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**COMMENT ON ANTHONY S. BRYK;
“ACCELERATING HOW WE LEARN TO IMPROVE”**

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I have to admit that the idea of "improvement science", which I had not encountered before reading this article, induced in me something of a shudder. But that is probably because I associate improvement with the patronising imposition of regimes of one sort or another, by people who assume superior knowledge or expertise, upon those who are supposed to know less. And my sense is that this is precisely what Anthony Bryk is arguing *against*. Though I find some of his language off-putting, his idea of education as a process in which everyone is working together, for the ultimate benefit of future generations, is one to which I would fully subscribe. If this is not happening now, or only with limited success, it must be for three reasons. The first lies in the uncoordinated proliferation of "experts" who are simultaneously regaling teachers with often contradictory advice on what to do. The second lies in an obsession with data collection and processing on an industrial scale, combined with a language of systems engineering that portrays the teacher as subject to mechanisms of control and feedback. And the third lies in the identification of students as individuals with needs that must be met, rather than as genuine participants in an educational process attentive to the needs of others, and who themselves have much to contribute to it. Bryk has a good deal to say about the first, rather less to say about the second, and almost nothing to say about the third.

Teaching is a noble profession, carried on by men and women of dedication and integrity. In countries where education is working well, the one feature that consistently stands out is the high regard in which teachers are held, not just in their own local communities but by society at large. They are both trusted and respected. And conversely, in countries where education is not working well, teachers are routinely denigrated, blamed for poor performance, and monitored in everything they do. The implications of this difference for how to improve educational outcomes should be obvious. Bryk is not the first to observe, however, that the perverse response to perceived educational failure is to lay on yet more tiers of control and monitoring, which actually make the situation worse, as they further discredit and disempower teachers, and impede their capacity to teach. Experts, driven by their own agendas and bearing quick-fix solutions, move in to take command. This is not to deny that educational experts have useful knowledge and experience to bring to the table.

But so, too, do teachers. More will undoubtedly be achieved if teachers and other professionals share their experience rather than keeping it to themselves. A conversation of many different voices is not a problem, even if they are all saying different things. But having many different voices instructing you in what to do is a problem, *especially* when they are all saying different things.

A conversation that embraces educators as active inquirers with experience to share is what Bryk calls a "networked improvement community" (NIC). I am not sure what is to be gained from the pseudo-scientific nomenclature, but the approach is surely preferable to one that treats teachers as data points within a self-regulating control system. The field of education, as Bryk observes, is awash with data, gathered in the course of holding teachers, as well as students and their schools, to account. It is one thing, however, to gather data on people, quite another to listen and actually to learn from them. To learn from educators, for example about what does or does not work in the classroom, is to gather not data but evidence. Currently, Bryk is saying, we have far too much data but not enough evidence. Data are *extracted* in regimes of audit; evidence is *presented* in settings of conversation. Though some forms of data may have their place, and are perhaps essential to democratic accountability, one can only agree, with Bryk, that educational improvement is more likely secured by listening to the evidence. A NIC, he says, should build practice-based evidence. Calls for evidence-based thinking are common, of course, across many other areas of public life. But it is no panacea. For the very way in which evidence is framed, of what counts as evidence and what does not, can lead to the exclusion, a priori, of voices and perspectives that cut across the grain of established positions, and can lend a spurious objectivity to proceedings that serve only to reinforce majoritarian positions.

To evidence, then, must be added one further ingredient. I can only describe it as attentiveness. It is the essence of any craft practice that the practitioner should pay close attention to his or her tools and materials, to join with them and to respond to them as they respond, in turn, to the coaxing of the practitioner. In an earlier era, as Bryk notes, teaching was understood as a craft in just this sense. But he is convinced that those days are over. Life is too complex, knowledge too diverse and voluminous, and aspirations too high for the craft model to bear.

But in this I disagree. I believe that the community of practice, in education, must remain a community of craft. The disappearance of craft sensibility from the field of education – if indeed it *has* disappeared – is not something that we should accept with equanimity, as an inevitable consequence of the complexification of society. I wonder whether the perception of society as having become exceedingly complex – of our being bombarded from all sides with information whose significance we can barely understand – might not itself be a *consequence* of the loss of attentiveness that is such a marked feature of our digitally enhanced age. Surely the purpose of education is to make us not just knowledgeable but wise, and these are not the same. We arm ourselves with knowledge; it gives us power, protection and immunity from attack. But to be wise is to disarm, to let others into our presence, to pay attention and to learn. Can we not imagine a future in which the schoolroom is once again a place where people of different generations can come together, in a space of freedom rather than struggle, to join in a spirit of genuine curiosity and care?