

Design-Based School Improvement

A Practical Guide for Educational Leaders

Kristina Hesbol
University of Denver
kristina.hesbol@du.edu

Rick Mintrop: *Design-Based School Improvement: A Practical Guide for Educational Leaders*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Press, 2016. 280pp. Paperback: \$33.00 ISBN 978-1612509020

ABSTRACT

Design-Based School Improvement offers a unique alternative to traditional school improvement literature by introducing design thinking to the school improvement process. This book is an exceptional and practical guide for educational leaders whose goals center on generating equity-informed solutions to persistent problems of practice. This innovative process frames a conversation differently about leading improvement, not only change, in today's schools. Grounded in organizational change research, the book is a welcome roadmap for a systemic improvement process that engages a variety of constituents. It challenges leadership teams to identify "wicked" and persistent problems of practice, those with potential for resolution within a specific timeframe. Anyone who has engaged in the implementation of a paradigmatically different process would attest to that being easier said than done. Mintrop's groundbreaking approach provides concrete support for transformative leaders who want to use such a significant and innovative approach to improve schools, addressing the core challenges of equity and resulting in improved learning outcomes for every student.

KEYWORDS

School improvement, design thinking, equity, improvement science, actionable problem of practice

For decades, educational reformers have relied on traditional scientific approaches to attempt to improve teaching and learning. Each reform promised to be the long-awaited answer to the constellation of complex challenges found in today's American public schools, but the result has been predictably myopic, first-order change. Rick Mintrop's compelling book, *Design-Based School Improvement: A Practical Guide for Educational Leaders* (2016) offers a thoughtful alternative, as a paradigm-shifting contribution to the school improvement literature. It is designed to "work the dialectic" (Cochran-Lytle & Smith, 2009), the purported gulf between the role of practice and the role of scholarship.

Seldom does a book present such opportunity for deep and broad impact on the field as this one. It is a practical guide for leaders who value school improvement grounded in equity, and whose goals center on generating equity-informed solutions to persistent problems of practice. Supported by more than ten years of experience leading design development projects as the founding director of the doctoral program in the Leadership for Educational Equity Program (LEEP) at the University of California Berkeley, Mintrop provides the reader with an innovative process that frames a conversation differently about leading not only change, but also improvement in today's schools. Throughout the book, he draws an unambiguous distinction between change and improvement.

In this book, Mintrop relies on a sociocultural perspective to reframe school improvement as a complex and persistent problem of practice, as anyone who has engaged in the messy process understands. He invites school leaders to think deeply about their complex educational contexts. One of the distinctive approaches offered by this book is the guidance to consider which urgent problems can be addressed - with a locally implemented solution



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program and is cosponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press.



impactinged.pitt.edu
Vol.2 (2017)

This journal is supported by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate: A Knowledge Forum on the EdD (CPED) cpedinitiative.org

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)
DOI 10.5195/ie.2017.37



- within a specified time frame of a design development study. Readers are encouraged to contemplate which problems of practice are appropriate to take on in their own contexts. Mintrop suggests that most of these are ill-structured and complex, and must go through a process to be framed and defined, spending energy only on what he refers to as “wicked problems” for which no conventional solution exists.

Design-Based School Improvement guides the reader to identify structural barriers that create inequities, to promote deep and equitable change that supports access to high quality, to use best instructional practices for every learner, and to support teachers to include multiple perspectives in their pedagogy (Kose, 2007; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). By positioning school improvement as a complex and persistent problem of practice, as opposed to a linear series of procedural steps, school improvement teams act as transformative agents of social change (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Understanding the problem using “practitioner research and applied theory as tools for change” (Perry, 2016, p. 200) provides school teams with a focus that not only addresses the identified problem, but also builds capacity for solving problems that will be identified in the future. Design thinking is foundational to this approach, because it is a process in which cycles of iterative, evidence-based inquiry yield designs that are co-created, as opposed to decades of school improvement models that are imposed on people.

Mintrop concentrates attention on identifying problems of practice, addressing them, as well as co-constructing solutions for them. He defines a co-constructed problem of practice (Perry & Imig, 2008; Perry, 2016) as a problem for which a remedy is urgently sought that can be locally implemented (p. 23). Elements of improvement science are integrated throughout this volume, including those described by Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu (2015) in *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*. Particularly notable is the discussion about drivers to leverage change, a process that yields significant contextual impact which has been traditionally foreign to educators.

Mintrop asserts that the importance, understanding, and application of design-based school improvement for educational leaders are at the core of an effective school improvement process. Context-specific design steps offer both practitioners and scholars a novel and iterative approach to improving both process and impact, that is being used with increasing frequency to create meaningful improvement in an array of educational contexts. Design thinking is the signature pedagogy at LEEP, linking an actionable problem to an intervention, and it serves as the interstitial space that supports Mintrop's school improvement process. An unambiguous theme focused on equity-oriented instructional leadership to improve schools (Brown, 2006, Marshall & Oliva, 2010, McKenzie, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2006; Zambo & Isai, 2013) is threaded throughout the book.

Grounded in the foundational work of such forerunners of design-based thinking as IDEO pioneers Tim Brown and Tom and Dave Kelley (Brown, 2012), Mintrop's work translates the major ideas of design thinking and applies them to practical design knowledge to improve schools. The author describes a boundary spanning process, integrating elements of design thinking with focused attention on confronting data. He designed this book with an introduction, four parts, and an Appendix. Each section is balanced with what he calls “theoretical excursions”, linking narratives from practice with design-based innovation, where the experiential accounts of both problem-solving and design-based work of an elementary school principal, a middle school principal, a high school principal, and a district assistant superintendent are presented. Each leader faces design challenges that we follow as readers, as the elements of design-based school improvement are applied. These field-based, experiential narrative scenarios of four school and district leaders show the application of abstract concepts into practice. Their co-created design-based studies are small-scale, but make a difference for equitable student learning outcomes in their schools using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle (Deming, 1986). The final section of each chapter provides practical advice for principals and other educational leaders who want to learn more about engaging in equity-framed instructional leadership. Former Berkeley doctoral students Mahua Baral, Liz Zumpe, and John Hall make contributions throughout this volume, expanding on identifying the problem, developing a theory of action, and implementing and iterating interventions.

Anyone who has engaged in the implementation of a paradigmatically different (Kuhn, 1969) process would attest to that being easier said than done. Mintrop's exceptional ground-breaking ap-



proach provides a guide for transformative leaders who want to improve schools, addressing the core challenges of equity. The foundation of this book is built on a rich description of theory, including organizational change and improvement science. Mintrop invites the reader to consider unconventional approaches that result in innovative learning improvement for every student. He emphasizes a clear distinction between change and improvement (Zambo & Isai, 2013), guiding the reader to focus on strategies that actually *improve* student learning outcomes. Design-based school improvement suggests that all successful improvement is the result of context sensitivity.

Design-Based School Improvement contributes to the scholarly and applied literature, as well as to our practical understanding of using improvement science and design thinking methods to lead the systemic improvement of learning outcomes. As similar problems of practice are identified and innovative interventions are generated and successfully applied, networked improvement communities (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015) can emerge, collecting and sharing data to improve learning outcomes. While the process is highly contextualized, the identification of wicked problems of practice is ultimately finite. Thus, this book serves as a guide for developing inclusive, democratic communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Mintrop offers a thoughtful alternative to mainstream school improvement literature. *Design-Based School Improvement* is a highly pragmatic book that includes both theoretical frameworks and practical guidance for educational leaders, from the classroom to the board room, who are engaged in the complex task of equity-oriented instructional leadership. The strategies outlined in this boundary spanning book provide innovative while pragmatic support to educators across the field, including teachers, principals, superintendents, board members, and university leadership preparation faculty members who are engaged in redesigning the preparation of leaders and systems that guide improved learning outcomes for every student.

References

- Brown, K. M. (2006). Leadership for social justice and equity: Evaluating a transformative framework and andragogy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(5), 700-745.
- Brown, T. (2012, November 19). *Design thinking: 5 inspiring social design pioneers*. Retrieved from <https://designthinking.ideo.com/?p=lpbylbgzw&paged=18>
- Bryk, A.S., Gomez, L.M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P.G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S.L. (2011). Commentary: Changing perspectives on practitioner research. *Learning Landscapes*, 4(2), 17-23.
- Deming, W.E. (1986). *Out of the crisis*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Center for Advanced Engineering Study.
- Kose, B. W. (2007). Principal leadership for social justice: Uncovering the content of teacher professional development. *Journal of School Leadership*, 17(3), 276-312.
- Kuhn, T. (1969). *The structure of scientific revolution*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kumaravivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond methods: Macrostrategies for language teaching*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Marshall, C., & Oliva, M. (2010). *Leadership for social justice: Making revolutions in education*. NY: Allyn & Bacon.
- McKenzie, K.B., Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J.J. (2006). Preparing instructional leaders for social justice. *Journal of School Leadership*, 16(2), 158-170.
- Perry, J.A., & Imig, D.G. (2008). A stewardship of practice in education. *Change*, 40, 42-48.
- Perry, J.A. (2016). The scholarly practitioner as steward of the practice. In Valerie A. Storey & Author (Eds.), *Contemporary approaches to dissertation development and research methods* (300-313). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Shields, C.M. (2010). Transformative leadership: Working for equity in diverse contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly* (46)4, 558-589.
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 221-258.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998
- Zambo, D. & Isai, S. (2012). Action research and the educational doctorate: New promises and visions. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 8(1), 97-112.