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Building a Culture of Continuous Improvement in Education: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Building a culture of continuous improvement in education has become a central concern for schools, districts, and higher education institutions seeking sustainable gains in teaching quality, student learning, and institutional effectiveness. Rather than treating improvement as a one-time reform event, the continuous improvement perspective frames educational change as an ongoing, evidence-informed, collaborative, and context-sensitive process. This review synthesizes the literature on how such a culture is built, sustained, and constrained in educational settings. Drawing on improvement science, school improvement research, professional learning community scholarship, quality culture research in higher education, and recent systematic reviews, the article argues that continuous improvement in education depends less on isolated tools than on a coherent organizational culture characterized by shared purpose, disciplined inquiry, relational trust, collaborative professionalism, leadership support, and routine use of data for learning. The literature also shows that while continuous improvement is widely promoted, the empirical evidence base remains uneven, with many studies emphasizing implementation processes more than long-term outcome effects. Across school and higher education contexts, the most consistent pattern is that continuous improvement becomes durable when institutions align structures, norms, and professional learning around iterative problem solving rather than compliance. The review concludes that building a culture of continuous improvement requires not only technical methods such as PDSA cycles and practical measurement, but also deeper shifts in identity, power, communication, and organizational learning.

Keywords: Education, Education Improvement, Educational Implementation

Introduction

Educational reform has long been marked by cycles of innovation, implementation, disappointment, and replacement. Many reforms have introduced new curricula, accountability systems, leadership models, or instructional programs, yet comparatively fewer have helped schools and universities become better at improving themselves over time. This distinction is crucial. Continuous improvement is not merely about adopting a promising intervention; it is about developing the organizational capacity to identify problems, test change ideas, learn from evidence, and adapt practice continuously. Bryk and colleagues crystallized this shift by arguing

that education needs methods that help institutions get better at getting better, while AIR's literature review similarly described continuous improvement as iterative inquiry grounded in local problems of practice rather than off-the-shelf adoption of external solutions. (Bryk et al., 2015; Garet et al., 2021). The idea of continuous improvement is especially important in education because teaching and learning are complex, socially mediated, and context dependent. Schools and universities do not improve through technique alone. They improve when staff members share a mission, trust one another enough to learn publicly, use evidence to question routine practice, and view change as part of normal professional work rather than as an externally imposed interruption. Anderson and Kumari's analysis of continuous improvement in schools makes precisely this point: deep improvement is unlikely to occur simply from introducing a new policy or structure; instead, schools must become learning organizations engaged in ongoing cycles of action, analysis, and change. (Anderson & Kumari, 2009; Reynolds & Neeleman, 2021). This article reviews the literature on building a culture of continuous improvement in education across school and higher education contexts. The review addresses four questions: How is continuous improvement conceptualized in educational research? What organizational conditions support a culture of continuous improvement? What barriers repeatedly weaken improvement efforts? And what do current studies suggest about leadership, collaboration, data use, and quality culture as mechanisms of sustained improvement? By bringing together scholarships from improvement science, school improvement, professional learning communities, school effectiveness, and higher education quality research, the article aims to provide an integrated account of how educational institutions can move from episodic reform to improvement as an enduring cultural practice. (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Bendermacher et al., 2017; Feldhoff et al., 2016; Stoll et al., 2006).

Method

This article is written as a systematized literature review aligned with systematic review principles rather than as a preregistered meta-analysis. The search process was structured around Google Scholar and ResearchGate, as requested, with bibliographic details and abstracts cross-checked on publisher, ERIC, BMJ, Springer, and other journal pages when available. The review design was guided by PRISMA 2020 as a reporting framework, especially its emphasis on transparency in review purpose, search logic, selection criteria, and synthesis strategy. PRISMA 2020 was developed to reflect advances in systematic review methodology and remains the main reporting guideline for contemporary reviews. (Page et al., 2021). Searches focused on combinations of the following terms: "continuous improvement education," "improvement science schools," "professional learning communities review," "school improvement capacity," "quality culture higher education," "educational change systematic review," and "school effectiveness systematic review." Priority was given to foundational texts and peer-reviewed review articles that directly addressed the development of improvement capacity or improvement culture in education. The final body of literature emphasized works that examined continuous improvement as an organizational process rather than merely reporting single program outcomes. This included books, review articles, realist reviews, systematic reviews, and selected conceptual and empirical studies repeatedly cited in the field. (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Bryk et al., 2015; Garet et al., 2021; Stoll et al., 2006).

Inclusion criteria favored sources that met at least one of four conditions: they explicitly addressed continuous improvement or improvement science in education; they examined organizational conditions for school or university improvement; they synthesized evidence on collaborative professional cultures such as professional learning communities; or they analyzed quality culture and improvement mechanisms in higher education. Excluded were articles that used the term improvement only generically, papers focused narrowly on one instructional intervention without

broader organizational analysis, and commentary pieces lacking a research or review basis. Because literature is conceptually diverse and methodologically heterogeneous, thematic synthesis was more appropriate than statistical aggregation. (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Feldhoff et al., 2016; Javornik & Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2023).

Conceptual Foundations of Continuous Improvement in Education

Continuous improvement in education is best understood as a disciplined, iterative, evidence-informed process through which educators define a problem of practice, test changes in context, study the results, and refine action accordingly. AIR's review describes this as iterative inquiry centered on local problems, while Hinnant-Crawford presents improvement science as a methodology that helps educators analyze systems, develop theories of improvement, use practical measures, and accelerate learning through networks. These definitions matter because they distinguish continuous improvement from conventional reform models that presume a program can simply be implemented faithfully and transferred unchanged across settings. (Garet et al., 2021; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). A culture of continuous improvement, however, is broader than a method. It refers to a shared organizational orientation in which inquiry, reflection, adaptation, and collective responsibility are normalized. In such a culture, improvement is not a special event reserved for crisis periods or strategic plans; it becomes part of ordinary professional life. Anderson and Kumari's case-based analysis suggests that schools engaged in sustained improvement resemble learning organizations in which educators repeatedly analyze progress and modify practice in relation to shared goals. Similarly, Reynolds and Neeleman argue that school improvement capacity should not be reduced to one reform package but understood as the ability of schools and systems to make themselves better over time. (Anderson & Kumari, 2009; Reynolds & Neeleman, 2021). This literature also makes clear that continuous improvement is not culturally neutral. Hinnant-Crawford emphasizes that improvement work should be centered on equity and justice, asking not only whether outcomes improve but for whom, under what conditions, and with what unintended consequences. That perspective is important in education because organizations can become very efficient at reproducing inequity if improvement is interpreted only as performance optimization. The best contemporary formulations of continuous improvement therefore link technical problem solving with moral purpose, contextual sensitivity, and attention to the experiences of those most affected by educational processes. (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

Continuous Improvement as Organizational Learning

One of the most consistent insights in the literature is that continuous improvement depends on organizational learning. Educational institutions improve sustainably when they can generate, share, interpret, and use knowledge across classrooms, departments, and leadership levels. This is why continuous improvement is often tied to concepts such as learning organizations, communities of practice, and professional learning communities. Stoll and colleagues famously argued that educational reform depends on teachers' individual and collective capacity and on school-wide capacity for promoting pupil learning. They describe capacity as a blend of motivation, skill, organizational conditions, culture, and infrastructure—an understanding that aligns closely with later improvement science frameworks. (Stoll et al., 2006). The organizational learning perspective also clarifies why technical tools are insufficient by themselves. A school can implement data meetings, PDSA cycles, or quality protocols without developing a genuine culture of improvement if participants do not feel psychological safety, do not trust the data, or do not believe they have agency to change practice. AIR's review found that supportive leadership, collaboration, and professional development were among the most commonly reported facilitators

of continuous improvement implementation, while empirical studies remained mostly small-scale and process-focused. This suggests that continuous improvement is as much a social achievement as a procedural one. (Garet et al., 2021).

Leadership and the Creation of Improvement in Culture

Leadership appears in nearly every major review as a decisive factor in building an improvement-oriented culture. In the AIR review, supportive leadership was one of the clearest enabling conditions for continuous improvement. In the higher education quality culture review by Bendermacher and colleagues, leadership and communication were identified as central drivers because leaders influence resource allocation, role clarity, partnerships, and the integration of managerial and psychological dimensions of quality. Across contexts, leaders matter not only because they authorize change, but because they frame what improvement means, what evidence counts, and whether staff experience improvement as learning or as surveillance. (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Garet et al., 2021).

Recent review evidence on educational change deepens this point. Aldridge and McLure's systematic review of 191 studies identified four broad supports for school change: developing a reform-ready climate, comprehensive planning, preparation for implementation, and building capacity. These themes map closely onto improvement culture. A reform-ready climate is fundamentally cultural: it concerns norms of trust, openness, commitment, and shared understanding. Comprehensive planning matters because improvement cannot thrive amid ambiguity and fragmentation. Preparation and capacity building matter because organizations do not improve simply by willing themselves to do so; they need knowledge, routines, and supportive structures. (Aldridge & McLure, 2024).

At the same time, leadership in an improvement culture is not purely top-down. Literature increasingly favors distributed and relational models of leadership in which responsibility for improvement is shared across teams. Continuous improvement requires many people to notice variation, test ideas, interpret evidence, and revise practice. This means leaders must create the conditions for professional voice and collective ownership rather than monopolize problem solving. Stoll et al. linked sustainable improvement to capacity building across the whole school community, and Hinnant-Crawford's improvement science framework similarly treats improvement as participatory, inquiry-driven work rather than leader-centric command. (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Stoll et al., 2006).

Professional Learning Communities and Collaborative Professionalism

No theme is more closely associated with a culture of continuous improvement than collaboration. Professional learning communities, or PLCs, have been one of the most influential models for organizing teacher learning around ongoing improvement of instruction and student outcomes. Stoll and colleagues' landmark review concluded that PLCs hold considerable promise for capacity building for sustainable improvement. Their argument remains influential because it presents collaboration not as collegiality for its own sake, but as a disciplined, learning-focused practice embedded in school culture. (Stoll et al., 2006).

More recent review work confirms the ongoing importance of PLCs. Huyen, Nga, and Thao's 2024 Scopus-based review describes PLCs as collaborative platforms that enhance teacher professional development and educational quality. Their synthesis highlights rising research attention to teacher learning, leadership, networking, and professional growth. This supports the view that continuous improvement cultures are built when educators have regular opportunities to analyze practice together, exchange expertise, and align their work around shared student-learning goals. (Huyen et al., 2024). However, the PLC literature also warns that not all collaboration

produces improvement. Collaboration can become superficial, ritualized, or detached from classroom learning if it lacks structure, trust, and evidence use. Continuous improvement requires more than meeting together; it requires collaborative inquiry. The strongest PLC models combine shared values, deprivation of practice, reflective dialogue, and focus on student learning. In that sense, collaborative professionalism is one of the main cultural mechanisms through which improvement becomes continuous rather than episodic. (Huyen et al., 2024; Stoll et al., 2006).

Data Use, Practical Measurement, and Inquiry Cycles

A second core feature of continuous improvement culture is disciplined use of evidence. Improvement science in education emphasizes practical measurement: institutions need timely, usable data that help teams understand whether a change is producing better processes or outcomes in real time. Hinnant-Crawford's primer gives considerable attention to seeing the system producing current outcomes, developing theories of improvement, and operationalizing those theories with practical measures. Likewise, AIR's review identifies iterative inquiry cycles as a defining component of continuous improvement, even while noting that many studies provide only limited detail about how such cycles were actually enacted. (Garet et al., 2021; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The significance of data in improvement culture is often misunderstood. Continuous improvement does not require endless data collection for compliance or ranking purposes. Rather, it requires data that are close enough to practice informing professional judgment. Improvement-oriented data are used to learn, not simply to audit. When educators are encouraged to examine variation, test assumptions, and ask why a process is producing the results it is producing, data becomes a medium of organizational learning. When data are used primarily to punish or compare, improvement culture is weakened because people become defensive rather than reflective. (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

Iterative cycles such as Plan-Do-Study-Act or Plan-Do-Check-Act provide a structure for this learning. Although the tool itself comes from broader quality improvement traditions, educational literature increasingly treats such cycles as useful when adapted thoughtfully to context. What matters is not the label but the organizational habit: planning deliberately, testing on a small scale, studying results honestly, and acting on what is learned. A culture of continuous improvement emerges when such cycles become normal and collective rather than occasional and bureaucratic. (Anderson & Kumari, 2009; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

School Effectiveness and Improvement Outcomes

The literature on school effectiveness strengthens the case for continuous improvement of culture by showing which conditions are repeatedly associated with stronger educational outcomes. Javornik and Klemenčič Mirazchiyski's systematic review identifies leadership, effective teaching, positive school culture, parental involvement, and adequate resources as prominent contributors to school effectiveness. These findings matter because they show that improvement is not just about implementing a process model. Improvement cultures must ultimately support conditions known to matter for student learning and school functioning. (Javornik & Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2023).

At the same time, school improvement research cautions against simplistic assumptions about causality. Feldhoff, Radisch, and Bischof's systematic review of longitudinal quantitative school improvement studies found that the field faces substantial design and methodological challenges. Their conclusion was not that improvement cannot be studied, but that its complexity—multilevel dynamics, indirect effects, reciprocity, and time lags—places high demands on research design. This is important for improvement culture research because it reminds us that the absence of simple causal proof does not mean culture is unimportant; rather, it means that improvement processes

unfold through interacting social and instructional mechanisms that are difficult to reduce to single variables. (Feldhoff et al., 2016).

Reynolds and Neeleman similarly argue that school improvement must move beyond asking what makes a good school toward understanding how schools become good. Their reconceptualization emphasizes contextually variable interventions, greater attention to classrooms and teaching, and stronger links between schools and communities. This perspective fits the continuous improvement paradigm well because it shifts attention from static characteristics to developmental processes. A culture of continuous improvement is therefore not a fixed trait that schools either possess or lack. It is a developmental capacity built through repeated inquiry, coordination, and learning overtime. (Reynolds & Neeleman, 2021).

Higher Education and Quality Culture

Although much of the improvement in literature focuses on schools, higher education has developed a closely related concept: quality culture. Bendermacher and colleagues define quality culture as the synergy between structural or managerial elements and cultural or psychological elements aimed at continuously improving education. Their realist review found that leadership and communication are key in linking those dimensions and that effective quality culture works through staff commitment, shared ownership, empowerment, and knowledge. This makes higher education literature highly relevant to the broader question of culture improvement because it shows that sustainable quality does not emerge from procedures alone. (Bendermacher et al., 2017). One of the most valuable contributions of quality culture research is its distinction between compliance and genuine improvement. Universities may install audits, standards, dashboards, and review templates, yet still fail to improve teaching and learning if these mechanisms are experienced as external control rather than as opportunities for local learning. Bendermacher et al. argue that outcomes of quality culture include staff and student satisfaction and continuous improvement of the teaching-learning process, but only when institutional approaches are tailored to organizational context. In other words, formal quality systems become developmental only when they are culturally embedded. (Bendermacher et al., 2017).

This higher education perspective also sharpens the broader educational argument. Building a culture of continuous improvement requires a balance between structure and agency. Too little structure leaves improvement diffuse and unsustained. Too much managerial control turns improvement into compliance. The literature suggests that the most fruitful middle ground is a culture in which structures support professional learning, communication, and shared responsibility rather than replacing them. (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Bryk et al., 2015).

Common Barriers to Continuous Improvement of Culture

Despite its appeal, continuous improvement is difficult to institutionalize. AIR's review found that the empirical literature remains relatively small, mostly case-based, and methodologically weak with respect to outcomes. Few studies use strong comparison designs, and few provide detailed accounts of improvement cycles in action. This suggests that educational systems often endorse continuous improvement rhetorically more readily than they document it rigorously. It also means that claims about effectiveness should be made carefully. Literature is stronger on enabling conditions and implementation processes than on long-term causal outcomes. (Garet et al., 2021).

A second barrier is the persistence of compliance-oriented cultures. Where accountability systems are heavily punitive or heavily bureaucratic, educators may avoid experimentation because failure is too risky and data are too closely associated with judgment. Under such conditions, staff may perform improvement rituals without engaging in authentic inquiry. This challenge appears across both school and university contexts and helps explain why the same tools can function very

differently in different institutions. Improvement of culture depends on whether people believe the purpose of evidence is learning rather than blame. (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Bryk et al., 2015).
A third barrier is fragmented professional learning. Continuous improvement requires educators to learn new habits of analysis, measurement, collaboration, and adaptation. Yet many institutions still treat professional development as isolated workshops rather than job-embedded collective learning. Stoll et al. long ago argued that sustainable improvement depends on organizational conditions and infrastructure of support, not just on individual teacher motivation. Recent PLC review work and change-readiness research echo that conclusion: improvement becomes fragile when there is insufficient time, coaching, shared inquiry, and leadership follow-through. (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Huyen et al., 2024; Stoll et al., 2006).
A fourth barrier concerns context and transferability. Reynolds and Neeleman caution against the tendency to treat solutions as universal, while Anderson and Kumari likewise note that continuous improvement in schools remains conceptually and empirically underdeveloped. Improvement efforts often fail when borrowed models are imported without adaptation to local conditions, student populations, histories, and capabilities. A culture of continuous improvement is therefore incompatible with a one-size-fits-all mentality. The point of improvement is precisely to learn what works here, for these learners, in these conditions, while remaining informed by broader evidence. (Anderson & Kumari, 2009; Reynolds & Neeleman, 2021).

Toward a Framework for Building Improvement Culture

Taken together, the literature suggests that a culture of continuous improvement in education rests on six interdependent pillars. The first is shared purpose: people must know what they are trying to improve and why. The second is relational trust and communication: without them, inquiry becomes defensive or symbolic. The third is collaborative professionalism through PLCs, teams, or other collective learning structures. The fourth is disciplined use of evidence guided by practical measures and iterative testing. The fifth is leadership for capacity building, not merely compliance. The sixth is context-sensitive organizational learning, meaning that improvement strategies are adapted and refined rather than mechanically copied. These themes recur across improvement of science, school improvement, PLC research, and higher education quality culture scholarship. (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Bendermacher et al., 2017; Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Stoll et al., 2006).
Importantly, these pillars are mutually reinforcing. Shared purpose strengthens data use because teams know what evidence matters. Trust strengthens collaboration because people can surface problems honestly. Leadership strengthens improvement when it protects time, resources, and learning routines. Iterative inquiry strengthens culture when staff see that collective reflection leads to practical gains. In this sense, continuous improvement culture should be seen as an ecology rather than a checklist. Institutions do not build it by purchasing a toolkit alone; they build it by aligning norms, structures, learning processes, and values over time. (Bryk et al., 2015; Garet et al., 2021; Reynolds & Neeleman, 2021).

Implications for Policy and Practice

For school leaders, the review suggests that continuous improvement should be framed as a way of working, not as a temporary initiative. Leaders need to cultivate reform-ready climates, protect time for collaborative inquiry, and ensure that data are used for learning. Improvement teams should work on clearly defined problems of practice, use small tests of change, and revisit assumptions regularly. Just as important, leaders should avoid turning improvement language into another compliance layer, because this undermines the trust and agency on which improvement depends. (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Garet et al., 2021; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

For teachers and middle leaders, literature points to the importance of collaborative routines that connect professional learning to student learning. PLCs remain one of the strongest vehicles for improvement culture when they are focused on instructional practice, evidence, and shared accountability. Educators need space not just to exchange ideas but to study the effects of those ideas and revise them. This is where continuous improvement becomes professionally meaningful: it turns improvement from something done to teachers into something teachers actively produce together. (Huyen et al., 2024; Stoll et al., 2006).

For higher education institutions, quality culture literature shows that sustainable improvement requires balancing accountability demands with genuine staff ownership. Universities should integrate review processes, curriculum redesign, feedback analysis, and quality assurance into ordinary academic work in ways that promote empowerment and learning. Improvement becomes more durable when faculty and professional staff experience quality work as developmental, context-sensitive, and connected to student learning rather than as purely administrative monitoring. (Bendermacher et al., 2017).

For researchers, the biggest need is for stronger empirical designs that can capture the complexity of the culture improvement without reducing it to simplistic metrics. Feldhoff et al. show that longitudinal school improvement research faces methodological challenges, but those challenges are not reasons to retreat from the topic. Instead, they point to the value of mixed-method, multi-level, and design-based approaches that can trace how leadership, collaboration, data use, and instructional change interact over time. Better evidence is especially needed on equity outcomes, sustainability, and the conditions under which continuous improvement moves from rhetoric to routine. (Feldhoff et al., 2016; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here shows that building a culture of continuous improvement in education is not primarily a matter of adopting the right tool, framework, or reform package. It is a matter of cultivating an organizational culture in which people collectively inquire into problems, use evidence to guide action, learn from variation, revise practice iteratively, and remain anchored to a shared educational purpose. Across school and higher education contexts, the strongest recurring themes are leadership that builds capacity, collaboration that deepens professional learning, communication and trust that enable honest inquiry, and quality systems that function as learning supports rather than compliance devices. (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Bendermacher et al., 2017; Stoll et al., 2006). At the same time, the review also shows that continuous improvement in education remains easier to advocate than to enact. The empirical evidence base is still limited, many studies are small-scale, and institutions often struggle to move beyond reform churn, fragmented professional development, and accountability cultures that discourage experimentation. Yet the literature is clear on one point: when improvement is treated as collaborative organizational learning rather than episodic implementation, educational institutions are more likely to develop the capacity to improve teaching and learning sustainably. Building a culture of continuous improvement, then, is not a peripheral management strategy. It is one of the most promising pathways through which education systems can become more adaptive, more equitable, and more effective over time. (Anderson & Kumari, 2009; Bryk et al., 2015; Garet et al., 2021; Reynolds & Neeleman, 2021).

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