

# Creating Ethical Frameworks for Educational Decision-Making

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## ABSTRACT

Educational leaders are increasingly required to navigate complex ethical dilemmas shaped by institutional constraints, diverse stakeholder interests, and evolving societal expectations. This paper examines the development and application of ethical frameworks in educational decision-making. Drawing on a thematic analysis of graduate coursework, historical insights, and real-world case studies, the article underscores the inadequacy of relying solely on rule-based approaches. Instead, it advocates for a multidimensional framework incorporating ethics of justice, care, critique, and professionalism. By engaging with virtue ethics and the moral character of educators, this paper emphasizes the need for ethically grounded leadership. The paper also outlines practical strategies for developing institutional ethical frameworks and highlights the significance of stakeholder involvement and transparency. Ultimately, it proposes that ethical literacy is fundamental to sustaining integrity, trust, and accountability in educational governance.

**Keywords:** Educational leadership; ethical decision-making; virtue ethics; stakeholder engagement; justice and care ethics.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the need for educational leaders to consider ethical frameworks in decision-making. A thematic analysis of graduate courses geared for educational leaders highlighted the need for a concrete decision-making model, as conflicts and competing values were seen as overall themes in discussions. As such conflicts become apparent, superintendents may consider using ethical frameworks. The ethical frameworks are fundamental to consider in ethical decision-making when topics of concern arise. Each of the frameworks operates from its authoritative standpoint on potential questions of ethics. They are concerned with a somewhat different kind of question. However, the frameworks are not mutually exclusive. There will be times when decisions involve ethical considerations in more than one way and generate moral dilemmas, making it impossible for an educator to adopt any one framework. Nonetheless, they serve as starting points ranging from establishing an ethical framework from which to discuss a moral dilemma to tools to help sort through ambiguity as decision-making occurs [1, 2].

### The Importance of Ethics in Education

In a 'rule-based' ethical culture, individuals follow a set of established rules, guidelines, or regulations that dictate what is considered right or wrong. This type of ethical framework is highly relevant to education, which is a system composed of standardized rules that inherently determine accepted practices. Almost all relevant decisions – such as a student's entry into a program, the syllabus of a course, the location of a school, and more – are determined by a specific set of rules (which might pertain to assessment objectives, credentials, eligibility, etc.). This does not imply that all areas of education lack ethical dilemmas. Indeed, there is a wide range of ethical questions related to legitimation, autonomy, congestion of knowledge, market control of knowledge, representativeness, academic freedom, and more that are open to decision-makers above all (or below, if one considers students). Because of institutionalization, however, it is difficult for individual educators to navigate these questions. This is why it is argued that clarity is essential. A participant in any educational institution should clearly understand what part of this institution they are responsible for, and what its rules entail in terms of actions that can be taken. It is

assumed then that participants are capable of performing their side of the wider contractual relationship, whether consciously or as mere agents of the institutional fides. Roadmaps are hugely important here to aid a participant's exploration of 'the rules of the game' within each part of this system without the prior assumption of expertise. This is also true in other areas of social life besides education, like law. Thus, while rule-based ethics is a crucial component of education, it hardly encompasses its entirety. The second important ethical framework is virtue ethics. This ethical dimension has garnered a great deal of attention in education of late. There has been renewed interest in the character of educators, not only concerning rules or procedures but also about characteristics such as honesty, humility, and moral courage. Educational institutions have also, in some cases, instituted more stringent hiring processes to ensure that employees possess desirable virtues (and do not display undesirable ones). This emphasis should be encouraged. A strong general character must underlie any practice aspiring to be deemed a profession. There is a great deal to these ethical questions, and they are relevant to education [3, 4].

### **Historical Perspectives on Educational Ethics**

Educational ethics has a rich history, rooted in the early role of universities and colleges in teacher education. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* first addressed educational ethics, exploring virtue and the "good" person. Two millennia later, Kant's *Recht's Erziehung* discussed the civic course of education needed for rational citizens in an enlightened society. For 200 years, these ideas remained largely unexamined until Dewey and Wright revived them. In the U.S., from the early 1900s, the philosophy of education began to engage with moral worth and the consequences of social practices. This period also saw a rise in occupational ethics, yet education was often overlooked in this discourse. Educators frequently neglected professional ethics, addressing it sporadically, while concerns primarily came from psychologists and philosophers paid little attention to educational administrators' ethics. Amidst this, a significant body of literature on educational ethics developed throughout the twentieth century, alongside discussions on professional ethics and pedagogical moral dimensions. Starting in the 1950s, influential philosophical works laid the groundwork for educational ethics. "Decision-Making Elements in terms of a Law-Based Code" introduced criteria for analyzing ethical problems. This was followed by significant texts, like "The Meaning of Moral Education" and "Educating for Virtue," published in 1966 and 1971, which deeply explored the role of values in education, establishing a theoretical framework for educational ethics. By the late 1970s and into the early '90s, a critical literature emerged, highlighting sociopolitical orientations, with some works serving more as critiques of education rather than examinations of educational ethics itself [5, 6].

### **Key Ethical Theories and Their Application**

The importance of ethical decision-making in education impacts students, families, and the community. Superintendents, when faced with ethically conflicting situations, should consult peers or boards for discussion. Expanding stakeholder engagement can enhance transparency and avoid recurring issues across districts. Student input and inclusion in discussions are vital. Superintendents must approach high-stakes scenarios with transparency and community concern, even if it seems arrogant. Ethical theories provide insights for board requests or press releases. Four frameworks are identified: the ethic of justice, care, critique, and the profession, each with strengths and limitations. Consulting multiple theories helps identify blind spots. Analyzing situations through these frameworks reveals nuances. The ethic of justice focuses on rights, fairness, and due process, prompting key questions about morality and obligations. While fair practices are prioritized, the ethic of justice can be impersonal and may overlook the emotional aspects of ethical dilemmas [7, 8].

### **Stakeholders In Educational Decision-Making**

Decision-making is a complex social process: one in which people discuss and debate a problem, its importance and meaning, and potential solutions. Decision-making can be collaborative or individual. It can occur face-to-face or remotely. It can be immediate or planned for months in advance. It can be straightforward and deliberative or subtle and complex. Choices can be informed or arbitrary. Decision-making can lead to changes that are carefully considered and evidence-based or to changes that are little more than knee-jerk reactions. The effect of decisions is similar: some create little impact, and others fundamentally alter the course of people's lives. In education, decisions can determine what students learn and how they are taught, and, thus, how they are prepared for college, careers, and citizenship. In education, decision-making has received considerable attention. Researchers have examined types of decision-making. Studies have sought to understand who is involved in decisions. They have focused on the types of data used in decisions. Examinations have centered on the necessary conditions for effective

decisions. They have analyzed participants' perceptions of decisions. They have studied unique decision-making contexts. In sum, extensive work has been undertaken to better understand the nature, process, context, and impact of educational decision-making [9, 10].

### **Developing An Ethical Framework**

Developing a framework for ethics in educational decision-making regarding integrity and shared governance will include several components. First, a definition of ethics and an exploration of why ethics are important in higher education are offered. Next, suggested core values for ethical decision-making will be provided. Finally, implementation strategies will be suggested. Ethics can be defined as the standards, principles, or rules of conduct for individuals or groups. Ethics can be viewed as an internal concept of behavior, values, and principles that guide events or behavior, and either become or are codified for individuals or groups as laws, regulations, or policies [11]. Ethics are important to all organizations, institutions, and individuals, but are especially relevant in higher education institutions due to their role with the public. Ethical management of institutions, their employees, and their students will affect not only the institutions but also broader perceptions and respect for higher education generally. Ethics in decision-making is important because decisions have consequences that can have social, financial, emotional, and political effects on individuals and groups. Colleges and universities also have a public responsibility to educate the public, behave honorably, and repay the financial trust extended by taxpayers, donors, and sponsors. An ethical lapse in any public institution in any sector will adversely affect the public's perception of all in that sector. Ethics, core values, and standards of behavior for a profession and a governing body are the foundation for the integrity of institutions, public trust, and the expectation of responsible and ethical behavior. Those organizations or institutions with governance responsibilities must include ethics in the code of governance [12, 13].

### **Case Studies in Ethical Decision-Making**

A review of the research reveals the following definitions of ethics relevant to educational leadership: ethically, ethically assume responsibilities of being a role model in relationships and behaviors, evaluate actions to determine whether they are justifiable within the ethical code of a given faith or religion, ethics is what ought to be done, ethics is socially and culturally determined, ethics is established by those possessing a greater societal and cultural power. Educational ethics... suggest how beliefs ought to guide behavior. Ethics provides the theoretical foundation for moral investigation. Ethical theories produce principles that lead to the resolution of moral dilemmas. There were many recent efforts to define ethics and ethical behavior in the different business sectors [14].

### **Ethical Frameworks**

Ethical frameworks can be defined as organizational approaches for assessing and making decisions about what actions ought to be taken, given contested ethical situations or moral dilemmas. An ethical framework (or structures, models, or tools) provides a systematic process to respond to ethical issues and dilemmas. A dilemma is defined as a situation in which two or more values, principles, or rules conflict in such a way that obeying one could result in disobeying another. In management, when an ethical dilemma arises, organizational performance is at stake, and managers may pursue one of three approaches, applying thorough ethical filters to discriminate good decisions from bad ones. These approaches include constitutive, consequential, and pragmatic ethical approaches. Dilemma responses usually involve two types of responses, namely avoidance and resolution/management. Avoidance responses to dilemmas are typically non-action responses, including ignoring the conflict, declining to make a decision, delaying action, detachment, and resignation. On the contrary, resolution/management responses include acting on the most urgent dilemma, focusing on one stakeholder group, developing a protocol, and redundancy on governance [15].

### **Case Studies in Ethical Decision-Making**

There is great interest in the ethical practices of educational leaders, including supervisors, as calls for transparency in decision-making are on the rise in school improvement. Consistent with educational theories, superintendents in a goal-oriented, modernizing district in Massachusetts faced significant challenges in their ethical decision-making practices. From the theory and practice of two general ethical frameworks, situational and relational, the case analyses focus on what ethical reasoning accounts for in each scenario presented. The conceptual framing offers a contingency view of ethics: that the rationale, processes of consideration, and sensibility of ethical reasoning vary with context, triggering the invocation of different ethical frameworks. In addition, the situational, rational-actor view of ethical reasoning is necessary, though insufficient, for a complete account. Further developments of ethical

reasoning with respect to norms, routines, and communities extend the field of educational leadership studies [16].

### **Challenges In Implementing Ethical Frameworks**

In their review of the current state of research on ethical leadership in education, they noted that considerably less research had focused on the role of principals, superintendents, or education policymakers, despite evidence highlighting the importance of such leadership in student achievement. Thus, a review of ethical decision-making in the educational setting and related literature provides an important basis for continued research and allows for the examination of existing research through the lens of educational leadership. The philosophical and historical foundations of ethics, as well as models, standards, and legal codes focused on ethical decision-making in education, are reviewed; recommendations for further research are included. Initially identified as an important area of inquiry in higher education, ethical leadership has increasingly been recognized as a critical topic also in K-12 education. Recent studies have shown that educational leaders can successfully influence ethical behavior in their institutions. Yet research on ethical leadership in education has largely focused on K-12 educational systems outside of the United States. As research in the field of ethical leadership continues to grow, an update on the present understanding of ethical leadership in K-12 education in the US is needed. Relevant studies are reviewed, including research addressing ethical decision-making and ethical dilemmas in school leadership; research focused on ethical standards, ethical practices, or the role of trust in fostering ethical leadership; and case studies or analyses of pedagogical approaches to ethical leadership in education. It is concluded that while substantial progress has been made in understanding ethical leadership across different studies and approaches, much remains to be done, especially in the US. Literature on ethical decision-making across disciplines is reviewed to examine its suitability for addressing ethical decision-making in educational leadership. The literature indicates that education professionals confront many ethical dilemmas at all levels, and deliberation over dilemmas often occurs collaboratively among multiple decision-makers. However, little research has examined how educational leaders navigate ethical dilemmas or how organizations might nurture such a virtually collective practice. There is a need to refocus attention on ethical decision-making in educational settings and to examine prior work from the lens of educational leadership and scholarship [17, 18].

### **Assessing Ethical Decision-Making in Education**

An ethical decision aligns with a moral framework characterized by standards of right conduct. Ethical decision-making can stem from moral consideration or established procedures, including formal processes. Educators can distinguish between ethical and non-ethical choices based on conflicting teaching styles, curricular content, and classroom layouts. However, assessing ethical decision-making in education is challenging, as guidelines rarely exist in isolation, making it difficult to evaluate ethical dimensions in complex situations influenced by societal expectations. Different ethical frameworks manifest across varied disciplines, necessitating educational settings to navigate their unique ethical contexts. Traditionally, instructional decision-making has relied on rational choice theory, but earlier research overlooked emotional influences on decision-making. This research explored ethical dimensions in secondary science education's decision-making process, using established criteria from previous studies for ethical assessment and planning. Peer educators rated their ethicality, leading to a review of planning against this assessment. Ethics and education are intertwined, shaping and enhancing the human condition; no practice is ethically neutral, and educational systems are inherently ethical. Ethical decision-making in schools involves a complex interplay of context, experience, personal beliefs, and values. Therefore, a practical definition of ethical decision-making considers these complexities, emphasizing the reflection and response to moral issues within one's influence. This process aims to balance competing goods, ensuring the best is achieved for all involved systems. In education, multiple ethical goods must be considered: the moral good for students, teachers, families, and communities; the societal good of an educated populace; and the broader ethical good of societal improvement through informed citizens. The ethical complexity of educational environments and the multifaceted nature of decision-making underscore the importance of addressing ethical dimensions in education [19, 20].

### **Training Educators on Ethical Practices**

The realm of ethics in education systems has shifted dramatically in recent years due primarily to the rapid advancement of technology and the ubiquity of social media. The resulting inundation of new technologies shaped an unsettled society marked by unique questions, pressures, and choices due to reliance on such media. Gradually, these new dilemmas have made their way into the schoolhouse,

particularly as educators have taken sides in the technology debate on social media platforms. Mass information (or misinformation) presented via school systems has raised new questions about the veracity of public data, testing practices and procedures, and educational technological procedures currently being developed, available, and utilized. With an eye toward measurable metrics, across-the-board changes in pedagogical techniques chosen by non-educators have confronted traditional practices. Such safeguards of educational precursory theory have birthed new ethical quandaries for educators globally. In response, and in accordance with guidelines, many professional organizations in the United States and elsewhere have established a code of ethics and/or a mandatory ethical education course for their members. However, these codes are often vague, ambiguous, or drastically different in scope, foci, and breadth. Online course offerings are also often vague and are treated as tick-the-box style requirements. For many pre-service teachers, it indicates that when they receive their full teacher status, they have a questionably construed ethical foundation. Where this is the case, it is not unusual for professional organizations to have limited recourse when ethics is blatantly overstepped according to their code. The literature and discussions on this issue are limited, most developing cases of egregiously poor scholarship that ultimately discipline, where accountability seems warranted or not. Specific scenarios that render clear-cut decisions difficult or impossible have yet to be articulated in the literature. The focus of this work is to contribute to existing literature by elucidating cases of ethical indecision, particularly concerning conduct outside the classroom. Proposed solutions will widen the lens of agency in decisions about professional roles as educators to address the reality of delineating across lines as both citizens and educators [21, 22].

### **The Role of Technology in Ethical Decision-Making**

Understanding the role of technology in ethical decision-making is an important part of achieving responsible technology use in education. This paper aims to promote awareness of ethical issues raised by technology in education and other fields, and to explore methods for engaging students in critical reflection on such issues. It is important to stimulate ethical reflection by framing scenarios that raise ethical issues that can be reasonably argued about, and by instilling the idea that ethical reasoning, though not perfect, is superior to the alternatives. The chapter will show how educational technologies can engage students in ethical reflection, promoting understanding of questions focusing on what students ought to do. This chapter is neither a treatise on information ethics nor a technical description of educational technologies. The goal is to suggest scenarios and techniques for engaging students in critically examining the ethical use of technology. Four different but related settings for engaging students in ethical reflection using technology will be examined: education on the learning technology, as an instrumental medium, as content, and as demonstration. Ethical reflection is closely aligned with critical thinking and inquiry and rooted in philosophical traditions. Ethical reflection focuses on practical questions about what a person, corporation, or government ought to do, whereas critical thinking typically focuses on epistemological questions about what one should believe. In the context of education, collaboration can be encouraged among students of different levels of education and backgrounds to increase learning about the ethics of technology [23, 24].

### **Future Directions in Educational Ethics**

If the mission of education has historically been framed in terms of its goals and purposes or political/moral imperatives, it is now regularly framed in terms of sector-wide or whole-of-system/sector managerialism. How do these frameworks meet teachers' needs? Educational policy design is a complex amalgam of knowledge, evidence, and judgment, combining ontological, epistemological, ethical, and managerial dimensions. Frameworks need to be fit for purpose across several policy levels: applied contexts, aggregated data, higher-order instruments (generalizable concepts and measures for higher-order research), and ethical perspectives. The latter in particular needs greater depth, as demands for ethical, good, or best practices in educational policy, judging practitioners or policies as ethical or otherwise, are everywhere evident. The next area is the relationship between educational policy design and educational decision-making. Given the genealogy of education as a focus of policy-making for normative needs, legitimate needs should provide the basis for rationale. Language, legitimacy, trust, and truth can be seen as cornerstones of desirable democratic policy activity, with educational legitimacy generating converging effective accountability, collaborative professional work, and ethical occurrence (knowledgeable and practiced debate. Agencies of educational policy can hire and fire participants in the design process, but adherence to these cornerstones is required to influence educational change. Finally, the response to educational policy design is uncertain and built on rapidly changing relationships, thus

changing means and mechanisms for future action. A reflexive policy-coalescing perspective is required, shifting from singular institutional delivery decisions to distributed networks of dispositions and choices, marrying bureaucratic intrusiveness to professional respect, education to vocational imperatives, rationality to ethics, the specific to the generalised/advanced, input efficiency to impact effectiveness, and selective endorsement to broad commitment. This reflects wider accountability developments, as policy approaches rely more on proactive forms of taxation and social pressure, rather than merely procedural satisficing, and judges increasingly aim to capture early-stage processes and events [25, 26].

### CONCLUSION

Ethical decision-making in education is not merely a theoretical exercise but a pressing necessity with far-reaching consequences for students, institutions, and communities. As the education sector confronts increasingly complex challenges, a robust ethical framework becomes vital for guiding actions and judgments. This article has demonstrated that effective educational leadership must be underpinned by a synthesis of ethical theories—justice, care, critique, and professionalism—while also integrating core virtues and stakeholder perspectives. Historical precedents, practical case studies, and conceptual models collectively illustrate how ethical frameworks can bring clarity, consistency, and moral depth to decision-making. Educational institutions and leaders must commit to developing and enacting these frameworks to uphold their public responsibility, foster trust, and ensure that their decisions are both principled and responsive to the communities they serve.

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