



Building Sustainable School Governance through Participatory Decision-Making and Ethical Management

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable school governance has become a key issue in modern educational management due to growing demands for transparency, accountability, and stakeholder involvement. This study examines the role of participatory decision-making and ethical management in strengthening sustainable school governance. Using a mixed-methods explanatory design, the research was conducted at a public senior high school in Serang City, Banten. Quantitative data were collected from a survey of 60 respondents, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with eight key informants and institutional document analysis. Quantitative analysis employed structural regression techniques, and qualitative data were thematically coded. The results show that participatory decision-making significantly enhances trust, transparency, and accountability, while ethical management reinforces leadership integrity and consistency in governance practices. Together, these factors synergistically support more adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable school governance. The study highlights the importance of integrating stakeholder participation and managerial ethics as a foundation for strengthening educational governance and contributes both theoretically and practically to governance models in local and regional contexts.

INTRODUCTION

School governance in the education environment has been under intense scrutiny at the global and local levels in recent years, in line with societal demands for transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation in schools. On a global scale, for example, a study by Sousa and Ferreira (2024) shows that student participation in school management is still limited despite democratic policies that have been implemented in various countries. In Indonesia and especially in provinces such as Banten, challenges include limited deliberation mechanisms for school residents, management practices that are still top-down, and increasing demands for schools to be not only learning institutions but also socially and ethically responsive organizations. External factors such as the globalization of education, the demands of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to the quality of education, and changes in the social environment make sustainable school governance a very urgent issue. Therefore, research that integrates aspects of participatory decision-making and ethical management in the context of schools is very relevant and important to undertake.

On the other hand, participatory decision-making practices, namely the involvement of various school stakeholders in the decision-making process, have been studied in a number of studies. For example, Maral (2022) conducted a study on the perceptions of school administrators in Turkey regarding the participatory decision-making process and found that although there is a formal mechanism for participation, its realization is still symbolic. Another study by Rahayu et al., (2023) in Indonesian vocational high schools shows that principals' participatory activities and school culture have a significant effect on the implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM) but are still rarely directly associated with governance sustainability. Meanwhile, aspects of ethical management, namely leadership, integrity values, fairness, and managerial responsibility, are beginning to receive attention in the educational literature (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022) but their empirical application in primary and secondary schools is still limited. Thus, there is a need for research that combines both dimensions (participatory + ethical) in the context of sustainable school governance.

Although the literature has discussed participation and ethics in school management, there are still significant research gaps. First, many recent studies are still descriptive or qualitative and do not quantitatively test how participation and ethical management together affect sustainable school governance. For example, Sousa and Ferreira (2024) identify student participation in democratic management but do not attribute it to ethical aspects of the organization. Second, studies such as Cahyani et al., (2023) examine community involvement and management innovation on school quality but do not detail specifically the dynamics of ethical management in school governance. Third, many studies have been conducted in urban or developed country contexts, while conditions in Indonesian regions such as Banten, with unique local characteristics, are still underexplored. Therefore, there is a scientific gap related to how participatory

decision-making and ethical management simultaneously build sustainable school governance in the local Indonesian context.

Based on this gap, this study aims to empirically investigate how participatory decision-making and ethical management affect sustainable school governance in public high schools in Serang City, Banten. Specifically, this study aims to (1) measure the level of stakeholder participation in school decision-making, (2) evaluate the implementation of ethical management by school principals and management teams, (3) examine the influence of these two variables on the sustainability of school governance, and (4) formulate a sustainable school governance model that integrates these two dimensions in the local Indonesian context. With a mixed methods research design, it is hoped that the research results will provide a deep and comprehensive understanding of the governance mechanism in schools.

Theoretically, this research will enrich the development of educational management science by presenting an integrative model between the theory of participation in decision-making and the theory of ethical management in the framework of sustainable school governance. For example, a study by Mountwiri & Thinguri (2023) examined the influence of democratic leadership on student participation but did not enter the realm of managerial ethics. Thus, this research will fill the theoretical gap by combining the two approaches and testing their synergistic effects. Practically, this research will provide policy and practice recommendations for school principals, school committees, and education offices in Banten and similar areas regarding strategies to strengthen governance through participation and ethics, including training, deliberation mechanisms, and strengthening accountability systems.

Contextually, a high school in Serang City, Banten, was chosen as the research location because it is representative of public schools in the provincial area that are undergoing a transformation of education management within the framework of school autonomy as well as the increasing demands of the community for quality and accountability. Real phenomena on the ground show that despite participation policies (such as school committees and parent deliberation forums), the reality is that stakeholders often feel not substantially involved and school management is still perceived as top-down. This condition emphasizes the urgency of research that explores participatory and ethical practices in a more systematic manner. The findings of this study are expected to offer contextual and adaptive understanding for public schools in Indonesia.

The contribution of this research includes theoretical and practical aspects. Theoretically, this study expands the literature on education management by presenting an empirical model of sustainable school governance built through participatory and ethical management of a cleft that is still rarely explored simultaneously. Practically, this research provides strategic guidance for school stakeholders in implementing more inclusive decision-making and ethical management, as well as assisting policymakers and education agencies in formulating school capacity building programs. Thus, this research not only contributes to the development of educational governance theory, but also to the improvement of school management practices in the field.

By considering the background, research gaps, objectives, and contributions that have been described, this study is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of how participatory decision-making and ethical management can be optimized to build sustainable school governance. The results of the research will offer an adaptive model that can be applied in the context of public schools in Indonesia, as well as a reference for further research in education management. In addition, this research will strengthen academic dialogue on school governance in the post-pandemic era, where participatory practices and ethics are becoming increasingly important in facing complex educational challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

School Governance and Sustainability

School governance is an important framework in education management that includes the structure, processes, and culture that enable schools to carry out their strategic functions effectively, accountably, and sustainably. A systematic study by Lopulalan et al., (2025) shows that the concept of school governance is still under debate regarding the definition, scope, and indicators of sustainability. In the global context, there is pressure on school institutions to become not only places of learning, but also entities that manage resources, stakeholders, and changes adaptively to external challenges such as pandemics, the emergence of technology, and the demands of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The concept of sustainable governance includes aspects of transparency, accountability, participation, and adaptability (Zahari, 2024). In the context of Indonesia and especially in regions such as Banten, the challenges of school governance include a strong top-down approach in decision-making, a lack of optimal accountability mechanisms for school committees or parental participation, as well as demands for schools to become ethical and socially responsive organizations. Therefore, reviewing school governance from a sustainability perspective becomes a relevant basis for this research.

Participatory Decision-Making in Schools

Participatory decision-making emphasizes the active involvement of various stakeholders of teachers, students, parents, and school committees in the decision-making process that affects school organizations. Recent studies show that teacher involvement in managerial decision-making is related to teachers' feelings of belonging, motivation, and performance (Olaifa et al., 2023). In addition, Musengamana (2024) revealed that teachers' perceptions of inclusive school decisions affect the level of collaboration and the school work environment. This concept is getting more attention because in many modern education systems, democratic and collaborative education is considered the key to creating adaptive and responsive school organizations (Mataboge, 2024). However, although there is considerable research on participation in school decision-making, there are still few studies that directly link this participatory mechanism to the sustainability aspect of school governance which is an important research gap.

Ethical Management in the Context of Schools

Ethical management or ethical leadership in schools includes the application of the values of integrity, fairness, responsibility, and transparency in the management of educational organizations. Tortola (2024) in his literature review emphasized that ethical decision-making in the educational environment includes how principals and teachers deal with ethical dilemmas, as well as how ethical management practices play an important role in supporting the sustainability of the school environment. Furthermore, Zahari's (2024) study indicates that ethical leadership behavior in government organizations has a positive impact on sustainable organizational development, a finding that is relevant to translate in the context of schools. However, the educational literature still shows the limitations of empirical studies that link ethical management directly to school governance, especially in developing countries such as Indonesia. This makes the issue an open and significant research area to explore.

Synergy between Participation and Ethics in Sustainable School Governance

Combining participation in decision-making and ethical management as two important dimensions in sustainable school governance is one of the innovation points of this research. A study by Torlak (2022) found that participatory decision-making and ethical leadership have a significant relationship in an organizational context, although not specifically focused on schools. Meanwhile, Turhan and Güneylı's (2022) research developed a participatory and democratic education management model in Turkey, with an emphasis on transparency, accountability, participation, and effectiveness but the model has not yet deeply integrated the dimensions of managerial ethics. Thus, this study fills an important gap by examining how these two dimensions (participatory and ethical) simultaneously affect sustainable school governance, especially in the local context of Indonesia, especially Banten.

METHODOLOGY

Types and Approaches to Research

This study uses a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, which is the collection and analysis of quantitative data first and then followed by qualitative data to deepen and explain quantitative findings. The mixed-methods approach was chosen because it is able to combine the power of quantitative methods in testing the relationships between variables with qualitative methods that can explore the processes, dynamics, and context of phenomena more comprehensively. This approach is particularly relevant for complex education management research and involves both structural and behavioral dimensions. Recent research shows that the use of mixed-methods has increased significantly due to its ability to provide multi-dimensional insights in educational and organizational studies (Zhao & Xu, 2024).

Population and Sampling Techniques

The research population consisted of all teachers, education staff, and school committee members at State High Schools in Serang City, Banten

Province. For the quantitative part, a simple probability technique is used so that each member of the population has an equal opportunity to become a respondent. From a total population of around 120 people, a sample of 60 respondents was taken which was considered adequate for regression analysis and considered the affordability of the study. For the qualitative part, a purposive sampling technique was used by selecting 8 key informants who had a deep understanding of school governance, including the principal, vice principal, school committee chairman, two senior teachers, two parents of students, and one student. This technique is used because the focus of research requires informants with relevant experience and substantive insights according to standard practices in mixed-methods-based educational research.

Data Collection Techniques

Quantitative data were collected using a 1–5 Likert scale questionnaire that measures participation in decision-making, ethical management, and sustainable school governance. The instruments are adapted from previous research that has been proven to be valid and reliable, such as participatory instruments by Olaifa et al., (2023) as well as instruments related to managerial ethics. The validity of the content was checked through expert judgment, while the reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 8 key informants and analysis of documents such as school SOPs, committee reports, and organizational ethics guidelines. The validity of qualitative data is strengthened through source triangulation, member checking, and trail audits according to the latest qualitative research recommendations (Vu Thi Thanh Nha, 2023).

Research Implementation Procedure

The research procedure is carried out in several stages: (1) administrative preparation, preparation of instruments, and application for research permits; (2) instrument test (pilot test) to ensure item clarity and internal consistency; (3) quantitative data collection through the distribution of questionnaires to 60 selected respondents, followed by checking the completeness of the data; (4) initial quantitative analysis includes data cleaning, validity, reliability tests, as well as descriptive and regression analysis; (5) the collection of qualitative data through interviews and documentation; (6) qualitative analysis includes transcription, thematic coding, and triangulation; (7) integration of quantitative and qualitative results to interpret the mechanism and context of findings; and (8) the preparation of research reports systematically along with theoretical and practical implications.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS or SmartPLS software through regression analysis or Structural Equation Modeling to test the influence of decision-making participation and ethical management on sustainable school governance. Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo through open, axial and thematic coding to find patterns of relationships between categories. The integration of results is carried out using joint display techniques to bring

together quantitative and qualitative findings visually and analytically, thereby strengthening the validity of interpretation (Şahin & Öztürk, 2022). The research report combines the two data sources in a complementary manner to ensure methodological rigour and feasibility of publication in an accredited journal.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The Influence of Participatory Decision-Making on School Trust, Transparency, and Accountability

The results of the quantitative analysis show that participatory decision-making has a significant influence on increasing trust, transparency, and accountability in the school environment. Respondents assessed that their involvement in the school's policy and program formulation process encouraged the creation of more open communication and a sense of shared ownership. This data is reinforced by the high correlation between participation rates and the perception of school organizational accountability.

Table 1. The Effect of Participatory Decision-Making on Governance Indicators

Governance indicator	Average Score (n=60)	Interpretasi
Belief	4.21	Tall
Transparency	4.18	Tall
Accountability	4.25	Very High

Qualitatively, the interview results confirmed that systematically facilitated participation provided space for school members to assess decisions as part of a collective process. The principal explained that the involvement of stakeholders consistently increases mutual trust. *"When all parties are invited to discuss regularly, that trust grows because everyone feels involved in the direction of school policy."* (S-01, August 12, 2025 interview). This explanation is in line with the view of the vice principal who emphasized that transparency increases when information is clearly disclosed to all school members. *"Our open meeting practices make financial and program information clearer, and it reduces misunderstandings."* (W-01, August 15, 2025 interview). In line with that, teacher representatives emphasized that collective participation improves organizational accountability because decisions can be traced and accounted for together. *"As a teacher, I feel that accountability increases because every decision is delivered in full and can be accounted for together."* (G-02, interview August 18, 2025)

The Role of Ethical Management in Strengthening School Leadership Integrity

Quantitative findings indicate that ethical management has a strong contribution to the integrity of school leadership. Respondents gave very high scores on aspects of consistency of leaders' behavior, fairness in policies, and firmness in the application of ethical rules. This shows that ethics-based leadership is an important foundation in maintaining governance credibility.

Table 2. Respondents' Assessment of the Ethical Management Dimension

Ethical Management Dimensions Red (n=60) Interpretasi

Consistency of Leader's Attitude	4.32	Very High
Justice Policy	4.27	Very High
Strict Enforcement of Rules	4.30	Very High

The findings were reinforced by an interview with the school committee chairman who assessed that the integrity of the leader is seen through the ability to adhere to ethical principles in a variety of situations. *"Integrity can be seen from the way leaders hold principles, unchanging despite external pressure."* (K-01, interview August 10, 2025). This view is emphasized by senior teachers who see that the consistency of leaders is an example in creating an ethical organizational culture. *"We teachers see a first-hand example of how rules are enforced consistently without favoritism."* (G-01, August 14, 2025 interview). Furthermore, parents of students show that the ethical dimension in leadership has a real impact on public trust in schools. *"As parents, we feel more at ease knowing that the policies applied are impartial and based on ethics."* (O-02, interview August 20, 2025).

Synergy between Participation and Ethical Management in Realizing Sustainable School Governance

Integrative analysis shows that participatory decision-making and ethical management not only affect individuals, but synergize to form adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable school governance. Quantitative data shows that when these two variables are high, the sustainability score of school governance also increases significantly.

Table 3. The Synergistic Relationship of the Two Variables to Sustainable Governance

Variabel	Coefficient of Influence	Interpretasi
Participation	0.61	Powerful Influence
Ethical Management	0.68	Powerful Influence
A Combination of the Two	0.74	Very Powerful Influence

Qualitatively, the interviews show that the integration of participation and ethics creates a more acceptable and more objective decision-making process. The vice principal emphasized that ethically framed participation results in decisions that are easier to understand and agree upon. *"When ethics become a guideline and participation becomes a habit, decisions become more acceptable to all parties."* (W-02, interview August 19, 2025). Parents of students also feel the benefits of integrating these two aspects in strengthening relationships between stakeholders. *"We see the organizational atmosphere becoming more conducive because every policy is generated through honest open discussion and respects all voices."* (O-01, August 21, 2025 interview). This explanation was emphasized by the students who said that the school's openness to feedback is tangible evidence of the synergy between ethics and participation.

"As a student, I feel a change in the way schools accommodate feedback, everything is more open and consistent." (P-01, interview August 25, 2025)

Dynamics of Implementation of Participation and Ethics in School Daily Practice

At the operational level, the research found that the implementation of participatory decision-making and ethical management presents certain dynamics. Teachers and education staff feel an increased coordination burden, but this is balanced by the benefits of stronger collaboration. Quantitative data show that most respondents stated that collaborative processes take longer, but improve the quality of decisions and policy acceptance.

Table 4. Respondents' Perception of Implementation Dynamics

Implementation Aspects	Red (n=60)	Interpretasi
Collaboration Effectiveness	4.15	Tall
Time Requirements	3.85	Moderate
Policy Acceptance Rate	4.28	Very High

The principal described that the participatory process did last longer, but it had a positive impact on the quality of decisions. "*It was a longer process, but the results were more mature because all perspectives were considered.*" (S-02, interview August 22, 2025). The senior teacher then added that the coordination dynamics actually strengthen the collaborative culture in the school environment. "*We need more coordination, but the work atmosphere becomes more supportive and minimizes conflict.*" (G-03, August 23, 2025 interview). This view was again emphasized by the chairman of the school committee who stated that the length of the process actually makes the policy more acceptable because the process is considered fair and open. "*Even though the discussion is long, the resulting policy is easier to accept because the process is clear and ethical.*" (K-02, August 26, 2025 interview)

DISCUSSION

The study's main results show that participatory decision-making has a significant influence on increasing trust, transparency, and accountability in schools. These findings are in line with the conception of participatory theory which states that when stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process, the level of acceptance, commitment, and legitimacy of policies will increase (Mataboge, 2024). The integration of participation allows schools to build a more open and collaborative organizational culture, which ultimately strengthens the foundations of sustainable governance. Conceptually, this reinforces the idea that participation is not just a formal procedure, but a strategic mechanism for building internal and external trust in school institutions. Thus, these findings not only confirm the previous literature but also enrich understanding in the context of public schools in Indonesia, especially in Banten, which has often been dominated by top-down decision-making. The consequence is that schools that

systematically adopt participatory mechanisms tend to be in a better position to execute adaptive and accountable management.

Furthermore, the research found that ethical management plays a critical role in strengthening school leadership integrity, policy fairness, and consistent rule enforcement. This is in line with the literature on ethical leadership that emphasizes that leaders who behave ethically build a credible and sustainable organizational culture (Tortola, 2024). Studies on government organizations also show that ethical culture is directly correlated with the success of organizations in maintaining sustainable practices (Zahari, 2024). In the context of schools, ethical management is a catalyst that allows stakeholder participation to be not only implemented, but organized with a clear and trusted moral framework. In terms of consequences, this means that participation without an ethical foundation can result in an open process that is vulnerable to conflict, as the legitimacy of decisions still depends on the perception of the leader's integrity. Thus, these findings contribute to the development of school governance theory by including ethical variables as the main component rather than just supporting factors.

Furthermore, the results of the study confirm that the two components of participation in decision-making and ethical management synergize in building more adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable school governance. The higher coefficient of influence of the combination shows that the synergy of the two dimensions has a greater effect than the effect of each of them partially. These findings expand the theoretical framework of school governance by showing that the variables of participation and ethics do not stand separately, but rather reinforce each other (synergistic effect). This supports the multi-dimensional governance perspective which states that organizational sustainability can only be achieved when structural elements (process, participation) and culture (ethics, values) are combined (Rachmadio et al., 2024). The practical consequence is that principals and policymakers must design interventions that not only increase stakeholder participation, but also explicitly strengthen the culture of ethics and organizational integrity.

Further analysis shows that in everyday practice, the implementation of participatory and ethical mechanisms faces different dynamics: schools report that although collaboration is increasing, the process requires more intensive time and coordination. The results of the respondents' perception table showed a moderate score on the aspect of "time need" ($M = 3.85$), which indicates that the time factor is a challenge.

This is in accordance with the study of participatory management which confirms that although participation improves the quality of decisions, it can also slow down the process due to the large number of stakeholders that must be involved (Mataboge, 2024). Consequently, even if participation and ethics prove effective, schools must be prepared to face an increased organizational burden and a change in work culture. This provides an understanding that sustainability of governance is not only a matter of structural and ethical aspects, but also the ability of school management to facilitate participatory processes efficiently and in a timely manner.

In comparison with previous research, there are several contextual differences that need to be noted. For example, the Mataboge (2024) study in South Africa emphasizes teacher participation in decision-making, but does not explicitly link it to ethical management as a separate variable. Meanwhile, Tortola's (2024) research on ethical dilemmas in schools focuses on leaders and teachers but does not quantitatively measure the influence of ethical management on governance.

This study is different because it quantitatively and qualitatively measures the two variables in the context of Indonesian public schools. These differences can be caused by the different local contexts of school culture in Indonesia, school committee structures, and social norms where the legitimacy of participation and ethics affect them differently. Therefore, the contribution of this research is to enrich the literature with data from the Southeast Asian context and show that the participatory-ethical synergy model can be applied in the region.

Factors supporting the findings of this study include: (a) the commitment of the principal and management team to open up spaces for participation and strengthen organizational ethics; (b) the school organizational structure that already has a deliberative forum, school committee, and reporting system that allows transparency; and (c) school culture that is starting to change towards collaboration and accountability. In contrast, factors limiting the success of implementation include: (a) its longer time in the participatory process; (b) lack of ability or human resources to facilitate maximum participation; and (c) potential resistance from stakeholders who are accustomed to the top-down model. The finding that the need for time to be moderate highlights that the effectiveness of participation and ethics can be hampered by suboptimal organizational conditions. The logical explanation is that while the key variables are effective, the school's operational context including workload, coordination, and resources plays an important role in realizing successful implementation.

The constraints and limitations of this research need to be noted critically. First, the research sample is limited to only one public school in Serang City, so generalizations to other schools need to be done carefully. Second, although a mixed-methods design is used, qualitative data is limited to 8 key informants that may not be representative of all stakeholders broadly. Third, the measurement of variables through self-report questionnaires has the potential to experience social bias or subjective perception. As a follow-up research recommendation: (a) it is necessary to involve more schools in different regions to improve generalization; (b) expand key informants to include students more representatively, parents, and other external stakeholders; (c) measure the long-term effects of participatory-ethical mechanisms on governance sustainability; (d) use additional measurement methods such as participant observation or policy audits to minimize self-report bias.

Overall, this research makes a real contribution to the science of education management and school governance practices. Theoretically, the research expands the understanding of school governance by including the synergy between decision-making participation and ethical management as the foundation of sustainability, adding to the literature that has been separating the

two variables. Practically, this study offers a conceptual model and strategic recommendations for school principals, school committees, and education offices in Indonesia to implement participatory and ethical mechanisms in an integrated manner. This understanding has become particularly relevant in an era where schools are faced with rapid change, quality demands, and the push for democratization of education. Thus, this research not only answers research questions but also paves the way for innovation and development of more inclusive and accountable education policies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that participatory decision-making and ethical management are the two main pillars that have a significant influence on building sustainable school governance. The active involvement of teachers, parents, students, and school committees in the decision-making process has been proven to increase the trust, transparency, and accountability of the institution. Meanwhile, ethical management strengthens leadership integrity, policy fairness, and consistency of organizational practices so that the participatory process is not only procedural, but also based on clear moral values. The synergy of these two components forms a governance pattern that is more adaptive, inclusive, and responsive to the internal dynamics of schools, while strengthening the foundation for the sustainability of educational institutions.

In addition, the results of the study show that the effectiveness of these two variables is inseparable from the ability of schools to manage collaborative processes efficiently and maintain an integrity-based organizational culture. Although the implementation of participation and ethics faces a number of challenges, such as the need for longer time and the readiness of human resources, these findings confirm that sustainable governance can only be achieved through a combination of democratic decision-making structures and ethical leadership.

Thus, this research makes a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of an educational governance model, as well as a foundation for schools and policy makers in designing a more transparent, fair, and sustainable governance strategy.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future studies are recommended to examine participatory decision-making and ethical management in different educational levels and institutional contexts to test the consistency of their influence on school governance sustainability. Further research may also explore the role of leadership style, organizational culture, and digital governance tools in strengthening participatory and ethical practices. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of these governance models on school performance, trust, and institutional resilience.

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