (Gallucci et al., 2012; Taylor, 2008). In other words, while we generally understand the various parameters of instructional coaching and some of its effects, there is little systematic examination of both what kinds of coaching work best in which contexts and the broader institutional factors that shape coaching policy and practice. This review seeks to synthesize existing policy research on instructional coaching and provide a conceptual framework for understanding the multiple roles of instructional coaches in the existing policy environment. I begin with a discussion of the policy roots of instructional coaching in U.S. contexts before turning to key themes in the current policy literature on instructional coaching. I find that coaches play at least three important roles in education policy implementation: a cognitive role developing teacher practice, an organizational role building instructional capacity, and a reform role helping local leaders implement instructional policy. I discuss these three themes before concluding with a discussion of some of the gaps in the literature and directions for future research.

U.S. Policy Context and Instructional Coaching

The historical development of instructional coaching policy has strong institutional roots in supporting literacy instruction. Coaching policies became more popular in the 1990s following groundbreaking research on peer coaching, which showed teachers are more likely to integrate newly learned instructional strategies into their

daily practice if they are provided with coaching from peers or experts (Joyce & Showers, 1988). The increased use of coaching intersected with several major federal literacy initiatives during this time period, culminating with the 1999 Reading Excellence Act, which implemented literacy coaching with the support federal funding. Around the same time, the Reading First initiative, under 2002's NCLB, significantly accelerated the expansion of literacy coaching—as evidenced by subsequent high-profile, comprehensive school reform efforts, such as America's Choice and Success For All, that prominently feature literacy coaches in their program design. Coaching in mathematics and other subjects, meanwhile, became more common later in the 2000s in response to policy demands for the use of "evidence-based" practices to improve student achievement (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Dole, 2004).

The growth in the scale and diversity of instructional coaching programs popping up across the country in a relatively short amount of time (over the past five to seven years) has been driven in large part by standards-based education policy. RTTT reforms, for example, rewarded many states and districts with grants that included coaching as an intervention strategy, while Title I funding is, also now, frequently earmarked for instructional coaching programs. In addition, the implementation of CCSS has accelerated the need for districts to provide instructional support for teachers by providing experts that can help teachers interpret standards and develop new classroom strategies aligned to standards (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). Currently, instructional coaches are becoming a standard feature of educational systems with more than 90% of students now enrolled in school districts that employ at least one instructional specialist who provides coaching support (Domina et al., 2015).

Why Instructional Coaching?

Research on school organization shows that instructional coach positions can support teacher learning and changes in classroom instruction (Camburn, 2010; Coburn, Choi, & Mata, 2010; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Mangin, 2009). In the past, finding effective ways to reform and improve instruction has been a challenge—education policy scholars have long lamented the difficulties in translating policy into practice, noting that classroom teaching is "decoupled" or "loosely coupled" with broader school infrastructures and its institutional environment (Elmore, 2000; Firestone, 1985; Fuller, 2008; Weick, 1976). Common obstacles to education policy implementation include a lack of resources, a resistant workforce, and insufficient knowledge, skills, or understanding (Cohen & Hill, 2001; McLaughlin, 1987; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). A growing body of work shows that instructional coaches have an impact on formal and informal school infrastructures in ways that frequently more tightly couple teacher practice with ongoing curricular and instructional reforms by building important capacities for implementation (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Hopkins, Spillane, Jakopovic, & Heaton, 2013; Spillane, Parise, & Sherer, 2011). However, the increasing popularity of instructional coaching goes beyond simple technical compliance and policy

fidelity; instructional coaching is a visible example of updated understandings and beliefs about teacher professional development.

In recent decades in the U.S., and partly in response to increased demands on teachers' classrooms, the assumptions and expectations of how teachers participate in professional development have undergone dramatic shifts: "The traditional notion of teachers as passive recipients has been largely rejected for a more active conception of teachers as co-constructors and contributors to the pedagogical knowledge base" (Baker-Doyle & Yoon, 2010, p. 115). Educational research has shown that changing teacher practice is challenging; implementing ambitious content standards and the associated transformations in instruction requires teachers to undergo extensive professional learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Elmore, 2004; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). However, past accounts of teacher professional opportunities have found them to be "thin, sporadic, and of little use when it comes to teaching" (DeMonte, 2013, p. 1).

In response, the educational community has recognized the need to improve professional development for teachers, including more sustained, intensive forms of professional learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Joyce & Showers, 1988; Resnick & Scherrer, 2012). Research indicates that teacher professional development programs, like coaching, that are school-based, collaborative, focused on instruction, ongoing, and context specific are linked to improved instructional quality (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Cohen & Hill, 2001; Garet et al., 2001; Supovitz & Turner, 2000). In this new policy environment, district and school leaders recognize the importance of teacher collaboration for learning new instructional programs and pedagogies. Coaches often work alongside individual and groups of teachers, helping teachers, for example, reflect on practice, make sense of academic standards, align curricular plans to state assessments, and use student data to improve instruction (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, & Zigmond, 2010; Coggins, Stoddard, & Cutler, 2003). Importantly, coaches can also provide essential organizational capacities that facilitate teachers' learning from one another, such as organizing peer observations, coordinating shared professional development needs, and pooling and distributing teacher-made resources (Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, & Autio, 2007). Thus, instructional coaching is prominently associated with emergent forms of "ongoing," "job-embedded" teacher professional development concerned with the quality of teacher learning opportunities around instructional reform efforts (Demonte, 2013; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Poglinco & Bach, 2004).

Overall, the current policy context creates a climate where instructional coaches must reform teachers' practices according to the desires and goals of policymakers, while also supporting and collaborating with teachers to improve instruction. Mounting evidence indicates this can often place instructional coaches in a difficult position because they must support teachers' self-directed learning,

while also being responsible for getting teachers to implement specific instructional approaches advocated by school or district leadership (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015; Obera & Sloan, 2009; Otaiba, Hosp, Smartt, & Dole, 2008) Importantly, the reforms being promoted by instructional coaches often challenge the existing mindsets and beliefs of teachers. Among other things, instructional reforms can ask teachers to redefine how they problematize gaps in student learning, reconsider their pedagogical approaches, restructure the content of their lessons, and integrate new skills (i.e., data-use) into their professional repertoire (Hill, Rowen, & Ball, 2005; Huguet, Marsh, & Farrell, 2014; Mangin, 2009; Marsh, McCombs, & Martorell, 2010).

As agents of educational change, instructional coaches are placed squarely in the middle of many potential conflicts between policy and practice. The following section teases out the complex work of instructional coaching in local educational systems and attends to how coaches balance the multiple demands on their time and efforts. For example, what does the current research base tell us about how instructional coaches mediate between their role as reformers and supporters of teacher practice? What is the nature of this role? And in the context of ongoing policy efforts, what factors and practices seem to support (or constrain) instructional coaches and their ability to influence standards-based curricular reform?

Managing From the Middle: The Multiple Roles of Instructional Coaches

Reviews of instructional coaching in education describe the role as "inherently multifaceted and ambiguous" (Gallucci et al., 2012, p. 922). Despite the growing prevalence of coaching, there is no standard model or definition of an instructional coach; this is no coincidence as coaching is often intentionally framed as a multi-purpose policy tool that can be modified to meet local needs (Kowal & Steiner, 2007). Coaching programs are typically externally derived from broader systemic reform, such as Reading First or America's choice, but also can be informally developed by local educators (Taylor, 2008). Coaching initiatives can adhere to any number of models, including clinical supervision, cognitive coaching, instructional consultation, student-focused coaching, peer mentoring, or mixed models (Bukowiecki, 2012; Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). Other research has identified different categories of instructional coaching, such as data-oriented, student-oriented, managerial, and teacher-focused, which can mean individual teachers or groups of teachers (Deussen et al., 2007). The equivocality of the coach's role is born out in the practitioner-oriented literature as well, which proposes a variety of position descriptions, rationales for coaching, types of coaching interventions, and approaches to teacher development.

Leaving aside the variety of practitioner definitions, from a policy perspective, instructional 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 policy" (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012, p. 5). In this sense, instructional coaches can fill a variety of educative and political roles. Based on the current body of

instructional coaching research, these roles may be usefully illustrated on a continuum ranging from positions that are "closest" to teachers' practice and concerned with the micro-processes of individual cognition around educational reforms, to roles that are "furthest" from the classroom and focused on the macro-structures of school organization that promote instructional capacity. Importantly, instructional coaches also play an important reform role in district policy implementation as brokers of district policy messages. In doing so, they must also learn how to adapt, modify, and buffer policies and programs when they meet the realities of school context and classroom teaching. I summarize these ideas below in Table 1.

In the cognitive role, coaches focus on teacher development at the classroom level, working with individual and groups of teachers to improve classroom practice. Next, in their organizational role, instructional coaches focus on instructional capacity-building to manage and diffuse knowledge between teacher classrooms. Finally, instructional coaches also have a reform role as a part of larger policy implementation efforts by schools and districts, using their position to influence educators and adapt reforms to the local context. Significantly, researchers have noted there are inherent conflicts between these two ends of the spectrum, and issues arise when coaches try to balance their roles as a lever for systemic vis-à-vis individual reform (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015). As "meso-level" implementers that occupy a space

Table 1

The Multiple Roles of Instructional Coaches

	Cognitive Role	**Organizational Role**	**Reform Role**
Area of Focus	Teacher development	Instructional capacity-building	Coherent and effective policy implementation
Main Activity	Work with individual or groups of teachers to improve instruction	Charged with knowledge management and building structures for teachers collaboration and professional development (e.g., PLCs)	Positioned as part of a larger reform effort and/or in the context of other reform efforts and must adapt and modify new policy information given local context
Drivers of Coaching	Informal social influence and semi-structured interactions	Formal organizational influence and semi-structured time drive interactions	Formal and informal political influence and reform accountability/ fidelity drives interactions

between policymakers and educators, instructional coaches face many unique opportunities and challenges. The remainder of this section fleshes out what we know about the role of coaches and coaching in the educational system as well as the factors that contribute to the ability of coaches to shape policy and practice according to the conceptual framework presented here.

Cognitive Role: Building Trust for Teacher Learning

Rooted in literature on peer coaching and teacher mentoring, a substantial portion of existing literature on instructional coaching is concerned with the cognitive aspects of coaching that address teacher development, either individually or in groups. From this vantage point, instructional coaching is seen as a "non-supervisory role," where "instructional coaches do not typically have positional authority to evaluate other adults; they do not work from a position of supervisory power and must use expertise and relationships to exert influence" (Gallucci et al., 2012, p. 922). In this role and in the context of reform, coaches are focused on facilitating continuous and collaborative teacher learning around new and existing instructional practice. This research stream supplies ample evidence that instructional coaches influence teachers' instructional beliefs and behaviors. Evidence suggests that coaches help teachers develop professional knowledge, or "professional capital" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), understand and utilize new curricula and/or pedagogies (Coburn et al., 2010), use data to identify and address gaps in practice (Marsh et al., 2010), and collaborate in groups around instruction (Knight & Cornett, 2008).

An emergent theme in the teacher development literature shows that coaches help educators interpret "policy messages" about instruction, a process widely referred to as "sense-making" in educational policy studies (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita, & Zoltners, 2002). Drawing on a cognitive framework for understanding policy implementation, sense-making is the process by which implementing agents access and apply prior knowledge to guide "the noticing, framing, and connecting of new ideas and events to what is already encoded in memory" (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 394). Research suggests that instructional coaches can and do facilitate teacher sense-making around standards-based reform, which allows them to help teachers gain deeper understandings of new instructional ideas and influence classroom practice, helping build teacher trust (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Coburn, Russell, Kaufman & Stein, 2012; Huguet et al., 2014).

Organizational Role: Developing Instructional Capacity for Knowledge Management

A second distinct theme in coaching literature emphasizes instructional coaching as a "capacity-building strategy," referring to the coach's role in "the development of skills and knowledge in both individuals and in the organization as a whole. It often involves creating new structures and roles to broaden participation" (Coggins et al., 2003, p. 3). In this role, coaches are focused on "resources-for-teaching" and organizational structures that support the development and use of instructional resources rather than individual teacher learning—processes rather than practice (Jaquith, 2012).

Coaching can also address scalability issues when the costs of implementing an innovation in a different context are not fully considered: "non-financial challenges, such as being able to find enough highly skilled people, can be just as significant and are often underestimated in discussions of scaling" (Levin, 2013, p. 10). In other words, there is an issue with turning high-impact "small scale" innovations into system-wide "large scale" solutions to which instructional coaching attends.

Instructional coaching also represents an important form of "distributed leadership"—an organizational approach where leadership responsibilities for instructional change are shared amongst several administrators and teachers (Blackman, 2010; Spillane & Keaney, 2012). Research shows that giving teachers formal leadership roles builds a sense of collective responsibility for learning and increases commitment to organizational goals (Spillane & Kim, 2012; Stoelinga & Mangin, 2010). From an organizational standpoint, instructional coaches have the potential to address scalability issues by fostering leadership and local capacity-building around instruction. Put differently, instructional coaches build "instructional capacity," or the capacity of schools and districts to support instructional improvement and support teaching in a manner that enables high levels of student learning (Jaquith, 2012; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Spillane & Louis, 2002). Research shows that coaching in this sense addresses "whole-school" organizational improvement in a variety of ways, such as building capacity for instructional leadership, managing knowledge resources, and building capacity for teachers to support their peers (Coggins et al., 2003; Neufeld & Roper, 2003).

Reform Role: Brokering Policy Information for Implementation

Another emergent dimension of instructional coaching is the political role that coaches play in carrying out reforms. In contrast to the educative roles of coaches (i.e. their role in teacher professional development and instructional capacity-building), research has paid relatively little attention to their role in policy implementation (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015; Woulfin, 2014). Past literature suggests that conflict is only inherent when coaches are given authorities or evaluative roles, implying that supportive roles are apolitical in nature; but, recent research indicates otherwise (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015; Obera & Sloan, 2009). Even the smallest interactions between coaches and teachers have political implications because they are frequently interactions about instructional reform initiatives. As a result, studies clearly indicate that they are viewed by stakeholders across the educational system, including themselves, as agents of reform. In this way, even when mentoring coaches can become "turnkeys for conveying district messages regarding curriculum" to teachers (Marsh et al., 2005, p. 51). In this role, coaches take on reform-oriented roles at the complicated intersection of power and learning, between policy and practice. In this sense, coaches are concerned with navigating the conflicting demands placed by policymakers on practitioners that are manifest in their interactions with administrators and teachers.

Evidence indicates that some political moves by coaches are more effective than others. In a study of Reading First implementation, Coburn and Woulfin (2012) identified three coaching activities that involved politics: pressuring, persuading, and buffering. Pressuring involved using explicit power to get teachers to change their practice according to Reading First guidelines by invoking specific sources of authority, like the principal or the grant funding. Persuading, meanwhile, involved engaging teachers in new ideas by pointing out connections and filtering policy information in ways that convinced teachers that Reading First approaches were aligned with their existing practice—a process researcher refers to as "shaping teacher sensemaking" (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Coburn, 2005) or "sensegiving" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In contrast, buffering involved protecting teachers from others, particularly when external administrators demanded specific compliances with Reading First policy. Persuading was the most successful strategy for getting teachers to change their practice, while pressuring yielded more inconsistent results. Interestingly, teachers were more responsive to pressuring and persuading by coaches in comparison to other colleagues and administrators, indicated coaches may have had special influence in coupling policy and practice.

A significant and related narrative in the research on instructional coaching indicates one critical source of power may exist in the structural location of coaches in school and district networks as "boundary-spanners" or "bridgers." In this way, for example, coaches can play key "gatekeeping roles" providing educators with information about particular aspects of policy to embrace, while telling them to ignore others (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012, p. 23). Because coaches work with many groups of teachers and administrators, they are uniquely placed to access, append, and diffuse policy information vertically and horizontally within and between schools (Daly, Finnegan, & Moolenaar, 2014; Huguet et al., 2014; Swinnerton, 2007; Woulfin, 2014). This is important for building knowledge and capacity. One of the constant themes in policy implementation literature emphasizes the importance of leaders in the framing and coordination of reform activity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Finnegan, 2012; Honig, 2012). In this role, educational leaders "broker" reform-related information between different groups, bridging for example district leaders with principals and school-level leadership. This role of broker, however, appears to vary depending on the reform and policy context and is determined by how well-suited coaches are in terms of expertise and bridging abilities (Coburm & Rusell, 2008; Swinnerton, 2007). I now turn to some of the factors that influence instructional coaching in their multi-faceted roles.

Factors that Influence Coaching

While the literature on the factors that impact coaching is still growing, existing evidence suggests that the quality and quantity of teacher-coach interactions have important implications for effective instructional coaching. Poglinco and Bach (2004), for example, found that teachers are more likely to modify their own instructional practices when coaches model instructional

techniques in their classrooms. Research by Lord, Cress, and Miller (2008) also document the effectiveness of this "show and tell" strategy for improving and changing teacher practice. Teacher-coach collaborations around the analysis and utilization of data also appear to impact instructional practice by helping teachers identify specific student learning needs and address those needs with the appropriate instructional tools (Marsh et al., 2010). The individual and professional attributes of coaches are also critical to successful teacher development. Research shows, for example, that teacher leaders with subject area content expertise are able to identify gaps in teachers' content knowledge and facilitate teacher learning in areas of deficiency. Teachers in turn develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter and desired practice, as well as the knowledge and skills, needed to enact that practice (Manno & Firestone, 2008). Research also shows instructional coaches with well-developed interpersonal and communication skills are better at facilitating change at individual and systemic levels (Knight & Cornett, 2008; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015).

Not surprisingly, trust is an important part of this equation and is well documented as a critical aspect of instructional coaching (Harrison & Killion, 2007; Poglinco & Bach, 2004; Taylor, 2008). Based in literature on the link between relational trust and effective schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), building a trusting relationship with teachers is emphasized in the professional development literature for coaches (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Knight, 2007; Marzano & Simms, 2013) and appears to be a necessary stepping stone for more advanced collaborations around instruction (Bean et al., 2010). In schools with high levels of relational trust, "teachers…value others who are expert at their craft and who take leadership roles in school improvement. Teachers in these schools also typically report that they trust, confide in, and care about one another" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 95). In short, engagement in intense interactions around instructional reform must be built on good relationships, which is as much of an attribute of individual connections as it is of the broader organizational environment.

Coaches thrive in schools where people trust them and each other. Significantly, case analysis, including many first-hand accounts, credits successes in coaching with having an established identity at the schools where they work and a prior trusting relationship with teachers and administrators (Coburn & Russell, 2008). Put differently, coaches hired "from within" appear are more likely to be effective, at least right away, because they do not have to invest time and energy in establishing new relationships. In an intense study of 20 instructional coaches, Bean et al. (2010) found that coaches who were new to their building had difficulty establishing trust and legitimacy with their teaching staff. Earlier work by Bean (2004) suggests that coaches can develop trust with teachers by initially engaging with teachers in informal, low-intensity settings, like hallway conversations, and slowly working their way up to more intense, formal interactions with greater effects on instruction, such as modeling lessons and

co-teaching—a theory corroborated in the Bean et al. (2010) study. Meanwhile, social network research reveals that coaches may also be able to build trust and credibility by giving teachers access to important instructional resources. Teachers with connections to coaches and formal instructional leadership through schools' social networks appear to be important when teachers have limited access to other forms of professional development (Penuel, Frank, & Krause, 2010). Networks are critical "pipes" into schools for external instructional expertise delivered by coaches, which research suggests can lead to spillover effects within schools enhancing professional development and enhance the credibility of coaches, which in turn build respect and trust (Sun, Penuel, Frank, Gallegher, & Young, 2013).

Next, the potential success for instructional coaches is frequently outside their direct control and left in the hands of district and school administrators. Scholarly and practitioner-oriented literature on instructional coaching suggests that the relationship between principals and coaches is an important part of coaching work (Ippolito, 2009; Knight, 2007, 2011; Kowal & Steiner, 2007; Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel, & Garnier, 2009). A growing number of studies find that principals' beliefs and behaviors significantly affected teachers' relationships with their instructional coaches (Matsumura et al., 2009). One level up, the way districts frame coaching policies to principals and coaches, their available resources to support coaching, and the pre-existing policy environment all appear to have a significant impact on show instructional coaching is implemented in schools (Mangin, 2014; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015). In one study by Mangin (2009), for example, district administrators chose not use literacy coaches because reading specialists were already being used in many schools from previous intentions. These individuals, who were already deeply institutionalized and well respected by the staff, would have been supplanted by coaches, and, in such cases, district officials did not want to "rock the boat."

Not surprisingly, coaches themselves report operating best when their role is well defined and when they have professional and institutional support (Mangin, 2014; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015; Matsumura et al., 2009). Regardless of how clear their role is, however, there are some kinds of activities that appear to better legitimize and establish coaches within school culture, creating more or less coherence around reform efforts. Interestingly, data-use appears to be an important avenue for building a collaborative culture (Marsh et al., 2010). In one study, researchers observed that careful data analysis helped reorient teachers' mentalities about student learning, making teachers more aware of their need for instructional support. Meanwhile, districts that introduced coaching via an external program that defined and accounted for coaching in its design resulted in higher levels of teacher receptivity to working with coaches (Mangin, 2009). Finally, it is also worth noting that capacity-building in schools, especially those labeled as "low-performing," is significantly affected by states' varying abilities to monitor reform

efforts and provide technical assistance to local school districts (Chubb & Clark, 2013; Elmore, 2004; Kober & Renter, 2011; McGuinn, 2012). Thus, district and school decision-making about instructional coaching is also determined by the external federal and state policy environment.

Literature Gaps and Directions for Future Research

There is growing empirical evidence that links coaching to improved teaching practice (Lockwood, McCombs, & Marsh, 2010) and some indications that it leads to higher student achievement (Bright & Hensley, 2010), but overall the research on the outcomes of instructional coaching policy has not kept pace with its implementation (Mangin, 2009). Although there is already a large and growing body of high-quality research—and, in many cases, empirically rich—that provides a solid starting point for further investigation, the understanding of the effects instructional coaching on, for example, teacher practice, district policy implementation, school reform, or student learning is still nascent. One of the major drawbacks of the literature on instructional coaching is the narrow focus on case studies, although not the diversity of cases themselves. Large-scale evaluations of coaching are somewhat limited to studies that focus on either literacy or mathematics coaching exclusively, and this research almost always takes place when coaching is the key component of a specific professional development program.

Overall, research on school organization shows that instructional coach positions can support teacher learning and changes in classroom instruction (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Camburn, 2010; Coburn et al., 2010; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Mangin, 2009), but consistent findings on coaching effects are not currently available. The growing consensus on instructional coaching seems to be that, while an improvement as compared to "one-stop" professional development models of the past, coaching does not necessarily improve classroom practice (Garet et al., 2001). At the same time, a growing number of case studies and some preliminary empirical analyses demonstrate the potential of instructional coaching for turning around low-achieving schools (Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002), improving teacher practice (Knight & Cornett, 2008), and raising student achievement (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Lockwood et al., 2010). More uncertain is the array of factors that support instructional coaching programs, including the appropriate selection criteria, organizational model, and professional development plan (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LaMahieu, 2015). Thus, like many educational interventions of the past, we have a limited understanding of what institutional and social conditions are optimal for cultivating effective instructional coaching practices (Bryk et al., 2015) or how to scale up successful coaching programs (Elmore, 1996).

This review indicates that the multi-faceted nature of the instructional coaching role is reflective of the broad application of coaching policy by district and school leaders in response to the complexity of teacher learning in the current policy environment. Instructional coaches essentially exist in an

intermediary space between encouraging self-directed learning and implementing specific instructional approaches. This position requires training that goes beyond their educative roles, such as developing trust with colleagues, organizing systems-based approaches to instructional change, and coordinating policy initiatives efficiently and effectively. Moving forward, policymakers and researchers should be sensitive to the multi-dimensionality of instructional coaching in their work as well as pivot towards a common understand of instructional coaching that represents the work coaches actually do. In this essay, I capture the multi-dimensional nature of instructional coaching by organizing their overlapping roles into a three-part framework that includes their cognitive role in developing teachers, their organizational role in building instructional capacity, and their reform role in district policy implementation. In closing this review, I utilize this framework to make recommendations for future lines of inquiry.

In their cognitive role, instructional coaches focus on developing teacher practice to meet the diverse learning needs of students. One key part of understanding this dimension of instructional coaching involves a more rigorous investigation of the various kinds of support that instructional coaches provide and that, by definition, teachers need. In particular, there is almost no work that explicitly compares and contrasts how instructional coaches support English language arts versus mathematics instruction. At least one study by Spillane and Hopkins (2013) directly addresses the distinct behaviors of elementary mathematics and literacy coaches, finding that literacy networks appear to have more subject-specific leaders and specialists than other subjects, which they linked to more collaborative networks. Similarly, there are very few studies that systematically examine differences in coaching for different levels of instruction (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school), kinds of teacher experiences (e.g., novice, mid-career, and veteran), or stages of implementation (e.g., early, middle, and late). Finally, much more research is needed to investigate the best instructional coaching practices for supporting teachers working in schools with high concentrations of traditionally underserved populations, including special education students, minority students, students living in poverty, and English learners.

The organizational role of instructional coaches is particularly relevant for district and school capacity-building, which involves the effective structuring of time, people, and resources around instructional support and improvement. Studies show that coaches spend only a fraction of their time working with teachers, and while this may represent a majority of their time, their activities are often focused at the systems-level, coordinating resources, managing data and consulting (Bean et al., 2010; Coggins et al., 2003; Deussen et al., 2007). Research in this area is growing and is pushing the boundaries of coaching literature to more fully integrate the meso-level nature of coaching. Neufeld and Roper (2003), for example, coin the terms "change coaching" and "capacity coaching" to conceptualize coaching activities that support whole-school reform and capacity-building (p. 4). At the same time, more theoretical

development and research is needed to understand the organizational dimensions of instructional coaching. In this regard, social capital theory and social network analysis may be particularly useful.

There is growing evidence that instructional coaching is linked to the development of social capital in schools, although the exact mechanisms behind this process are still being articulated (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Coburn et al., 2010). Social capital formation facilitates the organizational flow of knowledge and resources and is linked to trusting and collaborative school environments that support instructional improvement and build capacity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The formal nature of their position appears to give coaches access to important institutional and social resources unlike informal teacher leaders; for example, coaches are more likely to be nominated as experts in instructional advice–seeking and information–seeking school networks (Spillane, Healey, & Kim, 2010).

Still, past network analyses of organizational processes in educational settings often aggregate coaches and other school leaders together, meaning more work is needed that is focused on the social capital effects of coaches specifically. Additionally, much of the current work on instructional coaching focuses on the school-level processes, the various coach and teacher configurations that influence instruction, the kinds of tasks performed, and the factors that support and constrain coaches' work. To compliment this work, more research is needed to understand how instructional coaches build capacity at the district level as well, given the evidence that their activities include regularly interacting with district administrators, decision-making around district policy, and boundary-spanning between district and school leadership (Swinnerton, 2007).

Finally, with respect to their reform role in policy implementation, much of the existing research on the topic has been limited to case studies that examine a small number of schools and districts, which often include thorough, comparative accounts of different structures and processes that shape the work of instructional coaches. While rich in detail, this work draws on a relatively limited number of theoretical paradigms (e.g., sense-making, distributed leadership, and collective efficacy) that tend to explicate instructional coaching according to cognitive and organizational theories of action. Consequently, the discourse around coaching has generally gravitated towards understanding its structural and educative implications, as opposed to analyzing coaching using policy or political frameworks that may better situate coaching in contemporary policy contexts. The work of Coburn and Woulfin (2012) notably focuses on the politics of coaching but remains an exception to the rule. In this regard, the framing of instructional coaches as "professional sense-makers" by Domina et al. (2015) is an especially powerful concept that attends to their reform role at the intersection of standards-based reform and educational accountability.

More specifically, academic standards, like the CCSS, state assessments aligned to those standards, and teacher evaluation that, in turn, includes student growth measures on state tests are regular features of contemporary district policy

environments; all of which overlap and shape power and resource structures with important consequences for coaching work. We know, for example, that teachers who transition to the role of coaches are perceived as sharing leadership for reform with school- and district-level administrators (Taylor, 2008). Even when coaches do not see themselves as authority figures, teachers are inclined to see them this way given their formal designation (Obera & Sloan, 2009). How do these kinds of complex relationships impact policy and reform processes within both districts and schools that include teacher learning?

Decades of policy implementation research demonstrates the importance of policy alignment and organizational arrangements for educational-reform efforts. Coupled with the rapid expansion of instructional coaching in U.S. school districts, implementation models must more explicitly include a role for instructional coaches that fully considers their work at the intersection of policy and practice. Departing from this standpoint, future research should try to better understand how coaches can leverage their roles as middle managers to help educators appropriately adapt new, instructional reforms into their practice, while also helping administrators create and maintain a coherent and productive policy agenda.

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