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Instantiated Recoupling in Principals' Enactment of Teacher Evaluations: Emotion Work and New Forms of Ceremonial Conformity in Educational Institutions

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As accountability policies have proliferated and evolved in a number of organizational fields, recent scholarship in organizational sociology has paid close attention to the ways that accountability has forced tight coupling in a variety of organizations. Fewer recent studies examine efforts at ceremonial conformity that organizations may use to buffer internal practices from institutional pressures, or how organizations and their actors might attempt to engage in ceremonial conformity under newer accountability regimes. In this article, we examine how school principals enact state-mandated teacher evaluation policies with their teachers. To manage teachers' stress caused by the evaluations, we find that principals often allow, and at times enable, teachers to put on a "dog and pony show" during formal evaluations, a performance that aligns with district instructional policies but deviates from their common everyday practices. We argue that this is a novel form of ceremonial conformity that we call instantiated recoupling.

Keywords: ceremonial conformity, inhabited institutions, emotion work, education

INTRODUCTION

Policies requiring formal teacher evaluations have proliferated over the last 25 years in public schools across the United States and beyond (Murphy, Hallinger, and Heck 2013). Beginning in 2009, the United States Department of Education made

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the inclusion of teacher evaluation policies in state reforms a condition for receiving grant funding and waivers from sanctions for failing to meet earlier mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act. By 2017, more than 40 states had included some measure of student growth in their teacher evaluations (Doherty and Jacobs 2015; Porter 2015), and there has been a broader effort to expand teacher evaluation internationally as well (Akiba and LeTendre 2009; OECD 2013). The expansion of these policies was also a way in which states and districts attempted to address what has long been a pressing public concern with distinguishing effective teachers from less effective teachers, and implementing policies that tie rewards and sanctions to the evaluation of instructional performance. Goldstein (2014) argues that this concern rose to the level of a “moral panic” during the 2000s and 2010s, as public discussion and policy initiatives in public education prioritized rooting out “bad” teachers who supposedly do a disservice to students and who are parasitic to taxpayers. While the specific components of teacher evaluation policies vary across states and districts, they very commonly include a formal classroom observation that is scored using some standardized rubric (Kimball and Milanowski 2009).

Indeed both the content of teachers’ instruction, as well as their pedagogy, are increasingly mandated and evaluated from administration, thanks to education policies that have sought to increase the standardization of instruction in public education (Donaldson and Mavrogordato 2018; Everitt 2020; Goldstein 2014; Kelly 2012; Lane 2020; Porter 2015). But what does local noncompliance with accountability policies look like under these more recent regimes? In organizational sociology, coupling refers to the varying degrees to which people’s everyday activities in organizations comply with formal rules (tight coupling), or do not (loose coupling). While there is clear evidence of compliance emerging in institutions where loose coupling was previously the norm (Hallett 2010; Sauder and Espeland 2009), there is also an abundance of empirical research that shows patterns of tight and loose coupling coexisting alongside each other, especially in educational institutions (Coburn 2004; Diamond 2007; Everitt 2012, 2018; Spillane 2004; Spillane and Burch 2006). Additional research shows how people creatively find ways to retain forms of loose coupling after new policies mandating tight coupling are implemented (Kameo 2015). A central goal of accountability policies is to minimize, if not supplant, noncompliance with institutional rules, but research to date shows that local responses to accountability are dynamic and varied. Research rooted in symbolic interactionist tradition that can examine efforts at nominal compliance — or “ceremonial conformity” (Meyer and Rowan 1977) — in response to recent teacher evaluation policies could add insights into our understanding of how local actors creatively retain degrees of autonomy in the face of recent institutionalized attempts at standardization (Lipsky 1980).

We take up this question by examining principals’ accounts of how they conduct and make sense of the formal classroom observations that constitute their compliance with teacher evaluation policies. The work of teacher evaluation primarily falls to school principals (Donaldson and Mavrogordato 2018; Lane 2020). Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 32 elementary school principals in neighboring urban and

suburban school districts in the Midwest, we analyze principals' perspectives about the standardized rubrics they are required to use to conduct evaluations, as well as their perspectives on the interactions they have with teachers through which they carry out classroom observations. We find that principals take varied approaches to managing teachers' efforts to put on what they call a "dog and pony show" during their formal evaluations, a performance that aligns with district instructional policies but deviates from their common everyday practices. In other words, the "dog and pony show" is an instructional performance tightly coupled with formalized instructional practice endorsed by teachers' districts that they craft to get high marks for their formal evaluation, but that often does not represent their more common, everyday instructional practices. Principals can identify the "dog and pony show" because of the variety of interactions they have with their teachers: what they see when they observe the teacher for the formal evaluation often (but not always) differs from what they see in their more informal interactions that transpire when they "drop in" on teachers' classrooms. While principals often discourage teachers from doing this, they feel relatively powerless to do so, and they sometimes enable teachers to put on their "dog and pony show" as a way to minimize teachers' anxiety over the potential consequences of poor evaluations.

Our findings contribute to the organizations branch of symbolic interaction in two ways. First, we develop a concept we call *instantiated recoupling*, which refers to temporary and often inauthentic instances of tight coupling between policy and practice that occur within a broader context where loose coupling is also preserved and protected by local actors. We argue that this idea of instantiated recoupling offers a new conceptual tool for understanding how configurations of tight and loose coupling can exist alongside each other concomitantly in organizational settings, a long-standing interest of organizational research and a dynamic often driven by local action and meaning-making (Aurini 2012; Bidwell 1965, 2001; Cuban 1993; Hallett and Hawbaker 2021; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Spillane et al. 2019; Weick 1976). Second, we argue that instantiated recoupling offers evidence that ceremonial conformity to institutional pressures — or forms of noncompliance and policy resistance — can be driven down to the level of interaction in response to policies that force tight coupling between formal organizational practices and institutionalized rules. We argue this adds to a growing body of literature at the intersection of symbolic interaction and organizational sociology, known as inhabited institutionalism, a framework that foregrounds the reciprocal relationship between meaning-making through interaction and formal institutional structures that enable and constrain local action.

THEORY AND LITERATURE

Coupling Configurations and Inhabited Institutions

Schools have long been understood as operating with varying degrees of "structural looseness" (Bidwell 1965), a product of the tensions created by combining space for teachers' classroom autonomy while also working towards bureaucratic goals.

Prior to the accountability era in U.S. public education, Weick (1976) first developed the notion of “loosely-coupled systems,” or organizations in which the activities of different actors are not always consistent with organizational goals, nor are they always closely coordinated with each other. Indeed, loose coupling in schools was key to the foundation of new institutional theory in sociology. Meyer and Rowan (1977, 1978) theorized that the loose coupling between instructional activities and schools’ organizational priorities is necessary for minimizing uncertainty in the public’s overall sense of school effectiveness. Schools seek legitimacy as organizations by adhering to “institutional myths,” or rationalized ideals that serve as the formal structure of organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1977). In other words, these myths represent what people widely believe schools “ought” to be doing with regard to educating students (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021). But schools often comply with these myths in ceremonial ways that maintain loose coupling, and rely on a “logic of confidence and good faith,” shared among teachers, administrators, and the public they serve, to manage any concerns that schools might not be fulfilling their responsibilities (Meyer and Rowan 1977:357). These early articulations of new institutional theory began a rich tradition in organizational theory (Chaves 1996; DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 1991; Hwang and Powell 2009; Schneiberg and Clemens 2006; Strand and Meyer 1993), and informed a number of empirical studies specific to education (Coburn 2004; Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992; Meyer and Rowan 2006).

Just as loose coupling was a key empirical phenomenon in the development of new institutionalism, recoupling has served similarly in the development of inhabited institutionalism. Especially relevant in public schools as they began implementing various accountability policies over the years, recoupling refers to efforts to tightly couple practices with organizational goals that were previously loosely coupled (Espeland 1998). Hallett (2010) examines recoupling processes that occurred as part of an urban elementary school’s efforts to implement accountability policies. Previously accustomed to relative classroom autonomy, the teachers in this school experienced great “epistemic distress” at efforts by the new principal to authoritatively enforce tight coupling between classroom practice and new district instructional policy because it forced teachers out of their established instructional routines. Rather than create greater standardization and uniformity in the school, the recoupling instead created “turmoil” due to the ways that teachers interpreted the policy and its impact on their work, actively redefining the very meaning of accountability through their own local interactions (Hallett 2010). In this way, Hallett (2010) theorizes that teachers “inhabit” the institutional myth of accountability through their own creative responses to the recoupling they experienced. Inhabited institutionalism builds upon new institutionalism’s attention to formal structure by incorporating insights from symbolic interactionist traditions that attend to local interaction and meaning-making (Blumer 1969; Hallett 2010; Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Scully and Creed 1997).

Growing numbers of studies make use of inhabited institutionalism to examine a range of different organizational types (Binder 2007; Dorado 2013; Everitt and

Levinson 2016; Haedicke 2012; Kameo 2015; McPherson and Sauder 2013), and much of this burgeoning literature focuses in particular on how educational institutions are inhabited (Aurini 2012; Cobb 2017; Everitt 2012, 2013, 2018; Everitt and Tefft 2019; Hallett and Meanwell 2016; Nunn 2014; Reyes 2015; Spillane et al. 2019). In addition, several of these studies offer insights into patterns of tight and loose coupling. Aurini (2012) finds that teachers in private learning centers engage in both tight and loose coupling depending upon what particular situations require. Everitt (2012, 2013, 2018) finds that teachers' professional socialization and career experience inform their perspectives about which aspects of their work should be tightly or loosely coupled with policy requirements. Inhabited institutionalism has proven to offer powerful theoretical leverage for understanding patterns of tight and loose coupling in schools. Since Hallett's (2010) work, however, few studies have examined how principals are involved in the ways that coupling processes in schools are inhabited. Given that teacher evaluation policies are institutional efforts at recoupling, we frame our analysis of principals' meaning-making about teacher evaluations with inhabited institutionalism. Additional empirical studies on principals' work signal that they do indeed go about their work in ways that involve creative and dynamic responses to various institutional pressures just as inhabited institutionalism would predict.

Principals, Emotion Work, and Enacting Teacher Evaluation Policy

Principals occupy a uniquely meso-level position in educational hierarchies. On the one hand, they wield substantial authority in many aspects of their work. They supervise their teaching staff, help manage students, and work with parents. On the other hand, they are quite subordinate in other aspects of their work. They answer to a superintendent and school board, operate with finite resources, and comply with policies handed down from governing bodies at the district, state, and federal levels. Such organizational positioning gives principals a wide array of work tasks to perform, and creates significant time burdens on their schedules (Rigby 2016; Sebastian, Camburn, and Spillane 2018). In addition, despite common cultural images of principals as relatively solitary figures in their roles in schools (Wolcott 2003), recent empirical research finds that principals spend much of their time on work tasks that bring them into interaction with multiple other people who play some role in schools (Sebastian, Camburn, and Spillane 2018). Engaging in ongoing interaction with multiple others in schools is emblematic of principals' organizational position, as the meso-level consists of group dynamics among people doing things together (Fine and Hallett 2014).

In addition to the diverse and often collaborative tasks that constitute much of principals' work, research also shows that they adapt to the competing pressures they face in creative and dynamic ways. Hallett (2007) shows how different principals and their assistant principals can have starkly different leadership styles that shape their approach to handling efforts at compliance with policy requirements in the context

of managing their teaching staff. Similarly, Ispa-Landa and Thomas (2019) find that principals engage in ongoing emotion work, which is necessarily dynamic and driven by interaction (Gengler 2020; Hochschild [1983] 2012), and their emotion work practices are informed by principals' race and gender in patterned ways. Moreover, principals respond to school-choice policies in their districts very strategically. Jennings (2010) finds that they try to shape the student body of their schools by informally recruiting strong students as well as "counseling out" weaker students to attend school elsewhere. Taken together, the literature on principals shows that their work is embedded organizationally and institutionally; they perform their work via ongoing social interaction with others, and they respond to pressures in their environment with agency and strategy. Given these elements of how principals perform their managerial roles in schools, inhabited institutionalism is well-suited to frame an analysis of how principals make sense of teacher evaluation policies via interaction with teachers.

Research on the implementation of teacher-evaluation policies emphasizes the varied approaches that principals take in putting evaluations into practice (Donaldson and Mavrogordato 2018; Donaldson and Woulfin 2018; Kraft and Gilmour 2016; Lane 2020; Marsh et al. 2017). Like the scholarship on principals we discussed in the previous paragraph, the research on principal enactment of evaluation shows that principals exert a great deal of agency on how they go about the process (Donaldson and Woulfin 2018), and this contributes to a range of unintended consequences in the implementation of teacher evaluations (Kraft and Gilmour 2016; Lane 2020). For instance, while some approaches to enacting teacher evaluations can promote helpful forms of reflection on instructional practice for teachers, principals often feel underprepared to enact teacher-evaluation policies effectively (Derrington 2014). In addition, teachers and principals can at times manipulate the evaluation process. Marsh et al. (2017) find that, depending on organizational context, some principals will work with teachers to "distort" the intent of evaluation policies. They find evidence, like we do, that some teachers "put on a show" during formal observations to comply with policy mandates and some principals enable this behavior (Marsh et al. 2017). While these studies offer important empirical insights into policy implementation processes in education, they do not do as much to advance theoretical interests in the sociological study of organizations and institutions. We examine phenomena like the "dog and pony show," while engaging with organizational sociology, and explore what they tell us about coupling configurations and how they may be changing in educational institutions through local responses to new policy regimes.

DATA AND METHODS

Our interview data come from a total sample of 32 principals from the same number of elementary schools in both an urban district and 11 different suburban districts located in the same large metropolitan area in the Midwest. The lead author recruited

Table 1. Principals by District and Years in Position

Suburban Principals		Urban Principals	
Name	Years in Position	Name	Years in Position
Amy	22	Aaron	4
Benjamin	14	Andrew	3
Betsy	10	Barbara	3
Dave	3	Charlotte	20
Gail	5	Christian	6
George	6	Devyn	3
Janet	4	Gina	10
Joe	3	Greg	6
Karen	7	Irene	11
Kent	12	Joan	3
Madelyn	17	Kenny	3
Marge	14	Mario	29
Millie	9	Rachel	3
Paula	2	Richard	4
Peter	6	Sadie	8
Robert	10	Susan	13

these principals through professional contacts in each district, and publicly accessible contact information. Within the total sample, 16 work in suburban districts and 16 work in an urban district. In addition, 16 of them identify as women and 16 identify as men (see Table 1). Seven principals are people of color, all of whom work in the urban district. All principals in the sample work in elementary schools, and all are required by their respective districts to conduct evaluative assessments of their teachers. Our data are limited to interviews about teacher/principal relationships from the side of principals. This method was ideal for this study as access to school personnel and administration is fraught with institutional, logistical, and legal hurdles. Future work observing the actual interactions of principals and teachers may provide more detailed data.

Interviews averaged approximately 60 minutes in length. Principals responded to semi-structured questions asking them about their perceptions concerning a range of dynamics involved in their working relationships with their staff, students, and supervisors. With consent, interviews were audio recorded and the lead author wrote field notes during the discussion as well. Throughout each interview, the lead author asked follow-up questions in interaction with participants to solicit detailed accounts and examples of their experiences and the meanings they attribute to them (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Weiss 1994). The lead author transcribed all interviews verbatim, gave all participants pseudonyms, and edited out all identifying information in the transcribed interviews.

The study began with the lead author's broad interest in examining the ways principals make sense of the competing institutional pressures that bear on their meso-level position in schools. This guiding research question informed questions

that asked principals to: describe the range of their day-to-day work tasks; with whom they interacted during these tasks; the relative importance of different tasks for the successful performance of their jobs as they defined it; how much time they spend on different tasks; what kinds of constraints they confront from their districts; and what managerial strategies they use with teachers. Using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, the lead author began open coding and then more focused, flexible coding to identify analytically-inductive patterns of meaning in the data (Deterding and Waters 2018). Patterns emerged concerning principals' shared meanings about teacher evaluation requirements and how they conducted observations via interactions with their teaching staff. Coauthors then worked collaboratively with the data, writing more detailed analytic memos to interpret the coding patterns, and engage these patterns with existing theory and empirical research on principals.

PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE DANIELSON FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING

To understand instantiated recoupling in the context of teacher evaluation, we must examine how principals make sense of the evaluation tool itself and how they use it. In the urban and suburban districts where our principals worked, the Danielson Framework for Teaching (FFT) was the primary tool for conducting teacher evaluations. Charlotte Danielson published the first version of this framework in 1996 while working at Educational Testing Service (ETS) to be used for the Praxis III Classroom Performance Assessments. She has since formed a consulting firm called "The Danielson Group," which has put out three subsequent editions of the Danielson FFT (2007, 2011, and 2013). The 2013 edition is the most current one in use. Over the last ten years, the Danielson FFT has become one of the rubrics most widely adopted by states and districts for the purposes of teacher evaluation. The framework has four "domains" for evaluating teacher performance: "Planning and Preparation," "The Classroom Environment," "Instruction," and "Professional Responsibilities." In each domain, teachers are scored across four categories of performance: (4) "Distinguished," (3) "Proficient," (2) "Basic," and (1) "Unsatisfactory."

Our principals believe the Danielson FFT is not best-used as an evaluation rubric, but rather feel it is more appropriate for professional development. This is consistent with the findings of other research that shows many principals have some skepticism concerning the effectiveness of rubrics for evaluating teachers (Marsh et al. 2017). Paula describes her perspective on the Danielson FFT:

I have a friend that works at [local high school], and Danielson was implemented and changed the system there. There were a lot of people who were really, personally offended, like wanting to quit. And so it wasn't just there, it's just an example that probably a lot of people can understand because ... I think it happened everywhere. Because it became about the rating and not about the learning, and I think Danielson was in at one point, and she's like, "You're using it the wrong way. It's supposed to be professional development and teaching, and now it's being used

as like an evaluating tool, and that's not the way I designed it." We are not using this tool as the researcher intended it to be used.

(Paula, suburban principal, 2 years of experience)

To Paula, schools and districts are using the framework inappropriately. While she cites a specific school in the area, she also notes the ubiquity of Danielson FFT adoption ("I think it happened everywhere"). Because schools use it primarily for teacher evaluation, she feels that its use "became about the rating and not about the learning," which she feels is a kind of perversion of its original intent. She claims that Charlotte Danielson herself shares her perspective about this misalignment between the framework's intent and how it is used by schools in practice. Whether this represents Danielson's perspective or not, Paula defines it that way and it informs her own meaning making about what she observes in teacher evaluation practices.

Other principals shared Paula's sense that the real strength of the framework lies in its capacity to help teachers improve their instructional practice when it is used for professional development ("learning," as Paula put it). Millie discusses how the teachers who meet the "distinguished" category in the Danielson FFT demonstrate growth and cultivation in their instructional practice, and that the framework is better suited to helping teachers improve than it is at evaluating them:

I mean I think that the Danielson rubric clearly describes what we're looking for in distinction [distinguished, in the framework]. But to go through the formal process that we have, to me, I think there could be another way of evaluating a teacher. But I don't even know if I would call it evaluation; I would call it more like a self-growth model or something. They [teachers] identified areas that they were pursuing that year. And you know our strongest, distinguished teachers do that, where they come in with a plan of how they're going to focus on a certain area and hope to impact student learning and grow.

(Millie, suburban principal, 9 years of experience)

The teachers earning high marks of distinguished are those committed to professional growth. The framework correctly identifies those teachers who routinize efforts at improvement, but to Millie this is something qualitatively different than evaluation of their instructional practice ("I don't even know if I would call it evaluation"). While principals in our study see utility in the Danielson FFT, they also often feel that the policies prescribing how they are to use it as an evaluative instrument extend the framework beyond its purpose.

ENACTING TEACHER EVALUATIONS: THE "DOG AND PONY SHOW" AS INSTANTIATED RECOUPLING

We find that principals generally have two types of reactions when they witness a teacher perform the dog and pony show for their evaluation. The first is that some principals simply do not like it and discourage it, though they know it often emerges out of teachers' anxiety about the evaluations. Although they object to the teachers'

performance, none report that they are able to put a stop to it. The second reaction is among those principals that are more ambivalent to the dog and pony show. They often already lack buy-in regarding the rubric, and they sympathize with their teachers for whom the evaluation process can be overly stressful. They tend to allow their teachers different options, modifications, and “re-dos” until the evaluation has satisfied both the teacher and the policy requirement. They feel as if they work cooperatively with the teacher to make the dog and pony show work for them. The dog and pony show emerges, then, out of dynamic interactions between principals and their teachers, and becomes a routine part of school settings where our principals work.

Containing Teachers’ Stress: Principals’ Challenges in Policing the Dog and Pony Show

From principals’ perspective, it is in day-to-day interactions that principals and teachers collectively develop sets of meanings about teacher evaluation and through which the “dog and pony show” emerges as an organizational routine.

I think they know that when they’re planning for a formal observation they know how to include all that differentiation. They know what kinds of questions to ask. They are sure to put an assessment at the end. They have all that student-centered involvement and creation. And those are things some of my teachers do almost all the time but not all teachers do. And when they’re having their formal observation they make sure that they are doing those things. So I will ask questions like in the post like “tell me how you did X Y and Z. That was great. Tell me how many times a week that kind of activity happens in your class?” Or, you know, things like that because you know it just is__ I think they’ve figured it out ... When I’m in their rooms informally, I don’t see all those things happening, right? So, then I feel like it’s a dog and pony show. I don’t for others because what they’re doing during their formal observation is what I see them doing all the time.

(Gail, suburban district, 5 years of experience)

For some teachers, principals are aware that the formal evaluation that is scored and goes into teachers’ file does not represent their most common instructional routines. When that happens, as Gail describes, it “feels like it’s a dog and pony show.” It feels like an act to principals, one that is disingenuous. It is a type of ceremonial conformity to the rules that structure institutionalized organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1977), but it occurs at the level of interaction between teachers and principals. For some of their teachers, though, principals know that what they see during formal evaluations is reflective of their overall instruction because they see it in routine informal visits to their classrooms. Gail describes her subtle efforts to call out teachers who engage in the dog and pony show with probing questions such as, “Tell me how many times a week that kind of activity happens in your class?” though it is unclear how teachers respond to those questions.

From the principal’s perspective, when teachers engage in a “dog and pony show” instructional performance for the purposes of formal evaluation, we see evidence

of instantiated recoupling. In those moments, teachers seem compelled to recouple their instruction with district policies articulated in the Danielson FFT, but in the majority of their instruction outside those moments their instruction is more loosely coupled with district policies on instructional practice. Joan, an urban principal, explains why she thinks teachers put on the dog and pony show:

Joan: I think there are some cases where it's [formal evaluation] been pretty effective. Then there are some cases where the person is able to put on a really good performance in that 10-day window of an observation, and it does not represent what happens the other days in that classroom. For instance, there's some teachers that when you are just doing an informal visit, there might be issues with classroom management or there might be issues with planning and preparation. There might not be the level of on-task behavior or engagement in an activity on a day-to-day basis. But come that formal observation period, the teacher knows that they're going to get formally observed, so they're going to be very purposeful in planning for that 10 day window — really great instruction. So you complete that observation and you have to be true to the rubric and you have to say, "Yes, this was proficient," or "This was distinguished." But it's not necessarily typical of what's happening every day in the classroom.

Interviewer: Why do they do that performance?

Joan: Because there is pressure to maintain your job and to not fall within a category that's not proficient. Job security. They want to make sure that they can keep their job.

(Joan, urban district, 3 years of experience)

Principals observe that teachers feel the coercive force of evaluation policies and know that one way or another they must comply in observable ways with the framework during formal observations. Indeed, teacher evaluation policies have recoupled schools' organizational rules with institutionalized policies. Failing to comply could mean their jobs. But like Gail, Joan notes the diversity among teachers in how they comply. In "some cases" teachers' routine practices are coupled with the framework even though they are actually observed and formally assessed infrequently, a dynamic that allows for periodic deviation from the framework even if most of the time they do not deviate. For those whose compliance strategy involves the dog and pony show, the recoupling of their instruction to district policies is momentary, and they rely on their preferred "arsenal of practices" (Everitt 2012) that, for whatever reason, does not align closely with the Danielson FFT. In this way, this type of instantiated recoupling is similar to "distortive" responses among educators to teacher evaluation policies documented in prior research (Marsh et al. 2017), but one that happens at the level of classroom interactions.

Other principals note how the coercive pressure of evaluation policies undermine the overall quality of the evaluation process itself, even though they are fully aware when dog and pony shows are happening. Kenny, an urban principal, discusses his perspective:

I don't know if you would recognize it if you were a principal who just sat in your office all day. But me getting up and being in classrooms at different points in the

day and throughout the week, even for five or 10 minutes, I kind of see the work that's going on. And triangling that with assessments, with team meetings, with those informal interviews, and then the actual [formal] evaluation. Then there's also some teachers that don't turn in lesson plans. And all of a sudden they have this elaborate lesson or unit plan during their evaluation. You don't turn this shit in normally throughout the year, and all of a sudden it's your evaluation then here's a three page unit plan with everything laid out that you're supposed to be doing on a regular basis?! I can't rate them on what their actual work is throughout the year. I can only grade them on what is presented to me during this evaluation framework.

So if you scaled it back to, I wasn't going to give you your final evaluation until the end of the year, but I was doing all these things that are good practices throughout the year, and collecting the data, and then giving your final rating at the end of your year, like coaching and your actual growth as an educator throughout the year. That would be more beneficial. But the way it's set up now, it creates too much stress and pressure that people feel like they have to perform.

(Kenny, urban district, 3 years of experience)

Evaluation policies as they exist in Kenny's district not only compel some teachers to "feel like they have to perform," they also constrain his ability to conduct evaluation in a more long-term, meaningful way. Much like the principals in the above section who see the Danielson FFT as primarily useful in measuring teacher professional growth, Kenny would prefer for his evaluations to be more comprehensive and include both formal and informal observations throughout the school year. But he feels constrained by his district's policy: "I can only grade them on what is presented to me during this evaluation framework." The "stress and pressure" that Kenny cites as teachers' emotional motivation to engage in the dog and pony show is not unlike, though somewhat distinct from, what Hallett (2010) calls the "epistemic distress" that recoupling caused teachers in his urban elementary school. Like those teachers, evaluations structured by the Danielson FFT seem to force some teachers out of their established routines, but through the dog and pony show, principals observe that teachers try to manage this epistemic distress by compartmentalizing it. But the same policy that appears to pressure some teachers into a dog and pony show also limits principals' ability to engage in evaluation practices that might reduce its frequency. Teachers seem to respond with their performance, and Kenny feels he must acknowledge the performance as a valid evaluation because the policy itself limits him from including their more informal knowledge of teacher instruction in the formal evaluation.

Principals in the suburban districts felt similarly about how the policy, and teachers' creative response to it, structures this kind of instantiated recoupling into their practices. That this happens so similarly across both schools and districts signals that instantiated recoupling through the dog and pony show is becoming an institutionalized practice. Joe discusses how he feels this makes evaluation less accurate than it would otherwise be:

Some people know how to play the game, and they know how to do the dog and pony show. They know what they need to do to check all the boxes and get their gold star, right? So, I think I think because of the way our system is set up, people can kind of game the system. And then I think as an administrator, now if I were evaluating that person then I would feel uncomfortable because I would be almost looking for other areas to get around what they are doing to give them their true rating. I don't know, like, I don't want to be that guy who will, how can I look to ding them? It should be authentic. And if there were a lot more informal [evals] cooked in where it's just popping in and seeing things, I feel like that would be more effective, whereas I do feel there have been multiple instances where there are staff members who received glowing evaluations when that's not what I as the principal see. They know how to play the game, they do get that gold star. So I don't know that that's unfair. I think it's just inaccurate.
(Joe, suburban district, 3 years of experience)

Joe notes diversity among teachers in who, and how, they engage in the dog and pony show, noting that some teachers “know how to play the game” to “get that gold star” even though that might not be an accurate reflection of their overall instruction practices. Joe notes his own feelings about when he confronts this, and how it guides his actions. In short, he does not want to go out of his way to be critical of teachers even if he feels their evaluation will end up inaccurate (“I don't want to be that guy ...”). Even though he would rather have more accurate evaluations, he does not want to challenge teachers on the dog and pony show fearing it might reflect poorly on him.

While there is diversity among teachers regarding who engages in the dog and pony show, there is also diversity among principals in how they make sense of ways to respond to the dog and pony show when they feel it is happening. Some, like Gail quoted above, try to police it. Janet from the suburban district discusses her approach:

Let's say we do witness this dog and pony show: we will assign them a rating on our evaluation that is equitable to what we saw. However, I have very, very often in the comments put, “Even though Mr. Smith demonstrated da-da-da, I have frequently witnessed in the classroom, and although I'm glad to see that he's working on this area and making some advances ...” Again, it's, are they living there or are they living in a dog and pony show and did they just put it together for that one day? We will say that right outward to teachers, and say, “Wow, this is a great lesson, looks like you put a lot into that and you're trying some of the new things. How often do you find yourself doing such and such?” And then that kind of puts it back to them, [teacher response] “Oh, okay. They realize that we're just dog and pony.”
(Janet, suburban district, 4 years of experience)

Janet calls out teachers who she suspects engage in dog and pony shows, asking them how often they engage in the practices she observes in the formal evaluation. She “puts it back on them,” making sure they know she is wise to their act. Moreover, she finds a way to document in the formal evaluation that the formal lesson is not what she often sees in informal observations by writing this in the comments section. She creatively smuggles this into the formal evaluation in ways that some principals (like Kenny discussed above) do not feel they can.

Sympathizing with Teachers' Stress: Enabling the Dog and Pony Show

Other principals are a bit more sympathetic about the stress that evaluations create for teachers, even if they are vigilant about the prospect of teachers engaging in dog and pony shows. Barbara discusses her perspective:

I'm in classrooms regularly. I see what teachers do on a daily basis ... You can definitely tell when people are completely switching things up and trying to put on a show for this evaluation. And we definitely discourage that, so what we tried to do a couple of years ago was just do pop-ins. Like it's going to be a formal observation for your evaluation. But we're not gonna tell you when we're coming in because we just want to see what you do. And then it was like putting people on pins and needles. And of course it was like, "Well, you just missed that part and you just I just had done that and you didn't see that part of the lesson." You know, so it's like, "Okay, fine we'll schedule them." But you know please know that we're not asking you to put on a show. We just want to see what you do, and of course look at the rubric for your planning, but you should be doing that anyway.

So yeah, I mean especially people who you know try to be the A-student all the time. And teachers are much like kids. So there are certain people who just need to__ They want to be perfect. They want to do everything right. And so they get super nervous about it and then it ends up going bad because their energy is all off, and the kids are like, "I don't even know what's happening right now." So it actually hasn't worked well for them to try to do something different because the kids can tell. I mean they know if this is off their regular routine.
(Barbara, urban district, 3 years of experience)

Like Janet, Barbara tries to police teachers' efforts at the dog and pony show, noting that she discourages teachers from doing this. In the past, she attempted a strategy of conducting evaluations by just dropping in unannounced to observe teachers' instruction. According to Barbara, teachers resisted this practice, fearing that their inability to prepare for a formal evaluation would lead to lower scores and put their jobs at risk. Teachers were so vocal and persistent in their opposition to unannounced observations, emphasizing the stress it caused them, that Barbara eventually gave up the practice ("okay, we will schedule them"). Through such interactions, teachers and principals contest the terms and conditions under which the formal evaluations can be carried out. Though she dislikes the dog and pony show phenomenon, she is sympathetic enough to the stress that evaluation policies create for her staff that she is willing to back off on certain efforts to police the dog and pony show.

Some principals perform their evaluations ostensibly by the book, but still find ways to enable teachers' dog and pony shows. Sadie explains:

Well, I always told them that I'm only rating you based on what I observed in your class. It's not subjective for me. If you did something and two months ago I'm not going to go back and say well two months ago you did this. When I come in your classroom and I'm showing you my notes. This is what I saw. This is the evidence. So that's how I tried to soothe them a little bit. They always were on edge when

it came around observations and evaluating including the best teachers and the most experienced. They thought this was horrible.
(Sadie, urban district, 8 years of experience)

For Sadie, anything she observes outside the actual 30 minute to 1 hour observation is not considered in her assessment. Sadie uses this as evidence that she is performing the evaluations objectively. But she engages in behind-the-scenes work with her teachers to “soothe them a bit” because the evaluation process makes them feel so “on edge,” noting that many teachers feel the whole process is “horrible.” She assures them that the instructional content they present in their formal observations is all she will include, further encouraging and supporting the dog and pony show as an element of the interaction order in her school.

Other principals feel similarly sympathetic to the distress that evaluations cause their teachers. Amy describes the ways in which she counsels her teachers through this stress:

I just talk them down off the ledge, and let them know that “this is a test” [as in an attempt] or you know, “if you’re messing up in your observation and you want to start over, you want to do it a different day, and we can reschedule it. This is not like life or death here.” Because I’m in the rooms every day at least once. They can’t__ You know, they know that I know what’s going on in there. It’s not like this is the only time I’ve seen them is during this one observation or these four observations. And I can always bring up examples that I’ve seen. “Oh look, you know, remember this lesson? You did this really well in that lesson. Let’s focus on that. I’ll come back another time. Or maybe I’ll just come in when I see you doing something great, and I’ll just start typing that up if you’re comfortable.” You know and sometimes they’re better with that.

(Amy, suburban district, 22 years of experience)

Amy engages in a number of creative strategies to support her teachers through the evaluation process while still complying with the district’s evaluation policies. First, she relies primarily on her daily informal classroom visits as her way to “know what’s going on in there.” Second, she reassures her teachers that if a formal evaluation gets off to a bad start, she will allow them a do-over, so to speak, and come back another time. Third, she is willing to turn an informal observation into a formal one on occasions when she sees her teachers “doing something great.” She also makes a routine point to communicate all of this to her teachers in everyday interactions so as to make them feel more at ease about the evaluations and the impact on their jobs (“I just talk them down off the ledge”). She actively seeks out moments when her teachers’ instruction is tightly-coupled with district policy and evaluates in those moments, allowing for looser degrees of coupling between instruction and policy outside those moments. In this way, Amy defines the dog and pony show as a useful tool to manage her teachers’ stress and anxiety about evaluations while also complying with the letter of the policy on evaluations. While Amy’s particular strategies are somewhat unique to her and her staff, they produce a form of instantiated recoupling that occurs similarly across school and district settings.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings demonstrate that principals face challenges with how to manage their teachers during formal evaluations. Bound by an evaluative framework that they do not necessarily see as wholly appropriate, principals actively inhabit the institutional space by infusing their own modifications and informal observations of teachers' work into the formal evaluation protocol. Although our data are limited to the principal side of the social interaction, according to our principals, teachers often engage in what principals call a "dog and pony show" when formally observed for evaluation, an instructional performance that aligns with the Danielson FFT but does not always reflect teachers' own instructional routines. While principals generally discourage teachers from doing this, there is little they can do to stop it without distressing their teachers. Moreover, some principals even enable teachers to do it. In each case, teachers and principals develop a novel form of ceremonial conformity by engaging in instantiated recoupling. This temporary and often inauthentic form of tight coupling between policy and practice is a creative, collective, and interpretive response to new policies in the institutional environment, one that is negotiated between teachers and principals in their everyday interactions. Our analysis advances inhabited institutionalism by examining novel coupling configurations with attention to how they emerge from local interaction and meaning making, an analytic focus emphasized by inhabited institutionalism (Bechky 2011; Binder 2007; Hallett 2010; Hallett and Hawbaker 2021; Hallett and Ventresca 2006).

Our findings offer important empirical insights into the actual implementation processes of teacher evaluation policies in schools, and how these processes are complicated by the ways that teachers and principals make sense of them and enact them. If the goal of teacher evaluation policies is to improve and sustain the overall quality of instruction in schools by more effectively monitoring, assessing, and coordinating teachers' instructional practice, our findings suggest that it is not often working out that way in practice. While one of the limitations of our study is the relatively small sample of qualitative interviews (32), these interviews also represent the leadership of 32 different elementary schools across multiple districts, signaling that the "dog and pony show" phenomenon is not an idiosyncratically local one (Marsh et al. 2017). Principals report that many teachers (though not all) cope with the stress of evaluation policies by creating an instructional performance that is specific to the formal observation and closely aligned with the specific evaluation rubrics that structure the evaluation. They also report that for many teachers, this dog and pony show is a departure from their normal, everyday instructional routines. In this sense, principals find that the evaluation does not compel teachers to closely coordinate the majority of their instruction with district instructional standards; it only compels them to do so during the moments of formal observation and the scoring of their evaluations.

To be clear, we do not mean to imply that any instructional practices not aligned with the Danielson FFT (or other rubrics) are necessarily poor in quality, nor do we endorse the content of the Danielson FFT (or other rubrics) as necessarily capturing

the full range of effective instructional practices. Rather, we emphasize that these principals' districts endorse the Danielson FFT as their preferred instructional standards, and require principals to use it to evaluate their teachers and make staffing decisions. Principals report that teachers, however, strategically find ways to retain their preferred instructional practices that prior research shows they are deeply committed to (Coburn 2004; Everitt 2012, 2018; Everitt and Tefft 2019; Hallett 2010; Spillane 2004). Given the ways that formal observations are scheduled and structured by district policy, there is only so much principals can do to minimize or expose teachers' dog and pony shows, and many of them support teachers when they do it. Consequently, the recoupling intended by teacher evaluation policies is often momentary and haphazard in schools rather than sustained and pervasive.

We also argue that this concept of instantiated recoupling contributes to the study of schools as organizations, and the theoretical enterprise of inhabited institutionalism. First, schools have long functioned with combinations of tight and loose coupling despite sweeping institutional changes intended to promote tight coupling more pervasively through accountability (Bidwell 1965, 2001; Coburn 2004; Cuban 1993; Diamond 2007; Everitt 2012; Gamoran and Dreeben 1986; Hallett 2010; Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978; Spillane 2004; Spillane and Burch 2006). Examining how instantiated recoupling occurs in schools sheds light on key mechanisms that prevent policy efforts at tight coupling from fully supplanting loose coupling, and this is important for understanding how schools function in the current policy environment. Instantiated recoupling also represents a creative way that principals and teachers successfully buffer local instructional practices from institutional pressures to evaluate. Hallett and Hawbaker (2021) theorize that coupling configurations involve interconnections between local interactions, organizations, and institutions with varying degrees of tight and loose coupling between the three. Much of the scholarship that documents evidence of ceremonial conformity has done so by examining how organizations signal token compliance with institutional pressures that buffer their internal interactions from those pressures (Chaves 1996; Hwang and Powell 2009; Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Weick 1976). Our analysis of instantiated recoupling shows that when policies force tight coupling between organizations and institutions (principals are now mandated to conduct teacher evaluations as part of their jobs), ceremonial conformity can get driven down to the level of local interactions such as the dog and pony show. Since this is driven in part by the emotion work that principals and teachers do together in response to evaluation policies, we see an example of how people's agency in interaction contributes to forms of organizational change (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021).

Second, examining instantiated recoupling advances one of the primary aims of inhabited institutionalism: theorizing how "institutions function reciprocally from both the ground up and the top down" (Everitt 2018:12). In our analysis, instantiated recoupling rises out of people's active meaning making via local interactions regarding teacher evaluations (from the ground up) while it is simultaneously a response to institutional mandates delivered to these local settings by district policy and

principals' job requirements (the top down). Moreover, local organizational culture also matters (Donaldson and Woulfin 2018; Marsh et al. 2017), and one would expect that different versions of instantiated recoupling in local settings could create a variety of coupling configurations from site to site (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021). Indeed, our data suggest as much, with some principals taking a more "policing" approach to managing dog and pony shows, while others take a more sympathetic and supportive approach. Our data suggest multiple forms of instantiated recoupling span organizational sites with the possibility of becoming an institutionalized field-level phenomenon in education. Instantiated recoupling could offer a way to conceptualize how institutionalized practices that structure organizational functioning percolate up from human agency, meaning-making, and interaction, something that has been hard to pin down empirically but that inhabited institutionalism is well-suited to examine (Haedicke and Hallett 2016; Hallett and Hawbaker 2021; Zilber 2002). This work is strictly limited to interviews about interactions from principals only. Future work is needed to observe the actual interactions themselves. We must also address how teachers make sense of accountability policies and the role of the principal from the perspective of teachers. We think further research that examines forms of instantiated recoupling, both in education and other institutional environments, could be fruitful in adding to our understanding of the local sources of institutionalization processes (Zilber 2002).

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