The Restructuring of Educational Organizations: From Ceremonial Rules to Technical Ceremonies

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters

Citation

Citable link
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33797215

Terms of Use
This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA
The Restructuring of Educational Organizations: From Ceremonial Rules to Technical Ceremonies

Qualifying Paper

Submitted by
Maxwell Yurkofsky

April, 2017
Acknowledgements

This essay began as a final paper I wrote for Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell’s institutional change class in the Spring of 2014. Throughout that semester, I benefitted tremendously from conversations with Ebony in office hours where she helped me situate my argument in the broader field of institutional research in education. Over the past three years, I have rewritten this essay as a proposal, an outline, a comprehensive literature review, an AERA paper that focuses explicitly on the case of school choice, and finally, as this qualifying paper. During this revision process, I received many rounds of high-level feedback from Jal Mehta and David Cohen that helped to improve the strength and originality of my argument. I received more in-depth feedback from Jal, David, and Ebony on this final draft of the essay, particularly around the theory I draw on to frame my argument and the implications of my argument for research and practice. I have revised the introduction, theoretical framework, and conclusion as a result of this feedback. Finally, Ebony also helped me in cutting about 3,000 words from this essay.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 4

Theoretical Framework ...................................................................................................................... 7

(Still) Valuing Inputs in an Era of Accountability ................................................................. 9

Clashes with Environmental Pressures, Beliefs, and Technical Demands ......................... 12

Using Imperfect Means to Monitor, Support, and Encourage Adoption ......................... 21

Principal Dilemmas ....................................................................................................................... 28

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 32

References .......................................................................................................................................... 36
Introduction

A common theme of school reform efforts over the past many decades is the difficulty of spurring substantive improvements in teachers’ underlying practice in spite of structural or organizational changes (Mehta, 2013; Tyack & Tobin, 1994). But organizational theorists have noted that this quality of schools—though frustrating for reformers and policymakers—should not be surprising, and actually is key to survival given schools’ surrounding environment and the work educators engage in. Karl Weick (1976) famously labeled schools as “loosely coupled systems,” where various elements of organizations are less related to or capable of influencing one another (e.g., administrators influence on teachers, intentions influence on outcomes, formal structures influence on instructional practice), arguing that while loose coupling may stifle systemic efforts at changing schools, it also provides schools with a number of advantages (e.g., stability, autonomy for educators to adapt to local needs). Meyer and Rowan (1977) also saw decoupling, particularly of formal structures and instructional activities, as a key mechanism for survival in light of the fact that schools are subject to a number of pressures from the environment that are not always consistent with one another or the technical demands of instruction. To remain legitimate in the eyes of relevant stakeholders (e.g., local, state, and federal government, parents) while not compromising instructional quality, schools ceremonially conformed to many of these expectations, intentionally buffering the work of instruction from scrutiny.

New institutional theory emerged from Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) work and has since prompted educational researchers to pay attention to how various regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutions in the broader environment (Burch, 2007; Scott, 2013) may influence organizational and individual action (Coburn, 2004; 2005; Hallett, 2010); how such
pressures from the environment might intersect with the technical demands of organizational work (Rowan, 1990; Oliver, 1991); and the differences between ceremonial adoption and more substantive implementation of practices in light of these various pressures (Coburn, 2004; Bromley, Hwang, & Powell, 2012).

However, recent reforms have caused many to question the continued relevance of new institutional theory to educational contexts. At the time of these early theorizations, most policies affecting schools focused on educational inputs—such as teacher certification, student course-taking, and student designations—rather than outputs, and as such legitimacy often stemmed from looking and feeling like a school rather than actually supporting student learning (Meyer & Rowan, 1978). Since then, policies have shifted to prioritize educational outputs (e.g., student achievement, revenue from student enrollment), which has led to teachers and administrators paying much more attention to educational policies, classroom practice, and student outcomes (e.g., Spillane et al., 2002; 2011). As a result, many who have recently applied new institutional theory to educational contexts have argued that ceremonial adoption and loose coupling no longer characterize educational organizations (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Spillane, 2002; Spillane & Kenney, 2012), and that such accountability systems are producing “real conformity” (Rowan, 2006).

Unfortunately, institutional perspectives on educational organizations seem to be changing at a faster pace than schools themselves. Though schools are certainly more responsive to educational policies than in the past, there is still a wealth of literature documenting how these responses often leave underlying instructional practice intact. School leaders competing for enrollment focus on marketing and cream skimming students over academic
improvement (Jabbar, 2015; Jennings, 2010); schools facing accountability sanctions invest in test prep, particularly for “bubble students”, rather than improved teaching (Jennings, 2005), and schools and districts implementing new standards rarely provide the necessary learning experiences for teachers to change their practice in the intended ways (Porter, 2016; Swars & Chestnutt, 2016). Indeed, over the past decade NAEP scores have remained flat, despite this flurry of new reforms. Without a clear framework for understanding why these kinds of responsive but subversive actions take place, it will be difficult to design or implement policies that don’t succumb to the same unintended consequences.

As such, this essay will argue that new institutional theory can, with a more targeted analytic gaze, provide a helpful lens in understanding why these accountability-oriented reforms are not inducing the kinds of instructional improvements many hoped for. In particular, I will argue that what many see as tighter coupling between policy and practice often extends only to the surface-level aspects of work. In these cases, teachers and school leaders may face coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphic pressure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to adopt those practices that are most visible, while facing less pressure to change below-the-surface aspects of their behavior. Although such a distinction may seem subtle, this ceremonial engagement with the technical core of teachers’ work may be difficult to detect and discouraging for policymakers, administrators, and teachers alike. I will also lay out the conditions under which these technical ceremonies may arise—when: a) educators face pressure to adopt specific instructional or organizational practices; b) such practices conflict with i) other pressures in the environment ii) educators’ beliefs, values, or current approach to their work or iii) the technical demands of their work; and c) when there is a gap between what is intended and what is supported, monitored, or enforced. Finally, I will highlight how school
leaders may, as a result of increased monitoring and accountability, in particular face conditions that support implementing environmental demands in ways that discourage teachers’ substantive engagement.

**Theoretical Framework**

New institutional theorists examine how organizational survival is dependent not just upon technical efficiency, but also on legitimacy, which organizations achieve by conforming to regulative, normative, and cognitive institutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013). Organizations may acquiesce to pressures that enhance both efficiency and legitimacy, and defy or manipulate pressures that do not; when efficiency and legitimacy concerns are in conflict with one another (i.e., when schools face pressure to adopt practices or structures that are not seen as efficient), organizations may respond with *compromise* tactics (i.e., balancing, pacifying, and bargaining) or *avoidance behaviors* such as decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977)—ceremonially adopting formal structures while intentionally leaving instructional work to the discretion of teachers (Oliver, 1991). Oliver (1991) provides a helpful typology for understanding how legitimacy and efficiency concerns, along with eight other environmental antecedents, predict whether organizations respond to specific pressures with acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, or manipulation.

More recently, researchers have taken a more *inhabited* lens, examining how individuals making meaning in interaction with one another shape these organizational processes (DiMaggio, 1988; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Educational scholars in this tradition have begun to investigate how educators make sense of and respond to reforms by drawing on their existing worldviews and practices (e.g., Coburn, 2004). The inhabited intuitionalism
lens also allows for consideration of micropolitical and intraorganizational dynamics: how a principal responds to a reform may be influenced by the response of teachers (or how a principal *presumes* teachers will respond), and how teachers respond to reforms are also influenced by the decisions made by principals (e.g., Hallett, 2010; Stosich, 2015). Although less is known about the institutional antecedents of individual, versus organizational behavior, this essay will follow in the tradition of other work that uses broader organization-level typologies as a starting point for analyzing individual-level behavior (e.g., Coburn, 2004).

Finally, this essay seeks to move beyond unidimensional descriptions of schools as loose or tightly coupled, and instead identify the way the institutional environment influences the patterns of tight and loose couplings in educational organizations (Weick, 1976; Orton & Weick, 1990). While much of the recent institutional research in education has focused on the tighter coupling between educational policies and classroom practices (e.g., Coburn, 2004; Spillane et al., 2002), educational research has long noted that surface-level aspects of teachers’ practice (e.g., materials used, the arrangement of the classroom, the broad structure of the class, the content covered) are frequently loosely coupled with deeper or “below the surface” (Spillane & Jennings, 1997) aspects of their practice (e.g., discourse patterns, norms of social interaction, underlying pedagogical principles, and teachers’ beliefs and mindsets), which are often more important to educational improvement (Coburn, 2003). This essay will draw on research over the past 25 years to discuss the conditions under which policy changes that have in many cases tightly coupled formal structures with surface-level components of classroom practice are also likely to change below the surface aspects of teachers’ work.
Since the original research propagating new institutional theory, the regulatory environment surrounding schools has shifted to de-emphasize compliance and instead provide schools with incentives to meet performance targets. The reforms put in place by No Child Left Behind held schools accountable to meeting Adequate Yearly Progress in terms of standardized test scores for all students and subgroups, but in return cut down on many of the regulations facing districts (McGuinn, 2005). Policymakers have raised the bar of these performance targets through the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the use of value-added teacher accountability systems have increased the stakes attached to student test scores. Even school choice reforms rely on this broad theory, though the outcome metric of interest is the ability for schools to attract and enroll families at a sustainable cost (Chubb & Moe; 1990). But despite this decline in regulative control of educational inputs, educators still face a variety of normative pressures (Scott, 2013) around how they are supposed to meet these performance-oriented objectives. As subsequent sections will illustrate, this multiplicity of expectations may stifle deeper changes to educators’ work.

Normative pressures have proliferated at all levels of governance as a response to accountability reforms. At the district level, Mehan Hubbard Datnow (2010) describe how NCLB provided political cover and motivation for other efforts districts were invested in. At the school level, principals and teachers that are exposed to strict accountability policies have experienced pressure not just to improve test scores, but also around specific ways they should do so. Booher-Jennings (2005, p. 239) discusses how even though Texas’s accountability system did not prescribe certain methods for raising scores, districts...
administrators “believed that operating under the auspices of data-driven decision making and maintaining extensive documentation of student achievement would protect the district from challenges” thus viewing data-based decision making not simply as a means of improving test scores, but as a means of increasing legitimacy. As such, the district mandated that teachers and principals use very specific practices in interpreting and acting upon test results. Studies from other states have similarly shown how districts responded to accountability by asking schools utilize new data based technology systems (Burch, 2006), adopt and use new kinds of formative assessments (Burch, 2006), or to implement specific instructional strategies that are thought to result in test score gains (Goertz & Massell, 2005; Gold, Christman, & Herold, 2007), to name just a few examples. In an analysis of the process of writing school improvement plans, Mintrop and MacLellan (2002, p. 292) demonstrates the impact of this pressure, finding that plan writers were focused on including strategies and practices that were “deemed correct or effective by district or state officials.”

But it is not just in the context of accountability that educators face pressure to adopt specific structures or practices. As states have transitioned to the common core state standards, many state or district officials have encouraged the use of specific processes or materials. For example, the Florida DOE sent out requests for proposals from districts to use Race to the Top (RttT) funds to implement specific projects that support adoption of the common core state standards, such as lesson study (Akiba & Wilkinson, 2016). Sometimes, districts have mandated the use of specific instructional trainings and materials that were designed by the state to serve as supports, rather than requirements (Durand, Lawson, Wilcox, & Schiller, 2016). Schools within the same district also vary in the extent to which they mandate the use of particular instructional practices, pacing guides, and other
materials, or offer them as supports and guides to be adapted as needed (Bengtson & Connors, 2014).

Even charter schools, which are founded on the principle of autonomy to respond to competitive pressures from parents (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990), often face a number of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures that shape how they respond to competition. One source of pressure comes from charter authorizers. The application and renewal process pushes schools to conform to many of the institutionalized classifications around teacher certification, reporting of data, curricula, and other educational inputs (Bulkley, 1999; Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009). Charter authorizers have also been found to overregulate in the name of risk-aversion and quality control, unintentionally privileging charter applicants that are run by more established charter management organizations (Scott, 2009; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Hentschke, & Smith, 2004) or use well-established organizational and instructional strategies at the expense of more innovative but untested approaches (Ascher & Greenberg, 2002; McShane, Hatfield, & English, 2015). Charter schools, like traditional public schools, are also subject to various federal regulations (e.g., highly qualified teacher requirements) and the strings that come with many state or federal grants (Donaldson, 2013; Finnigan, 2007), as well as pressure from non-governmental organizations, foundations, and other schools with which they compete (Farrell et al., 2012; Hess, 2010; Quinn et al., 2013; Meyerson & Wernick, 2012; Scott, 2009; Wohlstetter et al., 2011).

The persistence of such pressures in the educational field stems from many endemic qualities of schooling. First, there is little consensus both within and across groups of educational stakeholders on the ends of schooling (Ingersoll, 2005). Compounding this normative
fragmentation is the causal indeterminacy (Orton & Weick, 1990) that plagues educational contexts, where the success of any given intervention is often more a result of its fit within a particular context (e.g., students, teachers, subject matter, preexisting school organization) or the skill with which teachers implement the intervention, rather than the inherent properties of the intervention itself (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015; Murnane & Nelson, 2007; Thomas, 2016). As a result, educational reforms are less often refined or replaced through a meritocratic process, and instead either go in and out of fashion in a cyclical manner or get layered onto one another, creating an incoherent web of “best practices.”

While this discussion has highlighted why even in a more accountability-oriented environment, schools may still face pressure to adopt specific structures and practices, not yet clear is how schools—and the actors within—respond to such pressures. The rest of this paper will discuss how this environmental context can create conditions that incentivize responses that relate to the technical core but in a ceremonial manner, and will describe a set of common circumstances under which this is more likely to take place.

**Clashes with Environmental Pressures, Beliefs, and Technical Demands**

The widespread set of regulative, normative, and cognitive pressures surrounding even more accountability-oriented reforms creates a context where educators are more likely to act in ceremonial—if technically oriented—ways. It is well established that organizations are more likely to reject or ceremonially adopt structures and practices that conflict with their beliefs, other pressures they face from the environment, or the technical demands of their work. Meyer and Rowan (1977) traced the decoupling of technical work from formal structure to the conflicting and often-unproductive demands that organizations in highly institutionalized
environments depend on for legitimacy. In a synthesis of the organizational literature, Oliver (1991) argued that organizations were more likely to reject or avoid pressures from the environment that were inconsistent with the organizational goals, in conflict with a multiplicity of other pressures they face, and inefficient at meeting the organizations’ objectives. This section will argue that these organization-level theories also apply when we take an inhabited approach to studying school behavior, and will discuss how the conditions for ceremonial behavior are still largely upheld in many accountability-oriented contexts.

Specifically, it will develop four main arguments. First, both teachers and school leaders are more likely to resist or ceremonially adopt reforms that are in conflict with their beliefs, other environmental pressures, and the technical demands of their work. Second, this outcome is common even for reforms like the common core state standards, school choice, and accountability, which attempt to address the problems of incoherence in prior reform efforts. Third, school leaders have some ability to shape teachers’ likelihood of implementing reforms, but whether they engage in such practices depends on their own beliefs, technical considerations, and the other pressures they face. If school leaders face multiple and conflicting pressures they must attend to, they are less likely to respond to them in substantive ways, which in turn will result in less intensive and careful support to teachers. Finally, this section will argue that principals may take into account teachers’ capabilities, the ambition of reform efforts, and the likelihood of resistance when they assess whether reforms are likely to improve their school’s performance. In a time where school leaders face many competing demands, dedicating the resource, time, and energy to respond substantively to one of those demands may be less appealing than attending to all of these
demands, even if in perfunctory ways, particularly if the odds of meaningful change from teachers are low.

**Conflicts with other environmental pressures**

One of the consequences of the trend identified in the previous section is that even in more accountability-focused environments, school leaders and teachers still face many demands that can conflict with one another, resulting in partial or ceremonial implementation of initiatives. Coburn (2005) found that teachers experienced more instructional messages from actors outside of their school system, and often responded to competing instructional messages by rejecting one set of practices, responding ceremonially, or melding them together in a way that doesn’t quite capture the underlying purpose of either. In a study of schools going through a reconstitution process, Malen, Croninger, Muncey, and Redmond-Jones (2002) similarly found that teachers often responded to the resulting influx of multiple instructional demands by reverting back to familiar routines and practices in their classrooms.

The persistence of this challenge is evident in efforts to implement the common core state standards, which were intentionally designed to provide educators across states with consistent messages around high-quality instruction. But achieving this coherence requires not just alignment of standards and assessments, but also from the various other actors that influence teaching practice: professional development providers, textbook publishers, formative assessment, and administrators, families, and colleagues. The difficulty of ensuring alignment across all these actors is evident in conflicting instructional messages present in even “common core-aligned” textbooks, many of which fail to support the cognitive work
intended through the new standards (Perry et al, 2015; Polikoff, 2015; Swars & Chestnutt, 2016).

Exacerbating the challenge of achieving instructional coherence is the nature of educational governance in the United States. For example, in studying the implementation longitudinal test-based accountability systems, Anagnostopoulos, Rutledge, & Ball (2013) found that schools, districts, and states contracted with consultants and vendors that spanned across state boundaries and thus offered services that were not well aligned with state or district-specific needs. In addition, they found that even divisions within particular state education agencies implemented test based accountability in different and contradictory ways. Adding to this complexity is that low-income schools often receive funds that are tied to the adoption of specific programs, which results in schools attempting to implement multiple, and at times conflicting, academic or organizational programs concurrently (e.g., Johnson, 2013).

While school leaders can play a role in helping buffer teachers from distracting environmental pressures in the hopes of allowing them to focus on key teacher-driven or school-wide priorities (Rosenholtz, 1985; Rosenholtz & Stimpson, 1990; Spillane & Anderson, 2014), their ability to do this can also be stifled by a multiplicity of expectations. Johnson and Fauske (2000) found that principals rely on many different, and often competing, sources of legitimacy, including students, parents, teachers, district administrators, as well as the broader educational community, and as a result must differentiate the scripts they use to maintain legitimacy among enough of these various audiences on which they depend. In a more recent study of first year principals, Spillane and
Anderson (2014, p. 11) similarly found that the “plurality, diversity, and simultaneity of stakeholder expectations—and the legitimacy and integrity imperative to which those expectations relate—hold potential to ‘overwhelm’” principals. They also found that leaders in higher performing schools had more capacity to support teachers in adopting new initiatives because they have fewer extraneous demands they had to negotiate in order to build legitimacy with other stakeholders (Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Even leaders of charter schools, who are intentionally given greater autonomy than traditional public schools leaders, can face conflicting demands from funders on which they rely to implement specific instructional or organizational reforms (Farrell, 2015; Wohlstetter, Smith, Farrell, Hentschke, & Hirman, 2011). Charter schools also sit at the intersection of multiple domains, including foundations, authorizers, and local, state, and federal regulations, such that even if foundations provide similar messaging, this may not always align with pressures from other important stakeholders (Finnigan, 2007).

All this suggests that while school leaders can play a role in buffering teachers from the kinds of conflicting demands that might yield ceremonial compliance, it may be difficult to play such a role given the various expectations they too are accountable for enacting in their school setting.

**Conflicts with beliefs and practices**

Teachers are also likely to resist or ceremonially adopt practices that conflict with their underlying beliefs about instruction (Coburn, 2004; Huberman & Miles, 2013; Weiss, 1995). The impact of this clash of beliefs can be seen in the implementation of accountability reforms over the past two decades (Mintrop, 2003), as teachers tended to resist test
preparation initiatives that conflicted with their discipline-specific practices (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007). Teachers may similarly subvert instructional reforms due to conflicts between the reform and their disciplinary beliefs (Gregoire, 2003), prior approach to teaching (Diamond, 2007; Maroulis and Wilensky 2014), or core routines and underlying assumptions about learning (Kennedy, 2005). Studies have highlighted how teachers often implement the appealing surface-level aspects of a new instructional initiative (e.g., the specific activities used) without realizing that their underlying beliefs and pedagogical approach conflicted with the reform’s deeper intent (e.g., Cohen 1990, Ball 1990).

While charter schools often have more autonomy to hire teachers whose values align with those of the school or network, teachers in these contexts also encounter divergent messages that they respond to with avoidance or ceremonial compliance. Teachers in some charter management organizations who initially had no disagreements with the mission or teaching practices overtime began to find the instructional expectations placed on them problematic or constraining (Mehta & Fine, 2015; Torres, 2014), often resulting in them exiting the system (Miron & Applegate, 2007). Teachers who seek out charter schools with non-traditional instructional philosophies they believe in have also grown frustrated by the demands placed on them around student achievement growth by authorizers, families, or other stakeholders (e.g., Blitz, 2011; Gawlick, 2007).

School leaders can frame reform efforts so that they align with teachers’ values or beliefs, increasing the odds that they will be substantively implemented. They can utilize language and draw on expertise that intentionally aligns with teachers’ beliefs (Detert & Pollock, 2008;
Woulfin, 2015), strategically deploying praise of teachers’ efforts (Murnane & Cohen, 1986), and empower teachers to shape implementation of reforms (Hopkins & Spillane, 2015). There is also evidence that school leaders are more likely to work to implement reforms (or aspects of reforms) that they personally believe in (Coburn, 2005; Hallett, 2010; Ladd and Zelli, 2002; Spillane et al, 2011), though few studies have examined in detail what factors shape leaders’ engagement with particular tactics to garner teacher support for reforms.

**Conflict with the technical demands of practice**

A number of studies have found that a major determinant of teachers’ adoption of initiatives is whether they think such reforms will improve their practice (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Detert & Pollock, 2008; Matsumura, Garnier, & Resnick, 2010; Zhao & Frank, 2003), and that teachers are more likely to dismiss reforms that they see as a bad fit for their students (Matsumura et al., 2010), that don’t prove useful in practice (Guskey, 2002; Huberman & Miles, 2013; Kersten & Pardo, 2007; Woulfin, 2015), that come in the wake of a number of other unhelpful reforms (Matsumura et al, 2010), or that don’t address a meaningful problem (Ingram, Seashore Louis, & Schroeder, 2004).

Despite intentions around their design, reforms that have spread in this more accountability-oriented environment are often perceived as unhelpful to educators in improving valued student outcomes. For example, moving towards more ambitious, conceptually focused, and student-centered teaching is difficult, can frustrate teachers, students, and families alike, and can frequently result in failed lessons, particularly in the short-term and when adequate support is lacking (Cohen, 1988; 2011). A number of early reports of implementation of the common core standards have found that successful implementation requires substantial
changes to teachers’ instruction that can be both difficult and taxing, particularly for teachers with students who are not used to more student-centered and conceptually focused instruction (Bengston & Connors, 2014; Porter, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2015; Swars & Chestnutt, 2016). This can frustrate even teachers who are broadly in favor of the standards and agree with the direction they are taking instruction (Perry et al, 2015; Chestnutt, 2016).

Nevertheless, decades of research have illustrated that school and district leaders can shape the extent to which teachers see a reform as likely to improve their practice. A common finding from both the professional development and implementation literature is that teachers are more likely to adopt practices when they have interactive, ongoing, context- and teacher-specific, and conceptually rich learning opportunities (Ball & Cohen, 1996; Borko, 2004; Coburn, 2004, 2005a; Matsumura et al., 2010; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Rowan, Camburn, & Barnes, 2004; Woulfin, 2015). Indeed, through intensive training, coaching, and support, school leaders can help teachers understand and implement practices in ways that are more likely to be successful in their context.

But whether leaders devote the time and resources necessary for teachers to adequately be convinced of and learn about new reforms depends on their own assessment of the reform’s potential. Principals, like teachers, are also more likely to substantively implement reforms that they see as useful in supporting their practice, which has resulted in more careful implementation of reforms that help them track teachers’ and students’ progress (e.g., Hallett, 2010; Spillane et al, 2011), and more superficial and compliance-oriented implementation to district initiatives that were not perceived to address real problems (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Woulfin et al, 2015).
School leaders’ conceptions of what is useful in supporting the efficacy of their school also depends on the valuations of the difficulty of a reform and teachers’ capabilities and attitudes. School leaders may see a number of tradeoffs to implementing ambitious instructional initiatives that aim to alter fundamental aspects of teachers’ practice, given the content knowledge and skill required from designers and facilitators, the ways such programs need to be tailored to specific teacher learners, and the human and fiscal cost of attempting to ensure that teachers actually do change their practice (Cohen & Ball, 1999). For example, even when California invested heavily in professional development to support deeper changes in teachers’ math instruction, only a small percentage of teachers engaged in the kind of learner-centered, content rich, and sustained learning activities that helped them change their practice (Cohen & Hill, 2000). Pushing teachers to understand problems in their existing practice and make changes can also yield backlash or defensiveness, and such turmoil can throw school leaders’ legitimacy into question and prevent them from being able to carry out their work (Johnson & Fauske, 2000; Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). Principals also may lack the resources and capacity to carry out ambitious reforms in ways that are likely to support teachers’ faithful implementation. In a review of literature on teacher observation and evaluation, Woulfin et al (2015) found that principals often lacked the time to implement teacher observations in substantive ways, did not have the necessary skills to implement evaluations in an effective manner (and rarely have adequate access to quality professional development), and did not have the incentive to fully implement teacher evaluations, since doing so risked alienating or frustrating teachers whose cooperation they rely on to carry out many school and district-level initiatives.
Reports on the implementation of CCSS provide early evidence that some of these challenges may salient for principals. Seventy six percent of district leaders surveyed in one report of CCSS implementation indicated that their districts currently did not have the resources to implement all aspects of the new standards (Kober & Rentner, 2011). This helps explain why principals felt unprepared to support classroom implementation of the new standards through the provision of exemplary models for specific practical guidance to support instructional change (Perry et al, 2015). While 64% of surveyed principals nevertheless felt prepared to be instructional leaders around the standards, only 48% of teachers agreed (Perry et al, 2015). In comparison, those districts that have been most successful in implementing the standards have intentionally taken efforts to roll out the implementation process in a slow and manageable way (Durand, Lawson, Wilcox, Schiller, 2016).

**Using Imprecise Means to Monitor, Support, and Encourage Adoption**

So far, I have argued that educators are more likely to substantively implement initiatives that are encouraged by stakeholders on which they depend, and when such initiatives do not conflict with their beliefs, technical work, or other obligations. But individuals may still adopt reforms that they disagree with if there are strong incentives or regulations to do so. Indeed, research in the organizational literature has supported the contention that organizations are more likely to adopt practices when doing so is incentivized, either through legal or financial means (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Oliver, 1991). Bromley and Powell (2012) have argued that in a more accountability-oriented environment, school organizations are likely to substantively implement practices, even if they depart from their goals. However, two characteristics of educational organizations may challenge their hypothesis.
First, educational outcomes are notoriously difficult to operationalize and measure. As a result, educational policymakers rely on imperfect substitutes, such as standardized test scores, that may be symptoms of student learning but do not themselves embody the qualities policymakers care about most (i.e., we care not whether a student can answer four specific multiple choice questions about a passage, but rather whether a student can read and comprehend passages of a particular complexity). Unfortunately, as hypothesized in Campbell’s law, such measures are therefore subject to corruption when they carry high stakes (Koretz, 2002).

Drawing on the experiences with high stakes accountability over the past couple decades, many researchers found evidence that the combination of imperfect measures attached to high stakes led to unintended and counterproductive instructional and organizational practices. As a result of accountability reforms, teachers have adjusted their practice to focus more attention on students who are on the “bubble” of proficiency at the expense of those struggling most (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Ladd & Lauen, 2010), and narrowed the curriculum to align to tested material (Au, 2007; Firestone, Mayrowetz, & Fairman, 1998; Jennings, 2012). Schools similarly employed triage practices at the organizational level, intentionally lowering the quality of interim assessments to resemble state tests (Johnson, 2013), exempting students from assessments that were likely to bring down test scores (Cullen & Reback, 2006; Figlio & Getzler, 2002) and devoting less time to non-tested subjects (Reback, Rockoff, & Schwartz, 2011). Each of these changes may have improved test scores, but likely had negative impacts on student learning when considering the variety of qualities educators care about for students.
This challenge intersects with a second characteristic of educational organizations, namely the atomized nature of schools and the difficulty of monitoring or measuring deeper aspects of teachers’ work. It is more difficult and expensive to monitor whether schools adopt reforms at deeper levels. Whether a school formally adopts a reform can easily be measured or monitored by interested stakeholders by reviewing key documents such as school budgets, staffing, or improvement plans. Assessing whether schools implement a reform at the surface level of classrooms is more difficult, since it involves actually observing teachers and classrooms to see if prescribed changes are enacted in practice, though such observations can be brief. Monitoring whether schools implement reforms in below-the-surface ways is more difficult still, since it involves observing teachers’ practice for sustained periods of time to examine more subtle pedagogical changes, such as new discourse patterns or responses to non-routine events.

Revisiting the case of accountability, the incentive to improve standardized test scores often resulted in changes to school structures or surface-level practices, but less frequently influenced below-the-surface aspects of instruction. Booher-Jennings (2005) illustrated how administrators in the school district felt pressure from the state to adopt data driven decision-making practices, and thus exerted pressure on schools to embody these practices as well. While administrators conceptualized these practices in ways that implied deeper changes in how teachers approach instruction and adjust their work (e.g., one administrator reflected that data driven decision making meant “finding out what’s wrong, remediating it, testing it again . . . and if they didn’t [get it], then what am I going to do differently?”), these intentions were often manifested through the adoption of policies and instructional practices
that target “bubble” students or the display of student test scores by teachers. Detert and Pollock’s (2008) comparative analysis of implementation of a data-driven school improvement process similarly found that one school’s regulation of teacher behavior and use of incentives yielded more ceremonial adoption by teachers and inhibited their learning and changes in beliefs.

Similar unintended consequences can result from the regulating or monitoring of surface-level aspects of teachers’ practice. Research over the past few decades has illustrated how regulations or mandates—particularly when decoupled from broader support—lead to more ceremonial adoption of practices by teachers (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Coburn, 2004; Huberman & Miles, 2013).

Finally, it is both difficult and rare for educators to learn about and engage with deeper aspects of reforms. Educators are more likely to adopt practices when they receive intensive and focused messaging and support around using those practices (Coburn, 2004; 2005; Woulfin, 2015). But designing professional development experiences for teachers that focus on deeper aspects of instructional practice is a well-documented challenge, given the content knowledge and skill it requires from designers and facilitators and the ways such programs need to be tailored to specific skills, knowledge, and beliefs of teacher learners (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Coburn (2005) found in one study that only 6.5 percent of the messages teachers received from the school system were of a “high” depth (i.e., wherein teachers are exposed to the underlying pedagogical principles of a practice), and that when teachers were exposed to messages without attending to the underlying pedagogical principles, they were less likely to substantively implement the reform.
The difficulty of supporting and incentivizing deeper changes in teachers’ practice can be seen in efforts to implement the common core state standards. These new standards are intended to shift teachers’ practice, particularly around the “minute-by-minute decisions [to] capitalize on teachable moments” (Swar & Chestnutt, 2016, p. 220; citing Griffin and Ward, 2014). Early studies of districts implementing the standards, however, have found that teachers are primarily exposed to more surface-level aspects of the new standards through professional development (Porter, 2016, p. 131; Swars & Chestnutt, 2016, p. 215), and that teachers do not have a deep knowledge about implementing the new standards (Ajayi 2016). Administrators also frequently evaluate teachers based on more surface-level aspects of their practice (Bengston & Connors, 2014). Additionally, while part of the motivation behind the shift to the CCSS was to develop better tests that are less capable of being “gamed” by schools and teachers, it is not yet clear that teachers yet see these tests as incentive to make deeper pedagogical shifts to their practice. In light of many state-level policies linking teacher evaluation to student performance on standardized tests, McDuffie et al (2015) found that teachers were less inclined to make instructional decisions based on CCSS principles and student learning progressions, and instead were focused on covering the topics on the new CCSS-aligned assessments, which served as a “proxy for understanding what to teach from CCSSM.” (McDuffie, 2015, p. 29).

These outcomes can be traced, at least in part, to the district and state context of schools. State educational agencies have historically had a role focused on monitoring compliance, and therefore have less capacity to support learning about deeper aspects of practice (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2013). District leaders similarly tend to use compliance-based
strategies in the implementation even of initiatives that require ongoing learning at the school level (Durand et al, 2016). Part of the problem is that districts also do not always have the capacity to monitor or support deeper aspects of implementation of practices, and therefore may emphasize more surface-level aspects of the reform (e.g., Woulfin, Donaldson and Gonzales, 2015), and that it can be difficult to communicate complex and nuanced aspects of a reform to school leaders, particularly in light of the sparse professional and affective ties between school and district leaders (Finnigan, Daly, & Che, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, many studies have found that principals often do not gain the skills necessary to implement reforms as they are intended (e.g., Sartain et al, 2011).

Charter schools offer a final illustration of the difficulty of ensuring that the pressures teachers and leaders face align with the intentions of a reform. For many advocates of market-based school reforms, competition for students and parents is theorized to incentivize schools to improve their efficiency and instructional quality (Chubb & Moe, 1990). But when we open up the black box of “competitive pressure” and investigate what kinds of pressures school leaders actually face in a competitive environment, it becomes clear very little has to do with below-the-surface aspects of instruction. Research on school choice in New Orleans has illustrated how competition for enrollment (as manifested in parental choices and the hunches of school leaders) pushed school leaders (particularly in failing schools) to focus on non-academic strategies (e.g., increasing marketing, adding extracurricular programs) over academic improvement (Jabbar, 2015; Harris, Larsen, & Zimmerman, 2015).
Charter school leaders also face pressure from the organizations on which they depend that are more aligned to formal organizational practices than deeper aspects of instruction. Many philanthropists, particularly those in the network of “venture philanthropists”, have strong preferences around the formal administrative practices of charter schools, but are less involved in deeper issues of instruction and pedagogy (e.g., Hess, 2010; Quinn, Tompkins-Stange, & Meyerson, 2013; Wohlstetter, Smith, Farrell, Hentschke, & Hirman, 2011). Even foundations that are less part of the venture philanthropy network often ask that their grants be used for specific additions to schools’ programs, rather to support or enhance ongoing instructional improvement (Hess, 2010; Wohlstetter, Smith, Farrell, Hentschke, & Hirman, 2011). In addition, because of the difficulty and expense of monitoring deeper aspects of the school’s technical work, Blitz (2011) found that authorizers generally rely on the easily quantifiable measures of progress like standardized test scores and even parental satisfaction surveys, but had less ability to gather or assess data about the extent to which the school is living up to the instructional mission laid out in the charter.

In summary, this section has illustrated how educators are more likely to adopt the aspects of reforms that are measured, supported, or monitored. Additionally, this section has highlighted the imperfection of most measures of relevant educational outcomes and the difficulty and cost of monitoring or supporting deeper aspects of classroom practice. As a result, deeper aspects of reforms are generally less likely to be monitored or supported, creating a climate where educators may face greater incentive and support around implementing the more surface-level and visible components of instructional or organizational initiatives.
Principal Dilemmas

Taken together, the preceding sections suggest school leaders in districts responsive to these accountability-oriented reforms may find themselves in a difficult situation. From above, they are dependent upon a number of external stakeholders for legitimacy, and as a whole these stakeholders tend to value the implementation of many overlapping and at times conflicting initiatives. Additionally, these stakeholders typically monitor, incentivize, and support the adoption of these various initiatives at the formal organizational or surface level of practice. From below, school leaders are reliant upon teachers to implement many of these reforms. Teacher implementation of reforms is difficult to guarantee, and requires that school leaders frame the reform so that it is aligned with teachers’ values, buffer teachers from competing initiatives that might pull them in different directions, and provide them with meaningful learning experiences around the reforms. But doing this for any one initiative takes away time and resources to support even superficial adoption of the other reforms that are more likely to garner legitimacy for the school and leader. School leaders in these circumstances will therefore face pressure to respond by emphasizing surface-level implementation of many of these reforms at the expense of deeper implementation of any one reform. As a result, teachers in these settings are unlikely to receive the kind of support and training they need to substantively adopt a reform, and thus are likely to also respond with more ceremonially compliant that may influence their surface-level practice but not deeper aspects of their instruction.

Though very little research has directly evaluated this hypothesis, a few studies have highlighted how multiple formal and surface-level pressures encourage school leaders to emphasize surface-level adoption of reforms by teachers, even at the expense of more
substantive implementation. In one study of the writing and enactment of school improvement plans, Mintrop and MacLellan (2002) found that school and teacher leaders wrote school improvement plans with much more attention to external expectations of relevant stakeholders than to internal challenges and capabilities, and that, in practice, faculty generally espoused compliance with the plans despite limited knowledge of their contents. The authors concluded that the plans ended up being “comprehensive to a fault and only loosely tailored to internal faculty capacity, perhaps creating a condition of change overload rather than strategic focus, that is, if all intended activities were implemented faithfully” and that in most cases “teachers ignore the plan despite professed compliance.” Mintrop (2003) has also studied how the implementation of ambitious standards and high stakes assessments without complementary capacity-building encouraged administrators to focus on monitoring of surveillable behavior, the silencing of critical teacher voices, and an avoidance of more honest self-evaluation. In a study of implementation of improvement processes in two schools, Detert and Pollock (2008) illustrate how, as a result of a more demanding institutional environment, one school implemented the reform in a regulative and high pressure way that yielded higher levels of compliance but less buy-in and real learning about the process. Johnson (2013) similarly found that a mix of high stakes assessments, multiple and weakly implemented grant-funded initiatives (e.g., around ESL support), and a lack of support infrastructure from administrators and coaches together resulted in school leaders regulating the surface-level implementation of many instructional reforms (e.g., the posters teachers hang on their walls, or the use of specific instructional practices during observations) in ways that actually detracted from teachers’ improvements in practice.
Spillane and Anderson (2014) have even located some of this behavior in the tradeoffs between efficiency and legitimacy school leaders face. They found that principals facing more acute institutional demands (e.g., due to declining enrollment or test scores) struggled to repair legitimacy in the eyes of various stakeholders who were each looking for specific things (e.g., parents looking for specific classroom features or a level of cleanliness, districts looking for improvements in enrollment, attendance, scores, graduation, etc.), while still working to improve the overall cohesion and integrity of the school.

Though there is less research to date on the decision making process of charter school leaders responding to competition, early evidence suggests that they are making a similar compromise. For example, as a result of competition, school leaders have enhanced outreach and marketing (Jabbar, 2015; Kasman & Loeb, 2013), have sought out students who are more likely to have high test scores (DiMartino & Jessen, 2014; Jabbar, 2015; Jennings, 2010), and are more likely to engage in these strategies than in instructional improvement efforts (Jabbar, 2015; Kasman & Loeb, 2013). While no studies to date have assessed how these responses to competition are influenced by the broader institutional pressures charter school leaders face, these actions are consistent with the hypothesis that legitimacy-enhancing organizational and surface-level responses may crowd out more systemic efforts at instructional improvement.

It is also the case that systems that are able to spur deeper changes to teachers’ practice do so in part by dramatically shaping the surrounding environment. A number of charter systems, for example, have developed a comprehensive infrastructure to overcome many of the constraining conditions discussed in this essay in order to support teachers in
implementing specific instructional and organizational practices (e.g., Furgeson et al, 2012; Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010). Many charter systems, for example, devote resources to recruiting and selecting teachers and leaders who are more aligned with (or have the willingness to adapt to) the particular instructional and organizational vision of the school, and then extensively training and coaching them to use the system’s instructional methods (Chadwick et al., 2011; DeArmond et al., 2012; Mehta & Fine, 2015; Rosenberg, 2012). The most successful of these systems have also developed mechanisms (e.g., continuous assessments, curricula and lesson plans, displays of students work) to ensure that “administrative leaders, teachers, and students share a highly developed picture of what they think good instruction looks like, and that this picture serves as the anchor for much of what happens at these schools” (Mehta & Fine, forthcoming). Finally, many of these systems rely on more intensive coaching, team teaching or apprenticeship, and observation so that these deeper aspects of instruction are monitored and supported (e.g., Lake, et al., 2010; Mehta & Fine, forthcoming). Other comparative research that identifies schools or districts that are implementing new instructional practices have similarly identified mechanisms for communicating, supporting, and monitoring deep visions of instruction as critical for ensuring that teachers make substantive changes to their practice (e.g., Cohen & Hill, 2000; Glazer & Peurach, 2015; Hopkins & Spillane, 2015).

These examples illustrate that the paradoxical position of school leaders torn between enhancing legitimacy by doing many things in a surface-level way and improving quality by doing a couple of things in a substantive way is not inevitable; still, they remain outliers, and this tension is likely to persist in schools that are not embedded in such carefully designed and comprehensive systems. Take the case of CMOs. While a number of studies have
documented how a substantial proportion of charter networks have been able to develop many aspects of this infrastructure (e.g., Furgeson et al, 2012; Lake et al, 2010), Mehta & Fine’s (forthcoming) comparative study suggests that these systems may be more rare in practice than they seem on paper. Despite intentionally sampling for those schools or networks that are considered by their peers as most promising in achieving consistent, rigorous teaching, Mehta & Fine found very few schools where teaching practice was consistently lived up to the espoused instructional philosophy.

**Conclusion**

This essay has argued that although the institutional environment surrounding schools has certainly organized more around the outputs of education, there remains a vast array of coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures supporting the use of particular formal structures and surface level practices as a way of maintaining legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983); but rarely is there isomorphic pressure around below-the-surface aspects of teachers’ practice. Leaders in such environments are therefore still likely to experience a variety of contradictory pressures from important stakeholders around how to improve outcomes, but while they used to resolve this tension through buffering teachers from a chaotic environment, the increased attention to monitoring and accountability over the past two decades may push many to implement the most visible and measurable aspects of these various reforms, even at the expense of more substantive implementation. In these cases, teachers are likely to experience pressure to implement an array of instructional and organizational initiatives, at least at surface levels, but in many cases without the incentives or necessary support to substantively engage with them at deeper levels.
A nuanced but impactful revision to the existing literature on educational organizations may therefore be necessary. While scholars have moved from predicting that school leaders engage in avoidance tactics (e.g., buffering, decoupling) to more traditional acquiescence to institutional demands (e.g., Bromley & Powell, 2012; Spillane et al., 2002; 2011), the implication of this essay is that as a result of greater levels of monitoring and accountability of diverse institutional demands, school leaders are likely to engage in compromise behaviors (Oliver, 1991), where they balance multiple constituent pressures by implementing the most visible elements of each. This in turn decreases the likelihood that leaders can create the conditions for teachers to substantively implement any given reform or initiative. As a result, teachers will either more strategically implement the aspects of reforms that preserve legitimacy while avoiding deeper changes to their practice, or they will engage in in good faith but imperfect attempts to implement reforms despite suboptimal levels of training and support. Thus, leaders, and in some cases teachers, will engage in technical ceremonies to the extent that they do make adjustments to the technical core of their work, but with at least one eye focused on external legitimacy, privileging what is visible to stakeholders on whom they depend over longer-term quality.

This argument has a number of implications for research and theory. First, it suggests that the problems of school reform stem not only from the technical challenges endemic to the (all but) impossible task of human improvement (Cohen, 1988) under conditions of overwhelming and imperfect information (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972), but also from the intersection of these challenges with legitimacy concerns. It may therefore be fruitful to take a field-level perspective (Burch, 2007), and research how the environmental context and the various actors that confer legitimacy influence educators’ choices. For example, Orton &
Weick (1990) argued that loose coupling stems from causal indeterminacy, as well as fragmentation in both the external and internal environment of organizations. While a number of recent reforms, such as the proliferation of “evidence-based” structures and practices; the alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessments; and the use of organizational routines to connect school structures to organizational practices have sought to overcome these conditions, this essay has illustrated how fragmentation and causal indeterminacy still persist, and can contribute to looser coupling of policies and deeper aspects of instructional practice.

Second, in line with Weick’s (1976) initial theorization, this essay suggests that instead of examining whether or not policy and practice is decoupled, we should seek to uncover the patterns of tight and loose coupling as educational organizations respond to more accountability-oriented reforms. The evidence presented in this essay suggests that as schools more tightly couple policy and surface-level practices, they may inadvertently loosen the coupling with deeper aspects of instructional practice (e.g., discourse patterns, pedagogical beliefs). Researchers who study implementation may therefore miss evidence of resistance or ceremonial compliance by collecting data only on teachers’ surface level practices. One approach to resolving this challenge is taking on Oliver’s (1991) framework and assessing the extent to which educators engage in acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, or manipulation. Focusing on avoidance behaviors (concealment, buffering, escape), for example, rather than decoupling of policy and practice, allows for a wider lens in examining how institutional context may influence educators’ behavior.
Third, this research emphasizes the importance of research that examines how school leaders respond to the policy environment, and the reciprocal ways leaders’ choices may influence, and be influenced by, their perceptions of teachers’ capacity and likelihood of changing practice. Spillane and his colleagues (2002) have already spearheaded much of this research, and use the phrase managing in the middle to capture the pressures school leaders need to negotiate from both above and below. While they have a generally optimistic take on how principals negotiate these competing interests, this essay lays out conditions under which school leaders might reconcile this tension in ways that actually subvert the intentions of many recent accountability-oriented reforms.

This argument also has number of implications for practice. First, many of the implementation challenges noted in the literature (e.g., Cohen, 1990; Cohen & Ball, 1999) are not just technical in nature: that we need to just provide better learning experiences for teachers in order for them to meaningfully implement reforms. While this may help, a deeper problem is rooted in the environment surrounding schools: educators gain legitimacy not through long-term incremental improvement, nor through deep and focused engagement with key problems, but rather by adopting the variety of practices and strategies that external stakeholders care about and can monitor. Thus, the active and dynamic educational sector, with actors that range from local, state, and federal government to NGOs, philanthropists, universities, think tanks, and other intermediary organizations may unintentionally contribute to the proliferation of surface-level pressures that can keep principals from focusing on building organizational coherence (e.g., Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). Solving at scale what appears to be the most technical of problems may therefore require a shift in how the various actors involved in the field of education support, monitor, and evaluate schools.
Finally, this essay provides support for the recent emphasis on understanding the role of educational infrastructure in supporting improvement in educational systems (Cohen & Moffitt, 2010; Cohen, Peurach, & Spillane, under review; Mehta & Fine, forthcoming). In particular, such infrastructure can play an important role in resolving some of the paradoxes discussed in this essay by communicating consistent messages and support to teachers and school leaders about deeper aspects of an instructional initiative or vision. However, research on these efforts would benefit from a more institutional lens, particularly one that explores how broader institutional pressures influence the process of building and sustaining infrastructure, and in turn the patterns of tight and loose coupling around system policies, surface-level practices, and deeper aspects of instructional work. Distinguishing between systems that support deeper changes to instructional practice from those that garner only surface-level changes (e.g., Mehta & Fine, Forthcoming)—and understanding what factors enable the former over the latter—will be a critical task for both researchers and practitioners over the next decade.

References


Figlio, D. N., & Getzler, L. S. (2002). Accountability, ability and disability: Gaming the system. Retrieved from


