

SCHOOL BOARDS, ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND & THE ONTARIO
LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This literature review examines the existing research on how school boards influence the organizational culture of the school system. This paper specifically addresses the areas how the Ontario Leadership Framework influences both policy and practice to influence the educational culture of Ontario's school system. The cornerstone of seminal work was the development of the Ontario Leadership Framework by Kenneth Leithwood which is widely accepted in the Ontario education system. The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) is a centralized way of governing educational leadership practices through the formalized process outlining organizational values, expectations and norms and for identifying leadership qualities, expectations and promotion of leaders within the context of the Ontario system. A great deal of research suggests that the OLF is an influential tool based on best organizational practices. Further consideration or future research should be focused on how diversity, equity and inclusion can be woven throughout the framework.

Keywords: leadership framework, governance, diversity, equity, inclusion, special education, Ontario Leadership Framework, organizational culture, influence on educational culture.

School Boards Influence of Organizational Culture in School Systems

Organizational culture has become increasingly important to systems leaders and much research has been conducted supporting the notion that leadership heavily influences organizational culture. According to Warrick (2017), organizational culture can have significant influences on performance and effectiveness, productivity and morale of employees, and recruitment and retention of employees. Based on extensive research by Kenneth Leithwood, the Ontario Leadership Framework was adopted by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2012 as a framework for successful leadership practices and effective organizational practices on the school and system level (Ontario Institute for Educational Leadership, 2021).

Educational leaders including teacher leaders, school administrators, and school board level managers use this framework to guide leadership practices and to influence the culture of the organization through norms and practices. The Ontario Leadership Framework is made up of five core capabilities: Setting Direction, Building Relationships and Developing People, Developing the Organization to Support Desired Practices, Improving the Instructional Program and Securing Accountability (Ontario Institute for Educational Leadership, 2021).

This paper will use a narrative style to review the literature and to determine how educational leaders influence organizational culture in connection to the Ontario Leadership Framework. The criteria used for analyzing and comparing the current literature includes how the five pillars of the OLF shape and frame how the practice of teachers and educational leaders, which is foundational to the organizational culture of educational institutions in Ontario. The current state of published research, reports, and books will be summarized and assessed in terms of gaps, types of bias, limitations and further research needed in this topic.

The Ontario Leadership Framework

Along with the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF), there are two additional frameworks board and system level leaders use to shape the educational and organizational culture of Ontario's school systems. The District Effectiveness Framework and the System Level Leadership framework both use the framework of the OLF. These frameworks serve as a guide to organizational norms, values, expectations and resources. The Ontario Leadership Framework is widely used in Ontario schools and much of Leithwood's work to support the framework is well-regarded.

Setting Direction

The Ontario Leadership Framework not only provides governance for teacher performance, but is a tool used by educational leaders in school boards to ensure clear communication about organizational goals and directions for its members. Many school boards are focusing on setting organizational direction on increased Diversity, Equity and Inclusive practices. The Ontario government's equity and inclusive education strategy acknowledges that students grow best in classrooms when all members are treated with respect, which is achieved when students move beyond tolerance to a place of acceptance and respect (Mitchel, 2012). According to Mor-Barak (2017), organizations that focus efforts on diversity within the workforce have a competitive advantage over those who don't. Diversity within educational settings is also associated with greater levels of student achievement. School boards are now more than ever working with community organizations to ensure schools include culturally responsive pedagogy in their lessons and classrooms to ensure equity and inclusion.

Leithwood et al. (2019) attests that when school boards create broadly shared mission, vision and goals, they better engage all stakeholders in the community in buying into a shared

sense of direction. Thus, when educational leaders have a clear vision and that vision is communicated well to employees, they will adjust their practices to meet the expectations of the organization. Rutledge & Cannata (2016) engaged in an intentional set of organizational practices around personalizing the learning experience for students. Successful schools identified a standard set operating procedures. Adding to this statement, Leithwood (2021) shared that equity-minded school leaders that outline and and pursue the vision of diversity, equity and inclusion do so by adopting a critical perspective on school practices, policies, and structures.

The drive to increase diversity, equity and inclusion in schools is not a new concept but has gained momentum and is now a widely accepted idea amongst educational leaders in school systems. Fillion (2015) also suggests that within the learning organization, it is imperative that there is dialogue between the members to develop a common shared vision and understanding. Fillion et al. (2015) quotes Senge (1990), stating “it consists, in fact, to establish a set of principles and guiding practices which lead the actions of all members of the organization as a group.” The importance of an organization's vision is not the innovation behind it, but rather how it translates on a practical level to serving the stakeholders (Kotter, 2001). “What’s crucial about a vision is not its originality but how well it serves the interests of important constituencies—customers, stockholders, employees—and how easily it can be translated into a realistic competitive strategy.” (p.30).

A postmodern worldview of this type of direction setting is reflected in the idea of deconstructing the organizational culture to uncover how organizations privilege some member groups while excluding others (Hatch, 2013). School boards have recently moved to deconstructing their practice to better meet the needs of all groups, specifically those who have been traditionally excluded or have struggled with systemic discrimination.

The setting direction pillar of the framework allows school board and educational leaders to build a shared vision, identify specific and shared short-term goals, create high expectations and communicate the vision and goals with stakeholders to contribute to the organization's culture, practices, expectations and norms. Senge et al. (2012) believes if there is shared vision, members will have better buy-in to the overall vision, the vision spreads much more quickly, and there is much more engagement to the vision-governing ideas.

The current research concludes that if the members of an organization participate in or buy into a shared vision, the organization will see greater engagement. Fillion et al. (2015) quotes Senge (1990b) that “insists on the fact that a shared vision is vital to the learning organization, particularly because it provides the point of reference and the energy for learning.”

Building Relationships and Developing People

Strong districts encourage their staff to be innovative and support to schools is differentiated in response to variability in student performance (Strong Districts and Their Leadership, 2013). According to Hitt and Tucker (2016), the work being done by teachers is extensive and dramatic, and leadership from board-level educational leaders is needed to support conditions for learning for students and to foster supportive conditions for teachers to be effective.

School boards and educational leaders often take a postmodern worldview in recognizing there is not necessarily a defined reality (Hatch 2013). This is an especially important notion when working within the framework “building relationships and developing people” as not all members will have the same perception of reality, how the educational system works and what best practices are. Teachers come from a variety of backgrounds with rich and diverse

experiences and values. School boards and educational leaders must recognize this when considering staff needs, stimulating professional development and building trusting, professional relationships with the members who are obligated to carry out the board's mission and values.

While the Ontario Leadership Framework allows for educational leaders and school boards to communicate the board context and support a culture that together focuses on the organization's vision and goals; it also allows teachers, administrators and educational leaders to interpret how their own thinking and practices fit into the framework. This is an example of how the postmodern worldview ties into the OLF for “building relationships and developing people.” This view is also used by teachers who have a postmodern worldview within their classrooms, they lead students to discover new learning.

The development of professional relationships in the workplace is the groundwork for collaborative professional development and human growth. According to Kotter (2001), “motivation and inspiration energize people, not by pushing them in the right direction as control mechanisms do but by satisfying basic human needs for achievement, a sense of belonging, recognition, self-esteem, a feeling of control over one’s life, and the ability to live up to one’s ideals.” (p. 32). Motivating the members of an organization supports the development of a culture of leadership and in the case of the Ontario Leadership Framework, a clear set of leadership expectations is presented for those wishing to advance in their leadership journey. Heifetz and Laurie (2001) suggest that all people have a vantage point or knowledge based on their lived experiences and if we give people the opportunity, they will use their skills to better the organization. Allowing members of the organization to discover, develop, cultivate and share their skill is imperative to the overall health of the organizational culture. Leaders must be intentional about how they affect the human resources in their organizations. Leithwood (2003)

suggests that leaders can affect the development of teachers in their building by providing intellectual stimulation, offering support for teachers based on their personal needs and by providing effective modeling that aligns with the school and boards vision.

The literature clearly outlines effective strategies for building relationships and developing people which the literature shows to have a positive impact on teachers and the education system, all of which greatly impacts the organizational culture and experience of the learners.

Developing the Organization to Support Desired Practices

According to the Institute for Educational Leadership Ontario (IEL), the system-level leadership framework identifies that “leadership is the exercise of influence on organizational members and diverse stakeholders toward the identification and achievement of the organization’s vision and goals” (2021).

Teachers across Ontario make assumptions about their organization and the norms and expectations it holds. Hatch (2013) notes that members of organizations make basic assumptions about behavioural and cultural norms and these assumptions frame how members perceive, think and feel about their organization. These assumptions are often not found in organizational literature, structures or frameworks. The Ontario Leadership framework provides a framework to guide the perceptions of members in the organization, it allows explicitly teaching of the desired practices, the organization values and ways which leaders can demonstrate their effectiveness.

Postmodern worldview in the “developing the organization to support desired practice” can be seen in the current shift to diversity, equity and inclusion work being done by many

boards is controlled by those with power and the privilege of communication to facilitate the narrative of systemic racism that school boards have been plagued with for many years (Hatch, 2013). School boards and educational leaders have power to influence the discourse that shapes the organizational culture, which is critical when determining board priorities or initiatives.

Leaders in organizations are pivotal in developing and supporting desired practices, and they can do this as a function of their individual leadership and also as leaders as a collective. According to Fillon et al. (2015), leaders help to build an organization, its practices and its capabilities by paving the way and establishing desired practices that incorporate the values and vision of the organization. Developing an organizational culture that is embraced by its members is important to ensure buy-in for best practices and desired practice. Recently, researchers have been interested in the development of organizational culture as this has been proven to affect member performance, behaviour and attitude (Warrick, 2017). Leithwood (2003) supports this claim stating that school leaders help schools to operate as a learning environment and opportunity for both staff and students. He goes on to explain how strengthening school cultures, modifying organizational structures, building collaborative processes and managing the school environment and stakeholders all help to strengthen and develop the organization (Leithwood, 2003).

The literature reviewed in these sections strongly supports the idea that approaching organizational development through the use of shared practices cultivates better performance and attitude and overall strengthens the organization for the members and stakeholders.

Organizations are always looking for ways to improve member performance to align with the values, norms and expectations of the organization, the literature suggests that a strong school

culture of collaboration is paramount in the success of influencing current practices, to desired practices.

Improving the Instructional Program

A “system-wide focus on achievement” is one of the most salient aspects of what districts do to support district-wide improvement efforts in the context of the values held by the communities they serve (Strong Districts and Their Leadership, 2013). School boards and educational leaders draw specifically on the pillar “improving the instructional program” in the Ontario Leadership Framework (Leithwood, 2012) to influence staffing practices, instructional design and school improvement. Utilizing this framework in this context allows teachers to see how the culture of the board expects them to operate to support student learning and achievement. School boards and educational leaders encourage teachers to exercise their personal pedagogical ideals when teaching, but the role of the Ontario Leadership Framework helps to frame the role

Student achievement is always at the forefront of educational leaders and poor student achievement, including low scores on standardized tests and poor graduation rates reflect poorly on school boards. Rincon and Fleisch (2016) identify an increased interest to improve instructional practice which has been identified as a challenge in education systems globally. Senge (2007) attests that organizations are only able to learn and grow through the learning and growth of the individuals within the organization. This is connected to the OLF as it outlines the desire for educators to be lifelong learners, and as lifelong learners, if educators strive to learn and grow in their profession, they will also benefit the organization. Senge goes on to identify that when members of the organization work together, they are able to grow quicker and the

results of that growth will again benefit the organization (Senge, 2007). Thus, having a framework that explicitly outlines these norms and expectations will have a positive effect on the organization's goals of improved instructional practice. Supovitz (2003) provides support for an organizational shift to collaborative inquiry among staff to support improved instruction and the effects it has on the learners. Improving the instructional practice for students of diverse cultural and academic backgrounds is a necessary and complex process, considering the demands already placed on teachers (Ernst-Slavit & Slavit, 2007), thus allowing teachers time to collaborate and share ideas and resources is a necessary addition to the OLF.

The literature above suggests that improving the instructional practice is imperative to student achievement and that school boards must be intentional about how they influence their members to be lifelong learners and reflective practitioners who strive to improve their skills.

Securing Accountability

School boards hold a great amount of responsibility to ensure schools under their purview and their members are held accountable. Anderson (2017) recognizes in his work that schools face ever-increasing scrutiny and accountability relative to student outcomes and school improvement. School boards and educational leaders use the “securing accountability” pillar of the Ontario Leadership Framework to influence a culture of accountability, both internally and externally to ensure teacher and leader effectiveness. School boards and educational leaders have a vested interest in ensuring that accountability is taken very seriously. To ensure accountability, school boards rely heavily on assessment data to ensure both staff effectiveness and student achievement. Data-driven decision making is used in schools to evaluate student

achievement and determine opportunities, improve school achievements as a collective responsibility and create change in practice to reach organizational goals (Park et al., 2012)

School boards and educational leaders construct administrative policies, built on the OLF, to influence organizational culture and norms. Anderson (2017) argues that it is healthy for school boards to have a business or administrative lens to education in order to support a culture of accountability within the school board. Hatch (2013) identifies that a centralized way to governing practice, or a formalized process comes from outlining rules, regulations, policy, procedures to support great organizational accountability.

Educational leaders and school boards strive to maintain the public's support and ensure accountability for this is paramount. School boards also recognize the importance of being reflective about current practice and are generally committed to constantly improving practices adopted by the organization. Leithwood (2008) suggests in his work that there are four main approaches that school boards can apply when looking to influence system level accountability: a market approach, a decentralization approach, a professionalization approach and a management approach. Depending on the make-up of an organization, leaders can determine an approach to ensure accountability in their organization, ensuring norms, values and expectations are met.

Practical Implementation of the Ontario Leadership Framework as an Influence of Leadership

Many school boards have adopted the use of a professional portfolio for educators and educational leaders to use when applying to jobs within the school district. These portfolios follow the Ontario Leadership Framework to provide context of professional work and the use of artifacts. According to Hatch (2013), artifacts are manifestations of expression of the same

cultural core that produces and maintains the values and norms. Educational leaders and school boards influence organizational culture and therefore the artifacts that are produced by the members are meant to demonstrate their understanding and application of the different aspects of the framework. Members of the Ontario College of Teachers are called to embed their practices in the The Ontario Leadership Framework which is grounded in both the District Effectiveness Framework and the System Level Leadership Framework, both of which are guided by the ministry of education.

Teachers who strive to move into leadership roles should ground their practices in these pillars and ensure they are prepared to demonstrate their practical application of the framework through the use of artifacts. Teachers looking to move into leadership roles should also be well aware of board initiatives and priorities on a school and system level. While Leithwood's framework provides some context for the vision and goals of a school board, teachers must find a way of connecting the practical experiences of day-to-day teaching with the framework to ensure they are meeting the priorities of the organization and thus the culture of the organization, which remains an uncommon practice.

Educational leaders are called to align resources with the priorities of the OLF including professional development, human and financial resources, and curriculum (Strong Districts and Their Leadership, 2013). Offering professional development to teachers and education leaders based on the framework supports the idea of creating a culture of leadership (Kotten, 2015) and helps lay the foundation for leaders or those emerging in their leadership roles. There was limited literature on the practical application of the Ontario Leadership Framework being used in schools and classrooms, as the literature focused on leadership, likely for those already actively working

with the framework out of necessity for their current role as a leader. The OLF is used in both hiring practices and employee evaluations as the framework for both planning and success.

The Ontario Leadership Framework a Postmodern Perspective

From a postmodern perspective, knowledge is provisional and improvements can always be made for the norms and expectations of the organization (Hatch 2013). Educational leaders and school boards encourage educators to be reflective practitioners and lifelong learners. The Ontario Leadership Framework is a tool to support the process of reflective practice and professional growth. The framework provides a guide which, although vast, is arguably vague in the specifics to determine mastery of the skill, thus leaving room to constantly grow and refine practices. Educators and educational leaders are expected to be critical thinkers, questioning assumptions with critical appreciation (Hatch, 2013). Postmodernists might look at the Ontario Leadership Framework and question how they will know when they have mastered the skills presented in the framework.

Conclusion

The framework offered by Leithwood (2013) is very well supported in the literature as it connects with many aspects of leadership both inside and outside the education context. Leithwood's work is the cornerstone of seminal work around current-day educational leadership and therefore has been reviewed and supported by many other researchers. The literature reviewed very much supports the five pillars of the Ontario Leadership Framework as best practices in educational leadership and beyond. The idea of allowing teachers' autonomy in their practice throughout the literature was a common thread and was presented as a helpful strategy for building and sustaining a positive organizational culture for teachers and leaders. The use of the Ontario Leadership framework as a mechanism to help school boards shape organizational

culture was validated by the research using evidence to support a clear vision for organizations that supports the development of members within the organization.

One limitation identified through this review of the literature was the lack of information about how the OLF could be used practically in classrooms. Most of the literature is based on those who are in school- or board-based leadership positions, not those who are in classrooms with students. Many of the papers focused on influences to leadership in higher education as opposed to elementary and secondary schools. Another limitation of the review was that many of the gurus on the topic haven't written updated material since the 1990 to 2000 era; there are current articles, but they are not nearly as many recent ones as there have been in the past. Many of the current day gurus are publishing books, rather than research or peer-reviewed articles, making it harder to glean their expertise in an efficient manner. There was not any bias explicitly named in the literature but those writing about best practices and influential leadership did so from the perspective, as the leader. Although no bias was identified, it could be inferred that the literature implied to the reader that members are mostly compliant in following the norms and expectation of their organizations, but in reality, this is likely not always the case.

Some recommendations that could be helpful for school systems are to implement professional development directly aligning with the Ontario Leadership Framework in order to support a culture of leadership and to encourage members to consider leadership on any level. Classroom teachers do not tend to interact with the OLF regularly and research shows that all members of organizations have special skills that leaders should harness to help better the organization. Honer (2016) identifies that teachers who are looking to move into administration generally seek out opportunities and become familiar with the framework as a necessity to their leadership journey. Leaders in organizational cultures should continue to create opportunities for

students and improve the recent research available. Leithwood's work to develop the Ontario Leadership Framework is well-regarded and used widely throughout Ontario as the grounding work for promoting, evaluating and influencing leadership in schools. More researchers should build on his work and make it more relatable to the classroom teacher.

As equity, diversity and inclusion are at the forefront of priorities for school boards across Ontario, how will the OLF align with those values? Is there a need for the framework to expand and explicitly include equity, diversity and inclusion? Most likely, revisions are required to better meet the vision of Ontario schools boards and to support them in realizing their goals.

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