

The Nature of Bryk's Theory

Refer to Bryk pages 64-68

The Systemic Character of Schools and the Dynamics of Change

The terms of this heading are very revealing regarding the nature of Bryk's theory of school improvement and the nature of the research they undertook to develop the theory. In the opening paragraph of this section [p.64], Bryk makes the following statement:

In the previous section, we focused on "carving at the joints" the organizational life of a school [delineating the 5 essential supports]. We now proceed to reintegrate these components, focusing attention on the systemic features that tie all of this together: the causal reciprocity of action across the separate subsystems, the organic and dynamic character of organizational change, and the institutional elements that undergird adult work in schools.

In discussing the "reciprocal dynamic" among subsystems within the school, Bryk also comments on the type of analysis required to capture this phenomenon. Here is what he said.

[A] The presence of this reciprocal causality has important implications for the empirical work that lies ahead...Traditional analytic methods are best suited for sorting out the separate effects of one or more factors, holding everything else constant. The results from such linear additive models may not "add up," however, when inquiring into the workings of intrinsically interactive systems [p. 65].

In discussing the nature of their theoretical stance, Bryk also refers to "Links to Contingency Theory." Here is that comment.

[B] Organizational theorists may quickly recognize that the theoretical framework detailed above has been strongly influenced by contingency theory. Stated simply, this theoretical perspective argues that the most effective managerial form for an organization is contingent on the technical and environmental circumstances affecting the core work of the organization [p. 67].

[C] In the concluding sentence of this section, Bryk says "Thus one can conceive of the analytic work...as an empirical test of the utility of contingency theory to inform improvement efforts in urban schools."

Their use of contingency notions lets them make the following conclusion.

[D] Our findings represent a challenge to the prevailing political rhetoric that all schools can improve in their effectiveness. To be sure, we fervently want to believe these claims. But, we also now know that all schools do not start in the same place, and those that are truly disadvantaged have enormous barriers to overcome. [p.25]

Please, go to the Forum: Bryk and Theory