

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Politics, Policies, and Practices of Coaching and Mentoring Programs**

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## **Charting the Research on the Policies and Politics of Coaching**

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**Abstract:** Facing relentless pressure to improve student achievement, many states and districts are using coaching as a policy lever to promote changes in practice. This special issue centers on the policies and politics of coaching, and this editorial commentary highlights what we know about the role of coaches and coaching in the field of education. Then I introduce and synthesize the special issue's seven empirical contributions. Taken together, these papers, using qualitative and quantitative methods, attend to the implementation of diverse coaching models. These papers surface novel findings on the coaching of both teachers and principals and have implications for scholars, reformers, and practitioners. Finally, I make recommendations for future research on coaching that is grounded in theory and which would advance our understanding of both educational policy and change.

**Keywords:** Coaching; Student achievement; Policies; Politics

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**Mapeando la Investigación sobre las Políticas y la Política del Coaching**

**Resumen:** Frente a la presión incesante por mejorar el rendimiento estudiantil, muchos estados y distritos están utilizando el coaching como una palanca política para promover cambios en la práctica. Esta cuestión se centra especialmente sobre las políticas y la política de entrenamiento y este comentario editorial destaca lo que sabemos sobre el papel de los entrenadores y de entrenamiento en el campo de la educación. Entonces introduzco y sintetizo siete contribuciones empíricas de la edición especial. Tomados en conjunto, estos documentos, utilizando métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos, asisten a la aplicación de diversos modelos de coaching. Estos papeles superficiales nuevos hallazgos sobre la dirección técnica de los profesores y directores y tienen implicaciones para los eruditos, reformadores, y los profesionales. Por último, hago recomendaciones para la investigación futura en el entrenamiento que se basa en la teoría y que permitan avanzar en nuestra comprensión tanto de la política educativa y el cambio.

**Palabras-clave:** Entrenamiento; El logro del estudiante; Políticas; política

**Mapeando a Pesquisa sobre as Políticas e a Política de Treinamento**

**Resumo:** Diante da pressão implacável para melhorar o desempenho dos alunos, muitos estados e municípios estão usando o coaching como uma alavanca política para promover mudanças na prática. Este especial centros de emissão sobre as políticas e as políticas de treinamento, e este comentário editorial destaca o que sabemos sobre o papel de treinadores e treinamento no campo da educação. Então eu introduzir e sintetizar sete contribuições empíricas da edição especial. Tomados em conjunto, estes documentos, usando métodos qualitativos e quantitativos, atenta para a implementação de diversos modelos de coaching. Estes papéis tona novas descobertas sobre o treinamento de professores e diretores e têm implicações para os estudiosos, reformadores e profissionais. Finalmente, fazer recomendações para futuras pesquisas sobre coaching que é fundamentado na teoria e que avançam nossa compreensão tanto política educacional e mudança.

**Palavras-chave:** Treinamento; O desempenho do aluno; políticas; política

**Introduction**

The last two decades have witnessed a dramatic upsurge in policymaking in the United States related to improving both instruction and educational outcomes. High profile policies—from the standards movement of the 1990s to today's Race to the Top—have placed instructional improvement squarely at the center of reform efforts. Accountability pressures—such as standards, instructional materials, and high stakes testing—try to influence what is taught and how teachers instruct their students (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond, 2007; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001). However, even under the force of these policies, there remains a disconnect between policy and what happens within classrooms. Under relentless pressure to improve student achievement, many states and districts have turned to coaching as a mechanism to connect policy's ideas with changes in practice (Annenberg Institute, 2004; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Wei, et al, 2009). For example, as part of Reading First, a branch of No Child Left Behind, the seven states with the largest student populations (California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Ohio) adopted reading coaches.

In their foundational work on coaching as a promising tool for instructional improvement efforts, Joyce & Showers (1980) declared that, in comparison to transient and superficial attempts to

promote teachers' professional learning, coaching offers "hands on, in-classroom assistance with the transfer of skills and strategies to the classroom" (p. 380). Coaches take on a variety of other roles in the education system, including supporting principals with data analysis, meeting with novice teachers, and delivering intervention services to students (Bean, 2004). Reformers and practitioners frame coaching as a strategy to provide teachers with content-specific, targeted and contextualized learning opportunities. Furthermore, coaching has spread across the field of education, yet many questions remain about its theory of action, enactment, and outcomes. More research is needed on the relationship between forces from the macro-level and coaches' activities on the ground. Specifically, researchers should attend to how educational policies define and promote coaching as well as the relationship between coaches' position and their interactions with teachers.

This EPAA Special Issue includes articles exploring the policies structuring coaching programs, the implementation of those programs, and the politics of coaches' work. The empirical articles in this issue share findings on studies of contemporary coaching programs. These articles on coaching will speak to policymakers, reformers, and educators and will contribute to broader discussions about the potential of policy levers to improve classroom practice and educational outcomes. This editorial commentary begins by reviewing what we know about the role of coaches and coaching in the education system and then introduces the Special Issue's contributions. I conclude by making recommendations for future research on coaching that is grounded in theory and with pressing implications for policy and practice.

## **Role of Coaches and Coaching in the Education System**

At the school level, teachers' knowledge and skill, plus their will to change, influence responses to reform (Coburn, 2004; Cuban, 1993). It has become apparent that conventional forms of teacher development, such as workshops and drive-by training sessions led by external consultants or experts, rarely produce lasting change (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Cohen, 1990). Consequently, policymakers and practitioners concur that it is necessary for teachers to have deep, situated opportunities for ongoing professional learning. Coaching, as a practice in which coaches facilitate contextualized learning opportunities for teachers and principals, responds to these issues (Bean, 2004; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Coaches can develop educators' understanding of a reform, aspects of instruction, and provide guidance on the technical and practical details of implementation (Bean, 2004; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). Perhaps more importantly, coaches play a structural role in reducing the individualism of teachers and their teaching. I argue that coaches break down the egg crate structure of schools by working within different teachers' classrooms and linking teachers with one another (Lortie, 2002).

Coaches can play both educative and political roles. Coaches' educative role involves activities to support teachers' ongoing professional learning. For instance, coaches serve as facilitators of reform by engaging teachers in ongoing and highly contextualized professional development (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, & Zigmond, 2010; Poglinco, Bach, Hovde, Rosenblum, Saunders, & Supovitz, 2003; Zigmond & Bean, 2006). These professional development activities include coaches observing teachers' classrooms, providing feedback on instruction, conducting demonstration lessons, working with groups of teachers to examine student data, and facilitating professional development sessions (Bean et al., 2003; Dole, 2004; Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, & Autio, 2007). However, coaches can also play a political role vis a vis instructional policy (Coburn and Woulfin, 2012; Deussen, 2007). Coaches' political role involves pressuring teachers to respond to policy in a particular way. As political actors, coaches promote a policy's ideas and practices in order to motivate change in a certain direction.

Within many reform efforts, coaches are uniquely positioned as intermediaries. Coaches are positioned between the district and school levels (Neufeld & Roper, 2003). At the district-level, coaches may directly receive information from central office administrators about instructional materials, testing, and budgetary issues. At the school-level, coaches can support teachers inside and outside of their classrooms. Since coaches occupy a boundary spanning position, they have access to an array of ideas about reading instruction. These ideas have the potential to influence coaches' work. By mediating policy messages and motivating other educators to change their practice, coaches link policy and practice (Coburn, 2004; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Spillane, 2004).

### **Contributions of the Special Issue**

The papers in this special issue attend to the practices of coaching both teachers and administrators, while also considering the policy context, including state and district level structures and initiatives. The first three papers focus on how coaches develop and support teachers. These papers use qualitative methods, including interview and observation data, to document the microprocesses of coaching.

First, Mudzimiri, Burroughs, Luebeck, Sutton, & Yopp provide a micro-level account of math coaches' work to improve both instruction and student learning. They shine light on coaches' interactions with teachers and encourage further research on the daily work of coaches. This paper also shares suggestions highly relevant to educational leaders. Second, Feldman, Anderson, & Minstrell draw on data from a 5-year study of science coaching in order to explicate how the coach-teacher relationship matters. This manuscript draws on concepts from organizational theory, including organizational trust, to emphasize the importance of coaches building trust while working to promote changes in the quality of science instruction. Finally, Berg & Mensah's paper also deals with the teacher-coach relationship as it intersects with science reform. In particular, they hone in on the issues experienced by elementary teachers while teaching science. This paper shares qualitative data on how coaching played a role in helping teachers resolve specific dilemmas of teaching.

Several papers grapple with principal coaching and use learning theory to showcase how coaches play a role in effecting change. These papers carefully attend to the nature and characteristics of the policy context. First, Matsumura & Wang draw upon sensemaking theory to analyze how principals interpret the instructional practices which coaches promoted in their schools. These researchers situate the study in a high-stakes accountability policy environment and emphasize the role of assessment and student data in reform. Matsumura & Wang carefully track how principals position their coach, arguing that this influences coaching practices and, ultimately, the implementation of a literacy reform. Second, Huguet, Marsh, & Farrell also attend to school-level administrators in their piece on coaching practices. Their use of sociocultural learning theory guides their analysis of how coaches attempt to raise teachers' capacity to use data. In addition, they clearly argue that coaches are also involved in mediating political dynamics of implementation. In contrast, the third paper, authored by Lochmiller, uses an economic lens and quantitative methods. Lochmiller utilizes the cost feasibility approach in order to estimate the cost of providing coaching to novice principals in Washington State. This paper shines light on the resources required to enact coaching policy and also makes suggestions for equitable ways to distribute coaches across a state.

Finally, one article moves outward to the district level. Mangin's piece, *Capacity Building and Districts' Decision to Implement Coaching Initiatives*, reports on district level activities related to coaching. This scholar also deploys concepts from organizational theory to explain the decision making activities of district administrators. This piece marshals evidence from qualitative data obtained across

20 school districts. In this way, Mangin issues an important reminder of the role of districts in spreading and supporting coaching policies and practices.

### **Future Directions for Coaching Research**

In the following section, I share suggestions for future research on the policies and politics of coaching. The majority of this issue's papers squarely target the enactment of coaching within a specific context. This attention to coaching activities helps us see how coaches promote reform efforts, coupling policy with practice. Scholars should continue to grapple with issues of context, including factors at the state, district, and school levels. For example, how does a state's approach to instructional policy influence coaching efforts? And, how do coaches within different types of districts work with teachers? Furthermore, researchers should design studies comparing the implementation of various coaching models within a single district. This type of research could reveal how the structures and routines espoused by a form of coaching shape daily practices of coaches and their interaction with other educators.

Several of this issue's papers use theory concerning how adults learn, develop, and change to illuminate the educative dimension of coaching by. Specifically, sensemaking theory permits researchers to hone in on how coaches interpret policy messages and work to shape teachers' understanding of policies and programs (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Woulfin & Coburn, 2011). I argue that another set of theories should also be applied to issues of coaching. It would be fruitful to use micropolitics and framing theory to grapple with the political branch of coaching. Micropolitics, in particular, would highlight how coaches deal with the ambiguity of serving as an administrator or fellow teacher (Ball, 1987; Blase, 2005; Flessa, 2009). Additionally, this theory would help explore questions regarding the role of conflict in coaching. What is the nature of coaching when there's disagreement about how to proceed or when coaches are mediating contentious issues regarding policy and program changes? Second, framing theory provides tools for studying precisely how coaches deliver policy messages to teachers. This could reveal how coaches work strategically with resistant teachers in an effort to promote change (Benford & Snow, 2000; Coburn, 2006; Scott, 2001). More research is needed that grapples with how coaches motivate and persuade educators in different roles (Fligstein, 2001). This would help us answer questions about how principal coaches can motivate school leaders to adopt new methods of teacher evaluation.

### **Conclusions**

The research on the policies and politics of coaching has implications for policymakers, reformers, and practitioners at multiple levels of the education system. In particular, this research can extend our understanding of how to build the capacity of teachers and school and district leaders to implement complex reforms. This research can help us understand how to increase the skill of educators to couple policy to practice. Finally, this scholarship can encourage reformers and educational leaders to design contextualized and meaningful opportunities for professional learning that is both relevant and collaborative.

It is vital that scholars interested in coaching turn attention to the intersection of coaching with policy associated with teacher evaluation and Common Core. How are coaches teaching teachers about the Common Core standards and associated instructional approaches? It is also critical to determine if coaches are taking on an evaluative role as enactors of evaluation policy. Specifically, how are coaches being deployed as observers in contemporary educator evaluation systems? And, to what extent, are coaches differentiating their coaching in order to work with

teachers deemed lower-performing by these evaluation systems? I argue that researchers should carefully consider the impact of these shifts in coaching on coaches' role as developers of teachers. These forms of research could yield valuable findings related to teacher development, school reform, and the education policy process.

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## About the Guest Editor

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Sarah Woulfin is an assistant professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. She studies the relationship between education policy, leadership, and instructional reform. Using lenses from organizational sociology, she investigates how leaders influence teachers' responses to reform efforts. In her doctoral work at the University of California, Berkeley, she focused on institutional theory, policy implementation, and coaching. She has published in the *American Educational Research Journal* (AERJ) and *Reading Research Quarterly*. Currently, she is an associate editor for *Educational Administration Quarterly* (EAQ). She is also on the executive steering committee of the Districts in Research and Reform SIG at AERA. From 2009-2012, Dr. Woulfin served as the program chair for AERA's Organizational Theory Special Interest Group. As a former urban public school teacher and reading coach, she was dedicated to strengthening students' reading and writing skills to promote educational equity. As a scholar, her commitment to raising the quality of instruction motivates her research on how policy influences—and is influenced by—administrators and teachers.



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