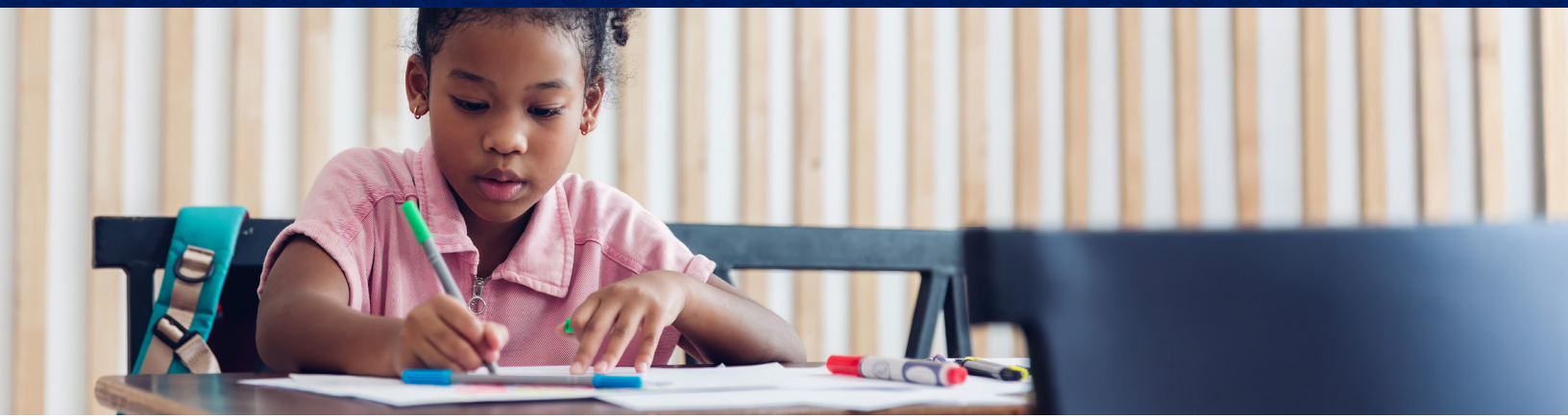


Improving Black Education: The Pitfalls and Possibilities of Continuous Improvement in Schools

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Introduction

The purpose of this brief is to provide an overview of the scholarship on continuous improvement (CI) with a particular focus on its impact on Black students' experiences and outcomes in schools. Various reform efforts have been employed to close gaps in achievement and opportunity and to disrupt unjust systems, and the embrace of CI methodologies has positioned the method as a remedy. This brief examines both the pitfalls and the possibilities of that embrace and closes with recommendations for school and district leaders as well as families and communities.

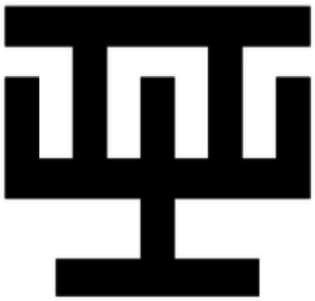
CI is a bit of a misnomer because educators have tried to improve schools continuously since their inception. In a methodological sense, it names a family of approaches to inquiry, including improvement science, design-based research, participatory and youth participatory action research, solidarity-driven co-design, and lesson study, that share common features. CI methods address problems arising from the field (problems of practice), blur lines between researcher and practitioner, and follow a cycle of inquiry that usually includes the development, testing, and refining of an innovation or practice (Bryk et al., 2015; Yurkofsky et al., 2020). One of the hallmarks of CI is the understanding that the people an issue impacts have the genius to address it.

The Pitfalls of Continuous Improvement

Origins in Tension with Justice

> *I just want to say, Walter Shewhart and W. Edwards Deming and Gerald J. Langley and Anthony Bryk, I thank all of those men for the work they've done in making improvement science a kind of discipline. But these men don't own improvement. Improvement has been around forever. And that's why in my Primer, I really started with that idea of science and looking at those Islamic foundations. . . In Ghana, the Akan people use Adinkra symbols. And hwemudua is an Adinkra symbol that translates to "measuring stick," and it's about quality. Quality in life improvement, but also in production. So,*

these things of course predate Shewhart and Deming. (Hinnant-Crawford & Caillier, 2022).



CI did not originate in education. The story most often told is that education's form of CI descends from mid-20th-century industrial settings, most notably the Toyota Production System and the work of W. Edwards Deming, then migrated into health care before entering education, where scholars, practitioners, and policymakers had grown dissatisfied with linear "what works" approaches that produced knowledge but rarely transformed practice or outcomes at scale (Bryk et al., 2015). As CI traveled across sectors, it carried assumptions about efficiency, productivity, and control that sit in tension with education's democratic purposes and equity commitments. Yurkofsky and colleagues (2020) argue that CI methods remain "too steeped in ideas from their forebears in industry" and must more consciously attend to issues of race, gender, and power if they are to contribute to a more just educational future (pp. 404–405). While this is the official history, there are alternative histories, and alternative spaces where we can find CI focused less on efficiency and more on justice, such as the organizing work of Septima Clark and Bayard Rustin.

Limited Evidence of Impact on Black Student Outcomes

To date, there are not many empirical studies that show that using improvement in X school had X impact on Black children. Much of the empirical research we have on improvement is "research on improvement" and not "improvement research." The irony in engaging in CI methodologies, which seek to determine *what works, for whom, and under what circumstances, is that it is difficult to say definitively how they work, for whom, and under what conditions.* Because CI is a model for organizational learning, much of the research has focused on adult behavior and the enactment of improvement rather than student outcomes. Improvement work is also fragmented across different problems, interventions, and measures of success, and a significant portion of it lives in the dissertations of teachers and school leaders addressing problems of practice in their own organizations, studies that are rarely examined in reviews of impact.

The Gates Foundation's evaluations of their Networks for School Improvement (NSI) initiative provide some of the clearest insights we have on the impact of improvement science on student outcomes, and because evaluators released both interim (2024) and final (2026) findings, they also show how impact developed over time. For Black students specifically, the findings were consistent across both reports, and consistently indistinct. The interim evaluation found "the impacts for Black students, Latino students, and students experiencing poverty were similar to the impacts on students overall…these student groups make up a large proportion of the students in the overall sample for this analysis" (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2024, p. 16), and the final evaluation reached the same conclusion (Johnson et al., 2026). An initiative explicitly designed for Black and Latino students produced effects that could not be distinguished from its general effects, a reminder that naming a population in a theory of action is not the same as designing with and for that population.

The Possibilities: Using Continuous Improvement to Improve Black Education

People often demarcate the publication of *Learning to Improve* as a pivotal moment bringing improvement into education. *Learning to Improve* was published in 2015; now, more than a decade later, one has to ask, has CI drastically changed the outcomes or conditions of Black education? The answer, simply put, is no; not yet. CI is just a tool. The tool is only as useful as the hands that hold it. For CI to lead to drastic advancement in Black education, Black educators, Black parents, Black communities and Black students have to be the ones holding the tool. While much of the research on CI has sought to improve outcomes for Black children and other marginalized groups of students, often, the aims, the goals, and the indicators were decided before the work began, and not in solidarity with Black communities.

Liberatory and Emancipatory Continuous Improvement

CI is designed to improve or transform systems. There is a growing body of improvement literature focused on using improvement as a tool for emancipatory aims. That body of literature begins with the underlying premise that the system of education in the US is flawed and requires second-order change or transformation, not simply tweaks to restore it to its optimal state. Edwin Bonney, the foremost scholar on improvement as a decolonizing practice, explains: "Improvement science in education should be to redress coloniality in education and seek to repair the harm that systems of oppression have and continue to cause to people on the margins" (E.N. Bonney, personal communication, 1 February 2026). This liberatory improvement body of literature speaks to the current shortcomings of improvement and its enactment as well as the possibility for it to be a methodological tool for justice (e.g., Hinnant-Crawford et al., 2023; Irby, 2022; Sandoval & Neri, 2024).

Liberatory improvement scholars speak to the necessity of naming systems of oppression and how they are embedded in the system of schooling. Many have adopted the tools of improvement, viewing them as agnostic, whereas Irby (2022) warns:

> Race-neutral inquiry cycles assume that race does not matter… through omitting the ways that racism and race shape schooling, conventional race-neutral cycles reify white supremacy by generating problems, plans, action steps, and so forth, suggesting that many things might be problems, but none of them are necessarily rooted in racism (p. 162).

Failure to name the oppression leads to addressing the wrong problem (i.e., fixing students and families rather than systems). In addition to directly naming oppression as a root cause, liberatory improvement literature has outlined the ways in which improvement has the potential to disrupt oppressive systems (Diamond & Gomez, 2023). CI gives educational practitioners the opportunity to reflect-in-action, which makes it "harder to ignore the elements of organizational life, like anti-Black racism" (Diamond & Gomez, 2023, p. 5). In essence, when combined with a critical perspective, CI tools can aid in the disruption of unjust systems.

Where the Evidence Points

The same evidence that exposes CI's pitfalls also shows what distinguishes improvement that works. In the NSI evaluation, schools that saw meaningful impacts were more likely to have done what improvement science asks of them: setting a specific aim, developing a theory of improvement, adopting tested change ideas, and centering equity (Johnson et al., 2026). Fifty-three percent of schools with meaningful impacts focused on equity in their inquiry cycles, compared to 34 percent of schools without meaningful impacts (Johnson et al., 2026). Stable improvement teams, supportive school leaders, and connections to other schools in the network were also associated with impact (Bush-Mecenas et al., 2026; Johnson et al., 2026). These relationships are correlational, but they point to possibilities with improvement.

Studies of networked improvement communities (NICs) tell a similar story. A Texas NIC focused on English language arts in seven middle schools and seven high schools, where the Black population ranged from 3% to 71%, found positive effects for Black students in middle school, where teachers' attendance at network activities was 19% higher than in high schools (Premo & Schunn, 2025). Consistent participation in the improvement work appears to matter. However, Premo and Schunn (2025) caution that benefits "are not guaranteed for all student groups and that specific attention may be required to each group" (p. 9). If CI is going to be a benefit to Black education, it will be intentional, not serendipitous.

Using CI as a Tool, Not a Remedy

CI must be a part of a multi-pronged strategy to improve Black education. Peurach and colleagues (2022) discuss resource-driven reforms and practice-driven reforms. CI is about practice and having individuals reflect on their practice while engaging in it. This reflection-in-action allows educators and leaders to interrogate how their everyday practices may be detrimental to Black children. But as a practice-driven reform, it will

not alleviate resource disparities. No amount of CI can redress resource inequity, and that remains a factor when talking about Black education. CI can be directed towards particular problems, such as improving an instructional strategy, which may benefit Black children, but a singular improvement initiative cannot address the myriad manifestations of anti-Blackness in educational systems. CI has its limits, but it has its uses too. It is imperative that those who love and care about Black children view CI not as a remedy, but as a tool in a collection of tools we are using to improve Black student outcomes and experiences. We must situate it properly. If we look back to Bayard Rustin and his Journey of Reconciliation, which was very much a CI project, where he sought to understand and challenge the system of segregation on interstate buses going south, we will notice that this project is but one of many projects Rustin was involved in. Improvement has its place, but it is not the panacea. And the modest gains we are seeing now are not improvement at its pinnacle, but improvement still in its infancy. As critical scholars continue to challenge the ways in which improvement is enacted, in time the returns on investment for CI will increase as more emancipatory approaches are adopted and employed in the pursuit of Black liberation.

Implications and Recommendations

CI will not deliver for Black children by default. Its value depends on who defines the problem, whether justice shapes every cycle, and whether the conditions and resources for the work are in place. The recommendations below draw directly from the pitfalls and possibilities described above.

For School and District Leaders

- **Let those closest to the problem define it.** Involve Black students, families, and educators in naming the problem, setting the aim, and identifying solutions, not only testing them (Hinnant-Crawford, 2025). Recognize their humanity and genius as full partners in improvement. Attend to power: notice who speaks, who decides, and whose knowledge counts. Ask whose voices shaped the problem definition and whose stories are missing (Sandoval et al., 2024).
- **Name racism as a possible root cause.** Root cause analyses that treat race as irrelevant risk fixing students and families rather than systems (Irby, 2022). Disparities are not the consequence of race but the evidence of racism. Frameworks such as ImproveCRIT offer a starting point (Hinnant-Crawford et al., 2023). What is not named cannot be addressed.
- **Measure what matters.** Center justice in every cycle by disaggregating data for Black students when studying results and revising change ideas when inequities appear. Measure implementation as well as outcomes, and do not relegate outcomes to annual state tests. If the data being collected for the improvement work does not make next steps obvious, the wrong data is being collected.
- **Protect the conditions for the work.** Keep improvement teams stable across years, stay actively involved as a leader, and protect time for improvement teams to collaborate (Johnson et al., 2026).
- **Finish the cycle.** Planning and trying are not the same as improving. Build in time to study results, identify what was learned, and decide what to do next based on what was learned.

For Black Families and Communities

- **Claim a seat where problems are defined.** If you have the capacity, join the school improvement team or attend their meetings. Ask school improvement teams who set the aim and how Black students' experiences informed it. If the conversation seems too technical or academic, ask the team to explain it in a way that makes the goals, strategies, and assessment accessible to everyone in the community.
- **Ask for the data.** Request data on the outcomes and experiences of Black students specifically, and ask how instruction, structures, practices, and policies are responding to what the data suggests Black students need.
- **Connect improvement to the broader movement.** Improvement is one tool among many in the pursuit of Black liberation. Join civic organizations that support the well-being of Black children, Black families, and Black communities.

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About the Author



Brandi Hinnant-Crawford, Ph.D., is a self-described motherscholar, critical pragmatist, and liberation theologian. She currently serves as the John and Deborah Bardo Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership at Western Carolina University. Crawford's scholarship focuses on equity and inclusion for marginalized students across the P-20 pipeline as well as how research, particularly improvement science, can be leveraged as methodological tools to catalyze just outcomes. Her work has been published in diverse venues such as Black Liberation Theology, Urban Education, Educational Researcher, the International Journal of Teacher Leadership, and the Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem Based Learning. In her 2020 book, Improvement Science in Education: A Primer, she reconceptualizes improvement by centering equity and justice as the purpose of improvement. She asks scholars and scholar practitioners to consider equity not only as an outcome of improvement but to ensure equity in the process by continuously asking who is involved (who is defining the agenda, who is given decision making authority) and who is impacted (who benefits and who bears the burden of the work).

Dr. Hinnant-Crawford holds a doctorate in philosophy from Emory University in Educational Studies, a master's degree in Urban Education Policy from Brown University, and bachelor's degrees in English (with teacher licensure) and Communication (media concentration) from North Carolina State University. From the time she first stepped foot in the classroom in the rural south to working in central office in the urban north to conducting research across the county, she has been committed to providing equitable opportunities to learn for all children. Dr. Hinnant-Crawford seeks to do the work her God and her soul require, her ancestors approve, and her children deserve. Dr. Hinnant-Crawford serves as a research fellow for the Black Education Research Center.

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