Book Review

Bryk, A. S. (2020). *Improvement in action: Advancing quality in America’s schools*. Harvard Education Press.

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For the past two years, America’s public schools have been navigating uncharted waters. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced schools to focus on critical operational issues, such as effective communication and scheduling in-person learning, virtual learning, and hybrid instruction. As a result, educators have had little time to consider methods of improving the academic experience for students. However, with the end of the pandemic in sight, school leaders are beginning to reflect on school improvement (Clifford & Coggshall, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020; Kaul & VanGronigan, 2020; Nielsen, 2021; Zhao, 2020). *Improvement in Action: Advancing Quality in America’s Schools*is a timely and relevant book for educators looking to improve their schools by producing optimal student and teacher outcomes. It provides educators, especially those at the secondary level, with concrete descriptions of the actions other educators have taken to increase the effectiveness of their schools by improving both student and teacher performance. This book is a must-read for educators looking to deepen their understanding of school improvement.

The author, Anthony Bryk, has been involved in school improvement for more than 30 years. He is a former professor of urban education at the University of Chicago and the Spencer Chair in Organizational Studies in the School of Education and Graduate School of Business at Stanford. He has also served as the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Bryk has a wealth of knowledge to share with his audience, as he has authored a number of other works on the science of improvement, including *Trust in Schools* (2002) and *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (2010).

In 2015, Bryk, along with co-authors Louis Gomez, Alicia Grunow, and Paul LeMahieu, published *Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*. In this book, the authors argue for a new approach to school improvement. Rather than implementing quickly and learning slowly, they recommend that educators learn fast to implement thoroughly. Simply put, in education, there are no universal solutions or quick fixes to address the educational problems our schools are currently facing. The authors argue that, to address these challenges, educators must collaborate across organizational boundaries to engage in continuous disciplined inquiry. They urge educators who want improved student and teacher outcomes to better analyze problems by answering two questions: “How can our educational organization continuously get better at what it does?” and “How can educators accelerate learning improvements?” (Bryk et al., 2015).

*Improvement in Action* is essentially a sequel to *Learning to Improve.* It provides readers with six case studies of educational organizations that faced numerous challenges to improving student and teacher outcomes and describes the steps they took to produce optimal results. Educators from these six organizations share the lessons they learned while addressing these problems. In all six cases, the educators asked themselves how they could improve their organizations and accelerate learning.

Although each improvement case study is unique, four similarities can be observed across them. First, educators examined data to better understand how their systems operated. Second, they used extant research and external expertise to better understand how their systems worked and thus identify the necessary changes. Third, they continuously monitored the progress of their improvement efforts and developed a hub or network to support these efforts, e.g., creating new staff positions and organizational roles. Fourth, these improvements were only made possible by stable leadership and supportive governance.

The common actions Bryk identifies in this book are consistent with those observed by other researchers in the field of improvement. For example, Hassel and Hassel (2009) reviewed dozens of studies related to turnaround situations implemented within differently sized non-profits across various healthcare companies and government agencies as well as within for-profits in numerous industries. Although these institutions were non-educational, Hassel and Hassel (2009) argue that their results are relevant for districts and schools because the chronically challenging environments (and the actions taken to reverse them) are consistent across venues.

One prominent theme in this book is that educational institutions must form partnerships to genuinely improve schools. K-12 and higher education institutions cannot make significant improvements working in isolation. Therefore, practitioners and researchers must work together for school improvement. In an excellent example of such collaboration, Bryk describes how the Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) took on the challenge of ensuring its graduates were prepared for college. However, while working toward this goal, FUSD leaders realized they needed support from a higher education institution, so they partnered with the University of California at Merced. As a result, these two entities created a practice-improvement partnership called “Equity and Access,” which was responsible for providing the district with access to relevant research and expertise to inform the district’s efforts.

A second key theme is that improvement is not something a school does once a year; it should be integrated in the school’s culture:

Improvement is not an endpoint; it is a journey. As a team moves down the path, they engage a learning-to-improve spirit; we can do better. The drive to get better and to continue to become the best at getting better—this is the ethos and the ethic of living continuous improvement. (Bryk, 2020, p. 44)

When I began my first principalship in the mid-1990s, many school leaders considered the school-improvement process to be nothing more than a state requirement. Once the school had completed the process and submitted its improvement plan to the state, the matter was deemed complete until the next plan had to be submitted. However, as a new principal, I understood that the science of improvement is continuous. Therefore, I appreciate Bryk’s efforts to demonstrate both the evolution of school-quality assessment in becoming improvement centered and the changes in how educators think about school improvement.

A third theme of the book is coherence. According to Fullan and Quinn (2016, p. 2), coherence consists of a shared understanding of the purpose and nature of work: “There is only one way to achieve greater coherence, and that is through purposeful action and interaction, working on capacity, clarity, precision of practice, transparency, monitoring of progress and continuous correction.” Bryk furthersuggests that all educators must have insight into the factors that shape their work, as this allows them to weave together various forms of expertise and is vital to organizational improvement.

Bryk’s text has numerous strengths. First, the six case studies provide readers with examples of real-life problems that other educational organizations have faced, which may be similar to their own. The stories bridge theory and practice and thereby make it easier to understand the information. Additionally, readers can conceptualize how the science of school improvement can be implemented in their institutions. Although each case study could stand on its own, together they show how different teams applied the same principles or concepts to achieve positive results. Second, Bryk helps the reader understand the need to comprehensively examine educational problems and conduct root-cause analysis to understand their nature. He uses analogies and figures to contextualize the educators’ problems. For example, Bryk describes FUSD’s low graduate matriculation rate and consequent low enrollment into postsecondary institutions as a “leaky pipeline” (p. 25). When FUSD educators conducted root-cause analysis of this problem, they discovered that students were slipping through the cracks at multiple points throughout their schooling.

Unfortunately, the book also has a number of limitations. First, the author focuses almost exclusively on improvement issues at the secondary level. For example, the case study of Fresno (Chapter 1) addresses high-school graduation rates and decisions about college attendance. The New Vision for Public Schools example (Chapter 2) also concerns problems related to high-school graduation rates. The Summit Public Schools case (Chapter 3) tackles the issue of high-school reform. Finally, the High-Tech High discussion (Chapter 4) also focuses on high-school graduation rates and college success.

Although these case studies are useful, their limited scope hinders the book’s relevance to a wider audience. Most of the six cases studies involved issues at the secondary level, though the principles presented could also be applied to elementary- and middle-school levels. It might have been helpful for Bryk to include a case with problems that elementary-level educators face. An example of this would be an elementary school or district that has addressed the issue of having a majority of its students not being proficient in reading by the end of third grade.

*Improvement in Action: Advancing Quality in America’s Schools* is an excellent resource for educators, school leaders, and researchers who want to improve the quality of America’s schools. It encourages school leaders to see school improvement as a tool that can positively impact student and teacher lives rather than as a mere compliance process. The book also upgrades the school-improvement process by imploring educational leaders to reflect deeply on school improvement and to avoid standardized approaches to fix complex academic problems. Instead, Bryk encourages educators to collaborate across the entire organizational structure and examine problems more deeply before determining solutions. I would encourage anyone who wants improve student outcomes to read this book.

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