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ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a contemporary reinterpretation of Organisational Development (O.D.) for educational institutions operating in increasingly complex, digitalised and accountability-driven contexts. While classical O.D. frameworks emphasised planned change, participation and organisational learning, current educational environments demand an expanded approach that integrates artificial intelligence, data governance, inclusion and ethical sustainability. Drawing on international literature published between 2020 and 2024, this study synthesises research on leadership, improvement science, professional learning and sociotechnical systems to propose an updated conceptual model of organisational development in education. An eight-stage framework is advanced, encompassing ethical diagnosis, collective sense-making, co-design, capacity building, ethical governance of technology, iterative implementation, reflective evaluation and organisational renewal. The article argues that sustainable educational improvement depends on moral purpose, professional trust and collective learning rather than technocratic reform or compliance-based accountability. Implications for leadership practice, policy design and future research are discussed, highlighting the need for participatory, ethically grounded and learning-oriented organisational development strategies capable of supporting equity, wellbeing and long-term institutional resilience.

KEYWORDS: organisational development; educational leadership; artificial intelligence in education; inclusion and equity; organisational learning.

Desenvolvimento Organizacional na Educação: Uma Visão Geral Contemporânea

RESUMO: Este artigo apresenta uma reinterpretação contemporânea do Desenvolvimento Organizacional (DO) para instituições educacionais que operam em contextos cada vez mais complexos, digitalizados e orientados para a responsabilização. Enquanto as estruturas clássicas de DO enfatizavam a mudança planejada, a participação e a aprendizagem organizacional, os ambientes educacionais atuais exigem uma abordagem ampliada que integre inteligência artificial, governança de dados, inclusão e sustentabilidade ética. Com base na literatura internacional publicada entre 2020 e 2024, este estudo sintetiza pesquisas sobre liderança, ciência da melhoria, aprendizagem profissional e sistemas sociotécnicos para propor um modelo conceitual atualizado de desenvolvimento organizacional na educação. Uma estrutura de oito etapas é apresentada, abrangendo diagnóstico ético, construção coletiva de sentido, codesign, capacitação, governança ética da tecnologia, implementação iterativa, avaliação reflexiva e renovação organizacional. O artigo argumenta que a melhoria educacional sustentável depende de propósito moral, confiança profissional e aprendizagem coletiva, em vez de reforma tecnocrática ou responsabilização baseada em conformidade. São discutidas as implicações para a prática de liderança, o desenvolvimento de políticas e pesquisas futuras, destacando a necessidade de estratégias de desenvolvimento organizacional participativas, eticamente fundamentadas e orientadas para a aprendizagem, capazes de promover a equidade, o bem-estar e a resiliência institucional a longo prazo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: desenvolvimento organizacional; liderança educacional; inteligência artificial na educação; inclusão e equidade; aprendizagem organizacional.

INTRODUCTION

Educational organisations operate today within a context of unprecedented complexity. Globalisation, digital transformation, demographic change and growing social inequality interact to challenge traditional assumptions about schooling, leadership and institutional governance. Schools, universities and training institutions are expected to deliver high levels of academic achievement while simultaneously promoting inclusion, wellbeing, civic responsibility and lifelong learning. These expectations are further intensified by accountability regimes, international benchmarking and rapid technological change.

In this context, Organisational Development (O.D.) offers a powerful conceptual and practical framework for understanding and guiding educational change. Originally developed within organisational psychology and applied behavioural sciences, O.D. emphasises planned, systemic and participatory change aimed at

improving organisational effectiveness and health (Beckhard, 1969; French & Bell, 1996). Its relevance to education lies in its focus on culture, leadership, professional learning and collective capacity rather than narrow structural reform.

However, the contemporary educational landscape differs substantially from the conditions in which classical O.D. models emerged. Digitalisation, artificial intelligence (AI), hybrid learning environments and data-driven governance reshape not only organisational processes but also professional identities and ethical responsibilities. Educational change can no longer be conceived as a linear, technocratic process focused on efficiency alone. Instead, it must be understood as a **moral, relational and sociotechnical endeavour** (Fullan, 2021; Selwyn, 2022).

This moral dimension of educational change is articulated forcefully by Hargreaves and Shirley (2021), who argue:

Educational change is not primarily about implementing new structures or strategies. It is about the moral purpose of education and the collective capacity of educators to improve learning for all students, particularly those who have been historically underserved. Sustainable change depends on relationships, trust and shared commitment rather than compliance with externally imposed reforms. (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2021, p. 12)

From this perspective, organisational development in education must explicitly address questions of equity, inclusion and ethical responsibility. The success of change initiatives depends not only on technical design but also on professional trust, shared meaning and organisational learning.

The purpose of this article is to reconceptualise organisational development for education in the mid-2020s, integrating classical theory with contemporary research on leadership, inclusion, artificial intelligence and organisational learning. The article adopts a critical yet constructive stance, arguing that O.D. remains highly relevant but requires conceptual expansion to address current sociotechnical realities.

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONS

Organisational Development emerged during the 1950s and 1960s through the work of scholars such as Kurt Lewin, Douglas McGregor and Richard Beckhard. Early O.D. theory combined systems thinking, group dynamics and action research to promote planned change grounded in participation and feedback. Beckhard (1969) famously defined O.D. as an organisation-wide effort, managed from the top, to increase organisational effectiveness and health through planned interventions in organisational processes.

Central to classical O.D. are several core principles:

1. A systemic perspective, recognising organisations as interconnected systems.
2. Participation and collaboration, involving members in diagnosis and change.
3. Learning and feedback, using data to inform continuous improvement.
4. Humanistic values, including trust, respect and development of people.

These principles align closely with the professional nature of educational organisations. Teaching and learning depend on collaboration, shared norms and professional judgement, making education particularly sensitive to organisational culture. Unlike industrial organisations, educational institutions pursue multiple and sometimes competing goals, including academic achievement, socialisation and personal development.

French and Bell (1996) emphasised that O.D. is not a set of techniques but a value-driven process aimed at enabling organisations to learn and adapt. This distinction is crucial in education, where reform efforts often fail due to superficial implementation or lack of professional ownership.

EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AS SOCIOTECHNICAL SYSTEMS

A key limitation of early O.D. models is their relatively limited engagement with technology. While classical theory acknowledged structural and technical elements, contemporary education is profoundly shaped by digital platforms, data systems and algorithmic decision-making. Educational organisations today function as **sociotechnical systems**, in which social practices and technological infrastructures are deeply intertwined (Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Selwyn, 2022).

Digital learning environments, learning management systems and AI-powered analytics increasingly influence curriculum design, assessment practices and institutional governance. These technologies do not simply support existing practices; they actively reshape them. Decisions about data collection, algorithmic classification and automated feedback have implications for equity, transparency and professional autonomy.

Williamson and Hogan (2024) capture this shift succinctly:

Educational technologies do not merely support decision-making; they actively shape it. Data systems and AI increasingly function as instruments of governance, influencing what counts as knowledge, how performance is measured and how professional judgement is exercised. (Williamson & Hogan, 2024, p. 78)

From an organisational development perspective, this implies that change initiatives must address not only structures and cultures but also the governance of

technology. Ethical questions surrounding data use, bias and accountability cannot be treated as peripheral issues; they are central to organisational health and legitimacy.

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION

Leadership plays a critical role in mediating organisational development processes in education. Unlike hierarchical corporate settings, educational organisations rely heavily on professional expertise and distributed decision-making. Leadership effectiveness therefore depends on influence, trust and coherence rather than control alone.

Over four decades of empirical research demonstrate the importance of instructional and transformational leadership for school improvement. However, recent studies caution against overly simplistic models that reduce leadership to performance management. Hallinger (2022), synthesising extensive international research, concludes:

Instructional leadership remains one of the most empirically supported approaches to improving teaching and learning. However, its effectiveness depends on contextual adaptation, professional trust and alignment with broader organisational development strategies rather than narrow managerial control. (Hallinger, 2022, p. 594)

This insight reinforces the alignment between leadership theory and organisational development. O.D. provides a framework through which leadership practices can be embedded in collaborative diagnosis, shared goal-setting and continuous learning rather than imposed reform.

Distributed leadership approaches further support organisational development by recognising leadership as a collective capacity rather than an individual role (Harris, 2023). Such approaches are particularly relevant in complex educational settings where expertise is distributed across professional communities.

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

A defining feature of contemporary organisational development is its emphasis on learning over compliance. Rather than treating change as a time-limited project, O.D. conceptualises improvement as an ongoing cycle of inquiry, action and reflection. This orientation aligns closely with research on improvement science and learning organisations.

Bryk et al. (2021) argue that sustainable improvement depends on disciplined inquiry embedded in everyday practice:

Improvement is not achieved through isolated initiatives but through disciplined inquiry embedded in everyday practice. Organisations improve when they develop routines that allow professionals to learn from variation, test ideas rapidly and build collective knowledge over time. (Bryk et al., 2021, p. 43)

For educational organisations, this implies building structures that support collaborative inquiry, data-informed reflection and professional dialogue. Organisational development initiatives that neglect these learning processes risk becoming symbolic or short-lived.

MORAL PURPOSE AND EQUITY IN ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Educational change cannot be separated from questions of equity and social justice. Organisational structures and policies shape who benefits from education and whose voices are marginalised. Contemporary O.D. in education must therefore engage explicitly with inclusion, diversity and ethical responsibility.

Inclusion is increasingly conceptualised as an organisational rather than individual challenge. Slee (2023) emphasises that inclusion requires systemic change:

Inclusive education is not a technical fix or a specialist programme. It is a systemic organisational challenge that requires rethinking cultures, policies and practices so that diversity is recognised as a resource rather than a problem. (Slee, 2023, p. 6)

This perspective aligns with the humanistic values of classical O.D. while extending them to address contemporary equity concerns. Organisational development processes that ignore inclusion risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than transforming them.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION

The integration of artificial intelligence into educational systems represents one of the most significant organisational challenges of the current decade. AI technologies are increasingly used for student assessment, predictive analytics, personalised learning pathways and administrative decision-making. While these tools offer potential benefits in terms of efficiency and responsiveness, they also reshape organisational routines, power relations and professional identities.

From an organisational development perspective, AI should not be treated merely as a technological upgrade but as a catalyst for organisational change. Decisions about AI adoption influence curriculum design, assessment practices and leadership structures. Consequently, educational institutions must develop collective capacities to critically evaluate, govern and adapt AI systems in alignment with educational values.

Selwyn (2022) cautions against technocratic approaches to educational technology, arguing that digital tools often reproduce existing inequalities and managerial logics unless critically examined. This concern is reinforced by recent governance-oriented research, which highlights the role of AI in reshaping institutional decision-making processes.

Williamson and Hogan (2024) explicitly frame AI as a governance mechanism rather than a neutral support tool:

Educational technologies do not merely support decision-making; they actively shape it. Data systems and AI increasingly function as instruments of governance, influencing what counts as knowledge, how performance is measured and how professional judgement is exercised. (Williamson & Hogan, 2024, p. 78)

For organisational development, this implies the need for participatory structures that involve educators in decisions about AI design, implementation and evaluation. Ethical governance, transparency and accountability must be embedded within organisational processes rather than treated as external compliance requirements.

DATAFICATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

The expansion of AI in education is closely linked to broader processes of datafication. Student performance, teacher practices and institutional outcomes are increasingly translated into quantitative indicators used for monitoring and accountability. While data can support reflective practice, excessive reliance on metrics risks narrowing educational purposes and undermining professional trust.

Organisational development theory emphasises that culture plays a decisive role in shaping how data is interpreted and used. In learning-oriented cultures, data serves as a tool for inquiry and improvement; in compliance-oriented cultures, it becomes a mechanism of surveillance and control.

OECD (2023) highlights this tension, noting that data-driven systems can either support professional learning or exacerbate stress and inequality depending on governance arrangements. Effective organisational development therefore requires

institutions to negotiate shared norms regarding data use, professional autonomy and ethical responsibility.

From this perspective, AI-informed organisational development must prioritise sense-making over measurement alone. Collaborative interpretation of data supports collective learning and mitigates the risks associated with algorithmic decision-making.

INCLUSION, EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Inclusion and equity have emerged as central concerns in educational policy and research worldwide. Demographic diversification, migration and increased recognition of disability and neurodiversity challenge educational organisations to rethink traditional structures and practices. Organisational development provides a systemic lens through which inclusion can be addressed as an institutional responsibility rather than an individual accommodation.

Ainscow (2020) argues that inclusive education depends on organisational cultures that value diversity and collaboration. This view aligns with O.D.'s emphasis on participatory diagnosis and shared problem-solving. Inclusive organisational development involves reviewing policies, resource allocation and leadership practices to ensure that marginalised voices are heard and supported.

Slee (2023) articulates the organisational nature of inclusion with particular clarity:

Inclusive education is not a technical fix or a specialist programme. It is a systemic organisational challenge that requires rethinking cultures, policies and practices so that diversity is recognised as a resource rather than a problem. (Slee, 2023, p. 6)

This framing has significant implications for organisational development initiatives. Inclusion cannot be delegated to specialist departments or individual teachers; it must be embedded within governance structures, professional learning systems and organisational values.

LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSION AND ETHICAL ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Leadership is a critical factor in shaping inclusive and ethical organisational cultures. Research consistently shows that leaders influence how inclusion is prioritised, resourced and enacted within educational institutions (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2022).

Inclusive leadership involves challenging deficit narratives, redistributing power and fostering professional collaboration.

From an organisational development perspective, leadership for inclusion aligns with distributed and transformational approaches. Leaders act as facilitators of dialogue, learning and collective responsibility rather than as controllers of behaviour. This orientation supports organisational resilience and adaptability in complex environments.

Harris (2023) emphasises that distributed leadership enhances organisational capacity by recognising expertise across professional communities. Such approaches are particularly effective in addressing complex challenges such as inclusion and digital transformation, which cannot be solved through hierarchical decision-making alone.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AS ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity building constitutes a core component of contemporary organisational development in education. Professional learning is most effective when it is embedded within daily practice, connected to student learning and supported by organisational structures that promote collaboration and reflection.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) provide strong empirical support for this position:

Professional learning is most powerful when it is embedded in the daily work of educators, connected to students' experiences and supported by organisational structures that prioritise equity, collaboration and reflective practice. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022, p. 112)

Organisational development initiatives that prioritise episodic training sessions without addressing structural conditions often fail to produce sustained change. In contrast, learning-oriented organisations invest in professional communities, coaching and inquiry-based improvement cycles.

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING, IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE AND EVIDENCE USE

The growing influence of improvement science has strengthened the alignment between organisational development and educational research. Improvement science emphasises disciplined inquiry, rapid testing of change ideas and learning from variation across contexts (Bryk et al., 2021).

For educational organisations, this approach supports a shift from compliance-driven reform to evidence-informed learning. Organisational development provides

the cultural and structural conditions necessary for improvement science to function effectively, including trust, collaboration and shared purpose.

Importantly, evidence use in education is not a neutral process. Decisions about what counts as evidence reflect values and power relations. Organisational development must therefore support critical engagement with evidence, recognising both quantitative data and professional judgement.

ETHICAL SUSTAINABILITY IN ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ethical sustainability refers to the capacity of educational organisations to pursue long-term improvement without compromising professional integrity, equity or wellbeing. Rapid technological change and accountability pressures risk creating short-term gains at the expense of organisational health.

Fullan (2021) argues that sustainable change depends on coherence, moral purpose and relational trust. Organisational development frameworks that foreground these elements are better positioned to support ethical sustainability.

In AI-enabled environments, ethical sustainability requires explicit governance structures addressing transparency, bias and accountability. Organisational development processes can facilitate ethical dialogue and collective decision-making, ensuring that technological innovation aligns with educational values.

INTERIM SYNTHESIS

This section has examined the implications of artificial intelligence, datafication, inclusion and professional learning for organisational development in education. Together, these dimensions highlight the need for integrated, ethically grounded and learning-oriented approaches to organisational change. Educational organisations must balance innovation with equity, accountability with trust, and efficiency with moral purpose.

REINTERPRETING ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

The preceding sections have demonstrated that while classical organisational development theory remains highly relevant, it requires substantial reinterpretation to address the sociotechnical, ethical and equity-oriented challenges facing education today. Contemporary educational organisations operate in environments characterised by rapid technological change, complex accountability regimes and heightened expectations for inclusion and wellbeing. These conditions demand an

expanded conception of organisational development that integrates moral purpose, professional learning and ethical governance.

Traditional O.D. models often assumed relatively stable environments and clear organisational boundaries. In contrast, contemporary education is increasingly networked, datafied and externally regulated. Organisational development must therefore move beyond episodic interventions towards continuous, adaptive and reflexive processes. This shift aligns with recent scholarship emphasising learning organisations, improvement science and distributed leadership (Bryk et al., 2021; Harris, 2023).

A CONTEMPORARY EIGHT-STAGE MODEL OF ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION

Drawing on the literature reviewed and the analysis presented, this article proposes an eight-stage model of organisational development tailored to contemporary educational contexts. The model is not intended as a linear sequence but as an iterative and recursive framework supporting continuous organisational learning.

Stage 1: Ethical and Contextual Diagnosis

Organisational development begins with a collaborative diagnosis of organisational culture, structures and practices. Unlike technocratic audits, this stage foregrounds ethical considerations, equity concerns and contextual realities. Stakeholders—including teachers, leaders, students and support staff—participate in identifying strengths, tensions and priorities.

Stage 2: Collective Sense-Making

Data, evidence and professional experience are interpreted collaboratively. This stage addresses the risks of datafication by emphasising dialogue over metrics. Organisational development processes support shared understanding rather than compliance-driven interpretation.

Stage 3: Co-Design of Change Initiatives

Change strategies are co-designed with stakeholders to ensure relevance, ownership and contextual fit. This participatory approach reflects core O.D. values and supports professional agency.

Stage 4: Capacity Building and Professional Learning

Professional learning is embedded in daily practice and aligned with organisational goals. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) emphasise, sustainable improvement depends on learning structures that prioritise collaboration and equity.

Stage 5: Ethical Governance of Technology

AI and data systems are governed through transparent and participatory processes. Ethical principles guide decision-making, addressing issues of bias, accountability and professional autonomy.

Stage 6: Iterative Implementation

Change initiatives are implemented through small-scale testing, feedback and refinement. This approach aligns with improvement science and mitigates the risks of large-scale reform failure.

Stage 7: Evaluation and Reflective Learning

Evaluation focuses on learning rather than judgement. Organisational routines support reflection on both intended and unintended consequences, including equity impacts.

Stage 8: Renewal and Adaptation

Organisational development is treated as an ongoing cycle. Institutions revisit diagnosis and sense-making in response to changing conditions, ensuring long-term adaptability and resilience.

DISCUSSION: ALIGNING ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH MORAL PURPOSE

The proposed model foregrounds moral purpose as a defining feature of organisational development in education. This emphasis reflects growing consensus that educational change must be evaluated not only in terms of efficiency or performance but also in terms of equity, wellbeing and social responsibility (Fullan, 2021; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2021).

Hargreaves and Shirley (2021) underscore the relational foundations of sustainable change:

Sustainable educational improvement depends on the collective capacity of educators to act with moral purpose, guided by trust, shared responsibility and a commitment to equity rather than short-term performance pressures. (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2021, p. 89)

By integrating moral purpose into organisational development processes, educational institutions are better positioned to navigate competing demands and maintain legitimacy in the eyes of their communities.

LEADERSHIP IMPLICATIONS

Leadership plays a central role in enabling contemporary organisational development. Leaders act as stewards of organisational culture, facilitators of learning and guardians of ethical practice. Distributed leadership approaches are particularly well suited to complex educational environments, as they recognise expertise across professional communities and support collaborative problem-solving (Harris, 2023).

Importantly, leadership for organisational development requires humility and reflexivity. Leaders must be willing to question existing assumptions, engage with uncertainty and learn alongside others. This orientation contrasts sharply with managerial models emphasising control and standardisation.

Hallinger's (2022) synthesis reinforces this view by highlighting the limits of directive leadership in complex contexts. Organisational development provides a framework through which leadership can be enacted as a collective and learning-oriented practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

At the policy level, organisational development offers an alternative to reform strategies focused primarily on accountability and standardisation. Policymakers can support O.D. by creating conditions that encourage professional learning, collaboration and ethical experimentation rather than punitive evaluation.

OECD (2023) cautions that AI-driven accountability systems risk undermining professional trust unless accompanied by robust governance frameworks. Organisational development processes can mediate these risks by embedding ethical dialogue and participatory decision-making within institutions.

Policies that recognise organisational development as a long-term capacity-building process are more likely to produce sustainable improvement than short-term initiatives driven by external pressure.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

From a research perspective, organisational development in education calls for methodologies that capture complexity, context and process. Qualitative and

mixed-methods approaches, including case studies, design-based research and participatory action research, are particularly well suited to studying O.D. processes.

Improvement science offers promising methodological tools for examining how organisations learn and adapt over time (Bryk et al., 2021). However, researchers must remain attentive to power relations and ethical considerations, ensuring that evidence generation supports rather than constrains professional judgement.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This article presents a conceptual synthesis rather than an empirical evaluation of the proposed model. Future research should examine the application of the eight-stage model across diverse educational contexts, including early childhood education, higher education and vocational training.

Further research is also needed to explore the long-term ethical implications of AI-enabled organisational development, particularly in relation to data governance, bias and professional autonomy. Comparative studies across national contexts would enrich understanding of how policy environments shape organisational development practices.

CONCLUSION

Organisational Development remains a vital and adaptable framework for guiding educational change in an era of complexity, digital transformation and heightened ethical expectations. By integrating classical O.D. principles with contemporary research on leadership, inclusion, artificial intelligence and organisational learning, this article has argued for a renewed conception of organisational development grounded in moral purpose and collective capacity.

The proposed eight-stage model offers a flexible framework for educational institutions seeking sustainable, equitable and ethically grounded transformation. Ultimately, the success of organisational development in education depends not on technical solutions alone but on the willingness of organisations to learn, reflect and act together in pursuit of shared educational values.

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