

Building Capacity Through Racial Tensions: Whose Knowledge Shapes Discipline Decisions in Ontario Schools and School Boards

Dr. Robin Persad
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

* Corresponding Author: **Dr. Robin Persad**

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Abstract
An Ontario school can resolve a complaint about racialized discipline without changing how its staff label and record student behaviour. This conceptual article examines the distance between settling a dispute and changing the routine that produced it. It addresses four research questions: (1) How do Ontario school and board routines determine whether a racial tension is treated as an institutional problem or as an individual conduct issue? (2) Under what conditions can marginalized knowledge alter a decision rather than only inform it? (3) What arrangements allow a change to be sustained beyond the efforts of one leader? (4) What evidence would show that a change was sustained, challenged, or revised? The article grounds the analysis in Ontario's statutory division of authority under the *Education Act*, in provincial and board discipline data, and in the provincial intervention in the Peel District School Board, and reads these sources through Critical Race Theory and organizational learning, drawing on recent open-access research on racial equity in educational organizations. It identifies a gap between hearing marginalized knowledge and giving it consequential influence, and proposes a recursive framework with five dimensions, each stated as a testable proposition. A worked example follows a Grade 7 discipline concern through the decisions of a principal, a superintendent, trustees, and the Ministry. No new data are reported. Instead, the article specifies the decision records that empirical studies of Ontario boards would need to collect.

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Introduction: When Resolving a Complaint Leaves the Rule Intact

Consider an illustrative situation in an Ontario elementary school. A Black Grade 7 student and a caregiver tell the principal that the student has been sent out of class repeatedly for conduct a teacher described as disrespectful. The principal meets with the family and teacher, returns the student to class, and closes the complaint. The return matters. The meeting, however, has not established what counts as disrespect, who decides when a removal is recorded, or whether comparable conduct by other students is treated the same way. Nobody disputes that the principal should repair the harm. The harder question is whether the school can repair harm in one case and still learn enough to change a practice when the evidence points that way.

The Ontario record gives the question weight. In the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), 42% of Black students in one high school cohort had been suspended at least once, compared with 18% of White students (James & Turner, 2017) [22]. More recent board data show Black students' share of suspensions and expulsions falling from 33.0% in 2018–2019 to 24.8% in 2022–2023 (TDSB, 2023) [43], then rising to 28.8% in 2023–2024, when Black students were suspended at almost three times their representation (TDSB, 2025) [45]. A reduction that reverses within a year is exactly the kind of result that a policy record alone cannot explain. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2025) [29] names discipline as an area where anti-Black discrimination

appears. These sources carry different kinds of authority, yet each points to the same interval between a documented problem and an institutional response. That interval is the subject of this article.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose is to develop a conceptual account of how a racial tension in an Ontario school can lead to a change in organizational practice, and why it often stops short. The guiding question is:

How can Ontario schools and school boards turn racial tensions into organizational learning and accountable changes in decision-making without shifting the burden of reform onto the people who raise the concern? Four research questions organize the analysis:

1. How do school and board routines determine whether a racial tension is treated as an institutional problem or as an individual conduct issue?
2. Under what conditions can marginalized knowledge alter a decision rather than only inform it?
3. What arrangements allow a change to be implemented and sustained beyond the efforts of one leader?
4. What evidence would show that a change was sustained, challenged, or revised?

Interpretation 1 addresses the first question, Interpretation 2 and the second and third dimensions address the second, Interpretation 3 and the fourth dimension address the third, and the fifth dimension and worked example address the fourth. The article is written for scholars of educational leadership, Ontario principals and supervisory officers, trustees, leadership preparation programs, and policymakers.

Key Terms

Throughout the article, *racial tensions* refers to disputes, recurring concerns, or contradictions in which racialized experiences or inequities are at stake. A tension signals that something warrants investigation; it does not settle which explanation is correct. *Marginalized knowledge* refers to accounts and expertise that an institution gives less credibility or influence. *Organizational capacity* refers to the shared knowledge, authority, time, resources, and review procedures that allow a school or board to change a practice beyond the actions of one leader. *Consequential influence* refers to participation that can alter how a problem is defined or which decision is taken, and that leaves a record showing how.

Context: Discipline, Data, and Authority in Ontario

Policy Commitments and Data Obligations

Ontario's equity commitments have accumulated over two decades. The 2009 equity strategy and Policy/Program Memorandum 119 require boards to develop, implement, and monitor equity policies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2013) [30, 31]. The *Accepting Schools Act, 2012* added obligations related to bullying prevention and inclusive school climate. The 2014 guidelines require boards to put procedures in place that enable students and staff to report incidents of discrimination, state that equity principles apply in progressive discipline when mitigating factors are weighed, and require boards to monitor and report on their progress (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) [32]. The 2017 Education Equity Action Plan acknowledged that racialized students, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities were overrepresented in suspension and expulsion data and set an expectation that schools would report fewer suspensions within three years (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017) [33].

Data obligations followed. Under the *Anti-Racism Act, 2017* and its regulation, school boards are required to collect race-based data in line with provincial standards (O. Reg. 267/18; Anti-Racism Directorate, 2018) [7]. As of January 1, 2023, every Ontario board had begun collecting voluntary student race-based data on academic performance, special education, suspensions, expulsions, and principals' decisions to refuse admission, with an average response rate of about 50% among the 52 boards that reported (Government of Ontario, 2023) [18]. The Ontario Human Rights Commission's (2025) *Dreams Delayed* plan then set 29 calls to action with timeframes for named duty-holders, asked them to move from process-focused to outcome-focused accountability, and called for disaggregated data to be published and complaint procedures reviewed.

Commitments of this kind can be met on paper while the referral that removed the student in the opening illustration goes unexamined. Eizadirad and Walton (2025) [15] observe that "institutions, always aware of optics, in many cases seem to engage in performative rather than substantive change" (p. 33). Virella *et al.* (2026) [48] call the same pattern equity decoupling: the adoption of equity language while the arrangements that produce inequality remain in place.

Who Holds Authority over a Discipline Concern

The *Education Act* divides authority among the Ministry, boards, directors of education, and principals, and the framework developed below depends on knowing who can change what. The Ministry sets discipline policy through regulation and memoranda. Policy/Program Memorandum 145 requires each board to adopt a progressive discipline policy aligned with Memorandum 119 and the *Human Rights Code*, requires each school to adopt a school-wide plan, and requires school climate surveys at least every two years (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018) [32]. Since 2020, pupils in junior kindergarten to Grade 3 cannot be suspended for the activities listed in section 306 (O. Reg. 440/20). Amendments in 2025 allow the Minister to investigate a board when a matter of public interest is at stake, including the engagement of parents, and to direct a board or vest control of its administration in the Minister (*Education Act*, 1990, ss. 230–230.3) [13].

Boards must promote a school climate that is inclusive of pupils of any race, ancestry, colour, or ethnic origin and must monitor the effectiveness of their policies (s. 169.1). Trustees must bring the concerns of parents and students to the attention of the board (s. 218.1), and the director of education reviews the multi-year plan with trustees each year (s. 283.1). The principal maintains order and discipline (s. 265) and may suspend a pupil for one to 20 school days, taking into account prescribed mitigating and other factors (s. 306). Those factors include the pupil's history, whether progressive discipline has been used, a disability identified in an individual education plan, and whether the activity was related to harassment of the pupil because of race, ethnic origin, or religion (O. Reg. 472/07, ss. 2–3). Parents must be notified within 24 hours, and an appeal can be filed with the board's superintendent within 10 school days (Government of Ontario, 2026b; *Education Act*, 1990, s. 309) [13, 20]. For serious activities, the board holds expulsion hearings (s. 311.3).

The arrangement has a gap at its lowest level. Removal from class short of suspension sits outside the notice and appeal provisions, and the government's own guide to suspensions does not address informal removals (Government of Ontario, 2026b) [20]. The gap has been noticed. Participants at the Commission's 2023 roundtables called for clear avenues of appeal and for accountability that does not place the onus on parents or students (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2023) [28]. Governance adds a newer complication. As of 2026, the Ministry lists several large boards, including the TDSB, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, and the Peel District School Board, as under supervision or provincial control, mostly for financial and governance reasons (Government of Ontario, 2026a) [19]. Where a supervisor holds the board's authority, the trustee route in section 218.1 may not lead to anyone who can decide. Table 1 summarizes this distribution.

Table 1: Who Holds Authority Over a Discipline Concern in an Ontario School Board

Level	Authority relevant to discipline	Source	What the framework asks
Ministry of Education	Sets progressive discipline policy; bars suspension in junior kindergarten to Grade 3 for section 306 activities; may investigate, direct, or assume control of a board	PPM 145; O. Reg. 440/20; *Education Act*, ss. 230–230.3	Whether provincial direction reaches removals short of suspension, and whether board records name their dependence on ministry action
Board of trustees (or provincial supervisor)	Promotes an inclusive climate; monitors policy effectiveness; hears suspension appeals and expulsion hearings; trustees relay community concerns	*Education Act*, ss. 169.1, 218.1, 309, 311.3	Whether family concerns reach someone with authority, including in supervised boards
Director of education	Reviews the multi-year plan with trustees; performance monitored by the board	*Education Act*, ss. 169.1, 283.1	Whether a concern that exceeds one school has an owner at the system level
Principal	Maintains order and discipline; suspends for one to 20 school days; weighs mitigating and other factors	*Education Act*, ss. 265, 306; O. Reg. 472/07	Whether removals short of suspension are recorded and reviewed, and whether harassment related to race is considered

Note. Summarized from the official versions of the statute, regulations, and memorandum on Ontario's e-Laws and ministry websites. The table describes formal authority; practice in particular boards may differ.

Rationale

Ontario suits this inquiry. Because its public duties are unusually explicit and its boards must collect race-based discipline data, it is reasonable to ask what evidence would show that a duty has reached a decision routine. In addition, much of the organizational literature on racial equity comes from the United States, including most contributions to the Frontiers Research Topic on racial equity and the organization (Virella *et al*., 2026) [48], and an Ontario analysis tests that literature against a different distribution of provincial, board, and school authority.

Literature Review: Four Strands and the Gaps Between Them

Strand 1: Discipline and the Experiences of Black Students and Families in Ontario

Ontario evidence on disproportionate discipline is consistent across boards. In Peel, Black students were about 10.2% of secondary enrolment but about 22.5% of suspensions, and the board had recorded 52 junior kindergarten and 103 senior kindergarten suspensions between 2013 and 2019 without breaking the elementary data down by race (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2020) [27]. In the TDSB, students with special education needs accounted for 49.5% of suspensions and expulsions in 2023–2024 while representing 15.2% of enrolment (TDSB, 2025) [45], which makes the intersection of race and disability unavoidable (Crenshaw, 1989) [12]. In the Toronto Catholic District School Board's Black Voices Study, which heard from 1,046 students, staff, and parents, 53% of Black staff respondents believed Black students were disciplined more severely for similar conduct, and participants described fear of retaliation for reporting racism (Young & Doan, 2023) [50]. At the Commission's 2023 roundtables, participants said that lived experience was often dismissed as anecdotal and that complaint processes were lengthy and disempowering (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2023) [28]. Students and families, in other words, hold knowledge that official records miss, but these studies say little about what institutions do with it once it is presented.

Strand 2: Ontario Leadership, District Reform, and Board Governance

Shah *et al*. (2022) [38] synthesized 95 documents on Ontario district reform published between 1996 and 2021. Race-evasive approaches focused on test scores and managerial effectiveness dominated, and a smaller anti-racist literature argued that accountability should run first to those most harmed by racism. The Peel intervention shows what board-level change can involve. After a provincial review of anti-Black racism and governance, the Minister issued 27 binding directions in March 2020 and placed the board under supervision in June 2020 (Rodrigues, 2023) [35]. Leadership preparation has not kept pace. All six Ontario principals and vice-principals interviewed by Spooner (2024) [40] reported no connection between the Principal's Qualification Program and their ability to lead equitably, although the program guideline expects candidates to identify and respond to systemic barriers (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017) [26]. Only 17.5% of administrators responding to a 2020 census identified as racialized, against 29.3% of Ontario's population, and the hiring framework that replaced Regulation 274 leaves administrators broad discretion (Abawi *et al*., 2026; Abawi & Eizadirad, 2020) [1, 2]. Black educators surveyed by the Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators described being treated as the problem when they challenged inequity (Turner Consulting Group, 2015) [46]. Cepin and Naimi (2015) [10] add that Ontario's equity policy positions teachers as recipients of training rather than agents who can change rules. Taken together, these studies explain how concerns get lost inside organizations, though none follows a single concern to a decision owned by someone other than the leader under study.

Strand 3: Participation and Whose Knowledge Counts

Kaiser *et al*. (2025) [23] followed White principals in a Seattle-area racial affinity leadership program. In one K–8 school, a coalition of families of colour asked for a clear process for handling racism and bias incidents, and the principal convened families in February 2023 to redesign the discipline response as a living document. Brown and Eizadirad (2026) [9], studying a Toronto re-entry program, found that a single point of contact "reduces the stress of retelling one's story" (p. 103). Edwards and Kalan (2023) [14] describe how Ontario institutions subjugate knowledge, including a case in which a Myanmar-trained pediatrician's medical degree was reduced to first-year equivalence, and argue for parallel structures through which discounted knowledge can be heard. Segeren and Kutsyuruba (2012) [37] found that community organizations shaped the early agenda of Ontario's equity policy but were not part of the final decision. Participation, on this evidence, can reshape a protocol. Which proposals were adopted, and why others were set aside, usually goes unrecorded.

Strand 4: Commitments, Routines, and Decoupling

Eizadirad and Walton (2025) [15] argue that equity work should be judged by impact, which means "tracking efficacy through data-driven measures to move beyond performative politics" (p. 35), with indicators that "go beyond surface-level metrics to assess the real-world impact on marginalized communities" (p. 35). Liera and Desir (2023) [25] propose giving racially conscious staff formal authority over biased practices and redistributing time and money in response to disaggregated data. Studies in the Frontiers Research Topic show how decoupling works. Only 45 of 115 California community colleges used racial language in reform reports, a pattern Galan *et al*. (2025) [16] call equity by implication. Slay (2025) [39] shows that routines can appear neutral while carrying racial meaning, and Salazar-Garza and Osworth (2026) [36] found that 38 of 80 Los Angeles County districts presented no equity material online while cautioning that websites cannot show practice. Virella and Liera (2024) [49] found that a culture of niceness redirected a district's discipline reforms toward comfort and buy-in. The divergence between commitment and practice is well documented; tools for tying a commitment to a specific decision record are scarcer.

Gaps Addressed

Four gaps follow. Few studies trace a single concern across intake, problem definition, approval, resourcing, implementation, and review. Participation research records voice more often than influence. Accountability research tends to measure commitments or portrayals rather than whether a changed routine survives turnover and changes in measurement. Ontario research has documented disparities and policy texts in detail, but has not connected the statutory authority map to specific discipline decisions, and Chaaban *et al*. (2025) [11] found only 10 Canadian studies among 124 reviewed. Table 2 summarizes these strands.

Table 2: Strands of Literature, What They Establish, and the Gaps That Remain

Strand	Representative sources	What the strand establishes	Gap that remains
Discipline and Black students' experiences in Ontario	James and Turner (2017) [22]; TDSB (2023) [43]; Young and Doan (2023) [50]; Ontario Human Rights Commission (2020, 2023) [27, 28]	Persistent disproportionality, and knowledge held by families that records miss	How institutions act on that knowledge
Ontario leadership and governance	Shah *et al*. (2022) [38]; Rodrigues (2023) [35]; Spooner (2024) [40]; Abawi *et al*. (2026) [2]	Race-evasive reform, limited preparation, and provincial intervention	Tracing one concern to a decision owned by someone other than the leader studied
Participation and knowledge	Kaiser *et al*. (2025) [23]; Edwards and Kalan (2023) [14]; Segeren and Kutsyuruba (2012) [37]	Participation can reshape protocols when power is addressed	Records of which proposals changed a decision
Commitments and routines	Eizadirad and Walton (2025) [15]; Liera and Desir (2023) [25]; Galan *et al*. (2025) [16]; Slay (2025) [39]	Commitments and routines can decouple	Linking a commitment to a decision record that survives turnover

Note. The table summarizes the article's reading of the literature. It is not a systematic review.

Methodology: Conceptual Approach and Trajectory of Argument

Design and Sources

This is a critical conceptual synthesis. It reports no new data. Sources were selected purposively according to four criteria. Each had to illuminate how a concern is recognized, whose knowledge counts, who holds authority, how change is implemented, or how it is reviewed. Ontario sources were given priority, with sources from elsewhere used to clarify a mechanism. Only open-access sources were used, so that readers and practitioners can check every claim. Every claim was taken from the body of a source rather than its abstract, and Ontario statutes, regulations, and memoranda were read in their official versions on Ontario's e-Laws and ministry websites. Sources play three roles: theory supplies distinctions, empirical studies and board reports supply situated evidence, and legal and policy texts establish duties and authority.

Theoretical Lenses

Critical Race Theory directs attention to how nominally neutral rules distribute harm unevenly. The editors of the Frontiers Research Topic draw on Ray's theory of racialized organizations and on Ladson-Billings and Tate's application of Critical Race Theory to argue that racial inequity is a problem of organizational routine rather than individual attitude (Virella *et al*., 2026) [48]. Slay (2025) [39] and Liera and Desir (2023) [25] apply the same theory to show how routines encode racial meaning and how resources and authority are distributed. Crenshaw's (1989) [12] critique of single-axis analysis requires attention to race and disability together. Organizational learning supplies a second lens. Virella *et al*. (2025) [47], drawing on Argyris and Schön, distinguish single-loop learning, which adjusts action within existing norms, from double-loop learning, which questions those norms. Ainscow (2020) [4] adds that evidence, including

students' comments on teaching arrangements, is central to inclusive development, and that equity depends on processes reaching into a school from outside. Together, the lenses ask whether a response corrects a case or revises the assumption behind similar cases, and whether those most affected can influence that revision.

Trajectory of Argument

The argument moves in four steps. Published evidence is read for the points at which a concern was dropped or carried forward, producing three interpretations. These are translated into five dimensions, each stated as a proposition (Table 3). The framework is then applied to an Ontario discipline example and compared with what an incident-resolution approach would record (Table 4). Decision processes are the unit of analysis. Evidence and analysis are kept distinct. A board report can show a pattern without revealing its cause, and a policy text establishes duties without demonstrating compliance. Case studies are read for mechanism, with no claim about how widespread a mechanism is.

Table 3: Evidence for Tracing a Concern From Recognition to Review

Dimension	Decision to examine	Possible evidence	What does not establish change
Recognize the tension	What warrants review	Accessible intake; review scope; named decision owner	Complaint closure or few reports
Recognize marginalized knowledge	Whether accounts revise the question	Documented changes to scope; confidential channels	Attendance at a meeting
Examine power	Who can approve and resource change	Authority map; reasons for decisions	An advisory committee without a route to the decision
Develop collective capacity	Whether the practice is workable	Guidance; assigned office; protected time	One training session or a single champion
Transform and account	Whether consequences were checked	Disaggregated trends; follow-up accounts; review dates	A new policy or one indicator alone

Note. The evidence types are illustrative and have not been validated.

Table 4: What an Incident-Resolution Approach and the Framework Would Record

Decision point	Incident-resolution approach	Framework
Intake	Complaint closed after a meeting	Remedy, plus a separate review with named owners at school and board
Problem definition	Student conduct	How removals are recorded; whether racial harassment was considered under O. Reg. 472/07
Evidence	The suspension record	Referrals, confidential accounts, climate survey, disaggregated data
Authority	Principal, with possible appeal	Authority map across school plan, board policy, supervisor, and ministry (Table 1)
Participation	Family attended a meeting	Proposals, a written response to each, and a trustee or supervisor route
Review	None	Term reviews, checks for displaced removals, contestable summary

Note. The example is illustrative and does not describe a real school.

Positionality

The author writes as a practising Ontario principal, and university instructor. This position brings familiarity with referral, suspension, and board reporting routines, and a risk of reading problems from an administrator's standpoint. To limit that risk, the analysis gives priority to sources that centre the accounts of students, families, and racialized educators.

Interpretations: Where the Opportunity to Learn Gets Lost

Interpretation 1: A Racial Concern Becomes a Conduct Problem

The first classification of a concern may be the most consequential decision a school makes about it. Treating a tension as an interpersonal matter is sometimes correct. The difficulty arises when the label closes off an organizational explanation. In the opening example, an apology repairs part of the harm but does not tell the school whether its referral category is too broad or applied unevenly, or whether removals appear in the data at all.

Ontario evidence points the same way. The disparities documented in the TDSB and Peel are too large and too persistent to explain case by case (James & Turner, 2017; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2020; TDSB, 2023) [22, 27, 43]. Abawi and Eizadirad (2020) [1] link discretionary powers introduced under the *Safe Schools Act* to disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of racialized students. Shah *et al*. (2022) [38] found that race-evasive approaches dominated Ontario district reform for 25 years, which supplies a ready vocabulary for redescribing a structural complaint as a personal one.

The claim advanced here is narrower than an assertion that every concern traces to one rule. These sources make it unreasonable to place responsibility solely on individuals before the institutional context has been examined. Complaint counts are a weak check. In the TDSB, parents and students filed only 9% of human rights complaints in 2023–2024 (TDSB, 2024) [44], and Black Voices participants described fear of retaliation (Young & Doan, 2023) [50]. Eizadirad and Walton (2025) [15] put the danger bluntly: "institutional procedures in place often end up protecting the institution more than the needs of people who lodge the complaints against the institution" (p. 31). Separating the immediate remedy from the decision to inquire into the practice, as the first dimension does, is a response to that danger.

Interpretation 2: An Institution Hears an Account but Does Not Use It

A concern can be heard, recorded, and still leave no mark on a decision. Two problems are at work. A student whose account is dismissed faces a credibility problem; a school that has no category for being sent into the corridor cannot register the experience at all. Participants at the Commission's roundtables described both, reporting that narratives were treated as anecdotal while quantitative data

were valued (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2023) [28]. Edwards and Kalan (2023) [14] show the same mechanism outside schools, where an institution's credential rules reduced a physician's expertise to first-year standing.

Curriculum offers a parallel. Amtul *et al*. (2024) [5] built an open archive of Canadian Muslims after identifying "a clear gap in resources and/or information readily available" (p. 40). They reviewed more than 100 people against stated criteria, selected 20, wrote lessons aligned with the Ontario curriculum, and added a form allowing visitors to "suggest an edit and/or nominate a Muslim Canadian who they believe deserves to be recognized" (p. 45). The archive makes selection criteria visible and open to public input. Whether a board adopts it lies outside the article's scope. Supplying a resource lowers one barrier, while changing who selects materials and how much time teachers have to use them is a separate barrier where institutions tend to stall.

Recognizing marginalized knowledge also means attending to intersections. A discipline review in a board where students with special education needs account for half of suspensions must examine race and disability together while protecting privacy in small groups (Crenshaw, 1989; TDSB, 2025) [12, 45]. The Ministry's guide to bias-free discipline asks leaders to gather information from students and parents on mitigating factors and to identify barriers that stop students from reporting (Government of Ontario, 2026c) [21]. No family should be asked to speak for a whole community, a safeguard written into the second and third dimensions.

Interpretation 3: Improvement Leaves the Governing Assumption Untouched

Professional learning can improve practice and still leave the assumption behind a routine in place. Virella *et al*. (2025) [47] describe a district mathematics supervisor who presented equity-focused professional learning as sessions on small-group instruction because administrators treated equity and mathematics as separate. The tactic placed learning inside an existing routine, but it depended on one person. Virella and Liera (2024) [49] document the opposite risk: leaders named discipline and grading policies as targets, yet a culture of niceness steered the work toward comfort. Eizadirad and Walton (2025) [15] describe conversations that "stay at the criticism level or complaining without advancing to what can be done as a collective" (p. 33), and efforts that settle for "surface-level representation rather than addressing deeper structural barriers" (p. 31).

Ontario preparation and hiring make the problem structural. Spooner (2024) [40] found that participants traced their equity commitments to personal experience rather than to formal preparation, and Abawi *et al*. (2026) [2] argue that discretionary hiring criteria such as best fit reproduce whiteness in who becomes a decision-maker. A principal who learns to question referrals still needs time and access to board data, along with authority over the local procedure. Without them the review remains a personal project, which is the problem the fourth and fifth dimensions address.

A Five-Dimensional Framework

The framework brings together five dimensions of institutional work. Recognition makes a concern available for inquiry. Recognition of marginalized knowledge changes the evidence considered. Examination of power identifies who can change the practice. Collective capacity makes implementation possible, and accountability tests what changed. The dimensions overlap, and review can reopen any of them. Figure 1 shows the relationship.



Note. The forward arrows show one analytical route. An institution can revisit any dimension as evidence emerges.

Fig 1: Five Dimensions of Building Capacity Through Racial Tensions

Recognize the Tension

Institutional responsiveness asks whether a school can respond to a concern and also investigate whether a rule contributed to it. In the opening example, asking why one student behaved disrespectfully assumes what the label is supposed to establish. Asking who defines disrespect, where the label is used, and who is removed from instruction leaves competing explanations open. The 2014 guidelines already require reporting procedures (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) [32], and *Dreams Delayed* asks duty-holders to review

complaint processes (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2025) [29].

Proposition 1. Schools that separate the immediate remedy from a documented inquiry into the practice will more often identify routine-level contributors to a concern than schools that close the inquiry when the complaint is resolved.

Recognize Marginalized Knowledge

Under epistemic responsiveness, accounts that institutions ordinarily discount become evidence when they can change a problem definition or an option on the table. In Kaiser *et al.* (2025) [23], the families' letter changed the question from whether one incident had been handled to whether the school had a process families could see. If students explain that informal removals differ from suspensions, a review limited to suspension totals must widen its scope.

Proposition 2. When affected students and families help set the scope of a review before data are analyzed, the review is more likely to detect practices that formal records omit.

Examine Power

Institutional reflexivity asks how formal authority and informal influence shaped a decision, and Table 1 supplies the Ontario map. A principal can revise the school-wide discipline plan but not the board's data system; a board can change policy, but in a supervised board a provincial appointee may hold that authority (Government of Ontario, 2026a) [19]. Liera and Desir (2023) [25] frame this as a question of authoritative resources, such as control over personnel, and allocative resources, such as money and time. Influence does not require displacing statutory responsibility. It may mean jointly setting review questions or requiring a written response to each recommendation.

Proposition 3. Community recommendations will more often produce durable changes in routine when the review includes a person with authority over the relevant rule and a written response to each recommendation is required.

Develop Collective Capacity

Adopting a new referral rule does not by itself change practice. Collective agency is the capacity to spread the work and authority that implementation requires. Staff need time to compare how they classify common situations, and someone must check recording. These responsibilities should not default to the family or the racialized staff member who raised the concern. Brown and Eizadirad (2026) [9] note that "women of colour disproportionately occupy frontline roles without equivalent institutional recognition or support" (pp. 96–97), and Ontario's Black educators have described being sidelined when they pressed equity concerns (Turner Consulting Group, 2015) [46]. Assigning one office to carry a concern between school and board also protects families from retelling their account at each stage. In the case Lanford *et al.* (2026) [24] describe, practitioner-led change took root once it was funded and staff were given the autonomy and time to pursue it.

Proposition 4. A change that depends on an individual champion is less likely to survive leadership turnover than one assigned to an office with protected time and a documented rationale.

Transform and Account

Transformative accountability asks an institution to state what changed and what evidence bears on the consequences, while leaving the change open to reconsideration. A revised policy is one kind of evidence. Whether staff use the procedure, and how students experience it, are others that the policy cannot stand in for. Recorded referrals might fall because teachers stop documenting removals. Brown and Eizadirad (2026) [9] offer a useful standard from another sector: "success is not solely defined by the absence of re-offense but by sustained engagement" (p. 102), and caseworkers did not withdraw after setbacks: "Rather than terminating services upon re-offense or re-admission, Amadeusz Prosper caseworkers remain a consistent presence" (p. 101). By that standard, fewer recorded referrals would count as success only if follow-up accounts confirmed the change, and a setback would be grounds for continuing the review. Institutions should report back in privacy-protecting summaries that participants can contest, which makes the framework recursive.

Proposition 5. Where institutions report back to participants and permit them to contest the summary, displaced effects such as unrecorded removals will be detected sooner than where review relies on administrative indicators alone.

Worked Example: A Discipline Concern in an Ontario Board

Return to the opening illustration. Over two months the Grade 7 student has been sent to the office several times, and once the principal issued a one-day suspension under section 306. The other removals were not suspensions, so they produced no notice and no right of appeal. The caregiver could appeal the suspension to the board, but the pattern that preceded it would not be before the board (Government of Ontario, 2026b) [20]. The principal restores the student's place in class, offers a route for follow-up that does not run through the teacher involved, and opens a separate review of the referral practice.

Recognizing the tension. When deciding the suspension, the principal was already required to weigh the pupil's history, prior progressive discipline, and any harassment related to race (O. Reg. 472/07). If that history consisted largely of unrecorded removals, the principal was weighing an incomplete record of the very history the regulation names.

Recognizing marginalized knowledge. The school pairs a time-limited review of office referrals with confidential accounts from students and caregivers and with the school climate survey required under Memorandum 145. Because the board now collects race-based discipline data (Government of Ontario, 2023) [18], results can be examined by race and disability with small cells suppressed.

Examining power. The principal can revise the school-wide plan, including how removals are recorded. The board controls discipline policy and data. Two Ontario precedents show board-level change in decision rights. Under the Minister's directions, Peel revised its discipline policy to prioritize restorative alternatives, required principals to notify their superintendent when considering a suspension or expulsion, and made training on mitigating factors mandatory (Rodrigues, 2023) [35]. The TDSB's action plan similarly calls for suspension decisions involving Black and Indigenous students to be handled through collaboration between principals and superintendents (TDSB, 2022, 2025) [42, 45]. Students and caregivers could propose recording the behaviour, the response, and time out of class in place of a broad label, and a trustee, or a supervisor where one holds authority, can take an unresolved concern to the board.

Developing collective capacity. Staff need time to compare classifications, and one office carries the concern between school and board.

Transforming and accounting. A one-term review asks whether staff use the guidance and whether recorded and informal removals have shifted. Peel shows the difficulty: the direction to eliminate racialized disparities in suspensions remained incomplete when supervision ended because the data were still being collected (Rodrigues, 2023) [35]. Table 4 compares the two approaches.

A shorter second example shows the framework in a different routine. Students tell a secondary curriculum committee that Muslim people appear in course materials mainly in discussions of conflict. Amtul *et al*. (2024) [5] report that "very few school boards in Ontario have begun to create anti-Islamophobia policies" (p. 39) and that the system must "go beyond rhetoric, and take proactive steps on several fronts" (p. 39). The framework asks the committee to treat the concern as an inquiry into selection criteria and to invite students to review those criteria before the next purchase cycle. The record would then show whether their proposal changed a criterion, in addition to whether a resource was bought.

Discussion: The Contribution of a Decision-Centred Framework

The idea that anti-racism requires systemic action is not new. What this framework adds has two parts. Conceptually, it separates voice from consequential influence and treats the decision record as the unit through which influence becomes observable. Methodologically, it converts that distinction into five propositions and a set of records that Ontario studies can collect. The Ontario case sharpens both. Liera and Desir (2023) [25] and Slay (2025) [39] theorize routines and resources in general terms, while the *Education Act* specifies who holds which decision, which allows a researcher to ask whether a concern reached the person with authority to change the relevant rule.

The Ontario evidence also complicates the literature. Kaiser *et al*. (2025) [23] show a principal opening a protocol to families, and Virella and Liera (2024) [49] show colleagues' comfort operating as an informal veto. Peel adds a third pattern, in which provincial directions changed decision rights from outside the board by requiring superintendent notification before suspensions (Rodrigues, 2023) [35]. External authority can move a routine that internal learning has not. It can also displace local accountability, as in 2026, when supervision for financial reasons placed several large boards beyond the reach of their trustees (Government of Ontario, 2026a) [19]. Whether supervision helps or hinders the routes by which families influence discipline is an open question that the framework makes testable.

What the framework defends is consequential participation; conflict has no value in itself. Eizadirad and Walton (2025) [15] insist that "the 'how' of implementation is critical" (p. 38) and distinguish allies from co-conspirators because "co-conspiratorship involves bearing some of the consequences" (p. 37). In organizational terms, the institution rather than the person who raised the concern should bear the cost of acting on it. Some concerns require independent review rather than facilitated conversation, and some communities may refuse participation on unsafe terms. Refusal under such conditions should never be read as consent to existing practice.

Implications for Ontario Policy and Leadership Preparation

Ontario's instruments establish duties but do not show that a board changed a disciplinary routine. Using Table 3 as a template, boards could link each decision on a discipline concern to a named role and a resource commitment, and could show families the response. The *Dreams Delayed* shift to outcome-focused accountability (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2025) [29] and the mandatory collection of race-based discipline data (Government of Ontario, 2023) [18] make such records feasible. Where board action depends on ministry authority or a supervisor, the record should name that dependency rather than leave school staff to absorb the shortfall.

Leadership preparation can use the framework directly. The Principal's Qualification Program guideline already includes a practicum in which candidates may facilitate a collaborative inquiry into how equity is maintained in school practices (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017) [26]. A practicum built on the opening example would ask candidates to separate the remedy from the review, draft an authority map using Table 1, and write a privacy-protecting summary for participants. Given Spooner's (2024) [40] findings, that task would test whether preparation reaches decisions rather than dispositions.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The article is conceptual, and the framework has not been validated. Its sources were chosen for what they illuminate, and the reliance on open-access sources excludes some foundational books. The Ontario data describe particular boards and years, and Peel is a single, unusually visible case. Statutory provisions are described as published in 2026. Anti-Black racism and Islamophobia cannot be treated as interchangeable, and the framework cannot stand in for scholarship on Indigenous jurisdiction and education.

The framework responds to the research agenda of the Frontiers Research Topic, whose editors identify routines as sites of racial reproduction, name equity decoupling, describe anti-racist change as multi-level, and call for work that foregrounds student assets while holding institutions accountable (Virella *et al*., 2026) [48]. Five directions follow for Ontario research:

1. **Tracing concerns longitudinally.** Follow discipline concerns from first report to review in several boards, using meeting records, drafts, budgets, and family accounts, to test Propositions 1 and 3.
2. **Comparing supervised and trustee-governed boards.** Examine whether provincial supervision changes the routes by which families influence discipline decisions.
3. **Using race-based discipline data.** Study how boards use the data collected since 2023, including whether informal removals are captured.
4. **Following changes through turnover.** Test Proposition 4 by tracking whether responsibilities revert to racialized staff after leadership changes, a pattern Ontario's Black educators have described (Turner Consulting Group, 2015) [46].
5. **Documenting harms and displaced effects.** Examine retaliation, confidentiality breaches, and exclusion moved into less visible practices, which Proposition 5 addresses. Brown and Eizadirad (2026) [9] offer a model for research partnerships in which "data and findings

remain accessible to Amadeusz to support their program and advocacy efforts" (p. 100).

Such research would answer the question Eizadirad and Walton (2025) [15] leave with their readers, namely how institutions will measure their actions through an approach "that takes the conversation beyond good intentions" (p. 39).

Conclusion

Resolving a racial tension shows that a complaint was handled. Whether the institution learned anything, or changed a routine, is a different matter. In the opening example, restoring the student to class was an immediate responsibility. Investigating what the school counts as disrespect, how removals are recorded, who can revise the rule, and what happens afterward was a separate one. In answer to the four research questions, the article has argued that classification at intake determines whether a concern becomes institutional, that marginalized knowledge alters decisions when it can change the scope of a review and receives a recorded response, that change persists when it is assigned to offices with time and authority, and that sustained change is shown by decision records and follow-up evidence rather than by policy adoption. In Ontario, where the *Education Act* specifies who decides and boards now collect race-based discipline data, these claims can be tested. The aim is to ensure that the people who identify harm do not carry the institution's responsibility for addressing it.

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