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# Beyond Decoupling: Rethinking the Relationship Between the Institutional Environment and the Classroom

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The decoupling argument—that schools respond to pressures from the institutional environment by decoupling changes in structures from classroom instruction—has been a central feature of institutional theory since the early 1970s. This study suggests the need to rethink this argument. Drawing on a study of the relationship between changing ideas about reading instruction in California from 1983 to 1999 and teachers' classroom practice, the study provides evidence that messages about instruction in the environment influence classroom practice in a process that is framed by teachers' preexisting beliefs and practices and the nature of the messages themselves. Implications are drawn for theories of teachers' autonomy and methodological approaches to studying macro-micro linkages.

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One of the most enduring images from institutional studies of public schooling is that of the classroom decoupled from changes in the institutional environment. Since the late 1970s, researchers have argued that schools respond to pressures in the institutional environment by making symbolic changes in structure and procedures but decouple these changes from classroom practice, buffering the classroom from environmental pressures (Deal and Celotti 1980; Driscoll 1995; Firestone 1985; Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz 1990; Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978). This perspective suggests that the institutional environment has little influence on teachers' classroom work. The image of the decoupled classroom is powerful. It provides an explanation for the legion of studies that have recounted the failure of school reform efforts to reach classroom practice (Cohen 1988; Cuban 1993; Elmore 1996; Sarason 1990). It supports research on the occupational norm of autonomy in teachers'

work (Goodlad 1984; Little 1990; Lortie 1975). And it echoes conventional wisdom that teachers simply close their classroom doors to unwanted pressures and priorities.

In spite of this argument's pervasiveness, few studies have directly examined the relationship between the institutional environment and teachers' work (Rowan and Miskel 1999; Scott 2001). Furthermore, recent theoretical advances in institutional theory have begun to raise questions about decoupling, suggesting that pressures from the institutional environment penetrate schools and classrooms in more substantial ways. In this article, I revisit the relationship between the institutional environment and teachers' classroom practice, specifically teachers' approach to reading instruction. In doing so, I draw on a larger study of the relationship between changing ideas about reading instruction in California from 1983 to 1999 and teachers' classroom practice, arguing that conceptions of appropriate instruction in the institutional

environment do reach within organizational structures to influence classroom practice, at times in consequential ways. But teachers actively mediate these pressures in a process that is framed by their preexisting beliefs and practices, which, in turn, are rooted in past encounters with institutional pressures. This process is influenced by the nature of the institutional pressure—its congruence with teachers' preexisting beliefs and practices, its intensity, its pervasiveness, and its voluntariness.

Reading instruction provides a fertile context for such research. During the period covered by this study, California experienced at least three major shifts in conceptions of appropriate reading instruction in the institutional environment. In the mid-1980s, state policy moved away from its long emphasis on basic skills to promote an approach called literature-based instruction. Shortly thereafter, in the early 1990s, a second movement, which I call "early literacy," moved from district to district and ultimately into state policy, putting forth an alternative vision of appropriate instruction. Finally, in 1995, the state began a period of active policy making to promote a "balance" between literature-based and basic-skills approaches. The intensity and temporal proximity of these changes, as well as the differences in fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning that they imply, rendered visible the dynamics of macro-micro linkages that otherwise might have been masked during periods of environmental stability or more subtle, incremental change. Thus, reading instruction in California provides a strategic opportunity to examine the relationship between the institutional environment and teachers' classroom practice over time.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Institutional theory seeks to understand the persistence of or change in structures, norms, and patterns of social relationships in organizations by highlighting the ways in which they are linked to organizations' broader social and cultural environment. In this conception, similarities in school structures, roles,

and organization are shaped by systems of cultural rules, shared norms, and taken-for-granted understandings about such things as the nature of subject matter, students' and teachers' roles, and what it means to be a school (Metz 1989; Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978; Meyer, Scott, and Deal 1981). Most institutional theorists have located the source or origin of these common cultural conceptions about schooling in the institutional environment outside the school. They have explored how norms and cultural conceptions are constructed and reconstructed over time as they are carried by individual and collective actors and are embedded within policy and governance structures (Scott 2001; Scott, Mendel, and Pollack 1996).

Since institutional theory reemerged as an influential branch of organizational theory in the late 1970s, the decoupling argument has been at its core. In their seminal 1977 essay, Meyer and Rowan argued that schools decouple structural or procedural changes in school organization from classroom instruction to buffer the technical core from scrutiny (see also Meyer and Rowan 1978) or to allow schools simultaneously to meet multiple and conflicting demands from the multilayered environment (Meyer et al. 1981).<sup>1</sup> This theoretical work has received some empirical support (see, e.g., Deal and Celotti 1980; Firestone 1985; Malen et al. 1990; Malen and Ogawa 1988). However, most studies that have invoked the decoupling argument have not investigated the relationship between classrooms and the environment directly. Rather, they have focused on the relationship between school administration and classroom practice (see, e.g., Deal and Celotti 1980; Firestone 1985; Gamoran and Dreeben 1985) or on schools' responses to governance reforms (see, e.g., Malen et al. 1990; Malen and Ogawa 1988), strategies that assume that the relationship between the classroom and the environment is largely mediated by school leadership or organizational structures.

Theoretical developments in institutional theory have raised questions about the view of the environment's influence on organizations' core technology offered by the decoupling argument. First, Meyer and Rowan's (1977, 1978) formulation depends on a

model of the environment that consists of two dichotomous parts: the technical environment, which puts demands on organizations for efficiency, and the institutional environment, which puts demands for conformity to institutional rules and taken-for-granted understandings. Meyer and Rowan argued that the decoupling strategy allowed educational organizations to be responsive to both kinds of pressures: schools could respond to the institutional environment symbolically while classrooms continued to be responsive to the technical environment (see also Rowan and Miskel 1999). Yet there is evidence that the institutional and technical environments are not separate but mutually interactive (Goodrick and Salancik 1996; Orru, Biggart, and Hamilton 1991; Powell 1991; Scott 2001; Scott et al. 2000) and that the institutional environment influences core organizational processes (Barley 1986; D'Aunno, Sutton, and Price 1991; Goodrick and Salancik 1996). If the institutional environment influences the technical environment and the classroom occupies the technical core of educational organizations, then it seems possible that the institutional environment could shape the classroom in direct and indirect ways. This point raises the possibility that schools are subject to institutional pressures regarding not only organizational structure, but conceptions of appropriate pedagogy.

Second, theorists outside education have argued that there is a range of possible organizational responses to pressures from the institutional environment that include but go much beyond decoupling (Oliver 1991; Powell 1991; Scott 2001). For example, Oliver proposed a typology of possible responses, ranging from acquiescence to compromise, avoidance (including decoupling), and defiance.

Some studies of public schools have lent preliminary support to these arguments. They have provided evidence that norms of appropriate instruction from the institutional environment *do* reach within organizational structure to influence teaching and learning and that teachers *do* respond to these pressures in multiple ways. Several studies have highlighted the way in which institutionalized conceptions of the nature of knowledge, learning,

and teaching in the environment tend to hold teachers' classroom practice in place (Bidwell 2001; Cuban 1993; Rowan and Miskel 1999), accounting for the widespread "sameness" of teachers' classroom practice. This view suggests that teachers have little autonomy in the face of institutional pressures from the environment, challenging research that has highlighted the occupational norm of autonomy in teachers' work (Goodlad 1984; Little 1990; Lortie 1975).

Other studies have moved away from assumptions of a unitary environment, arguing that teachers are often faced with multiple conceptions of appropriate pedagogy. In these situations, teachers respond in different ways: They favor one conception over another (Hemmings and Metz 1990; McLaughlin and Talbert 2001; Popkewitz, Tabachnick, and Wehlage 1982; Talbert and McLaughlin 1994), respond symbolically (Metz 1989), or combine multiple approaches to create hybrid practices (Cuban 1993; EEPA 1990; Hemmings and Metz 1990; Tyack and Cuban 1995). Finally, work by McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) and Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) has suggested that teachers exercise agency and autonomy in response to institutional pressures, constructing and reconstructing institutional pressures in the context of their professional communities.

However, these studies leave many questions unanswered. First, little is known about when and under what conditions teachers respond to pressures from the institutional environment in one way, rather than another. Second, studies have explored the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom during a single moment in time, and thus little is known about the way in which teachers respond to changes in the environment diachronically.<sup>2</sup> Finally, although several studies have provided evidence that teachers reconstruct pressures from the environment as they put them in place in their classrooms, little is known about the processes by which this reconstruction occurs.

To gain insight into these intraorganizational processes associated with teachers' response to institutional pressures, I drew on theoretical and empirical work from sense-making theory. Sensemaking theorists are

concerned with the ways in which the social structure and culture of organizations develop and change. They have argued that cognitive understandings (“the way things are”), norms (“the way things should be”), and routines (“the way things are done”) are socially constructed over time through interpersonal interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Weick 1995) and in dialogue with messages from the environment (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Porac, Thomas, and Baden-Fuller 1989). The approach thus positions teachers’ sensemaking as a key mediating link between shifting logics in the environment and classroom change.

Sensemaking theorists have suggested that school and classroom culture, structure, and routines result, in part, from “micro-momentary actions” by teachers and other actors in the school (Porac et al. 1989). Action is based on how people notice or select information from the environment, make meaning of that information, and then act on those interpretations, developing culture, social structures, and routines over time (Porac et al. 1989; Weick 1995). The meaning of information or events—in this case, messages about reading that are associated with institutional pressures—is not given, but is inherently problematic; individuals and groups must actively construct understandings and interpretations. They do so by placing new information into their existing cognitive frameworks, also called “worldviews” by some theorists (Porac et al. 1989; Vaughan 1996; Weick 1995). Thus, teachers notice new messages and construct understandings of them through the lens of their existing practices and worldviews (EEPA 1990; Jennings 1996; Spillane 1999; Spillane and Jennings 1997; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002).

As teachers enact interpretations in their classrooms, they create new practices, patterns of interaction, and ways of thinking that may become institutionalized over time (Barley 1986; Orlikowski 1996; Vaughan 1996). In this way, aspects of messages from the environment become embedded in culture and routines of the classroom and are carried by teachers as part of their worldviews. These new worldviews and practices, in turn, become the lens through which

teachers make sense of new messages. Because of the recursive, incremental nature of sensemaking, chronology plays an important role. Teachers’ responses to pressures from the institutional environment in the past set the stage for later responses to messages (Vaughan 1996).

This article, then, extends institutional theory by reconceptualizing the relationship between macrosocial processes of shifting ideas in the institutional environment and microsocal processes of classroom change. This reconceptualization, grounded in an account of the process by which teachers actively mediate messages about appropriate instruction from the environment, suggests that the environment influences classroom practice in ways that are shaped by teachers’ preexisting worldviews and practices. These beliefs and practices, in turn, are rooted in a teacher’s history of connections with and responses to past messages from the environment. Thus, this study contributes to theories of teachers’ autonomy by exploring how teachers’ connections to the institutional environment create a powerful framework within which teachers exercise agency. I further argue that the nature of the messages themselves—their congruence, intensity, pervasiveness, and voluntariness—influences the degree to which teachers respond to pressures in ways that influence classroom practice in consequential ways. Finally, the study contributes methodologically, highlighting the importance of historical designs that allow researchers to understand the dynamics of macro-micro linkages as they unfold over time.

## METHODS

To study the relationship between changing ideas about reading in the environment and teachers’ classroom practice, I used a qualitative cross-case design (Yin 1984), since this is a primary strategy for documenting organizational processes as they unfold. I focused on the experiences of three teachers in two urban elementary schools in California. Limiting the investigation to three teachers allowed for the depth of inquiry necessary to

capture the subtle and iterative process by which the teachers constructed and reconstructed messages from the environment over time. I focused on two schools because prior research and theory suggested that schools may play a key role in mediating teachers' access to messages, a key question for the larger study of which data for this article were a part. In this article, however, I pay primary attention to how teachers respond to the messages they encounter from the institutional environment; the role of school context in shaping teachers' access to messages is treated more fully elsewhere (see Coburn 2002).

The study was both historical and cross sectional. A historical focus was crucial to capture the ways in which teachers responded to different movements in reading instruction and to document the process by which this occurred over time. Toward that end, at the macrolevel, I investigated changes in conceptions of appropriate reading instruction in the environment from 1983 until 1999 by interviewing 35 key informants at the state and district levels, analyzing documents, and reviewing secondary sources. At the microlevel, I developed oral histories of focal teachers' practice throughout this period, supplementing them with an analysis of classroom documents and artifacts. In addition to historical data, I investigated the relationship between the environment and the classroom in real time during the 1998–99 school year, relying primarily on in-depth interviews (Spradley 1979) and sustained observation (Barley 1990).

I used purposive sampling to select two urban elementary schools that represented strategic contrasts along dimensions that prior research and theory suggested played a role in how schools mediate teachers' access to messages from the environment: the organizations' connections to the environment (D'Aunno et al. 1991; Popkewitz et al. 1982; Scott 2001) and history of practice (Vaughan 1996; Weick 1995). Thus, I selected two schools—Stadele Elementary and Baldwin Elementary<sup>3</sup>—that had contrasting connections to the environment (in different districts and involved in different reform efforts) and schools with contrasting histories of involve-

ment in reform efforts on reading. See Appendix Table A1 for information on the schools' connections to the reform environment from 1983 to 1999.

I also used purposive sampling to select focal teachers. First, I focused the investigation on teachers in the first and second grades because reading instruction in the early grades was the focus of controversy in the environment during the time covered by the study. Second, research on organizational imprinting (Stinchcombe 1965) and political generations (Mannheim 1952; Whittier 1997) has suggested that the social and historical conditions at the time of entry into a domain of activity are likely to shape organizational and individual actions and interpretive frameworks in ways that persist even when the social conditions change. Thus, teachers' worldviews and practices are likely to be influenced by the nature of their connections to particular movements in reading instruction at the time they entered the profession. Ideas about appropriate reading instruction have shifted markedly over the past 30 years as three major movements that have sought to change the way reading is taught in the early grades have emerged, spread, and been challenged by subsequent approaches (see the next section for further details). Thus, I sought to choose teachers who entered the profession during these different movements: prior to 1987, 1987–93, and 1994–99. However, the demographics of teachers in the schools did not cooperate. There was a bimodal distribution of teachers' entry into the profession among the early-grades teachers whereby most teachers in both schools started either prior to 1983 or after 1994, with virtually no teachers in the middle group. Thus, I focused instead on selecting teachers who started teaching before 1987 and after 1994.

To select focal teachers, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nearly all the first- and second-grade teachers in both schools, as well as resource teachers, members of the leadership teams, current and former principals, and select other teachers. At Stadele, I interviewed 12 current classroom teachers, 4 current resource teachers, 2 retired teachers, and 1 retired principal. At Baldwin, I inter-

viewed 9 current classroom teachers, 1 current resource teacher, and 1 retired teacher. I also conducted classroom observations with 8 teachers at Stadele and 6 at Baldwin to gain a better understanding of the nature of their reading instruction. Using information garnered from the initial round of interviews and observations, I selected for in-depth study 3 teachers—Sharon and Marisa at Stadele and Deanna at Baldwin—whose approach to reading instruction and responses to contemporary policy messages represented the general trends of other teachers who entered the profession during the same period. See Appendix Table A2 for a summary of the early-grades teachers' approaches to reading instruction in both schools.

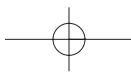
I interviewed Sharon, Marisa, and Deanna 28 times in interviews that lasted from 45 minutes to three hours. A significant proportion of these interviews was devoted to developing oral histories of teachers' classroom practice and connections to the environment. There are, of course, limits inherent in the retrospective interviewing that is necessary to develop oral histories; accounts of events may be smoothed by the passage of time, and less-salient events may be forgotten (Floden and Huberman 1989; Goodson 1992; Hoffman and Hoffman 1994). I used two strategies to address these limitations. First, I rooted the oral history interviews in discussions of artifacts. I searched school archives and teachers' filing cabinets and bookshelves for records of prior policy, professional development, curricular materials, students' work samples, and other relevant materials. These artifacts, some of which involved teachers' written reflections from when they participated in professional development, became both an additional source of information from which to triangulate and the basis for further interviews. Second, I interviewed the focal teachers' close colleagues about events that they experienced together. This approach served both to provide an additional source of information about messages about reading that was highlighted by the focal teachers and to identify additional messages that the focal teachers may not have remembered.

I also conducted classroom observations, spending 89 hours observing the focal teach-

ers' classrooms. Finally, to capture the teachers' connections to messages about appropriate instruction during the study year, I spent more than 130 hours at Stadele and 21.5 hours at Baldwin observing teachers' conversations during formal meetings and professional development<sup>4</sup> in addition to countless hours of informal conversations during lunch, before and after school, and in the hallways.

To analyze data at the macrolevel, I inductively developed a history of changing ideas about reading in the environment, drawing on interviews with key informants, writings by key proponents of particular approaches to reading instruction, and evidence from documents to chart the ways in which certain sets of assumptions, practices, and approaches became bundled at particular moments of history, gained legitimacy, and became embedded in policy and governance structures. Through this process, I identified the three major movements in reading.<sup>5</sup> I then recoded interviews, policy documents, and secondary sources for the presence and absence of the assumptions, practices, and approaches that were associated with the movements to understand the ways in which movements moved in and through the environment and into schools over time.

To analyze macro-micro connections and teachers' microlevel responses, I used NUD.IST qualitative data analysis software to analyze documents, observations at meetings and in classrooms, and interviews. First, I analyzed each focal teacher's connections with and responses to institutional pressures that were related to reading instruction chronologically, creating holistic portraits of the teachers as they developed and changed their reading program over time (see Coburn 2001b; Coburn and Kim 2003). In the course of this analysis, several broad patterns emerged. In particular, it appeared that the nature of the teacher's interaction with the institutional message influenced her response in ways that were conditioned by her history of interaction with messages from the environment. To investigate these patterns further, I reanalyzed the data, coding each individual encounter that the three teachers had with institutional pressures and the resulting change in practice. It is this more focused and



specific analysis that I present in this article.

To facilitate the analysis, I identified what I called key “messages” about reading instruction from the environment. The messages included specific statements or exhortations about how teachers *should* or *must* teach reading that were carried by such things as professional development, new classroom materials, policy documents, statements from principals or district officials about what they expected to see in reading instruction, or reports in the mass media on the “reading crisis.” To identify messages, I analyzed documents (e.g., professional development materials, curriculum materials, policy documents), supplementing this strategy with data from interviews with the focal teachers, their colleagues, principals, and district- and state-level informants. Thus, the identification of relevant messages was not contingent on the focal teachers’ recollections. Among the three focal teachers, I identified 223 encounters with messages from the environment. While each teacher encountered a similar number of messages (79 for Sharon, 70 for Marisa, and 74 for Deanna),<sup>6</sup> they were not necessarily the same messages, even for teachers in the same school.<sup>7</sup> (See Appendix Table A3 for further information about the sources of the messages.)

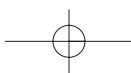
Once I identified the messages, I created longitudinal records of the teachers’ interaction with a given message over time, which became the key analytic unit for the study. To capture microlevel changes in classroom practice, I coded a teacher’s response to the message, using a coding scheme that was rooted in earlier theoretical work in institutional theory in nonschool settings and elaborating the codes through an iterative process of coding and recoding (Miles and Huberman 1994). In this way, I used a strategy of theory elaboration whereby existing theory is challenged, refined, amended, and further specified through an iterative dialogue with data from a contrasting case (Vaughan 1992).

To capture macro-micro links, I coded the factors that characterized the nature of a teacher’s interaction with a message from the institutional environment. In the absence of theory in this domain, I used a more emer-

gent process to identify and code these factors. As I mentioned earlier, during the first round of data analysis, several factors emerged as potentially influential. I used iterative coding to define factors more sharply and to interrogate these patterns further. That is, I began with codes that described, with little interpretation, the factors that characterized the interaction between teachers and institutional pressures. By grouping categories and using systematic comparison (Strauss and Corbin 1990), I moved to progressively higher levels of abstraction until I ended up with the following codes: degree of congruence, intensity, pervasiveness, and voluntariness. I then coded each response high, medium, or low along each dimension (see Table 1 for the definitions used in the coding).

Codes for these factors did not depend solely on the message or the teacher, but on the interaction between the two. For example, degree of congruence refers to teachers’ perceptions of the extent to which the content of messages corresponded with their preexisting worldviews or practices. Since the three teachers had contrasting beliefs and practices, different teachers could and did have different perceptions of the congruence of the same message. In another example, the degree of pervasiveness of a message—the degree to which the teachers were connected to a message in multiple, overlapping, or interlocking ways—could also vary by the teachers. How a message was coded depended on an individual teacher’s history of interaction with similar messages. The first time a teacher encountered a message, the message was coded with a low degree of pervasiveness, but as that teacher encountered the message with greater frequency, the degree of pervasiveness increased. Thus, because the teachers were connected to messages in different ways, different teachers experienced the same message as being more pervasive or less pervasive.

Finally, I used descriptive statistics to analyze the relationships between these factors and the teachers’ responses. Because nearly all patterns of response to factors were similar for all three teachers, I report findings across the teachers, noting and explaining the one



**Table 1. Definitions Used in Coding the Factors that Influence Teachers' Responses**

| Factor                         | Definition  |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>Degree of Congruence</i>    | Teachers' perception of the extent to which the content of a message about reading corresponds to their preexisting worldviews or practices.  |
| Low                            | Teachers characterized messages as inappropriate, inconceivable, potentially ineffective, or not fitting with what they were already doing.   |
| Medium                         | Teachers characterized messages as unfamiliar but plausible, appropriate in some respects but not others, fitting with some aspects of classroom instruction but not others.  |
| High                           | Teachers characterized messages as something they were already doing, as fitting with preexisting practices, or as consistent with their beliefs about appropriate reading instruction.   |
| <i>Degree of Intensity</i>     | The degree to which teachers had opportunities to engage with a message in sustained, iterative ways.   |
| Low                            | Brief or fleeting interactions, including mentions in faculty meetings or professional development, casual conversations with colleagues, quick look through documents or materials, or participating in a single workshop or event.  |
| Medium                         | Interaction was sustained over a brief period or was intermittent over a long period, including professional development experiences that were in depth but short term, curricular materials that teachers used for short periods in class, pressures for standardized tests recurring year after year but (in these schools) confined to a single season of the year, and interaction with a key carrier on an occasional basis.                   |
| High                           | Interaction was sustained over a long period, including daily contact with curricular materials, intensive professional development that stretched over at least a year and involved opportunities for dialogue between ideas and experimentation in the classroom, interaction with a key carrier on a daily basis, or incorporation of messages from professional development into ongoing dialogue or planning with colleagues in the workplace. |
| <i>Degree of Pervasiveness</i> | The degree to which teachers encountered a particular set of pressures or messages in multiple, interlocking, and/or overlapping ways.  |
| Low                            | At the time a teacher encountered the message, it was the first or only time she encountered the message.   |
| Medium                         | At the time a teacher encountered the message, she had encountered the message in more than one way but less than five ways.  |
| High                           | At the time a teacher encountered the message, the teacher had been connected to the message in more than five ways.  |
| <i>Degree of Voluntariness</i> | Nature of pressure that accompanies messages from the environment.  |
| Normative                      | Messages put forth ideas about what teachers should do, specifying valued ends for instruction and/or the appropriate means to get there.   |
| Regulative                     | Messages involved rule setting, monitoring, or sanctioning (Scott 2001). Teachers were mandated to teach in a particular way, toward particular ends, or using particular curricular materials.   |

factor in which one teacher's pattern of response differed from the others'. The aggregation of responses more clearly shows the regularities in the environmental influences on the microprocesses of teacher change.

## READING INSTRUCTION IN CALIFORNIA

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, California schools were the site of tremendous reform energy that was focused on changing how children were taught to read. Three successive movements that sought to redefine what constitutes "good" reading instruction gained prominence in the profession, became part of state policy, and were carried into schools by providers of professional development and instructional materials. These shifts can be seen as a series of attempts to bring about institutional change. Deeply institutionalized approaches to teaching reading were challenged by a series of approaches that gained legitimacy, spread, and became institutionalized to various degrees, only to be challenged by the emergence of a subsequent approach.

At the start of the period in this study, an approach to early reading instruction, known as the basic-skills approach, was deeply institutionalized throughout the country (Goodlad 1984; Pearson 2000). After emerging from conflict during the 1960s, this approach was carried by textbooks, assessment systems, and preservice education for the next two decades. By the early 1980s, at the start of this study, large-scale studies of classroom practice documented the widespread use of this approach (Cuban 1984; Goodlad 1984). The basic-skills approach had attained a taken-for-granted status as the natural or commonsense way to teach reading (Pearson 2000).

The first major shift began in the early 1980s, when a movement within universities, the teaching profession, and the policy community began to challenge the basic-skills approach. Advocates of what would be known as literature-based instruction put

forth a vision of reading instruction that was rooted in epistemological assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning that were fundamentally different from conventional wisdom. The movement for literature-based instruction gained a particularly high profile in California in 1987, when it became embedded in the state-level *English-Language Arts Framework* (California State Department of Education 1987), which, in turn, was linked to the state's adoption of textbooks, professional development contracts, and standardized testing (Brandt 1989). Shortly after literature-based approaches began to gain prominence in the professional and policy world, a second movement—what I call "early literacy"—quietly began to put forth yet another vision of early reading instruction. Rooted in the pedagogical principles of an early intervention program called Reading Recovery (Askew et al. 1998; Breneman and Parker 1991), this set of approaches spread from district to district throughout the state, ultimately making its way into state policy and spawning a host of professional development providers who were focused on applying Reading Recovery principles to early-grades classrooms.

But in the mid-1990s, questions about what constituted good reading instruction exploded onto the public stage after the release of test scores that placed California last in the country in reading, tied with Louisiana and Guam (Carlos and Kirst 1997). In what was dubbed "the reading wars" by the popular press, controversy raged about the root causes of low test scores. Critics began to call for the end of literature-based approaches and a return to "basic skills." In 1995, the state responded by publishing the report of a task force that called for a "balance" between literature-based approaches and the basic-skills approach (California State Department of Education 1996), launching the third policy shift in two decades. For the next several years, different groups of actors put forth different constructions of just what a "balanced approach" is or should be, constructions that were rooted in divergent assumptions about teaching and learning. Over time, a coalition of state actors and researchers was able to define and embed in

state policy a conception of “balanced” instruction. Throughout the second half of the 1990s, the state legislature passed 12 bills allocating nearly half a billion dollars toward reform efforts that promoted what I call the “balanced basic-skills” approach (California State Board of Education 1999). With this legislation, the state systematically undid linkages between state policy and literature-based and early-literacy approaches, putting in their place policies that defined good reading instruction in terms of this new construction of balance.

These large-scale movements in reading instruction penetrated classrooms to various degrees. Teachers in the study were bombarded with multiple, changing, and at times conflicting messages about what constituted good reading instruction through *regulative* means, as ideas about what constituted appropriate reading instruction were mandated through rule setting, monitoring, or sanctioning; through *normative* means, as teachers were pressured (but not required) to adopt certain approaches to maintain legitimacy; and through *cognitive* means, when reading beliefs and practices attained taken-for-granted status as the natural or common-sense way to do things (Scott 2001). Messages about reading were thus “carried” into classrooms by policy at all levels of the system, through reform programs, assessment systems, textbooks and other materials, professional development, community expectations, and individual and collective actors. Hence, formal policy (at the state, district, and school levels) was only one of many mechanisms by which messages about reading came into schools. And the messages varied greatly in the degree of latitude that teachers were afforded in responding.

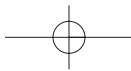
### THE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE CLASSROOM

In sharp contrast to the image of the classroom decoupled from the institutional environment, shifting ideas about what constituted “good” reading instruction in the environ-

ment did reach within organizational structures to influence the technical core—classroom routines, materials, organization, and teachers’ worldviews—at times in consequential ways.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the process by which they did so differed substantially from the model of institutional demands and actors’ responses posited by most institutional studies (Scott 2001). Rather, pressures from the environment became occasions for social negotiation and interpretation in an iterative process that unfolded over time.

As suggested by sensemaking theorists, the teachers mediated pressures from the environment, constructing responses by drawing on their preexisting worldviews and practices. That is, the teachers used their beliefs about the nature of reading instruction and how students learn, as well as taken-for-granted understandings in their workgroups or schools, to select, interpret, and enact new approaches in the context of their existing reading program in ways that were shaped by the social and structural conditions in their school.<sup>9</sup> Yet there was considerable variation in the teachers’ responses to institutional pressures. The teachers responded to some new messages in ways that reified their preexisting worldviews and practices. But other messages caused them to question their assumptions or reconfigure the organization of instruction leading to incremental change. When they did so, these new worldviews and practices became the lens through which the teachers engaged in making sense of subsequent messages. As Vaughan (1996) suggested, chronology played an important role: How the teachers responded to ideas about reading instruction that they encountered earlier in the study influenced how they responded to the messages they encountered later.

Each teacher’s history was shaped by this process. Sharon started teaching in 1964 after she attended preservice training in southern California. She entered teaching at the beginning of the era of basic skills, an approach that was deeply institutionalized in the environment for the next 20 years of her career and provided a powerful frame for how she understood subsequent approaches. When Sharon encountered literature-based



instruction in the mid-1980s—an approach that contrasted sharply with her preexisting beliefs and practices—she filtered it through a basic-skills lens, often enacting messages in her classroom in ways that transformed them so they reinforced or only slightly altered her approach. Sharon initially had a similar response to messages about early literacy in the mid-1990s, although over time she constructed responses in ways that altered her teaching practices more substantially. Finally, when she encountered messages that were associated with balanced basic skills, she found them highly congruent with her fundamental (basic-skills) assumptions and drew the new approaches and ideas into the center of her reading program.

Marisa entered teaching in 1994 on an emergency credential as literature-based instruction waned and a period of great controversy in reading instruction was beginning to unfold. She attended classes throughout her first year of teaching and earned her credential at the end of her first year. Her credential program emphasized literature-based instruction, and Marisa initially drew heavily on this set of approaches when she put together her reading program. She subsequently participated in professional development across the spectrum of approaches that were available during this turbulent period. Unlike Sharon, she eventually embraced most (but not all) aspects of the early-literacy approaches she encountered, slowly shifting from a literature-based classroom to one that was a hybrid of literature-based and early-literature approaches. However, she rejected most (but not all) messages that were associated with balanced basic skills as unsuitable.

Finally, Deanna began teaching in the late 1960s and early 1970s on the East Coast. She entered teaching right out of school, where she was trained in a basic-skills approach. During her first years of teaching, Deanna made a brief foray into individualized instruction as part of a school-university partnership. She subsequently took off 19 years to raise her children, relocated to California, and returned to teaching in 1990 during the height of the literature-based approaches to reading instruction. Like Sharon, Deanna found literature-based approaches difficult to

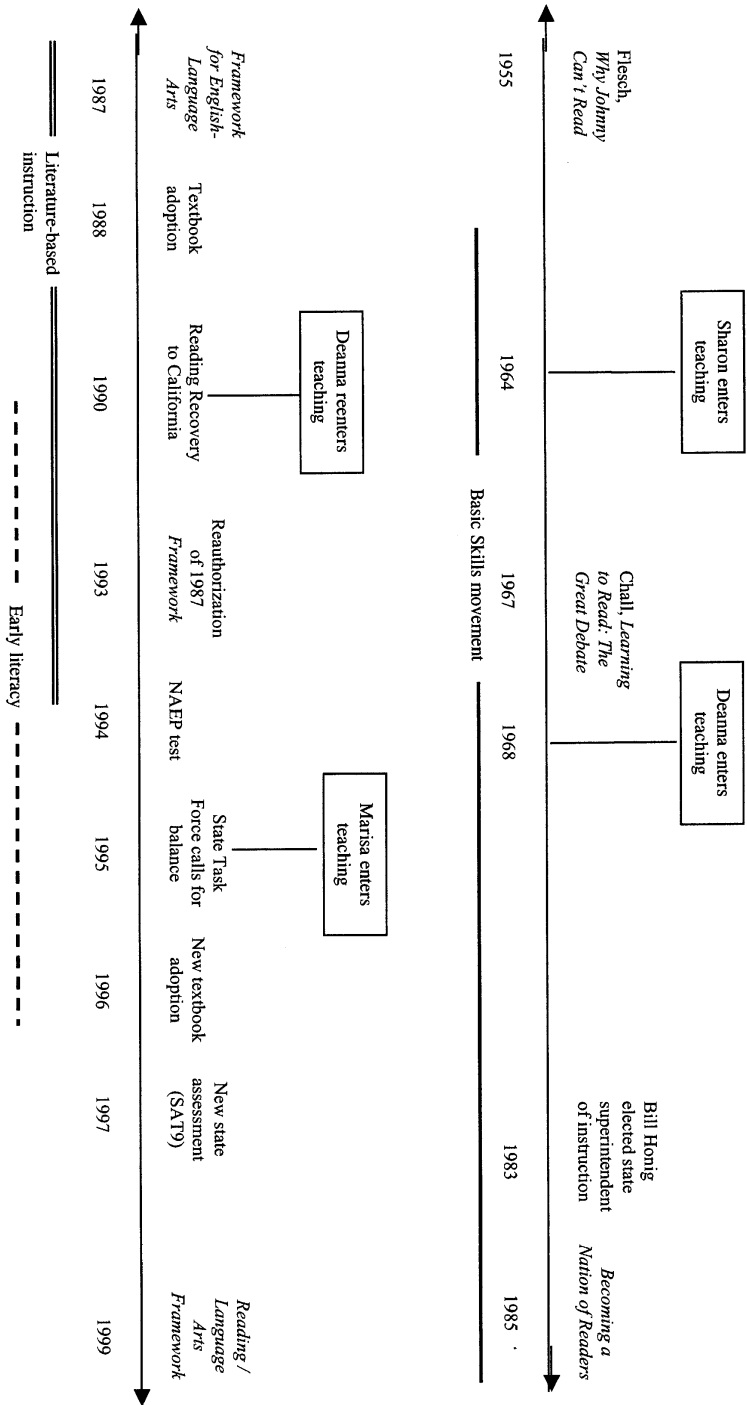
understand and implement. Although she attempted to integrate these approaches in her classroom, she tended to return incrementally to basic-skills approaches over time. However, Deanna had a different response to messages about early literacy that she began to encounter in the mid-1990s. As she engaged with these ideas, she slowly shifted her approach to teaching reading in fundamental ways. Thus, when she encountered subsequent messages about literature-based approaches in the late 1990s, she interpreted and enacted them in the context of her encounter with early literacy, responding in more favorable ways. Finally, Deanna had a somewhat mixed response to the few encounters she had with balanced basic skills, bringing only small aspects of the approach into her classroom. Figure 1 plots the teachers' career trajectories against key changes in the reading environment.

On the surface, each teacher's experience seems idiosyncratic. But while each teacher traversed a unique pathway as she engaged with pressures related to changes in the institutional environment, there are clear patterns of response across the three. More specifically, the teachers tended to respond to encounters with messages in similar ways when the circumstances of their interaction with messages were similar. To illustrate this point, I first develop a typology of teachers' responses to messages, illustrating the range of possibilities, which include but go beyond decoupling. Next, to explain variation in responses, I highlight the way in which the nature of a teacher's interaction with the message—its congruence, intensity, pervasiveness, and voluntariness (e.g., the degree to which messages were accompanied by normative or regulative pressure)—influenced how the teachers responded to changing ideas about reading instruction in the environment.

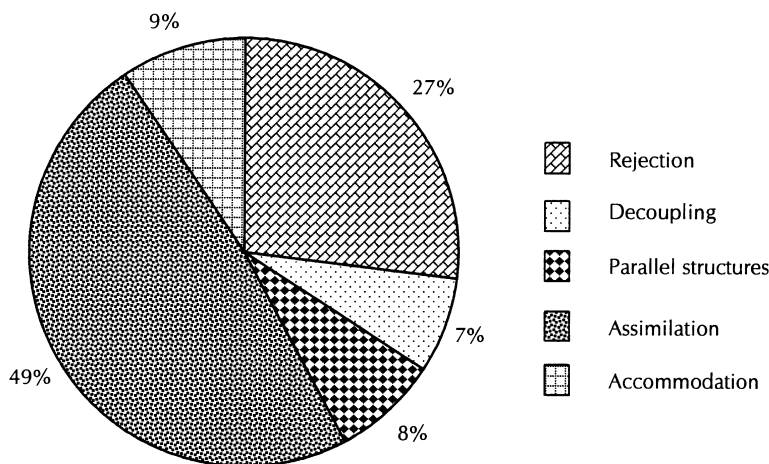
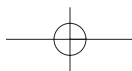
### **Responses to Institutional Pressures**

When confronted with shifting institutional pressures, Sharon, Marisa, and Deanna employed a full range of responses; indeed, decoupling accounted for only a small per-





**Figure 1. History of Reading Instruction in California and Teachers' Entry Dates into the Profession**  
 Note: This figure maps teachers' entry against key developments in the history of reading instruction in California. Shifting movements in the environment are indicated at the bottom of the timeline. For a detailed discussion, see Coburn (2001b).



**Figure 2. Teachers' Responses to Messages About Reading: 1983-99**

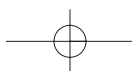
Note:  $N = 223$ . The analysis includes messages that three teachers encountered over time. The messages varied by teacher because of different entry points and different contextual conditions. However, each teacher encountered a substantial number of messages.  $N$  for Sharon = 79,  $n$  for Marisa = 70, and  $n$  for Deanna = 74.

centage of their responses. Here, I present a typology of teachers' responses that captures this range, drawing on Oliver's (1991) typology of organizational responses to institutional pressures but modifying it to address two limitations that were highlighted by my research. First, the language Oliver used for her categories—words, such as *defiance*, *acquiescence*, and *manipulation*—implies a top-down unidirectionality of institutional pressures and an oppositional attitude toward these pressures by people in organizations. However, the relationship between institutional pressures and classrooms was much more interactive and nonlinear than that portrayed by Oliver. The teachers were connected to messages from the environment via a web of interactive linkages through which messages about reading moved in, out, and around schools through multiple routes. Messages pressed in, but teachers also reached out for materials and professional development. Furthermore, although the teachers adopted an oppositional stance toward some institutional pressures, it was by no means the sole or even predominant stance. Second, Oliver hypothesized only one possible way in which organizations respond to institutional pressures that bring rules or norms into the organization in a substantive

fashion, a category she called "acquiescence." In this study, however, the teachers incorporated messages in their classrooms in ways that varied substantially in degree, variation that would be lost in Oliver's typology.

Next, I describe five ways in which the teachers responded to institutional pressures related to reading instruction during the period covered by the study: rejection, decoupling/symbolic response, parallel structures, assimilation, and accommodation.

**Rejection** Given the extensive reform activity related to reading instruction from 1983 to 1999, the teachers were connected with multiple messages about appropriate instruction. Once they constructed an understanding of what a given message was about, they either engaged with the idea or approach or dismissed it. In this way, the teachers selected some messages in and selected others out. They tended to reject approaches that were not congruent with their beliefs about reading instruction or that did not "fit" with their preexisting approach to reading instruction. For example, after participating in professional development on early-literacy approaches in her second year of teaching, Marisa rejected the suggestion that she should incorporate ongoing assessments into her classroom,



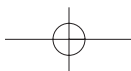
including an assessment called a running record. For Marisa, running records and other one-on-one assessment tools were cumbersome and did not fit into her ongoing routines for instruction. Furthermore, they did not fit with her sense of what was important in reading instruction. She explained: "Assessment is weird. It's like, do I really need to know all those little things about this child? How valuable is this?" As Figure 2 shows, rejection was a relatively widespread response, accounting for 27 percent of the 223 responses to messages.

**Decoupling/Symbolic Response** At times, the teachers responded to pressures from the environment with symbolic responses that were decoupled from the instructional core, as suggested by early institutional theorists. For example, in response to pressure from the district to use a district rubric to score assessments of performance, Deanna and the other teachers at Baldwin posted the rubrics on their classroom walls but did not use them in their assessment practice. Sharon and some of her colleagues at Stadelé had a similar response to word walls, an instructional approach that engages students in interactive word play that is intended to help them learn high-frequency words and letter-sound correspondence (Cunningham 1995). Sharon put lists of words up on the wall, but neither referred to them in class nor used them in instructional activities with her students. In these instances, the teachers responded to pressures symbolically, rather than in ways that influenced classroom routines, organization, use of materials, or approaches to instruction. It is important to note that they responded to institutional pressures symbolically much less frequently than is suggested by the decoupling argument. Rather than being the sole or even predominant response, only 7 percent of teachers' responses involved decoupling (see Figure 2).

**Parallel Structures** As anticipated by Oliver's (1991) framework, when faced with multiple and conflicting priorities, the teachers responded by creating classroom structures and approaches that balanced the different priorities. Often, they did so by creating two

or more parallel approaches to reading instruction that corresponded with different pressures or priorities. For example, during the 1998–99 school year, the teachers at Baldwin were faced with pressures from the district to follow the new district-adopted reading textbook and pressure from the principal to implement a new structure for reading groups called guided reading instruction. These two pressures were incongruent in many ways. For instance, guided reading emphasized the use of texts that were at the students' instructional reading level, while the textbook series included stories that tended to be at a reading level that was too high for most of the students in the school. The teachers at Baldwin balanced these twin pressures by creating two parallel structures for reading instruction using two instructional approaches that were premised on different assumptions about teaching and learning. Deanna taught using the textbook for whole-class instruction during one part of the day to be sure to "expose all children to the curriculum and what they need to know" and did guided reading groups at another point in the day to provide opportunities for the students to learn "at their level." Eight percent of the 223 teachers' responses involved creating parallel structures to balance competing pressures and priorities.

**Assimilation** Because the teachers drew on their tacit worldviews and assumptions to construct their understanding of the content and implications of messages, they often interpreted and enacted messages in ways that transformed them to fit their underlying assumptions. In the language of cognitive learning theorists, they assimilated new knowledge or experiences into existing schemas or ways of doing things (Fosnot 1996; Piaget 1978).<sup>10</sup> In this way, the teachers often came to understand messages in ways that differed, at times substantially, from what was intended by the policy maker, publisher, or reformer.<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon happened as they constructed what Spillane and Callahan (2000) called "form-focused" understandings of messages. That is, the teachers understood messages in terms of changes in instructional routines, materials,



or classroom organization, rather than in terms of the underlying pedagogical or epistemological assumptions of the approach.

For example, in the late 1980s, during the era of literature-based instruction, Stadele became involved in a reform effort that sought to promote thematic approaches to literacy instruction. This approach, which involved organizing instruction around themes that integrated different subject matter into literacy, was rooted in a vision of learning as an active process of making connections across subject matter in a holistic manner. It contrasted sharply with Sharon's assumptions about learning. At this point in her career, Sharon's reading instruction continued to be heavily influenced by the basic-skills approach in which she was trained. Sharon embraced behaviorist assumptions about learning that were associated with the approach, viewing learning to read as mastering a sequence of skills that moved from less to more complex. She organized reading instruction to teach discrete reading skills in a particular sequence in reading groups and then to have the children practice these skills using worksheets in learning centers (an organizational structure that she adopted during her connection with the movement toward individualized instruction in the early 1970s).

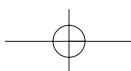
Although thematic instruction was premised on sharply different assumptions about teaching and learning, Sharon and the other teachers at Stadele embraced the approach. After they participated in school-wide professional development, Sharon and her grade-level colleagues decided to reorganize the work they asked their students to do in learning centers. Rather than have students work on a series of unrelated activities, Sharon purchased or created worksheets that were related to a theme, often linked to stories the students were working on in reading groups. In implementing thematic approaches to literacy in this way, Sharon did not shift her fundamental ideas about teaching and learning away from an emphasis on skills in sequence, as intended by the reform. Instead, she constructed an understanding of thematic teaching as a way to make her preexisting approach—skills-based worksheets—"more interesting." Thus, while Sharon used differ-

ent materials in her learning centers (those linked to stories or themes) that enabled her to make greater connections between activities in the learning centers and reading groups, the learning centers continued to function as an opportunity for the students to practice the skills that Sharon introduced in reading groups using worksheets that emphasized the mastery of discrete skills.

Thus, Sharon and the other teachers brought new approaches and materials into their classrooms in ways that altered the technical core, especially classroom routines and materials. But they did so by assimilating the approach into their preexisting framework for reading instruction, rather than by challenging the framework itself. Echoing findings from the broader literature on school reform and teacher change (EEPA 1990; Jennings 1996; Spillane 1999; Spillane and Jennings 1997; Spillane and Zeuli 1999), assimilation was widespread in my study. Of the 223 teachers' responses, 48 percent resulted in assimilation (see Figure 2).

**Accommodation** In other cases, the teachers engaged with pressures from the environment in ways that caused them to restructure their fundamental assumptions about the nature of reading instruction or students' learning, or in the language of cognitive learning theorists, they transformed their preexisting knowledge structures to accommodate new information or experiences (Fosnot 1996; Piaget 1978; Smith 2000). They often did so as they constructed understandings that were "function focused" (Spillane and Callahan 2000). That is, rather than focus on surface-level features of the message, the teachers focused on underlying epistemological or pedagogical assumptions.

For example, in the mid-1990s, Deanna began to participate in professional development, at school and through a local university, that was related to early-literacy approaches to reading instruction. This professional development offered a model of reading instruction that differed significantly from Deanna's underlying beliefs about how children learn to decode, which remained firmly situated in the basic-skills approach in which she had been trained. Deanna taught decod-



ing by using a structured phonics program that taught skills in a systematic and largely decontextualized way. She also worked on decoding when she listened to children read in round-robin reading groups, taking care to correct them when they made mistakes.

The early-literacy approach to decoding differed significantly from Deanna's approach along a number of dimensions. First, it put forth a model of decoding that emphasized using multiple sources of information (or cuing systems) to decode, rather than a sole or predominant focus on phonics. Second, it emphasized teaching decoding in the context of stories, rather than teaching it separately. Finally, it emphasized a facilitative approach to teaching. Rather than correcting children when they made mistakes, the professional development encouraged teachers to ask children questions about their reading (Does this look right? Does it sound right? Does that make sense?), so the children would develop the ability to be self-monitoring and self-correcting readers (Fountas and Pinnell 1996; Neal et al. 1997).

After participating in the professional development and experimenting with this set of messages in her classroom, Deanna came to reconstruct her assumptions about the reading process and shifted the way she taught decoding. She began to see decoding as a complex process involving more than just attention to phonics, prompting children to pay attention to semantic and syntactic cues in addition to phonemic information. She began to do most (although not all) of her decoding instruction in the context of stories. And, perhaps more significant, she reported that she learned a more facilitative way to interact with students while they were reading stories. Rather than interrupt the students when they made mistakes and correct them, she began to ask questions to help the children figure out words on their own. For Deanna, this change represented a fundamental shift in pedagogical strategy from a transmission model, in which teachers tell students the answer, to a teacher-as-coach model, in which teachers ask students questions to help them develop strategies of metacognition and self-correction.

Thus, Deanna responded to this set of

messages in ways that went much beyond the introduction of new materials or organizational structures. Instead, the messages challenged and restructured the underlying assumptions about teaching and learning that guided the way she taught decoding. As Figure 2 indicates, only 9 percent of the teachers' responses involved accommodation.

Hence, decoupling was only one of several options, and not the most prevalent one. Many of the responses—parallel structures, assimilation, and accommodation—brought pressures from the institutional environment into the technical core in ways that influenced the teachers' worldviews and practices, albeit at various levels of depth. The teachers often constructed understandings and enacted messages in ways that combined the new with the old, leading to a pattern of incremental change. But at times, they responded by rethinking assumptions and reorganizing routines in more fundamental ways.

### ***Factors that Influence Teachers' Responses***

How the teachers responded to pressures from the environment was influenced, in part, by the nature of their interaction with messages from the environment. Here, I identify four dimensions along which teachers' interactions with messages from the environment varied—degree of congruence, degree of intensity, degree of pervasiveness, and degree of voluntariness (normative versus regulative pressures)—and argue that these dimensions shaped how and when the teachers responded to messages in one way versus another. With only one exception, when the nature of their interaction with messages was similar, the teachers responded in similar ways.

**Degree of Congruence** The nature of the teachers' response to messages from the institutional environment was influenced by the content of the messages. In particular, the teachers' perceptions of the degree of congruence between the institutional pressures and their preexisting beliefs and practices were crucial. Here, the teachers' generations

played a role. All three teachers had beliefs and practices that were substantially influenced by the sets of beliefs that were dominant at the time they entered the profession. Thus, they came to messages associated with reform movements in the 1990s with substantively different preexisting beliefs and practices.

Congruence was important along at least three dimensions. First, the teachers were more likely to engage with new ideas or approaches, depending on the degree to which they could find ways to connect them with their preexisting beliefs. At times, the messages seemed so distant that they could find no ways to connect with them at all. In these cases, the teachers rejected the messages as inconceivable or incomprehensible, reporting that they just “didn’t make sense.” For example, given Sharon’s strong belief in reading groups as the essential organizational structure for teaching reading, suggestions that she use an approach to reading that involved one-on-one conferencing with students seemed inconceivable and thus had a low degree of congruence. Second, congruence was important in normative terms. The teachers were more likely to respond to pressures to teach a particular way if they saw the approach as linked with their sense of valued ends for reading instruction. They had multidimensional goals for reading instruction, ranging from student achievement to motivation, social justice, and relevance to the children’s lives. Third, congruence was important in terms of the degree of “fit” with the teachers’ preexisting classroom practice. All three teachers had well-developed and complicated structures for teaching reading—ways of organizing time, children, and materials and types of activity structures they used. As is illustrated by Marisa’s encounter with assessment tools discussed earlier, the teachers rejected new approaches when they could not find ways to work them into their established programs.

In this way, the teachers’ responses to institutional pressures were both constrained and enabled by their worldviews and practices. Beliefs and practices constrained their responses by bounding the range of comprehensibility and appropriateness, often circum-

scribing the domain within which the teachers experimented and adapted new messages from the environment. But they also enabled the teachers’ responses by providing what Zucker (1991) referred to as conceptual “handles” on which teachers could connect new ideas and approaches with what they already understood and did.

Of the 223 responses with messages from the environment that the teachers encountered in this study, 42 percent were to messages with a low degree of congruence, 30 percent were to messages with a medium level of congruence, and 27 percent were to messages with a high degree of congruence. Of the three teachers, Sharon experienced a much higher percentage of messages at a low degree of congruence (53 percent) than did Deanna (31 percent) or Marisa (41 percent). Yet all three teachers had a similar pattern of responses to messages at greater or lesser congruence. The greater the congruence of institutional pressures with the teachers’ preexisting beliefs and practices, the more likely the teachers were to incorporate new approaches and influences into their classroom practice in some manner. Thus, as can be seen in Table 2, just over 90 percent of the teachers’ responses to messages with a high degree of congruence resulted in the incorporation of the messages into the classroom in some fashion (parallel structures, assimilation, or accommodation). In contrast, the rate of incorporation dropped to 82 percent at a medium level of congruence and to 38 percent when congruence was low.

However, although the teachers were more likely to respond to messages with a higher degree of congruence by making changes in their practice, they were also more likely to incorporate the messages by assimilating them into their preexisting practice, rather than by making more substantive adjustments.<sup>12</sup> For example, when the teachers incorporated messages at a high degree of congruence, they responded in 82 percent of the cases with assimilation. Yet they assimilated only 53 percent of the medium-level messages and 23 percent of the low-level messages. In contrast, although the teachers were less likely to respond to messages with a low or medium degree of congruence by incor-

**Table 2. Teachers' Response to Institutional Messages About Reading, by Degree of Congruence, Intensity, Pervasiveness, and Voluntariness (percentage)**

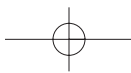
|                                | Nonincorporation |            |                     | Incorporation |               |
|--------------------------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|---------------|---------------|
|                                | Rejection        | Decoupling | Parallel Structures | Assimilation  | Accommodation |
| <i>Degree of Congruence</i>    |                  |            |                     |               |               |
| Low                            | 44.7             | 17.0       | 6.4                 | 23.4          | 8.5           |
| Medium                         | 17.6             | 0          | 13.2                | 52.9          | 16.2          |
| High                           | 9.8              | 0          | 4.9                 | 82.0          | 3.3           |
| <i>Degree of Intensity</i>     |                  |            |                     |               |               |
| Low                            | 48.0             | 4.2        | 1.4                 | 43.7          | 2.8           |
| Medium                         | 23.7             | 10.3       | 6.2                 | 47.4          | 12.4          |
| High                           | 5.4              | 5.4        | 20.0                | 56.4          | 12.7          |
| <i>Degree of Pervasiveness</i> |                  |            |                     |               |               |
| Low                            | 33.9             | 15.3       | 1.7                 | 35.6          | 13.6          |
| Medium                         | 26.9             | 4.8        | 3.8                 | 51.9          | 12.5          |
| High                           | 20.0             | 3.3        | 21.7                | 55.0          | 0             |
| <i>Degree of Voluntariness</i> |                  |            |                     |               |               |
| Normative                      | 28.6             | 4.0        | 5.0                 | 51.8          | 10.6          |
| Regulative                     | 12.5             | 33.3       | 33.3                | 20.8          | 0             |

porating them into their classrooms, when they did, they were more likely to do so in ways that pushed their thinking or caused them to reorganize their practice in more substantial ways. Just over 16 percent of the times that the teachers incorporated messages at a medium level of congruence and nearly 9 percent at a low level of congruence, they did so in ways that led to accommodation. Messages with a high level of congruence led to accommodation in only just over 3 percent of the teachers' responses.

It is important to note that the teachers' worldviews and practices—and thus their perceptions of the degree to which messages were congruent—evolved throughout the years covered by the study. The teachers' connection with and responses to messages from the environment earlier in the study shaped the worldviews and practices that they subsequently used to make sense of the messages they encountered later. For this reason, the teachers sometimes made different determinations of the congruence of the same message at different points in their careers. For example, when Marisa participated in professional development that promoted the principles of an early-literacy approach

to reading instruction in her first year of teaching, she found many of the approaches inconceivable. Marisa was trained in a credential program that emphasized literature-based approaches to teaching reading, including an emphasis on grouping children heterogeneously (often as a whole class), using children's literature for instruction, and deemphasizing instruction in skills. The early-literacy professional development, in contrast, emphasized grouping children homogeneously for reading instruction, using stories that were at children's instructional reading levels (which, when the reading level was low, tended to be predictable and contrived), and emphasizing skills and strategies, albeit in the context of the stories. At the time, Marisa reacted negatively to the professional development. She recalled, "I just couldn't relate to how the kids [in the promotional videos] were managing with that program compared to what my kids would have done." Determining that this program had a low degree of congruence, Marisa rejected all aspects of it out of hand.

Over the next few years, however, Marisa came into contact with smaller aspects of the approach and integrated them into her class-



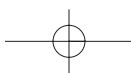
room. On the advice of other teachers at Stadele, she began to move away from whole-class instruction to small groups, but continued to group the students heterogeneously because she believed that children learned from their more advanced classmates in groups. She participated in professional development that emphasized systematic instruction in skills and added a separate skills component to her literature-based classroom, shifting her orientation to instruction in skills. She began to question the wisdom of heterogeneous grouping after she attended required professional development for second-year teachers and became aware that many other teachers were grouping their students homogeneously. After she made these incremental changes in practice, Marisa participated in professional development that once again put forth the full early-literacy model. This time, she came to the experience with somewhat different worldviews and practices and found the approach to have a higher degree of congruence. After observing the professional developer teach a class, Marisa remarked: "I was like, 'Oh my God this is it! Right away I knew as I watched her instruct that lower literacy development group and how she could integrate science into the other groups. . . . So I was like, all right. This is really cool!'" Marisa subsequently reorganized her classroom into homogeneous groups so that she could use stories at the students' instructional levels. She moved away from literature to predictable texts for children with lower reading levels. And she shifted from teaching skills separately to teaching skills in the context of stories. In this way, her responses to past messages set the stage for her responses in the present.

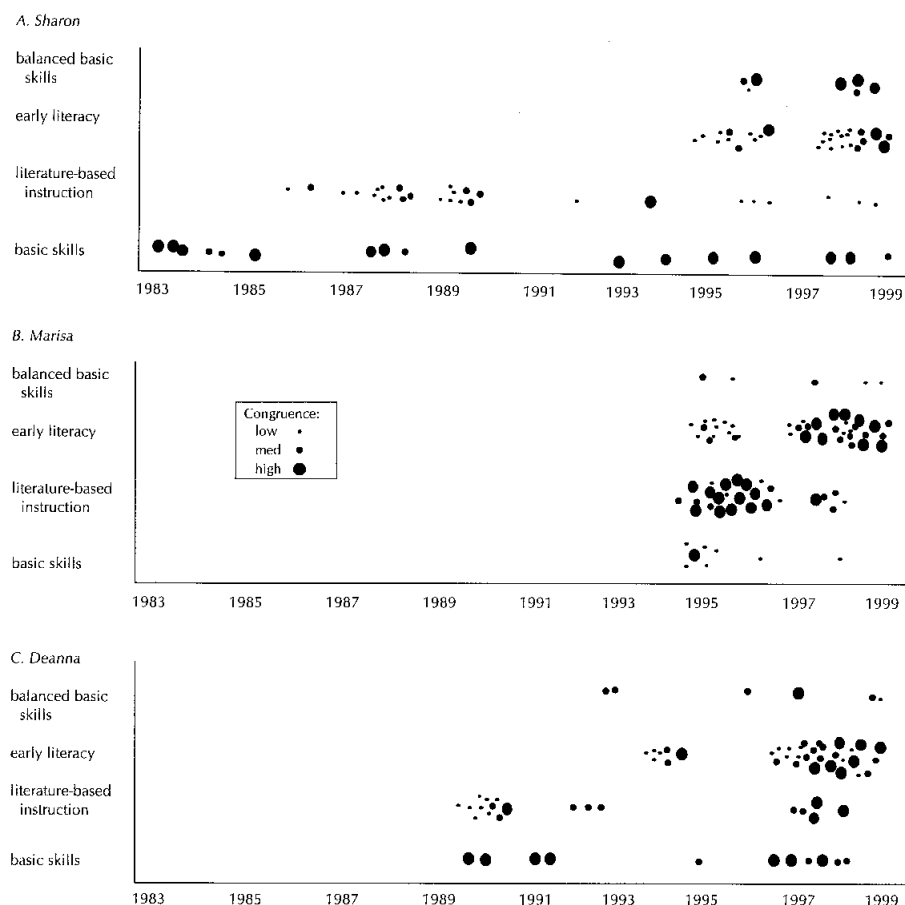
Marisa was not alone in the degree to which her worldviews and practices shifted over time as she encountered and responded to messages from the environment. As is illustrated in Figure 3, as the teachers encountered messages about reading associated with a given movement, they often responded in ways that shifted their beliefs and practices and therefore their view of the congruence of subsequent messages associated with an approach. Thus, although Sharon maintained strong assumptions related to basic-skills

approaches throughout the years covered by the study (and hence continued to experience basic-skills messages as being highly congruent), encounters with messages influenced her beliefs and practices such that she found early-literacy and balanced basic-skills approaches to be more and more congruent over time. From 1990 to 1999, Deanna increasingly came to see messages that were related to early literacy and, to a lesser extent, literature-based instruction as having a higher degree of congruence. Finally, as Marisa's beliefs and practices changed in interaction with institutional pressures, messages that were related to literature-based instruction became less congruent and messages that were related to early literacy became more congruent over time.

**Degree of Intensity** The teachers were also influenced by the degree of intensity of their connection to a particular message. By intensity of connection, I mean the degree to which the teachers had opportunities to engage with a message in sustained, iterative ways. The teachers' connections to pressures from the environment varied widely in their intensity, from momentary mentions in staff meetings or a vague awareness of a policy change to in-depth study as part of professional development or a school-reform effort.

The teachers were more likely to respond to pressures from the environment when their connections with these pressures had a greater degree of intensity. Of the 223 responses to messages, just under 25 percent were to messages with a high degree of intensity, 44 percent were to messages with a medium degree of intensity, and just over 30 percent were to messages at a low degree of intensity. Deanna was somewhat more likely to encounter messages at a high degree of intensity (39 percent) than was Sharon (20 percent) or Marisa (16 percent). It is striking that nearly 90 percent of all three teachers' responses to messages with a high degree of intensity involved incorporation into the classroom in some fashion and just over 12 percent resulted in accommodation. At a medium level of intensity, only 66 percent of the messages resulted in incorporation into the classroom. As with messages with a high degree of intensity, 12 percent of the medium-



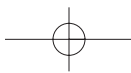


**Figure 3. Teachers' Assessment of the Degree of Congruence of the Messages They Encountered over Time**

level resulted in accommodation. Finally, the teachers were much less likely to respond to messages with a low degree of intensity in ways that brought the messages into the classroom in consequential ways and were more likely to respond with rejection or symbolic response. Thus, 48 percent of the teachers' responses to low-intensity messages involved making changes in classroom practice, of which only 3 percent resulted in accommodation. In contrast, 48 percent of the teachers' responses to low-intensity messages involved outright rejection, while only 24 percent of the teachers' responses to medium-intensity messages and 5 percent of the teachers' responses to high-intensity messages involved rejection.

The teachers tended to experience pres-

ures from the institutional environment with a high degree of intensity when they encountered them through sustained professional development, close interaction with colleagues, or one-on-one interaction with a key carrier. Deanna's experience with professional development on early-literacy ideas about decoding discussed earlier provides an example of messages with a high degree of intensity. Deanna participated with her colleagues in 18 months of on-site professional development on early-literacy approaches from a university-based service provider who provided workshops, demonstrated lessons, and observed and provided feedback to individual teachers who were experimenting with new practices in their classrooms. Greater intensi-



ty of connection seemed to lead to more substantive and consequential responses because it allowed the teachers to work with messages in an iterative fashion, constructing understandings of new ideas and approaches that often started with assimilation but ultimately pushed toward accommodation over time.

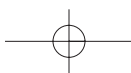
High- and medium-intensity connection—especially to the degree that it involved interaction with colleagues—provided the opportunity for the teachers to engage in a dialogue between experimentation with practice in their classroom and reflection that allowed them to continue to experiment and shift practice over time. For example, in Deanna's case, this structure of professional development allowed her to try new approaches, discuss her experiences with colleagues, and get ongoing feedback from the professional developer that guided her experimentation toward a deeper and more substantive response. In fact, this experimentation and conversations with colleagues continued long after the professional developers left, and Deanna continued to refine and deepen the approach over the course of several years. When messages were of a lower degree of intensity, Deanna and other teachers sometimes did not even notice them or remember them later. And when the teachers did experiment with an approach accompanied by a low degree of intensity, they often rejected it when they encountered difficulty in the absence of ongoing support.

**Degree of Pervasiveness** This dimension refers to the degree to which teachers are connected to particular sets of pressures or messages in multiple, interlocking, and overlapping ways. For example, the teachers in both schools repeatedly encountered messages that promoted the use of running records. It was part of the newly adopted textbook series, played a prominent role in the district's policy documents on assessment, was featured in several professional development opportunities, and became the centerpiece of Stadelé's reform effort. Thus, running records, and the conception of the reading process and approach to assessment that they imply, had a high degree of pervasiveness for Sharon, Marisa, and Deanna.

These teachers' responses to running records were part of the 27 percent of all responses to messages that had a high degree of pervasiveness. Just over 46 percent of the responses were to messages that were characterized by a medium degree of pervasiveness and 27 percent were to messages that were characterized by a low degree of pervasiveness. Of the three teachers, Marisa was more likely to encounter messages with low and medium degrees of pervasiveness and was less likely to encounter messages with a high degree of pervasiveness than were the other two teachers, perhaps because of her short tenure in the profession.

Although the pattern is not as strong as with the degree of intensity, the teachers were also more likely to respond to pressures from the environment in more substantive ways the greater the degree of pervasiveness. As Table 2 shows, 77 percent of the teachers' responses to messages with a high degree of pervasiveness, 68 percent of the responses to those with a medium degree of pervasiveness, and 51 percent of the responses to those with a low degree of pervasiveness involved making changes in classroom practice (parallel structures, assimilation, and accommodation).

Observational data suggest the mechanism here. As the degree of pervasiveness increased over time, Sharon, Marisa, and Deanna became increasingly likely to experiment with or try out a particular practice. Running records provide a good example of this phenomenon. All three teachers rejected running records in their early encounters with them because of concerns about management issues and because the structured, formal approach to ongoing assessment was distant from their more informal and intuitive approaches. But multiple encounters with running records brought this assessment to their attention and created greater normative pressure to try them. For example, as I discussed earlier, Marisa rejected running records, along with other forms of ongoing assessment, the first time she encountered them during her second year of teaching. She subsequently rejected them several more times, even after she briefly tried them out, when she had two more training sessions and



encountered them as the major assessment instrument in the new reading series. During her fourth year of teaching, however, Stadel became involved in another training session on running records. This time, Marisa felt that she really *should* give them another try. She explained, "I didn't like doing [running records]. I didn't like them at all . . . finding the time to sort of sit there with each kid. So when it was incorporated into our [reform work], it was more like, OK, I really should do this." Marisa began to experiment with running records once again. She began to use them on a more and more regular basis and ultimately worked them into the fabric of her reading program.

However, although a high degree of pervasiveness often encouraged the teachers to experiment with a particular approach, the teachers were less likely to sustain a new practice or incorporate the practice in ways that caused them to restructure their assumptions or reorganize their program unless pervasiveness was accompanied by a high or medium degree of intensity. For example, while the pervasiveness of the approach created normative pressure for Marisa to try running records in the classroom, the in-depth professional development she attended and ongoing support from her colleagues seemed to provide the knowledge and assistance that she needed to use the challenging approach in an ongoing and substantive way. But not all teachers had this support with messages, and there was a pattern whereby the teachers initially responded to pervasive institutional pressure that was not accompanied by intensity by incorporating new approaches or reorganizing classroom instruction only later to cut back, winnow down, or abandon the practice over time. For example, Sharon and Deanna responded to what they experienced as pervasive pressure to use whole-class instruction during the era of literature-based instruction in the early 1990s by completely reorganizing their reading program from homogeneous reading groups into whole-group heterogeneous instruction. However, they had virtually no professional development on how to teach reading using this organizational structure. Sharon later abandoned the practice when she could not figure

out a way to make it work with the pedagogical approaches she used. Deanna successively modified the approach over a number of years in ways that moved it back toward her original approach. Thus, Sharon moved from accommodation to rejection and Deanna moved from accommodation to assimilation.

**Degree of Voluntariness** Finally, the degree of voluntariness influenced the teachers' responses to messages from the environment. As I discussed earlier, institutional theorists have emphasized the ways in which pressures in the institutional environment are carried through regulative, normative, and cognitive means (Scott 2001; Scott et al. 2000). Here, I focus on just two of these kinds of pressure: normative and regulative.<sup>13</sup> Messages that are accompanied by normative pressure put forth ideas about what teachers *should* do, specifying valued ends for instruction and/or the appropriate means to get to them (Scott 2001). Thus, while teachers are encouraged to change their practice in a certain direction, ultimately their decisions are voluntary. In contrast, messages that are accompanied by regulative pressures involve rule setting, monitoring, or sanctioning (Scott 2001). With regulative pressures, teachers are mandated to teach in a particular way, toward particular ends, or using particular curricular materials, and, as a result, messages are experienced as involuntary.

In this study, the teachers were far more likely to be connected with normative than with regulative pressure. Just over 90 percent of Marisa's and Sharon's encounters and just over 85 percent of Deanna's encounters with messages involved normative pressures. This phenomenon stems, in part, from the fact that both district and state policy makers tended to rely on normative, rather than regulative, means to influence teachers' reading instruction. Thus, instead of mandating a particular approach, these policy bodies tended to develop position papers and, in more recent years, standards that put forth a position on appropriate instruction, adopted textbooks that carried particular kinds of message about instruction, or provided funding for professional development that was supportive of particular approaches to reading

instruction. Although the state attempted to increase accountability to standards (and thus regulative pressures) by linking them with standardized tests, the mechanisms that held teachers accountable for students' performance on these tests were comparatively weak throughout the years covered by the study (1983–99).<sup>14</sup>

The teachers did experience some state, district, and school-level mandates. For example, Baldwin's district mandated that teachers use a battery of curriculum-embedded assessments to assess students' progress three times a year. Furthermore, the teachers were mandated to "reflect" on the results of these assessments in conversations with their colleagues. Both schools also had policies and practices that the teachers were required to follow that could be characterized as regulative pressure. For example, as I mentioned earlier, teachers at Baldwin were required to use the district-adopted textbook for their instruction (the teachers at Stadele were not).

On average, the teachers were more likely to respond to normative messages than to regulative messages by incorporating them into their classroom and doing so in ways that altered their preexisting practice. As Table 2 shows, two thirds of the teachers' responses to normative pressure involved changes in classroom practice, compared to over half the teachers' responses to regulative pressures. However, there was significant variation among the teachers along this dimension. Deanna was almost equally likely to incorporate messages that were accompanied by regulative pressure as those accompanied by normative pressure, while Marisa and Sharon each incorporated close to two thirds of the normative messages versus close to one third of the regulative ones.

This variation may be attributable, in part, to the fact that Deanna was more likely to encounter regulative messages with a medium or high degree of congruence than was Sharon or Marisa. The teachers' responses to regulative messages were conditioned by the degree of congruence between the messages and their preexisting beliefs, values, and practices. All three teachers tended to respond to regulative messages that were congruent with preexisting practice by incorporating

them into their practice in ways that led to assimilation or parallel structures, but tended to respond to regulative pressure that was incongruent either by rejection or decoupling. Eight of the 10 regulative messages that Deanna encountered versus only 2 out of 7 that Marisa encountered and 3 out of 7 that Sharon encountered were at a medium or high level of congruence. Because Deanna encountered a greater percentage of regulative messages with a medium or high degree of congruence, she was more likely to respond to them by making changes in her practice.

In spite of the difference in their responses to regulative pressure, all three teachers were still substantially more likely to alter preexisting practices in consequential ways when they incorporated normative pressures than when they incorporated regulative messages. When they incorporated normative messages, just over 10 percent of the time they did so in ways that led to accommodation. In contrast, no teacher ever responded with accommodation to regulative messages. However, even though the teachers were more likely to incorporate normative messages in consequential ways, they were also more likely to respond to normative messages by rejecting them than regulative ones. Just over 20 percent of Deanna's responses and just over 30 percent of Sharon's and Marisa's responses to normative messages involved rejection. In contrast, only 10 percent of Deanna's responses and just under 15 percent of Marisa and Sharon's responses to regulative messages involved rejection.

Taken together, these findings begin to unpack the conditions that influence the process by which teachers respond to pressures from the institutional environment. They suggest that teachers are more likely to respond to messages by bringing ideas or approaches into their classrooms in a substantive way when these messages have a high degree of congruence with preexisting practice, a high degree of intensity, or a high degree of pervasiveness or are accompanied by normative pressures. The degree of intensity is especially influential, since it provides a mechanism for teachers to engage with messages over time, allowing them to draw con-

nections with messages that may at first seem incongruent; to experiment with and adjust new practices in ways that may allow them to shift classroom routines and regularities in more substantial ways; and to interact with knowledgeable others in ways that encourage them to surface, question, and possibly rethink their tacit assumptions. Yet, while messages with a high degree of intensity seemed to provide the conditions for more substantial change in classroom practice, they were the least common way that the teachers encountered messages. And even when the teachers experienced institutional pressures with favorable conditions for change, they were still more likely to respond in ways that assimilated messages into preexisting frameworks than to alter their frameworks for teaching reading itself.

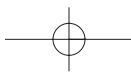
## DISCUSSION

The decoupling argument—that schools respond to pressures from the institutional environment by decoupling changes in structures and procedures from classroom instruction—has been a central feature of institutional theory as applied to public schools since the 1970s. However, this study has suggested the need to rethink this argument. Building on theoretical advances in the broader institutional literature (see, e.g., Oliver 1991; Scott 2001), the study has provided empirical evidence that the environment penetrates schools in substantial ways, reaching within structures to influence teachers' worldviews and practices. Furthermore, it has extended institutional theory by drawing on theoretical work in sensemaking theory to develop an account of the process by which this phenomenon occurs. The study has provided evidence that teachers' classroom doors are permeable as messages from the environment provide the raw materials for construction, set bounds for what is even conceivable through taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning, and pressure teachers to move in certain directions and not others. But it has also provided evidence that teachers mediate logics in the institutional environment, con-

structing and reconstructing them through the lens of their preexisting practices and worldviews and making key gatekeeping decisions.

This reconceptualization of the relationship between the environment and teachers' classrooms has implications for the ways in which both institutional theory and the sociology of teachers' work have conceptualized teachers' agency and autonomy. Traditionally, institutional theorists and sociologists of education have portrayed teachers' agency in different ways. On the one hand, sociologists of education have documented the occupational norm of autonomy that grants teachers a high degree of control in making decisions about classroom practice (Goodlad 1984; Little 1990; Lortie 1975). This approach portrays teachers as having a high degree of agency in constructing their approach to teaching and learning. In contrast, institutional theory more broadly has tended to emphasize the limited agency of individual actors in organizations, instead emphasizing the ways in which environments shape individual and collective action. Many scholars have criticized institutional theory for what they see as an overly deterministic view of the environment and the "overly socialized" (Scott et al. 2000:32) view of actors (DiMaggio 1988; Powell 1991; Scott et al. 2000).

This study has suggested something of a middle ground between these two positions. By emphasizing teachers' role in mediating pressures from the institutional environment, it has portrayed teachers as agents, constructing their practice by combining the elements available to them in the environment with their preexisting practice in a process that Campbell (1997:22) characterized as "dynamic innovation." But it has conditionalized this agency by highlighting the ways in which decision making about instruction is shaped by broader social and historical contexts. Thus, it suggests to sociologists of teachers' work that rather than an occupational norm of autonomy, teachers have instead what I characterize as bounded autonomy. Deep-seated assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning that are linked to broader movements in the environ-



ment guide decision making often in preconscious ways, framing the range of appropriate action and guiding what “makes sense” to teachers. Regulative pressures place technical limits on decision making, creating pressures and priorities that teachers feel they must respond to in some fashion. And teachers’ preexisting regularities, developed over time, constitute a strong framework into which teachers tend to try to “fit” new approaches and ideas.

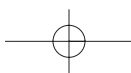
To institutional theorists, this conceptualization of teachers’ agency adds to the growing body of work in institutional theory that has begun to move away from the determinism that characterized early work, imagining a greater role for agency in the dynamics of institutional persistence and change (see, e.g., Campbell 1997; Goodrick and Salancik 1996; Oliver 1991; Powell 1991; Scott et al. 2000). However, to date, most of the work on agency in institutional theory has focused on the agency of organizations, not individuals. Studies that have addressed individual agency have been focused on understanding changes in the environment (rather than organizational responses to changes in the environment) and have been limited to leaders of professional organizations, high-level managers, and key political figures. Here, I pushed this line of thinking further by highlighting the agency of workers inside organizations, who, given the social organization of their work, exercise bounded autonomy as they actively mediate messages about what constitutes “good” practice.

This study has also extended understanding of the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom by suggesting not only that pressures from the environment influence classroom practice, but that various mechanisms by which pressures are carried influence classroom practice in different ways. Few institutional studies of public schooling have investigated schools’ and teachers’ connections to the environment. Yet this study has provided evidence that the nature of teachers’ interaction with messages plays a crucial role in the degree to which pressures from the environment influence classroom practice. Messages that are associated with changing ideas about instruction in

the environment are carried in ways that vary considerably in their congruence, intensity, pervasiveness, and voluntariness. These different mechanisms influence the degree to which teachers are inclined to notice and engage with new ideas or approaches in the first place. But they also provide different conditions for teachers to interact with messages in ways that have the potential to encourage teachers to rethink their assumptions and alter their routines. Future investigations of the relationship between the environment and classrooms must pay explicit attention not only to the content of the messages, but to the mechanisms by which teachers are connected to the multiple and shifting pressures in the institutional environment.

Finally, this study has highlighted the utility of exploring these questions historically. Nearly all studies of the relationship between the environment and the classroom to date have explored this question at a single point in time. And while diachronic designs are increasingly commonplace in the broader institutional literature (see, e.g., DiMaggio 1991; Fligstein 1991; Scott et al. 2000), most of these studies have been primarily concerned with investigating change in the environment, rather than the dynamics of macro-micro linkages (Scott et al. 2000 is an exception). This study has demonstrated that the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom unfolds over a long period. Teachers’ responses to messages are not static. Rather, teachers’ response to a single message may emerge and change over a number of years as teachers repeatedly encounter messages, shifting their orientation or inclination to respond. But it also occurs as teachers engage with a set of ideas or approaches in an iterative fashion in ways that sometimes broaden and deepen their response and sometimes lead to the winnowing down or even subsequent rejection of an approach. A study conducted at one moment in this process is likely to come to different conclusions about the nature of teachers’ responses to messages than would the same study done a few years later.

A historical design is also important in the chronological sense (Scott 2001; Vaughan 1996). Teachers’ responses to institutional



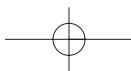
pressures earlier shape the beliefs and practices that teachers subsequently use to respond to new pressures in the environment later. Creating a design that captures this chronology can highlight such findings as the role of path dependence in institutional persistence and change. But capturing this process over time also provides a way to understand the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom

as interactive and recursive, rather than the more typical vision of a top-down relationship present in most institutional studies of public schooling. All this suggests that a historical approach is crucial for gaining insights into the complex relationship between the environment and the classroom, as well as the broader project of understanding the dynamics of institutional persistence and change in classroom instruction.

## APPENDIX

**Table A1. Degree of Connection of Stadele Elementary and Baldwin Elementary to Different Movements in the Reading Environment**

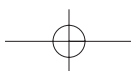
| Movement                            | Stadele Elementary | Baldwin Elementary |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Basic Skills</i>                 |                    |                    |
| 1983–87                             | High               | High               |
| 1988–94                             | Low                | High               |
| 1995–99                             | Low                | Low                |
| <i>Literature-Based Instruction</i> |                    |                    |
| 1983–87                             | Low                | Low                |
| 1988–94                             | High               | Low                |
| 1995–99                             | Medium             | Low                |
| <i>Early Literacy</i>               |                    |                    |
| 1983–87                             | Low                | Low                |
| 1988–94                             | Low                | Low                |
| 1995–99                             | Medium             | High               |
| <i>Balanced Basic Skills</i>        |                    |                    |
| 1983–87                             | Low                | Low                |
| 1988–94                             | Low                | Low                |
| 1995–99                             | Low                | Low                |



**Table A2. Summary of Early-Grades Teachers' Approaches to Reading Instruction at Stadele and Baldwin Elementary Schools**

| Name          | School         | Date Entered the Profession | Role             | Approach to Reading Instruction  |
|---------------|----------------|-----------------------------|------------------|--|
| Evie          | Stadele        | 1962                        | 1st grade        | Primarily basic skills with elements of literature-based and early literacy                    |
| <b>Sharon</b> | <b>Stadele</b> | <b>1964</b>                 | <b>1st grade</b> | <b>Primarily basic skills with elements of literature-based and early literacy</b>             |
| Helen         | Stadele        | 1969                        | 2nd grade        | Primarily basic skills   |
| Tom           | Stadele        | 1991                        | 2nd grade        | Primarily literature-based   |
| Stephanie     | Stadele        | 1994                        | 2nd grade        | Primarily literature-based and early literacy with elements of balanced basic skills           |
| <b>Marisa</b> | <b>Stadele</b> | <b>1995</b>                 | <b>2nd grade</b> | <b>Primarily literature-based and early literacy with elements of balanced basic skills</b>    |
| Yumi          | Stadele        | 1996                        | 1st grade        | Primarily literature-based and early literacy with elements of balanced basic skills           |
| Francine      | Stadele        | 1996                        | 1st grade        | Primarily early literacy and basic skills  |
| Margaret      | Stadele        | 1996                        | 1st grade        | Primarily literature-based and early literacy with elements of basic skills                    |
| Talia         | Stadele        | 1997                        | 1st grade        | Primarily literature-based and early literacy with elements of basic skills                    |
| Elise         | Stadele        | 1998                        | 1st grade        | Primarily literature-based and early literacy with elements of balanced basic skills           |
| Sylvia        | Baldwin        | 1967                        | 2nd grade        | Primarily basic skills and early literacy with elements of literature-based instruction        |
| <b>Deanna</b> | <b>Baldwin</b> | <b>1968</b>                 | <b>2nd grade</b> | <b>Primarily basic skills and early literacy with elements of literature-based instruction</b> |
| Vivian        | Baldwin        | 1973                        | 1st/2nd grade    | Primarily basic skills with elements of early literacy   |
| Sally         | Baldwin        | 1978                        | 2nd grade        | Primarily basic skills and early literacy  |
| Cherise       | Baldwin        | 1985                        | 1st grade        | Primarily basic skills   |
| Stephen       | Baldwin        | 1994                        | 1st grade        | Primarily early literacy and literature-based with elements of basic skills                    |
| Chloe         | Baldwin        | 1996                        | 1st/2nd grade    | Primarily early literacy with elements of literature-based and basic skills                    |
| Erminda       | Baldwin        | 1997                        | 1st/2nd grade    | Primarily early literacy and literature-based with elements of basic skills                    |
| Jeff          | Baldwin        | 1997                        | 2nd grade        | Primarily early literacy with elements of basic skills   |
| Bettina       | Baldwin        | 1998                        | 1st grade        | Primarily early literacy and literature-based instruction                                      |

Note: Teachers' names are pseudonyms. Focal teachers are indicated in bold.



**Table A3. Sources of Messages for Focal Teachers**

| Teacher | School  | Basic Skills  | Literature-Based Instruction   | Early Literacy   | Balanced Basic Skills   |
|---------|---------|---|--|--|---|
| Sharon  | Stadele | Credential program<br>Standardized tests<br>Textbook<br>Curricular material<br>Professional development<br>District policy<br>School policy<br>Principal's expectations | Textbook<br>Curricular materials<br>Professional development<br>State policy<br>District policy<br>School policy<br>Principal's expectations | Professional development<br>District policy<br>Textbook  | State policy documents<br>Standardized tests<br>Media                             |
| Marisa  | Stadele | Standardized tests<br>Professional development  | Credential program<br>Textbook<br>Curricular materials<br>Professional development<br>District policy<br>School policy                       | Textbook<br>Curricular materials<br>Professional development<br>District policy  | State policy documents<br>Standardized tests<br>Media<br>Professional development |
| Deanna  | Baldwin | Credential program<br>Standardized tests<br>Textbook<br>Curricular material<br>District policy<br>School policy<br>Principal's expectations<br>Professional development | State policy<br>Professional development<br>Textbook   | Textbook<br>Curricular materials<br>Professional development<br>District policy<br>School policy<br>Principal's expectations | Standardized tests<br>Media<br>Professional development                           |

**NOTES**

1. In putting forth the argument that organizations, in general, and schools, in particular, decouple administrative change from their core technology in response to pressures from the institutional environment, Meyer and Rowan (1977, 1978) provided an explanation for the phenomenon of loose coupling between levels of the system and organizational subunits (especially school administration and classrooms) noted by Weick (1976) and Bidwell (1965). This explanation, in turn, suggested that the institutional environment had little influence on classroom practice (Rowan and Miskel 1999). The decoupling argument and its corresponding assumptions about the relationship between the environment and organizations' core technology have been influential, not only in studies of public schools, but in institutional studies of organizations more broadly (Scott 2001). It is this set of arguments about the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom that is the focus of this article, rather than the broader phenomenon of loose coupling.

2. Cuban's (1984, 1993) study of the history of classroom practice investigated the relationship between the environment and the classroom historically. However, Cuban's study did not follow particular teachers or schools over time; rather, it looked at different groups of schools at different historical periods and thus is unable to provide guidance on the ways in which schools or teachers respond to changing pressures from the environment over time.

3. The names of schools are pseudonyms.

4. The difference in observation time in Stadele versus Baldwin reflects the fact that Baldwin had significantly fewer structured opportunities for teachers to meet than did Stadele.

5. Typically, commentators have identified only two major shifts in reading policy during this period: the move to literature-based instruction in 1987 and the call for the "balanced approach" to instruction starting in 1995. However, my historical research suggests that there was a third shift in policy starting in the early 1990s, which I identify as

the move toward early-literacy instruction. Although not as high profile, this shift was nonetheless tremendously influential in many districts in the state, including the two districts in this study. For a more in-depth analysis of changes in reading policy in California from 1983 to 1999, see Coburn (2001b).

6. All three focal teachers encountered roughly the same number of messages. This finding is somewhat surprising because Marisa, a beginning teacher, taught for only four years of the study. However, this disparity can be attributed to the fact that Marisa was connected to messages about reading through multiple state and district programs and professional development that was targeted to new teachers, programs that did not exist when the other two teachers entered the profession.

7. Teachers were connected to messages about reading both when they *pressed in* through policy and school- or district-sponsored professional development and when they themselves *reached out* to new resources, training, and materials in their proximal environment. Connections to messages varied greatly among the teachers. State policy was often reinterpreted and reshaped at every level as it worked its way through the system to schools (McLaughlin 1991; Pressman and Wildavsky 1984; Spillane 1996). Therefore, teachers in different districts and different schools were often connected to substantively different messages. For example, as can be seen in Appendix Table A3, Deanna had virtually no connection to state policy during the era of balanced basic skills, in spite of extensive policy making and activity at the state level. She did not because her district used state funds for professional development to promote early literacy, rather than balanced basic skills, and did not, as in Sharon and Marisa's district, distribute state task-force documents and frameworks outlining approaches promoted by state policy. Similarly, school leaders also mediated connections as they buffered teachers from pressures, on the one hand, and brought in and intensified messages via curricular materials, on the other hand. However, teachers' connections to messages also varied within schools for two reasons: Teachers in

different microcommunities were connected to messages through their colleagues, and teachers reached out on their own to professional development and other resources in the environment. For more detail on these mechanisms and pathways, see Coburn (2002).

8. Organizational theorists have traditionally defined the technical core of an organization as the set of "arrangements" that are developed to perform the central tasks of an organization (Scott 1992; Thompson 1967). These arrangements include work processes, knowledge and skills, and the materials that are used to carry out these central tasks (Scott 1992). Here, I follow previous organizational researchers in defining the technical core of schooling as classroom instruction (Rowan 1990; Scott 1992; Spillane and Zeuli 1999). In particular, a message from the environment has influenced the core technology of the schools if it has influenced classroom instructional routines, the use of materials, organizational arrangements, or the teachers' knowledge or worldviews about reading instruction.

9. Among the social and structural conditions in the school that influenced teachers' sensemaking, teachers' patterns of interaction with their peers were particularly influential. For further discussion, see Coburn (2001a).

10. This analysis is consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Fazio & Cooper, 1983; Festinger, 1957), which suggests that to minimize cognitive dissonance, individuals selectively interpret new information in ways that are consistent with existing cognitive schemas (see Fiske and Taylor 1991 for a review).

11. This was especially likely to occur if messages differed or even challenged teachers' preexisting beliefs. If messages were congruent, teachers assimilated them without necessarily transforming them from what the policy maker intended.

12. Given that accommodation involves a major reconstruction of fundamental beliefs, it is not surprising that it was unlikely that teachers responded to messages that had a high degree of congruence by restructuring their beliefs in substantive ways.

13. This is not to say that cognitive aspects

did not play a role. On the contrary, the teachers' tacit worldviews and taken-for-granted assumptions played a crucial role in holding things in place in the face of new pressures from the institutional environment (Bidwell 2000; Cuban 1993; Rowan and Miskel 1999). The teachers used these assumptions and already-institutionalized practices to make sense of new approaches and ideas that they encountered. In this way, institutionalized notions of appropriate, natural, or legitimate teaching defined the limits of or provided a framework for possible responses in the form of taken-for-granted notions about roles, rules, or ways of doing things. However, these cognitive elements were largely a characteristic of preexisting beliefs and practices, not characteristics of the new pressures that the teachers were experiencing from the environment, because these movements in reading instruction were at a relatively early stage and were not yet widely institutionalized. Ideas associated with the movement, therefore, had not yet become taken for granted either in the environment or in teachers' practice. Given that the focus of analysis is on teachers' responses to these new movements in the environment, it was not appropriate to look at cognitive pressures.

14. In the last two years of the study, California initiated a system that ranked schools on the basis of their performance on the state's standardized tests (called the Academic Performance Index). Although there were plans to link this ranking with rewards and sanctions, which would theoretically increase the strength of regulatory pressure, this linkage did not occur until the year after the study ended.

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