EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND INDEPENDENT K-12 SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO

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Abstract

School leaders face many dilemmas in their ethical decision-making as part of their regular responsibilities (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Cranston et al., 2003, 2006; Ehrich et al., 2015; Eyal et al., 2011; Langlois, 2004; Langlois & Lapointe, 2007). This study explores how leaders in Ontario's public, private, and independent K-12 schools experience dilemmas and how governance influences ethical decision-making, as seen through the multiple paradigm approach (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). A comparative multiple case study approach was used to examine the experiences and perspectives of leaders in six case schools, including two schools from each governance type (public, private, and independent). The study's first phase featured semi-structured interviews with two leaders from each school and a document analysis; these data collection methods enabled the development of the six cases. In the second phase, three paired interviews with two leaders of the same governance type provided additional data for cross-case comparisons with governance type serving as the central comparative dimension. Key findings reveal that while school governance shapes the nature of ethical dilemmas leaders encounter, it systematically influences which ethical paradigms become salient in their decision-making. Leaders across all governance types draw from the same ethical toolkit, but governance type may shape which paradigms they emphasize and prioritize. Public school leaders experienced dilemmas and influences distinct from the private and independent school leaders, whose experiences were more similar. This research contributes to the understanding of school leadership decision-making and underscores the importance of governance in shaping leadership preparation programs, hiring and retention practices, professional development and training, and school policy development and implementation.

Keywords: School leadership, ethical dilemmas, ethical decision-making, school governance type, private schools, public schools, independent schools

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When a public school principal must choose between assigning staff to a breakfast program or to providing more one-on-one support, when a private school head decides whether to expel a student whose family cannot pay tuition, or when an independent school leader weighs parental demands against professional judgment, these scenarios represent more than administrative challenges. They are ethical dilemmas that strike at the heart of educational leadership, where decisions about resources, access, and values directly shape students' futures. Such ethical dilemmas occur in an increasingly complex landscape of challenges that includes school violence, bullying, inequities, student mental health issues, and resource constraints. In this demanding environment, ethical decision-making becomes critical (Grimmett, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Tintoré et al., 2022). Educational leaders must weigh the needs of students, staff, and the community in a context characterized by competing interests (Sergiovanni, 1991a), while contributing to the flourishing of human society (Starratt, 1991). At the same time, the type of school governance within which leaders operate fundamentally shapes both the nature of the ethical challenges that they face and the ethical frameworks that they use to resolve them. However, despite their potential to influence ethical decision-making by educational leaders, school governance types remain underexplored in the research literature.

Researchers in educational leadership have called for more significant consideration and understanding of ethical paradigms and their influence on ethical decision-making in school leadership (Arar et al., 2016; Arar & Saiti, 2022; Begley & Johansson, 1998; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Cranston et al., 2003; Hodgkinson, 1991; Langlois, 2011; Noddings, 1992; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994). Despite this widespread recognition of the need for ethical leadership in education, there remains a gap in understanding how different types of school

governance influence school leaders' decision-making. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining how school governance types may shape the ethical dilemmas faced by school leaders as well as the ethical frameworks they use to resolve them.

Background

The Context of School Governance in Ontario

In Ontario, schools are organized into three primary types of governance structures: public, private, and independent. These governance types determine the purpose, value, and authorities within the school as an organization (Lane & Birch, 2025). While schools in the province are principally governed by the *Education Act* (Government of Ontario, 2014), the operational realities differ significantly between types of governance. In this study, public schools are defined as those which operate within provincial jurisdiction under school boards, while independent schools are usually governed as individual schools by an elected board of directors, and private schools are managed by private business owners and/or their employees (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

The educational landscape in Ontario is shifting, with a notable 29% increase in private and independent school enrollment for the decade between 2012 and 2022, compared to only a 1% increase for public schools over that same period (Government of Canada, 2024)[1]. In tangible terms, this growth represents 35 000 more students enrolled in private and independent schools each year, comprising 7.6% of Ontario's K-12 student population (Government of Canada, 2024). Furthermore, there was a 52% growth in the number of Ontario independent schools (954 to 1445) from 2013 to 2022 (Hunt et al., 2022). Davies et al (2025) have noted that

[1] Statistics Canada reports student enrolment based on the number of registered students on September 30th each year.

in 2023, non-public schools represented a 21% share of all schools in the province. This trend represents more than a statistical change; it signals a shift in the school governance landscape in Ontario, which in turn changes the organizational context in which many school leaders operate.

How Governance Type Shapes Ethical Context

School governance types are more than administrative arrangements; they shape the kinds of ethical dilemmas that leaders encounter and the resources available to resolve them (Heres & Lasthuizen, 2012; James & Sheppard, 2014; Madestam et al., 2018; Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017). Organizational authority, accountability, and institutional mission vary significantly across governance types, producing different pressures and expectations for decision-making (Madestam et al., 2018; Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017). Literature on school governance types from across a variety of jurisdictions, as seen in the paragraphs that follow, illustrates some of these differences.

In public schools**,** leaders face dilemmas rooted in legislated mandates and system-wide priorities such as equity, standardized accountability (Jaafar & Anderson, 2007), and resource allocation. They must implement policy directives while balancing diverse community needs with finite resources. This often requires leaders to navigate tensions between what is required and what they believe will most benefit their students (Faubert & Paulson, 2020; Heres & Lasthuizen, 2012; Madestam et al., 2018).

In private schools**,** dilemmas are often shaped by financial sustainability and market pressures. Leaders work in tuition-dependent contexts where parental expectations, institutional reputation, and long-term viability weigh heavily on decisions. Questions of access, inclusion, and equity intersect with the need to preserve the school's mission and satisfy fee-paying families (Jacobsen, 2024; Machin, 2014; Üztemur et al., 2022).

In independent schools, which are non-profit and accountable to boards of directors, leaders encounter dilemmas related to governance, staff relations, parental influence, and administrative autonomy. Board oversight introduces both resources and constraints, requiring leaders to negotiate authority and maintain trust with multiple stakeholder groups (Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, 2021; Lane & Birch, 2025).

Overall, the literature provides useful classification and critiques of the ethical dilemmas encountered by school leaders in various governance types, but it remains limited in scope; the published research tends to focus on public schools, emphasizes managerial accountability and under-theorizes ethical practice mediated through governance type. Each governance type shapes the dilemmas faced by school leaders, the boundaries of their decision-making authority, and the expectations of stakeholders (Heres & Lasthuisen, 2012; Jacobsen, 2024).

Ethical Paradigms and Ethical Decision-Making

As societal expectations for competent and principled leadership have grown (Arar & Oplatka, 2022), research on ethical school leadership has expanded in recent decades (Ahmed, 2023). School leaders regularly confront dilemmas such as balancing individual student needs against the collective good, navigating tensions between board policies and community values, making difficult budget allocation decisions, and addressing socio-economic and academic equity tensions that have no clear-cut solutions (Shapiro & Gross, 2007; Tintoré et al., 2022).

These dilemmas lie at the heart of school leadership, prompting Hodgkinson (1991) to observe that "values, morals, and ethics are the very stuff of leadership and administrative life" (p.11). Such value conflicts require leaders to draw on ethical paradigms as part of their decision-making.

Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2022) multi-paradigm approach encompassing the four ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care, and the profession is foundational to the conceptual framework of this study, which is detailed and illustrated in Chapter 2. The ethical paradigm of *justice* focuses on rights, laws and fairness, *critique* challenges existing laws and rules, questioning power structures and seeking social justice, *care* prioritizes relationships and the needs of individuals, and the *profession* emphasizes the unique responsibilities and best interests in educational practice.

This paradigmatic approach captures the complexity of how governance type might influence ethical decision-making without predetermining which ethical paradigms will be most relevant in which contexts. The framework positions governance type as a key contextual factor that influences how leaders navigate ethical dilemmas through the different ethical paradigms.

The Research Problem

Leadership complexities point to a larger issue in the literature. Despite extensive scholarship on ethical leadership, research on how school governance types shape the nature of leaders' ethical dilemmas and the conditions through which they must resolve them remain underexplored. Ahmed's (2023) systematic review of ethical leadership studies in educational research from 1990-2022 revealed no research themes or mediating effects related to governance types, despite noting that "the rate of publication has been dramatically increasing" (p. 4) in this area. Existing research has shown that school leaders routinely encounter value-laden decisions (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Jenlink, 2015; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022), yet the influence of governance type is seldom mentioned.

This issue is especially pressing given Ontario's growing enrolment in private and independent schools (Government of Canada, 2024). Leaders operate under distinct pressures

and accountability mechanisms that may require different ethical approaches, yet current research and preparation programs provide little guidance for the growing populations in non-public schools. Without a better understanding of the influence of governance type, the field lacks the information needed to develop appropriate support systems that equip leaders to respond effectively to ethical dilemmas.

This study therefore contributes to the generation of new knowledge on educational leadership by examining how different types of governance structures shape the application of ethical paradigms and decision-making for K-12 school leaders in Ontario. In doing so, this study seeks to advance theoretical and practical understanding of how governance types mediate the ethical school leadership decision-making.

Research Questions

A qualitative exploratory comparative case study design was used to explore how different types of school governance structures influence individual K-12 school leaders in Ontario, their dilemmas, and their ethical decision-making. To delve deeper into these important issues, this study poses the following research questions aimed at exploring school governance and ethical decision-making among educational leaders:

1. What kinds of ethical dilemmas are faced by education leaders in K-12 schools working in different types of governance structures?
2. How does type of school governance structure influence ethical decision-making for K-12 school leaders?
3. What ethical paradigms frame the decisions made by school leaders?

Given its exploratory nature, this study does not seek to judge the ethics of individual leaders. The research questions, conceptual framework, and research methods are not aimed at

assessing the merits of the different types of governance against each other, but rather, aim to compare leadership decisions in each case type to better understand interrelationships and influences of various factors tied to governance type. The focus is on comparative elements rather than evaluative ones.

Significance of the Study

This research is important for several reasons. First, school leaders can have a profound impact on student well-being and success (Leithwood et al., 2020), and effective leaders must be responsive to their context (Hallinger, 2018; Miller, 2016). As Hodgkinson (1991) notes, "Roles will be embedded in different types of organizational context, again with different patterns of values" (p. 112). This suggests that the governance type within which leaders operate shapes not only the challenges they face but also the values they must navigate. When faced with dilemmas, which occurs almost daily in educational settings (Arar & Saiti 2022), school leaders must consider the ethical relevance of values and choices specific to their organization to make decisions (Langlois, 2004).

Second, ethical paradigms serve as crucial frameworks that enable school leaders to approach decision-making through disciplined thinking (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). Indeed, ethical analysis offers leaders unique responses to ethical dilemmas, distinct from those that might be expected from purely managerial or instructional perspectives. Understanding how school governance type influences the application of these paradigms can enhance the effectiveness of leaders' decision-making.

The practical significance of this study extends beyond the research community to educational leaders and policymakers. By understanding how the distinct pressures documented in this study (e.g., legislated mandates versus, market forces, and board accountability) influence

ethical dilemmas and paradigm application, this research can inform governance-specific leadership preparation. Rather than relying on generic ethical frameworks, preparation programs could address context-specific challenges: how public school leaders navigate ethical decisions within system constraints, how private school leaders balance educational mission with financial sustainability, or how independent school leaders manage multiple stakeholder expectations. This understanding can also enhance recruitment by helping match leaders to governance contexts that align with their ethical decision-making approaches and improve support systems that recognize the distinct ethical landscapes that each governance type creates.

Key Terms

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout this dissertation, the following section defines the key terms and concepts central to understanding how school governance structures influence ethical decision-making.

Ethical Dilemmas

Situations requiring "a choice between competing sets of principles and values" (Cranston et al., 2006, p. 60), where educational leaders face uncertainty about the best course of action due to conflicting values and competing stakeholder needs. These situations require careful consideration of underlying moral principles and other values which shape decisions.

School Governance Types

For this study, three governance types are examined, which this researcher distinguishes through funding, mandates, and leadership composition. Public schools are schools operating under provincial jurisdiction and school board authority and are funded through taxes (Government of Ontario, 2014). Private schools are for-profit institutions with owners, which operate independently of government funding. Independent schools are non-profit private

schools governed by elected boards of directors (Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, 2022).

Ethical Decision-Making

Jones (1991) defines an ethical decision as "a decision that is both legal and morally acceptable to the larger community" (p. 367). For the purpose of this study, ethical decision-making in this study refers to the process through which educational leaders resolve ethical dilemmas. It involves conscious reflection on competing values and the application of ethical paradigms to guide choices.

Educational Leadership

While the term educational leadership holds many definitions in the literature, for this study, educational leadership refers to the practice of formal school leaders who hold official positions, titles, and appointments within K-12 schools and are responsible for guiding educational processes, managing organizational operations, and making decisions that impact student learning and school community well-being.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into six chapters. The current chapter introduces the thesis and presents its rationale and problem statement. Chapter Two offers a literature review and critical analysis that sets the context for the study and addresses relevant findings from previous studies that connect ideas, key terms, and constructs throughout the thesis. This review is divided into sections which include ethical theories, ethical decision-making, decision-making through multiple ethical paradigms, school leadership and decision-making, school governance, and the influence of school governance. It concludes with a presentation of the conceptual framework underpinning the study. In Chapter Three, the study's research methods are presented and

described, including the epistemological positionality of the researcher, the research design, case selection and analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study. Chapter Four presents the key findings and themes for each case and case governance type along with a summary of cases by governance type, while in Chapter Five, individual cases and pairs of cases are compared via a cross-case analysis, revealing dominant themes organized by the study's research questions. Chapter Six presents an overview and analysis of the study by revisiting and updating the conceptual framework and providing an interpretation of the findings with links to the relevant literature. Finally, the study's limitations are presented along with some noteworthy areas for future research and a discussion of the overall contributions to future theory, policy, and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The vital importance of schools in shaping a just and informed society requires that they be well-led and well-governed. The literature review for this study explores important bodies of research on ethical decision-making and school governance types. These bodies of research constitute the foundation for this study's research questions, conceptual framework, and research methods. This chapter presents a review of the literature, aims to provide the reader with an understanding of these key areas, and situates them within the established terminology and concepts. The first section of this chapter examines ethical theories, ethical decision-making, and the ethical paradigms that frame decisions made by school leaders. The second section considers types of school governance in Ontario, focusing on understanding the three types of interest for this study: public, private, and independent. The third section explores the relationship between ethical decision-making and school governance type, highlighting their interactions and potential impacts. Finally, the conceptual framework for this study is presented and explained.

Considering Ethics

Ethical Theories

The word 'ethics' is derived from the Greek word *ethos,* referring to 'character', and so an ethical person is someone who has character (Cranston et al., 2014); this is often defined by what we ought to do or how we ought to live our lives (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Willower (1981) explains ethics as describing "the nature of the good society...and what one ought to do in situations that require judgments of value and moral choice" (p. 115-116).

Ciulla (2006) notes that ethics lie at the heart of leadership, and that a deep knowledge of ethics can provide a wider appreciation of the complexity facing leaders as they make values-based decisions to resolve ethical dilemmas. Three foundational ethical theories provide a basis

for understanding the intersection between ethical decision-making and leadership; these are described in the sections that follow.

Utilitarian Ethics. Utilitarian ethical theory, also sometimes called consequentialism, is "generally held to be the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good" (Driver, 2022, p. 1). Utilitarian ethical decisions focus on the consequences of the actions that produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Gilead, 2024). In other words, utilitarianism considers the benefits, outcomes, and consequences of a decision and it considers a decision to be morally right when it produces the greatest pleasure and happiness for the majority of people affected (Dion, 2012).

Despite its intuitive appeal, utilitarian theory presents significant challenges to educational contexts. Filip et al. (2016) identify two main limitations that complicate its practical application: First, the theory assumes that decision-makers can accurately predict the benefits or consequences of their actions, which is a particularly difficult task in educational environments where outcomes may not manifest for months or years. Second, it presumes that every person would come to the same conclusion about what constitutes happiness or benefit, yet educational stakeholders often hold vastly different priorities and values.

The measurement and comparison problems inherent in utilitarian decision-making pose additional difficulties. Assessing and predicting pleasure and happiness is subjective and inconsistent, with the judgment resting on the decision-makers rather than those experiencing the consequences (Driver, 2022). Accordingly, education leaders face the difficult task of comparing gains against intangible benefits, such as weighing budget savings against long-term student wellbeing, or comparing one group's academic achievements against another's social and emotional growth.

Problematically, utilitarianism also implies that decisions that might produce the greatest good might also infringe upon individual rights or require the abandonment or suspension of certain moral codes (Filip et al., 2016). The utilitarian consequentialist notion that the ends justify the means can thus sacrifice individual welfare and create particular tensions in educational settings and is therefore sometimes criticized when applied to this context (Gilead, 2024).

The limitations of utilitarian ethics in educational contexts highlight the need for alternative ethical frameworks that do not rely solely on consequentialist reasoning. While utilitarianism focuses on outcomes and the greatest good for the greatest number, educational leaders often require ethical guidance that emphasizes the inherent rightness or wrongness of actions themselves, independent of their results. This need for principle-based decision-making, particularly in situations where outcomes are uncertain or where individual rights must be protected regardless of collective benefit, points toward deontological approaches to ethics.

Deontological Ethics. The term "deontology" is derived from the Greek word deon, meaning "duty" and logos, meaning "reason" and relates to the professional duties and responsibilities inherent to any role (Langlois & Lapointe, 2007). Deontological theory focuses on the correctness or wrongfulness of decisions and behaviours independent of their consequences (Alexander & Moore, 2024). This ethical theory emphasizes principles that dictate how one should act (Filip et al., 2016), aligning the actions with principles, over the results achieved. Ethical principles thus provide frameworks for critical analysis when facing complex decisions requiring moral judgment (Nix, 2002).

Ethical principles, according to Dunlevy and Walker (2011), represent fundamental standards that guide human interactions and relationships. These principles shape thinking and

behaviour, leading people to act in ways that are considered good and virtuous (Donlevy & Walker, 2011). Within this theory, the intention behind an action carries greater weight than its outcome and an action is morally right only if it can be universally applied to all rational beings and be universally recognized (Dion, 2012). This Kantian ‘golden rule’ principle that one should only do unto others as one would have done unto themselves thus applies equally to all persons including the decision-maker (Donlevy & Walker, 2011).

For educational leaders facing ethical dilemmas, deontological ethics demands treating all individuals as ends in themselves, and not merely as means to achieve other goals. This requires leaders to recognize and uphold the inherent dignity and worth of every person, whether students, staff, parents, or community members (Jenlink, 2015). In practice, this might mean refusing to compromise one student's educational opportunities to benefit another or declining to give staff hope through false promises even if it would improve short-term productivity. The deontological leader asks not "What outcome do I want?" but rather, "What action honors the dignity of all involved and could serve as a universal principle for ethical leadership?"

Deontological ethics have some shortcomings. First, there are situations where it is possible to comply with deontological norms but doing so will bring about negative consequences. For instance, if a principal discovers that a teacher falsified attendance records, reporting them prevents the opportunity to correct the behaviour and could result in longer-term negative consequences for the teacher if the behaviour is repeated. Second, a paradox exists where violations of norms are considered wrong, yet a wrongful act could prevent many more wrongful acts. Consider as an example a teacher who promised confidentiality to a student but then learns of abuse that must be reported. Finally, there can be conflicts between different deontological obligations whereby a person can be simultaneously expected to do something

while also refraining from it, thus entering a dilemma (Alexander & Moore, 2024). An example of this might include protecting student privacy while fulfilling an obligation for transparent communication with parents.

Virtue Ethics. The third and final theory of normative ethics to be explored is virtue ethics. At its core, virtue ethics defines virtues as "excellent traits of character" (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2023, section. 1.1) that represent stable dispositions to act in morally praiseworthy ways. Unlike deontological and utilitarian approaches that focus primarily on duties or consequences, virtue ethics centers on the moral character of the decision-maker (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2023). As Filip et al. (2016) explain, "virtue-based ethics foster virtue as a way of shaping one's character and ethical behaviour" (p. 84), judging individuals by their character traits rather than isolated actions.

Drawing from both Aristotelian and Confucian philosophical traditions, Ghosh (2016) identifies six cardinal virtues essential for educational leaders: *courage* (the willingness to take principled stands despite potential opposition), *temperance* (self-regulation and moderation in decision-making), *justice* (fair treatment and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities), *prudence* (practical wisdom in applying moral principles to complex situations), *humanity* (compassion and care for the wellbeing of others), and *truthfulness* (honesty and integrity in communication and action). These virtues work together to form the moral foundation necessary for ethical educational leadership.

Ghosh (2016) identifies three key characteristics of leadership virtues in educational contexts. First, virtues originate from leaders' moral foundations, character, and value systems, becoming visible through their behaviours and decisions. Second, these behaviours demonstrate consistency over time, contributing to the leader's reputation and establishing trust within the

school community. Third, educational leaders can develop and strengthen their virtues. With continual learning and application, leaders can acquire and nurture their leadership virtues.

Importantly, virtues are contextually sensitive, meaning that their expression must be adapted to specific situations and cultural environments (Ghosh, 2016). For example, when defending a vulnerable student, courage might manifest as protective intervention, while advocating for policy changes might manifest as courage by building coalitions instead of direct confrontation. The same core value adapts its expression to different relational dynamics and school contexts.

A virtuous action, according to Ghosh (2016), is fundamentally "voluntary, intrinsically motivated, and expressed through consistent behaviours" (p. 246). This definition emphasizes that virtue is not merely about external perception but represents genuine internal dispositions that manifest through repeated moral actions. Virtues exist along a continuum of development and individuals can possess virtues to varying degrees and continue strengthening them through practice and experience. As Hackett and Wang (2012) suggest, virtue in leadership represents dispositions or traits acquired and maintained through learning and continuous practice.

The integration of virtue ethics with educational leadership connects to broader concepts of ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In educational settings, virtue-based leadership influences not only individual decisions but also shapes the ethical climate of schools, modeling ethical behaviour for students, staff, and the broader school community.

While deontological, utilitarian and virtue ethical theories provide the philosophical foundation for understanding moral reasoning, their application in educational leadership contexts requires further examination through the lens of practical ethical decision-making that school leaders employ daily.

Ethical Decision-making

Definition and Context. The ethical dimensions of leadership have come under increasing scrutiny in light of ethical scandals across various sectors, prompting researchers to more clearly define and examine "ethical leadership" (Lasthuizen et al., 2019). Brown et al. (2005) provide a foundational definition of ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (p. 120). This definition emphasizes both the leader's personal conduct and their active role in promoting ethical behaviour throughout their organization.

Building on this foundation, Langlois and Lapointe (2012) conceptualize ethical leadership as "a social practice that integrates autonomous professional judgement. Ethical leadership is as much a resource based on [...] ethical dimensions, as a capacity and power to act in a responsible and acceptable manner" (p. 343). Their definition highlights the professional judgment required in ethical leadership and positions it as both a resource and a capacity for responsible action.

Research by Berkovich and Eyal (2021) demonstrates that leadership styles significantly influence ethical decision-making patterns. They argue that "stable leadership behaviours are related to situational responsiveness, such as decision-making" (p. 133) and that these more stable elements constitute a style. This suggests that consistent leadership practices create predictable patterns of ethical decision-making across different situations. This connection between leadership style and ethical judgment underscores that ethical leadership emerges through the consistent conduct and behaviours that individuals demonstrate when facing situations requiring ethical decision-making.

The Role of Values in Ethical Decision-Making. Values serve as the foundation for ethical decision-making in educational leadership. School leaders routinely navigate competing demands that vary depending on institutional logics (Dulude & Milley, 2021) and diverse stakeholder needs (Tintoré et al., 2022). In these complex situations, leaders typically draw upon their personal values or those promoted by their organization to guide their decisions.

Begley and Johannson (1998) define values as "those conceptions of the desirable that motivate individuals and collective groups to act in a particular way to achieve particular ends" (p. 399). Similarly, Hodgkinson (1978) describes values as conceptions "of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action" (p. 121). These definitions reveal values as motivational forces that shape both individual and collective behaviour.

Hodgkinson's observation highlights that "values constitute the essential problem of leadership" (1991, p. 11) and that if there are no value conflicts, then there is no need for leadership. This illuminates why values are central to educational leadership: the tensions and conflicts between competing values create the very situations that require ethical decision-making. Value conflicts emerge when leaders encounter situations where no single solution can satisfy all stakeholders, or when decisions force individuals to prioritize one deeply held value over another, potentially challenging core beliefs or professional requirements (Begley & Johansson, 1998). Given school leaders' accountability to multiple stakeholders, they frequently face situations where values conflict, creating ambiguity and ethical dilemmas.

Ethics and values are related yet distinct concepts. Ethics refers to the study of moral principles and frameworks used to guide decision-making based on what one ought to do (Cranston et al., 2014). On the other hand, values represent the fundamental beliefs and priorities

that inform what individuals or groups consider important or desirable. This understanding positions educational leadership as inherently ethical work, involving reflective examination of values underlying potential decisions when resolving ethical dilemmas (Willower, 1994). The exercise of ethical leadership becomes anchored in leaders' decision-making processes when confronting ethical dilemmas (Arar et al., 2016; Cranston et al., 2003, 2014; Langlois, 2004; Langlois & Lapointe, 2007, 2012).

Ethical Dilemmas in Educational Leadership. An ethical dilemma refers to "a circumstance that requires a choice between competing sets of principles and values in a given, usually undesirable or perplexing situation" (Cranston et al., 2006, p. 60). Crucially, ethical dilemmas typically involve choices between two or more "right" options rather than clear distinctions between right and wrong (Cranston et al., 2006). These situations arise in contexts where conflicting principles and other values complicate decision-making between seemingly valid alternatives (Jenlink & Jenlink, 2015).

The distinction between "ethical dilemma" and "moral dilemma" proves important for understanding educational leadership challenges. Ethics involves the systematic study of values, while morals refer to first-order beliefs about good and evil or absolute notions of right and wrong (Sun, 2011). Ethical dilemmas require a conscious reflection on morality, presenting situations where all choices appear equally valid or equally problematic. In this sense, a moral dilemma occurs when an individual’s core values are challenged, whereas an ethical dilemma arises when competing moral principles collide.

Schools, as spaces where interpersonal and intergroup conflicts naturally occur, generate situations where different values and beliefs create conflict. As Goldring and Greenfield (2002) observe, "Much of school leadership involves making value judgments about the right thing to

do in the face of more than one desirable choice. At other times, the challenge may be choosing the least harmful from among several undesirable alternatives" (p. 3). This characterization illustrates how educational leaders must simultaneously consider different types of values - right versus wrong, better versus worse, operating at multiple levels.

Lyse Langlois, along with colleagues, has provided important research on ethical decision-making for school leaders in Canada (Langlois, 2004; Langlois et al., 2014; Langlois & Lapointe, 2007, 2012; Lapointe et al., 2020). Their research reveals important patterns in how educational leaders approach ethical dilemmas; first, these researchers found that ethical decision-making sophistication develops over time through accumulated experience with complex situations (Langlois & Lapointe, 2007). Second, decision-making by school leaders such as superintendents follow a series of steps that include: responding to the problem, checking organizational policies, appealing to conscience, conducting ethical analysis, and finally closing the procedure while anticipating consequences. These steps integrate consideration of both personal and professional values alongside meaningful personal reflection, which lead to ethical decisions (Langlois, 2004).

Value Frameworks for Decision-Making. Paul Begley's extensive research on value theory provides crucial insights into how personal and professional values function in educational leadership decision-making. Begley and Johannsen (1998) drew on Hodgkinson's (1996) three types of values that influence decisions: trans-rational or metaphysical values rooted in principle, sub-rational values based on personal preference and individual good, and values of consequence or consensus that consider desired outcomes or majority will. Begley (2000) notes that values grounded in consequence and consensus tend to predominate in educational decision-making. He further notes that the sub-rational or personal preferences receive some

consideration, while trans-rational principles are most often avoided. This pattern creates potential value problems because even when people try to make rational, consequence-based decisions, unconscious personal values can still influence how they interpret and prioritize the same information (Hodgkinson, 1996).

Value conflicts constitute the primary source of ethical dilemmas for educational leaders. As Begley (2000) notes, drawing on Roche's 1999 work, "the ambiguities of the postmodern world present a complex dilemma for school administrators acting in the face of increasing moral confusion and ambiguity [where] confusing and conflicting values often preclude the determination by administrators of any clear choice, action, or decision" (p. 244). These conflicts can occur within individual leaders' value systems, between different educators' values, or between school and community values. Having established the nature and complexity of ethical dilemmas facing school leaders, we now turn to examining the specific paradigms through which these leaders frame and resolve such dilemmas.

Decision-Making Through Multiple Ethical Paradigms

The three normative ethical theories of utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics provide the philosophical foundation for the multiple ethical paradigms framework used in this study. The paradigms translate these abstract theories into practical decision-making tools that enable educational leaders to apply normative ethical reasoning to ethical dilemmas. Where the paradigms emphasize justice, care, critique, and professional ethics in educational leadership, the theories supply broader ways of reasoning, whether by focusing on consequences, rules and principles, or the character and relationships of those involved.

Ethics form the foundation of educational leadership, given the complex ethical dilemmas that school leaders routinely face. A movement to foster ethical leadership in schools gained

momentum in the 1990s (Starratt, 1991), emphasizing the importance of ethical paradigms in educational decision-making. Starratt (2017) defines ethical paradigms as frameworks that encompass the beliefs, assumptions, principles, and values supporting a moral way of life. Building on Brown et al.'s (2005) definition of ethical leadership, educational leaders must perform their actions ethically across all stakeholder relationships, with students, families, teachers, staff, administrators, government regulators, and broader society.

The complexity of ethical dilemmas in education requires sophisticated analytical approaches. Starratt et al. (2010) explain:

> When surveying ethical challenges education leaders face, one is confronted by a multiplicity of perspectives, both analytical, ideological, and political, that tend to reflect the differing societal and internal contexts of schools and the differing perspectives – traditional, progressive, research-based, individualistic or communitarian focused – on the process of educating the young. These realities suggest the necessity of careful analysis of differing perspectives as a necessary methodology of ethical deliberation, as well as weighing of consequences of various choices. (p.718)

To navigate these complex ethical dilemmas, leaders can draw upon various ethical paradigms that describe dimensions of ethical behavior and underlying values (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Langlois, 2004; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt et al., 2010). Starratt (1991) argued against treating each ethical paradigm in isolation, suggesting instead a tri-dimensional model including justice, critique and care, in which each ethic is fulfilled only when applied alongside other ethics. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) similarly assert that using more than one paradigm at the same time enables school leaders to generate more nuanced and reflective solutions and make more ethically sound decisions.

While Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) agree with the significance of Starratt's multiple paradigms, they concluded that even when taken together, justice, critique and care did not capture a full representation of the factors that should be taken into consideration in ethical decision-making. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) added a fourth paradigm to those presented by Starratt (1991), supported by Sergiovanni (1991b), and Gilligan (1982). The revised 4-paradigm framework seeks to capture all the ethical aspects pertaining to educational leadership. This study adopts Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2022) framework to provide conceptual grounding for exploring ethical decision-making in school leadership. Table 1 summarizes these four paradigms which are then described in detail.

Table 1. *Multiple Ethical Paradigms*

Ethical Paradigm	Description
Ethic of Justice	Focused on rights, laws, policies, and democratic principles.
Ethic of Critique	Aimed at identifying and addressing inequities in society and schools.
Ethic of Care	Emphasizes interpersonal relationships and individual well-being
Ethic of the Profession	Expects leaders to apply professional standards and develop individual codes of ethics.

The Ethic of Justice. The ethic of justice is strongly aligned with deontological ethical theory (Kwemarira et al., 2023). Both frameworks prioritize rules, duties, and the concept of justice as fairness, emphasizing consistency and equal treatment as fundamental principles. Deontological theory asserts that morally right actions must be universally applicable; in other words, actions are ethical when they can be consistently applied to all individuals regardless of circumstance. This deontological emphasis on achieving impartial and universal decisions

through consistent application directly corresponds to the ethic of justice's commitment to fairness and equal treatment for all community members.

The ethic of justice also focuses on rights, laws, and social contracts, viewing communal understandings and relationships as central themes. This paradigm requires treating every school community member with equality, dignity, and fairness while recognizing that individuals must sometimes forego certain rights for the collective good (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). This interpretation of the ethic of justice is closer to the utilitarian ethics theory and emphasizes the application of rights and laws to maximize overall good for the greatest number, even when individual students or staff members may not be optimally served (Drašček et al., 2021). Earlier conceptions of the ethic of justice often refer to equity as a key consideration. However, concepts and applications of the term have evolved, and a more contemporary application of equity in the field of education refers to equal opportunities (Jurado De Los Santos et al., 2020), and equality of outcomes (Akmal & Pritchett, 2021) rather than equal treatment.

For school leaders, "the ethic of justice provides a framework for people to solve problems by first establishing what is just and fair for the individual and the school community" (Mathur & Corley, 2014, p. 137). This often requires weighing individual rights against community needs. Sergiovanni (1991b) positions justice as the epicenter of any school and the primary guidepost for decision-making processes. The prominence of justice in social value hierarchies makes principles of justice and moral integrity key elements of organizational culture that positively impact ethical decision-making (Arar & Saiti, 2022).

However, justice can also be problematic. As Foucault and Chomsky (1973) observe, justice serves "as an instrument of certain political and economic power, or as a weapon against that power...the notion of justice itself functions within a society of classes as a claim made by

the oppressed classes and as a justification for it" (p. 138). This critique highlights how justice can legitimate existing rules and laws that may themselves be inherently unfair.

Vogel's (2012) study of twenty educational leaders identified practical applications of the ethic of justice, including basing decisions on data, valuing accountability, ensuring fairness, and protecting individual rights. All the participants claimed ethical positions consistent with the ethic of justice yet also reflected an acute awareness of inequities and the need for an ethic of critique.

The Ethic of Critique. The ethic of critique both confronts and complements the ethic of justice by challenging existing rules and laws. Unlike the ethic of justice, this paradigm treats laws as distinct from ethics (Mathur & Corley, 2014), instead questioning and analyzing established paradigms of justice and fairness. The ethic of critique recognizes that existing laws and codes may be inherently problematic, often serving to maintain social hierarchies and privilege those already advantaged (DeMatthews et al., 2015).

Rooted in critical theory and linked to critical pedagogy, this paradigm seeks to expand human rights and amplify voices that are often unheard in educational discourse (Puyo, 2022). Social justice concepts are deeply embedded within this framework, recognizing needs for emancipation from ethnic, racial, sexual, economic, cultural, and political injustices while affirming the dignity of disenfranchised individuals. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) explain that this approach "asks educators to go beyond questioning and critical analysis to examine and grapple with those possibilities... Such a process should lead to the development of options related to important concepts such as oppression, power, privilege, authority, voice, language, and empowerment" (p. 16).

Educational leaders applying the ethic of critique must consider whether certain groups hold advantages over others, assess whether groups lack access to decision-making processes, and identify underlying assumptions at play (Wood, 2012). Practical applications of the ethic of critique include empowering others, developing capacity in others, courageously taking risks, and promoting change (Vogel, 2012).

The ethic of critique ensures that normative ethical theories, as discussed earlier, remain dynamic rather than static, actively examining and refining established approaches through critical analysis. It is not typically aligned with consequentialist theories, which emphasize maximizing overall benefit or minimizing harm. Instead, it is grounded in the interrogation of power, privilege, and structural inequities, drawing attention to who gains and who is marginalized in ethical decision-making. While both approaches share a concern for justice and outcomes, critique is rooted more in equity and social transformation than in utilitarian calculation. The ethic of critique helps school leaders resolve ethical dilemmas by promoting equity, questioning injustice and seeking transformative change, often by challenging established norms or policies.

The intersection of the roots of the ethic of critique and the sensibilities associated with the ethic of care can create a community where everyone feels equally represented and respected.

The Ethic of Care. The ethic of care emerged from feminist scholarship emphasizing nurturing and encouragement, positioning individual students at the center of educational decision-making (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). Conceptualized by Gilligan (1982) and further developed by Noddings (1992), this compassion-oriented paradigm focuses on how decisions, circumstances, and issues impact other individuals. Noddings (1992) positioned caring as education's most crucial element, characterizing it through understanding, empowerment, and

trust. These attributes form an ethical compass concerned with the experiences of people who are interpersonally and emotionally close (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Starratt et al., 2010). Beck and Murphy (1994) similarly emphasized an educational leadership model in which relationships, community, and concern for others remain central.

School leaders play essential roles in developing caring cultures that value relationships and prioritize relational practices fostering mutual recognition, growth, empowerment, protection, and possibility. Research confirms that the ethic of care is a statistically significant variable that influences decision-making, with strong interpersonal bonds between leaders and colleagues strengthening robust school-community relationships (Arar & Saiti, 2022).

Applying this paradigm to ethical decision-making is challenging because it deals with emotions. As Brugère (2020) notes, "an ethic of care restores the notion of emotion as motive for action" (p. 69). This creates tension between rational approaches (such as discipline and attention) and emotional responses (empathy and compassion) that may not be considered rational. The ethic of care prioritizes emotions over reason, potentially conflicting with the ethic of justice where a more universal approach might predominate (Brugère, 2020).

The ethic of care emphasizes virtuous character traits like compassion and empathy, making it a subset of virtue ethics. While deontological ethics focuses on following rules and utilitarian ethics focuses on achieving the best outcomes, both virtue ethics and the ethic of care focus on the character and motivations of the decision-maker. Specifically, the ethic of care asks whether someone is acting from genuine concern for another person's wellbeing.

While the ethic of care emphasizes the importance of nurturing relationships and emotional responsiveness to individual needs, educational leaders must also draw upon their professional training, expertise, and standards to ensure their caring actions are both effective

and appropriate. The ethic of the profession provides this professional dimension by emphasizing professional knowledge and experience as ethical compasses.

The Ethic of the Profession. The ethic of the profession emphasizes professional knowledge and experience as an ethical compass. This final paradigm was added to complement the trio of previously mentioned paradigms outlined by Starratt (1994). This acknowledges the assumptions, codes and expected behaviours within the professional context, whether these are formally documented or implicit. Educational leaders must consider professional standards, ethics of the community, formal codes of ethics, and individual ethical codes when making decisions in the best interests of members of the school community (Shapiro & Gross, 2007).

The ethic of the profession emphasizes fidelity to the responsibilities, standards, and codes that define professional integrity, grounding decisions in what it means to act as a trustworthy and principled educational leader (Eyal et al., 2011). This is distinct from the ethic of justice, although both reference rules and fairness. Whereas justice prioritizes rights, equity, and the fair distribution of resources, the profession is rooted in the norms and obligations specific to the role of the educator (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Eyal et al. (2011) define this paradigm as "the basis of the course of legitimacy of professional practices, namely, their comprehensive knowledge" (p. 399).

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) observe that “all too frequently, the ethic of the profession is seen as simply part of the justice paradigm” (p.11). However, in their framework, professional ethics are “those moral aspects unique to the profession and the questions that arise as educational leaders become more aware of their own personal and professional codes of ethics” (p. 20), which makes them distinct.

The ethic of the profession connects to various aspects of educational leadership, including "the ability to identify an ethical dilemma, to solve it and to make decisions when confronting an ethical dilemma" (Arar et al., 2016, p. 655). When school leaders base decisions on proven experience, expertise, knowledge and high professional standards, their decisions are considered ethical.

This paradigm incorporates elements from both deontological and virtue ethics theories. It is rooted in deontology, in that "the predetermined codes and values guiding the profession serve as a marker for ethical conduct" (Wood, 2012, p. 205). At the same time, generally held expectations for decisions that fall outside of formal rules may also apply, thus also aligning with virtue ethics.

The four ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care, and the profession provide distinct lenses through which educational leaders can analyze ethical dilemmas. However, the practical application of these frameworks reveals that they function most effectively not in isolation, but through dynamic interaction and integration.

The Dynamic of the Paradigms. The extant literature consistently supports the view that the paradigms complement each other (Langlois, 2004; Langlois & Lapointe, 2007; Puyo, 2022; Shapiro et al., 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1991) and that when used simultaneously or in combination, they contribute to resolving complex educational dilemmas (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020; Eyal et al., 2011). The paradigms exist in harmony and conflict with one another and thus, there may often be tension between them within the decision-making process.

Considering these paradigms separately and together in a multiple paradigm approach provides educational leaders with a metatheory of ethics through which they can resolve ethical

dilemmas. Starratt et al. (2010) illustrate this integration by noting that an ethic of justice alone can be too rigid and minimal, so it needs the warmth and generosity that comes from an ethic of care. However, caring relationships must also consider broader fairness and the common good. Meanwhile, an ethic of critique helps leaders question not just how rules are applied, but whether the rules themselves are appropriate. Yet critique without compassion can devolve into complaining or self-righteous cynicism. The authors suggest that these ethical paradigms work best when they inform and temper each other, creating a more nuanced approach to ethical decision-making in educational leadership.

However, scholars debate whether the ethical paradigms merit equal priority. Eyal et al. (2011), in their study of ethical judgements of school leaders facing dilemmas, found that prioritizing some ethical perspectives over others may be necessary. Less experienced leaders tended to prioritize considerations that did not contradict each other, particularly the ethic of care and the ethic of the profession. Sergiovanni (1991b) similarly suggested that decisions based solely on justice or on utilitarian approaches indicate lower ethical standards. Despite these variations, the prevailing notion emphasizes holistic approaches prioritizing the best interests of students, which is at the centre of school leadership (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022).

School Leadership and Ethical Decision-Making

Leading a school encompasses many responsibilities, choices, and resolving conflicts arising from the competing interests and demands of various stakeholders. The literature on educational leadership has burgeoned over the last few decades, altering the theories on the best approaches to leading organizations in an increasingly globalized and interdependent social context (Copeland, 2014; Gumus et al., 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). The continuous

development and adjustment of school leadership theories has emphasized several leadership practices that are currently encouraged in Ontario schools.

Transformational Leadership and Ethical Considerations. In Ontario, while distributed leadership has gained attention, transformational leadership is the leading theory presently espoused in research and practice (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Day et al., 2020) and is the predominant theory of leadership upon which the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) is based (Ontario Institute of Education Leadership, 2013). The framework "describes successful individual and small group practices for both school and system leaders, as well as effective organizational practices" (Ontario Institute for Education Leadership, 2025, para.1). The definition of leadership in the OLF is 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" (Ontario Institute of Education Leadership, 2013). Despite the widespread influence of the framework, there has been recent criticism of the OLF. Yee and Yee (2024) note that the framework is outdated, and was created from the traditional, white male-oriented leadership perspectives. However, the provincial emphasis on this framework which is grounded in transformational leadership means a further investigation of this kind of leadership is warranted.

Transformational leaders focus on inspirational vision, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, high expectations, and individual consideration (Hallinger, 2003). It is characterized by a visionary and collaborative approach that seeks to empower others, and mobilize educators and students toward meaningful, equity-driven change and continuous school improvement (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Research demonstrates that transformational leadership produces positive and significant effects on teachers, school culture,

organizational functioning, and student outcomes, including academic achievement and school engagement (Leithwood, 2010).

Despite these positive impacts, transformational leadership also carries the potential for exploitation and misuse (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Gumus et al., 2018; Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Zhu et al., 2015). Zhu et al. (2015) observe that “transformational leaders could be unethical, and transformational leadership and ethical leadership [are] not necessarily aligned” (p. 84). This observation highlights an important distinction between authentic transformational leaders, who operate ethically, and pseudo-transformational leaders, who use similar techniques for unethical purposes.

Authentic transformational leaders demonstrate moral character by transcending self-interests to focus on the greater good based on moral principles. They "do the right things, which fits the principles of morality, responsibility, sense of discipline, and respect for authority, customs, rules, and traditions of a society" (Zhu et al., 2015, p. 84). In contrast, pseudo-transformational leaders are considered highly influential but pursue morally and socially questionable goals (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Gumus et al., 2018; Northouse, 2016). This distinction underscores why, as Gumus et al. (2018) note, "It seems inevitable that ethical leadership fostering moral values would become an important component of educational leadership" (p. 32). The recognition of unethical practices among some transformational school leaders has intensified focus on values and ethics in leadership, promoting leadership practices grounded in ethical foundations.

Stakeholder Influence on Ethical Leadership. Leadership and decision-making are exercised under constraints and educational leaders operate within complex networks of stakeholders who influence their decision-making processes. These stakeholders include external

agents such as school boards, parents, policymakers, and local community members, as well as internal actors, including school staff and students (Lakomski & Evers, 2022). The specific configuration and influence of these stakeholders vary significantly across different educational contexts.

While leadership theories and ethical paradigms provide frameworks for decision-making, they operate within particular types of governance structures that shape how leaders identify, analyze, and resolve ethical dilemmas. The following section examines how different types of school governance influence this process.

School Governance

Organizational governance refers to "the system and legal framework within which the organization is run. It clarifies the organization's vision, values and core purpose, who has the authority to act on behalf of the organization and the power to make decisions is devolved and delegated, and who is accountable" (Lane & Birch, 2025, p. 72). In the educational context, Mifsud and Wilkins (2025) refer to school governance as 'the way school leaders and governors pursue certain institutional and ideological means to maintain accountability of their organizations as custodians of education services" (p. 2). All organizations, including schools, function within these frameworks to guide their operations and decision-making processes.

In the field of education, governance has become increasingly complex and contested with its conceptual meaning evolving since the 1990s, reflected in both theory and practice (Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024). School governance research explores the complexities, policy trends and narratives in accountability, and educational governance innovation (Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024). A review of school governance literature reveals several frameworks that warrant deeper analysis to evaluate their applicability across governance types.

Glatter's (2003) framework of school governance offers useful analytical clarity by identifying four "ideal types" (p.229) of schools: competitive market, school empowerment, local empowerment, and quality control. The competitive market model treats the school like a small or medium-sized business with considerable autonomy and few connections to a broader governance system (Glatter, 2003). The school empowerment model emphasizes political and managerial independence, giving schools more control over their own direction and operations. The local empowerment model, in contrast, situates a school as part of a larger network or system, where authority and accountability are shared across institutions (Glatter, 2003). Finally, the quality control model reflects a more bureaucratic approach relying on rules, procedures, controls, and monitoring systems to ensure consistency and compliance (Glatter, 2003).

However, Glatter's typology is anchored in public-sector assumptions and offers little guidance for understanding private or independent schools, which do not fit neatly within these categories. For instance, one of the framework's key dimensions "the main focus within the system" (p.230) presumes system integration that is absent in non-public schools. This limitation reflects a broader trend in governance research that focuses on public schooling and overlooks the diversity of governance arrangements across educational sectors (Rodrigues et al., 2025).

Glatter (2003) nevertheless underscores an important point:

> Governance context is an important and often neglected influence on leadership. Generalizations are often made about what constitutes effective leadership without taking into account the specific and diverse frameworks of policy and governance within which it is exercised. (p.231)

This recognition begins to touch on concerns about generalizations, despite largely only supporting an understanding of public schools.

Building on this, Ben Jaafar and Jacobson (2007) proposed a framework for school governance in Canada that focused on accountability. They identified four themes - the emergence of standards, shifts in the locus of responsibility, change in measurement and reporting systems, and consequences of accountability - across two accountability paradigms: economic-bureaucratic, and ethical-professional. The first of these paradigms assumes a public principle where the collective good is achieved through democratic processes (Jaafar & Anderson, 2007). The second paradigm, on the other hand, "assumes a private principle where an economic discourse exists for the collective good" (Jaafar & Anderson, 2007, p. 211), and reflects a business metaphor that is driven by utilitarian goals. While valuable for understanding accountability trends in education governance, this model's focus on centralized governance, standardization, and measurement and reporting of outputs limits its applicability to non-public schools. Consequently, a gap remains in conceptualizing governance diversity across educational contexts.

Both Glatter's (2003) and Ben Jaafar and Jacobson's (2007) frameworks illuminate important aspects of school governance but share a public school orientation. Both underplay the complexity and nature of governance beyond the public sphere, where market pressures, community governance, and organizational autonomy intersect.

More recent analyses extend this discussion; for instance, Rodrigues et al., (2025) reviewed governance research spanning from 2019-2023 and identified a wide variety of theoretical and conceptual approaches, and found over thirty definitions for governance concepts. They conclude that education governance is "a dynamic and complex field in transformation, rather than one fixed hierarchical model" (p.19) characterized by fragmentation, lack of consensus, and diverse institutional emphases. Similarly, Wilkins and Mifsud (2024)

highlight tensions between marketization and modernization, noting that governance involves mechanisms of choice, competition, and performance culture, alongside corporatization. Importantly, many of these dynamics are evident to varying degrees across all school governance types.

This evolution in governance structures is significant for understanding ethical decision-making. As governance arrangements diversify, school leaders must navigate competing accountabilities, stakeholder relationships, and conflicting values (Rodrigues et al., 2025; Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024). Examining governance through this lens underscores the contextual nature of ethical decision-making and the need for frameworks that extend beyond public governance types.

Canadian Educational Governance Context

In Canada, the role of the federal government in education pertains exclusively to First Nations schools on reserves, and federal schools for children of military personnel (Sheppard et al., 2015). Provincial and territorial legislatures hold authority over Kindergarten to grade 12 schools through ministries and departments of education which establish the parameters, mandates, duties and powers of school boards (Sheppard et al., 2015), or service centers (in the provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec).

In Ontario specifically, schooling occurs within various types of governance that include public, private, and independent schools. This study focuses on school governance types and their implications for ethical decision-making. Each of these is defined and described in the sections that follow. While centered on type of governance, the analysis recognizes that public schools operate within broader systemic contexts that significantly influence leadership practices.

Public Schools

Universal public education is a cornerstone of Canada's democratic civil society. In the *Education Act* (Government of Ontario, 2014), a public school is defined as "a school under the jurisdiction of a school board" (sec 1.1). Education governance occurs through three tiers: the provincial government, the school boards, and the schools themselves, with each level encompassing the capacity for democratic participation but with varying breadth of mandate (Piscitelli et al., 2022). According to Bosetti et al. (2017), public schools are "tuition-free schools open to all children residing in a provincially determined school jurisdiction catchment zone, supported by taxes…" (p. 6). Ontario schools are primarily administered by school boards which are local units of school governance responsible for the administration of a group of schools, setting school policies, hiring teachers, curriculum implementation and decisions around major expenditures (Caribou et al., 2021).

Governance in Ontario public schools operates through a somewhat centralized system but with strong elements of local autonomy. In Ontario's K-12 schools, the Ministry of Education is the provincial authority is considered the most powerful authority responsible for implementing the *Education Act* (Government of Ontario, 2014) and oversees 72 school boards servicing 93% of the province's K-12 students (Government of Canada, 2024). The Ministry develops and decides on policies and programs, sets the curriculum, allocates funding to boards, establishes provincial standards and guidelines for assessment, reporting, establishes graduation requirements, student support, community services and student achievement, and creates lists of approved materials to support learning (Faubert & Paulson, 2020). Additionally, the Ministry of Education provides strategic vision documents and leadership frameworks constitute policy as levers (Faubert & Paulson, 2020).

School boards constitute public schools' second level of governance. While some prominent and large school boards in Ontario were placed under the oversight of appointed supervisors in June 2025 (Martin, 2025, Stone & McFarlane, 2025), most are overseen by school board trustees. The future of this aspect of the Ontario governance arrangement is uncertain (Rushowy, 2025). National constitutional protections stipulate that the government of Ontario provide publicly funded language-based and religious-based schooling through four school systems: English, French, English Catholic, and French Catholic (Faubert & Paulson, 2020).

Trustees "are both elected officials and board members" who "must be responsive to the voters to ensure management is guiding the organization according to what the public wishes." (Piscitelli et al., 2022, p. 19). Maharaj (2020) explains that school board responsibilities include both the professional and political domains and he further notes that how a trustee comes to be elected can impact the execution of their roles as either oversight or advocacy. The role of school boards has been diminishing in recent years, leading some people to question the continued necessity of their value (Faubert & Paulson, 2020; Maharaj, 2020; Piscitelli et al., 2022). Nonetheless, Ontario school boards are required to adhere to the *Education Act* (Government of Ontario, 2014) as well as overseeing budgets and spending, making decisions about building or closing schools, and providing special programs. In order to do so, school boards develop board-specific policies that must comply with the *Education Act* and ministry guidelines. Each school board employs a director of education who functions as chief executive officer, appointed by elected trustees and serving as the most senior public servant (Faubert & Paulson, 2020). Superintendents, responsible for groups of schools, may handle appeals, special education meetings, and board-wide program oversight.

Individual public schools belong to a school board and are most frequently divided by grade levels (Faubert & Paulson, 2020). They operate under principals responsible for overseeing teaching and curriculum, developing School Improvement Plans, supervising staff, making student admission decisions, managing special education placements, administering budgets, allocating specialized staff, maintaining student records, overseeing discipline, collaborating with school councils on parent involvement and fundraising, and developing policies for homework and codes of conduct. Vice-principals support these responsibilities, while larger secondary schools may include department heads providing leadership to subject specialist teams (Piscitelli et al., 2022).

Public schools can vary considerably in a number of key ways. There is some degree of choice amongst Ontario public schools, given the four types of boards discussed earlier as well as the existence of alternative schools or schools with special programs. Alternative schools "provide an opportunity to succeed in a different educational setting that emphasizes differentiated methods in teaching and learning" (TDSB, 2025), while some schools offer special programs such as the arts, business studies, STEM, International Baccalaureate, Waldorf-inspired education, Forest School, and others.

While public schools ostensibly provide universal access, the proliferation of alternative schools and special programs introduces selection mechanisms that can intersect with race, class, language, and geography to stratify access within the public system itself (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017). These programs, often concentrated in urban centers and requiring parental knowledge of application processes, transportation capacity, and cultural capital to navigate specialized curricula (Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017), may reproduce the

exclusionary dynamics associated with private and independent schools while operating under the legitimizing banner of public education.

Leadership Frameworks in Ontario. School leaders in Ontario public schools are expected to use the Ontario Leadership Framework to guide their practices (Ontario Institute of Education Leadership, 2013). Board-level managers, teacher leaders, and school administrators are trained to refer to this framework to determine school-level and system-level leadership practices, decision-making, priorities, professional development, and accountabilities. Notably, no specific ethical framework exists for school leaders, although there are ethical standards for the teaching profession outlined by the Ontario College of Teachers (2023) and an Ontario Code of Conduct for the Education Sector, both of which exclude school leaders (Government of Ontario, 2023a).

Despite this multi-layered structure incorporating democratic processes, Faubert and Paulson (2020) conclude that:

> The formal authority structure in Ontario is highly centralized – the important educational matters are determined at the Ministry level. The structure does provide school boards and, to a lesser extent, schools with limited autonomy to make decisions around the choice of programs and services for achieving state-set education goals. (p. 240)

The diverse roles and inclusion of a democratic process embedded within the Ontario public school system may suggest otherwise. For example, education from the middle is touted as a type of leadership that can draw the top down and the bottom up to foster collaboration and address complex problems and dilemmas (Hargreaves, 2023). This suggests that despite increased centralization, school leaders still retain considerable autonomy and have some opportunity for local decision-making.

While debates exist about the degree of centralization within public education systems, what remains uncontested is that it remains more centralized than non-public governance. Regardless of one's position on absolute centralization, public school leaders operate under demonstrably greater structural constraints than their private and independent counterparts. The comparison is not between highly centralized and moderately centralized systems, but between schools subject to provincial mandates and those largely exempt from them. This relative difference, not the degree of centralization within public education, creates the governance-based variations in autonomy, political control, and accountability that constitute distinct ethical landscapes across school types. This underscores why comparisons across governance types, rather than within public schools alone, are important for theorizing ethical leadership.

Private Schools

In Ontario, any school that is not classified as a public school is considered private. According to subsection 1 (1) of the *Education Act* (1990), a private school is defined as "an institution at which instruction is provided at any time between the hours of 9 am and 4 pm on any school day for five or more pupils who are over the compulsory school age in any of the subjects of elementary or secondary school courses of study…". Private schools can operate as businesses or as non-profits, independent of the Ministry and in compliance with the requirements of the *Education Act* (Ontario Institute of Education Leadership, 2013). In other terms, in Ontario, 'private school' designates any school that charges tuition fees and operates outside the public education system. This study will distinguish independent schools as distinct, despite fitting the provincial definition of a private school.

The legislative conflation of for-profit private schools with non-profit independent schools under a single "private" designation itself warrants examination. This categorization

obscures significant differences in accountability and profit motive while simultaneously naturalizing both as legitimate alternatives to public education. The term "private" itself functions ideologically, framing education as a commodity subject to market principles rather than a public good, and positioning fee-based exclusion as a neutral organizational choice rather than a mechanism of social stratification.

The province does not regulate, license, accredit or oversee the operation of private schools, although high schools that grant credits require inspections (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2025). Unlike public schools, private schools are not required to participate in provincial testing although they may opt to do so at their own cost. All private schools are required to submit annual Notices of Intention to Operate (Government of Ontario, 2023b) and report statistics to the Ministry using the same online platform as public schools, including student registration details, numbers and qualifications of teachers, and hours of instruction.

Milian and Quirke (2017) describe Ontario private schools as “only lightly regulated by the provincial government” (p. 344) and that “Ontario private schools operate as they wish. In other words, K-12 schools, in particular, enjoy near complete latitude” (p.344). Glinos (2021) argues that Ontario private school regulations “are far more lax” (p. 170) than in other provinces. This regulatory void raises critical questions about what practices are permitted. The absence of regulation reveals a governance philosophy that privileges institutional autonomy and parental choice over collective responsibility for children's education and positions education as private consumption rather than social investment.

Ontario private schools do not receive government funding; this differs from private schools in many other provinces, including British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Quebec, and Manitoba (Bosetti et al., 2017). The debate around funding Ontario private schools has

existed since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s (Allison, 2020; Glinos, 2021; Hedges et al., 2020; Shapiro, 1985). This agenda marketizes education and gives preference to directing education toward skilling a productive workforce and contributing to wealth in the market economy. Ontario commissioned a report on private schools in 1985, primarily to examine the role, regulations, and standards of private schools, while also exploring public funding debates. Ultimately, the Report of the Commission concluded that private and independent schools should not have a right to public funding (Shapiro, 1985), and that conclusion continues to be upheld at the provincial level, even though this issue has been contentious for several provincial governments. Despite ongoing discussions on this matter, public support in Ontario for funding private schools peaked in 2002 at 34% (Hart & Kempf, 2018).

Given the lack of public funding, Ontario private schools rely exclusively on tuition fees for operations. Kane (1992) points out that the reliance on these fees is the basis of a unique reality where these schools must "satisfy their clients, and are obliged to demonstrate successful outcomes" (p 8-9). This emphasis on client satisfaction may fundamentally alter what constitutes educational success and ethical practice. The framing of education as a service purchased by a client repositions teachers and leaders as service providers. This market relationship may enable practices that could be ethically contested in other contexts or become normalized as reasonable business decisions.

Private schools in Ontario exist within a variety of governance and management structures, with a variety of leadership models emerging due to market pressures (Hunt et al., 2022). Leaders in private schools may operate under various titles, including chief executive officer, director, owner, principal, and head of school, and they may work individually or as part of a leadership team. They may or may not have an official reporting structure or accountability

to another leadership level, such as an owner (Hunt et al., 2022). While accreditation is not required, various accrediting organizations exist for voluntary participation.

Although often conflated in public discourse and in provincial legislation, independent schools are based on a distinct type of governance structure that merits separate consideration from the for-profit private schools.

Independent Schools

The term 'independent' refers to a private, not-for-profit school. Canadian Accredited Independent Schools (2022) explains that "the key difference is that private schools can be for-profit and independent schools are not. Independent schools have charitable status" (para 2) and are overseen by an elected board of governors. These schools charge fees, select their students, and may be founded on various pedagogical orientations, program foci, or religious affiliations (Bosetti et al., 2017). The designation of independent schools as charitable organizations is open to scrutiny. The public benefit from the charity serves a narrow demographic of economically advantaged families. This apparent contradiction reveals how governance structures can legitimize educational segregation.

A typology of independent schools has been proposed by various scholars (Allison et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2022; Milian & Davies, 2017). The different typologies capture elements of program focus, market segments, or the nature and purpose of the school. The lack of consistency points further to the diversity and specialization that exists. Independent schools, like private schools, can vary across several dimensions including religious, college preparatory, and international. They may be single gender or co-educational; large or small; day or boarding (or both), traditional or progressive; specialized for diverse learners or special populations; serving all grades or only particular ages (Baker et al., 2016).

Like private schools, independent schools located in Ontario are mainly unregulated. Independent schools at the secondary level offering diploma credits are inspected, but independent elementary schools have no corresponding inspection requirement. As with private schools, teachers hired in these schools are not required to be certified, nor is the provincial accreditation program of studies mandatory (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2025). The lack of regulation can be somewhat mitigated through accreditation and association membership.

Van Pelt and Mitchell (2018) identified four key functions of optional education associations and accrediting bodies: professional development, public relations, administrative operations, and student services. They also concluded that associations in non-funded provinces, including Ontario, "are more likely to engage in self-regulatory activities and quality measures, such as teacher certification, quality assurance, and governance development" (p. 3).

CAIS defines accreditation as "the dual purpose of accountability and school improvement - aligning school practices to the highest national standard" (Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, 2023, para 2). However, the fact that only 40 of Ontario's independent schools are accredited with CAIS, even though the province had 1644 registered private and independent schools in 2024 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2025) suggests that self-regulation remains the exception rather than the norm. As noted earlier the Ministry does not distinguish between private and independent schools, and there is no national accrediting body dedicated strictly to private schools. Other organizations serving independent schools include the Council of Independent Schools of Ontario, the Canadian Council of Montessori Administrators, and the Canadian Federation of Independent Schools. While government oversight of independent schools is marginal, accrediting bodies and associations can provide accountability and opportunities for the development of governance policy and practices.

The governance of independent schools is distinct from that of private schools. They are self-sufficient and self-governing entities governed independently by an elected board of directors or trustees. The elected board serves as the main governance body, ensuring that "the school has clear strategic direction, provides appropriate risk oversight, ensures the school has leadership capacity and resources, and effectively manages Board performance" (Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, 2021, p. 5). Board members at independent schools can be parents, former students, and members of the community; they are responsible for the school's evolution, reputation, and long-term viability.

Individual directors have fiduciary duty and duty of care obligations for which they can be held personally liable (Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, 2021). They are expected to dismiss any personal interests and are bound by a duty of confidentiality. Yet, fiduciary duty to the institution may conflict with broader educational ethics. Because they govern institutions where parental self-interest is institutionalized as governance, directors may enter a conflict of interest. Directors on the board are also responsible for ensuring strong school leadership. Hiring, supporting, coaching, and deciding whether to renew head contracts are part of the board's foremost responsibilities (Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, 2021).

The head of school (head) serves as CEO of the independent school and is a direct employee of the board. A strong collaborative relationship between the board and the head is essential and requires a clear understanding of the division of responsibilities. The head is the manager, while the board governs (Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, 2021). While independent schools leaders are not accountable for reaching government-imposed standards, they are accountable to their boards and responsible for achieving standards set by regional or national accrediting bodies and market forces (Baker et al., 2016).

The governance of independent schools through elected boards and professional leadership represents a more formalized structure than many for-profit private schools; however, school leaders are primarily accountable to the board of directors, which is comprised mostly of parents.

The boundaries between school governance types are not always clear. For instance, as mentioned previously, independent schools are not recognized as distinct from private schools in the *Education Act* (Government of Ontario, 2014). Furthermore, there has been a notable and growing shift towards the privatization of public education in Ontario and the rest of Canada which challenges assumptions that public schools are sites of equity, diversity, and economic justice (Winton, 2022). Consequently, governance types in the K-12 education landscape in Ontario can be blurred along various dimensions.

The Influence of School Governance Type on Ethical Decision-Making

There is a considerable body of research outlining the role of governance type on ethical decision-making in various kinds of organizations (Heres & Lasthuizen, 2012; James & Sheppard, 2014; Madestam et al., 2018; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000; Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017). While scholars agree that governance structures influence ethical decision-making processes, the extent of this influence and underlying theoretical explanations remain subjects of ongoing debate in the literature. In educational contexts, public, private, and independent schools operate under fundamentally different structural constraints and stakeholder relationships, leading to divergent pressures and priorities for school leaders (James & Sheppard, 2014; Madestam et al., 2018; Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017). Five key dimensions revealed in the literature will be explored: decision-making autonomy, political control influences, financial control mechanisms,

financial responsibility levels, and the degree of parental and student influence on leadership decisions.

The following sections examine each of these dimensions in detail, analyzing how governance structures create different ethical landscapes for school leaders.

Autonomy

Autonomy in decision-making tends to vary according to school governance type. Shakeel and DeAngelis (2017), through their study of principals in the United States, found that private school leaders have a "systematic advantage" (p.14) over public school leaders, as they have a greater ability to make decisions autonomously. Private school principals demonstrate greater influence in decision-making because "private schools have fewer political constraints and enjoy more autonomy in selection of students and daily administration than public schools" (p. 6). This example illustrates that even within systems that might be considered decentralized, governance in the public domain is less autonomous than in the private domain.

These findings align with research from other national contexts and extend to different aspects of educational leadership. A comparative case study of autonomy and control for school leaders in independent and public schools in Sweden confirmed this pattern, finding that public school leaders did not experience as much autonomy and control over pedagogical direction and school improvement work as their independent school counterparts (Nordholm et al., 2022). This international evidence reinforces the systematic nature of autonomy differences across governance types, suggesting that structural rather than cultural factors drive these variations.

Research on public schools suggests that increased autonomy, when present, correlates with positive organizational outcomes. Cheng (2016) found that public schools that had greater principal autonomy also had greater mission coherence, which would be considered

advantageous. This finding, combined with the documented autonomy advantages in private and independent schools (Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017), suggests that governance structures limiting public school leader autonomy may inadvertently constrain organizational effectiveness.

Mifsud & Wilkins (2025) directly challenge assumptions linking autonomy to improvement, noting "no automatic link exists between decentralization and quality improvement" (p. 11). This raises critical questions for ethical decision-making: Does increased autonomy in private and independent schools enable more ethically responsive leadership, or does it reduce accountability mechanisms that protect against ethical violations? Kim and Weiner's (2022) finding that leaders can "skirt around boundaries" (p. 487) suggests that autonomy may be ethically ambivalent rather than inherently advantageous.

Influence of political control

The political context influencing government policies at provincial and local levels also influences the school context. Increasingly, non-governmental organizations and special interest groups have also entered educational policymaking in domains relating to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ETFO, 2025), gender-based issues (Malott, 2024), and the sexual and health education curriculum (Lenti, 2018). Public schools are most affected by such political influence, where curriculum, budgetary allocations, and performance measures are dictated through various government levels and directed by elected officials and other government stakeholders. Consequently, school leaders often view educational policies as increasingly problematic (Miller, 2019).

Madestam et al. (2018) examined the differences in perceptions of core values among school leaders working within different governance systems in Sweden. They found significantly higher political influence across all indicators, with differences of 15-23 percentage points

showing that municipal (public) school leaders were more guided by political goals, engaged more with politicians and considered political statements more often in their work. Similarly, Miller (2019), in a comparative study across 16 countries concluded that public school leaders are strongly affected by political control and policy shifts. This influence often manifests through ad-hoc policymaking and short-term policies initiatives, "where those required to implement policy are often not provided with adequate time or resources to do so effectively" (Miller, 2019, p. 482). These influences impact decision-making for school leaders who then have to navigate new dilemmas and tensions. Miller (2019) further notes that changes in government or education ministers can lead to shifts in policies and priorities, that may conflict with schools' interests or values, and can at the same time, be vague and conflictual.

In contrast, Rush and Gilmore (2012), observe that independent schools are free to define their own mission, regulate admissions, define teacher credentials, and teach what the school deems important. While Miller (2019) documents that educational policy and government control leaves public school leaders feeling constrained, conflicted, or frustrated, this professional frustration must be weighed against democratic principles. Piscitelli et al. (2022) argue that Ontario's governance structure incorporates capacity for democratic participation (by voting for trustees), raising a critical tension about the balance between autonomy and accountability.

To navigate these tensions, principals rely on political acumen - the ability to understand power relations, anticipate political implications, and strategically negotiate among competing interests and values within and beyond the school (Winton & Pollock, 2013). Winton and Pollock's (2013) analysis of micropolitical practices in Ontario schools found that educational

leadership is inherently political and that principals must employ a range of strategies and types of control and influence to balance external policy demands with school priorities.

Taken together, these studies reveal that political control is both a defining and destabilizing influence in educational leadership. Although different governance types may offer varying degrees of democratic engagement, school leaders need to navigate shifting policy landscapes and navigate strategic political engagement.

Financial control

The business aspect of private and independent schools demands different leadership around finance and success criteria. James and Sheppard (2014) note the implications of ownership and profit motive for school leaders. Their study of private and independent international schools found that school leaders working within these types of school governance were exposed to more market forces, as they are more reliant on fees for income. Machin (2014), in exploring the role of private and independent school leaders, notes that while these leaders remain centered in the values and beliefs of pedagogy and educational traditions, they must also speak the language of commerce and "know business, or all schools would be bankrupt" (p. 22). He notes differences between school governance types in terms of the expectations placed on leaders regarding their involvement in decision-making, admissions, and tolerance for lack of resources.

Additionally, Poultney (2013) notes that some leadership challenges are specifically related to maintaining the viability or profitability of a private school. She further points to the school community and mission as critical factors in decision-making in these schools, in addition to the composition of the governing board.

Financial responsibility

School leaders across all governance types face financial pressures, but the nature, scope, and implications of these responsibilities vary significantly. In private and independent schools, leaders bear direct responsibility for institutional viability, as "if the educational conduct of the institution was poor, student enrolments would decline, which would have financial implications that would then be of interest to the [governing] board" (James & Sheppard, 2014, p.17). Every aspect of school finance in these institutions, including salaries, benefits, and facility management, is overseen at the school level, creating immediate accountability for financial outcomes.

Although financial outcomes are an essential aspect of leadership in private schools, public school leaders are not immune to the economic pressures of their schools (Cohen, 2022; Winton, 2022; Winton & Martin, 2025). Privatization of Ontario public schools is becoming more commonplace, and “public systems have become more private-like” (Winton, 2022, p. 7). This can occur through policies and practices that shift funding towards private actors, increasing school fees, or allowing private businesses to profit from public education (Winton, 2025). Hedges et al. (2020), in their critical policy analysis, note an expansion of the broad range of civil society actors beyond the government involved in public service delivery, including schools.

In Ontario public schools, parent fundraising exemplifies these changing financial dynamics. Although parents cannot raise funds for required materials, they are frequently approached to contribute money to pay for enhancements and enrichment opportunities, which is permitted in the provincial guidelines (Government of Ontario, 2022b). Amounts raised by schools can vary significantly, leading to concerns of inequity and potential political influence. For instance, with the school principals' consent, affluent families in the Toronto District School

Board could purchase instruments, playgrounds, and technology unavailable to those in less affluent neighbourhoods (Toronto District School Board, 2018).

Despite this wholesale marketization of education across all governance types, public school leaders in Ontario are not subject to the same levels of financial control or responsibility as those in private and independent schools. Public school leaders manage budgets within established systems with external oversight and guaranteed base funding (Ministry of Education, 2025), while private and independent school leaders must ensure institutional survival through market performance and direct accountability to fee-paying families.

Influence of parents/students

The relationship between school leaders and their parent and student communities varies significantly across governance types, creating distinct ethical considerations and decision-making pressures. While all school leaders must navigate stakeholder expectations, the nature and intensity of parental and student influence differ substantially between public, private, and independent schools. This influence manifests in three key areas: employment vulnerability and fear of reprisal, governance structure complications, and the prioritization of stakeholder feedback over formal assessments.

An exploratory study of ethical decision-making and ethical dilemmas specific to teachers in private schools in Turkey noted that fear of reprisal and parental demands were considerations not widely cited in the public context (Üztemur et al., 2022). In private and independent schools, contracts are often renewed yearly, resulting in fear of reprisal from dissatisfied parents who can directly impact employment security. In this study, participants commented on elevated parental expectations and how they define an ethical dilemma as having a substantial impact on their decision-making. These examples suggest that the pressures extend

beyond influence to coercion. While this study focused on teachers, it is relevant because it helps situate the culture and expectations within private schools whose school leaders face pressures from fee-paying families.

As established previously, parent-elected boards are common in independent schools (Breedt et al., 2021; Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, 2021; James & Sheppard, 2014; Van Pelt et al., 2019). As James and Sheppard (2014) point out, this can be problematic as it privileges parents' interests and can have a short-term focus. Further, these authors note potential conflicts of interest between roles as board members and parents. Freer's (2008) dissertation on parental influence in private schools describes the nuances of navigating parental expectations as clients, financial stakeholders, and parents. He concluded the influence of parents in private schools was significant in formal solicited ways such as through surveys, board participation and meetings and in informal unsolicited ways including social pressure, informal conversations and implicit expectations based on financial contributions. He reveals how financial dependency creates conditions for ethical compromise. This means there is high influence for fee-paying parents, necessarily privileging those with economic capital. This raises questions about whose interests are served and whose may be marginalized when leaders must prioritize satisfaction of economically powerful stakeholders for institutional survival.

User influence, such as parental and student demands, is universal to all school leaders, although it may be perceived differently depending on the type of school governance structure (Madestam et al., 2018). Research demonstrates that in market-driven educational environments, immediate stakeholder satisfaction often outweighs external accountability measures (James & Sheppard, 2014), making responsiveness to parent and student preferences more valuable than formal evaluations for independent and private schools compared to public schools.

Summary of the Influence of School Governance on Ethical Decision-Making

The research evidence from these sections supports the comparative analysis presented in Table 2, which summarizes how school governance type systematically influences leadership expectations and decision-making contexts across these five critical dimensions.

Table 2. *Influence and Leadership Expectations by School Governance Type*

Leadership expectations and considerations	Public Schools	Private Schools	Independent Schools
Autonomy	Low	High	Moderate/high
Influence of political control	High	Low	Low
Financial control	Low	High	Moderate/high
Financial responsibility	Moderate	High	High
Influence of parents/students	Low	High	High

The evidence presented demonstrates that governance type creates systematically different contexts for ethical decision-making in educational leadership. These structural differences shape not only the types of ethical dilemmas leaders encounter but also the frameworks and considerations they must apply when resolving these challenges.

Theoretical Explanations for Governance-Based Differences in Ethical Decision-Making

Scholars have attempted to explain why these differences in influence might exist between governance types. Heres and Lasthuizen's (2012) study on governance types in a wide variety of institutions suggests that the core tasks and missions might be sufficiently different to result in these variations. They postulate that ethical dilemmas may be more pronounced in public organizations because of an inherent interest in serving the public good. However, this contrasts with the work of Machin (2014), who determined that in the case of private

international schools, leaders continued to define their role in educational terms rather than solely based on commercial demands. Perhaps more convincing as a rationale is that the demands and expectations from external stakeholders vary based on governance type, shaping leaders' views on ethical leadership and determining what constitutes an ethical dilemma (Rainey & Chun, 2005). Political dynamics, such as those imposed by ministries of education and school boards, can inhibit the discretionary decision-making of public school leaders. In contrast, private and independent school leaders may feel inhibited or pressured by feelings of serving 'clients' (Machin, 2014) rather than serving the public good.

While the literature has advanced understanding of governance, it remains limited in scope. Much of the scholarship privileges public systems, often overlooking the distinctive conditions of private and independent schools, which operate under different logics of authority, accountability, and legitimacy. Even where autonomy and market mechanisms are acknowledged, these are typically treated as technical or structural features rather than as the basis for ethical challenges for leaders navigating competing demands. Moreover, the literature assumes a relatively standardized set of accountability structures, leaving limited knowledge of how governance type may shape the dilemmas leaders face.

Conceptual Framework for Ethical Decision-Making in Schools

This study's conceptual framework integrates two major domains identified in the literature and presented in detail in the previous sections: 1) ethical decision-making through multiple paradigms of justice, critique, care, and the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022), and 2) the governance types within which educational leaders operate. Together, these bodies of literature provide a lens for understanding how school leaders reason ethically while navigating distinct organizational, political, and accountability contexts.

The ethical paradigms describe how leaders interpret and respond to ethical dilemmas, whereas governance types define the contexts where and under what conditions those dilemmas emerge. In this framework, governance type functions as the contextual moderator that influences the nature of the ethical issues leaders encounter and the extent to which particular paradigms are emphasized in their decision-making.

Leaders working in public, private, and independent schools face distinct levels of autonomy (Nordholm et al., 2022; Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017), political oversights (Madestam et al., 2018; P. Miller, 2019; Rush & Gilmore, 2012), financial accountability (James & Sheppard, 2014; Machin, 2014), and stakeholder influences (Breedt et al., 2021; Üztemur et al., 2022). These contextual factors collectively shape the types of tensions and dilemmas leaders face and the reasoning processes they employ.

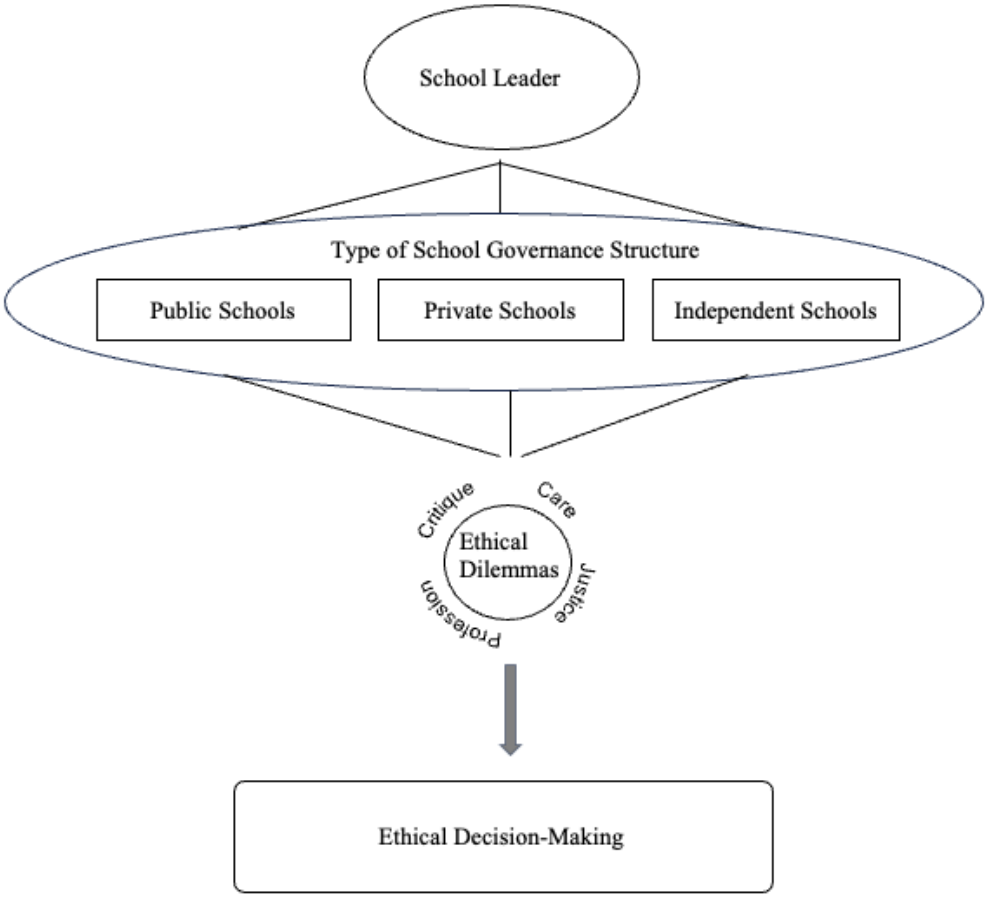
The framework proposes that governance type functions as the mechanism connecting ethical dilemmas that arise in leadership practice to the ethical decision-making used to address them. Tensions and paradoxes inherent in educational leadership give rise to ethical dilemmas that require leaders to weigh competing obligations or values. Because governance types embody distinct priorities, as discussed earlier in this chapter, leaders experience and resolve ethical dilemmas in ways that vary across governance contexts.

Figure 1 illustrates these relationships. Governance type provides the external context that shapes specific ethical dilemmas, while the ethical paradigms represent the internal reasoning processes the leader uses to guide a resolution to the dilemmas.

Overall, this conceptual framework extends prior scholarship by synthesizing ethical and organizational theories to examine how governance types influence ethical decision-making in schools. It positions school governance type as an active contextual factor shaping leaders'

dilemmas, value conflicts, and decision-making. This framework therefore guides the study's exploration of how educational leaders across public, private, and independent schools interpret and act upon ethical dilemmas in ways that reflect the ethical paradigms and the conditions of their governance type.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework*



Conclusion to the Chapter

The literature review has explored the complexities of ethical decision-making for K-12 school leaders, emphasizing the importance of understanding the interplay between school governance types and ethical paradigms. The central focus of this study is to examine these dimensions, revealing gaps in the current literature; the unclear relationship between governance types and ethical dilemmas, the unexplored ethical challenges faced by leaders in different types

of governance, and the ethical paradigms utilized by these leaders. These paradigms may conflict with each other, just as they may work in harmony. This tension that conjures ethical dilemmas which are resolved by considering them together. These insights have shaped the research questions and informed the conceptual framework.

Each governance type examined in this research possesses distinct structural and accountability features that influence the contexts in which ethical decision-making occurs. However, several factors blur these distinctions. Ministry classifications, such as Ontario's broad designation of all non-public schools as private, obscure meaningful differences, while the ongoing trend toward privatization further complicates the landscape (Winton, 2022). For example, independent schools, although often grouped with private schools, operate under elected board and maintain non-profit status, which distinguishes their leadership and accountability structures. In other words, each school type has unique governance structures and leadership accountabilities, and these elements influence school leaders' decision-making. Autonomy, political influence, financial matters, and parental pressures all impact leaders and determine which values and ethical paradigms to follow.

The central focus of this study is an examination of the dimensions of ethical decision-making, type of school governance, and ethical paradigms. Hence, the aim of this research is to address several gaps in the literature. First, the relationships between school governance types and ethical dilemmas are poorly understood; second, the ethical dilemmas faced by leaders in various governance structures remain unexplored. Finally, little is known about what ethical paradigms school leaders in each school governance structure use when making decisions. These gaps have thus informed the research questions, conceptual framework, and research design. The following chapter outlines the methodology used for this study.

Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological approach and methods used to answer the study's questions. It begins with the rationale for a case study research design. Next, I outline my positionality and the epistemological underpinnings of my research, before outlining the selection of the cases and the analysis. The subsequent sections address ethical considerations, data collection methods, and analysis. Finally, limitations are discussed, and mitigating actions are explained.

Research Design

A case study design was selected to provide detailed descriptions of school leaders' decision-making in K-12 schools in Ontario. Creswell and Poth (2018) identify case study research as "a type of design in qualitative research that may be an object of study as well as the product of inquiry" (p. 96) and further go on to define it as "a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (p. 96). While Merriam and Tisdell (2016b) state that the term 'case study' is often used interchangeably with 'qualitative research,' it is best considered a type of qualitative research among several others, all of which share "a search for meaning and understanding" (p. 37). Yin (2018) notes a different but complementary scope and situates case study research as investigating a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context (in which the boundaries may not be precise) and that a case represents a technically distinctive situation in which there are many variables of interest, and that they rely on multiple sources of evidence.

In education, a case is usually represented by a person or a program, a classroom or a school, and the research is distinguished by focusing on a holistic study of a phenomenon

(Merriam, 1998). In this research, school governance is the primary comparative dimension across the cases.

A case study has much to offer educational research. It can provide detailed descriptions of practice, explain the determinants of existing practice and events, and explore the application of new procedures (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021). Quintão et al. (2020) said, "The main advantage is its high applicability to human situations and contemporary contexts of real life. Furthermore, it offers a deep and at the same time, broad and integrated vision of a social unit, complex, composed of multiple variables" (p. 266).

A comparative, multiple-case study design was selected to examine the perceptions of influence related to the type of governance structure on school leaders' ethical decision-making. In this study, each case was explored through the co-construction of knowledge about perceived influence, which will be discussed further in the next section. Each case is understood in its own right, but with enough depth to understand and describe context, and to explain complex patterns (Goodrick, 2020). A multiple case study is generally considered more compelling and robust than a single case study (Yin, 2018).

There are three types of comparative case study design, according to Vavrus and Bartlett (2022): variance-oriented, interpretivist, and process-oriented. Variance-oriented case studies embrace a neo-positivist stance with the aim of generalizing or may employ experimental or correlational designs. Interpretivist case studies on the other hand, embrace an interpretivist stance, resist comparison, and the interest is primarily in the cases themselves. The process-oriented case study builds on each of the other two designs and rejects the interpretivist refusal to consider causation yet acknowledges that analysis may reveal how some situations and events influence each other. In this study, the process-oriented stance is applied. Maxwell (2013) notes

that process approaches "tend to see the world in terms of people, situations, events, and the processes that connect these: explanation based on an analysis of how some situations and events influence others" (p. 29). This approach treats cases as being made or constructed. The process-oriented stance also "integrates an interpretivist focus on meaning-making, with a processual notion of causations" (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2022, p. 8). While identifying elements of causation was not intended, an explicit, formal, and structured focus on comparison occurred during collection and analysis.

This design contributes to answering the research questions by looking at detailed descriptions of schools, leaders, and decision-making to resolve dilemmas, through the specific lens of the type of school governance. The design and methods were also shaped by my positionality and worldview.

Research Philosophy

This study is grounded in the social-constructivist paradigm, which posits that knowledge is not a replica of reality but a human creation constructed through human interactions (Tennyson & Volk, 2015; Vygotskiĭ & Cole, 1978). Central to social-constructivism is the principle that knowledge construction occurs through a non-hierarchical, collaborative process (Kukla, 2013). As Adams (2006) explains, "social constructivist epistemology locates knowledge, not as an objective, context-devoid discovery, but rather as a contextually driven intrapersonal creation" (p. 254). This perspective positions me as an active agent in constructing the knowledge and understanding that emerges from this study.

My positionality as an experienced educator and school leader shapes this research. Having spent decades as an independent school leader, in addition to periods of time in a private school and public schools, has influenced the knowledge, context, and assumptions that I bring

to this study. As a school leader, I have navigated countless ethical dilemmas and engaged in the daily decision-making inherent to the role. These experiences, combined with informal interactions with colleagues across different school types, have led me to believe that a school's type of governance structure plays a significant role in ethical leadership practices.

While my professional background provides valuable insight into the contexts under study, I also recognize the risk that my prior experiences and assumptions could unduly shape the interpretations. To safeguard against this, I employed several reflexive strategies. First, I grounded my analysis in participants' own words and narratives, returning to the data frequently to ensure that the themes were supported by evidence rather than my preconceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, I employed member checking by sharing preliminary findings with participants to verify whether my interpretations resonated with their lived experiences or required modification (Roth, 2018). Third, I actively sought disconfirming evidence during analysis, specifically looking for instances where governance type did not appear to influence ethical leadership practices, or where other factors seemed more salient (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016a). These safeguards created systematic checkpoints to interrogate my initial belief about the role of governance type and ensure that findings emerged from the data rather than solely from my preexisting assumptions.

My positionality, experience, and worldview are thus intertwined and fundamentally shape this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research represents the confluence of these elements, manifesting in the research questions, methodological choices, and analytical approaches. Acknowledging this positioning is essential to maintaining transparency and credibility in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012).

Defining and Selecting the Cases

The cases, as a contemporary phenomenon within their real-life context, were six schools distributed across the three governance types of interest for a total of six cases. Individual schools made up the 'bounded systems' (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) for the cases. The cases were delimited (or instrumental) in that they did not capture a picture of the entire bounded unit; instead, they focused more on one aspect (Hamilton, 2010; Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Yin, 2018): ethical decision-making. Bounding the system in this way helped determine the scope of data collection and distinguished data about the type of governance of each school.

The selection of schools was guided by several key criteria designed to ensure meaningful comparison across governance types while maintaining sufficient contextual richness within each case (Goodrick, 2020; Rule & John, 2015). Two schools from each governance type were selected to enable comparative analysis while providing sufficient depth within each type and constituted the units of analysis. Schools serving the K-12 spectrum were prioritized, although this criterion was applied flexibly given that schools with different governance types organize grades differently. While public schools typically organize schools by grade division, many private and independent schools do not. All schools were located in Ontario to control for provincial policy and governance contexts. Schools were also selected where formal school leaders were willing and able to participate in both individual and potentially paired interviews, ensuring sufficient data richness for case development. Finally, schools were selected from those with established operations for at least 5 years, to ensure that their respective governance structures had time to influence organizational culture and decision-making patterns.

The decision to select six schools (two per governance type) balanced several considerations. The benefits of a multiple case study are optimal if four to ten cases are selected (Stake, 2006), which is enough to show interactivity between cases but not so many as to overwhelm the researcher. Two schools per governance type enabled the examination of variation within governance types, to reduce the risk of attributing governance-specific characteristics to individual school anomalies. The sample size also aligns with the social constructivist epistemology, prioritizing depth and richness of understanding. Six cases provided adequate complexity while being manageable enough for the intensive analysis required for qualitative case study research.

Phase 1: Building the Cases

Participants and Participant Selection

Recruitment for the study began in May 2023, by gaining permission from public school board officials to contact school leaders. I contacted the Ontario Principal's Council, who redirected me to ethics committees of school boards. Through email correspondence, I was able to secure permission to interview public school leaders. All school leaders were identified from within an existing professional network and through snowball sampling and were recruited via email. A copy of the recruitment email can be found in Appendix A. Recruitment was purposeful and based on the understanding that I sought to discover, understand, and gain insight about the school (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016a).

The recruitment process revealed important insights about how types of governance structure influences willingness to participate in research about ethical decision-making. Leaders from 14 schools were approached before being able to confirm participation from the six schools included in the study. The difficulty in securing public school participation, with leaders citing

confidentiality concerns and permission requirements, itself illustrated how types of governance structures shape leader autonomy and decision-making freedom. Similarly, some independent school leaders' concerns about potential conflicts of interest due to my professional background highlighted how different relationships between schools and the broader educational community come into play. These recruitment challenges, while initially frustrating, ultimately became part of the data about how governance influenced leader behaviour and decisions. The recruitment did not seek to represent the entire range of different school contexts that exist within each governance type. The final sample achieved theoretical coverage within each governance type and provided sufficient variation to enable meaningful cross-case comparison while maintaining the depth necessary for rich case development.

In the study's first phase, two participants from each of the six schools were interviewed. Twelve school leaders in a designated leadership role participated in semi-structured interviews. While it is acknowledged that school leaders can hold virtually any role, this study focused on those who were in formal leadership positions with official positions, titles, and appointments. The titles and roles varied considerably depending on the type of governance, which partially contributes to the purpose of the study by further highlighting the impacts of types of governance.

Study participants consisted of two principals, two vice-principals, three heads of school, a chief financial officer, a head of junior school, an assistant head of school, one director of admissions, and a director of student services. In public schools, only principals and vice-principals were included, yet these job titles did not exist in any of the other schools in the study. A summary of the participants is found below in Table 3. Eight participants had previously worked in a school with a different type of school governance, while four had spent their careers

working in only private or only public schools. One person from each of the six schools participated in Phase 2, described later in this section.

Table 3. *Overview of Participants*

Identifier	School Governance Type	Title	Worked in Another Governance Structure
I1	Independent	Head of School	Yes
I2	Independent	CFO	Yes
I3	Independent	Head of Junior School	Yes
I4	Independent	Director of Student Services	Yes
PUB1	Public	Principal	Yes
PUB2	Public	Vice-principal	Yes
PUB3	Public	Principal	No
PUB4	Public	Vice-principal	No
PR1	Private	Head of School	Yes
PR2	Private	Director of Admissions	Yes
PR3	Private	Head of School	No
PR4	Private	Assistant Head of School	No

Data Collection Procedures

Using multiple data sources was critical to providing a rich narrative and addressing the concerns of credibility and dependability through triangulation (Yin, 2018). To address this, semi-structured interviews and document analysis comprised the data sources in Phase 1.

Interviews.

Interviews took place from June to September 2023 and were a primary data collection method for this study. Yin (2018) describes interviews as "One of the most important sources of

case study evidence" (p. 118). They can be especially helpful in answering the 'how' and 'why' of events and for insights reflecting participant experiences. For case study interviews, the questions should be fluid rather than too structured (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Accordingly, semi-structured interviews with the twelve individual school leaders were conducted. These interviews with school leaders provided evidence that could not have been gathered any other way (Baškarada, 2014). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to refocus the conversation or prompt participants when interesting or novel ideas emerged. The interviews addressed workplace influences, value conflicts between the individual and the institution, and the impacts on school function and operations related to decision-making when facing ethical dilemmas. They were also critical for facilitating the co-construction of knowledge. In each interview, I positioned myself as a former school leader, and together with the participants, addressed the interview questions as colleagues rather than strictly as researcher and participants. My background was already known to some of the participants, so this disclosure ensured greater consistency in researcher-participant interactions. The interviews lasted 30-50 minutes, and participants joined online via Zoom from school or home. The interviews were recorded with participant permission, and the transcriptions were distributed for member checking; one participant opted to make changes, mainly by removing sections of text that were deemed sensitive in content.

The interview guide for individual interviews was specifically designed to address the research questions and was based on the conceptual framework of this study. This guide is found in Appendix B. Creation of the guide began with a pilot study of three interviews with school leaders from within my professional network. At the time, the conceptual framework was incomplete, but the connections between interview questions and the research questions was

solidified. The natural path of the responses from the participants led to three primary changes. First, additional questions were added to address specific decision-making choices. Second, a question about value conflicts was added to help distinguish the ethical dilemmas. Finally, the pilot led to the addition of a question regarding leadership experience in schools with different types of governance structures, as defined in this study.

The semi-structured approach and open-ended nature of the questions was chosen to elicit original ideas from the leaders about their challenges, dilemmas, and decision-making. The first questions set the stage and tone for the discussion which were intended to build trust and a common understanding of purpose and intentions of the interview and the study. While a more direct approach was considered, such as asking participants to respond to a uniform fictitious critical incident, it was decided that drawing out real dilemmas faced by interviewees was essential to be able to answer the first research question which is specifically focused on identifying the types of dilemmas faced by the school leaders. The choice of examples they shared became an important part of the data, just as much as the ethical paradigms they omitted. Similarly, participants were asked to identify their value conflicts, which is directly aligned with answering the third research question. Table 4 below illustrates how the interview guide connects with and addresses the research questions and elements of the conceptual framework.

Table 4. *Rationale for Interview Questions*

Interview Question	Research Questions	Relationship to Conceptual Framework	Other

1- To get us started, tell me a bit about your school.
• What kind of school do you work at?
  o What grades does it serve?
  o Who runs it?
  o How many students are enrolled?
		School governance	Building trust
			Setting the stage
			Case context

• What is the mission/philosophy of your school?			
2-What is your role at the school? • What was your pathway towards school leadership? • What are your main responsibilities?	2	School leadership	Building trust Setting the stage
3- How would you describe yourself as a school leader? • What are your leadership priorities?		School leadership	
4 -What kinds of decisions predominate for you in your role at the school? • Do you feel that your values play a role in your school leadership decision-making? If so, how?	1, 3	Ethical dilemmas Ethical paradigms	
5- Ethical dilemmas occur when we need to make difficult ethical choices, and the options seem equally good or equally bad. What types of situations arise at work that result in ethical dilemmas for you? Can you give me some general examples of these situations? • What makes these a dilemma? Can you describe the ethical conflicts that come up in these situations? • Are there certain types of ethical dilemmas that seem to come up a lot for you? If so, which ones?	1	Ethical dilemmas Ethical paradigms Ethical decision-making	
6- Do you tend to talk to others while sorting through your decision-making to resolve ethical dilemmas? • If so, with whom? What do you typically talk about with them?	2	Ethical decision-making	
7- Can you share a specific example of an ethical dilemma you experienced while in your role as school leader? • What was the issue? Who did it involve? • What choices did you have?	1, 2, 3	Ethical dilemmas Ethical paradigms Ethical decision-making	

• What value conflicts did you experience that made this a dilemma for you? • Did you have a process to help decide about how to resolve the dilemma? • What values do you prioritize when faced with a dilemma? • Are there any deal breakers in your decision-making process?		
8 -How did your school's governance type play a role in your decision-making?	2	School governance Ethical dilemmas Ethical paradigms Ethical decision-making
9- Have you worked in a different type of school governance type than the one you are in currently? • If so, do you feel you had a different decision-making approach or outcomes in general regarding ethical dilemmas because of the school governance context?	1, 3	School governance Ethical dilemmas Ethical paradigms Ethical decision-making
10- Do you have any other comments or things to add before we conclude?		Open-ended responses

Document Review.

Throughout the interviewing timeframe, a document review captured various dimensions of each case. This allowed for a more accurate and complete portrayal of each case than the interviews alone. Considering that "finding pertinent documents hinges to some extent on the investigator's ability to think about the problem under study" (Merriam, 1998, p. 121), available documents had to be carefully considered. Dimensions of the cases found in the documents include school mission and vision, student and family statistics (including enrolment and attendance), financial data and financial management policy and procedure, school communications, school policies and programs with attention to student wellbeing, and

admissions information where applicable. As demonstrated in the next paragraph, the document review contributed to building the cases by providing data on school context and governance structures that could be analyzed to uncover meaning and build an understanding of each case.

All documents used in this study were publicly available. A summary of the documents collected for review in each case can be found in Table 5 below. Documents reviewed included school and board websites, school brochures, marketing information, staff manuals and meeting agendas, annual reports, handbooks, brochures, and policy documents (staff, student, and school). As was previously noted, the documents contain a wide variety of information and data, highlighting further differences between the cases. In the cases of the public schools, sometimes individual schools did not have a document, but the board they belong to did, in which case the word '*yes*' is indicated in brackets.

Table 5. *Summary of Document Review*

Document Type	Public Schools		Private Schools		Independent Schools	
	Public Alternative	Public Elementary	Private Independent Boarding School	Private Montessori	Academically Focused Independent School	University Preparatory Day School
School Website	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Prospectus	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parent Handbook	-	-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Financial Handbook	-	-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Application Form	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Newsletters/Annual Reports	(Yes)	(Yes)	Yes	-	Yes	Yes

EQAO Test results	Yes	Yes	-	-	-	-
Policy Handbook/manual	(Yes)	(Yes)	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Meeting Minutes	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes

Data Analysis Procedures

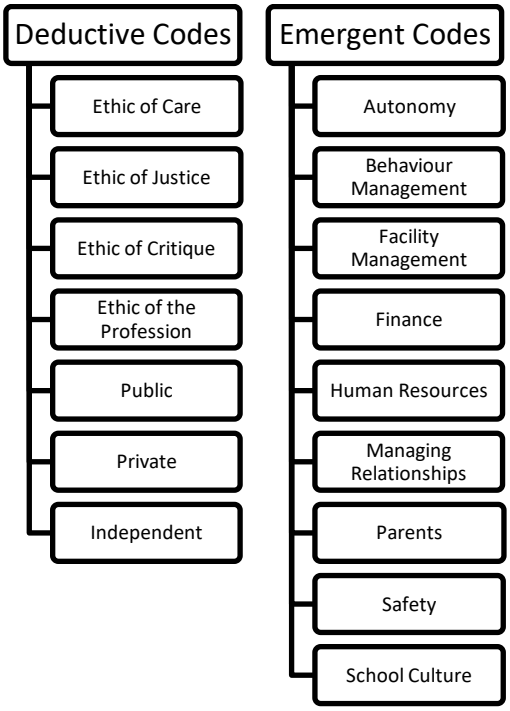
Qualitative data analysis procedures began with systematic data preparation to ensure consistency and quality throughout the analytical process. To do so, interview transcripts were first transcribed through Zoom's automated transcription feature, then carefully edited for clarity. The editing process involved multiple reviews to ensure accuracy while preserving the authentic voice and meaning of the participants' responses. All edited transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 for systematic analysis and management. Document files were similarly uploaded and organized by case and document type. Colour codes were applied to assist with data management, as well as coding stripes in the software, which was essential for managing the complexity of multiple data sources across six cases.

Coding Framework and Approach. The coding process followed a systematic approach combining deductive and inductive elements. Initially, open coding was used to familiarize myself with the data and identify potentially significant segments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016a). This exploratory phase involved reading each transcript multiple times and noting preliminary observations about patterns, themes, and unexpected insights that emerged from the data. Second, deductive codes were derived from the conceptual framework, specifically targeting the four ethical paradigms (care, justice, critique, and profession) identified by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), as well as governance-related themes aligned with the study's focus on school

governance types. The third stage included the development and refinement of emergent codes, including themes around decision-making processes, institutional constraints, and leadership challenges. New codes were created when data segments did not fit existing categories, ensuring comprehensive capture of participant experiences. Finally, a review and consolidation of all codes for consistency was undertaken.

Throughout this iterative process, I maintained detailed memos documenting coding decisions, emerging themes, and interpretive insights. Regular reviews of coded material ensured consistency and helped identify patterns and relationships that might not have been apparent during the initial coding. For this qualitative research, the goal of the coding was to unravel the data and "rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107) while organizing the data into themes. Substantive categories were included to capture descriptive content about the beliefs shared by participants (Maxwell, 2013). Figure 2 displays the deductive and emergent codes used in the NVivo analysis. Following qualitative research best practices, detailed frequency counts were omitted, because for this study, the analytical value lies in the specific content and context of the data, rather than the frequency of occurrence.

Figure 2. *Codes for Analysis*



Interview Data Analysis. Each interview transcript underwent a systematic analysis focused on extracting rich, contextual understanding of participants' experiences with decision-making. The analysis targeted three primary areas aligned with the research questions: types and characteristics of ethical dilemmas encountered by school leaders, decision-making processes and the influences that shape them, and the perceived role of type of governance in enabling or constraining decision-making.

During the coding process, particular attention was paid to specific examples of ethical dilemmas shared by participants, including the stakeholders involved, the competing values at stake, and the contextual factors that made the situation challenging. Additionally, I examined the language and terminology used by participants to describe their decision-making, which revealed underlying assumptions about leadership, ethics, and governance. References to formal policies, expectations, and various pressures were noted. Value conflicts and tensions described

by leaders were also prioritized. Finally, decision-making strategies and consultation patterns were analyzed, including how they navigated competing demands.

Coded segments were grouped into thematic categories, with careful attention to explicit and implicit meanings in the participant narratives. This way, the analysis included what participants directly said about their experiences, but also what their choice of examples, language and emphasis revealed about their values.

Document Analysis. Documents were initially assessed using Bourgeois's (2021) criteria for pertinence, authenticity, completeness, and preciseness. During this screening process, documents deemed not pertinent to the study's focus, such as residential boarding program materials, were excluded from detailed analysis. Documents were included in the analysis if they were determined to be relevant to the research questions and demonstrated a clear connection to each school's context, culture, leadership or governance. A complete list of retained documents is in Table 5. Documents were used to assist in building the cases by gathering information on school context, governance systems and accountabilities, and leadership structures.

Documents underwent systematic coding that was applied using the same framework applied to the interview transcripts. This parallel approach enabled a more direct comparison between the cases and the experiences of the school leaders. The coding process focused on identifying values expressed in the mission statements, policies, promotional materials, and communications. Additionally, details about governance and decision-making as formally outlined in the documents were examined. School priorities, as outlined in strategic planning documents or policies were also analyzed. Finally, aspects of school culture and assumptions about education, leadership, and community were carefully considered.

As noted by Merriam (1998), the purpose of creating and collecting the records differs from their analytical use in research. While the documents may have initially been created for accountability, community-building, marketing and recruitment purposes, the analytical focus centered on extracting insights specifically relevant to building a comprehensive understanding of the case.

Within-Case Analysis and Synthesis. The document review and interviews occurred simultaneously because these boundaries were not absolute, and an interactive process must occur with data collection, analysis, and reporting of different sources. Following Yin's (2018) recommendations for case study analysis, I analyzed each school as an individual case, before any cross-case comparisons were undertaken. This within-case analysis was essential for developing a deep understanding of how the type of governance structure, school context, and study participants shaped the ethical decision-making in each case.

For each school, I constructed comprehensive profiles that included school context, governance and leadership, ethical dilemmas and ethical decision-making. I examined elements of size, demographics, mission, reporting relationships and leadership teams. I analyzed ethical decision-making patterns, focusing on common types of dilemmas encountered, stakeholder configurations and recurring themes in ethical dilemmas. I identified the dominant ethical frameworks, seeking evidence of which of the four ethical paradigms (care, justice, critique, profession) were most prominent in the school and in individual decision-making. Finally, I examined governance influences, specifically the ways in which each school's type of governance structure seemed to influence ethical decision-making

A descriptive narrative was then constructed for each case (school) based on the coded individual interview transcripts and document analysis. I shared the narratives with the school

leaders as a form of member checking to ensure I captured an authentic account of the context and practice and to provide credibility through triangulation within each case. By inviting participants to review and respond to the narratives, the process became an additional opportunity for co-construction of understanding about their experiences.

The within-case analysis phase concluded with detailed, validated narratives for each of the six schools, providing the foundation for Phase 2 of the process. These individual case understandings would prove essential for identifying patterns and variations across different schools in the subsequent phase of analysis.

Phase 2: Cross-Case Analysis

Participants

In the second phase, six of the same participants from the first phase (one leader from each of the six case schools previously interviewed) agreed to participate in a journaling exercise and paired interviews grouped by school governance type. This was essential for exploring governance as the comparative focus of the cases. The participants for Phase 2 volunteered to proceed from Phase 1 immediately after their first interview, or in some cases after conferring with their colleague. In one case, a leader said they were too busy to continue to Phase 2; however, all the other participants from Phase 1 offered to participate in Phase 2, and leaders from the pairs decided between themselves which person would continue.

There were three paired interviews: one for independent school leaders, one for public school leaders, and one for private school leaders, each including two participants. The interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. Table 6 below indicates the participants and pairings of the Phase 2 participants in the paired interviews. The participant identifiers are the same as the ones used in Table 3.

Table 6. *Paired Interview Participants*

	Public School Pair		Private School Pair		Independent School Pair	
Identifier	PUB1	PUB3	PR1	PR3	I2	I4
Title	Principal	Principal	Head of School	Head of School	CFO	Head of Junior School

Data Collection Procedures

Journals. Participants were asked to complete a journaling exercise between the individual and the paired interview. A daily journal or principal log is an effective instrument for capturing leadership practice (Camburn et al., 2010), as it can serve as a tool to record memories while they are still fresh and track information over time. Various aspects of leadership, management, personal development, and experience are easily recorded. The template for the journaling exercise for Phase 2 can be found in Appendix C. This exercise was offered as a reflection tool that could be completed at a frequency that was at the participant's discretion. Participants were not required to read from, specifically reference, or share anything that was written in their journal, although they were invited to do so if they wished. Instead, it was intended to help the participants reflect upon and remember their ethical dilemmas and guide them in the paired interview.

The decision not to monitor the journals or to collect them for data analysis was based on three factors. First, data collection from journals would have required informed consent that may have presented as a barrier to participant recruitment. Second, making the journals mandatory would have required a commitment over time that may have similarly been a deterrent to participation. Third, participant fatigue, and concerns about confidentiality (Thomas, 2015) were

also considered. For these reasons, the journals were discussed periodically and distributed in a timely manner, but remained the private property of the participant.

Paired Interviews. Paired interviews were selected for Phase 2 because they offered unique advantages for exploring experiences related to governance type which was the organizing construct for the cross-case comparison. By bringing together leaders from the same governance type, the method enabled validation or contrast of individual experiences with shared structural contexts. This approach was particularly valuable for identifying assumptions about governance that might not have surfaced in individual interviews, as participants could build on each other's perspectives to articulate experiences that are often implicit in their daily practice.

Paired interviews are intended to flow as the participants interact with each other while being observed by the interviewer. Wilson et al. (2016) define paired interviewing as an alternative to individual interviews and focus groups which involve "interviewing two people together for the purposes of collecting information about how the pair perceives the same event or phenomenon" (p. 1551). Both interviewees interact with each other and participate in the discussion as equitably as possible. Qualitative data is collected in the form of verbal exchanges and observations. A synergy between the pair on shared themes or different interpretations can be identified cohesively when participants interact in these natural pairs. Wilson et al. (2016) suggest that compared to individual interviews, the use of paired interviews leads to a process that is more iterative, interactive, continuous, dynamic, holistic and synergistic. Furthermore, an atmosphere of confidence between the interviewer and interviewees can more easily be established in paired interviews, and they also allow the interviewer to gain insights from the interactions between participants (Houssart & Evens, 2011).

The paired interviews occurred in October 2023; given that the individual interviews were spread out over four months due to summer break, the time lapse between the individual and paired interviews was from two weeks to four months. Pairs met on Zoom and were established based on the type of school governance structure. None of the participants in any of the pairs had met before. As the interviewer, my role involved facilitating conversations rather than directing them, allowing participants to build on each other's responses while ensuring all interview questions were addressed. I used open-ended prompts to encourage elaboration and occasionally summarized or reflected back what participants shared to deepen the conversation.

Overall, the intended goal of a collaborative and interactive discussion with high levels of engagement was achieved by enthusiastic and responsive conversations between all participants in each of the three interviews. In each pair, participants immediately drew connections to common experiences, people, and professional contexts, which helped to quickly establish rapport between the participants and facilitated sharing during the interviews. However, one interviewee engaged in some posturing which included frequent name-dropping and imbalanced time speaking. I gently redirected the conversation and directly invited the quieter participant to share their perspective on specific points raised by their colleague.

Each pair related to descriptions of their school governance type, the dilemmas they faced, and the ethical paradigms they applied to their decisions. The interview guide for the paired interviews can be found in Appendix D.

Data Analysis Procedures

Cross-case analysis was conducted following the completion of individual case analyses, adhering to established best practices for multiple case study research (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016a; Yin, 2018). This phase involved two distinct but related analytical processes: analysis of the paired interviews and systematic comparison across the three governance types.

Transcripts from the paired interviews were analyzed using a modified version of the coding framework developed in Phase 1. Initial data codes included the four ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care, and profession. The codes for type of school governance that were used in Phase 1 were no longer necessary for Phase 2, as each paired interview was specific to a particular type.

Transcripts were again managed and coded using NVivo 14 to undertake a comparative and inductive qualitative analysis between the cases. The transcripts from the paired interviews were not returned to participants for member checking due to their joint nature; changes by one participant would affect the comments or changes made by the other participant.

The paired aspect of these interviews required attention to both individual contributions and the interactive dynamics between participants. Analysis focused on convergent themes where both participants agreed or built upon each other's ideas, as well as divergent perspectives that revealed different experiences within the same governance type. Additionally, interactive moments where one participant's comments prompted new insights from the other were carefully examined, along with governance-specific language and assumptions that emerged through the conversations.

The coding process involved multiple readings of each paired interview transcript. Initial coding identified substantive contributions from each participant, while subsequent readings focused on the collaborative meaning-making that emerged through their interaction. Special attention was paid to moments when participants validated, challenged, or expanded upon each other's perspectives. Several new codes emerged in the analysis of Phase 2, which included

common challenges, strengths of the governance structure, and key governance characteristics. The themes from these codes were significant for comparative purposes, but omissions were considered equally important, which will be discussed further in the findings and discussion chapters.

The systematic comparison across governance types drew on Phase 1 individual case analysis (document analysis and individual interviews) and the Phase 2 paired interview data. The cross-case comparison focused on identifying common ethical dilemmas across governance types as well as examining variations in ethical decision-making. The analysis focused on the different manifestations of the four ethical paradigms across the schools governance types and in identifying governance-related factors related in ethical decision-making.

The final analytical step involved systematically integrating insights from both phases of the study to construct a comprehensive understanding of how type of governance structure influences decision-making. Phase 1 provided rich context-specific understanding of each case, while Phase 2 revealed patterns and variations across governance types. Where Phase 2 findings differed from or expanded upon Phase 1 insights, these discrepancies were carefully examined to determine whether they reflected methodological differences, evolved participant thinking, or the influence of peer interaction. For instance, some governance-related constraints and opportunities that participants mentioned only briefly in individual interviews became more predominant themes when validated by colleagues in paired interviews, suggesting that shared experiences helped participants articulate understandings of governance influence.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were applied throughout the entire research process. Because this study involved human participants, the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the University of Ottawa

provided ethics approval through the Certificate of Ethics found in Appendix E. All participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Informed consent was acquired before collecting data. The consent form is found in Appendix F. Permission for public school leaders' participation was acquired through correspondence with internal research and evaluation committee chairs, who gave permission after obtaining the REB certificate and reviewing the consent documents and the data collection instruments. Identifiers were given to participants to anonymize the results. No school or individual is identified in the research files or the thesis. All electronic data collected is stored on my personal computer or in a password-protected online NVivo account or OneDrive account. All interviews were recorded and stored electronically with password protection. I am the only person with access to the raw data. All primary data will be deleted or destroyed no later than five years after completing my thesis defence.

Limitations

There were several methodological limitations in this research, and they are discussed in further detail in Chapter Six. First, participant recruitment was particularly challenging; fourteen school leaders (all from different schools) were approached before successfully recruiting participants from each school governance type. This might suggest some bias towards those who participate because of the dilemmas they face, how they resolve them, or the degree of freedom of expression they feel. Consequently, this study includes participants who were comfortable and willing to discuss ethical decision-making, and they may have different dilemmas and decisions than those who did not want to be participants. Additionally, six pairs of school leaders were sought, yet only one person from each pair was approached at a time. Therefore, a leader would agree to participate in the study and then ask a colleague to be the other participant for each case.

In five of the six cases, the person who first decided to participate was in a position of authority over the other leader, calling the nature of voluntary participation into question. This had not been foreseen, as initial participant recruitment began with leaders in various positions, and it would have been possible for subordinates to request the participation of their supervisors. For example, a vice-principal might have invited their principal to join them in the study; however, the recruitment unfolded in reverse, by chance. This suggests that the nature of the relationship between the leaders at a school may, to some extent, have influenced participation, although all potential participants were assured of the confidentiality of the individual interviews prior to participating. Due to the recruitment challenges as well as the scope of the research, a full breadth of school contexts within each governance type was not explored.

An additional limitation is the variety of documents that were available to analyze. Each school had a range of publicly available documents, but each case differed. Only publicly available documents were collected. While this may have initially been considered problematic, the differences became part of the data for building the cases. Recognizing which aspects of the school were deemed essential or obligatory to share, or the details provided about certain aspects of the school, contributed to a richer understanding of the case and were part of the thick descriptions that contributed to validity.

A final limitation is the unknown use of the journal activity. While the journals were offered as a reflective tool to help participants prepare for paired interviews, their optional nature meant usage varied among participants and some may not have used them at all. No participants explicitly referenced their journals during interviews, suggesting that the primary value may have been in prompting reflection rather than providing direct data. This aligns with Camburn et al.'s (2010) observation that journals serve to crystallize thinking even when not formally

analyzed. Leaders were empowered to discuss only those issues that they felt comfortable sharing. I weighed the advantages and disadvantages of using the journal in different ways; I concluded that the benefits of confidentiality and personal choice outweighed the risks of analyzing the journal and the pressures of written records, which might have led to a lack of participation, although it is noted that social desirability bias may still be present in what participants chose to share.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from six case schools organized into three governance types: public, private, and independent. For each governance type, two individual school cases are presented first, followed by a synthesis that integrates findings across the paired schools. Each individual case is structured around three key themes: (1) context, which provides essential background on the school's demographics, academic performance, and culture; (2) governance and leadership, which examines the decision-making structures and leadership roles within each school; and (3) ethical dilemmas and ethical decision-making, which explores the specific dilemmas leaders face and how they navigate competing ethical paradigms.

Following the presentation of all six cases, synthesis sections identify themes that characterize each governance type, including the role of policies and procedures in public schools, issues of autonomy and client relationships in private schools, and the balance of autonomy with stakeholder management in independent schools. Together, these findings illuminate how school governance types may influence the nature of ethical dilemmas encountered by school leaders and the decision-making processes that they employ to resolve them.

Schools are described in each case by unique features based on governance characteristics. Table 7 below outlines these key governance features by governance type.

Table 7. *Key Governance Features of Case Schools*

Key Governance Features	Public Schools	Private Schools	Independent Schools
Subject to Ontario labour law	✓	✓	✓
Compliance with Workplace and Occupational Health and Safety Acts	✓	✓	✓
Compliance with Ontario Human Rights Code	✓	✓	✓
Parent rights to financial documents	✓	×	✓

Parent rights to governance meeting minutes	✓	×	✓
Parent voice on board or council (required)	✓	×	✓
Certification required for teachers and leaders	✓	×	×
All teachers required to be members of Ontario College of Teachers	✓	×	×
Required school inspections	✓	×	×
Obligated to follow provincial curriculum	✓	×	×
All aspects of the Ontario Education Act	✓	×	×
Publicly funded (in whole or in part)	✓	×	×
Required to set a balanced budget	✓	×	×
Subject to provincial mandates (such as EQAO, collective agreements, attendance, bussing, accessibility and inclusion policies, student records, report cards, behaviour, and others)	✓	×	×

All participant quotations and paraphrased statements are cited in the text as *personal communications*, following the conventions outlined in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2020). To protect confidentiality, each participant has been assigned a pseudonym (e.g. PUB2, PR3), which is referenced in Chapter 3, and is used consistently throughout the findings.

Public Schools

Public Alternative School

Context and Culture. The Public Alternative School (a descriptive pseudonym) caters to 240 students from kindergarten to grade 6. It is located in a large Ontario city and is part of a group of alternative schools described on the English school board website as being student-centered and supporting all students in achieving their personal best. The program has seven tenets: cooperation and teamwork, innovative approaches, an integrated curriculum approach with multi-age groupings, a balance between student-directed and teacher-led approaches, a family and community-centered environment, and ongoing assessment and evaluation

(confidential)[2]. Individual school data is sparse, and the website was not updated from 2012 to the writing of this thesis. The board provides the website framework and has basic contact information and links to board resources and information.

The school is housed in a traditional 1950s school building which this researcher determined after visiting, has ample outdoor space and bright and spacious classrooms. All students are enrolled in core French, and there is no option for French Immersion which has become a contentious policy issue in some boards in Ontario. Due to some earlier challenges with a former principal who was reported by local news outlets as being incompetent, the school is under-enrolled and saw a decrease of about 25% of the student body between 2021-2023; as a result, some classrooms are empty, and most classes average about 20 students (PUB1). Of the 240 students, 100 have Individual Education Plans[3], and there are 20 students with a Safety Plan[4] (PUB1). The principal quickly pointed out that these proportions differed from the board's and attributed the high rates of challenging behaviours to being an alternative school (PUB1). The additional challenges can shape the nature of the dilemmas and the resources and priorities allocated to resolving them. The vice-principal explained this in the following way:

> We also find that we get a lot of kiddos who they themselves or their parents are super disenfranchised with education. And with usually formalized education systems. Parents have usually had a difficult time at school. And those habits are seen again with their own children. (PUB2)

[2] To preserve confidentiality and anonymity, citations for school websites are not included.
[3] Individual Education Plans are written plans that describes special education programs, accommodations and services that a school board will provide for a student.(Government of Ontario, 2022c)
[4] A student safety plan is a plan developed for a student whose behaviour is known to pose ongoing risk to themselves, other students, worker or other people in general. It serves as a crisis response plan (Government of Ontario, 2018)

The vice-principal explained that she felt the tenuous relationship with schooling impacted her ability to build a strong culture of learning (PUB2).

The Education Quality and Accountability Office of Ontario (EQAO) conducts standardized math, reading, and writing testing for all grade 3 and grade 6 public school students in the province. The 2022-2023 results (the most recent at the time of the interviews) indicate that most students in the Public Alternative School were not meeting the standards; grade 3 students met the provincial standard only 26%, 35%, and 26% of the time, respectively, for those disciplines, and 8%, 67%, and 46% met the provincial standard in grade 6 for those same disciplines (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2025).

According to the principal, members of the school community aim to create and maintain a culture of caring. He praised staff for their understanding of students' individual needs and for being adaptable in helping them reach their potential (PUB1). The leaders expressed that there is a strong emphasis on student safety established in the processes and procedures and on encouraging students to attend school. Students generally seem happy at school (PUB 1; PUB 2) but are often seen as students whose needs are not easily met in the traditional education system. Frequently, students register at alternative schools because of an actual or perceived lack of fit in their neighbourhood school (PUB1; PUB 2) All children have a right to an education, which is embraced not only as a human right but also as an essential ethos within the school (PUB2). Consequently, the principal and vice-principal reported that there is a welcoming environment where a strong sense of belonging is fostered and encouraged by staff.

Governance and Leadership. A large English-language public school board in Ontario operates the school. Consequently, school governance is bound by the *Education Act*

(Government of Ontario, 2014), and school board governance as described in Chapter 2. At the time of data collection, a Board of Trustees had been elected in municipal elections.

The school has a full-time principal and a part-time vice-principal. Both of these participants also indicated that they received considerable support and guidance from systems principals who are principals within the board who oversee general priority areas rather than a particular school or groups of students (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2024) and their superintendent. The principal also indicated appreciation for a network of other school principals he could consult and collaborate with: "I use my resources here a lot… I definitely lean on the wisdom of a crowd" (PUB1). The participants felt that they had a fair amount of autonomy within a well-established hierarchy of leadership and decision-making in the confines of the school board. The principal described it in the following way:

> So, my world is flooded with memos of decisions that have been made at the system level. My favorite memo is the Friday memo, which is the memo with all the memos on it… All of those system things that are coming in, they need to be implemented in a way that makes sense for your building… how are you making that look within your space does matter. So, there are decisions happening there. (PUB1)

Leadership priorities were focused on safety and school culture (PUB1; PUB2). The vice-principal shared: "I'd love to say, oh, we're great instructional leaders. But here it's constant in terms of student behavior" (PUB2). While both participants recognized the ideals of their leadership roles, they felt that they had to prioritize basic needs over academics. The vice-principal said, "I always think my number one priority is to keep everybody in my building safe and calm" (PUB2). They felt they had little time or energy to develop staff or focus on students'

academic needs. They aimed to keep students and staff safe and ensure a positive culture that encouraged students to attend school.

The school has a parent council that assists in raising funds for the library, organizing bake sales, and school dances, but it does not have an advisory role. The principal explained that one of his four main pillars of leadership responsibility is community outreach, a large part of which he identified as engagement with the parent council (PUB1).

Ethical Dilemmas and Ethical Decision-Making. Many of the decisions made by the school leaders focus on safety and student behaviour (PUB1; PUB2). The primary dilemmas that they faced resulted from clashes in the paradigms related to the ethic of the profession and the ethic of care. Abiding by professional standards can be categorized as justice when the focus is on fairness, rules and due process, but is rooted in the ethic of the profession when leaders act in ways consistent with the values of the profession and consider what is procedurally correct but also what is professionally and morally appropriate and the integrity of the profession. As noted earlier, there is frequent overlap between paradigms and decisions rest on applying the paradigms together.

The vice-principal explained that she liked to be guided by the policies and procedures. She described a dilemma in which she had to decide whether to transfer an employee who felt unsafe at work, even though the Ministry of Labour had determined that the workplace was safe and that no accommodations were required, while the employee continued to demand them. She weighed the ethic of justice by relying on the determination of the ministry, against the ethic of the profession in considering the reactions of the other employees, and the ethic of care in accommodating the requests of the employee. She decided to lean on the ability to claim the decision was not hers alone, even though she could have moved the employee. She stated, “So

that decision was made for me, which as I said, I love when those things happen" (PUB2). She also added:

> We have so many policies and procedures that are bound by far bigger things than you. Whether it's Ministry of Labour or whether it's Ministry of Education. So sometimes those ethical dilemmas, thank goodness, are taken away, right? Cause you get to just say, well, this is the policies and procedures, and whether I like it or not, or whether I wish there was something different, realistically this is where it needs to stop. (PUB2)

The dilemmas illustrated in this example are unique to the public school context. There is no option to move a teacher to another school in independent or private contexts. Her comment indicates her assessment of the policies and procedures as outlining the decisions she should take, rather than apply an ethic of critique or apply agency or autonomy to resolve the problem.

The other participant explained that the decision-making for behaviour management was particularly challenging, stating that "Certainly some behaviour challenges are happening all the time" (PUB1) and that he felt "bombarded" with the challenges that staff and teachers were having and were not able to resolve on their own. He explained that sometimes the decisions are made easier because "the system is telling you what you have to do" (PUB1).

There was extensive deliberation on how leadership decisions around safety would impact the lives of the teachers, students, and their families. This ethic of care was exemplified by recognizing that a decision's outcomes "could have a major impact on the rest of their life" (PUB1). Referring to a teacher disciplinary dilemma following an incident where a child was pulled aggressively by the hand, the principal said, "Given the information I had, it was the right thing to do [to suspend him], but it was going to bring undue harm to somebody, despite it being

the right thing to do" (PUB1). Removing the teacher from the school had thus created a clash in the ethics of care and the profession.

Similarly, decisions about whether to suspend a student were presented as being common. Weighing the safety of the school community against a student's individual needs often left the participants with an ethical dilemma where both decision-making options were rooted in the ethic of care but for different stakeholders simultaneously. The consideration of student rights is most prominent in the public context, because the right to education is a public responsibility as outlined in the *Education Act* (Government of Ontario, 2014). The need to consider the impact of discipline on a teacher's future career and deliberations about student suspensions and expulsions weighed heavily on the participants and occurred regularly (PUB1; PUB2).

Despite the tensions between the ethics, the participants were comfortable with their ethical decision-making. They felt that they had enough autonomy to make ethical decisions, and that they were neither forced nor did they make decisions that they were uncomfortable with, although they felt that decision-making can be challenging and stressful.

Public Elementary School

Context and Culture. The Public Elementary School (a pseudonym) serves 250 students from kindergarten to grade 8 and is housed in a 100-year-old heritage building in the downtown area of a large Ontario urban centre. Views from Google Earth suggest it has a large playground and ample facilities. According to the website (confidential), it is a single-track school that offers English programs with core French instruction, special education, and English Language Learning (ELL) programs.

According to the vice-principal, almost 95% of the students come from low-income families or those living close to the poverty line. At the same time, the other 5% are generally

from a more privileged and well-resourced community (PUB4). As the participant described, “There is no middle ground” (PUB4). Almost all students walk to school and live in a highly multicultural immediate community. Most of the students are racialized, and 63% of the students have a first language that is not English or French (PUB3). Based on the socioeconomics of the attending families, the school has been designated as one of several schools in the board for special resource allocations as part of its equity outcomes goals (confidential document).

The 2022-2023 results from the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) noted earlier, indicated that grade 3 students scored 44%, 76%, and 59% in meeting the provincial standard in math, reading, and writing, respectively, while the grade 6 students did worse in math but better in language with 31%, 88%, and 88% meeting the standards in each of the areas (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2025).

According to the participants, there is a strong focus on safety and in meeting the needs of students. Considerable resources have been allocated towards ensuring food security (PUB3). This includes dedicating an educational assistant release time from instruction, as well as financial investment in a kitchen and daily food purchases and preparation, resulting in a breakfast, lunch, and snack program (confidential).

Participants also emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive school environment. One leader stated, “We need to build a place where people feel safe” (PUB3). Adding staff to this comment, he went on to say, “It’s not easy working in [this] school. It’s not for everybody” (PUB3). He was similarly focused on parents and asked, “How do you create an environment where parents feel comfortable and safe?” (PUB3), adding that many parents indicated that they did not always feel safe in their own homes.

Governance and Leadership. The school belongs to an English public school board and school governance is therefore bound by the *Education Act (Government of Ontario, 2014)* in the same way as the other public school in this study.

There is a principal and part-time vice-principal who also has a partial teaching assignment. This was the second year that this leadership team had worked together under the regulatory superintendent and municipally elected Board of Trustees. Despite the provincial guideline that every publicly funded school should have a school council (Government of Ontario, 2022a), this school does not have one due to the special status as an equity-deserving school (PUB3). This means that there is no parent advisory body providing advice or sharing involvement with school leaders, nor parent involvement in school improvement or accountability directly to parents.

On the one hand, school leaders report they leaned on the superintendent for support, but on the other hand, they were sometimes strained by expectations and restrictions at the board level (PUB3; PUB4). In recounting a story of advocating for a student facing trauma and needing to change schools in the hopes of having a fresh start, the vice-principal explained, “I had to fight the system” and “I got in a lot of arguments with other principals” (PUB4). The policies in place would not allow for the student to be admitted at a different school that would have better met her needs.

The participants described the public governance structure as simultaneously supportive through networks of principals, system-principals and superintendents, and limiting due to policies that do not always account for individual circumstances. The principal noted, “It’s not my school, right? We go from place to place” (PUB3), emphasizing that leadership is contextual

for him. Thus, conflicts with the system due to policy and procedure were embedded and consistent across the public schools.

Both participants described perceiving the leadership environment and responsibilities in their school as somewhat overwhelming which then also shaped their decision-making. One said, "I never get a break. I eat on the run. I stand and eat, if I eat at all. Some days, I don't even go to the bathroom until school is over…it's insanity. It's unmanageable at times. It's actually unmanageable" (PUB4). The other expressed a similar sentiment: "This place is always hopping… it's on a daily basis. The list goes on… but it just never stops. It's coming from everywhere" (PUB3). Both leaders noted that instructional leadership is the goal, but there was no time to implement it due to their school environment's demanding and busy nature (PUB3; PUB4).

Ethical Dilemmas and Ethical Decision-Making. Dilemmas at this school were centered around the two issues of safety and human resources. To resolve these dilemmas, the leaders relied primarily on the ethic of the profession and the ethic of care. Due to the bustling nature of the school, many of the dilemmas also centered on prioritizing decisions based on urgency and immediacy over potential long-term benefits.

In the Public Elementary School, the reliance on the ethic of the profession was partially rooted in avoiding reprisals. Leaders repeatedly mentioned relying on the *Education Act*, the Ontario College of Teachers, and collective agreements when resolving ethical dilemmas. On the one hand, the leaders wanted to maximize teacher performance, but the documents and policies outline courses of action that they felt sometimes protected the employee more than elevate performance. In this way, neither option presented a clear ethical choice, as each option compromised the other.

Leadership decisions and behaviours were framed within the policies and expectations of these organizations and documents. The principal stated that he always followed all policies and procedures, regardless of his principles or what might sometimes be a personal value preference for a different decision. In this way, by citing his personal value favouring professional expectations, rather than just the rules, his decisions are rooted in the ethic of the profession. The principal also mentioned that his values are not always aligned with the ethic of the profession and past decisions have sometimes been rooted in fear and concern of being challenged, in which case he was deciding based on justice through rule-following. He shared an example of being bound in his hiring practices by policies that prioritize formal training over practical experience. He wanted to consider candidates that he thought were the best fit for his school and was frustrated that some candidates did not succeed in the board screening processes (PUB3). He said that although the principal is the person to make final hiring decisions, the policies and processes are so limiting that he does not feel he has many options. (PUB3).

Referencing human resources, he stated, "In Ontario, our unions are very strong, and so anything you say in a meeting in 2023, anything you do, will be held against you" (PUB3). Using another example of equitable hiring practices, he followed the letter of the law, indicating:

> A human rights file could be filed against you, so not only could you get it from the union, but you also get it from the human rights. It gets worse. So, then your superintendent has to get involved to come back and look at your decision-making practices, and it just goes on and on and on. (PUB3)

This principal seemed uncomfortable with the general context within which he needed to make decisions; however, he appeared clear about what decisions to take. For him, free choice was not always possible when resolving dilemmas. He valued the professional expectations that

are written into the policies and procedures, but he also valued caring for the needs of the individual student, and these two were sometimes at odds. Following the laws demonstrates justice, while following the unwritten professional expectations demonstrates the ethic of the profession. These two clashed by each compromising the other.

The dilemmas shared by this principal are specific to the public governance type. The adherence to collective agreements, Ontario College of Teachers, specific terms of large-scale hiring practices, and even certain elements of the Education Act do not exist for schools outside of the public context. This makes his comments a notable finding.

The vice-principal, however, often made decisions based on the ethic of caring, and was also the only participant in the study to identify her application of the ethic of critique. She stated:

> I follow policies and procedures. I do. I follow what I am supposed to be doing. But sometimes I maybe fudge on those a little bit because I don't think it's necessarily what's in the best interest of the child. So, I will make those decisions even if I am going to get my hand slapped because I can justify it in the end. (PUB4)

While this approach demonstrated prioritizing student welfare over procedural compliance, it represents individual resistance rather than systematic critique of policies that may not serve students' best interests.

The ethic of care was evident when referring to any community member, but the vice-principal referred to herself as operating in the grey zone. She described a dilemma in which the ethic of care clashed with the ethic of the profession: she hesitated when deciding to inform parents about a student's behaviour because her knowledge of the family culture suggested that the punishment at home would be more severe than she felt was warranted (PUB4). The ethic of

the profession guided her to share the information, but the ethic of care made her create a well-crafted management plan that would support the student. By sharing careful messaging and leaving out important details, she felt she abided by the spirit of the rules, but not the intended expectations. She also applied the ethic of critique in bending the rules which she found inappropriate (PUB4). Both participants emphasized the importance of empathy in their choices and putting the student's best interests first. As one leader shared, “Everything I do is in the interest of the body that’s standing in front of me or the child that I am making the decision for” (PUB4). The two participants shared the ethic of care and the ethics of justice and the profession, yet they personally leaned in different directions (one sometimes applying critique, and the other more reliant on the profession) to resolve their dilemmas and to make their own decisions.

Synthesis of Public Schools

Public school leaders in this study operate within a governance structure where extensive policies and procedures shaped their decision-making freedom while providing systematic support. While school boards in the province may vary in the degree of support or constraint they place on individual school leaders, both schools in this study illustrate how the more centralized public governance model (described in Chapter 2) creates a distinct ethical decision-making environment. In this context, extensive laws and policies establish strong accountability mechanisms that shape leadership practice, particularly prioritizing the ethic of justice, while creating tensions with the ethic of care.

Policy, Process, and Procedures as Defining Features. The most prominent theme across both public schools was leaders' heavy reliance on policy, process, and procedures, which translated into a strong focus on the ethic justice and of the profession. All four leaders indicated that the prevalence of processes could be both helpful guides and significant hindrances (PUB1;

PUB2; PUB3; PUB4). The tension between support and constraint was evident in leaders' mixed reactions to working in a public school context.

School leaders expressed frustration with what they perceived as excessive oversight from their boards. One participant shared, "I am concerned in terms of the top-down approach in terms of decision-making that's happening now" (PUB3), while another commented that "for lack of a better word, like the red tape is a handicap" (PUB1). This frustration often centered on autonomy, with leaders feeling unable to exercise professional judgment. One stated in an exasperated manner, "Please, as a principal, you should be able to make that decision. You know, an ethical, moral decision" (PUB3).

The prevalence of accountability structures through policy and procedures sometimes interfered with decision-making effectiveness. As one leader explained, "The flow of the day and policy and procedures butt heads, so like they don't always match. Right? So, like my sort of a common-sense plan. How I want to deal with X might not be exactly what my policy procedure would be" (PUB1). In this way, the accountabilities limited decision-making, despite them also freeing the leaders from some dilemmas (PUB1; PUB3).

In public schools, formal policy frameworks constrained leaders' capacity for critique. Nevertheless, one vice-principal exercised critique by interpreting and leveraging policy ambiguities, navigating and ultimately pushing against its fixed boundaries.

Conflicts in Ethics of Justice and Care. The emphasis on procedural compliance frequently generated tensions when the ethic of justice conflicted with the ethic of care. Participants described situations in which concern for students was constrained by rigid adherence to professional and bureaucratic requirements. Several leaders noted that strict procedural compliance sometimes produced adverse effects for students. For example, when

protracted decision-making processes delayed essential resources until they were no longer needed or after harm had already occurred (PUB1; PUB3). One principal illustrated this by describing how a central approval process for purchasing devices took several months to complete; an action he said he could have accomplished in a single day (PUB3).

School leaders emphasized that the public governance system in which they worked often prioritized process over outcomes (PUB1; PUB2; PUB3; PUB4). These constraints were especially apparent in personnel management, where performance improvement procedures were highly formalized and sometimes generated anxiety and stress rather than opportunities for professional growth (PUB1). For instance, informal hallway conversations about performance were not always permitted; instead, a formal meeting with a union representative might be required (PUB1).

Other examples revealed similar tensions between procedural justice and care-driven outcomes. In one case, a principal recounted that students were unable to use the gymnasium because maintenance policies required a formal tendering process to replace light bulbs: “Maybe if I was in a private system, I could work with the custodian - we could do it together. But now you have to find somebody and hire somebody... to change a light bulb... So again, students are impacted by that” (PUB3). The leader valued students’ access to physical activity but faced constraints imposed by procedural rules.

A principal described a similar dilemma when procurement policies required materials to be purchased only from approved vendors. This limitation meant he could afford to purchase just one classroom carpet instead of six, as would have been possible with an alternative supplier (PUB3). His commitment to fostering a positive classroom environment was therefore in conflict with the procedural requirement to comply with vendor restrictions.

Acceptance of Systemic Constraints. Despite their frustrations, participants acknowledged understanding the rationale for extensive oversight. They recognized that centralized structures existed for good reasons, with one noting: "That's probably the reason they've set up these guidelines and parameters because somebody's not doing it, and somebody's not doing it properly" (PUB3). School leaders also appreciated that extensive procedures sometimes simplified difficult decisions, even when they found the constraints frustrating. In this way, the participants acknowledged the public governance type reduced the number of dilemmas, despite there being regular ethical tensions.

The ambivalent relationship with their type of school governance was best captured by one principal's summary, "Most of the time I feel like I've experienced a pretty supportive, good, strong, support network, which is what I'm saying. But I definitely experience the other, where you're sort of butting up against a wall. And that would be the other side of a robust structure" (PUB1). The participants sometimes appreciated that policies made decisions easier, but they also felt that allowing more autonomy in decision-making could make them more effective leaders.

Shared Ethical Decision-Making Patterns. The public school leaders consistently applied the ethic of the profession and justice when facing dilemmas and tensions, drawing heavily on established policies and procedures. While they demonstrated strong commitment to the ethic of care for students and staff, public governance appeared to prioritize professional compliance over other ethical considerations. Each leader participant emphasized their obligation to serve all students regardless of circumstances, reflecting the ethic of justice through their commitment to universal access. However, the ethic of critique was also present when leaders expressed their concerns about established policies or decision-making structures.

The public school governance thus creates an ethical decision-making environment characterized by systematic support coupled with constrained autonomy, where leaders navigate complex student needs within prescriptive policy frameworks while serving a universal access mandate. Leaders valued both the support and the structure provided by their governance system but felt that greater decision-making autonomy could enhance their effectiveness in serving students and staff.

Private Schools

PIBS

Context and Culture. The pseudonym PIBS represents the characteristics of being a private international boarding school. PIBS is a small, non-denominational, and co-educational school located in a village in Ontario about an hour's drive from the nearest city. Documents reveal that PIBS serves grades 9-12 students and offers the Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The school is not accredited, although the prospectus indicates it is a member of the Ontario Federation of Independent Schools (which provides leadership and membership training services) and is registered as an Ontario Private School.

The school mainly caters to international students, according to the promotional materials; 20 different countries are represented within the student population. The maximum enrollment capacity of the school is about 60 students; however, in the 2023-2024 school year, the total population amounted to less than half of this number (PR2). Amongst enrolled students, five were registered as day students and two as online students in 2024 (PR2). The prospectus indicates that the school charges $20 000/year for tuition for a local day student to almost $60 000/year for the most common profile of full-time international boarding students. Some bursaries and merit-based scholarships are available (confidential). One participant described the

school as a “boutique school” (PR2), given the number of students enrolled and its specific clientele.

PIBS is heavily marketed. Despite the school's small size, there is a team dedicated to admissions, enrollment, and marketing that travels abroad regularly for recruiting (confidential). The school’s documentation is carefully curated and highlights past successes to attract prospective students. Students must apply to enroll, and according to the school website (confidential) acceptance criteria are strict and are based on data gathered from an individual interview, previous report cards, a personal profile, a confidential reference from their school principal, and an entrance exam.

The academic focus is on preparation for entrance into a Canadian university, for which a guarantee is given in the promotional and policy documents. According to the school prospectus, if a student is unsuccessful, they are offered another year at the school free of charge. PIBS boasts on its website of successes in university placement results and a robust multi-cultural experience that encourages every student to reach their full potential. The traditional program offers many academic course options and opportunities to learn English. The academic program is referred to as “enhanced” (PR2), and students receive widespread individual support to meet their potential through a daily tutorial, a personal advisor, preparation for literacy tests, university guidance, and a weekly student success program (confidential documents). All teachers are certified and are members of the Ontario College of Teachers (PR1).

The school culture is close-knit due to its size and boarding element (PR1). The classes are small, with an average of just ten students, and documents reveal there is a strong focus on community, compassion, developing courage, and inclusivity. These values are promoted intentionally through specific activities and programming and in the overall educational

approach which is outlined on the website and promotional documents. Documents also indicate that students can participate in regular trips that include sport events, cultural events, festivals, and entertainment. Furthermore, the school has established a daily co-curricular program comprising various clubs, sports, arts, and special interest activities that are outlined in the prospectus. The website indicates that school has a house system designed to promote and support a cohesive and inclusive family atmosphere.

Governance and leadership. PIBS is a private school co-owned by business investors who also own and manage other schools worldwide. It is, therefore, designed as a for-profit entity (PR1). The owners have full control of the business yet have delegated most responsibilities to the head of school (head). The owners hired the current head to operate the business about a decade ago and he is the sole person working under their supervision and management (PR1; PR2).

The head refers to the owners as "silent partners" (PR1) who are hands-off in style and expectations: they only meet once a year. Decision-making for significant financial matters, such as creating the overall gross annual budget, rests with the owners. However, the head was empowered to make all operational decisions regarding the school, including those related to annual and monthly operating budgets, curriculum, pedagogy, staffing, facility management, client and community relations, risk management, policy development, recruitment, enrollment and retention, programming, and promotion of the school (PR1). The website indicates that a few staff members had subordinate leadership roles in areas such as admissions, maintenance, and food services. The small team relied heavily on trust and communication to work effectively (PR1; PR2).

Both participants explained that their school's governance type generally meant that they did not have to justify, explain, or validate decisions (PR1, PR2). School policy documents only mention a reporting and accountability structure within the school-level leadership. While the leaders appreciated the freedom provided by this lack of interference, guidance, or oversight from supervisors or external policies, they also acknowledged that this causes them to feel highly accountable to stakeholders for their individual decisions, which sometimes led to additional stress (PR1; PR2).

Ethical Dilemmas and Ethical Decision-Making. Both participants from PIBS shared dilemmas related to financial control and responsibility, as well as competing obligations to parents and staff (PR1, PR2). One participant initially stated that they experienced no dilemmas because all decisions were clearly guided by existing policies (PR1), reflecting the ethic of justice. However, they later recounted specific dilemmas concerning the allocation of bursaries and scholarships and staffing decisions, such as contract terminations. These examples suggest potential tensions between the ethic of justice and the ethics of care and the profession, indicating that their decision-making may not have relied solely on justice as they initially believed.

In one example, the head stated, "I was talking with the dad last night, and he wanted a scholarship, and I said no. And how did I make that decision? Gut intuition? What he's told me about their financial situation? Or he just wants it?" (PR1). This would suggest that there is no clear policy to guide this decision, thus resulting in an ethical dilemma related to a clash in values related to justice and those related to the ethic of the profession and the expectation to maintain the viability of the school.

The leader struggled with determining fairness in how scholarships should be allocated. At the same time, he also said, “We have a policy that defines when we do and don’t give scholarships,” and later, “But we’ve got a really clear policy. It's written down. It's done with” (PR1). The head of school determined that the circumstances did not provide sufficient financial justification to warrant awarding a scholarship to the family. Nonetheless, it was acknowledged that securing any level of financial contribution from the family was preferable to the potential outcome of the student choosing not to enroll. The dilemma focused on pleasing parents as clients in order to maintain financial viability. The ethic of justice, in terms of equity and fairness in the allocation of resources, clashed with the ethic of the profession due to the financial responsibilities of being a private school. When parents are not pleased, they may choose not to enroll, jeopardizing the school's financial stability (PR2).

Dilemmas related to personnel management also weighed heavily on the two participants (PR1, PR2). Again, the ethic of justice dominated, but the clashes were primarily between justice and care. In considering termination or hiring decisions, the participants struggled to put aside personal feelings towards individuals and overall perceived value to the school against what seemed fairer. There was a strong and consistent value placed on policy:

> So, when it's a policy, it's sort of clear it's black and white: we do it here, and we don't do it here. Easy. I treat everyone the same. I treat everyone equally. I treat everyone equitably. No one's getting a favour. No one's getting a different experience. (PR1)

At the same time, it was evident that applying the policy can create a value conflict:

> I might struggle most often when I have to release a staff. That’s hard for me because I feel badly for them. But most of the other ones I kind of feel are pretty clear cut when applying

> all those different pieces, whether it be the policy, our mission, our values, my values, the school's values, Canadian values. It feels easy. Or easy to me. (PR1)

Notably, the other school leader mentioned that the policy was not uniformly applied (PR2), which could explain how value conflict resulted in dilemmas. On the one hand, the leader said it was easy, but he also identified it as his biggest struggle. The head's dilemma, therefore, demonstrated the conflicts between the ethics of justice, profession, and care. He needed to make the decision whether or not to implement the policy (that he wrote) which is in keeping with the ethic of the profession and the ethic of justice, or instead, to align his decision with his ethic of care. While this head of school resolved the dilemma by deciding based on the ethic of justice and the profession, it was nevertheless uncomfortable because it presented a value conflict.

Private Montessori

Context and Culture. Private Montessori is a co-educational preschool to grade 8 institution with about 250 students. The school was founded roughly 40 years ago and is well established in its large metropolitan community. Documents indicate it is accredited as a child-care facility, has a Montessori Council, is affiliated with an association of independent schools, and is registered as an Ontario Private School.

Students all come from the local community and attend as day students. Most enroll at a very young age and stay for many years (PR3; PR4). Enrollment is consistent and profitable, but the school is not considered to be operating at full capacity (PR3). Tuition fees range from almost $17 000 for a part-time Casa (preschool) program, to about $19 000 for other full-time schooling. There is no documentation for scholarships or bursaries, although some families may arrange different pay structures in consultation with school leaders (PR4). Students must apply to enroll; selection criteria are not publicly available, and according to the website, interested

families must formally inquire at the school to request additional information on admissions for anything beyond tuition and fees.

The Private Montessori school has an authentic Montessori program, particularly in the early years, as indicated in the promotional documents. As the students grow older, they prepare to transition to high school in what one participant referred to as a "bridging program somewhere between grades 4 to 8" (PR4). This includes a shift from the Montessori philosophy's independent and hands-on learning towards more group lessons and more traditional learning activities.

According to the documents and the school leaders, considerable attention is given to school culture, and a warm and nurturing environment is emphasized (PR3; PR4). The focus is on realizing academic potential and promoting discovery, enthusiasm, and a love of learning. (confidential document). Throughout the school documentation, diversity and inclusion are prioritized, and the focus is on stimulating and nurturing the students within a strong Montessori environment.

Governance and Leadership. On the school website, the school is described as an "independent private Montessori school." However, the school is privately owned as a for-profit business. The choice to include the word 'independent' is notable, particularly in conjunction with the word 'private.' Internet searches of the owners indicate that they are aware of the different definitions of governance type associated with these different terms (prior experience, roles, and having given presentations on this topic). This could indicate their awareness of a lack of public understanding about the differences between the two terms used to define governance typologies in this study.

The school business was purchased several years ago from the founding head of school. An internet search reveals the owners are experienced school leaders with sixty years of combined school leadership, including founding and owning a private school and leading a high-profile independent school. The owners visit the site weekly but do not lead the school's daily operations (PR3, PR4). The school leaders (participants) described that they had a strong personal commitment to the school and were hired internally for their positions without formal training or experience in school leadership (PR3, PR4). One was trained as a teacher, and the other was trained as a Montessori specialist. The two describe an informal separation of roles and rely primarily on each other's strengths, challenges, and preferences to determine key responsibilities and areas of leadership. Each person described complementary co-leadership (PR3, PR4).

The owners oversee many aspects of school operations and finances. Documents reveal there is no board of directors, parent council, or student council. The owners are the primary decision-makers, and the leaders support day-to-day operations. As one leader specified, "[The founder] had never been interested in any sort of parent board, not interested in parent volunteers, and [the new owners] were quite happy with that when they came in. That was the reason they chose our school" (PR3). Financial decision-making rests primarily on the owners. As one participant stated, "They do own our school, so we do bounce a lot of ideas off them in terms of money…we sit down [to] chat with them, we don't just make the decision on our own" (PR3). Or, as the other leader noted, "I don't know anything about the financials of the school other than the staff salaries" (PR4). Many business decisions are deferred to the owners, and there is a reluctance to go against their wishes. A participant shared, "So, like I said, they are the ones that hold power. They're the ones that pay our salaries. It's their school" (PR4). The

participant school leaders felt empowered to make decisions regarding daily operations, but not to influence the vision, mission, and long-term planning (PR3; PR4). This, in turn, impacted communication and power dynamics in leadership responsibilities between the owners and the day-to-day decision-making.

The participants noted the impact of the governance type as both providing autonomy and being limiting. As one noted, "But being a private school is also a business. So, we do run a business. We do advertising, marketing, all those lovely things" (PR4). She further went on to add:

> Because it is a business, we have to please those parents. They are the bread and butter. We have to have the parents in order to pay our staff, but we want our staff to be happy because we don't want to have a massive turnover because this vicious circle goes like this: parents say, why do you keep losing staff? (PR4)

In referring to a disciplinary decision where a student was aggressive towards others, she added, "I have to protect the students in my school, but his tuition is also key to the school's success, right?" (PR4). In contrast, she also noted that as a private school, they were not bound by the same policies as public schools. She shared the example of being able to decide not to allow a particular student to re-register. She appreciated the options and the freedom, while at the same time noting the added pressure of accountability to parents in being the ones who determine the rules and regulations because they cannot defer blame or claim an inability to make changes (PR3). Furthermore, their decisions may impact the institutional reputation which, in turn, impacts viability. Each of the school leaders shared that they felt high degrees of autonomy in day-to-day operations and a greater sense of ownership over decisions (PR3, PR4).

Ethical Dilemmas and Ethical Decision-making. The school leaders identified constant tensions in balancing the needs of various stakeholders with a persistent pull between competing values. Parents, students, teachers, and owners expected a range of different decisions from leaders to resolve a particular issue. In each situation, the leaders encountered value conflicts as they sought to determine whose needs to prioritize and whose to compromise, given that all appeared equally legitimate and significant. Such a pattern is characteristic of market-driven schooling contexts, in which parental demands assume a heightened level of influence relative to public schools.

Participants reported consistently feeling conflicted about meeting the different needs of stakeholders. This anecdote describes one dilemma addressing the conflicting needs:

> A hard thing… is keeping parents happy. Being a private school there's this balance. It's sort of a tightrope. You're always walking with supporting staff, but hearing parents chirping in your ear, that you know my child's not getting as much one-on-one as they should be. But you're really trying to support your staff as much as you can. Also, walking that tightrope is probably the most challenging thing. (PR4)

She then went on to share how she makes decisions when faced with clashes between the two stakeholder groups:

> I think the most stressful decision is [to decide] if it's the parent or the teacher that's right. That I need to either [one] prop the teacher up and give them guidance, give them mentoring so that they can reach another level? Or [two] is it the parent that I need to shut down? …That's probably my most time consuming and my most stressful decisions that I have to make. (PR4)

Both participants strongly emphasized prioritizing parental needs due to parents being clients (PR3; PR4).

Another example relates to demonstrating the use of the ethic of care and the profession, in attempting to meet the needs of a teacher and a student. A leader explained her reaction to a teacher who inadvertently humiliated a child when asking him to switch classrooms:

> Recently I had a teacher who asked this child to go to a grade lower class because he was being disruptive in her class, and he flat out refused. So, she called me upstairs, and she explained the situation to me, and I had to decide. Am I going to support her and demand for him to go to another class when deep down, I was saying, that's humiliating for him to go to a class a grade younger, could we find another alternative? And I chose to side with the teacher. (PR3)

The leader permitted the teacher to make the final decision to move the student, applying the ethic of the profession to avoid undermining the teacher's professional autonomy and identity. However, this created a dilemma in relation to the ethic of care, as the leader also valued the preservation of the student's dignity, which had been compromised by the situation and was within her capacity to address.

Synthesis of Private Schools

Both private schools in this study demonstrate how for-profit governance creates a distinctive business-oriented decision-making environment where financial viability, client relationships, and operational autonomy fundamentally shape leadership decisions and the application of ethical paradigms. PIBS, an international boarding school still establishing its market position, and Private Montessori, a well-established community school, share remarkably

similar experiences in how their private ownership structure influences ethical decision-making, particularly creating tensions between the ethics of justice, care, and profession.

Autonomy. High levels of autonomy were often cited as characteristic of leading in the private school context. This was viewed both positively and negatively. On the one hand, participants appreciated the freedom to make their own decisions. Still, they also noted the stresses of making too many decisions. They appreciated the ease with which they can make decisions without oversight, but this autonomy also presented challenges. A support network was lacking for these participants: "I would say the negative in my decision-making is, I don't have anyone to take counsel with, so to have broad shoulders, thick skin. It's lonely at the top" (PR1). Another head of school commented, "Not having a regular body I can go to, to say 'I need help here. I'm struggling with this situation.' That would be a negative in my decision-making" (PR3). Furthermore, the private school participants noted the responsibility and stress created by this level of autonomy. One participant pointed out:

> You're the bad guy; it's tough, and the other part is not having a council or a board to report to. My owners are wonderful guys, and I can call them at the drop of a hat and ask for help. But they kind of look at me and say, well, 'We hired you to do the job'. (PR1)

This sentiment extended to expectations from owners, faculty, and parents (PR1; PR2; PR3; PR4).

Parents. Parents were the source of considerable ethical dilemmas and decision-making. One participant identified this by saying, "I think for me, one of the biggest challenges I have is pleasing the parents" (PR3). A different leader pointed out with frustration that "[Parents] seem to think they have a different level or a greater say in how their child's day goes than they should" (PR4). As profit-motivated entities, private schools rely on parents as clients. Keeping

parents happy and satisfied as clients, therefore, weighed heavily on the participants. Ethical decision-making was sometimes influenced by these important stakeholders, who feel that they should have a say in the leaders' decision-making given their status as clients of the school.

One head of school explained their complex relationship with parents in the following way:

> Ultimately, we're all in education because we want to see kids flourish. But then, in the private school education system, this being a little bit finance-focused if the students that go to this school have a positive experience and have a fun experience and get into the programs of their choice and get scholarships, do fun stuff, that's going to reap benefits financially. It means, you know, 80% of marketing is word of mouth, and on and on it goes. (PR1)

Participants suggested that while the motivation behind certain decisions might sometimes be grounded in values related to pleasing the client, it still results in a better overall student experience.

Finances. Financial considerations and business elements also impacted decisions beyond the student experience. These private school participants regularly made decisions within an extensive scope. Infrastructure decisions, human resources, and financial management are notable components of their responsibilities. If enrollment is low, terminating staff becomes a possibility. They oversee renovations and upkeep directly. They shared stories of making decisions about new flooring and roof repairs. And these decisions must be weighed against competing priorities. While finances were not seen as problematic, they were seen as ever-present. The business aspect of the school was an underlying element of everything else. One participant referred to delivering a "product" (PR2) meant as the educational experience. In her

words: “You’ve got to be proud of the product you put out there as well. So, it's always that dilemma” (PR2). She explained the importance of “not undervaluing your own product” (PR2) by making compromises. So, financial decisions between resource allocation and maintaining standards sometimes result in conflicts.

The leaders of private schools identified autonomy, decision-making breadth, parental involvement, and financial matters as the primary areas in which they make decisions. These were considered characteristic elements of the private school governance and often led to ethical dilemmas. While leaders generally relied on ethics of the profession, conflicts arose between these and the ethics of care and justice. Balancing individual care with policy adherence and best interests of the school sometimes caused conflict.

Independent Schools

AFIS

Context and Culture. The Academically Focused Independent School (AFIS) is a medium-sized, co-educational community with approximately 800 students enrolled in grades 4-12. Located in a large urban center in Ontario, the school serves students and families from around the world. According to the school website, AFIS is one of Canada’s oldest schools and is known for its strong academic reputation, prestigious standing, and expansive, elegant campus. Documents highlight distinguished alumni and a 100% university acceptance rate, including admission to the most prestigious institutions. The school is well-resourced and is accredited locally, provincially, and internationally. School documents emphasize the advantages, success, opportunities, and legacy for its graduates. The overall tone in the documents is one of seriousness and prestige.

The school's programming includes the International Baccalaureate and various inter- and extra-curricular options. Documents indicated that students at AFIS may attend as day students (with tuition fees starting at about $36 000/year) or as boarding students (with fees at roughly $80 000/year). Additional enrollment fees and student charges add $5-$10 000 annually. The school offers merit awards and bursaries from endowments for those with financial need. In 2022, documents indicated this financial assistance amounted to $1.5M and has been growing steadily. The website indicated that applications are restricted and are subject to scores on admissions exams, academic history, and potential overall contributions to the composition and culture of the school. The school is not operating at full capacity, and because of this, difficult decisions sometimes need to be made to balance student suitability and the overall financial needs of the school (IN4).

Along with the focus on academics, recruitment documents indicated there was a strong commitment to global citizenship, fostering compassion, character development, and meeting the needs of the whole student. The non-denominational school fosters spirituality and ethical growth based on "the values of pluralism, integrity, inclusion and mutual respect" (confidential). Documents indicate there is a program for social and emotional learning in junior school, which is replaced by an advisor program in high school, which turns its attention towards healthy choices, positive social behaviours, and current events.

Governance and Leadership. AFIS is a registered charity and not-for-profit organization. Documents revealed that the elected Board of Governors consists of 23 voting members who were guardians of the school's mission and core values. There is also a Foundation Board that manages the trust funds of the Foundation, a Fundraising Guild comprised of parents, and a Parents' Committee that acts as an advisory group to the school leaders

(confidential documents) and each of these groups has sub-committees. Documents showed that operations of the school are led by a ten-member team, each with its own group of staff. Thus, leadership comprises teams responsible for individual school divisions, teaching and learning, student services, finance, enrollment and advancement, human resources, partnerships and programs, and boarding.

One leader explained the breakdown of governance and leadership responsibilities as follows:

> We have the board that runs the school and in addition, obviously, the head of the school. And then we have our leadership teams that help manage the operational pieces of the school on a daily basis, but the head of school reports to the board. (I4)

In this way, the board is responsible for strategic governance, and the staff is responsible for operations.

Participants shared that the school's governance type impacted their leadership and decision-making. When remarking on eligibility and access to resources, one participant indicated that because they focus on students who are university-bound, allocations are prioritized towards enrichment rather than students struggling to meet expectations. She explains: "That's the program that we offer" (I4). She added, "That's the choice that the family is making. So that's difficult. And yes, for sure, my whole mindset would be different if I wasn't in the independent school system with that" (I4). The other participant took a different view, sharing that he appreciated the increased autonomy and the ability to question things more deeply. He recalled his experience working for a large public school board and compared his experience by explaining that "When the decisions would get made, you were told. And it was like a filtered down system" (I3). The independent schools were "a better fit" (I3) for this

participant. He shared that the demands of the independent schools were extremely challenging, although he appreciated the systems and resources that were in place and the support that was provided (I3).

At times, the client focus influenced the school leaders' decisions. One participant shared an example of a teacher who was frequently absent, and he remarked, "You're compassionate towards these teachers, and you want to free them up as best as possible, but when their attendance suffers, our clientele pays for them to teach their classes…" (I3). He inferred that the paying parents impacted his response to teachers requesting time off. Ultimately, he declined the teacher's request specifically because he was concerned about upsetting the paying clients.

Ethical Dilemmas and Ethical Decision-Making. The ethical paradigms of justice and care predominated for the participants from this school. They emphasized the importance of a strong and caring culture for all stakeholders and said school messaging supports a culture of kindness and character development. One participant expressed it in the following way:

> And then I think of the kindness piece that's in our model. So, our model is honest. Encourage kindness. And that kindness, I always say that to kids, it should be a capital 'K', and the rest can fall in. (I3)

Ensuring student well-being while maintaining the program's integrity posed a conflict between the ethics of care and justice. The challenging program is only a fit for some students. Seeking a program that is different from what public schools offer is the key market driver. Yet parents sometimes insist that the program change to meet their child's needs rather than vice versa. Common tensions faced by the participants were focused on meeting parent expectations. A strong client focus was evident in the dilemmas they shared, and the ethical decision-making related to this focus. Parents at this school advocated actively for their children and make

demands of school leaders (I3; I4). Participants noted that many parents were not respectful and could be quick to blame the school when their child did not meet the expectations in a course. This led to dilemmas relating to the ethic of justice because of the values of meeting the needs of all students equally and fairly. For instance, failing a student who does not meet the academic expectations could lead to blame, while at the same time, fairness to the other students in the class should not be compromised. The school leader feared he was choosing between protecting the quality of the credit or diluting the value of it by granting it to students who perhaps may not deserve it (I3). Participants lamented that the school is simply not the best fit for every child, which can lead to unhappiness, stress, and lack of success for some admitted students (I3; I4), despite parents' intentions when selecting the school.

The participants also noted the impact of this selection through admissions processes. They made decisions to "filter" (I4) the students to determine fit, potential struggles, and likelihood of thriving. While there is a robust and formal admissions process, the decision ultimately lies with the school's leadership. Dilemmas resulted from trying to meet the needs of different stakeholders with different needs and expectations while also maintaining the professional standards and expectations set forth by the school (I3; I4). The professional standards indicate needing to meet a threshold of admissibility, but leaders admitted to feeling influenced by pressure from families, and through pressures to meet financial targets. The financial considerations are of particular interest, because they represent another aspect of the profession that could conflict with following procedures. These specific tensions are not possible in the public governance structure.

The ethic of the profession similarly had influence and was applied to decision-making, and leaders noted that general expectations, not only in the school environment but in the

broader independent school context as well, demanded competitiveness, academic rigour and preparation for university. This was the source of internal value conflicts and ethical dilemmas for the leaders who shared: “We can’t just grant credits willy-nilly…we’re walking that fine line between what the teacher says is the integrity of the credit, and the needs of the student and the school.” (I4) The motivation to provide individual students with the best possible growth opportunities was thus weighed against the professional expectation to demand rigour and high performance - even if the student was either unprepared or incapable.

University Preparatory Day School

Context and Culture. The University Preparatory Day School (UPDS) is a large, co-educational Pre-Kindergarten to grade 12 school. UPDS has roughly 1200 students and is in a large Ontario city. It is comprised of 4 schools on two nearby campuses. The Preschool (ages 2-4) and Lower School (SK-grade 5) are located on one campus, while the Prep School (grades 6-8) and Upper School (grades 9-12) share the other campus. Accreditation with provincial, national, and international bodies is ensured and promoted on the website. Brochures and promotional materials show facilities that are extensive and touted as ‘state of the art’. They also promote numerous opportunities for engagement in various sports, clubs, and activities that require specialized facilities and equipment. While well-established and with high reputational rankings, the school is still in transition and growing in size and programming.

UPDS offers an enriched Ontario curriculum and Advanced Placement courses for senior students. Fees are $23 000 for preschool and $35 000 per year for JK to grades 12. There are additional fees each year of roughly $2 000 -3 000 per student. Students may write an exam to qualify for a $2 000 scholarship or apply for a bursary based on need, and they must undergo an

admissions selection process that includes submitting report cards and participating in an interview.

Despite a robust academic program and larger enrollment size, documents indicate there remains a personal approach, and a philosophy rooted in promoting values, friendships, the whole child, and nurturing confidence. The documents and the participants indicate that academics are a priority but are not superseded by other student outcomes. This appears to be a philosophical choice and a marketing decision to promote citizenship, community, humanity, joy, and responsibility. Students are also well prepared for top universities at home and abroad, and the school has a 100% acceptance rate to university. The online message is one of preparedness for life's challenges. Students are involved in travel, service, environmental initiatives, and philanthropic projects to promote social change. Within this context, a strong focus remains on academic mastery, critical thinking, inquiry, and communication.

Governance and Leadership. As a registered charity and not-for-profit organization, and documents reveal that the school is governed by a sixteen-member elected board of directors whose mandate is to uphold the school's mission statement. Decisions relating to the school's strategic direction fall to the board, which comprises parents, past parents, alums, and community members (I1; I2). The board is not responsible for daily operations (I1). The head of school reports directly to the board and is their sole employee. Documents indicate the school is also supported by a parent association comprised of elected members. While they have no formal decision-making authority, the association is responsible for enhancing school spirit, facilitating communications, and raising funds for the school. The website shows that the leadership team has ten senior members, each having their own team. These teams hold responsibility for various

school divisions, human resources, finance, admissions, advancement and alums, student life, teaching and learning, and academics.

The head of school described his decisions as being guided by both a shared purpose and by the school's strategic plan (I1). The school's values are "engraved between the walls" (I1), and he prioritizes modelling these values as part of his role. His priority is to live the school's core values and make them visible. In this way, he feels it is essential that his core values match those of the school. He said:

> I think part of, you know, choosing to work in an independent school, and the environment that you're in is because you believe in what the school stands for and that your values should be aligning with the environment that you're in, or else, you know, you're an impostor. (I1)

The participants tried to align with board members as allies for decision-making (I1; I2). They noted the importance of having values aligned with "key members" so they could have the "right backing" (I1) in making difficult decisions. They also noted some limitations in working with a board, explaining that while they had considerable autonomy, the board had ultimate authority for some decisions (I1; I2).

Interview participants both indicated their strong preference to work in an independent school because of how governance impacted school culture. One example was an appreciation that they get to choose key team members, such as principals, chief financial officer, human resources managers, and so on (I1). One participant said he appreciated an "open, transparent, collaborative process where people's unique backgrounds and their experiences were valued" (I1) rather than a top-down approach. He felt that working in an independent school allowed him

to focus on a student-centered environment. Another leader indicated that he appreciates the low staff and teacher turnover of the school and its positive downstream impacts on students (I2).

Despite the apparent accolades given to the independent governance model, participants also noted potential conflicts of interest (I1; I2). The following comment explains this:

> One of the conflicting challenges that I think independent schools do, in fact, have, is that the board members are made up of parents, and when you have parents on the board… there can be a natural conflict of interest. (I2)

The participant went on to explain that sometimes parents advocate in the best interest of their children, rather than the school as a whole. He described this as a "systemic issue within independent schools" (I2). While overall, the governance model was perceived as strong, reliable, and fair, the need for allies and potential conflicts of interest were still present.

Ethical Dilemmas and Ethical Decision-Making. The ethical paradigm of care predominated for the school leaders at UPDS. Often, the ethical dilemmas they faced were rooted in conflicts between this paradigm, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of the profession. Participants also thought that the nature of most of the dilemmas they faced was related to their school's governance (I1; I2).

In all decision-making, dilemmas and value conflicts were centered around the ethic of care. All stakeholders were considered equally, and this paradigm was foundational to the school's mission, operations, and strategies at every level. One participant explained this by saying, "So you know, whether it's systems or structures, you want to make sure that there's a really true understanding that people feel valued, respected, and understood within the walls of our school" (I1). An example of the ethic of care shared by a participant included looking at the implications of changing the school's catering company. This change would have widespread

impact on staff job losses and considerable angst was felt about protecting people, honouring them, and demonstrating that they were a valued part of the institution. “We wanted to make sure we were doing right by the staff,” the participant explained, and sacrifices were made to ensure the staff could maintain their employment and that they “were being looked after” (I2).

While managing stakeholder interests remained important, caring for students was always the priority (I1). In explaining his decision-making process, the participant put it this way:

> Schools were not built for adults. Schools were built for children. And you want to create the best learning environment for children. And that really grounds, you know, the ethical dilemmas and decisions you face, particularly when you have conflicts within the constituent groups, over how to resolve a matter. Who really benefits from it? (I1)

Focusing on students' interests served as a guide, yet dilemmas persisted related to the profession, particularly in balancing the needs of parents versus other priorities. Participants noted the heavy demands from parents and the pressures to meet financial targets (I1; I2). Examples included considering admissions for a student whose family promised to make significant contributions to an endowment fund, yet the student was not considered a good fit for the school. In this instance, participants shared the struggle to choose between meeting financial targets by accepting donations “with strings attached” (I1) or staying aligned with the school mission in accepting only students who are deemed “mission-appropriate” (I1). Ultimately, the head of school did not succumb to the temptation to take the donation but admitted it created a dilemma for him. The contextual professional expectations and norms around building an endowment fund through financial surpluses further led to conflicts that demanded the application of the ethic of the profession. One participant explains this by stating:

> The biggest difference, you know, particularly in an independent school, is that we are so led by the budget and the surplus. And, if you think about it, the choices that we make and the decisions that we make are really on behalf of the parents and the tuition that they pay like we are their representatives. (I2)

Another finance example included parents who are voting members of the board and whom the leaders reported to. Both participants shared that they had value clashes in attempting to meet the needs of these supervisory parents on the board with decisions that they thought were in the best interests of all students and the school (I1; I2). The self-reported decisions of the school leaders suggest they prioritized the whole school rather than their personal reputation.

Synthesis of Independent Schools

AFIS has a clear mission and mandate for its students and school leaders. The participants primarily embraced the ethic of care but were sometimes conflicted in their decision-making, balancing this care with the ethic of justice. They felt that meeting the individual needs of students could compromise the mission of the school and, therefore, conflicted with their ethic of justice in providing equally for the needs of all students at the same time.

The strong shared vision at UPDS helped leaders make ethical decisions that aligned personal values with the school's values. Well-grounded in the ethic of care, participants sometimes faced conflicts between care and the profession in meeting the needs of parents while still considering their unique stakeholder needs.

Key governance themes that emerged for independent schools included high levels of autonomy, financial considerations, parents, and admissions or student enrollment. Dilemmas focused on these areas, which characterized the school context and led to the need for ethical

decision-making. Depending on the leader's role, the overall leadership from the elected board also impacted decisions and school climate.

Autonomy. Independent school participants shared various aspects of autonomy that they enjoyed in their roles. This autonomy extended to human resource management (such as hiring and grievances or professional development), asset allocations, curriculum directions, school culture, class composition, programming and policy development. While some of these were handled in tandem with either board members or other school leaders, the decisions around these issues were made at the school level. One participant shared, "My experience has always been that the independent schools have quite a bit of choice" (I2). Examples included demonstrating the ethic of care by giving staff members the day off if they had been working overtime or following the ethic of the profession in offering professional development to staff. Additionally, they enjoyed having autonomy in managing human resources: "There is a real advantage that we have, which is that I can hire and interview the best person for the job" (I3).

The autonomy provided to school leaders in independent schools also meant that they felt pressure to meet the diverse needs of a wide range of stakeholders whose needs could not be met simultaneously. They shared that while individual needs and requests felt both feasible and reasonable, collectively they were not. Consequently, they needed to prioritize needs and requests. Ultimately, participants in these schools relied on the ethic of care, justice, and the profession, and prioritized the needs of students even though financial pressures could sometimes lead to conflicts in meeting these needs.

Finance. Financial considerations were often part of decision-making; however, the participants felt privileged to have the financial resources available to allow them a high degree of choice. Unlike profit-driven organizations, participants reported they had the freedom to make

decisions based purely on educational priorities. This financial stability enabled them to invest in long-term initiatives: fostering organizational growth, supporting professional development, enhancing student outcomes, and expanding student opportunities. Participants viewed their financial position as a significant competitive advantage, with one noting: “I find that the spending piece for sure is one of the serious advantages we have” (I3).

The participants also shared dilemmas, such as conflicts with finance and enrollment. An example of this was a dilemma about enrolling more students, which, on the one hand, would provide the financial resources necessary for school operations, it would also place additional strain on existing resources within the school. They believed that they needed to balance these two needs to ensure quality programming (I1; I3). Other examples of the clash between enrollment and finance emerged from both schools. One head described his experience by sharing, “You know, there was one where the family was potential prospective donors to the school. But the kid, he would have made life really hard for the teachers, and so we had to say no last year to one” (I3). A participant from a different school shared a very similar dilemma:

> You have a significant pool of major donors, and there's probably a small percentage of them that are trying to direct their donations and try to really put forth their own personalized agenda. And the dilemma that you face ahead is there's also, you know, fundraising targets that you try and meet, because you do report to the board…And you know, obviously it was a bit of a challenge. (I1)

In these instances, there was a temptation to accept available funds to support the viability of the school, but which would compromise the mission and values at the same time. So, while these tensions resulted in dilemmas, the leaders focused on the longer-term impacts of their decisions

rather than the short-term ones. While no single ethical paradigm was followed, the decisions reflect elements of justice and the profession.

Parents. The concept of parents as clients was firmly rooted in these schools. Parents contributed to additional dilemmas related to the ethical paradigm of the profession, and the stress felt by school leaders pertaining to the demands and expectations of parents was high. One participant explained, "So parents, well, you know, I mean, parents always want the best for their child, and they will go to lengths to ensure that that is what's happening" (I4). Another added, "There's well, there's an element of service they expect when they pay for their kids to go to school" (I3). In turn, leaders made their decisions and communicated them in a manner that reflected these high expectations. One participant explained, "I act fast. Like if a parent has a concern, I need to acknowledge it and look into it within 24 hours and have a plan and so it can be quick, quick, quick!" (I3). Parents were viewed as critical stakeholders. Their opinions and reactions were of great importance, as illustrated in the following comment:

> You make sure that if you are making a decision… Well, how are the parents going to react to this? We had to do what was best for the school and best for the students… In any other school, you just make the change and go. (I2)

Additionally, some parents held a dual role as elected board members who were responsible for policy direction and critical financial decisions at the schools. Examples of decisions around issues like tuition increases or funding allocation towards specific projects illustrated potential conflicts. They noted it was sometimes hard for parent board members to consider the school's needs over the needs of their children. One participant shared his views by adding:

> You do not want them to be involved in a financial issue with the school. So, it becomes, okay, we have to do what is the best thing, and we always need to keep the students' best interests in mind. But at the same time, parents will push. (I2)

The significant requests made by some parents meant that school leaders sometimes struggled with balancing client needs, the school's best interests, and executing political acumen in making decisions.

The scope of decision-making responsibilities, along with high levels of autonomy, were noted as both challenging and appreciated. Financial considerations also weighed heavily and were impacted by the demands and expectations of parents as clients and as board members.

Chapter 5: Cross-Case Analysis

While the individual case studies presented in Chapter 4 revealed the unique contexts and challenges facing each school, systematic comparison across cases leads to observations that illuminate how governance type may shape the ethical landscape of educational leadership. Rather than comparing schools as discrete entities, this chapter analyzes patters that emerge across governance types to explore how governance may influence the dilemmas school leaders encounter and the ways they respond to them.

Although the study employs a comparative case study design, the analytic unit is governance type, not the individual schools. The schools function as the empirical sites through which governance becomes visible in practice. Accordingly the analysis in this chapter is focused on cross-governance patterns rather than school-specific contrasts.

The comparative analysis leads to the observation that despite operating under different ownership models, private and independent schools demonstrate strong similarities in their ethical challenges and decision-making influences, while public schools present a distinctly different profile. This grouping suggests that the market-based, fee-for-service relationship that characterizes both private and independent schools creates fundamentally different ethical terrain than the publicly funded framework governing public education. These differences manifest not only in the types of dilemmas encountered by leaders, but also in the range of influences that shape their decision-making.

While governance type characterizes the contexts within which ethical decisions are made, the analysis reveals that it also influences the degree to which leaders draw upon the different ethical paradigms, rather than determining which paradigms they apply. This finding

highlights a more complex relationship between governance type and ethical decision-making than was previously understood.

The analysis is organized around the three research questions that guided this study, with findings presented through the central themes that emerged from the data. Several themes surface across multiple research questions and they will be addressed more than once but through a different lens each time.

This cross-case perspective illuminates governance-related characteristics that were not visible within individual cases, providing crucial insights into how structural arrangements create, constrain, and enable ethical leadership in K-12 education.

Research Question One

The first question posed for this study is, "What kinds of ethical dilemmas are faced by education leaders in K-12 schools working in different governance types?" The findings from the individual interviews, paired interviews, and document analysis indicated some differences and similarities in ethical dilemmas between the schools when grouped based on governance type. While there were differences between all cases, there were considerable similarities between the private and independent schools when compared to the public schools. The main themes for the kinds of ethical dilemmas that the school leaders experienced are outlined below, along with similarities and differences between the governance types of all the schools.

Finance

Both private and independent school leaders experienced several dilemmas centered around financial concerns, in stark contrast to public school leaders, for whom major financial decisions occurred outside of the school's accountability. Finances were identified as both a direct and indirect influence on dilemmas faced by private and independent school leaders,

related to meeting targets, expectations for institutional viability, and staff and faculty needs in terms of employment and resources.

Pressure and expectations to meet financial targets resulted in dilemmas about student enrollment; leaders from all four of the private and independent schools shared this concern. Participants had to weigh the benefits of additional funds or profits against the fit of the student with the mission and programs being offered. One participant described frustration with the admissions team by saying: “They were only looking at what the impact was going to be on the profitability of the school as opposed to the culture or retention, or the other sort of trickle down.” (PR2) Sometimes, accepting a student that is not a good fit can lead to short-term financial gains, but longer-term losses if this leads to a culture shift which in turn results in other students withdrawing their enrollment. Private and independent school leaders experienced pressure to accept students to meet financial targets because they identified tuition is the primary, or only, source of revenue for their schools.

Feelings of responsibility towards staff and faculty, and ensuring their livelihood, also led to dilemmas centered around finance. Participants from private and independent schools expressed concerns that if financial targets were not met, staff and faculty would be affected either in terms of workload, pay and benefits, or job stability. One participant said, “So I get the finance piece. It's great to add a kid to the school. It's an extra 30 grand: do that a few times. There's your 150K to pay for a new employee. But they [would also] come to me and say, ‘My classrooms aren’t humongous like they can hold 20’.” (I3) Class sizes, preparation time, benefits packages, professional development, and layoffs were mentioned as concerns for these leaders. Many dilemmas were grounded in considering the different financial impacts of decisions that needed to be made.

While finance emerged as a recurring theme across all four schools, important structural differences shaped how financial responsibility was enacted. The two independent schools operated with comparable financial governance models, resulting in similar scopes of fiscal authority and accountability for their leaders. In contrast, the two private schools differed markedly. At PIBS, the head exercised broad financial oversight and decision-making authority. By comparison, leaders at the Private Montessori school reported experiencing many of the same financial pressures despite having significantly less knowledge of, and control over, their school's finances. Notably, these divergent governance arrangements produced strikingly similar ethical dilemmas, suggesting that financial pressures may transcend differences in formal authority and organizational structure.

Parents as Clients

Participants from private and independent schools described paying parents as clients expecting high levels of service and seeking to influence school decisions, whereas public school leaders characterized parental relationships as focused on partnerships rather than customer satisfaction. Value conflicts over meeting different needs led to a host of challenges, and in some instances, the expectations related to the schools' financial performance and those of parents-as-clients were in contradiction with one another.

A head of school shared the challenges of declining offers of donations from parents when he felt that there was an ulterior motive. Not meeting parent expectations was often perceived by parents as being confrontational, which then had the potential of leading families to withdraw their children from school. Sometimes, tensions arose with parents pertaining to non-payment of fees. A participant recounted a tense conversation with a parent: "Look, we're a school, we're a business, and we're an organization. Tuition is owed. Your child is here, and we

are fulfilling our end of the bargain. Why are you not fulfilling your end of the bargain?" (I2) He experienced a dilemma because he did not want the child to be impacted by non-payment of fees but wanted to ensure fees were paid. He was torn about whether to remove the student from the school because he felt it was unfair to the child, but he also feared that if he did not, a precedent could be set regarding contractual obligations.

In private and independent schools, the parents are not just parents; they are clients with a contractual agreement. Having been told, "I pay your salary" (PR4) on more than one occasion, a participant explains how the tone is set. Another shared that: "Because as a business, we have to please those parents" and, "I think for me one of the biggest challenges I have is pleasing the parents." (PR3)

Leaders thus faced dilemmas of deciding between what seemed best for the student(s) or the school without jeopardizing relationships that ensure institutional viability. Parents regularly ask for their children to be given special consideration, and leaders do not always feel it is warranted. Saying 'no' to clients became a dilemma because it seemed to contradict the parent's expectation of client service. Leaders describe a delicate balancing act in making equitable yet service-oriented decisions. An example of this was shared by a participant from an independent school who consistently heard from parents requesting that their children be given academic accommodations, such as extending deadlines, adjusting grades, alternate assignments, redoing assignments, and additional assistance, in the absence of a clear justification or rationale. On the one hand, a parent might argue that such accommodations or modifications are a key feature of a private or independent school, but leaders struggled with values of fairness and integrity in these cases.

A private school interviewee described a common situation of a parent implying they would only enroll their child if they were to be granted a scholarship. However, without any basis for a scholarship and indicators that there was no financial need for a bursary, he was left to decide whether to offer financial aid or gamble that the school might be left with an empty seat. Similarly, an independent school leader shared dilemmas related to various parental demands. In one example, the school leader was encouraged to allow a parent to chaperone a field trip, even though the parent had not completed the necessary screening. In this case, the parent threatened to remove their child from the school if they were not permitted to attend. While the parent's request was declined, the leader felt undue pressure to accommodate them.

Personnel Management

Public, private, and independent school participants identified frequent dilemmas related to teacher discipline or managing personnel.

Public school participants described the challenges that they faced in managing and leading teachers who underperformed or who did not meet expectations. On the one hand, they drew heavily on policies and procedures to guide their actions and decisions while also noting that they felt constrained by the lack of choice. Strong teacher unions and collective agreements create a climate where casual conversations between teachers and leaders to address concerns are not always possible. One principal shared an example of having to call a formal meeting with a teacher with an invitation with a union representative, even though the concern was minor and he would have preferred a casual hallway conversation (PUB1). Dilemmas ensued because of value conflicts regarding what was deemed best for the school against the available options to address poor performance. Participants expressed that working in a public school, and associated union

agreements made it difficult to discipline or dismiss problematic staff members, and available measures to improve performance often felt limited.

In contrast, private school and independent school respondents encountered dilemmas centered on personnel management where they bore direct responsibility for making decisions about contracts, compensation, benefits and terminations (I2; P3; P4). Unlike their public school counterparts, these decisions were not outlined by systemic protocols or universal procedures beyond labour laws. Instead, individual staff and faculty members could often negotiate directly with school leaders.

While autonomy provided leaders with valuable flexibility in personnel decisions, it also created significant additional pressure. Leaders struggled with this tension because inconsistent treatment of employees, or lack of the ethic of justice, could damage staff morale, even though the freedom to make individualized decisions grounded in the ethic of critique proved beneficial in many situations. Although these leaders appreciated not being constrained by union requirements, they also expressed that the constant burden of personnel management decisions was sometimes overwhelming.

Student Discipline

Leaders in all three types of school governance contexts shared dilemmas centered on student discipline, although the nature of the concerns varied.

In private and independent school leaders faced dilemmas about how to respond when students violated the school's code of ethics. One independent school leader described his dilemma in addressing an allegation that a student had made a racist comment toward another student. He felt enormous pressure from parents to impose punitive measures, although conflicting accounts of the incident made verification difficult. At the same time, he wanted to

use the situation as an educational opportunity to address intolerance, racism, justice, and the role of progressive or restorative approaches to discipline (I3). He ultimately leaned on the ethic of justice and his value of fairness and thus undertook an educative approach. Similarly, a private school leader explained the challenges of responding to students who smoked, missed curfew, or broke other school rules (P1). While policies sometimes offered clear guidance, there was often ambiguity in how consistently and fairly consequences should be applied.

Public school leaders by contrast emphasized dilemmas involving consequences for students with behaviours that put the safety of others at risk (PUB1; PUB2; PUB 3; PUB4). They were forced to weigh the right to be at school against the right for all students to learn in a safe environment. Leaders described feeling constrained in their disciplinary options, particularly when dealing with persistent or aggressive behaviours.

Student Safety

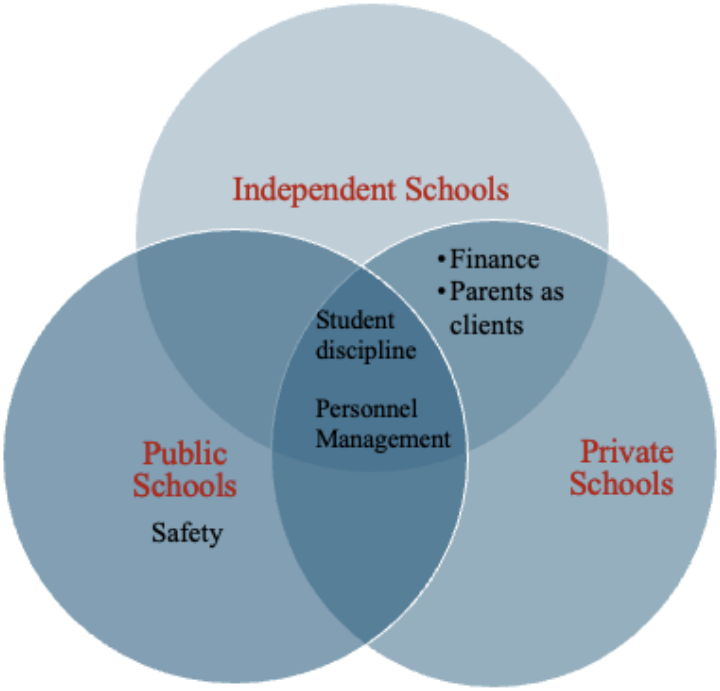
Public school leaders confronted complex dilemmas centered on protecting student safety across multiple dimensions. Participants in this study described facing dilemmas that weighed students' physical, social, and emotional well-being while grappling with insufficient resources to meet all safety needs (PUB2, PUB3; PUB4). With limited personnel and time, leaders were often forced to prioritize among competing safety concerns, determining not only which issues to address but in what order. A vice principal shared “But ethically, it is really difficult to then have to also go into a classroom and say, I realize that this person hurt the student, or I realize that this person hurt you as the teacher or the EA. But they're back in your classroom…So that's an ethical dilemma” (PUB2). She struggled with deciding between physical and emotional safety versus protocols and the human right to attend class. Throughout the dilemmas, ethics of the profession and personal ethics served as their primary guides.

Private and independent school leaders also shared thoughts about safety. However, their concerns were centered on examples such as lack of kindness (fostering emotional safety) and taking action to ensure the facilities were physically safe for the students. The intensity and frequency of safety-related dilemmas were thus most pronounced for leaders in public schools.

Summary of Analysis for Research Question 1

Education leaders in K-12 schools in Ontario may face different kinds of ethical dilemmas depending on type of school governance, except for decisions related to student discipline, which was a theme shared by all leaders. Figure 3 below shows the similarities and differences in dilemmas faced by leaders in public, private, and independent schools.

Figure 3. *Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Education Leaders in K-12 Schools*



Research Question Two

The second question addressed in this study is "How does school governance influence ethical decision-making for K-12 school leaders?" The cross-case analysis reveals that the type of governance creates distinctly different decision-making environments that shape how leaders approach ethical choices. Once again, private and independent schools were similar in the influences they experienced, while public schools operate within a fundamentally different decision-making context. Analysis of the data from across the cases revealed key themes, which are outlined below. Some of the themes identified in response to question one re-emerged for question two (finance, parents, and safety) which are discussed again specifically as related to this question.

Themes Shared by Private and Independent Schools

Both private and independent schools share several common influences on their decision-making that distinguish them from public schools.

Finance. Both private and independent school leaders identified significant financial responsibilities that created unique ethical dilemmas when there were tensions between educational mission and fiscal sustainability. Private school leaders explicitly described their roles through a business lens, with one participant noting: "Now it's sort of, I'm independent, like, I'm really running my own company. I'm really running my own business. Because [the owners] don't interfere. So, I think that certainly the decision process is different and as a result, probably the outcome is different." (PR1) This leader further emphasized his financial accountability: "I have to report to [the owners] with quarterly financial reports, but other than that, it's really my company to run as I choose and see fit." Another private school leader reinforced this business orientation by stating: "Being a private school is also a business." (PR4)

Independent schools, despite operating as non-profit entities with different stakeholder relationships, faced similar budget-driven pressures. An independent school participant explained: "So, we follow the ESA (Employment Standards Act). We don't have to refer to a collective bargaining [agreement]. We don't have that, so the biggest difference, you know, particularly in an independent school, is that we are so led by the budget and the surplus." (I2) This budget-centered approach distinguished both school governance types from public schools operating within government-funded frameworks.

The financial responsibilities created ongoing ethical dilemmas as leaders weighed profitability and budget constraints against educational priorities. These tensions were particularly evident in fundraising decisions, where potential donors could compromise institutional values. A head of an independent school described rejecting a significant donation to maintain financial integrity:

> We stood clear in our position that it was a hard discussion because obviously there were some opinions that would say that this gift is significant. It's important, it was a 6-figure gift and, you know, when we walked out of it, you know, we had a greater clear conscience that although we didn't hit the fundraising target, we couldn't really have reputationally known that one individual would dictate the direction of the school (I1).

School Culture. Private and independent schools indicated an emphasis and prioritization of a healthy school workplace culture that was influenced by governance type. The workplace culture can be thought of as the atmosphere created through the collective and underlying beliefs, norms and values that the teachers and administrators hold (Yee & Yee, 2024). A positive school workplace culture prioritizes staff wellbeing as a primary consideration, where staff have a sense of belonging, pleasure, involvement, and positive team spirit (Yee & Yee, 2024).

Leaders described how their governance type created ethical dilemmas when maintaining positive staff culture conflicted with other institutional needs. One independent school participant explained: "Faculty culture is one that I want to maintain" (I3) noting that this commitment sometimes created ethical tensions when budget constraints or enrollment pressures conflicted with staff support needs.

Private and independent school leaders reported their commitment to this culture-building through deliberate financial investments in staff development and comprehensive mentoring programs that supported both new and veteran educators (I1, I2, I3, PUB1). This sustained focus on staff culture represented a strategic choice made possible by these leaders' greater autonomy in budget allocation and personnel decisions.

Autonomy. In direct contrast to the constrained decision-making environment described by public school leaders, private and independent schools shared as a second theme of governance influence: autonomy. “Our owners are present, but we have a great deal of autonomy” (PR4), one leader shared. This was generally viewed positively, such as how this private school leader put it:

> So, autonomy, I guess, would be the decision-making making is pretty fun, pretty great, especially when I've come from other organizations where you can't do anything that's too extreme; it is very difficult to get something done unless you have approval from multiple people in a large board. And it's just slow and cumbersome. And you can't make those fast decisions or decisions that need to be made without canvassing and bringing in a lot of people. (PR1)

While autonomy enabled responsive decision-making, leaders also described how this freedom created ethical burdens absent in more constrained environments. One participant explicitly questioned the ethical implications of her autonomy:

> I think we have a lot more freedom here because we're private. We can make some decisions like sending this child away or asking this child not to return. That can't happen in the public system. We can do that. We have that option. So, I think we do have a lot more freedom. Is that necessarily ethical? I don't know, but I think our governance model is we have a lot more freedom than they do in the public system. (PR4)

At times, autonomy in the private school context made decisions more challenging, for example:

> We don't have the structure to fall back on and say, well… that's just the board of education rules, whereas they have that to fall back on. For us, the rules are our rules, so

> if a parent doesn't like something, we can't brush it off. These are our rules. So, we have to own it all. (PR3)

Parents. Another theme that emerged as an influence for private and independent school governance was that of parents. As noted in relation to the first research question on kinds of dilemmas, the parental theme emerged again for question two, specifically indicating that governance type influenced decision-making. Leaders felt that by choosing to be at the school, and by paying fees, parents have a high degree of influence. One private school participant indicated that the 'whole system' was designed around parents when she said, "So it is a choice on their behalf for them to be here and so our whole system is sort of based on that as well, isn't it?" (PR3)

While leaders felt their decision-making was influenced by parents, they did not indicate that the outcomes of their decisions were altered as a result. They did question this deeply, however. They paused to consider options differently, and in the case of independent schools, they also questioned the overall objectivity of the governance type with parents making up the board. One shared, "So, when you have parents on the board, and you're […] making decisions around, you know, tuition, or strategy, or EDI, it becomes a challenge. But you just question… well, how objective is the board really?" (I2) By comparison, in public schools, parents of students in individual schools do not have decision-making authority for policy, finance, hiring, or viability.

Breadth of Decisions. The final theme shared by private and independent schools was how the broad scope of their decision-making responsibilities created ethical dilemmas about competing priorities and resource allocation. Leaders described facing ethical tensions when decisions in one area conflicted with values or needs in another. Each participant noted the

breadth of decisions for which they were accountable, including infrastructure and maintenance, policy development, legal matters, banking, admissions, advancement, and marketing.

This extensive scope created ethical dilemmas when leaders had to choose between competing institutional needs. As one participant explained: "I think in independent schools it's slightly different because there's almost a tendency to want to be everything to everybody" (I2). Another added: "It's this careful balance of trying to keep everyone happy all the time" (I3). These leaders faced ethical dilemmas about how to prioritize limited time and resources across diverse stakeholder demands - whether to invest in facilities improvements that attract prospective families or staff development that supports current educators, or whether to focus on marketing efforts that ensure enrollment or student support services that serve current families. These are not responsibilities or decisions that fall within the professional scope of public school leaders.

The breadth of responsibilities meant that ethical decisions often had cascading effects across multiple areas, creating complex webs of competing ethical obligations. Leaders expressed feeling "spread thin" not just operationally but ethically, as they struggled to balance their care for students, staff, parents, and institutional sustainability simultaneously. This contrasted with public school contexts where such decisions were often distributed across system levels, allowing individual leaders to focus more specifically on educational and student welfare considerations.

Themes for Public Schools

Student Rights. The most notable theme for public schools was consideration for student rights, particularly as defined within the context of human rights and within board-level policy. The value of equity was highly prioritized in the public schools, as one principal explained: “The

same thing is… equity versus the school community, and the right to education…So, like we don't get to decide as a public school. You want to come to the school, you can come." (PUB3) This sentiment was similarly shared by the other principal: "A public school is public, and everybody has the right to it. And it's one of their human rights. So, if we are taking that away, why are we taking that away?" (PUB1) This perspective influenced decisions related to discipline, access to services, and safety considerations. Access is considered a universal right in the public system; this contrasts highly with the other governance types which selected their students through a competitive admissions process. Public school leaders were both motivated and required to provide support for students with special needs and faced dilemmas about the fair allocation of limited resources.

Another example of student rights surfaced when considering the Ontario Human Rights Commission report, *The Right to Read* (2022). The contents of the report and the obligations it identifies were highly relevant to the public schools, as indicated by this comment from a principal:

> We're changing the decisions we're making and how we're doing what we're doing, how we're teaching how to read, because of that human right. So… I think again with the public-private [perspective], now we're reading, whether or not it's the most academically rigorous or not becomes irrelevant. It's more about 'Am I helping this child reach their right to read, to learn to read.' I think that human rights bit plays in much more in the public school, which is my domain. (PUB1)

This accountability was implemented through policy at the provincial, board, and school levels. While the Ontario Human Rights Commission report has implications for all schools, it was only mentioned by the public ones.

Safety. A second theme for public school leaders was how their type of governance created unique ethical dilemmas around student safety that required balancing individual student needs against community protection. Public school leaders described facing complex safety-related ethical decisions that their counterparts in selective admission schools rarely encountered. The public school participants all shared that the public context was more inclusive which also meant they had few options in deciding how to deal with aggressive behaviours.

One vice-principal explained the intensity of these challenges: "The stuff that happens here because of where we're located, and our student population, is insanity" (PUB4) highlighting some contextual cultural aspects that might extend beyond governance. Leaders described ethical conflicts when students posed safety risks to others through behaviors like throwing furniture, kicking and punching, and abusive language directed at both students and staff. These situations required immediate responses while balancing multiple competing considerations about appropriate interventions and consequences.

These safety concerns created daily ethical dilemmas about resource allocation and intervention priorities. As one vice-principal noted: "So unfortunately, most of the decisions we make every day like… here it's constant in terms of student behavior" (PUB4). Leaders faced ethical tensions between protecting the learning environment for all students while also providing appropriate support and interventions for students who exhibited challenging behaviours by sometimes harming themselves or others.

Policy and Process. A third theme of influence for public schools was how extensive policy and process requirements created ethical dilemmas when compliance conflicted with the leaders' professional judgment and ethic of justice. As one participant noted: "There is a process for everything" (PUB3).

Leaders described ethical tensions when prescribed procedures delayed urgent interventions or did not address individual circumstances effectively. One principal explained: "Sometimes, the red tape of public education also makes it a little bit more difficult or challenging, and when you can't do something because of this, or you have to do a million things before you get to the end versus if you're working in a private situation, sometimes you can navigate that a bit differently… I find that governance… is always in the back of my head." (PUB1). This example highlights how the values associated with the ethic of justice (following the rules) clashed with the ethic of the profession in wanting to decide expediently and with consideration for unique circumstances.

However, these same policies also resolved ethical dilemmas by providing clear guidance when leaders faced difficult choices. As one noted: "when you have to make decisions, it's easy to make reference and go back to those policies and procedures" (PUB1). Despite extensive procedures, one principal emphasized: "I haven't had a situation where I thought that my hand was forced, and I made a decision that I wasn't comfortable with that I had to make because someone made me." (PUB1)

Support Networks. A fourth theme that emerged for the public school leaders was the presence of strong and supportive professional networks. Noting the large numbers of other principals perhaps experiencing similar dilemmas, they felt that there was always someone to reach out to in resolving dilemmas and in making decisions. This support stood in contrast to the experiences of private and independent school leaders, who often described decision-making isolation and the burden of autonomous leadership.

Numerous supports at the board level were also cited, including systems principals, superintendents, and board-level legal teams, which led one participant to conclude: “I feel

there's a lot of sounding boards." (PUB1) In contrast, the independent schools noted the opposite, citing they felt alone (I3; PR1; PR3). Most often these leaders had one other person in the school, or a small team to rely on. While they noted there could be people in other schools to support them in decision-making, the uniqueness of each school meant that differences were often so significant that perspectives could be disconnected or irrelevant.

Lack of Autonomy. The final theme for public schools is a significant lack of autonomy contrast to what was observed in private and independent schools. More centralized policy development and expectations for their application, budget decisions, personnel management, and curricular focus were all mentioned by participants as areas where they lacked autonomy. Centralized decision-making was viewed as "top-down":

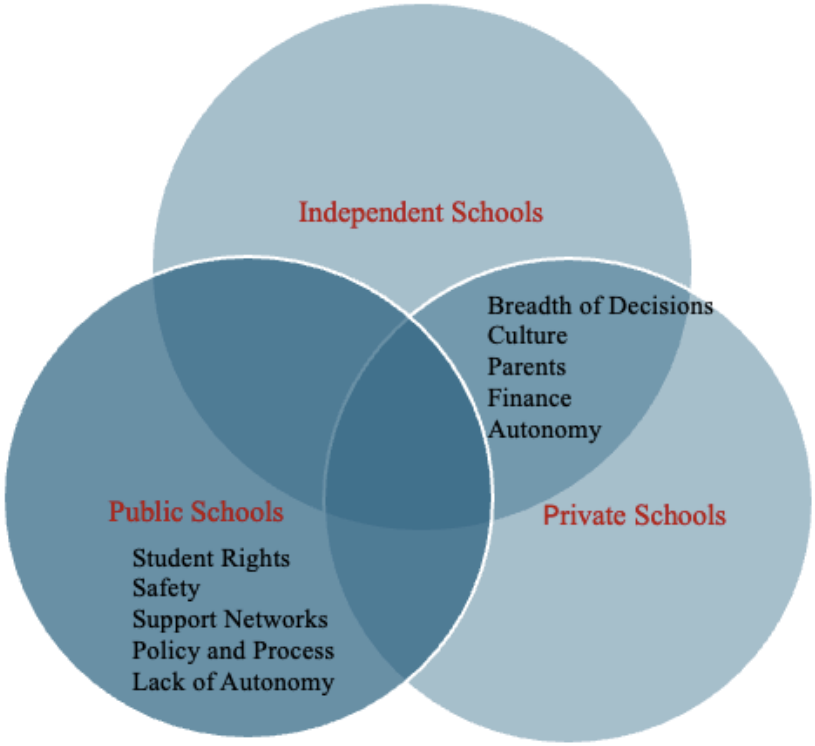
> We gather the information, and then it's passed to one of our investigators and they inform us as to what are the next steps. Of course, there's consultation, but I think that's a piece, too; on a higher level, they make the decision." (PUB3)

This view was shared in the paired interview when the other principal noted that: "Everything gets vetted by a central team. It just takes a lot longer to accomplish things that you could do in one day, which you know, in order to get that approval, it takes a long, long time." (PUB1) The contrast in autonomy between public school leaders and those working in the other two governance types is notable. Nevertheless, while the process and responsibilities for decision-making were influenced, one principal was careful to note that he largely agreed with the decisions. He explained that: "Sometimes I have an issue with speed or an issue with freedom, but not an issue with values." (PUB1)

Summary of Analysis for Research Question Two

Themes derived from the influences of governance type on decision-making were similar in private and independent school cases and differed from those in public schools. These influences are depicted in Figure 4 below, indicating similarities and differences in how school governance type influenced ethical decision-making.

Figure 4. *Influence of Governance Type on Decision-Making Dilemmas*



Research Question Three

The third and final research question guiding this study is, "What ethical paradigms frame the decisions made by school leaders?" In all six cases, the ethic of care, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of the profession were found to influence decisions by school leaders. However, while these paradigms were consistently present, the relative weight or emphasis each leader placed on them varied depending on the context and nature of the dilemma. The ethic of

critique was hardly mentioned by study participants, with only one instance in which a participant described working around policies when they conflicted with student needs.

Ethic of Care

Participants across all governance types applied the ethic of care when making decisions, centering their choices on compassion, kindness, honesty, integrity, and consideration of impact on students. This ethical framework (Langlois, 2011; Starratt, 1991) considers who benefits and who may be harmed by decisions and actions, grounding choices in concern for others. Analysis revealed the prominence of care was in tension with justice in public schools, and with the profession in the cases for private and independent schools.

Leaders faced ethical dilemmas when they were faced with conflicts in how to care for different individuals or stakeholder groups simultaneously - students, teachers, and parents. Student discipline decisions exemplified these care-based conflicts: when a student was harmful or potentially harmful to others, leaders experienced ethical tensions between the benefits and rights of that individual student and the risks to the broader school community. Suspension decisions in public schools particularly highlighted this dilemma - while such decisions protected other students, they were not considered beneficial to the suspended child and were sometimes viewed as harmful, removing educational access despite being necessary for community protection.

Leaders also described care-based dilemmas when deciding how to allocate limited resources among competing needs, having to choose which groups of students or staff would benefit and which would not when faced with excess demand. These situations forced leaders to prioritize among stakeholders they cared about equally.

Participants frequently described drawing upon both care and justice ethics simultaneously when resolving these dilemmas.

Ethic of Justice

A central paradigm used by participants was the ethic of justice (Castrellón, 2022; Langlois, 2011; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022), which includes prioritizing fairness, equality, and maximizing the benefits for all while respecting the rights of individuals (Begley, 2014). This paradigm adheres to the idea that people should be treated to a standard that can be uniformly applied. The institution is then expected to serve the common good first but also consider how different decisions impact individuals.

Reliance on rules, policy, and guidelines was a central theme in every school. Participants consistently reported the importance of fairness, which was mostly considered to be adhering to existing procedures and precedents or stated expectations. A common example of the application of the ethic of justice to resolve an ethical dilemma includes staff dismissals and reprimands. Leaders understood that they must engage in actions or dialogue that might have a profound negative consequence for the staff member primarily because a rule was broken, or expectation was not met; there was a strong sense that everyone had to be treated both equally and in a particular way as dictated by policies. Student discipline was the other notable theme that was underscored by the application of the ethic of justice. Participants commonly cited codes of conduct, school rules, previous cases, and policy manuals as guideposts for decision-making when facing challenges with student behaviour.

Public school leaders applied the ethic of justice paradigm through policy compliance as central to their decision-making, while the private and independent school leaders applied it less often, and it was often in tension with client-service considerations.

Ethic of the Profession

Professional standards that are both pre-established and those based on a personal code of ethics through personal experience and ethics that govern the working environment are key elements that define the ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). When educational leaders encounter specific challenges, such as budget constraints, disciplinary issues, curriculum changes, or staff conflicts, they engage in ethical decision-making guided by the expectations and norms established within their particular school context and within the profession.

Each participant explained that they followed the expectations set forth by their professional community, regardless of whether these expectations were formalized through written policies and mandates or communicated through informal cultural norms. Leaders also described feeling aligned with their school's mission and values, explaining that this philosophical compatibility was essential to their effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Rather than relying solely on abstract ethical principles, participants made decisions based on what their specific educational community prioritized and valued. These leaders balanced their understanding of professional ethics with considerations drawn from both the ethics of justice (focusing on fairness and rules) and the ethics of care (emphasizing relationships and individual needs). This balancing act required them to navigate between institutional requirements and their personal convictions about what would best serve their students and staff.

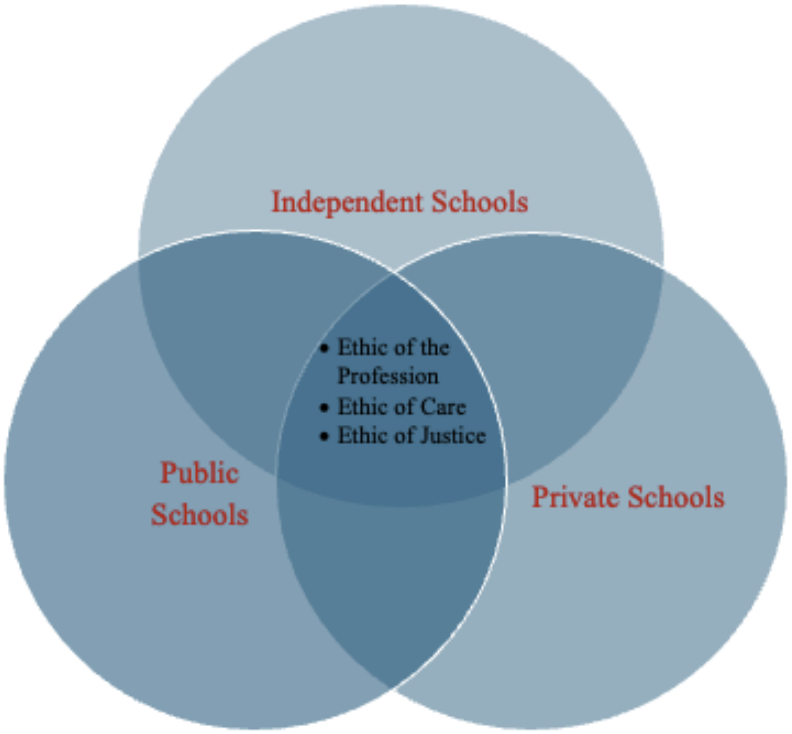
The intersection of care and the profession can be seen in one leader's explanation of adopting a new student wellness program: "Again, the student support and well-being piece, because it's become a real focus in many of our independent schools" (I4). This decision demonstrates how professional trends in independent education aligned with the leader's care-

based ethic to support individual student needs, making the adoption both professionally appropriate and personally meaningful.

Summary of Analysis for Research Question Three

While all leaders employed the same set of ethical paradigms, governance type shaped which paradigms dominated their decision-making and how heavily they weighted competing paradigms when they conflicted. The application of the ethics of care, justice, and the profession across governance types reveals shared ethics among leaders from all of the schools, yet the absence of critique indicates a significant gap in addressing systemic inequities. Figure 5 below illustrates how ethical paradigms were applied by leaders in public, private, and independent schools.

Figure 5. *Ethical Paradigms that Frame Decision-Making for School Leaders*



Summary

The cross-case analysis reveals that governance types create distinct environments that fundamentally shape how school leaders experience and navigate ethical decision-making. While market-based governance types (private and independent schools) and rights-based governance (public schools) do not determine which ethical paradigms leaders employ, they create profoundly different contexts within which these paradigms influence decisions.

The findings of the study highlight that private and independent school leaders often face similar ethical dilemmas, despite different ownership models; this suggests that the market relationship inherent in fee-paying education creates ethical dilemmas that transcend organizational structure. School leaders face value conflicts around financial sustainability, client service expectations, and leadership autonomy that are largely absent in public education. Conversely, public schools confront unique tensions between care and resource limitations, justice and safety imperatives, and professional judgment and bureaucratic oversight.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

This research examined how school governance type influences ethical decision-making among K-12 education leaders in Ontario. Through a qualitative comparative case study involving six schools across public, private, and independent governance types, the study explored what ethical dilemmas leaders face, how governance influences their decision-making, and which ethical paradigms frame their decisions.

The findings reveal a paradox in ethical decision-making: school governance type fundamentally shapes the ethical dilemmas that leaders navigate, yet it does not determine the ethical paradigms that leaders use to make decisions. It may, however, affect the extent to which each paradigm is applied. This reveals how governance types influence ethical decision-making and how they create, constrain, and enable different forms of ethical decision-making by school leaders.

This chapter examines these findings in four key ways. First, I interpret the findings by connecting them to extant literature on educational leadership, school governance types, and ethical decision-making, showing how this research extends current understanding. Second, I present a revised conceptual framework that accounts for these findings and their theoretical implications. Third, I explore the implications of these findings for leadership theory, preparation programs and policy development. Finally, I acknowledge the study's limitations and suggest directions for future research that could extend these insights.

Key Findings

Several key insights emerge from this research that advance both theoretical understanding and practical knowledge of ethical decision-making by school leaders. First, governance types may influence categories of ethical dilemmas through different structural

arrangements, stakeholder relationships, and operational constraints. Second, while leaders across all governance types draw from the same set of ethical paradigms (care, justice, profession), governance type systematically shapes which paradigms become prominent in their decision-making and how heavily they weight each one. Third, autonomy and accountability operate paradoxically across governance types, with both constrained and autonomous contexts creating different ethical tensions. Fourth, financial considerations manifest differently across governance types, creating unique categories of ethical dilemmas in market-based schools while operating indirectly in public schools. Fifth, governance structures may create fundamentally different institutional goals and stakeholder relationships that shape how leaders navigate competing demands. Finally, the absence of the ethic of critique across almost all schools reveals significant barriers to social justice leadership regardless of governance type.

Interpretation of Findings and Connections to the Literature

Governance May Shape Paradigm Salience But Not Paradigm Access

The case analysis revealed a more nuanced relationship than initially theorized. Leaders' ethical dilemmas and the paradigms they rely on are influenced by governance type, which shapes both what challenges arise and which ethical frameworks take precedence. All leaders, regardless of governance context, drew on the ethics of care, justice, and the profession. Public school leaders' decision-making was more heavily influenced by the ethics of justice and profession through policy frameworks. Private and independent school leaders, on the other hand, navigated dilemmas with a heavier tension between care and justice through stakeholder relationships. The ethic of critique was lacking across all contexts, suggesting barriers that transcend governance type.

Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2022) ethical paradigm framework does not address the influence of contextual factors such as governance on how leaders apply ethical paradigms to decision-making. However, my findings reveal a nuanced relationship that is related to governance type.

This finding extends Hallinger's (2018) work on contextual influences in educational leadership which identified school context as a significant factor but did not examine governance-specific effects on ethical decision-making. Hallinger's (2018) research focused primarily on instructional leadership contexts, whereas my study reveals that governance type may function as a powerful determinant of the nature of the dilemmas while having minimal influence on the ethical decision-making paradigms leaders use to navigate these challenges. The distinction suggests that context operates more selectively on leadership practice than Hallinger's (2018) broader framework suggested.

Market Versus Rights-Based Governance

A second important insight emerges from the clustering of private and independent schools despite their fundamentally different ownership models and stated purposes. Independent schools are typically established to advance a particular educational philosophy or pedagogical vision, while private schools may operate with more explicit profit motives. Given these foundational differences, greater differentiation between these governance types was expected. Instead, these schools demonstrated striking similarities in the types of ethical dilemmas faced by leaders and the contextual factors that influenced their decision-making, while public schools presented a distinctly different profile across nearly every dimension examined.

This pattern in the findings suggests that market mechanisms, rather than ownership models, may be an important factor shaping ethical decision-making. Both private and

independent schools operate as market-based organizations where leaders must balance educational mission with financial sustainability while managing parents as clients whose satisfaction directly impacts institutional viability. Public schools, conversely, operate within rights-based frameworks where universal access and equity considerations predominate over market considerations.

The convergence of private and independent school leadership dilemmas contributes to current policy debates around school choice, by demonstrating that market mechanisms, rather than ownership structures or stated missions, might be the primary driver of leadership decision-making in non-public schools. This finding is analytically significant because it suggests that non-profit educational intent does not differentiate independent schools from for-profit institutions at the level of lived leadership practice. In so doing, it extends existing research on educational marketization, which does not distinguish market effects between different types of governance (Hedges et al., 2020; Lubienski & Yoon, 2017; Winton, 2022; Winton & Martin, 2025).

Furthermore, this clustering pattern aligns with Feiger's (2024) centralization-decentralization spectrum. Feiger's framework suggests that centralized systems constrain autonomy while providing systematic support. Public schools in this study operated within increasingly centralized structures characterized by provincial oversight and extensive procedural requirements (Kelpin, 2024; Martin, 2025) while private and independent schools functioned as autonomous entities with internal governance structures enabling greater flexibility but requiring broader leadership responsibility.

Autonomy, Accountability, and Ethical Decision-Making

The relationship between autonomy and accountability emerged as a central theme distinguishing governance types. This study confirms existing research suggesting that public school leaders operate with significantly less autonomy than their private and independent counterparts (Cheng, 2016; Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017; Nordholm et al., 2022). However, my findings reveal a more complex relationship between autonomy and ethical decision-making than these previous studies identified, as explained in the paragraphs that follow.

Cheng's (2016) comparative analysis of public and private school autonomy focused primarily on administrative flexibility, and found that private school leaders had greater freedom in hiring and curriculum decisions. My research extends Cheng's work by revealing that autonomy operates paradoxically in ethical decision-making contexts. This paradox was not captured in Cheng's framework, which treated autonomy as uniformly positive for leadership effectiveness.

Miller's (2019) study of 34 public school principals found that government oversight created feelings of professional frustration and reduced decision-making confidence, with leaders reporting feeling "handcuffed" by bureaucratic requirements. My findings both confirm and extend Miller's conclusions. Like Miller's participants, public school leaders in my study expressed frustration with policy constraints. However, my data reveals that although feeling constrained, participants also described feeling protected from difficult choices by policy boundaries. This suggests that autonomy constraints in public schooling have both limiting and liberating effects that Miller's framework did not capture.

Lynch et al. (2024) note that accountability expectations create decision-making bias favoring governing body policy over professional judgment. My findings provide specific evidence for how this bias manifests in ethical decision-making, showing that public school

leaders consistently prioritized policy compliance even when they questioned its alignment with student needs.

Private and independent school leaders experienced the opposite paradox. They described their autonomy as both empowering and burdensome, enabling responsive decision-making while creating pressure to address diverse demands without system-level support. This finding extends Madestam et al.'s (2018) research, which found that private sector leaders valued their ability to exert influence and respond quickly to challenges but did not examine the ethical decision-making impact of this autonomy. My research reveals that this freedom creates unique ethical dilemmas, as leaders must navigate competing demands without the protection of system-level policies.

Financial Considerations as Ethical Determinants

The prominence of financial considerations in private and independent school decision-making extends existing literature on market-driven education by demonstrating how financial pressures create specific categories of ethical dilemmas. Unlike public schools, where major financial decisions occur at system levels, private and independent school leaders directly confront ethical dilemmas involving financial sustainability, profit margins, and resource allocation.

Poultney's (2013) analysis of private school governance noted that financial viability creates leadership challenges but did not specify how these manifest as ethical dilemmas. Leaders in my study described specific value conflicts between serving student needs and maintaining institutional sustainability, such as deciding whether to accept students who are not a good fit or choosing between hiring additional staff and maintaining profit margins.

James & Sheppard's (2014) international comparison of private school leadership found that ownership and profit motives impact decision-making but focused on operational implications rather than ethical decision-making. My research extends their work by showing how business considerations create unique ethical dilemmas. Private school leaders must consider profit margins alongside educational outcomes, adding a commercial dimension to ethical decision-making that was absent from other contexts.

Like Machin's (2014) findings, participants in this study from private and independent schools described needing to develop business acumen beyond traditional educational leadership skills. However, my research reveals that this business orientation creates ongoing ethical dilemmas rather than simply requiring additional skill development. Leaders must continuously balance educational mission with financial viability, often creating sustained conflicts between professional values and institutional sustainability.

Public school leaders also described financial pressures, but these manifested as fundraising activities and resource scarcity rather than direct financial management. Winton (2022), Hedges (2020), and the Toronto District School Board (2018) found that public school leaders rely on and fundraise from private sources to support supplementary programs and resources. Participants in this study similarly shared stories of securing grocery gift certificates for families or donations of books for classrooms and libraries. These manifest in dilemmas about how to allocate time and effort as a leader, with some public school participants feeling they needed to weigh the value of basic needs against educational outcomes.

Institutional Goals and Stakeholder Relationships

Leaders operate within different institutional frameworks that shape their stakeholder relationships and accountability mechanisms. Public school leaders are primarily accountable to

provincial authorities and regulatory networks (Faubert & Paulson, 2020), while leaders in private and independent schools must respond to diverse stakeholders including parents, owners, boards of directors, or religious affiliates (Poultney, 2013).

Despite these structural differences, all participants demonstrated a shared commitment to providing quality education for students, consistent with research on school leadership across governance models globally (James & Sheppard, 2014). However, these varying governance types create different institutional objectives that influence the ethical dilemmas leaders face in their decision-making processes.

In private and independent schools, parents function as clients whose satisfaction directly impacts institutional viability. This client relationship creates unique ethical dilemmas, as leaders must balance professional judgment with customer satisfaction. The findings suggest that this dynamic can influence ethical decision-making when parental demands conflict with professional expertise or student wellbeing. Madestam et al. (2018) and Üztemur et al. (2022) pointed out that fears of reprisal and heavy parental influence were sources of dilemmas and value conflicts in decision-making, but they did not examine governance-specific effects. My findings extend this work by demonstrating that governance type fundamentally alters parent-leader relationships.

Public school leaders described different relationships focused on accountability and partnership, mediated by system-level policies that protected them from individual parental pressure. This difference demonstrates how governance type shapes both the nature of stakeholder relationships and the resources available for managing them.

The Critique Gap

The minimal application of the ethic of critique represents an important finding with implications for educational equity and social justice. Despite operating under different governance types with varying degrees of autonomy, leaders across almost all schools avoided challenging systemic inequities, with only one brief instance where a participant described working around policies that conflicted with student needs.

Shields (2019) articulates a pathway toward socially just, inclusive and equitable schools, emphasizing the central role of critical theory and the related ethic of critique in transformative school leadership. She defines critique as necessary to "redress positions and perspectives, structures and cultures, policies and practices, that result in any form of oppression or inequity" (p 144). However, Shields is clear that critique alone is insufficient. Sustained effort, deliberate strategies and courage to create more just and inclusive schools are still needed. The findings from this study suggest that Shield's vision for transformative school leadership has yet to be fully embraced in practice. While participants demonstrated an awareness of inequities and, in some cases, engaged in critical reflection, this critique was not consistently translated into concrete leadership actions aimed at structural change.

Furman's (2012) comprehensive framework for social justice leadership emphasizes the importance of the ethic of critique in challenging systems that marginalize students but does not examine how different governance structures might inhibit or enable critical approaches. My research suggests that governance type creates systematic barriers to critique across all contexts, though through different mechanisms.

Furman, in her earlier work (2004), advances the ethic of community as a necessary complement to the other ethical paradigms in education leadership, positioning community as both a vehicle for justice and a foundation for broader moral purposes. She defines the ethic of

community as “the moral responsibility to engage in communal processes as educators pursue the moral purposes of their work and address ongoing challenges” (p. 215). However, the findings from this research suggest that when structures of governance constrain or disincentivize critique, communal processes themselves may be shaped by the same pressures that limit critical engagement. Two decades later, the persistent absence of critique signals the need to revisit the ethic of the community as another means to examine how governance may influence the moral dialogue necessary for social justice leadership.

Martínez-Recio et al.'s (2025) recent study of social justice leadership found that leaders face institutional barriers to equity-focused practice but focused primarily on public school contexts. My findings extend their work by showing that these barriers operate differently across governance types. Public school leaders described fear of consequences for challenging established systems, noting concerns about investigations or disciplinary action. Private and independent school leaders, despite having greater autonomy, demonstrated little inclination toward critique-based approaches, perhaps because they had the power to modify systems rather than challenge them externally.

Travers & King's (2025) research on barriers to equity leadership identified fear of reprisal as a significant constraint but did not examine how this manifests across different governance types. My findings provide specific evidence of how governance type shapes these fears differently. Public school leaders feared system-level consequences, while private and independent school leaders appeared to focus on incremental changes rather than structural critique.

While the ethic of critique was designed to challenge the systems that marginalize students and perpetuate inequities (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Langlois et al., 2014; Langlois &

Lapointe, 2007; Puyo, 2022; Starratt, 1991), it was minimally applied by research participants in this study. This finding connects to broader literature on social justice confirming widespread challenges (Martínez-Recio et al., 2025; Travers & King, 2025). It may reveal that school governance type creates different barriers to critical practice than was previously understood.

These six insights reshape our understanding of how governance type influences ethical decision-making. Table 7 below summarizes these patterns across the research questions, illustrating how governance type creates distinct dilemma categories and decision-making influences while ethical paradigms remain consistent across all contexts.

Table 8. *Summary of Findings by Research Question and School Governance Type*

	Public Schools	Private Schools	Independent Schools
Q1: What kinds of ethical dilemmas are faced by education leaders in K-12 schools working in different governance types?	• Personnel Management • Student Discipline • Safety	• Finance • Parents as Clients • Personnel Management • Student Discipline	• Finance • Parents as Clients • Personnel Management • Student Discipline
Q2: How does school governance influence ethical decision-making for K-12 school leaders?	• Policy, Process, and Procedure • Strong Support Network • Safety • Lack of Autonomy • Student Rights	• School Culture • Autonomy • Finance • Parents as Clients • Breadth of Decisions	• School Culture • Autonomy • Finance • Parents as Clients • Breadth of Decisions
Q3: What ethical paradigms frame the decisions made by school leaders	• Ethic of Care • Ethic of the Profession • Ethic of Justice	• Ethic of Care • Ethic of the Profession • Ethic of Justice	• Ethic of Care • Ethic of the Profession • Ethic of Justice

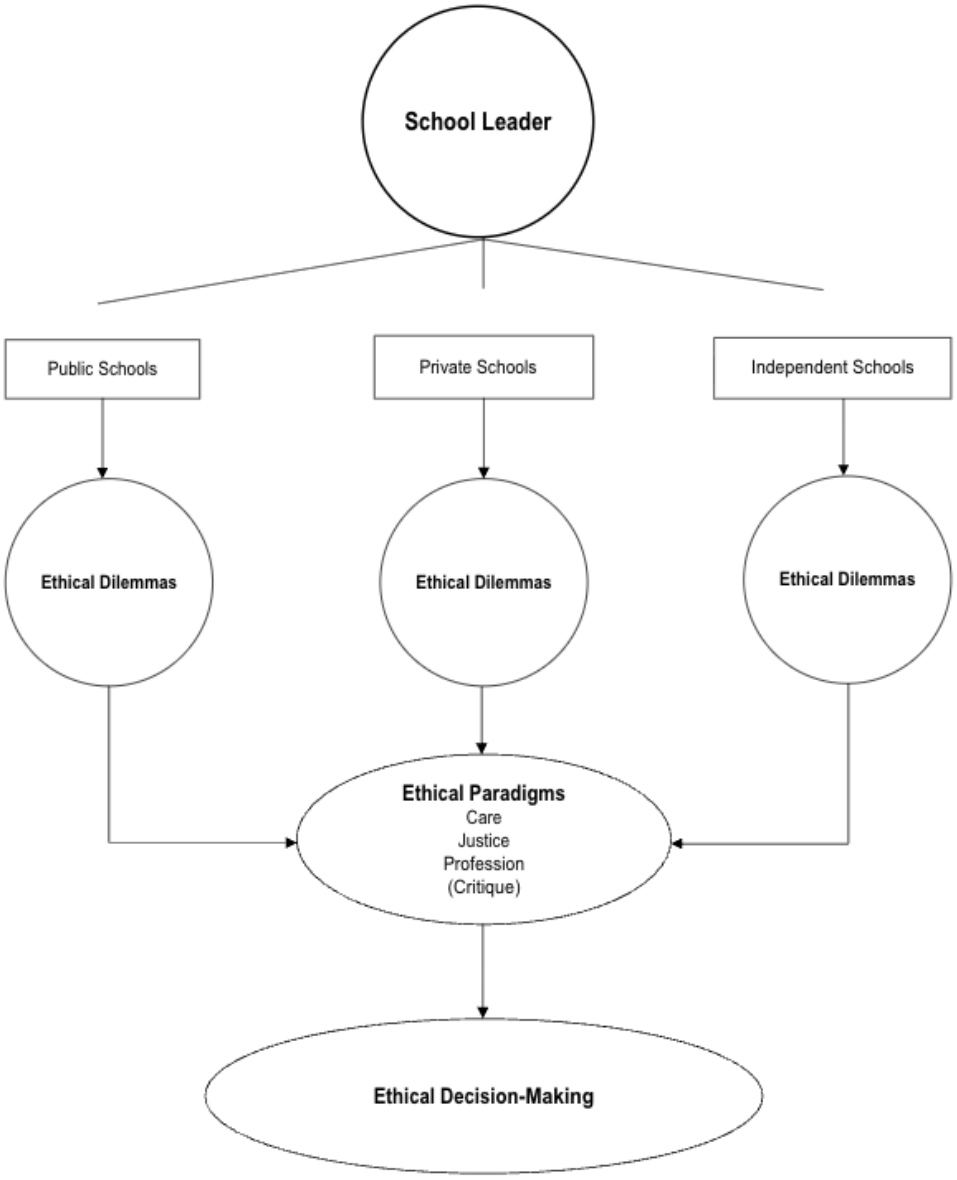
Revised Conceptual Framework

The findings from this study necessitate theoretical refinement of how governance type influences ethical decision-making by school leaders. The original conceptual framework for this study (see Figure 1), based on Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2022) ethical paradigms, anticipated that governance type would influence both the types of dilemmas leaders face and the ethical paradigms that they apply in resolving them. The findings confirmed the first assumption, but not the second.

Governance type shaped which dilemmas leaders encountered. Public school leaders faced dilemmas centered on policy compliance, safety, and resource constraints. Private and independent school leaders navigated dilemmas around financial viability, client satisfaction, and autonomy. Findings also revealed that governance type did not limit which ethical paradigms leaders applied, but it did influence which paradigms became central to their decision-making**.**

Figure 6 reflects this refined understanding. Governance type functions as a contextual moderator for the dilemmas, which determine the application of each ethical paradigm.

Figure 6. *Revised Conceptual Framework*



By examining how educational leadership values are applied differently across various governance types and school-specific contexts, this research makes an important contribution to leadership theory while offering practical insights for theory, practice and policy.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to ethical leadership theory by demonstrating the complex relationship between governance type and ethical decision-making. The findings reveal both expected consistencies and important variations across governance types that advance theoretical understanding.

While all leaders applied the ethics of care, justice and the profession, governance type shapes which of these paradigms becomes central to their everyday practice. This finding supports the premise that shared values and mission-driven practice exist across contexts (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Gumus et al., 2018; Leithwood, 2010), but it also suggests that the ethics are not applied uniformly regardless of governance type. The governance-specific nature of ethical dilemmas suggests that contextual factors play a larger role in shaping leadership practice than these theories acknowledge.

The distinction between dilemma types (governance-influenced) and ethical paradigms (more universal) provides a deeper understanding of how ethical decision-making is shaped by context. This contributes to Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2022) framework by including contextual factors not previously specified.

Implications for Leadership Preparation

The findings have important implications for school leader preparation programs. Public school principals are required to complete the Principal Qualification Program delivered through Ontario Universities and principal's councils (Ontario College of Teachers, 2023), while the Canadian Accredited Independent School (CAIS) offers optional professional development in governance and other related areas (Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, 2024).

Schools can tailor training and development to best meet the needs of their leaders potentially reducing stress and conflict. However, there is no known existing universal program

for leaders that explains the influences of governance on dilemmas and decision-making. I suggest that The Ontario College of Teachers revise the Principal's Qualification Program to address this gap. Embedding governance context analysis into leadership training could enhance ethical awareness and decision-making resilience.

Leadership preparation should also address the critique gap identified earlier, preparing leaders to advance equity and social justice. While some authors comprehensively address this issue (G. Furman, 2012; Kowalchuk, 2022; Martínez-Recio et al., 2025; Shields, 2019; Travers & King, 2025), leaders need frameworks for understanding the implications of autonomy and accountability and for navigating the ethical implications of different degrees of decision-making shaped by governance type.

Policy Implications

The research findings prompt several important policy considerations for educational governance. The differences between the more centralized public schools and more decentralized private and independent school governance models raise questions about optimal governance arrangements for supporting ethical decision-making and educational equity. Understanding that the ethical paradigms are applied across contexts with varying emphasis, yet still lack a critical lens, might suggest that current board-level and school-level policies do not adequately address the governance-specific barriers leaders face in executing their ethical decision-making.

The findings also have implications for ongoing policy debates about school choice and educational privatization. The clustering of private and independent schools around market-based decision-making suggests that market mechanisms, rather than ownership structures, may be the primary driver of ethical decision-making patterns. More differences in dilemmas and salience of the ethical paradigms were expected between these two types of governance, because

their respective missions and profit motive are vastly different. Pressures to meet customer satisfaction and market niche through differentiation could shape ethical decision-making by prioritizing these over other considerations such as equity or community responsibility. This insight could inform policy discussions about voucher programs, charter schools, funding of private schools, and other market-based reforms by highlighting the way that markets influence not only the organizational behaviour, but also the ethical paradigms guiding school leaders.

Applications of Findings

Findings from this study can help current and prospective leaders make informed career decisions by better understanding the potential nature and scope of their work. This is especially timely given the increase in the proportion of students attending private and independent schools in Ontario (MacPherson, 2022) and with current challenges in recruiting new school leaders (Osborne, 2024). Individual leaders may be drawn to a particular school based on governance type by using research to understand the different influences on their decision-making and the nature of dilemmas that might be more likely to prevail.

The findings also offer concrete guidance for improving day-to-day leadership effectiveness. Leaders in all contexts should expect ethical dilemmas around student discipline but can prepare differently for governance-specific challenges. Leaders considering private or independent school roles should develop financial literacy, client service skills, skills for managing diverse stakeholder expectations, and making autonomous decisions under pressure. Public school leaders, however, should prepare for building strong networks, collaborative decision-making, and working within clearly defined policy frameworks.

School boards and governing bodies can use these findings to design more effective leadership support systems for leaders already working in schools. Public school systems should

emphasize mentoring networks and policy guidance, while private and independent schools should focus on providing business skills training and decision-making frameworks for autonomous leadership.

Study Limitations

This research, while providing valuable insights into governance and educational leadership ethics, has several limitations that must be acknowledged to properly contextualize the findings and their implications. These limitations fall into three main categories: methodological constraints, sampling limitations, and scope restrictions.

Methodological Limitations

Several methodological factors may have influenced data collection and analysis. Potential bias represents a concern, as participants may have exhibited social desirability bias when discussing ethical decision-making. This may have also influenced the selection of which dilemmas to discuss. Some participants, particularly those in private and independent schools, appeared to be "giving the pitch" when describing their institutions, potentially downplaying areas of concern or minimizing systemic issues. In one paired interview, a power imbalance emerged where one leader dominated the conversation, which may have skewed the data toward one participant's experience. To address these concerns, confidentiality was emphasized through informed consent and assurance of confidentiality, and trust-building approaches such as building rapport and respecting boundaries were employed.

The temporal aspect of ethical decision-making also presented methodological challenges. Individual interviews revealed that leaders exhibited recency bias, overemphasizing recent events and providing imbalanced representations of their experiences. Examples of dilemmas provided by the participants seemed to represent a combination of the most

challenging and most recent rather than the most typical. This limitation was mitigated by emphasizing common dilemmas and redirecting responses in semi-structured interviews, while paired interviews provided more typical data about dilemmas.

Sampling Limitations

The participant selection process created several constraints. Varied leadership roles among participants may have influenced findings, as the inclusion criteria for the study required having held a formal leadership position. Public school participants held standard roles (principal and vice-principal), while private and independent school participants represented diverse specialized positions (heads of school, assistant heads, directors of various departments, chief financial officer). This diversity brought different perspectives focused on specific areas of responsibility, which was sometimes evident in the scope and nature of the responses.

The case selection process also created limitations. The participating schools include those who agreed to participate after an exhaustive search rather than a criteria-based selection process. Many public school leaders who were approached were uncomfortable with participating in the study or could not identify a second leader to participate. In some cases, leaders indicated a fear of breaking the rules or acting without permission. On the other hand, private school leaders required owner approval that was not always granted.

The schools in this study represent segments of their respective sectors and may not be representative of the broader landscape. Both participating independent schools serve elite populations focused on academic excellence and both public schools serve high-needs communities. The academically focused environments may show different patterns than the more diverse private and independent schools, and the high needs communities may face unique challenges that may not reflect those faced by leaders in other public schools. The stark contrast

between these may have amplified differences that might be more subtle when comparing more similar schools.

Scope and Contextual Limitations

This study's scope presents several limitations. The research includes only two schools from each governance type, meaning that the expressed views and experiences may not represent those of other school leaders. Participating schools serve different grade levels and operate within Ontario's specific regulatory framework, limiting applicability to other jurisdictions where governance can differ substantially. Additionally, other contextual factors specific to each school may also influence both the types of ethical dilemmas faced by school leaders and the paradigms that they rely on to resolve them. These other contextual factors lie outside the scope of the present study and were not investigated at length.

A further limitation concerns the study's research instruments. The interview protocols and frameworks were not designed to elicit or assess the personal ethical positions of individual leaders. As a result, while the study examines how leaders navigate ethical dimensions within their governance contexts, it does not explore the underlying personal ethical commitments, values or moral frameworks that shape their decision-making more broadly. Consequently, the individual ethics of participating leaders remain beyond the scope of the analysis.

Directions for Future Research

This study opens several important avenues for future research that could deepen our understanding of the influences of governance type on educational leadership decision-making and extend these findings to new contexts and populations. The research agenda emerging from these findings encompasses five key areas that warrant investigation.

Expanding Governance Contexts and Geographic Scope

Future research should examine additional governance models to build a more comprehensive understanding of how types of governance influence leadership practice in general. Charter schools, cooperative schools, partially government-funded institutions, and various hybrid arrangements represent governance types that could reveal new patterns in ethical decision-making. As school governance continues to evolve globally (Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024), understanding how different school governance types influence leadership practice becomes increasingly important.

Comparative studies across different jurisdictions would help determine whether the patterns observed in Ontario reflect broader governance influences or are specific to particular geographical contexts. Public school governance varies significantly throughout Canada and internationally, creating opportunities for both an expanded scope of studies and focused research in new contexts. Such research could illuminate how different governance types shape the relationship between ethical decision-making and school leadership.

Financial Influences on Leadership Ethics

The prominence of financial considerations in this study's findings warrants dedicated investigation into the relationship between school funding mechanisms and ethical decision-making. Even within each governance type explored in this study, funding models can vary considerably across jurisdictions, creating a context for understanding financial influences on leadership practice.

Pressing questions relate to the impacts of subsidies and tax incentives for private education on ethical decision-making. These policy mechanisms represent contentious areas in educational governance and leadership across Canada (Allison, 2020; Bacchus, 2025; Plourde, 2022), yet their effects on day-to-day practices and ethical decision-making remain largely

unexplored. Research in this area could inform policy debates by examining how different funding arrangements shape the ethical dilemmas faced by school leaders and how they are resolved.

Cross-Governance Leadership Experience

A promising research direction involves recruiting leaders who have worked across multiple governance contexts. These participants could provide unique insights into how different institutional environments shape ethical decision-making, as they possess direct comparative experience.

Data collection instruments designed specifically to capture cross-governance comparisons could leverage these leaders' natural tendency to compare different institutional contexts. Such studies could employ longitudinal designs following leaders as they transition between governance types, or retrospective approaches examining leaders' reflections on their varied experiences.

Outcomes and Effectiveness of Ethical Decision-Making

While this study examined the nature of ethical dilemmas and decision-making, future research should investigate the outcomes and effectiveness of different approaches to ethical leadership. Large-scale studies presenting a standardized critical incident to leaders across governance types could reveal how school leaders interpret ethical dilemmas and apply ethical paradigms when facing the same fictional situation.

Mixed-methods approaches combining governance analysis with assessments of leadership values, decision-making patterns, and school outcomes could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ethical leadership manifests in practice. Such research

could examine whether certain types of governance foster more effective ethical decision-making or different outcomes for students and school communities.

Interrelationships Between School Governance and School Culture

Future studies should examine how school culture influences ethical decision-making among school leaders, particularly examining how different governance types cultivate distinct cultural environments. Longitudinal research could examine how shifts in school culture following governance reforms subsequently alter leaders' approaches to ethical dilemmas. Additionally, comparative case studies across schools with similar governance types, but different cultural orientations could uncover the extent to which culture, rather than formal structures alone, drives variation in ethical decision-making. Such research would contribute to understanding which cultural conditions support more robust ethical leadership and how leaders might intentionally cultivate these conditions within their specific governance contexts.

The Ethic of Critique and Social Justice Leadership

Future research should specifically examine why school leaders across different governance types avoid critique and what conditions might foster more critical approaches to educational leadership. The literature on the barriers and constraints to social justice leadership demonstrate that leaders must actively work to disrupt systems (Furman, 2012; Martínez-Recio et al., 2025; Travers & King, 2025). Kowalchuk (2022) found that some principals perceived the Ontario Leadership Framework as actively constraining their capacity to enact social justice leadership, highlighting misalignment between policy frameworks and transformative leadership goals. However, the literature omits an exploration of differences by governance type. Studies focusing on the relationship between governance type and social justice leadership could explore whether certain practices, policies, and procedures better support leaders in addressing

educational equity concerns. Research examining leaders who do employ critique-based approaches could identify organizational, policy, or personal factors that enable these practices. This study suggests that the nuanced role of governance warrants further research.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that school governance type may shape the ethical contexts within which educational leaders operate and shapes which ethical paradigms become central to their decision-making. While leaders across public, private, and independent schools drew on the same ethics of care, justice, and profession to address ethical dilemmas, the nature of those dilemmas varied markedly according to governance structures.

The finding that schools across all governance types rarely applied the ethic of critique suggests that current educational leadership structures may inadvertently discourage critical examination of systemic inequities. Advancing educational equity thus requires individual ethical commitment and structural changes that support and enable leaders to challenge practices.

These findings carry particular relevance as Ontario continues to experience increasing centralization of educational governance with growing provincial oversight that constrains local decision-making autonomy (Kelpin, 2024; Martin, 2025). This trend, combined with global developments in school choice policies and privatization initiatives models, makes understanding how governance type influences ethical decision-making increasingly vital for developing leaders capable of navigating ethical dilemmas while maintaining their commitment to serving all students effectively and equitably.

Educational leadership remains challenging work requiring thoughtful navigation of competing values. By recognizing both the universal ethical commitments that unite educational leaders and the governance-specific challenges that distinguish their experiences, we can work

toward more effective preparation, support, and practice that ultimately serves the fundamental educational mission of ensuring quality education for all students.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

Participants Requested for University of Ottawa Study
"Ethical leadership and ethical decision-making: A comparative case study of K-12 public, private and independent schools in Ontario"

The purpose of this study is to examine ethical decision-making for school leaders in Ontario working within schools of different governance types. This will be done through constructing cases of public schools, private schools, and independent schools and then comparing the cases. Two leaders from the same school must volunteer for the school to be included in the study. Leaders in roles such as Principal, Vice-Principal, Owner, Head of School, CEO, and Directors would be eligible to participate. Participants may benefit from being involved in a process that allows them to reflect on their professional practice and share how this affects their leadership. The findings from this research will be shared with participants and other stakeholder groups which may aid in capacity building efforts.

Two leaders from each case school are being invited to participate. One leader from each school will participate in one interview, and the other will participate in two interviews. The candidate for the second interview can be determined after the first interview through self-selection, and the candidate in a more senior role will be included if both participants express an interest in participating in both interviews. Please note that the second interview will be a paired interview with a leader from a different school of the same school type (public, private, independent). Interviews will be conducted online via Zoom or Teams and should take approximately 60 minutes to complete. Participation is entirely voluntary. This study is part of a doctoral thesis at the University of Ottawa that is being conducted by Meg Garrard, Ph.D. candidate. If you would like more information, please send an email to [redacted]

Appendix B

Individual School Leader Interview Guide

Participant:

Date/Time:

My name is Meg Garrard. Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in my research.

As a reminder, the purpose of this interview is to better understand your leadership role at your school and the ethical dilemmas that you face. In this interview, I hope to be able to gain insight into specific dilemmas and how you resolve them. The interview will last between 45-60 minutes. As mentioned in the consent form, your participation is entirely voluntary and there will be no compensation for it. Your identity and that of your school will remain anonymous, and you can withdraw from this research at any time. I would like to remind you that I will be recording this interview and that the recording will be kept confidential and in a secure location. You will have the opportunity to review the transcripts and delete or amend any of your comments if you choose.

Before we start, I just want to confirm that you have read and returned the signed consent form. Do you have any questions or concerns on the study or this interview?

1. To get us started, tell me a bit about your school.

- What kind of school do you work at?
    - What grades does it serve?
    - Who runs it?
    - How many students are enrolled?
- What is the mission/philosophy of your school?

2. What is your role at the school?

- What was your pathway towards school leadership?
- What are your main responsibilities?

3. How would you describe yourself as a school leader?

- What are your leadership priorities?

4. What kinds of decisions predominate for you in your role at the school?

- Do you feel that your values play a role in your school leadership decision-making? If so, how?

5. Ethical dilemmas occur when we need to make difficult ethical choices, and the options seem equally good or equally bad. What types of situations arise at work that result in ethical dilemmas for you? Can you give me some general examples of these situations?
- What makes these a dilemma? Can you describe the ethical conflicts that come up in these situations?
- Are there certain types of ethical dilemmas that seem to come up a lot for you? If so, which ones?

6. Do you tend to talk to others while sorting through your decision-making to resolve ethical dilemmas?
- If so, with whom? What do you typically talk about with them?

7. Can you share a specific example of an ethical dilemma you experienced while in your role as school leader?
- What was the issue? Who did it involve?
- What choices did you have?
- What value conflicts did you experience that made this a dilemma for you?
- Did you have a process to help decide about how to resolve the dilemma?
- What values do you prioritize when faced with a dilemma?
- Are there any deal breakers in your decision-making process?

8. How did your school's governance type play a role in your decision-making?

9. Have you worked in a different type of school governance type than the one you are in currently?
- If so, do you feel you had a different decision-making approach or outcomes in general regarding ethical dilemmas because of the school governance context?

10. Do you have any other comments or things to add before we conclude?

Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me today. Your experiences will help the field of education to better understand ethical decision-making for school leaders. Once I have a chance to transcribe this interview, I would like to share it with you to review the content.

Appendix C

Leader Journal

This optional template is intended to assist you in recording some of your thoughts around ethical dilemmas you are facing in your schools. This template is for your use only, and the researcher will not ask to see what you record on these pages. You may opt to jot down short form notes, full sentences, drawings, or any other strategy that works best for you. Recording your thoughts in this journal may assist you in reflecting on the types of dilemmas you face on a day-to-day basis and may help to serve you when we meet again for our paired interview with another school leader. Please feel free to print off additional pages as needed.

Date:

Briefly describe the dilemma:

Why was this a dilemma for you?

How did you go about trying to make a decision regarding the dilemma?

What were the primary considerations for you that led to your decision?

Appendix D

Paired Interview Guide

Date/Time:

As you will recall, my name is Meg Garrard, and I will be facilitating this paired interview today. Thank you very much for your ongoing commitment to participate in my research.

Introduce each of the participants by name and school name.

Review the consent form and ask participants if there are any questions about the consent form.

I have asked you to here to share your thoughts and experiences of school leadership for a second time. As a reminder, I am completing case study research on ethical decision-making for school leaders working under different governance types. You are paired together because your workplace shares one of these governance types: public, private, or independent. The goal is to learn more about governance context and school leadership. The interview is expected to last about 60 minutes and will be recorded. Your participation is voluntary and there will be no compensation for it. Each person's comments are to be respected and free of judgement. The discussion is to remain confidential within this group. Neither you nor your school will be identified in the research.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. To get started, let us introduce ourselves. Please tell us a bit about who you are.
    a. Please share your role at your school.
    - What has been your pathway towards your current school leadership position?
    - Tell us a little bit about your current school context and the governance structure of your school.

2. How would you describe the strengths and weaknesses of this governance structure, from a school leader's perspective?

    Specifically related to decision-making…

3. What kinds of ethical dilemmas do you face in executing your role as school leader? Feel free to discuss the example you used in our previous interview if you wish.

   a. Would you say that certain categories of dilemmas are more common? If so, which ones?
   b. Do you think that the type of school you work in makes a difference in this regard? Why or why not?

4. Why do you think these dilemmas predominate in your school environment?

5. When resolving these dilemmas, what conflicts or barriers do you face in your decision-making?

   a. Do you tend to talk to others while sorting through your process? If so, who?
   b. Do you tend to consult any documents? If so, which ones?

6. Do you feel you have any guidance or expectations on how you make these decisions?

   a. Do you feel any pressure to lean in any direction in your decision-making to resolve ethical dilemmas?
   b. If so, how?

7. In what ways, if any, do you feel that your school type enables you to make ethical decisions in your workplace?

8. Are there any final comments you would like to add before we conclude?

I thank you once again for your participation in this research. Your comments and engagement today are extremely useful in helping to understand school governance context and ethical decision-making for school leaders.

Appendix E

Certificate of Ethics Approval

23/05/2023

Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-05-23-8900
Titre du projet / Project Title	Educational leadership and ethical decision-making: A comparative case study of public, private and independent K-12 schools in Ontario.
Type de projet / Project Type	Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral thesis
Statut du projet / Project Status	Approuvé / Approved
Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	23/05/2023
Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	22/05/2024

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher	Affiliation	Role
Meg GARRARD	Faculté d'éducation / Faculty of Education	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Isabelle BOURGEOIS	Faculté d'éducation / Faculty of Education	Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154 Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada
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www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie | www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics

Appendix F

Participant Consent Letter

Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

Meg Garrard
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa
Phone [redacted]
Email: [redacted]

Faculté d'éducation
Faculty of Education
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LETTER OF CONSENT: "DECISION-MAKING FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS"

Dear Sir/Madam:

You are invited to participate in a research study on the influences of school governance type on ethical decision-making for school leaders. The purpose of the research is to highlight any differences between public, private, and independent schools with respect to what considerations and processes leaders take in making their decisions. This research is conducted by Meg Garrard, Ph.D candidate, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.

You will be asked to participate in one or two interviews recorded online with audio and video using Zoom or Teams. Participants who engage in a second interview must note that it will be a paired interview with another leader from a different school of the same school type (public, private, independent). Participants may self-select and if both are equally interested in participating, then the leader in the more senior role will be selected. This participant will also be asked to keep a simple journal (that does not need to be shared at any time) to assist in preparation for the paired interview. Transcripts of all individual interviews will be shared with those participants for review.

Time Involvement: Your participation in each interview will take about 60 minutes.

Reimbursement: No payment is offered for participation in this study.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer personal information and discuss ethical dilemmas I have faced at my school, and this may cause me to feel emotional and/or uncertain. I have the option to refuse to answer questions or to withdraw from the study.

Benefits: My participation in this study will advance knowledge of leadership practices and decision-making in schools and help highlight any differences among these different school types.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only to understand educational leaders' decision-making and to enhance knowledge of this. I understand that my identity and that of my school will be protected, and that anonymity is guaranteed and will not be included in any publications.

** I am aware of the limits to confidentiality of participating in a paired activity. While the researchers will respect the confidentiality of participant data, I understand that they cannot guarantee that other members of the group will preserve the confidentiality of the information I will share.*

Conservation of Data: The data collected, including recordings, transcripts researcher notes, consent forms, will be kept in a secure manner through

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password protection on a personal device, or in a locked cabinet that can only be accessed by Meg Garrard. The information will be retained until December 2029, after which time it will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. I understand that I can withdraw the data from my individual interview. Any data already collected from paired interviews will be retained, as the data is highly dependent on the discussion.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor, Isabelle Bourgeois, full professor [redacted]. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone [redacted]

It is recommended that I save a copy of this consent form for my records.

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name: _____ Participant's signature: _____
Date: _____
Researcher's signature: _____
Date: _____