STUDENT DECISION-MAKING IN THE CLASSROOM:
AN EXAMINATION OF EXISTING THEORIES AND A MODEL FOR
MAINSTREAM IMPLEMENTATION

by

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Abstract

Authors such as Bill Glasser, A. S. Neill, and John Holt have critiqued the compulsory nature of secondary schools and the inherent structure imposed on them by educational authorities. This structure limits student opportunities to make decisions regarding their own learning. This thesis examines the concept of student decision-making and its effect on student learning in educational environments. It argues for inclusion of more student-centred decision-making opportunities as part of a democratic education model. The thesis analyzes different educational theories and models that grant students, to varying extents, chances to make decisions about their own learning. The thesis presents an alternative to the current system: a model that questions imposed structures and places the student at the centre of the decision-making process, while asking educators to consider their roles as facilitators.

The thesis begins by summarizing the prescribed Ontario Ministry of Education requirements, followed by an examination of the concept of decision-making itself, beginning with philosophical justifications through analysis of the works of authors such as Gutmann, Levinson, and Brighouse. Next, the thesis examines certain theories of education in order to
give context for the proposed model. The existing theories selected range from liberal conceptions to critical pedagogy to “unschooling”; each theory is analyzed and discussed with respect to how student decision-making is supported.

The next two chapters focus specifically on existing educational models where student decision-making is recognized through specific methods and strategies. Models include Glasser’s Choice Theory, the Montessori School method, self-determination theory, the Sudbury Valley School, and Summerhill School—the latter two affording students numerous decision-making opportunities in explicit and widespread ways.

The thesis concludes with the proposed model, referred to as the Student Decision-Making Model, which could be implemented in Ontario high school classrooms, with considerations made regarding if and how changes to Ministry structure are needed. The model recognizes the student as the central character in the school decision-making process and is illustrated with an exemplar known as the Time Use Exemplar. The model’s combined focus on student choice and Ministry regulation allows it to reach the maximum number of students.
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There are several people without whom I would never have been able to complete this thesis. To my supervisor, Dr. John Portelli, I am very grateful for the wisdom and experience he has shared with me, not only for the thesis but throughout my entire doctoral program as my advisor. I thank him for his many useful notes on my drafts and for his Socratic style meetings where I was forced to consider the philosophical implications of my positions and to do so in a manner that would resonate with both teachers and academia.

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Frontispiece

I

Educating our children is not just about imposing a body of knowledge on them. Rather, it involves preparing children from the early years for the world in which they will come of age. It means instilling a love for lifelong learning, creativity, self-expression and an appreciation for diversity.

- Queen Rania of Jordan

II

...if I were asked to name the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education, I should say: ‘Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make it the full meaning of the present life’.

- John Dewey (1893)
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements................................................................................................................................. iv  
Frontispiece......................................................................................................................................... v  
List of Tables........................................................................................................................................ viii  
List of Figures...................................................................................................................................... ix  

CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................... 1  
1.1 Position of the Researcher.................................................................................................................. 6  
1.2 The Evolution of Decision-Making Opportunities in My Classroom ............................................. 7  
1.3 The Existing Educational Structure in Ontario.............................................................................. 11  
1.3.1 Governance and Administration.................................................................................................. 13  
1.3.2 Secondary School Course Requirements.................................................................................... 14  
1.3.3 General School and Evaluation Requirements.......................................................................... 16  
1.4 Thesis Outline.................................................................................................................................. 21  
1.5 Introduction to the Conceptual Framework.................................................................................... 24  

CHAPTER TWO: PATERNALISM AND STUDENT DECISION-MAKING............................................ 34  
2.1 Defining Terms................................................................................................................................. 35  
2.2 Paternalism, Education, and the Liberal Democratic Society......................................................... 40  
2.3 Conclusion....................................................................................................................................... 47  

CHAPTER THREE: DECISION-MAKING AND EDUCATIONAL THEORIES...................................... 49  
3.1 Guiding Framework............................................................................................................................ 49  
3.2 Contextualizing Decision-Making Within the Structure.................................................................. 51  
3.3 Eamonn Callan and a Liberal Interpretation..................................................................................... 53  
3.4 John Dewey and Experience............................................................................................................ 56  
3.4.1 Dewey’s Educational Theory........................................................................................................ 56  
3.4.2 Dewey Within the Decision-Making Theory Spectrum............................................................... 58  
3.5 Paulo Freire and Decision-Making in Critical Pedagogy.................................................................. 60  
3.6 R.S. Peters and Authority.................................................................................................................. 65  
3.7 The Unschooling Movement............................................................................................................ 67  
3.7.1 John Holt and Unschooling.......................................................................................................... 67  
3.7.2 Ivan Illich and Deschooling.......................................................................................................... 69  
3.7.3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Emile............................................................................................... 73  
3.8 Conclusion....................................................................................................................................... 74  

CHAPTER FOUR: DECISION-MAKING IN EXISTING EDUCATIONAL MODELS.......................... 75  
4.1 William Glasser and Choice Theory.................................................................................................. 75  
4.2 Decision-Making in Montessori Schools........................................................................................... 79  
4.3 The Self-Determination Theory....................................................................................................... 82  
4.4 The Dutch ‘Study House’.................................................................................................................. 88  
4.5 Growth Mindset and the Failure Myth............................................................................................. 89  
4.6 Conclusion....................................................................................................................................... 91  

CHAPTER FIVE: EXEMPLARS OF DECISION-MAKING IN PRACTICE........................................... 94  
5.1 A. S. Neill and the Summerhill School............................................................................................... 94  
5.1.1 Placing Neill Within the Decision-Making Theory Spectrum.................................................... 95  
5.1.2 Neill, Summerhill, and Structure.................................................................................................. 97
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3 Critiques of the Summerhill Model</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 The Sudbury Valley School</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1 The SVS and Lack of Prescribed Curriculum</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2 The Sudbury Valley School as a Democratic School</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3 The Sudbury Valley School: a Critical Analysis</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Canadian Exemplars of Student Decision-Making</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Conclusion</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX: THE STUDENT DECISION-MAKING MODEL</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Reconsidering the Accepted Culture of Decision-Making in Schools</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.1 The Four Components of a Model</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.2 Connecting the Components with SDMM Elements</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.3 Connecting the Autonomy Conception with the SDMM</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 An Exemplar of the Model: Student Time Use</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1 Introducing the TUE to the Students</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2 What Changes and What Stays the Same</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3 Keeping Track Using the Choice Log</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.4 Student Reflection and the “Choice Debrief”</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Potential Critiques and Future Areas of Inquiry of the Model and Exemplar</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1 Critiques of the SDMM</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2 Criticisms of the Time Use Exemplar</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3 Future Areas of Inquiry</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 Conclusion</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Components of a Model and Elements of SDMM</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Time Use Exemplar Student Choice Log</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Student Decision-Making as Part of the Educational Structure</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Decision-Making Theory Spectrum</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Time Use Exemplar “One-Pager”</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Student Reflection Journal</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The timeline of the Time Use Exemplar</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Education has always been a battleground as different groups of people, representing different interests, argue over what the purpose of education is. Is it to prepare students for the workforce or further schooling? Is it to develop people capable of thinking critically or act as a setting for the development of social skills? Perhaps it is a tool of those in power to dictate the longevity of their own hegemony. Or perhaps education is simply the way our society transfers existing knowledge from one generation to the next.

This thesis aims to explore the role a student plays, or perhaps should play, with respect to making his or her own decisions as part of his or her education. The thesis questions the extent to which education needs to rely on a paternalistic approach in order to best serve the student, by curtailing opportunities for student decision-making for the good of the student. It examines the concept of student decision-making in the literature as well as existing educational theories and models that support said decision-making. Based on the analysis of this literature, the thesis concludes with a new model that I developed and that supports a culture of student decision-making in Ontario’s secondary schools.

Regardless of what one believes the aims of education to be, it could be universally acknowledged that at some point, either along the educational path or at the end of it, the student is given less direct instruction. Somewhere along the way, each student is required to consider his or her own viewpoints, needs, values, and experiences before personally deciding on his or her next step. With this in mind, one could argue that an integral tenet of education is to prepare students for situations where their own decisions will play a major role in their own lives.

I posit that the educational system in place for the majority of students relies more on the decisions made by adults for the student. Shafer (2016) summarizes the day of a typical (in this case, female) student:
A teenager sitting in class follows a lesson formulated by her teacher and a curriculum written by distant policymakers. On the walls, posters she didn’t choose inform her of her school’s goals and values. Throughout the day, she eats, talks, and even dresses according to rules determined by her principal. Her day begins and ends at times the school board and superintendent established. (para. 1)

Further, the system requires the student to abide by those decisions and defines educational success in the same way. Current systems of education, especially at the high school level, capitalize on student desire to achieve good grades, receive positive feedback, and attend a good university (or get a good job) to maintain the status quo. As a result, students are more likely to follow direct instruction, without considering their own viewpoints, in a bid to achieve what is often considered success.

The current system arguably deprives students regular opportunities to develop the skills and abilities that go hand-in-hand with making their own choices. Additionally, there is an argument to be made for the negative effects on student well-being that can come from depriving students of decision-making opportunities. As Carney notes, “students build self-esteem and confidence when their voices are heard and they have opportunities to make decisions and deal with the natural and logical consequences of their decisions” (2015, p. 37).

Thus, the recognition and facilitation of student-driven choice opportunities is an important consideration. Schooling should be more educational; students learn not only prescribed facts, but more about themselves as decision-makers. Arguably, this is a necessary (but by no means sufficient) aspect of a democratic society that asks its citizens to exercise their decision-making skill through voting, for example.

Democracy in education is required to develop democratic citizenship. As Gutmann (1993) states: “We should therefore support a set of educational practices to which citizens,
acting collectively, have consciously agreed, provided that those practices also prepare future citizens for participating intelligently in the political processes that shape their society” (p. 3).

Does high school education in Ontario, as it currently exists with its explicit Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) regulations and implicit culture, maximize the opportunities for students to make decisions that affect their own learning and development, both inside and outside of the classroom?

Opportunities for student choice certainly exist in Ontario’s current system. As determined by the OME, there are opportunities when high school students select courses (see section 1.3.2). At the school level, teachers can afford students choices with respect to individual assignment topics, classroom time use, and the like. Still, as chapters three to five show, many educational theories and models exist elsewhere that are not reflective of the daily culture of high school education in Ontario. Thus, one must wonder whether an educational system that minimizes student choice opportunities (as I argue Ontario does) is depriving students of the chance to practice making decisions. The same way we would never ask a person to drive a car without practicing with an experienced driver, we ought not to expect students to arrive at decisions without giving them the opportunity to practice making decisions as part of their educational experience.

This thesis addresses the central problem that high school students are subjected to paternalism to an extent that impinges on their own best interests. In both daily practice as well as broad policy, decisions that could be made by students, or at least with more student input, are made by adults. The existing culture of education limits recognition of student autonomy,

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1 In Canada, education is the purview of provincial governments. The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) oversees all education-related matters in the province.
2 See section 1.3 for a summary of Ontario Ministry of Education requirements, which show how students are often deprived of decision-making opportunities.
denying students the opportunity to practice the life skill of decision-making and to tailor their educational experience to their own self-assessed needs and desires. Furthermore, the lack of student autonomy recognition arguably restricts each student’s capacity to grow and flourish as a person, rather than just as a learner or student. The Student Decision-Making Model (SDMM) in chapter six, informed by philosophical concepts and practical examples, contributes to the field of education by:

1. increasing the instances of student decision-making across the province;
2. increasing recognition of student autonomy in Ontario schools;
3. formalizing the elements of student decision-making in a flexible manner.

Note the use of the word “increasing” in the points above. This thesis does not claim that student decision-making is entirely absent in secondary schools in Ontario. Schools do have programs and policies in place, but they are not widespread. While many teachers and administrators may claim their classroom or school substantially integrates student decision-making, this is not always the case. As Alfie Kohn (1993) observed:

As one survey of American schools after another has confirmed, students are rarely invited to become active participants in their own education. Schooling is typically about doing things to children, not working with them. An array of punishments and rewards is used to enforce compliance with an agenda that students rarely have any opportunity to influence. (p. 10)

Kohn goes on to state that classroom rules for elementary students, rights and responsibility documents for those in high school, elements such as room decor and solutions to conflict, as well as determination of content and outcomes are rarely co-constructed with students. This is

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3 Examples of these schools are given at the end of chapter five, both in Canadian and international contexts.

Other authors have more recently challenged existing educational structures that continue to rely on decisions made solely by adults. Evans and Boucher (2015) stress the importance of the correlation between motivation and student choice in the classroom. They note that student motivation in school seems to be stronger in the younger years and diminishes as a student gets older; they connect this change with the decrease in decision-making opportunities afforded to students as they reach the senior grades.

Wendy Ostroff (2016) highlights the importance of encouraging the natural curiosity of students to optimize their educational experience. She argues that students should indulge this curiosity to explore concepts that are of interest to them, not necessarily those selected by an adult: “curiosity by nature is subversive to the traditional, top-down classroom. When order in the classroom is desired most of all, curiosity can become a liability” (p. 6).

I focus on a singular conception (decision-making), as opposed to a variety of elements that could be linked to autonomy, to keep the scope of the thesis manageable. I selected decision-making specifically because of arguments such as those above; additionally, decision-making is an observable action that can be implemented in schools, which is the basis for the Student Decision-Making Model in chapter six.

I begin this thesis via an examination of the role of the adult in the development of an educational system that puts not only the student but the student’s opportunities to make decisions at the forefront. Considering the roles of adults and students in decision-making is important because it gives context to decision-making, in general terms, as both an educational construct (i.e., decisions the state makes on educational policy or legislation) and a student outcome (i.e., students having more opportunities to make decisions while at school). It is
important to consider the paternalism that is evident when an adult (or group of adults) ultimately makes decisions about how students get to make decisions. Should it be the role of the adult to determine to what extent students make decisions at school? The idea of limiting students’ autonomy with their best interest in mind is discussed further in chapter two.

I then look at existing educational theories and models where incorporation of decision-making is supported. In the final chapter of this thesis, I draw from these theories and models to propose my own model: a cultural shift in schools today that puts more decisions, both individual and school wide, in the hands of the student.\(^4\) Proposing this model is done to address the aforementioned “lack of practice” issue, while at the same time considering what changes, if any, may be required with respect to curricular content, assessment practices, or social considerations that play a major role in formalized schooling today.

1.1 Position of the Researcher

I have been employed as a certified high school and middle school teacher for the past 15 years. From 2005–2008, I taught science and math at Southridge School and Meadowridge School, both independent, coeducational schools in British Columbia. In 2010, I joined the faculty of Branksome Hall in Toronto, an all-girls independent school where I have taught grades 7 to 11. Since 2015, I have held an administrative position of Assistant Head, Middle School, which has been combined with a reduced teaching load as a permanent position. While an independent school,\(^5\) Branksome Hall follows Ontario curricular policy prescribed by the OME in order to grant graduates the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).

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\(^4\) The model (chapter six) speaks to a new viewpoint both inside and outside the classroom but uses an in-class example about student time use to help illustrate what one potential change could look like when supported by a different culture.

\(^5\) The OME refers to all schools that are run independently of the government as “private schools.” Private schools may choose to undergo OME inspection to be given authority to grant Ontario Secondary School Diploma credits.
Branksome Hall is also an International Baccalaureate (IB) school, which means that in addition to adherence to the Ontario curriculum, the school is assessed by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) in order to ensure it adheres to the IBO’s standards. The IB is known to be an academically rigorous program and, as such, the students who attend Branksome tend to be academically driven students preparing for postsecondary university education.

Branksome Hall students display, for the most part, a desire to succeed, to improve, and to overcome the challenges they face in the classroom. Most students desire to attend nationally and internationally recognized universities, and put forth the effort required to meet that goal. As a result, I acknowledge my teaching experience may be biased toward working with highly motivated students.6

After several years of teaching, I observed that students were often more productive when working on tasks that they themselves wished to work on at that time, regardless of which class they were officially meant to be focused on at that specific moment. From these observations, I informally implemented a program during student-centred7 inquiry time in my classes that gave students more opportunities to make their own decisions; the evolution of this process over the years is outlined in the section below. It was my goal to create a classroom environment that both respected students’ priorities, and aided in them in preparing for their goals of post-secondary success.

1.2 The Evolution of Decision-Making Opportunities in My Classroom

The introduction of more student choice opportunities began when I was a math and science teacher at Southridge and Meadowridge Schools between 2005 and 2008. In those roles, 

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6 It should be made clear at this point that the ideas postulated by the author in this thesis were not developed from any type of empirical research with Branksome Hall students in the classroom.

7 In this thesis, the use of “student-centred” and “teacher-centred” refers to time periods in a lesson, defined by what is occurring. Student-centred time is when students are actively working on tasks, individually or in groups. Teacher-centred time is when the teacher is instructing and student attention is focused on the teacher.
I taught students from grades 8–11. As part of teaching best practice, I made a concerted effort to limit the amount of teacher-centred work time in each class. As a result, students had a relatively large portion of each class to work either independently or in small groups on a task I had assigned.

As someone who already believed in the benefit of allowing students opportunities to make their own learning-oriented decisions, I offered students options with respect to time use, as well as how they could demonstrate their knowledge. For example, I began to offer what I termed a “class-wide choice” option—when logistically feasible, I would give the entire class an option of deciding the order of lessons (for example, labs versus class content) or due dates. Students would vote, and the majority decision was often implemented. On projects, I regularly allowed students to decide for themselves how best to present the material. Since a rubric was given, students were aware of what level of understanding was required to show proficiency with the subject matter. As such, students were free to determine how this knowledge display would look. For the same assignment, the final product may have included PowerPoint presentations, posters, podcasts, essays, or websites.

Most often, I relied upon a method similar to the “class-wide choice” option described above, tailored to be student specific. At the end of the teacher-centred portion of the lesson, students were explicitly reminded of the different options they had with respect to what was required for that class. Those options may have been: reviewing the day’s notes and working on the assigned homework questions, working on a long-term project or lab that was in progress, or preparing for the next unit test. Each student would then self-select the option he or she felt was the best use of his or her time. I found that days where students had these options tended to be more productive for the students—they were on task, focused, and disruption was minimalized.
Late in the year I spent at Southridge, and in the early months I subsequently spent at Meadowridge, I began noticing that while many students were working on one of the given options, several students would put their science or math materials away and begin working on something for another class. When I would query students about this, they would often explain to me that they were comfortable with the material covered in class or, at the very least, were confident that they would be able to complete those assigned tasks at another time. Regularly, students would note that they had something they felt was more pressing—a task for another class (such as an English essay), a teacher’s email that needed a response, or preparation for a quiz for a class that afternoon.

It was at this point in my career that I began to realize that the arbitrarily defined “periods” may have been constricting students from doing their best work, as they always had their minds on all their subjects regardless of which physical class they may have been in at any given time. Near the end of my first year at Meadowridge, I began to adjust my practice to allow students to use the student-centred portion of a lesson to determine what they would like to work on, whether it be work for my class or not. At this moment in my career, the plan was new and as such relatively vague. At times, I discussed the benefits and drawbacks of certain decisions with individual students, but this was not required and occurred on an ad hoc basis. To ensure the general feasibility of this program, I did implement three restrictions to students:

1. the due dates for the work in my class would not change based on their choices;
2. they must be working on something for school;
3. students must work in the room with me.

As I observed students in this new iteration of my practice, I noticed that students continued to be on task and productive and that behavioural issues remained low. I also noted, anecdotally,
that students seemed less anxious and more relaxed when they knew they had the opportunity to work on a task from another class.

I had started my doctoral studies at OISE one year prior to commencing teaching at Branksome Hall in 2010. The courses I had taken in that program had given me a clearer idea of the need for more clearly defined parameters as well as a better method for students to record how they made their decisions and how they felt a decision may have helped or hindered their goal achievement. At Branksome Hall, I adjusted my implementation style again, retaining the element of choice (from my class or other classes) from my earlier experience, while also asking students to reflect on the choices they made. I provided students with a sheet whereby they could record any instance where they chose to work on a task from another class, as well as their reasons for making that choice.

Approximately once per month, I would ask the entire class to look back at this sheet and to reflect upon how their decisions aligned with what they hoped to achieve overall. Students often remarked to me that this process helped them get the most out of the choices they made by utilizing past experience to make more informed choices in the future. Many students commented to me that they began to think more carefully when choosing to work on items for another class. Several students noted they looked more closely at their priorities and exercised the option to work on tasks for another class only when they felt highly anxious about that work. One student specifically mentioned she was not happy with how she had performed on the most recent test for my class and said she believed spending too much time working on tasks for other classes had played a role. Going forward, she chose the “work for another class” option fewer times and felt that helped her get back on track in all subjects.

It was this model that served as my inspiration to explore an educational model that puts student decision-making at the forefront, as well as the exemplar (see chapter six) that focuses
on how students use their time in class. Any such model will have to contend with certain OME regulations and structures already in place. The next section explores the existing educational structure in Ontario.

1.3 The Existing Educational Structure in Ontario

In Canada, education falls under the jurisdiction of provincial governments. An OME-defined curriculum exposes students to several different areas of study, including science, mathematics, social sciences, visual and performing arts, and languages. This gives students more information and experience to select areas of study or employment opportunities that they feel would be best for them, as they have become familiar with a variety of topics. Teacher certification programs ensure students are being taught by professionals with proper training and interest in professional development. Common assessment practices and curriculum at the senior level ensure students who wish to attend postsecondary institutions are prepared to do so.

In this thesis, I will examine the support for student decision-making in public and independent/private schools, specifically those schools that undergo inspection and thus operate according to policies dictated by the OME. As such, the students in question are between Grade 9 and Grade 12 (aged approximately 14–18 years old).8 I chose this cohort because, as previously stated, the focus of this thesis is on the incorporation of opportunities for students to practice decision-making. This cohort is at the age and stage where they are potentially able to make their own decisions based on previous experience and are approaching high school graduation, the arguably arbitrary line where society deems individuals more capable to make decisions for themselves.

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8 For a more detailed description of why Grade 9 to Grade 12 students are the primary focus of this thesis, see section 3.2 (Contextualizing Decision-Making Within the Structure).
Focusing my thesis on Grade 9–12 OME-compliant schools in Ontario opens the door to some assumptions that should be accepted for this thesis:

1. schools (public or independent/private) that offer the OSSD implement OME-approved curricula;
2. students at these schools are not often included in discussions on curricular content, decisions on student discipline, or given leeway with respect to time-use during the school day;
3. administrators enforce cultural norms by explicitly requiring teachers to cover OME curriculum;
4. student decision-making is implicitly denied as they are required to learn OME-approved content in a prescriptive manner.

Furthermore, I operate under the assumption that logistically, were teachers able to incorporate more student decision-making opportunities into practice, they would be able to do so in a manner they deem best for their students. This assumes that they would have the time to plan, implement, and develop changes within their classes, despite the multitude of administrative tasks, initiatives, and performance reviews to which they are already subject (Ball, 2003). It further assumes they would regularly support their students’ decision-making and that they would find time to reflect upon the results of implementing such changes and determine ways to improve as needed.

The remainder of this section is dedicated to summarizing the educational structure as it exists today in Ontario’s secondary schools. It should be noted that while this is the current structure, this thesis asks the reader to consider that while many elements of the structure may remain intact, others may need to be updated or even discarded to bring about a new educational culture that fully supports students as decision-makers (see section 1.5).
In the province of Ontario, secondary schools follow a specific set of guidelines in order to gain accreditation and subsequently award graduating students the Ontario Secondary Schools Diploma (OSSD). Schools are either public (funded by the government and grant credits towards the OSSD) or private (funded internally). Private schools may choose to undergo OME inspection on a cyclical basis in order to grant credits towards the OSSD. In this chapter I focus on those schools which grant OSSD credits and the associated OME requirements. These fall under the areas of governance/administration, course requirements, and teaching/learning requirements.

1.3.1 Governance and Administration

The OME, under the leadership of the Minister, oversees policies and funding for school boards throughout the province. The OME also develops the provincial curriculum and graduation requirements. The 72 school boards in Ontario allocate funds received from the OME for the hiring of faculty and staff as well as school maintenance. The OME also develops local education policy and ensures schools follow legal requirements set out in the Education Act. The school board is also comprised of elected trustees, who represent the interests of students and parents.

Superintendents, also known as supervisory officers, are responsible for one or more publically funded schools within the school board’s purview. They report directly to their school board’s Director of Education. Among other responsibilities, they oversee board-wide programs, supervise principals and vice-principals, and make recommendations with respect to school organization.

Principals are leaders within the schools themselves. They, along with one or more vice-principals, monitor budgets, maintain student records and reporting, and oversee teaching and learning in the school. Principals and vice-principals ensure that their school is meeting all OME
requirements with respect to course offerings, curriculum, and the like. They mentor and supervise teachers, oversee student discipline matters and communicate regularly with the parent community (People for Education, 2016).

Private schools that undergo OME inspection to grant OSSD credits (often referred to as “independent schools”) are not overseen directly by the OME and receive no funding from them. As such, they are not part of a public school board, nor do they report to a superintendent. Many independent schools have their own board of governors, who hire the principal and guide strategy but do not take part in the day-to-day operation of the school.

The principal, with recommendations from vice-principals and other administrators, oversees hiring of all faculty and staff. Teachers in publically funded schools are required to have Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) certification. While teachers in private schools are not required to hold this same certification, I have observed (anecdotally) that most OSSD-granting private schools require their teachers to have OCT designation as part of their policy. Finally, principals in independent schools, like their public school counterparts, ensure that all teaching, learning, and course requirements are met by the school for the purposes of OME inspection.

Teachers in public and OME-inspected private schools are responsible for ensuring the OME curriculum is taught and that student progress is regularly evaluated. While best practices are always developed and shared as part of professional development, there is no firm policy or regulation for how secondary school teachers must plan their lessons in the classroom. While they are subject to curricular and assessment restrictions, they have more latitude when it comes to determining what the timeline of each class will look like.

1.3.2 Secondary School Course Requirements

In order for a student to graduate with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, he or she must have successfully completed a certain number of required and elective courses between
Grades 9 and 12. Those courses include **18 compulsory credits**: four English credits (one for each grade), three mathematics credits (one of which must be from Grade 11 or 12), and two credits in science. Additionally, they must complete single credits in Canadian history and Canadian geography as well as in the arts, physical education, and a combination credit of career studies and civics.

Furthermore, students are also required to select **three “group” credits**, one course from each of three given groups in which there are options, as well as **twelve optional credits**, where students select courses based on their own interests (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). The selection of optional courses could already be considered a recognition of student choice, as students are encouraged to select courses in which they find interest. This includes the three additional “group” credits, where (for example) a student who chooses business studies as a group 2 choice still has more choice when selecting which specific business course to take.

Even within the 18 compulsory credits, elements of choice still exist; many of the compulsory credits can be satisfied by selecting one course from a list (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). Listed below are examples of these choices, which do not fully cover all the options available to students:

- **Arts**: students select from dance, drama, media arts, integrated arts, music, or visual arts
- **English**: along with those courses titled “English,” students may also select amongst literacy skills, media studies, Canadian literature, writer’s craft, and others
- **Health and Physical Education**: students select from healthy active living, health for life, exercise science, and recreation and fitness leadership
- **Mathematics**: along with choice between applied and academic courses, students may also choose among mathematics for work and everyday life, calculus and vectors, advanced functions, and data management
- **Science:** along with general courses, students may also choose among biology, chemistry, physics, earth and space science, and environmental science

Finally, the OME has set graduation requirements that occur outside the classroom; students must complete 40 hours of community service as well as a provincial literacy requirement.

By looking at these course requirements, one could make the argument that the OME would be more accurate in calling them “course guidelines,” as the courses themselves are rarely required. Instead, groups of conceptual topics are required, and students are already expected to make decisions with respect to the specific selection and planning of which courses they will ultimately take. If we accept the assumption that to an extent their decision-making power is limited (not all schools offer all courses, for example), we can safely ask the question: “If students are given the opportunity to make decisions about the selection of courses in high school, how could this be extended more formally to the entire educational structure and culture?”

### 1.3.3 General School and Evaluation Requirements

The OME prescribes certain elements of the teaching and learning experience which are to be implemented by teachers under the supervision of school administrators. This holds true for any publically funded school as well as private schools that aim to grant OSSD credits. As noted above, the first is the requirement that teachers be members in good standing of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). Other requirements involve day-to-day operations as well as student assessment and evaluation requirements.

**Day-to-day operational requirements.** The requirements I summarize in this section are found in the *Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) document. Some policies

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9 It should be noted here that Ontario has French school boards as well as Roman Catholic school boards. They are not explicitly mentioned or discussed specifically in this thesis as they are subject to the same requirements as all other schools in the province.
address student safety and well-being. Schools are required to have a plan for any students with anaphylactic allergies or asthma. Principals are also required to ensure their faculty and staff are retrained annually in dealing with these health issues. There are also policies in place to combat bullying and ensure proper protocol to deal with concussions. Other guidelines are put in place to ensure the implementation of environmental, equity, financial literacy, and indigenous education.

The OME also mandates how schools must recognize and meet the diverse needs of learners. Instructions are given on how to work with English language learners, at-risk students, and those with special education needs (who require Individualized Education Plans). Principals are required to abide by specific record-keeping procedures, namely an Ontario Student Record (OSR) and Ontario Student Transcript (OST) for each student. Students are required to attend school from the age of 6 until age 18 (or when they graduate high school).

Each secondary school in Ontario is required to publish a school program and course calendar which lays out all pertinent information for parents regarding graduation requirements, reporting periods, the school’s expectations for students, the curriculum offered, and what resources are available to support students. Secondary students are required to successfully pass the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) in Grade 10.

With respect to the courses themselves, each course that is eligible as an OSSD credit must include a minimum of 110 hours of instruction, guided by the topics laid out for that course in the Ontario Curriculum document. What constitutes these hours is clearly noted by the OME:

For the purpose of granting a credit, scheduled time is defined as the time during which students participate in planned learning activities designed to lead to the achievement of the curriculum expectations of a course. Planned learning activities include interaction
between the teacher and the student and assigned individual or group work (other than homework) related to the achievement of the learning expectations in the course. Planned learning activities will be delivered through classroom or e-learning instruction and activities and/or through community placements related to work experience and cooperative education. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, pp. 70–71)

As such, part of the Ontario educational structure is that in each course, schools must schedule 110 hours of instructional time. These 110 hours are a school requirement, not necessarily a student one. Students are not required to work on each course for a minimum of 110 hours; they are simply required to be given the opportunity to do so.

**Evaluation and assessment requirements.** The requirements noted in this section can be found in the OME’s *Growing Success* (2010) document. In this document, the OME outlines two categories in which teachers are tasked with evaluating student progress. The first, which is not meant to be included as part of the student’s final grade, is their growth in six “learning skills and work habits.” These include responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative, and self-regulation. One of the criteria for self-regulation is that one “sets own individual goals and monitors progress towards achieving them” (p. 11). This could be viewed as a platform on which student decision-making can thrive in Ontario classrooms. Students who wish to set individual goals will need to select what their goals are and justify them.

The OME developed this list of learning skills and work habits from the work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD developed key competencies essential for success in an increasingly globalized and modernized world. One of the competencies is “acting autonomously,” which *Growing Success* presents as “the ability to act within the bigger picture” and “the ability to form and conduct life plans and personal
projects” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 13). This competency pairs with the decision-making element of the Ontario Skills Passport, discussed in section 1.5.

The second category is the specific assessment and evaluation of assigned projects, tests, assignments, and the like. Teachers assess in order to determine student progress with respect to their mastery of curriculum outcomes defined in the OME’s curriculum documents. Formative assessments may be diagnostic in nature, or occur in a less formal manner during class. They are designed to provide students with descriptive feedback that informs how well he or she is progressing (without the results from the assessment being used to determine a final grade) or to aid the teacher in determining if any teaching strategies should be adjusted in the short term. These assessments are known as assessments as learning (peer- and self-assessment, student learning reflections, or student goal setting), or assessments for learning (quizzes, exit slips, review games, etc.). A summative assessment measures learning at the end of a sequence, and typically the assessment is put towards the student’s final grad. This summative assessment is an assessment of learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

Growing Success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) requires teachers to evaluate these assessments through four categories: knowledge and understanding, thinking, communication, and application. A teacher may, for example, assign a mathematics project that will be graded for knowledge and understanding and communication. Upon assessing the project, the teacher will give a level in each category, from level 1 to level 4. The OME provides assessment criteria charts to assist teachers in determining levels.

By the end of the year, students should have had multiple opportunities to show achievement in each category, though the degree to which the four categories are evenly balanced depends on their relative importance for each course. These assessments are viewed as student products, and are to be combined with teacher observations and student–teacher
conversations to determine the student’s final grade. The OME prescribes weighting percentages for course work and a final assessment as well as a conversion chart for levels to percentages. The expectation for teachers is that “both mathematical calculations and professional judgement will inform the determination of percentage marks” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 40), and that teachers should look for the most consistent levels of achievement throughout the reporting period, with emphasis given to more recent assessments.

Growing Success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) also explains how schools structure report cards, what should be included, and the number of times per year they are to be sent out to parents. Along with student information and an attendance/punctuality report, the six learning skills and work habits categories are assessed, with teachers giving feedback for each using a four-item scale ranging from “excellent” to “needs improvement.” Then, a final percentage mark for the course, as well as a teacher comment, are given. These assessment and evaluation procedures are a key element of the educational structure in Ontario. They are prescribed by the OME to ensure students (and parents) have a clear and consistent way of viewing their progress during or at the end of a course.

The OME’s policy and program requirements (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016), as well as assessment and evaluation procedures (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) serve a purpose: to provide all students access to the same educational standards. A by-product of a state-regulated approach is the limitation of opportunities for students to make their own choices, as those decisions are often made by adults in the process of developing the structure. As noted above, choice does exist—as a student progresses through high school he or she begins to note more options related to which courses he or she will take. These choices, while important, occur at set times during the student’s high school career. There should also be a
place for decisions that present themselves on a regular basis, creating more chances for students to practice making decisions and reflect on the outcomes of their decisions.

The OME policies, as outlined above, do not explicitly present specific examples of how regular decision-making can occur as part of the learning experience (save for a general reference to it in the *Ontario Skills Passport*, discussed in section 1.5). The highly prescriptive curriculum means that individual schools, teachers, and students cannot make choices with respect to course content. Requirements for instructional hours lead to daily timetables where students travel from one subject to another after a set period of time— this does not allow students to decide how long they wish to work on a certain task.

Due to evaluation and assessment requirements, teachers often prescribe the method of knowledge display students must use to show conceptual understanding. Thus, an entire class may be forced to write a test at the end of the unit, denying individual students the opportunity to choose for themselves how best to present their knowledge. The OME’s administrative hierarchy often places the student as solely the recipient of operational decisions made by the school or school board. Decisions regarding student discipline, school strategy, personnel hiring, and facilities design are often made by adults, with little to no student input.

In this thesis, I aim to look at several different theories and models of education that make student decision-making a central feature of their practice, and do so by either working within or challenging the limits set out by respective educational authorities. In chapter six, I develop and present a model informed by these theories and models that address these inherent restrictions on decision-making for students.

### 1.4 Thesis Outline

This thesis is separated into seven chapters, starting with a broader philosophical context and looking at more specific educational theories and models as the thesis progresses. I begin
chapter two by first defining the terms that will be used in the thesis. I then review literature that considers the relationship between the inherent paternalistic nature of education and the potential implementation of a model that focuses on the student as the central decision-maker. This chapter focuses on why decision-making should be a more explicit part of education in a liberal democratic society. This question is discussed in relation to the work of Brighouse, Levinson, and Gutmann, as they are the major contemporary authors who have written on topics of democratic education, paternalism, and choice for students.

After identifying and briefly examining relevant philosophical considerations, chapter three continues the development of this thesis by looking at existing theories of education as they relate to student decision-making. Specifically, I look at theories that, to varying extents, provide support for the incorporation of more student decision-making opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom. These theories begin to give some context to the idea of incorporating student decision-making into an educational context, by analyzing proposed systems that would allow a student-centred decision-making model to flourish.

Educational theories, including those of John Dewey, Eamonn Callan, Paulo Freire, and others are examined with the aim to provide a foundation for how decision-making could potentially be implemented within a school context, by connecting the specific concept of decision-making with the field of education. These educational thinkers, and their theories, are chosen to lay the groundwork for an educational culture shift towards student decision-making, as seen in the conceptual framework visual seen in section 1.5.

Chapter four examines educational models, which differ from theories as they go beyond ideas on what should be and elucidate a set of strategies used to incorporate decision-making into schools and classrooms. This section discusses the outcomes and strengths of each model,
including Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory, Glasser’s Choice Theory,\(^{10}\) the Mindset work of Carol Dweck, Montessori Schools, and individual case studies. Use of these models allows for an analysis of what decision-making in the school environment has looked like.

Chapter five continues with this theme, but in a more specific capacity, by focussing on two of the more well-known and prevalent examples of student decision-making: The Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts and A. S. Neill’s Summerhill School in England. The chapter also looks at three Canadian schools (two of which are in Ontario) that implement student decision-making to a substantial degree, while still passing OME inspections. All five schools discussed in chapter five were chosen for two reasons. First, a large amount of scholarly writing exists for Summerhill and Sudbury Valley, and the three Canadian schools are the subjects of several journalistic articles. In both cases, the writing that exists documents their processes, from their mission statements, to their day-to-day procedures, even to the experience of their alumni. Second, all schools identify the focal point of school decision-making with the student as opposed to the adult.

As I mention in chapter five, Summerhill and Sudbury Valley are examples of schools that do not fit within the existing educational structure as prescribed by the OME. In many ways, they are exemplars not only for what would work but also for what to expect when the school’s structural status quo is questioned and reimagined. Both schools operate as student-centred educational institutions which serve to show that an educational model need not serve the needs of the adults or society first. A model of education can exist by considering the interests of the student first and building a program around those interests.

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\(^{10}\) Deci and Ryan, and Glasser, refer to their conceptions as theories. For the purposes of this thesis, I define them as models because they espouse a specific set of strategies rather than speak only to a theoretical conception.
In chapter six I develop the Student Decision-Making Model (SDMM)—an educational model for educators and administrators that creates an educational culture that puts students at the centre of the decision-making process at school. Using the philosophical, educational, and specific exemplars of decision-making already discussed in earlier chapters, it includes an exemplar of a set of strategies related to student time use which could be implemented in a high school classroom. Key considerations will be given to which in-school expectations and potential OME requirements change and which stay the same.

As this chapter serves as the model for the thesis, it is my hope that this chapter could be used as a guideline for implementation of a new student-centred decision-making paradigm within a school environment. The model serves as the platform for my conception of student decision-making as an educational focus, and is supported by an example of a set of strategies (based on how students choose to use their time) to assist educators in constructing possibilities of how student decision-making can be exercised in the classroom.

1.5 Introduction to the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this thesis focuses on the relationship between the student and a new decision-making model within which schooling in Ontario functions today. The OME prescribes curriculum, where in turn that curriculum is interpreted, modified, and in some cases subverted by educators to determine in what form it is ultimately shared with students. For example, Ball (2003) argues state regulation (which falls into the structure element of my conceptual framework) in the public sector of education is problematic. Teacher relationships are rearranged with a new focus on performativity, or the requirement to meet certain targets and evaluative goals. While this may develop teachers who “strive to excel,” it could also lead to creative atrophy and nongenuine attempts at policy appeasement.
This thesis explores the process by which a shift in the culture of schools, through organic means, by policy, or both, can be realized via the encouragement and proliferation of decision-making opportunities for students in the classroom. While the idea of educational structure may be seen as a constraint in this regard, I ask the reader to consider an educational model whereby student decision-making opportunities exist both within the prescriptive policy set forth by (in this case) the OME as well as outside of these prescribed elements. Thus, the model asks the reader to question whether all requirements set forth by the OME are in the best interests of the student and whether some of them may be adjusted or even deleted in order to facilitate such a model.

I focus on decision-making not only because of my experience as a teacher (see section 1.2), but also because it connects, in a concrete manner, with the structure. Specifically in this case, I refer to the Ontario Skills Passport (OSP), a list of goals for learners developed by the OME, which encourages learners to use the OSP to “assess, build, document and track their skills and transfer them to further education, training, the workplace and everyday life” (2017b, para. 1). Under the Essential Skills heading of the OSP, one of the skills listed is that of “decision making.” The OSP considers it an important skill for learners to develop, defining it as “the making of any type of decision, using appropriate information” (2017c, para. 4).

The idea of decision-making as a central part of the educational experience is not a new one. As I state in this thesis (mostly in chapters three to five), different educational theories and models speak to the importance of student-centred decision-making opportunities. What is different in this thesis is the aforementioned focus on a chosen skill, in this case decision-making, which is not necessarily a component of traditional conceptions of education. As part of their educational experience, students should be developing skills that will assist them in achieving success in future education or the workforce, among them an ability to make
decisions of their own accord. School, as an educational institution that offers support to students, could be considered an ideal location for students to practice and develop this skill.

As the conceptual framework in Figure 1 shows, the student interacts with the decision-making model by receiving more opportunities to make decisions and then actively making those decisions and learning from them. The model is placed in its own separate box, as the types of decisions the student can make are determined by educators and may or may not be initially compatible with OME requirements.

In the conceptual framework, the student receives support from teachers, parents, and administrators during the routine instances throughout his or her high school years where the student needs to make decisions. These decisions may occur at school, with teachers helping students consider the benefits and drawbacks to decisions related to how they use class time, different options for displaying knowledge, or which clubs or sports teams to join, as examples.

Administrators and guidance counsellors provide similar support, though their area of expertise may be more specific. Administrators can help students make decisions that relate to changes in school routines, provide needed information with respect to school operations, and support students whose decisions may have, or have already had, disciplinary or behavioural ramifications. Guidance counsellors can help guide students as they make decisions on their peer relationships, postsecondary planning, or personal well-being.

If the conceptual framework were to end there, one could make the argument that very little has actually changed from the status quo. Students have many opportunities each day to make decisions, both in direct relation to their education or otherwise. Where the conceptual framework goes beyond the existing educational structure is by reimagining the student’s role in interacting with said structure. In this thesis, I posit that the student be given more opportunities to make decisions each day and that some of those opportunities are “higher stakes” than those
Figure 1. Student decision-making as part of the educational structure.
he or she normally makes.

The implementation of more decision-making opportunities can be realized by changing the current school culture around decision-making. Instead of viewing decisions as individual choices a student can make, from pre-set options, governed by adults, we should view the student as the owner of these decisions, and that he or she will be faced with these decisions daily in all manner of educational areas. The student as decision-maker should become the primary focus, as opposed to the student only as *tabula rasa* learner, because a student who makes choices that dictate how, what, or when he or she will learn may be able to manipulate the structure to suit his or her learning, even when the structure cannot be completely broken.

The nature of the changed educational structure is outlined in more detail in chapter six, but it is informed by existing educational and philosophical theories and models discussed in earlier chapters. These theories include democratic education and other educational theories such as liberal, progressive, critical, or even unschooling, which are all described in chapter three. There are also existing models such as the self-determination theory, Montessori schools, or Glasser Quality Schools. In chapter five, I look more closely at two schools: the Summerhill School and the Sudbury Valley School, to complete the different existing theories and models that all recognize, to some extent, the likelihood that it is in the student’s best interest to give him or her more control over the decisions he or she makes as a student.

In any of the theories or models outlined in chapters three, four, and five, the end result could be categorized in one of two ways. Either the theory or model does not speak to how the existing structure would coexist with an increased student decision-making role, or it conflates the development of student decision-making with a major change to the structure itself, often placing itself in an alternative education construct. Where is the model that both acknowledges
and aims to facilitate the student as decision-maker but does so in a way that recognizes the role that the existing educational structure plays, as either an asset or an obstacle?

The schools discussed in chapter five—The Sudbury Valley School, Summerhill School, and the three Canadian examples—along with their respective frameworks and procedures help bridge the gap that leads to the model I outline in chapter six. This model, which exists in the area inside the box of the conceptual framework diagram, differs from a theory in that it provides more tangible options for the implementation of increased student decision-making in schools.

As noted in the conceptual framework, the SDMM is a model that focuses on the Venn diagram connecting structure with decision-making opportunities. In chapter six, I detail what I view the four main components of a model to be. These components, also found in the conceptual framework, are used to organize and classify different elements of the SDMM. The four components I have isolated from research into different existing models are:

1. Organizational Culture\(^{11}\) and Values
2. Roles of Stakeholders
3. Pedagogical Approaches, Curriculum, and Assessment
4. Structure

The fact that the term structure shows up twice in the model is not surprising. It is discussed in several existing models in reference to regulatory bodies that govern the model in question. In the SDMM, it is also a vital element in that student decision-making needs to either work within the existing OME structure or adjust that structure in the best interest of the student. So while the other three components are important to the development of any model, structure is also an element of the SDMM because my model needs to “contend” with it—one cannot effectively

\(^{11}\) For a definition of the term culture as used in this thesis, please see Defining Terms in chapter two.
implement increased student decision-making opportunities without considering what effect the structure will have on the model’s operational success.

To affect changes in the culture of student decision-making in schools, what changes do we make that upset the structure, and which ones do we make that leave it intact? The green (upper) circle represents the existing educational structure. Certain areas of this structure are not amenable to increased student decision-making opportunities; they are represented in the nonoverlapping area of the green circle. These include, as examples, the physical layout or location of the school itself or certain OME regulations that would require legislative action to alter.

The orange (lower) circle represents the increased decision-making opportunities that could be made available to students as part of the changing school culture. They may challenge the status quo, but could be areas in which students make more decisions for themselves. Examples in this area, seen in the nonoverlapping area of the orange circle, include the content covered in course curricula or adjusting the daily schedule at the school level to allow students more time to work on assignments in a manner of their own choosing.

The area of the box where the two circles overlap represents potential changes that can be made in schools today that both increase the number of student decision-making opportunities and coexist with the existing educational structure. One example could be the way in which students display their knowledge—is there a reason why a student should use a required method to present his or her knowledge in all cases? Is a test always necessary? Could a student make a podcast rather than a PowerPoint? Would connecting his or her curricular knowledge to a personal service learning project be more useful to the student than an essay? Should all students be evaluated using the same assessment tool for a single task? These
questions do not challenge what is being learned, but rather how the student shows what he or she has learned.

Another potential change that exists in the overlap of the Venn diagram is what I refer to as the Time Use Exemplar, and it is the example I give in chapter six to illustrate what one change to the educational structure might look like. In it, I lay out the strategies that a teacher could use to give students more concrete opportunities to decide how to use their time in class. It involves proper communication from the teacher as to the reasons and benefits of why a change was implemented, students making decisions about how they use their time, and reflecting on how those decisions aligned with their own goals and interests.

A question not yet asked in this thesis, but worthy of consideration, is: Who is responsible for making these changes? If changes made require OME or legislative approval, the change becomes part of a political conversation as well as an educational one, but would allow for more changes to occur in the green (upper) circle of the Venn diagram. Others may make the argument that any adjustments to student decision-making opportunities in school can be made at the school board or individual school level. In doing so, the changes allowed may be limited to the orange (lower) circle, but be easier to implement.

Whichever body develops the policy to aid the change (for example OME, school board, or individual school level), the incorporation of the student and his or her supports and a plan informed by theory are still required. Regardless of who dictates the policy, a change to school culture that puts student decision-making at the forefront would also be necessary. In this thesis, I do not endorse one pathway for who would drive the change toward a student-focused decision-making model. In chapter six, I discuss why I purposely leave this question unanswered—anyone, from the OME to an individual teacher, has the ability to implement the
changes called for in this thesis. The item worthy of consideration is what the benefits and limitations are for each potential change.

My thesis provides a thought-out model based on a close examination of various educational theories and models while considering the realities of the current institutional structure of education. This is where the significance of this thesis is most relevant. It is likely that elements of student decision-making are occurring in high schools across Ontario today. Yet, for students in OSSD-granting public or private schools, the structure laid out by the OME does not make opportunities for student decision-making explicit. Curriculum and OME documents do not lay out specific steps for what such an approach could look like. By omitting the importance of the student’s role as primary decision-maker, the OME gives tacit approval for an educational culture that requires students to act on decisions made for them.

Schools that do aim to develop cultures promoting student decision-making are often labelled alternative schools and in Ontario may not grant the OSSD. As such, the number of students who attend these schools is a small percentage of students in Ontario. The model proposed in chapter six is not predicated upon the belief that student decision-making is unheard of in Ontario. Instead, the model can be viewed as a call to action for all stakeholders: legislators, policy writers, administrators, educators, and parents to consciously see the student as capable of making decisions on a regular basis. This has not yet happened on a province-wide scale, and while the model leaves the door open for different methods of implementation, it is reasonable to argue that there is no overarching policy in Ontario regarding student as decision-maker. This thesis argues there should be, and proposes how that model would look.

The explicit introduction, and guided facilitation, of student decision-making opportunities could be a tool towards preparing students for the process and reflection that come with decision-making in noneducational environments. We get better at shooting a basketball, or
playing the piano, or a host of other things by virtue of the chances we have to practice. By extension, guided support or coaching from those considered experts in those areas speeds up development. It is plausible to believe that decision-making is no different.
CHAPTER TWO: PATERNALISM AND STUDENT DECISION-MAKING

In this chapter, I aim to introduce philosophical considerations for an educational system that encourages student decision-making. After defining some of the key terms that will be used throughout this thesis, I begin my discussion on the idea of student-as-decision-maker by considering the broadest of potential conflicts: Can a student be an authentic decision-maker at school if school is (to some extent) a paternalistic construct?

It should be noted that in this thesis, there is an *Inception*\(^2\)-type dream within a dream: I am not considering adults making decisions about use of technology, curricular content, or some other area of schooling. Instead, I am speaking about adults making decisions regarding the student’s opportunity to make decisions. As a result, it is important to analyze the possible conflict that may arise when adults drive a new model that affords more choice to students. Perhaps it is inappropriate for adults to decide on the implementation of greater decision-making opportunities for students. One could make the argument that by virtue of decision-making being the topic in the spotlight, the students themselves should be the ones determining how and in what ways they get to make decisions.

In this section, I examine and adapt an argument made by some philosophers of education, that as part of the liberal democratic tradition, educators must provide appropriate opportunities for high school students to develop as members of a democratic citizenry. Specifically, I look at the balance that could be found between the aforementioned paternalist approach and one whereby the student voice is given more prominence.

\(^2\) The motion picture *Inception* (Nolan & Thomas, 2010) explored a science fiction universe wherein individuals could infiltrate the dreams of others. Deeper still, one could travel to a dream within a dream. The recursion is analogous to one of the concepts of the thesis, namely adults making decisions with respect to students making decisions.
2.1 Defining Terms

Incorporating student decision-making into the classroom gives students the chance to learn about themselves by the choices they make. Doing so transcends specific content and teaching methods. While education still has elements of schooling in it (it is how we logistically make education work on a day-to-day basis), this thesis aims to look at the interaction between the decision-making opportunities themselves and the existing educational structure that may or may not need adjustment in order to accommodate such opportunities. Conversely, certain elements of educational structure may make some desired student decision-making opportunities unfeasible.

For the purposes of this thesis, I ask the reader to take the phrase decision-making at face value. It is not an educational theory or model in and of itself; it is the specific action whereby one selects an option amongst several possibilities. In this thesis, decision-making refers to the opportunities students are afforded to choose an action that directly relates to their own learning, in situ.

Consequently, one could argue that decision-making is a visible characteristic related to agency, the capacity to act within a specific environment (Schlosser, 2015). The student who is given several different options of how to use his or her time, for example, and consequently selects one method of time use, is the agent. He or she may then select an option intentionally, by considering the potential outcome of selecting each individual option and comparing those outcomes to his or her goals. Often, this definition is paired with “structure”—factors or environments that can influence or restrict the choices available to the agent. Examples of structures are religion, culture, socioeconomic status, and the like (Barker, 2003). For this thesis, I note the educational system that exists today—including the interrelationships between
governmental policy, administrators, teachers, parents, and students—as another example of an existing structure.

My definition of decision-making overlaps with liberty. Berlin (1969) argues that liberty can be separated into a person’s freedom to make choices that directly affect his or her own life and the removal of constraints and external coercion from the process of making decisions. The latter, which Berlin terms negative liberty, paves the way for agency—eliminating barriers surrounding decision-making places an individual in an environment where he or she is more able to act upon his or her will.

In several sections of this thesis, I refer to autonomy. I use this term in the spirit of Isaiah Berlin’s (1969) positive liberty, which refers to an individual’s freedom to make choices which will affect him or her in one way or another. The term autonomy is complex and often refers to a much broader connotation than decision-making. In a philosophical sense, autonomy includes elements of moral law, metaphysics, and the conception of internal and external motivating factors. One could argue that students are innately autonomous by virtue of being human. Others, such as Freire (1998) argue that autonomy is a trait to be developed over time.

For the purpose of this thesis, I use the term autonomy to be more in line with Eamonn Callan’s definition as “the regulation of the will” (1988, p. 26). For the purposes of this thesis, I define the concept of the will (a concept ubiquitous throughout philosophical texts) as a person’s ability to select one option from a set of choices (O’Connor, 2010). In regulating the will, the autonomous person is consciously opting for a specific course of action in a rational and independent manner as opposed to a choice made by impulse or unrealistic expectation. This is tied to Frankfurt’s (1971, 1988) views on the will and levels of cognition, which is explained in more detail in chapter three.

Another vantage point is R.F. Dearden’s (1975) personal autonomy:
A person is autonomous, then, to the degree that what he thinks and does in important areas of his life cannot be explained without reference to his own activity of mind . . . the explanation of why he thinks and acts as he does in these areas must include a reference to his own choices, deliberations, decisions, reflections, judgments, plannings or reasonings. (p. 63)

Conversely, Hand (2006) takes issue with Dearden’s (1975) terminology, arguing “on this definition one cannot but be autonomous, since explanations of what a person thinks and does necessarily make reference to her activity of mind” (p. 536). Hand states that what one does is necessarily a reflection of the choices he or she made internally and therefore is evidence of autonomous thinking. There is merit to this critique; a student who is told to do Task A may at that time choose to do Task B instead, and an observer may comment that the student is autonomous. Yet, if the student told to do Task A chooses to do Task A, the fact that he or she “complied” with the instruction does not necessarily mean the student is not autonomous.

In this thesis autonomy is used as an overarching ontological concept. It is not an element of a specific school-level strategy or policy, for it is not a specific skill but rather it is “embodied” in what a person is. Decision-making, by contrast, is the observable action students in schools complete each day, whereby one utilizes his or her own experiences and process to make a choice that aligns with his or her own interests, values, or desires. So while the terms autonomy and decision-making are not synonyms, they are interrelated; the tending of a field with the former creates fertile ground for the growth of the latter.

As a result, I ask the reader for some latitude regarding my use of the term autonomy in this thesis. I stipulate its place in philosophical literature as an ontological trait, though I
position it as an umbrella term\textsuperscript{13} that includes decision-making, the focal point of this thesis. I do not purport to redefine the term autonomy one way or the other. Rather, the purpose is to give context to the way it has been used by others in support of my contention that students should have more opportunities to make decisions in Ontario secondary schools. For example, later in this chapter autonomy is viewed as an element of liberal democratic educational philosophy, the antonym of paternalism, and a potential educational aim.

The current educational state in Ontario as described in the first chapter is what I refer to in this thesis as the \textit{structure}; it is the schema in which students, teachers, administrators, and the OME currently interact to create an educational system. It is important to note that the term “education,” with respect to the system and structure, is not arbitrarily selected. “Education” is favoured over the term “schooling,” as the latter speaks to specific methods of teaching prescribed content in a set environment. Education speaks to the student’s ability to not only learn content, but to learn about culture, values, and ethics, to think critically and inquire, and to become familiar with himself or herself as a learner.

The term \textit{culture} should be defined as well. At its most simple, culture is often described as “the way we do things around here.” Yet, the usage of the term in this thesis is more complex; Edgar Schein (1990) defines culture as follows:

\begin{quote}
Culture is what a group learns over a period of time as that group solves its problems of survival in an external environment and its problems of internal integration . . . the perceptions, language, and thought processes that a group comes to share will be the ultimate causal determinant of feelings, attitudes, espoused values, and overt behavior.
\end{quote}

(p. 111)

\textsuperscript{13} As an umbrella term, I also recognize that there are elements of education, other than decision making, which could be associated with autonomy, such as critical thinking or dissent. For the purposes of this thesis, and to build a platform for the SDMM in chapter six, I focus solely on decision-making.
Thus, an educational organization (such as a school or school board) may develop its culture over time as the members within the organization work together to solve problems and improve practice. The values, behaviours, and attitudes that become commonplace within the organization are a result of the experiences garnered through problem-solving and growth. I posit that current educational organizations in Ontario have cultures that tend to value adults making decisions for students and operate with that in mind.

This thesis proposes, as outlined in chapter one, a shift in educational culture towards the acknowledgment of the student’s decision-making capacity as the key element of his or her educational experience. Throughout this thesis, I will examine different educational theories or existing models which already recognize such a culture shift to some extent. Specifically, the schools analyzed in chapter five are excellent examples of this approach and form the basis for the Student Decision-Making Model outlined in chapter six. This culture shift would be an example of a broader educational philosophy known as democratic education, which accords the student voice, with respect to decisions about school life, the same weight as that of the adult or educator (Waghid, 2014).

The definition of democratic education often incorporates the idea of democracy as both a methodological element but also as a goal. Ideally, we educate utilizing democratic principles that give students equal voice (as noted by Waghid, 2014, above) but at the same time, the reason we do so is to prepare students to be members of a democratic society. As Gutmann notes:

The most defensible conception of democratic education is democratic in both its end and its means. The end of democratic education is to create democratic citizens, people who are willing and able to govern their own lives and share in governing their society. (1993, p. 1)
I accept that both elements of this definition are applicable to this thesis, but note that the procedural consideration—utilizing democratic (decision-making) principles as a factor for culture change—plays a much larger role in my consideration of what a new educational model would look like. As such, the model I develop at the end of this thesis is not meant to be a complete adoption of all democratic education principles. It takes from models and theories discussed in later chapters elements which are not only useful to the student as the one who makes decisions but are also either already aligned with the OME structure or could be with potential structural changes.

Major differences between mainstream Ontario schools and alternative democratic schools, particularly those whereby all members of the school community make decisions as a group with respect to the schools’ day-to-day functioning, are also considered in the development of my model. In this thesis, democratic education still relates to the importance of the student voice, with respect to both the student’s voice in making decisions for his or her own learning, as well as for the way the school works in general.

In the next section, I look at some of the tensions that exist when considering a model based on student decision-making in an inherently paternalistic field, such as education.

2.2 Paternalism, Education, and the Liberal Democratic Society

Prior to any discussion on the merits of increased decision-making capacity for students in schools, one must first consider what justifications exist for sending students to school in the first place. If the central argument in this thesis is the expansion of decision-making opportunities for students, then the argument could be made that mandatory school attendance deprives students of that choice for themselves outright. Indeed, there are educational theories that exist in this vein, such as unschooling, which are examined in more detail near the end of chapter three. The model espoused in this thesis does not intend to go to such lengths, so one
must consider what role paternalism, or the limitation on individual autonomy for the individual’s own good, plays.

Gutmann (1980) defines paternalism as the justification for interfering with the freedom of children while still considering their current or future interests. Paternalism is justified, she argues, since absolute freedom could lead to decisions made by children that could result in harm or limitations on their future freedom. She bases her justification of paternalism with respect to education on the work of John Rawls (1971), specifically his theory of justice as fairness. In his theory, Rawls introduces a concept known as the original position, a completely neutral point of view that could hypothetically be adopted by any member or members of a society who are making decisions for that society, including the principle of justice that best meets the needs of all citizens.

To ensure neutrality, the subjects who adopt the original position make choices while deprived of specific information about themselves or others. Rawls (1971) terms this the “veil of ignorance”; no knowledge of race, gender, socioeconomic status, personal interests, or conceptions of what is required to lead a good life. Those adopting the original position do know “certain fundamental interests they all have, plus general facts about psychology, economics, biology, and other social and natural sciences” (Freeman, 2014, para. 1). Rawls further posits that those operating under the veil of ignorance, if asked to select principles of justice that best serve the interests of the society, would rationally come to two conclusions—all members of society enjoy equal basic rights and liberties, and all have access to the same education and options for employment.

Using the original position concept, Gutmann (1980) states that paternalistic decisions are made with the child’s settled preferences or interests—as best we know them—in mind. If those settled preference or interests are deemed to be irrational, or are simply not known, we act for
the child as we would for ourselves, utilizing theory of primary goods such as housing, nutrition, health care, and of course education.

In Gutmann’s (1980) liberal vision of paternalism, any standards for paternalism must be rooted in the secular view of goods from a liberal democratic society. She uses the examples of Jehovah’s Witnesses who deny certain medical procedures for their children on religious grounds, as well as the *Yoder v. Wisconsin* Supreme Court decision in the United States that forbade the state from enrolling Amish children beyond a certain age. She argues against a system whereby the religious freedom of the parent is extended to the right to deny education to the child, as formal secondary education is vital to the development of informed citizens: “A child’s right to education is a necessary precondition for the development of capacities to choose a conception of the good life and to employ the political freedoms of democratic citizenship” (p. 350).

Gutmann (1987) further elaborates on the role of education as part of democratic society, noting a need for schools to explicitly teach democratic character by stressing the importance of, and opportunity for, critical thinking. Students who do not develop a capacity for critical thinking will have difficulty in, among other things, questioning authority. She argues that children bereft of critical thinking capacity cannot grow up to be part of a democratic citizenry.

As I note later in this chapter, and in the model itself in chapter six, such skill-building is related to student decision-making. A student who is required to make decisions on a more regular basis and to reflect upon those decisions using his or her own criteria is developing the capacity to think critically. Gutmann’s view of democratic education, while focused on preparing the student as a citizen, still lends credence to the importance of the decision-making skills that said citizen will need as an adult.
In Chapter 3 of *Democratic Education*, Gutmann (1987) argues for a deliberative approach to implementation: Parents, teachers, local school boards, and state/federal authorities should work together to ensure all students have access to democratic education (nondiscrimination) and that no one view of what constitutes the “good life” should be accepted over another (nonrepression). The model developed in this thesis is not affected, one way or another, with respect to these two elements. Gutmann argues that student involvement in the decisions regarding their own education could be a good counterbalance to teachers who, with more freedom, may attempt to limit students’ growing capacity to question.

While important, is this a key reason for involving students in decisions regarding their own schooling? My model utilizes the paternalistic justification to empower students with a larger role in the decision-making process. While at first this may seem contradictory, it is in the degree to which decision-making becomes a central educational feature that paternalism plays a role. The desired end result of my model is expanded opportunities for student decision-making, but a paternalistic lens limits the extent. Rather than students being allowed to make any choice at any time, the types of choices, and how and when they can occur, are still developed by adults and realized through the culture and structure of the school. I posit that student decision-making should be a central element of educational culture not only for its ability to temper the student–teacher relationship but more importantly for students to learn what criteria are important in making a decision and what effects the outcomes of their decisions may have on themselves and others.

Levinson (1999) similarly argues the importance of critical thinking capacity, noting that children will be most likely to develop capacity for autonomy and critical thinking in an environment that invites mutual respect and pluralism. In her words, the “ideal liberal school” is the optimal environment for the development of said capacity, as it is not bound by the emotions
and beliefs of the family unit, nor is it voluntary or lacking in cultural diversity as is the case with some out-of-school programs such as Scouts. She recaps this environment, stating:

The liberal school under this ideal, therefore, establishes a singular environment in which children’s capacity for autonomy is constantly reinforced and developed through classroom discussions, written work, projects and simulations, other pedagogical exercises, curriculum design, and even the structure of the school. (p. 63)

Where Levinson leaves a door open is whose voices are considered in developing a learning environment in this manner. Like Gutmann, she defends limited paternalism as a necessity for providing children with the primary good that is education and goes further by discussing what that education should look like. To this I add the query: “Why is the ideal liberal school constructed solely by adults?” The fact that formal schooling is currently a required element, and that schools should be tolerant and open to critical thought, are justified by paternalism. What that school might theoretically look like on a logistical level could be aided by the input of students for whom the structure is designed, though in the end that structure exists as the result of decisions made by adults regarding the decision-making opportunities of students.

Brighouse (2006) is skeptical that the purpose of education is to simply prepare students to be productive workers. He makes a case for an educational system that goes beyond content to morals and virtues as necessary to ensure students are prepared to be flourishing citizens with the capacity to benefit their own lives and the lives of others. In his writing, he notes that children have interests in their ability to make their own choices regarding which values to adopt.

To illustrate this point, Brighouse (2006) uses the example of the ethnic diversity of both students and faculty in schools. Similar to Levinson’s (1999) “ideal liberal school,” he argues exposing students to a variety of backgrounds and cultures, an experience they are unlikely to
have with their families at home, is necessary. By doing so, students learn about shared values and those that differ and use this information in their own decisions about personal values:

The ethos of that school will encourage genuine and serious engagement between the children, and between them and the adults, in an atmosphere that is emotionally stable and physically safe. The aim is not to promote *toleration* between different groups (though that, too, is important) but to enable children to learn more about alternative ways of living and new perspectives. These are resources for the children, which enable them to reflect critically on opinions and values received from their families and from the mainstream culture. (Brighouse, 2006, p. 22)

Brighouse (along with his colleagues) goes deeper into this topic by considering what elements are necessary in order to prepare students for growth into flourishing citizens (Brighouse, Ladd, Loeb, & Swift, 2016). They note that educational policy developed by adult decision makers requires its own set of value judgements that define what it means to be a flourishing citizen. For example, policies developed from a neoliberal context will likely prioritize student achievement measured through standardized testing over the more subjective skills required for the appreciation of music or art. This could be problematic for a model (such as the one I develop in this thesis) that relies upon decisions made by adults to shape the educational environment for students. If different schools or districts, overseen by different educational authorities, disagree on what it means to be a flourishing student, is it possible that some students may never have the opportunity to flourish? While an extreme example, one could argue that a school governed by an educational policy stressing the importance of accumulating wealth may be helping its students to flourish in one narrow definition, but to what end?
Brighouse et al. (2016) seek to remedy the ambiguity that comes from adults, imbued with their own values and beliefs, developing the policies that directly affect children. They propose a theory of educational goods—a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions children need to develop so they can be in a position to benefit not only themselves but others as well. They outline six capacities educators should focus on if they wish for their students to be in the aforementioned position of benefiting themselves as well as those around them. Two of these capacities—autonomy and democratic competence—are especially relevant for the justification of student decision-making as a key element of an effective educational system.

With respect to developing a capacity for autonomy, Brighouse et al. (2016) note the importance of ensuring students have the knowledge and strength to make decisions that align with their own values and interests. They state:

Children benefit from the ability to make and act on well-informed and well thought-out judgments about both how to live and what to do in their everyday lives. For human beings to flourish, they need to engage in activities and relationships that reflect their sense of ‘who they are and what matters to them.’ (pp. 8–9)

Like Gutmann, the authors note that development of capacity for autonomy should be part of education in the liberal democratic tradition but should be used in moderation.

The second capacity covered is that of democratic competence. Brighouse et al. (2016) argue that in order for a student to have this capacity, he or she needs to have a basic understanding of political history as well as an ability to bring reason and evidence for arguments and counterarguments. I connect these capacities of autonomy and democratic competence to my model that focuses on student decision-making; an effective educational structure can utilize decision-making as a tool for the development of the individual’s ability to
think critically. Ultimately, this is a key requirement for one to be an effective member of a democracy.

In this thesis, I use the arguments above that formal education is required to develop capacity for decision-making or autonomy in children. As such, an element of paternalism with respect to mandated formal schooling is not counterproductive, and extending this element of paternalism to within education (where some decisions are still made by adults on behalf of the child) is acceptable for the same reasons. That said, this thesis aims to extend the collective position taken by the authors cited in this section, by explicitly considering how the student could benefit from an expanded decision-making role in the daily operation of his or her educational experience. As I note later in this thesis, the model developed here does not seek to transfer all decision-making power to the student, as one may see in a libertarian philosophy such as the Summerhill School. In a liberal democratic society, a paternalistic approach works in tandem with the implementation of decision-making opportunities in the educational schema.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed some of the different terms that will be used in this thesis, as general concepts (agency, autonomy, and liberty), specific educational theory (democratic education), and the visible outcome to be implemented (decision-making), developed on the foundation of concept and theory. Decision-making, utilized in a more ubiquitous manner within educational structure, can change the culture of education and schools to place the student, as opposed to the educator, at the centre of decisions made. It is my belief that such change could occur through the lens of the Student Decision-Making Model, which asks educators to incorporate the aforementioned democratic education theories into the classroom in such a way as to develop students as individual decision-makers. In the next
chapter, I look at different educational theories that serve to promote decision-making as part of their inherent philosophy.
CHAPTER THREE: DECISION-MAKING AND EDUCATIONAL THEORIES

3.1 Guiding Framework

The concepts outlined in this chapter are grounded in a guiding framework. It is a visual display of educational theories found in the literature\(^\text{14}\) which support the inclusion of student decision-making within them, to varying degrees (Figure 2). The purpose of the visual and its subsequent discussion is to identify and analyze different positions taken by selected educational theorists vis-à-vis decision-making. While decision-making exists as a visible tool for the theory of democratic education, it also exists as part of the theories posited by Dewey, Callan, and others. I will explore the possible connections between decision-making as a specific notion and its application in democratic schools, considering specifically the Sudbury Valley School\(^\text{15}\) and the libertarian approach employed at A. S. Neill’s Summerhill School.

It should be made clear that the reason for presenting this set of normative theories is not to highlight one or more of them as a crucial platform on which the concept of student decision-making, or my use of it, rests. Instead, it is a tool used to outline different conceptions of decision-making in education that support the implementation of initiatives that give students more opportunities to make decisions. I ask the reader to note that looking from left to right across the spectrum, decision-making on the part of the student is (generally) viewed less as an integrated piece in an existing educational schema and more as a personal or moral absolute that exists in such a way as to question traditional educational structure.

Liberal and progressive notions of education use student decision-making as an

\(^\text{14}\) Please note the authors mentioned in Figure 2 are only examples of each theory, and are not the sole voices of those theories.

Figure 2. The decision-making theory spectrum.
ingredient within a schema that still focuses on structural elements such as curriculum, OME requirements, scheduling, testing, and the like. As one moves toward the unschooling end, student decision-making becomes a greater focal point; the student’s choices and desires are given more weight while external structural factors become less central.

In this chapter, I will work through each of these theories, explaining the basics behind each and how decision-making is used via selected authors within each. It should be noted that certain assumptions are made in doing so; the authors selected for each theory do not comprise the entire list of supporters of a given theory. The argument could be made that for different reasons, certain authors may fall into different theories than those I have chosen. I ask the reader to note that these examples are given as a means to understand a greater concept, that being the idea of a continual change of the student’s role as decision-maker within an educational setting.

3.2 Contextualizing Decision-Making Within the Structure

It is important to keep in mind the varying levels of what I term “structure,” or the existing cultural, legal, and educational norms within a learning environment. These norms include such considerations as what learning content is prescribed, what teaching methods are used, how students interact with teachers and facilitators each day, the degree to which the state directs the educational experience, and the cultural understandings and myths that affect student learning.

I have chosen to limit my discussions on structure to those that clearly exist within the world of a Grade 9 to 12 student in Ontario for reasons beyond my professional familiarity with this cohort. Specifying this subset of students can act as a focal point for any decisions or proposals that will be laid out to integrate student decision-making within the structure. It is only by specifying for whom we wish to make decision-making a more prevalent educational
One feature that we can defend why doing so would be in their best interest. In this vein, structure as an educational construct is based on three major aspects:

1. The degree to which the OME controls what occurs in the school or classroom;
2. How closely schools and classrooms align with the commonly accepted paradigm (students divided into grades based on age, classes separated by subject and time-limited, one teacher working with a room full of students, etc.);
3. The formality and distance required within the student-teacher relationship.

One could postulate that these three aspects of structure look different when viewed through the varying lenses of individual educational theories.

For example, a liberal educational environment places great importance on OME requirements and aligns closely with the accepted paradigm (some schools, such as the Sudbury Valley School may differ in some respects). At the other end of the spectrum, a student in a homeschooled environment may not have any notion of what the OME requires him or her to learn, and the lack of a building, timetable, and consistent peer group puts that educational method at odds with what we often see.

An educational environment could exist outside of the given list of educational theories. Imagine a school that chooses to teach only OME-sanctioned topics and does so in a highly regimented and scheduled manner that relies heavily on lectures and tests or essays. At first glance, such a school may fall even to the left of the liberal exemplars, but the apparent lack of any student decision-making opportunity makes it beyond the scope of this thesis. It is the relationship between integration of decision-making, and adherence to structure that gives an educational setting its place amongst the theories.
3.3 Eamonn Callan and a Liberal Interpretation

In this section (as well as later sections that explore the work of Paulo Freire and R. S. Peters), the theory of decision-making is looked at through the lens of autonomy, as defined in chapter two. I have chosen to do this because in some contexts, as with those noted here, autonomy can be seen as a larger concept within which the specific actions of decision-making could be located. Eamonn Callan (1988) describes autonomy as one’s own ability to control his or her own will. As defined in chapter two, in this thesis the will is the ability to make a decision when faced with several options, and regulating or controlling it is connected to one’s ability to choose in a rational fashion as opposed to an impulsive one.

How do we know if a decision is made rationally? I submit that a rational decision is only made after deliberate consideration as opposed to the result of an impulsive desire. This consideration includes an element of reflection on past choices made and their subsequent outcomes, and is addressed in the SDMM in chapter six. How do we know if a student is making a decision that serves his or her best interests? For this we can consider whether the student is acting freely.

Frankfurt (1971) defined free action by first considering the subject’s desires. He noted that a person would have a first order desire if he or she wished to do something (for example, “I want to exercise every day”). Whether or not this desire translates into that action itself is what will define it as effective or noneffective. Frankfurt adds another layer; he also posits that one’s desire to want to perform an action is a desire itself. In other words, “I want to exercise every day” is a first order desire, while “I want to want to exercise every day” is a second order desire. If the subject’s second order desire is for his or her first order desire to be an effective one, then the subject possesses second order volition, as well as second order desire.
The student who acts on a second order desire is acting on a desire with which he or she identifies. This student is making a decision that reflects the actual self. In this case, the student making the decision is doing so rationally and not impulsively, and we can safely assume the decision made is in his or her own best interest. For example, a student may want to work on a task for subject B while in class for subject A. If he or she wants to want to work on the other task and thus does so, he or she is acting freely—the decision made is the one that reflects who he or she really is and thus is in his or her best interest. In fact, making that decision is truly reflexive: “It is apparent that making a decision is something that we do to ourselves. In this respect it differs fundamentally from making a choice, the immediate object of which is not the chooser but whatever it is that he chooses” (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 172). In this thesis, I consider how the concept of autonomy can shape the opportunities for students to make decisions, beginning with Callan.

In *Autonomy and Schooling*, Callan (1988) argues for the importance of autonomy in the development of moral character. He posits that if one is to be virtuous, one must have the autonomy and respect of self to display such virtue. His conception justifies autonomy as a holistic necessity but also discusses its existence in the nurturing of student interests as well as their role in the governance of schools. He views autonomy as an important part of the educational experience and moves the student closer to the centre of the educational environment, stressing the importance of nurturing student interests. Portelli (1989) aptly notes that Callan’s stance aligns him with Dewey; they both question the logic behind teacher- (or more accurately, adult-) selected subject matter as curriculum.

I place Callan’s (1988) view of autonomy (and from it, decision-making) on the “left end” of the decision-making spectrum. He should not be viewed as the ultimate extreme of the spectrum, only the furthest “left” of the theorists surveyed in this chapter. Callan does not view
student decision-making as unimportant, nor does he argue for the maintenance of status quo educational structures. For example, his critique of teacher-selected subject matter puts him at odds slightly with considerations of OME-imposed structure, as mandated curriculum is currently standard practice for mainstream education in Ontario.

Callan does not speak explicitly about other changes in structure, but in chapter 4 he rejects the prevailing deschooling (or unschooling) argument and defends mandatory schooling. Then in chapter 5, he again affirms the need for students to be involved in curriculum development and potentially in school governance. When compared to other theorists mentioned below, Callan’s stance on autonomy as an a priori attribute—combined with his acceptance or rejection of existing educational structures—places his theories on the end of the model that integrates autonomy most closely with the educational paradigm that exists today. This is best summed up in his position that as adults in charge of developing the educational experience for students, we should “favour authority structures which give students maximum scope for the exercise of autonomy” (Callan, 1988, p. 149).

Nickel (2007) also discusses Callan’s vision of autonomy which is based on the interests of each student, specifically what topics or ideas have meaning for that student and/or give him or her a sense of personal identity. The student’s ability to make a choice based on his or her personal interests should be not be mistakenly defined as being in the best interest of the student, which, while valid, goes beyond the scope of Callan’s autonomy definition. Nickel labels this autonomy viewpoint as interest autonomy (IA). In this viewpoint, choices are not considered free if the actor was not aware of all possible options as well as consequences.16 This

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16 It should be noted that consequence is not a synonym for punishment. In this thesis, the term consequence is used to note the possible outcome or result of an action, which may be positive, negative, or neutral.
connection between action and consequence is similar to that found in Dewey (1938) and is discussed further in the next section.

3.4 John Dewey and Experience

John Dewey’s views on educational practice place him as a pragmatist in the philosophical landscape. His most salient point often surrounds a preference for teaching students as opposed to training them (1916), a partially Rousseauian philosophy that stresses the importance of exposing students to experiences that will aid in their education.

3.4.1 Dewey’s Educational Theory

Dewey argued for progressive child-centred education whereby all experiences impacted directly on the child so that he or she, with adult facilitation, would learn and grow as a result (Dewey, 1916, 1938). As Dewey states in *My Pedagogic Creed*:

> The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences. (1897, article 2)

Dewey’s pragmatist schema outlines the ways a person eventually acts upon a stimulus or impulse. The person consciously considers possible solutions, including actions he or she may take and the consequences that may result. These considerations are drawn from the subject’s past experiences and thus play a key role in each person’s ability to make decisions.

John Dewey’s experience-inspired child-centred educational model appears in his general educational manifesto (1897) and *Democracy and Education* (1916) where he indicated the difference between teaching and training, forwarding arguments for progressive education where students are engaged in select experiences that will live on and be remembered in future
experiences (1938). While Dewey’s model of education rejects central authority, it still requires an authoritative figure to complement the child: “Basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others” (Dewey, 1938, p. 8).

Themes such as those discussed above are also seen in *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), where Dewey illustrates the point using a hypothetical science teacher who is not concerned with adding new facts to the science he teaches . . . what concerns him, as teacher, is the ways in which that subject may become part of experience; what there is in the child’s present that is usable with reference to it. (p. 23)

Similarly, in *The School and Society* (1943), Dewey speaks of the “home economics” class, where boys and girls are learning to sew, as an eloquent model; the experiences gained are not strictly the physical algorithms necessary to complete a task. Instead, the child experiences the act of sewing as a base from which lessons on history and geography can be gleaned. Dewey is making the argument that the content itself is not central to the development of the student and/or his or her own learning. Instead, the experience the student has in approaching the content is what drives learning. As such, Dewey’s progressive theory of education moves beyond the requirement for set curricula, and in so doing opens the door for the questioning of an existing structure. If the approach to content is as important, if not more so, than the content itself, then this could also apply to the varying ways students may choose to approach what they learn and how they show their learning.

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17 This decision making based on experience-based criteria, or critical thinking, has been described further in the work of Bailin *et al.* (1999).
Other educators have questioned Dewey’s position regarding experiential education. Isaac Berkson (1958/1970) cast “learning by doing” in a different light, positing that its individualistic nature downplays moral values which are based in historical traditions and interpersonal relationships. The individualism of experiential education may not be in the best interest of the child as it limits the importance of community:

His conception of the social does not go beyond interaction between individuals and remains on the psychological level, failing to give adequate weight to the role of the community. Furthermore, the individualistic bias of experimentalism overemphasizes the factor of experience, leaving little room for mind, ideals, and institutions, which are or should be at the heart of the learning process. (Miller, 1958, p. 133)

Berkson argues that it may not be in the best interest of the child to take such an experimentalist\(^{18}\) approach when the resulting effect is one of individual experience that may or may not include the study, discussion, and critique of grander notions and theories.

### 3.4.2 Dewey Within the Decision-Making Theory Spectrum

Dewey’s lifelong quest for a more student-centred, experience-based progressive education has had a profound effect on pedagogy. Well-respected educators such as Alfie Kohn champion student-centred models that use problems and experiential context rather than rote memorization and the inundation of facts ad nauseum. These are educational platforms that are built upon a belief that a student-centred ideology, such as Dewey’s experiential progressive school, is a more effective method of educating children.

Dewey, like Callan and Glasser (discussed in chapter four), focuses his work on what is in the best interest of the individual, while considering the balance between student experience

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\(^{18}\) Berkson uses the term experimentalism in place of progressivism, as he views it to be a more relevant descriptor of Dewey’s methodology (Miller, 1958).
as a result of increased decision-making, and existing structure. All advocate the creation of an educational experience whereby each learner is afforded more opportunities to make decisions. Concurrently, each also speaks to the circles of influence that surround the learner in education: teachers, administrators, and family.

Dewey posits that as educators, we should aim to move away from curricular content as the focal point of learning and towards activities and tasks from which students can draw experiences to aid them in further learning (1902). Furthermore, Dewey never fully embraces or rejects the need for any specific educational structure, though he recognizes the importance of the school within a community and society (1916). He argues for student-specific experience-based education and questions today’s educational structure by saying a central authority figure (such as administration or the OME) is unnecessary, opting to replace it with more individualized adult-student interactions. For these reasons, I choose to place Dewey to the right of the liberal theories on the chart; his theory occupies a different niche which falls under “progressive” education.

Dewey differs from Callan and Glasser in his approach to the role of student as decision-maker. Dewey’s model places greater emphasis on the specific and tangible learning opportunities that occur as a result of each student’s decisions and the results that the student must consider due to those decisions made. Callan’s conception justifies the implementation of more student-centred choice as a holistic necessity but also discusses its existence in the nurturing of student interests as well as their role in the governance of schools. Glasser’s work seeks to bring forth this same opportunity for choice through proper strengthening of student–teacher relationships.

Both the former and the latter aim to do so within formalized schooling environments which, while adjusted to fit their own needs, are still based upon the structure that exists
currently. Dewey stretches the third aspect of structure even further, stating that student–teacher relationships exist even more individualistically (akin to a mentor/protégé relationship), blurring the walls of formal education even further, and bringing decision-making into education in a manner wholly dependent on the student’s interests and experiences.

3.5 Paulo Freire and Decision-Making in Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire included discussions of decision-making and autonomy in several of his works. At its core, Freire defined autonomy not as a skill to be taught or a right to be granted, but rather the end result of a long-term process involving decision-making and reflection. As he states in *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998):

No one is first autonomous and then makes a decision. Autonomy is the result of a process involving various and innumerable decisions. For example, why not challenge the child while still young to participate in a discussion and a decision about the best time to do schoolwork? Why is the best time for homework always the parent’s time? Why waste the opportunity to emphasize the duty and the right that the children have, as people, to engage in the process of forging their own autonomy? (p. 98)

The example given above alludes to the student, either in the classroom or at home. This is evidence of Freire’s conception of autonomy, not as a synchronic event, but rather as something one must view as diachronic, occurring over a long period of time.

In his body of work, Freire pays particular attention to the plight of those oppressed at the hands of the oppressors. He advocates for the former in an economic and cultural context, often reminding us that those without economic or cultural capital often find themselves lacking opportunities that others take for granted (1970). Freire also expands this idea to the teacher–student context, asking readers to consider the similarities that teachers and/or administrators could have with the oppressors and how students can be oppressed. In order to understand how
Freire’s views on oppression connect to his thoughts on autonomy, one must first look more closely at the views on oppression themselves.

Freire characterizes these oppressors as those who exploit by virtue of their power. Often, they have either inherited or earned financial resources and political connections which allow them to, for lack of a better word, control others as part of a power reproduction agenda. He believes it is not the role of those oppressed to rise up in order to dominate and oppress the original oppressors. This will do little more than put the oppressed in the role of oppressor and vice versa; progress towards a universal human ethic will remain elusive. Simply having been oppressed at one point in the past does not give credence to using one’s own brand of exclusion and division when the opportunity arises.

Rather, it must be the shared goal to restore humanity to both groups; we are not predestined to live in a certain fashion but rather we make our own history. It is a “Hegelian” triad in a sense: The oppressors develop their thesis, the oppressed respond with their antithesis, and the creation of a world that respects the humanity and autonomy of all regardless of societal stature is the subsequent synthesis (Freire, 1970).

So where is the connection between the aforementioned oppressor/oppressed relationship and that of the educational system? Freire (1970) makes an (indirect) argument that in many educational systems today, the student is an oppressed being whose development is limited to the whims of the powerful educator. The status quo in many schools still accepts a neoliberal culture that thrives on content knowledge, testing, standardization, and centralization. The “learn, memorize, but do not question” mentality still pervades educational

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19 Freire hints at his disdain for such systems in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992) when he implores that Freirian pedagogy should not become Freirian methodology; each school’s answers should be reinvented in each context.
systems that prepare oppressed students for a workforce where they will accept their subordinacy and not question; they will become oppressed adults.

The educational system oppressor maintains this status quo by utilizing the banking concept, which builds upon (but is not a synonym for) Locke’s empiricist tabula rasa. In the banking concept, students are seen as vessels the educational system fills with facts in order to fulfill their “education,” with little attention given to the notions of creativity, critical thinking, or decision-making. The educational oppressors can then select and determine which facts will be used in order to help reproduce their own power for their own benefit.

Freire (1970) questions the validity of the banking concept, stating that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 53). The concept goes further, as Freire highlights the importance of the teacher in creating a classroom wherein the student is given ample opportunity to think, problem solve, and develop concepts. In other words, it is vital that each student’s ability to make decisions be respected as he or she makes choices and reflects on outcomes to create solutions. As Freire (1970) states:

The task of the dialogical teacher in an interdisciplinary team working on the thematic universe revealed by their investigation is to “re-present” that universe to the people from whom she or he first received it – and “re-present” it not as a lecture, but as a problem. (p. 90)

In so doing, he or she is freed from the banking concept and its innate effect on maintaining a priori oppressor/oppressed roles. The suppression of autonomy is the oppressor’s most powerful weapon. In appreciating and encouraging autonomy (as a universal right) in students, the oppressor shows respect for the student’s ontological right to make choices that create his or her being:
The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not “marginals,” are not people living “outside” society. They have always been “inside” – inside the structure that made them “beings for others.” The solution is not to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform the structure so that they can become “beings for themselves.” Such transformation, of course, would undermine the oppressor’s purposes; hence the utilization of the banking concept of education to avoid the threat of student conoscêntização. (Freire, 1970, p. 55)

In this, Freire express strong belief in the appreciation of the student (or oppressed party) as a member of the system and not an object of it. As such, that student’s right to choose and accept consequence (i.e., be autonomous) is vital not only because it is his or her innate right but also in order to change strata of oppressor and oppressed to equal relationships amongst humans.

Freire speaks repeatedly of conoscêntização, or “consciousness raising.” The term refers to the change seen in the development of a person as he or she begins to move beyond naiveté and view society through a critical lens. He believes that as more people find themselves on the path to conoscêntização, society will default less towards oppressors and oppressed and more to creating new standards, methodologies, and policies that encourage and support all individuals (Smith, 1976).

Freire also considers the term “unfinishedness,” the state of mind he believes we must always view ourselves as we strive to become more human, understand our own rights, and most importantly, respect those same rights in others. Cognizance of our unfinishedness is vital to our condition as humans and to our understanding that our lives are not predestined (Freire, 1998). Instead, our futures are the sum total of the choices we make in our daily lives: “The future is something to be constructed through trial and error rather than an inexorable vice that determines all our actions” (Freire, 1998, p. 54).
Autonomy, as Freire (1970) describes it, allows oppressed individuals to restore humanity (not just to themselves but to their oppressors) by making a “trade.” The citizen or student sheds a banking concept designed to keep him or her happy with current roles and in its place takes on conscientização, where awareness of unfinishedness promotes autonomy as each strives to become more human. To Freire, autonomy is a living concept, constantly changing and evolving. It is does not occur in isolated time or space; it is the human right to make decisions and, as importantly, learn from the results of those decisions.

While Freire speaks explicitly regarding autonomy and students, it would be inaccurate to place him with the previous authors on one end of the chart. This is due to Freire’s justification for student autonomy; it should be used as a tool not just for learning but to create change in the power inequality that currently exists between oppressed students and oppressive entities. In this case, the oppressive entities could theoretically be viewed as the OME (as an arm of the state), and Freire’s desires for changes in social roles are in line with a need for a large-scale change to the existing schooling structure.

Freire’s theories built on critical pedagogy ask those within the schema to use autonomy outside of structure. For this reason, Freire’s work is not as useful—in the development of this thesis—as others noted in this chapter. I place Freire’s theory separately in the decision-making theory spectrum from the aforementioned authors. Freire’s recognition of the necessity of student autonomy within an educational context makes his work valid within this context. Freire does not necessarily see autonomy as a requirement to fulfill any specific aim of education. Rather, he frames it as a necessary component of righting existing inequalities with respect to balance of social power.

I have placed A. S. Neill’s libertarian approach, put into practice at the Summerhill School in England, adjacent to the critical pedagogy approaches of Freire and Peters (discussed
Neill seeks to place the student’s freedom foremost in educational practice, explicitly removing or radically altering the three tenets of structure. As with the Sudbury Valley School, I have chosen this school (and educational theory) as a case study, which I will speak to in detail in chapter five.

3.6 R.S. Peters and Authority

R. S. Peters’ ideas of the validity and importance of autonomy share a common foundation with those of Freire, particularly when viewed through the rights of the person. Peters (1966) goes beyond the theoretical or ideological arguments that automatically recognize the autonomy of all citizens, students, or members of a community due to the prima facie belief they are entitled to it. Instead, Peters asks us to consider the logistics of such idealism. What instances call for the encouragement and explicit recognition of autonomy on its own and which require an implementation of authority that works in tandem with an individual’s innate autonomy?20 Who are the stakeholders involved in this process? Do students, children, or people in general just become autonomous, do they walk the road alone, or do they become autonomous by existing in a relationship with others?

Peters (1966) speaks to these conundrums using the child as the exemplar (1966). He believes it is unlikely that the correct implementation of autonomy is simply to raise children in an environment with no rules or order. Structure, instead, is the foundation required that allows the ability to make decisions to develop: “Rationality requires a middle course between authoritarianism and permissiveness” (Peters, 1966, p. 198). Much like Freire, Peters argues for a diachronic model of autonomy which develops over time and is the result of gradual growth due to lessons learned from experience and consequence.

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20 In fact, Peters’ model may speak more to the concept of agency rather than autonomy. This is further elucidated in the Defining Terms section of chapter two.
Peters debates the goals of progressive schools that have the commendable goal of developing agency and an independent spirit. “Children have to learn to make their own choices, to stand on their own feet; it is argued that this sort of permissive atmosphere encourages them to do this” (Peters, 1966, p. 196). Peters does not agree with the laissez-faire approach to authority, instead preferring to use authority wisely to aid each student (or person) in the process of decision-making.

Peters believes the goal of education is not simply the removal of obstacles to freedom and allowing nature to take its course. Instead, it revels in the relationship between authority and protégé, between teacher and student. Peters, like Freire, places autonomy within the realm of Berlin’s positive liberty, whereby it is recognized by those in positions of authority in those who are not, be they students (in Peters’ worldview) or the oppressed (in Freire’s).

While Peters has still deemed autonomy to be an important part of the growth and development of the person, he stipulates the importance of decision-making as more than just allowing people to do what they want, when they want. If recognition of an actor’s autonomy means allowing him or her to make choices of his or her own accord, then as educators it behooves us to present students with opportunities to do so. If we make choices because we want a specific outcome, then making choices is a skill like any other. Much like training for a sport or practicing a musical instrument, the more times one attempts a task, the more proficient one generally becomes at it. As Peters discusses in his example of the elective curriculum, the key element is not solely one’s choice from different alternatives, but rather, having the experience to choose amongst them:

What sense is there in saying that children should have ‘choice’ of what subjects they are to study unless they are in a position to really ‘choose’? There is all the difference in
the world between choosing between alternatives and ‘opting’ for alternatives on the basis of what is immediately attractive. (Peters, 1966, p. 197)

Here we see Peters’s view of autonomy, as seen from the vantage point of the child in the educational context. He states that children, left to their own devices, are likely to make curricular choices that seem “fun” in the short term rather than those which are best for them in the long term. Autonomy, according to Peters, is not the absence of rules or order. Instead, it is an authority-led progression from decision-making innocence to experience. As such, it is on par with the model developed in this thesis that asks educators to encourage and facilitate the development of each student’s decision-making ability.

3.7 The Unschooling Movement

At the far end of the educational theory chart, we see theories that seek to replace mandatory or formalized schooling altogether. The unschooling movement, discussed in the 1960s by educator John Holt, is a platform for the deschooling movement started by Ivan Illich in 1971. This alternative approach to education is also seen in Emile, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. If one were to consider the Venn diagram in the conceptual framework, the theories at this end of the chart incorporate the ideals of agency or decision-making discussed in this thesis but do so via a complete dissociation from the current structures retained by Callan, Dewey, Glasser, et al.

3.7.1 John Holt and Unschooling

American educator John Holt argues for student centred education with the interests of the student in mind. His works (1964, 1967) were considered controversial when proposed. They describe schools as arenas where skirmishes are fought; students battle simply to save face and avoid humiliation or embarrassment in failure. In response, Holt discusses alternative educational models that place the student at the centre of the forum. Modified schooling
practices eliminate adult-driven curricula and fear-based learning in favour of child-centred learning originating from the student.\textsuperscript{21}

Holt’s critique of the pedagogical status quo lays the groundwork for the changes to educational practice for which he argues (1964, 1967). In \textit{How Children Fail} (1964), Holt tells the story of a classroom of children in a progressive school who become uneasy when asked what happens when teachers ask them a question to which they do not know the answer. He explains: “I asked them why they felt gulpish. They said they were afraid of failing, afraid of being kept back, afraid of being called stupid, afraid of feeling themselves stupid” (Holt, 1964, p. 63). The state of fear in the classroom ipso facto places the teacher (or even the answer) at the centre of the educational schema, but not the student.

Holt, therefore, argues for education that stresses the needs of the student. What this model looks like cannot be parsed out in a position paper or policy; it must be created with the specific child or children in mind. A true child-centred education, according to Holt, places the love of learning over the fear of failure, and the onus is on the teacher or authority to create a system that honours this.

For such reasons I would like to stress again what I said very early in this book. My aim is not primarily to persuade educators and psychologists to swap new doctrines for old, but to persuade them to \textit{look} at children, patiently, repeatedly, respectfully, and to hold off making theories and judgments about them until they have in their minds what most of them do not now have – a reasonably accurate model of what children are like. (Holt, 1967, p. 173)

\textsuperscript{21} Eventually, this came to be labelled “unschooling” (1981), a pedagogy which focuses on what the student wants to learn and how a plan can be put in place to support it.
Holt’s theories do not require a complete about-face in the educational theories practiced today. In fact, one must consider placing Holt’s ideas into today’s contexts, as they were written a half century ago. However, time does not affect the basic concept that no person, child or adult, will find a positive learning experience when fear is the motivator.

Rather, it is vital that any educational decision, from far-reaching policy to classroom instruction, be made with knowledge regarding what the child wants to learn and how he or she would best learn it. Like Illich in the next section, Holt argues for an educational system that places the student at the centre and develops lessons and curricula around his or her interests. In so doing, he is also questioning the need for formalized schooling that delivers content selected by adults.

His consistent arguments in favour of homeschooling (1981), while questioning the usefulness of the educational structure, place Holt on the far right end of the spectrum. All three tenets of structure are on shaky footing in a homeschooling model; there are no clear definitions of classes, testing, student–teacher dynamics, and the like. While Holt’s unschooling model is admirable in terms of its ambitiousness, one would quickly come to the conclusion that changing the educational system in Ontario to such a model would be widely rejected by many of the major stakeholders. Could there be a way of increasing student decision-making opportunities in the educational structure in a manner more consistent with the left-hand side of the decision-making theory spectrum? In what ways would the existing educational structure need to be altered or amended in order to do so? These questions are looked at more closely in chapter six.

3.7.2 Ivan Illich and Deschooling

Illich (1971) takes a very strong stance against formal schooling in *Deschooling Society*. In this book, he speaks to the importance of informally allowing the learner to self-select topics
of interest. He does not make an argument for isolated learning; instead Illich marries the idea of self-directed learning with social interaction. After all, why can’t two people who both choose to explore a certain topic do so together?

Commonalities exist between the deschooling concept and others discussed in this thesis. Like Dewey, Illich argues for learning by experiencing rather than listening. He believes that this is possible only with the abandonment of structured schools that force feed adult-selected curriculum using instructional rather than experiential means. He notes such a process is ideally suited for training rather than authentic learning and concerns itself more with the instrumental/economic aims than ideological or aesthetic ones:

School sells curriculum – a bundle of goods made according to the same process and having the same structure as other merchandise. Curriculum production for most schools begins with allegedly scientific research, on whose basis educational engineers predict future demand and tools for the assembly line, within the limits set by budgets and taboos. The distributor-teacher delivers the finished product to the consumer pupil, whose reactions are carefully studied and charted to provide research data for the preparation of the next model, which may be "ungraded," "student-designed," "team-taught," "visually-aided," or "issue-centered." (Illich, 1971, p. 41)

In the quote above, Illich makes a legitimate argument regarding the development of content for learning.

As an educator, it has been my personal experience that educational improvement is an iterative process; student feedback, quantitative data, and research allow educators to decide what has worked in the past and what needs to be changed. I interpret Illich’s (1971) comments regarding “preparation of the next model” as his way of saying that changes in the structure will always remain within the structure. I further interpret his argument to be that the most
efficient route to an ideal education system would be an instantaneous, large-scale shift to deschooling.

Illich (1971) also notes the emergence of formalized schooling occurred in concert with industrialization. He argues it is used more as a tool for society to create a generation of pupils that can best serve its own agenda, rather than making the desires and interests of the pupil the priority. He also makes economic arguments regarding the financial burden formal schooling places on the state—ambitious initiatives that invested billions of dollars in formally educating disadvantaged children did not yield the expected results—in fact, “compared with their classmates from middle income homes, they have fallen further behind” (1971, p. 5).

Illich makes the case for deschooling not just schools, but the prevailing need for education that exists within society as well: “Institutionalization of values leads inevitably to physical pollution, social polarization, and psychological impotence: three dimensions in a process of global degradation and modernized misery” (1971, p. 1). Illich is warning the reader that allowing an institution (such as a formalized schooling structure) to centralize and determine what is important is dangerous as it concentrates power with those who make the decisions regarding what is covered and what is not. Deschooling society means exactly what it says: We need to challenge a priori assumptions that society needs schools in order for children to learn.

In chapter 4, Illich (1971) uses a spectrum to place any societal institution depending on how it interacts with the citizenry. On the left-hand side of his spectrum are the “convivial” institutions, ones that do not need to manipulate or force the citizen to see the benefit in utilizing them (such as sewage treatment, parks, and the like). In *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), Illich outlines the necessity to focus on these institutions and find ways to use them such that
each person contributes to society in an authentic manner, rather than as the output of a state-controlled institution.

Conversely, on the right-hand side of the aforementioned spectrum are the manipulative institutions in which the citizen is “made the victim of advertising, aggression, indoctrination, imprisonment, or electroshock” (Illich, 1971, p. 55). The extreme examples he gives on the right end are the military, law enforcement, and prisons, areas of society that need to consistently reinforce to the citizenry why they are needed. Ulrich Beck (1992) speaks to a similar notion in his discussion of *Risikogesellschaft*—or “risk society”—where he argues that certain “choices” granted by the state or existing power structures are given only as manipulative tools. Once the citizen makes an incorrect choice and fails, he or she becomes even more dependent on the state-developed institutions and the cycle of power reproduction continues unabated.

Illich places the school on the right hand side of this spectrum. He labels it a “false public utility”, in that its value within society is reified only by the presumption that schools are necessary to develop students who will have the knowledge and technological expertise to survive in the modern world. Again, we see comparisons to other authors. Illich’s deschooling theory is based on the assumption that schools are controlling institutions that strip learners of decision-making opportunities in order to propagate the learning of content and values prized by those in power. This is comparable to Freire’s work on education being a tool of the oppressor. While Freire argues that the learner should work within the structures of formal education to balance the scales of power inequity, Illich believes this can only be done by eliminating formal schooling altogether.
3.7.3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau and *Emile*

In *Emile* (1762/1979), Jean-Jacques Rousseau outlines a methodology whereby the child is taught using nature and the environment as the classroom. This method downplays the role of parent or teacher and stresses the importance of guides who aid in development of critical thinking and awareness. Rousseau argues that the child should be involved in the creation of his or her own learning, the selection of criteria, and the development of regulations.

Rousseau defends this argument through a characterization of the “child-as-person,” rejecting meritocracy or authority in favour of a philosophical ontology. The setting for this educational model is nature itself, for it is the only teacher that teaches without agenda, bias, or belief. As Rousseau (1762/1979) states:

> In the first operations of the mind let the senses always be its guides. No book other than the world, no instruction other than the facts. The child who reads does not think, he only reads; he is not informing himself, he learns words. Make your pupil attentive to the phenomena of nature. Soon you will make him curious . . . . Let him not learn science but discover it. If you ever substitute in his mind authority for reason, he will no longer reason. He will be nothing more than the plaything of others’ opinion. (p. 168)

This sets the stage for the student, through nature and with a mentor, to learn lessons that are catered specifically to his or her personal needs. Discussions like the one above show deference to a natural education: We must educate the child this way because it is who he or she is.

Critiques of this methodology abound not only due to the text itself but also as a result of the perceived hypocrisy of the author. Rousseau was critiqued quickly by encyclopédistes such as Voltaire and Diderot, who believed his personal life (specifically as a man who abandoned his own kids) made him unqualified to lecture on education. One could also question his
treatment of gender differences. He argues for education that reifies certain gender roles. While it is debatable whether he states one gender is inherently “better” than another, the gender divide itself is contrary to the child-centred belief. If we educate based on individual needs, then it is counterintuitive to group students based on any other factors, including gender.

Like Holt and Illich, Rousseau (1762/1979) rejects the tenets of structure, abandoning formalized schooling entirely. When he says “no book other than the world,” he is arguing against prescriptive content in favour of child-selected topics. Furthermore, he incorporates a Deweyian context of experiential education as the methodology. The student selects for himself or herself the topics that form the basis for learning. This is evidence of Rousseau’s awareness that the student as decision-maker is an ideal component of educating youth. This, coupled with very little adherence to formal educational structure, places Rousseau (as well as Illich and Holt) on the far right end of the chart.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to describe the educational theories of a select group of authors who have discussed ways of incorporating decision-making into education. While they differed in their reasons for championing more democratic considerations, this was not the focal point of my comparison. Instead, I listed them by considering to what extent they accept or reject the traditional structure that exists within Ontario high schools today. In so doing, I have introduced a Student Decision-Making Model I believe is not out of touch with other liberal conceptions of educational change—it asks participants within the system to adjust certain habits without radically reforming the educational system in which those adjustments take place.
CHAPTER FOUR: DECISION-MAKING IN EXISTING EDUCATIONAL MODELS

Chapters two and three of this thesis have been more focused on the broader concepts of education, with an eye to decision-making as an element of education. Authors such as Callan, Dewey, Freire, and Holt analyze educational environments in terms of autonomy or with the general concept of student decision-making in mind. In this thesis, I label their input as theories.

What of the examples where decision-making is laid out in a more targeted way, with specific skills and strategies included? I refer to these examples as models. As noted in the introduction, while some of the ideas discussed in this chapter are named as theories by their original authors, I categorize them as models because they contain specific methods or strategies that could be (and are) implemented in classrooms. In this chapter, I look at these more specific educational models and analyze how they implement student decision-making opportunities in educational environments.

The approach taken by each model helps inform the Student Decision-Making Model I outline in the chapter six of this thesis. Looking at the work of Dr. Bill Glasser’s Choice Theory, Montessori Schools, the Self-Determination Theory, the Mindset Work of Carol Dweck, and other individual case studies, I show that the model of student as decision-maker already exists successfully in various forms, and each, in its own way, serves as part of the template for my own model.

4.1 William Glasser and Choice Theory

William Glasser, a psychiatrist by training, developed a concept he refers to as choice theory. In this theory, there are five basic human needs: survival, love and belonging, power, fun, and freedom. Glasser posits that we are all internally driven to satisfy them (Glasser, 1998), and these needs are arguably relevant to students as well. In this thesis, I focus on the freedom
need, which aligns with the concept of decision-making discussed in this thesis. Humans feel they need freedom as part of their daily lives. It is in the way we make choices with respect to our relationships, that can guide them in a positive direction.

Based on his work with choice theory, Glasser developed an educational model that places the student at the centre of the schema to ensure he or she actively learns and improves. This is done by eschewing external control (presumably by the authority figure) in favour of strong student–teacher relationships and the recognition of the importance of choice for each student (Glasser, 2001). In so doing, he has created a model that has been adopted by many schools across North America, which he terms “Glasser Quality Schools.”

Glasser’s view of the student-centred classroom shows a somewhat more distinct departure from the traditional OME structure. He keeps several of the elements seen in mainstream classes today including class sizes, streaming by age level, testing, and the like. At the same time, his competency-based classroom—which allows students to retake assessments until they achieve at a certain level22—is a key difference.

Another noteworthy pillar of the Glasser approach is his emphasis on properly developed student–teacher relationships, which serve to challenge the third tenet of structure outlined in the second section of this chapter. Glasser speaks to these relationships explicitly; he suggests students refer to teachers by their first names and eschews detention or other “power-over” meetings with students in favour of using a “connecting place” to discuss any issues with behaviour or academic performance.23

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22 Glasser strongly questions the ABCDF grading system; his method requires a student’s final work to achieve a “B” on the rubric (a student may have to go through several iterations of the assignment to reach this level). The structural element of letter grading is still used, but adjusted, for “using low grades to give credit for incompetence doesn’t make any sense” (Glasser, 2001, p. 16).

23 His specific strategies, with respect to how a classroom should run and what role choice should play, is why I label his choice theory-inspired classroom as a model as opposed to a theory in this thesis.
Glasser implores educators to use a different set of skills when dealing with students of concern. The traditional method he confronts is the use of external control, characterized by “the seven deadly habits: criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, and rewarding to control.” (Glasser, 2001, p. 24) Instead, teachers or educators are encouraged to replace these deadly habits with “the seven connecting or choice theory habits: caring, listening, supporting, contributing, encouraging, trusting, and befriending” (Glasser, 2001, p. 25).

As with other models noted in this chapter, I am not advocating for the adoption of all of Glasser’s ideas. Yet, the seven choice theory habits lay the groundwork for the implementation of student-centred decision-making initiatives in the classroom, in service to Glasser’s acknowledgment of freedom as a human need. Therefore, a teacher who subscribes to this approach is more likely to give a positive and supportive response to a student inquiry as opposed to one which may be restricted by certain elements of an existing structure. As a result, one could make the argument that a student is more likely to self-advocate about his or her learning styles, needs, or desires.

Glasser’s choice theory was implemented in a Grade 3 classroom.24 Using the teacher’s daybook and student interviews (both initially as well as repeat interviews with select students 6 years after the initial study), Irvine (2015) looked at the effect choice theory had on student engagement and attitudes towards learning. The teacher showed her daybook to the students at the beginning of the day so they could see what activities and topics were blocked off at certain times (known as “choice periods”). At that point, they were asked to use that knowledge to create their goals for the day, which were different for each student based on their relationships with the material to be presented that day. As Irvine notes:

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24 Interestingly, the teacher did not have any training with choice theory; the author of the study noted that her approach was consistent with the elements of choice theory with respect to basic human needs and the seven choice theory habits.
If a student was already familiar with the story, he or she could choose to work on the questions before the afternoon reading activity. They could then choose to read a different story during the class reading time. The choice time blocks were flexible in that a student need not work on the same activity for an entire time block; they could choose to change activities, thus avoiding boredom and reducing frustration, but the new activity must be on their list for the day. (Irvine, 2015, p. 6)

Through this approach, the teacher explicitly recognized and fostered decision-making skill-building in her students by giving them choice that still had to exist within certain parameters. Her approach lays the groundwork for the Student Decision-Making Model I outline in chapter six in that it challenges some of the traditional ideas of student choice in the classroom while continuing to honour certain elements of the educational structure. The study finds reduced behaviour issues and a decreased need for active classroom management. It further found that no student ever chose to “do nothing” during choice periods, that students reported feeling strong ownership over their learning, and that students interviewed 6 years later noted that year as one they not only enjoyed but in which they felt there was substantial learning.

Like Callan’s argument for student-developed curricula based on personal interests, Glasser’s progressive approach to choice and his focus on student–teacher relationships outline an educational model that makes adjustments to existing structures in education. At the same time, their models still maintain the overall logistical requirements of daily mandatory schooling. Glasser’s model and Callan’s theory, as well as the example of the Sudbury Valley School (discussed in detail in chapter six) all share a desire to maintain the skeleton of formal schooling while adjusting the structures that lie within to place the student’s desires, well-being, or growth at the centre of the system.
4.2 Decision-Making in Montessori Schools

The Montessori school model was developed in the early 20th century by Dr. Maria Montessori. Basing her model of education on the tenets of psychological development, the Montessori model was developed. While each Montessori school may work in a slightly different manner, several core values exist, namely trained Montessori teachers, use of specific materials, child-centred work, uninterrupted work time, and mixed-age groups (American Montessori Society, 2017).

Uninterrupted work time is key to this thesis, as it calls for a period of time when the adult does not dictate for how long or in what order the student does work (American Montessori Society, 2017). Researcher Luz Marie Casquejo Johnston notes the connection between the concept of autonomy and Montessori education, noting “autonomy supports are a hallmark of Montessori methodology. Montessori spoke of choice, challenging teachers to allow students to choose work. In this way, the teacher encourages students to build their own intellect” (2016, p. 29).

It should be clarified that “choosing work” could mean choosing both the activity and topic of work as well as choosing in what order to complete certain tasks. In a study of six Grade 7 students at a school in California, Casquejo Johnston (2016) looked at the student Montessori experience through the lens of Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory, a model I explore in the next section. She found that when students were asked about measures of choice and freedom, each student in the study referred, more than once, to the ability to “choose type of work” as well as “choose order of work.” While the former could cause tension with existing educational structure, the latter reifies my argument for the importance of students making decisions. The students in this study all noted the opportunity to make their own decisions with respect to their time use to be an important part of their experience.
Kendall (1992) noted “choice of work” as one of the four behavioural indicators for autonomy in her study comparing the experiences of Montessori students versus those in traditional classrooms. Specifically, she cites the disparity in teacher-directed time in the classroom (73.1% in traditional classrooms vs. 4.4% in Montessori classrooms) and task selection methods (82.1% of students in Montessori chose their own task outright or did so from options given by the teacher; this occurred in less than 1% of observations in traditional classrooms). She concludes that “the resulting degree of autonomy shown by the Montessori students supports the constructivist view of autonomy as developing through a dialectical process between intrinsic and extrinsic factors” (p. 100).

Using a three-pronged model of autonomy proposed by Stefanou, Preencevich, DiCintio, and Turner (2004), Koh and Frick (2010) examined how autonomy was supported in a Montessori classroom. The three types of autonomy that Stefanou et al. outlined were:

1. organizational autonomy (learning environment—choice of who to work with, seating plan, work rules);
2. procedural autonomy (form of work—how to display their learning to others);
3. cognitive autonomy (learning process—freedom to work independently, ask questions, and share views).

Each of these conceptions of autonomy supports a model in which student decision-making is placed at the centre of educational change, driven through a reassessment of an educational culture that deems the adult to be the sole decision-maker. Each of the conceptions listed by Stefanou et al., if implemented within Ontario schools, would enrich the learning experience for students. Notably, all three conceptions could be implemented in the orange (lower) circle of the conceptual framework—no changes to OME structure would even be required!
In fact, Koh and Frick found organizational autonomy to be a key means by which teachers can support students in the classroom:

Organizational autonomy support was also observed during the *Morning Work Period* even though students were not subjected to a fixed time-table but chose the *Works* they wanted to do. Five or six students could be typing project reports on the computers while two or three others may be working on Math problems at their desks. A teacher could be searching for a book with two students in the library; while the others were engaged in individual feedback sessions. In one corner of the classroom, four or five students were observing the growth process of caterpillars bred by the teachers while pairs of students were working together on Science experiments in another corner. Both the teachers and students were observed to be enthusiastically engaged throughout the *Morning Work Period* with personal consultations and *Works* even though it stretched the entire morning. (2010, p. 8)

Further to this, the authors concluded that teacher support for organizational autonomy created a classroom environment which encouraged peer support and the construction of social relationships, both between students and between student and teacher. As these examples show, recognizing and supporting student decision-making in the classroom and implementing it in an explicit and thoughtful manner can have positive effects on student learning and experience.

Using the examples above, I have aimed to show that one important element of Montessori education—*inclusion of student choice with respect to task selection*—is compatible with the concept of championing decision-making that I propose in this thesis. I am not advocating for the full-fledged integration and implementation of Montessori practices into all OME classrooms. Yet, it is quite possible for teachers to implement this one area of Montessori
pedagogy into mainstream classrooms in order to give each student opportunities to practice making decisions in an educational context.

4.3 The Self-Determination Theory

Much like Glasser’s five basic human needs, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) also focuses on several innate human characteristics that form the basis of a model. While the SDT is a broad concept applicable in many areas, it is relevant to the field of education. The theory studies the elements surrounding motivation\(^\text{25}\) in people, and “propositions also focus on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people’s sense of volition and initiative, in addition to their well-being” (Self-Determination Theory, 2017).

In order to facilitate one’s motivation and engagement in an activity, the SDT identifies three specific human needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The theory argues that all three are necessary to optimize the level of engagement one finds with an activity as well as his or her level of creativity and performance observed in the activity (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this thesis, I focus on the autonomy human need, its relationship to the more specific element of student decision-making, and how educators can support this need in the classroom. I do this by examining several different examples of the application of Self-Determination Theory in classrooms.

In order for student autonomy to be recognized within the classroom context, the classroom environment itself must support the explicit display of student autonomy. Deci and Ryan (1987) consider intentionality, or one’s choice to act in a certain way to achieve a desired outcome. They found that some intentional behaviours come about via choice as a means of personal expression, which they refer to as “self-determined” behaviours. Teachers can create

\(^{25}\) For the purposes of this thesis, I define motivation similarly to the way it is defined in the self-determination theory—it is what we need intrinsically to turn our desires into action. As such, it is analogous to Frankfurt’s second order volition: an individual wants to want to do something, and wishes for it to actually happen.
classroom environments that promote self-determination by presenting information conceptually, having students teach learned material to one another, and using nonpressuring language (i.e., avoiding phrases such as “you should” or “you have to”; Deci & Ryan, 1994).

The ways in which teachers can structure their learning environments and communicate their expectations has also been explored. One study of over one thousand high school students found in classes where teachers provided clear expectations combined with more opportunities for student choice, students were more likely to feel internally motivated and less likely to engage in aggressive behaviour or suffer from test anxiety. The requirements for success in this context are the same as noted by Deci and Ryan in the above paragraph. Clear expectations, according to the authors, are often coconstructed by teacher and student, explicitly outline what desirable classroom behaviour looks like, and include rationales for possible task options (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Vansteenkiste et al., 2012).

The study further notes the relational importance of both decision-making opportunity and clear expectations—the absence of either one resulted in students who “displayed less autonomous study motivation, scored lower on a variety of self-regulated learning outcomes, and reported more externalizing problem behavior in comparison to students in the high autonomy support and clear expectations cluster” (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012, p. 437). Unsurprisingly, students who perceived a lack of both support as decision-makers and clear expectations displayed even poorer learning outcomes and less internal motivation.

On the other side of the coin, behaviours still viewed as intentional by definition are the result of external regulations imposed upon the actor. They use psychological research to show that rewards, deadlines, and evaluation can all have a negative influence on intrinsic motivation.

26 Note in this case structure does not refer to the educational structure I reference in the introduction of this thesis, but rather how the teacher structures his or her classroom as an autonomy-supportive environment.
Their research found students involved in supportive environments, which they define as environments “that encourage the process of choice and the experience of autonomy” (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012, p. 1027), showed enhanced intrinsic motivation when given a choice on which task to undertake.

Katz and Assor (2007) looked more comprehensively at the SDT work of Deci and Ryan as well as other behavioural studies that focused on choice through the lens of their theory. They argue that choice motivates intrinsically in some ways but not necessarily so in others. They note that what is more valuable to the student is not only the act of choosing but how the students view those choices in relation to their own goals and ideals.

They also note that allowing students to simply “pick” an option from a set listed does not enhance motivation. “When choice is separated from other aspects of autonomy support and self-realization (e.g., interest, values, volition, and goals), the act of choosing is not the major motivating property of choice” (Katz & Assor, 2007, p. 432). For an educational environment to be effective with respect to student decision-making, the decisions made by each student should align with the student’s own interests and desires.

The authors conclude that “…teachers should offer options that seem valuable to the students because they enable students to work on subjects and tasks that interest them and allow them to achieve their goals” (p. 437). They also note that teachers should explain how the options are relevant to student interest and, like the Montessori model, provide uninterrupted work time to complete those self-determined tasks. These conclusions help shape the Student Decision-Making Model I outline in chapter six of this thesis.

Several examples show the positive effects on student intrinsic motivation through classrooms that support student decision-making. Students were surveyed about their experiences in a Physical Education course with respect to their perception of support by the
teacher. Through this lens, researchers found a direct correlation between self-reported levels of self-determined motivation and teacher observations regarding student effort and perseverance (Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2006).

Similar findings are seen in a study of mathematics classrooms, particularly the effect on homework attitudes. Hagger, Sultan, Hardcastle, and Chatzisarantis (2015) found associations between perceived autonomy support and motivation with respect to homework behaviour and subsequently on student grades. The end result of improved grades, while a positive attribute in many ways, is not a necessary component of my conception of student as decision-maker. As noted earlier, rewards (of which assessed grades could be considered) can have an undermining effect on intrinsic motivation. The changes in behaviour and student action are relevant, as they speak to student-centred justifications for incorporation of student decision-making opportunities within the classroom context.

As a more general example, an international study of high school students in Denmark, the United States, and South Korea was done. The authors note that Denmark and the United States are more “individualistic” nations, where teacher support for the individual choices made by individual students is more prevalent than in South Korea, considered a more “collectivistic” nation. Ferguson, Kasser, and Jahng (2011) conclude that students in Denmark and the United States, who studied in more autonomy-supportive environments, reported higher levels of school satisfaction than those in South Korea:

To the extent that adolescents felt that their parents and teachers understand their perspectives and allowed them to make their own choices, adolescents positively perceived their lives and their experiences in school. In contrast, when adolescents felt controlled by their parents and teachers, and felt that these authorities treated the
adolescents’ own experiences and choices as relatively unimportant, they reported lower satisfaction with life and school. (p. 658)

In the examples above (physical education, mathematics, and the international context), students and teachers reported higher levels of school satisfaction, perseverance, and/or achievement when the students felt they were able to make choices based upon their own needs and desires.

Beyond academics, an educational environment supportive of student decision-making can positively influence a student’s wellness. Middle school students responded to questionnaire prompts that asked, for example, how often they get to help in school decision-making or how well their voices are heard. Through their responses, Yu, Li, Wang, and Zhang (2016) determined that environments with relatively high levels of teacher support for student voice led to increased classroom engagement and that “teacher autonomy support significantly increases adolescents' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby making adolescents more engaged and involved in their school daily activities. This enhanced school engagement in turn mitigates or offsets adolescent anxiety and depression” (p. 120).

At the college level, Brooks and Young (2011) posited that according to the SDT, “offering students choices in a classroom may enhance their feelings of self-determination and intrinsic motivation to participate in class activities” (p. 51). They sought to determine whether there was a connection between an increased recognition of choice-making opportunities and student motivation. Students were given questionnaires; roughly 60% of the students were in classes where no choice-making opportunities existed with respect to assignments required. The remainder were in classes where they were given some degree of choice, such as selecting which assignments from a list they would complete for the course.

The authors actually found that students reported higher levels of intrinsic motivation in the classes where students were given little to no choice! Further analysis of their data showed
that, in fact, the issue is consistency across all course elements. Students benefit in courses where attendance, assignment selection, and other options are aligned. Brooks and Young (2011) concluded that students require a clear experience, either student centred or teacher driven. This will prove difficult to adopt in the Student Decision-Making Model without certain elements of the high school structure, such as attendance, being altered.

To offset this challenge, it should first be noted that this study was done in a college classroom, where structural restrictions do not exist to the same extent. Furthermore, we should also consider the sheer volume of choice a student is given. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) showed this in a postsecondary social psychology course, where all students were given an option of completing an extra-credit assignment. Some students were given a list of six topics from which to choose (limited-choice), the others were given a list of 30 choices (extensive-choice).

They concluded that “the provision of extensive choices does not necessarily lead to enhanced motivation when compared with contexts that offer a limited array of choices” (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000, p. 999). One could make the connection with the clear expectation requirement noted in this section: Giving students unlimited or even a large number of choices is not necessarily the best approach. Clear expectations should also include a limited number of options that are consistent and provided to the students with an accompanying rationale. Thus, the Student Decision-Making Model outlined in chapter six would not distill down to a “do whatever you want” instruction.

At this point, one could critique the need for implementing such an approach by asking “isn’t this what teachers do already?” The argument may be made that prescribing choice to students is already occurring and that teachers create classroom environments that support student decision-making currently. While anecdotally I have found that to be true only sporadically, some research also shows there is work to be done in this area. In a survey of over
400 teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools, Hansen (2010) asked teachers to rate the appropriateness of hypothetical teacher responses to educational scenarios. Those responses represented points along the continuum from controlling to autonomy supportive.

Hansen (2010) concluded from his research that “orientations were more controlling and less autonomy-supportive for middle school teachers than for elementary teachers and for high school teachers than for middle and elementary school teachers” (p. 112). Specifically, he noted a significant increase in controlling teacher behaviour in high school teachers when compared to teachers of Grades 1–8. This supports the model I put forth in chapter six, specifically with respect to the age level of students and their teachers involved.

As shown in this section, the self-determination theory connects with my conception of student decision-making in this thesis. Research done with students of different age levels shows that the most positive learning environments are those where students feel they have consistent messaging from teachers regarding their options and that the options given to them are supported by relevant rationale and correlate with the students’ own goals, values, and desires. In developing the Student Decision-Making Model (chapter six), these findings will be used.

4.4 The Dutch ‘Study House’

It should be noted that many of the studies or models referenced in this chapter took place in, or were geared towards, elementary or middle school classrooms, while my conception of a culture that prioritizes student decision-making looks at students in high school cohorts. In Holland, students in senior secondary education take specialized courses as they prepare for higher education. Since the early 1990s, the Dutch government has implemented the “study house” concept, where reforming school organization and teacher procedures are the catalysts for increased student self-regulated learning (Veugelers, 2004).
One of the elements that came out of this concept is “option hours”; students are given a set number of school hours each year where they can select which topic, course, or assignment they wish to undertake; Veugelers (2004) likens this to the type of self-regulated learning evident in Montessori schools. The idea of option hours is analogous to my model via the Time Use Exemplar; students are given opportunities to decide what they wish to work on instead of being required to stick to a specific subject. While creating these option hours could create conflicts with the structure in Ontario education, the adoption of option hours is, whether by design or not, a recognition of the student as the central decision-maker in Dutch secondary schools.

Interestingly, Veugelers (2004) also notes that during option hours, teachers “fight” to have students come study their subjects, lest they be seen as teachers whose courses are too easy or, worse, teachers who are not effective at helping students with the content. He observes that “introduction of option hours has intensified the micro politics to the extent that they are having an impact on the daily relations between students and teachers” (p. 148). This is certainly understandable, and my model would help reduce this tension by formalizing the way in which it is implemented. It is by setting the parameters around how students and teachers should interact in this regard, and specifically when time-use choice can occur; the Dutch model of option hours outside of regular class time should be weighed against a system wherein the options for time use fall within the structure’s subject-specific schedule. This is discussed further in chapter six.

4.5 Growth Mindset and the Failure Myth

In her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Dr. Carol Dweck (2006) posits that a key element of success is adopting a “growth mindset” in which one believes that he or she can improve, grow, and ultimately succeed at anything through challenge, persistence, and
effort. This is in contrast to the “fixed mindset,” where one believes that ability is predetermined and static—no amount of effort can overcome it. She argues that those with fixed mindsets tend to avoid challenges and not put in effort out of fear of the embarrassment of failure. Conversely, those with a growth mindset take on challenges, understand that short-term failures are learning opportunities, and find higher levels of achievement as a result.

While Dr. Dweck’s (2006) theory may not seem like it has much to do with the conceptions of agency or decision-making laid out in this thesis (and on the surface, this is understandable), I use it to address a point that could be made against the implementation of student decision-making opportunities in the high school classroom. One could make the argument that to allow students choice with respect to how they use their time during class, what they study, or how they display knowledge could lead to their making unwise decisions that, ultimately, could be harmful.

This deficit mentality can be addressed through Dr. Dweck’s (2006) work. In one study of junior high school-aged students, Dweck found that students who displayed fixed mindset characteristics showed a decline in grades over the two years, while those who adopted a growth mindset actually saw increases in their grades. While in this case, the mindset concept is connected to in-class student achievement, it can also be viewed through the decision-making lens.

By encouraging students to adopt a growth mindset, we no longer see a choice made by a student that did not lead directly to desired effect as “unwise” or damaging. Instead, it is an opportunity for the student, along with the support of his or her teacher, to reflect upon the decision and consider how he or she may go about making decisions in the future. As Dweck notes, people with a growth mindset “know that setbacks will happen. So instead of beating
themselves up, they ask: ‘What can I learn from this? What will I do next time I am in this situation?’ It’s a learning process” (Dweck, 2006, p. 241).

While I am not advocating for the explicit teaching of growth mindset as part of my model, I choose to include it here as a counterargument to the position that allowing students to make more choices in the classroom merely sets them up for failure. It is quite likely, by virtue of their age, experience, and impulsivity, that students will make decisions that are not ideal. The guidance of adults who assist students to see for themselves why those decisions may not have served them best allows those same students to look ahead to future decisions in a more informed manner.

After all, would it not be in the best interest of the child for him or her to make these (potentially) problematic choices in high school while the student is surrounded by a strong group of supportive adults? Failing to do so merely pushes this experience for the student until after high school graduation, where employers and college/university professors are far less likely to provide the same level of support to the student as was available prior. In chapter six, I put forth a set of strategies and tools that aid the students during their decision-making and reflection processes, which also includes interactions with teachers, guidance counsellors, and administrators.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined and considered several existing models that incorporate student decision-making as a notable feature within the classroom. While the methodology differs among them, they do have commonality in that each endeavours to allow the student more opportunity to make choices about his or her own learning in the classroom. Several models stress the importance of ensuring students are able to make choices that align with their own interests and desires. While some express this concept broadly, others focus more on choice
with respect to displaying their curricular knowledge, while still others (such as the Montessori system) begin to delve into the importance of student-driven time-use choices.

Over the past 3 years as a teacher and administrator at Branksome Hall, I have had the opportunity to be a part of the team that brought in new furniture for student lounges as well as for a new 21st century pilot classroom. Working with faculty, administrators, and students, we selected furniture that promoted collaboration, inclusion, and active learning. A study was performed and the data were analyzed. From my own anecdotal observations, I have found students enjoyed utilizing the lounges during class time to work on assignments. This is another form of student decision-making; students choose where they wish to work during class.\textsuperscript{27}

I will consolidate the theories I analyzed in this chapter and to connect them with the broad-based and educational theories laid out in chapters two and three, to create an actionable model. This is done in concert with two specific case studies analyzed in the next chapter. Both display explicit acknowledgement of the student as decision-maker, but do so within an educational structure that is incompatible with present-day OME requirements.

Student decision-making as an element of democratic education has been studied as a concept, theory, and model, both within and outside of the educational structure. Chapter six of this thesis seeks to answer the question: “What would an educational model look like if it aimed to optimize student decision-making opportunities by questioning the status quo culture of education in Ontario? What specific set of steps and strategies could aid members of the educational community to encourage and develop this new culture, which weighs the student

\textsuperscript{27} In fact, student decision-making was present on several levels in the student lounge project. Students were also consulted and asked to give input on what furniture would be purchased for the lounges. In this case, students were making decisions that affected not only their own learning, but what they felt would be best for the community as well.
voice more heavily? This is the basis for the *Student Decision-Making Model (SDMM)* outlined in chapter six.
CHAPTER FIVE: EXEMPLARS OF DECISION-MAKING IN PRACTICE

In this chapter, I aim to examine two more well-known student-centred schools, which have both championed the student as decision-maker as a major pillar of their own pedagogy. Summerhill School in England (started by A. S. Neill) and the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts both implement the philosophy that students should have more say in the decisions that affect them at school. While Neill’s approach is broader, the Sudbury Valley School connects it specifically to the school’s operations in areas such as daily routines, student discipline, and subject material to be studied. What the schools have in common is that they are, for all intents and purposes, alternative schools not necessarily subject to the limitations or regulations of an educational structure.

Later in the chapter, I look at three Canadian schools that have implemented student decision-making opportunities for their students to varying degrees. These schools, unlike Summerhill and Sudbury Valley, are OME-inspected schools that grant credits towards the high school diploma of their respective provincial governments. The examination of these institutions, in concert with the philosophical and practical discussion of democratic education and decision-making given in earlier chapters, set the stage for the Student Decision-Making Model in chapter six of this thesis.

5.1 A. S. Neill and the Summerhill School

At Summerhill, the democratic school in England founded by A. S. Neill, a different relationship exists between authority and student than in traditional schools. Based upon the Summerhill ethos and its rules, each person is given an equal voice, be they teacher or learner. At such, the authority at Summerhill extends beyond the adults to include all students. Each member of the community works to maintain a system whereby all involved have maximum
freedom. This exists not only in the enforcement of rules but in areas of academic study, personal lifestyle, and other judgements rarely reserved for children (Neill, 1992).

Thus, the approach at Summerhill is to place the decision-making process in the hands of the student. Choices exist not only in how to behave and what to study but also whether students choose to attend class at all and what time they go to sleep. Instances that require mediation are done so by the students themselves. The lack of adult-driven curricula, regulations, and criteria shift the focus of the educational process from the teacher to the child.

Using stories and anecdotes from his time at Summerhill, Neill explains the rationale behind a school that uses self-government and choice geared towards the student. He contends that the objective was “to make the school fit the child – instead of making the child fit the school” (Neill, 1992, p. 9). He states his view is “that the child is innately wise and realistic. If left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far he is capable of developing” (Neill, 1992, p. 9).

5.1.1 Placing Neill Within the Decision-Making Theory Spectrum

The educational experience at Summerhill is structured around the student, not an external authority figure. It is an environment that pays deference to the rights of the student, wherein the role of the adult is to remove obstacles that hinder the child’s right to freedom (Berlin, 1969). As mentioned in chapter three of this thesis, Neill’s model, which I label a libertarian approach, is an example of child-centred pedagogy that focuses on individual student needs, but its actual methodology and outcome could be critiqued.

Neill’s model seems to give priority to the student’s ontological freedom, as defined by Sartre (Detmer, 2005). While freedom itself can have quite a broad definition, I argue that Summerhill’s goal surrounds the understanding of “student-as-person.” To that end, the methods employed at Summerhill are not done in the interest of giving students freedom to make certain
choices in select situations. Instead, the students at Summerhill are viewed first and foremost as people whose metaphysical freedom must be respected. Thus freedom at Summerhill refers not so much to a freedom to do but rather a freedom to be.

A caveat to this method of labelling exists when one considers the degree to which the Summerhill pedagogy is executed. In this chapter, I accept the assumption that Neill’s school is one that endeavors to remove all constraints to liberty for the child. In actuality, this is not an all-or-none proposition. Were this to be so, there would be no rules or consequences to actions of community members. Instead, it is more accurate to state that Neill looks to remove any and all constraints on the student so long as such freedom does not impinge upon the freedoms and rights of others. Neill himself has stated that there is no such thing as absolute freedom (Darling, 1992).

Evidence for this includes the lengthy list of rules at Summerhill (including safety-related ones such as climbing on roofs) or the locked cabinets used to keep students from certain materials. Also, Neill’s thoughts on the “spoiled child” display an ideology that differentiates liberty from license, which can have detrimental effects on others (Barrett, 1981). Thus, we must approach Neill’s Summerhill School with the caveat that removal of constraints towards liberty does not condone actions that harm the liberty of others in the community. Acceptance of those hurtful actions would make the term liberty a misnomer, for that would be defined as license by Neill himself (Barrett, 1981).

A. S. Neill’s Summerhill School ranks amongst the more progressive educational experiments. In an environment that values play and happiness over forced schedules and bureaucracy, students develop intrapersonal skills as they make choices and decisions that affect themselves. One could make the argument that Neill’s school, which aims to remove any barriers to freedom that its students may encounter, is promoting the practice of making
decisions in all aspects of school life. Yet, there remains a fundamental difference—with respect to the concept of structure—between Neill’s model and the Student Decision-Making Model I outline later in this thesis. The conceptual framework in chapter one of this thesis includes structure as an external element—the overseeing authority such as the OME or school board. Neill’s structure, while ever present, is the internal structure the school makes for itself.

5.1.2 Neill, Summerhill, and Structure

More traditional schools zero in on academics, pushing students to memorize facts, write essays, sit in ordered rows, and move according to bell schedules. Neoliberal pedagogies, particularly in the United States, would judge the effectiveness of such programs through the analysis of standardized test scores. Neill would likely find that these educational models miss a key element of education. Is it not the purpose of education to teach the child, as opposed to the subject? It is only through such an approach that students can fully realize their ontological freedom. Administrative hierarchies and scheduled classes, along with tests, quizzes and other evaluative measures, all act as hindrances to the development of the child.

A student-centred pedagogy puts the needs of the child at the forefront of educational decision making and policy. Froebel developed the basis for education that encourages students to dedicate their energy to areas of personal interest in 1836. “Only by the extension and enrichment of the child’s instinct to involve itself in active play could sympathetic adult educators help the child in his or her full development as an ‘acting, feeling, and thinking’ human being” (Doddington & Hilton, 2007, p. 14).

This testament to the teaching of the child, as opposed to the training of the child, fits with Dewey’s liberal pedagogy and, specifically, his pragmatist schemata. For Dewey, a constant rebuilding and reassessing of experience is the life force behind education. At Summerhill, the removal of constraints to freedom and the ability for children to make their own
choices is a key factor in their education. Upon facing a decision, children think and make decisions based not just on what they believe the consequences (positive or negative) to be, but also via reflection on past similar experiences (Dewey, 1938).

Adopting a Deweyan experience-based educational culture could theoretically go hand in hand with removing any and all obstacles from a student’s metaphysical freedom. The Summerhill mission is to take the steps required to allow the child to live his or her own life, not that crafted by parental desire or societal pressure. Neill argues that the constraint to liberty placed upon the child “only produces a generation of robots” (1992, p. 15). By developing the free culture, children grow up to be kind to others but also question the roles and status quo imposed upon them.

Neill created an educational environment in which all rules, regulations, pressures, and stimuli are internal. They may be located within the child him- or herself or exist within the confines of the school and its pedagogy. Summerhill does not answer to any larger educational authority. It does not need to follow standardized curricula, meet contact time requirements, or pass inspections. It is not required to hire teachers with certain qualifications, and mandates passed down by a governing authority would not apply to the school. Thus, the lessons about student-centred education are not necessarily applicable to a broader context. Neill’s model works for Summerhill, but any school that still operates under a “higher” regulatory body would find it lacks context as a template.

5.1.3 Critiques of the Summerhill Model

The Summerhill School could be viewed as a hypocritical institution, for if Neill argues for removal of all obstacles to develop complete freedom, where is the student’s freedom to choose to attend school in the first place? Furthermore, student-centred ideology requires that attention be paid not only to the freedoms and choices of each individual student but also to the
freedom of students as a collective. Summerhill uses rules, regulations, and self-government to ensure freedom does not degrade into license, where one can make choices that negatively affect others with no consequence (Barrett, 1981). The critique is that the democratic process we are often so quick to celebrate creates hidden problems that weaken the collective student-centred agenda of the school. Majority voices, as Apple (2001) has so aptly described, tend to drown out voices of those marginalized or in the minority.

Different educational models would each question what helpful role, if any, Neill’s ideology would have on the development of the student. As an example, a more conservative educator may stress that such freedom would be useless, if not harmful, in the preparation of a student who can compete in a global economy. A student attending an institution that allows him or her to view “authorities” as equals, decide when to attend class, and have a voice in law regulation would undoubtedly have difficulty coping in a bureaucratic, hierarchical, and highly regimented corporation.

Another issue that comes from Neill’s insistence on the importance of student enjoyment at school is that the environment created at Summerhill does not mirror the environments that the student will likely face outside the school’s walls. While it is admirable, the nurturing of ontological freedom and subsequent ability to choose what to do or not do in any situation may develop students who are inwardly focused. Suissa (2006) argues this point, saying “one has the impression of a lively group of self-confident, happy children who may, one imagines, very well grow up to be happy, but completely self-centred individuals” (p. 96). Her position that Summerhill seems to be more of an isolated island than a school involved in the community also adds weight to the question of whether a school free of restrictions on ontological freedom is itself free from faults.
According to Neill’s (1992) account of Summerhill, there are very few or no structured discussions between teacher and learner regarding the choices being made by the students and the consequences that follow. Students given the freedom to make a variety of choices may not learn from these choices if there is no specific analysis and reflection included in the program. Students may not make the connections between consequences and choices, nor may they understand the effects some decisions had on their short-term or long-term goals. Neill’s methodology may be successful on one level by removing the constraints to ontological freedom, but since the environment is still a school, one can still question whether or not such a methodology actually provides any learning experiences if the students do not gain knowledge from their choices.

With respect to Neill and the lack of curriculum, Wood (2007) questions Darling’s (1994) view of progressive education via child-centred education, positing that the “notion that curriculum content arises through needs and interests was one of the key weaknesses of the developmental approach” (p. 123). Simply because a student shows an interest in a specific topic does not ensure meaningful conceptual understanding and skill development. It is myopic to assume curricular development to be toxic to the development of childhood innocence,28 for it ignores the importance of curriculum as the basis for learning and critical thinking (Wood, 2007).

Finally, questions have been raised whether Neill has tried to develop theory regarding educational practice through the simple observation of a small number of children (Barrow, 1978). An argument for child-centred education, such as the one developed at Summerhill, may fail to focus on the needs of individual students when the procedures and beliefs developed there

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28 Wood (2007) in this context critiques models of child-centred education through the lens of early childhood education (ECE); hence the allusion to “innocence.” Her thesis remains relevant as it sharply questions A. S. Neill’s view regarding child-centred education being free of curriculum to allow children to remain children.
arose from interactions with certain specific pupils. Perhaps more can be gleaned by examining another alternative democratic school, one with a larger footprint, more graduates, and a more concrete connection to a structure of education that exists outside the school’s walls.

5.2 The Sudbury Valley School

In the late 1960s, a small school with a progressive concept was planned, developed, and opened by a group of parents and educators. Located in a converted barn on six acres of land in Framingham, MA, the Sudbury Valley School (SVS) accepted its first students in 1968. Today, the size of both the facilities and student body has grown, and the school educates children from the ages of 4 to 19 (Sudbury Valley School, 2017a). The fact that much of the literature on this school defines its demographic by age—when most traditional schools would do so by grade—is an indicator of one of the school’s key components: grades, classes and streaming hinder natural learning and growth that take place in an age- and ability-mixed environment.

The school’s model eschews the traditional classroom model, where students, similar in age, ability and often socioeconomic status, sit at desks in a classroom and listen passively to an adult teacher. Further, the school questions the separation of subjects in traditional schools (math, science, English, etc.) and use of assessments (quizzes, tests, and essays). Instead, the SVS model is in favour of an organic learning experience initiated by the child.

The philosophy of the school rests on a researched and carefully considered belief that all children are interested in something and will want to learn about it if given the support to do so. This is not to say the child “does nothing” but rather that he or she chooses to focus on specific interests, making his or her time each day more efficient and productive. If placed in a social environment with other children undergoing the same educational experience, children internalize knowledge of relevant subject matter, master necessary skills, and develop their own unique dispositions through everyday conversations and experiences.
In this section, I will look at the school (which serves as the model for many like-minded schools across the globe) and its implementation of democratic education. The SVS model approaches curriculum and learning in a unique way; the school includes students in its day-to-day operations and decision-making processes and uses their voices in conflict resolution. Furthermore, I ask the reader to note that the Sudbury Valley School has connections to an external structure that Summerhill does not—for example, the school has the necessary approval of school officials in the town of Framingham, MA and all students are required to submit a thesis in order to graduate (Sadofsky & Greenberg, 1994).

The Sudbury Valley School operates using a variety of progressive beliefs, all combined to develop a system that starts with the child’s interests and works outwards. In the next section I discuss some of the school’s basic philosophies that reflect an inclusion of decision-making on the part of the student: lack of prescribed curriculum in favour of self-directed learning, incorporating play into learning, using mixed-age and mixed-ability student groupings, and student participation in school-wide decisions and resolving conflicts between members of the community.

5.2.1 The SVS and Lack of Prescribed Curriculum

The curriculum\(^{29}\) at SVS is developed using a method not normally seen in traditional schools throughout North America. A student will come to Sudbury Valley School, likely between the ages of 4 and 19. That student will find that there is no prescribed curriculum, tests or assignments. Instead, he or she is free to pursue knowledge of topics that interest him or her.

Here, the school likely runs up against its first criticism. What if a student wishes to do nothing? To this, one could respond with the query that if a student comes to an environment

\(^{29}\) While SVS may lack a prescribed curriculum developed and approved by a group of adults (such as a board or government department), the term can still be used to describe the content, learning objectives, and learning strategies used to guide the education of the child. The key difference is it is developed by the student.
where he or she is given the opportunity to learn about whatever he or she chooses and still chooses to do nothing, why is it more likely that this disengaged student would find passion in the centralized, mass-prescribed curriculum of today’s mainstream schools? Perhaps the correlation, if any, between the SVS model and apathetic students is not a causal relationship.

Next, we must consider the word “nothing.” So entrenched are we in our lecture, memorize, and assess educational model that perhaps we automatically assume that a lack of books and notes means no learning is taking place. As the school’s website explains, the story of the child who elects to simply go fishing every day is not necessarily learning “nothing” as the conventional wisdom may believe. That student “was reading about fishing and doing research on fish and doing all sorts of things that had to do with fishing” (Sudbury Valley School, 2017b, para. 54). At SVS, anything the child wishes to do requires that he or she learn all the relevant concepts, facts, ideas, and even controversies surrounding it.

Unlike the traditional pedagogical method, at SVS the student’s learning is entirely self-directed. No adult or teacher will give him or her all this information. He or she will find it through a process of peer discussion, reading, problem solving, and adult facilitation. One student may elect to go fishing, while another will want to learn to play the guitar. A third student will want to read a book, while a fourth will wish to develop a computer program. With the proliferation of outdoor education programs, music and art schools, and technology courses, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find any topic chosen by a student at SVS that is not covered in some traditional curriculum somewhere. The difference lies in the fact that the student chooses when he or she wishes to approach it.

**Self-directed learning at SVS.** The crux of the SVS model lies in its defence of self-directed learning. Sadofsky and Greenberg (1994) explain the school’s premise: “All people are curious by nature; that the most efficient, long-lasting, and profound learning takes place when
started and pursued by the learner . . . [and] that all people are creative if they are allowed to
develop their unique talents” (Sadofsky & Greenberg, 1994, p. xv). The school does away with
forced curriculum and learning objectives in favour of a more organic methodology whereby the
student determines for him- or herself what the curriculum should be.

By simply asking oneself “what am I interested in?” each student develops a curriculum
that is personally relevant. The school then provides a nurturing environment where students can
learn more about their chosen topic through the means they like best: discussion with peers or
adults, reading, or problem solving. The belief is that because the student has chosen what to
learn, the innate interest and sense of ownership translate into knowledge and learning that are
permanent and meaningful.

As curriculum covers a spectrum from content to learning methods, self-directed
learning extends beyond topics. At SVS, students are given the opportunity to play a role in
developing their own teaching and learning strategies. This includes choosing with whom they
wish to learn and how that learning will look. Learning occurring within groups of students
who are of different ages and abilities is common at SVS (Feldman, 1997); what is noteworthy
is that those groups are consistently developed by the students themselves.

**Delete classrooms and grade levels, add play.** The Sudbury Valley School takes the
unorthodox approach of eliminating grade levels and classrooms in its quest to create a truly
self-directed learning environment. Students are encouraged to pursue learning they feel is
relevant, and as a result denoting specific classrooms for specific tasks would be logistically
problematic. Instead, a group of students may work on a computer problem using technology in
one room, while at the next desk other students may be reading or discussing current events.

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30 A discussion on play as learning, a relevant factor on how students learn, is seen later in this section.
The lack of specific classrooms extends beyond subjects but to age as well. At SVS one will not find a “Grade 5” or “Kindergarten” classroom. The combining of students at different age levels allows learning and peer support to proceed unencumbered. By seeking to connect students of different age groups, the school aims to have younger students find answers to their self-directed questions through the help of older or more experienced pupils. With traditional schools and their emphasis on grades (e.g., 1 through 12), this type of relationship is far less common.

The theory is supported by Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (1978). At SVS, Jay Feldman (1997) did research and noted several positive outcomes of age mixing. They ranged from the peer support mentioned above to numerous instances of older students including younger or less experienced students in an activity by adjusting the difficulty of the challenge to meet everyone’s needs. He found that older students routinely responded positively to requests by younger students for help, and gave help freely, often speaking with each other about methods for teaching younger children.

By bringing Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development to life, Feldman (1997) found at Sudbury Valley School “older children showed a commitment to younger children whose company they sought out and whose outcomes they cared about” (p. 9). Additionally, he noted that “in addition to the possible benefits to their self-esteem, younger children might also be able to develop new skills through these [age-mixed] friendships” (p. 9). It seems clear that the school’s mission to allow students to create knowledge through self-initiated and collaborative activity is aided greatly by doing away with traditional grade levels.

Gray and Chanoff (1984) noted that a commonly used method for learning within these heterogeneous groupings was “play.” This could be viewed in the literal sense; the incorporation of games brings with it development of rules, learning strategies, and working with teammates.
However, the authors observed play to be a synonym for the “pursuing of immediate interests” (p. 610)—what is more fun than taking part in an activity that you really want to do? They further state “it is no accident that the kinds of activities children enjoy are precisely those from which they learn a great deal” (p. 610).

The Sudbury Valley School creates an environment of learning that encourages self-study and exploration developed by the individual student. It also argues that such methodology would not be possible without a democratic environment that gives those same students a voice in running the school on a day-to-day basis. The curriculum at Sudbury Valley School goes well beyond the learning of new concepts, ideas, or facts. It also includes an understanding of responsibility, duty, and ethics.

**Communal decision-making and conflict resolution.** Like Summerhill, the Sudbury Valley School follows a democratic model. The school goes about its daily functioning by ensuring that each member of the community, student or adult, has an equal say or vote in the running of the school. Each member therefore is given agency over an equal portion of the school and, as such, students and adults both often feel a great deal of responsibility towards the school’s well-being.

Two groups, made up of students and adults, run the school from the inside, eschewing hierarchy in favour of collaboration. The first is the Assembly, “which has the right to make broad policy for the school” (Sudbury Valley School, 2017b, para. 23). It is made up of select students, parents, and members of staff, and any large-scale decisions regarding the school mission or direction are decided democratically. The second is the comprehensive School Meeting, which helps organize the day-to-day running of the school (Greenberg, 1973).
Scheduling decisions (e.g., when the spring concert would be held) or other logistical decisions regarding facilities and so on, would be decided, again democratically, in this venue.

Finally, any issues with contraventions of rules or disputes between members of the community are decided by a Judicial Committee (JC) that meets regularly. The function of the JC, composed of students and staff members, is to hear both sides of the issue and determine a resolution and/or determine punishment. These initiatives (Assembly, School Meeting, and Judicial Committee) do not directly tie in to the school’s curricular approach but are vital as a platform for the school’s democratic ideology. If one wishes to create a school where students are afforded the right to decide what they will learn, so too must they exercise their right to determine how they will learn and what their learning environment will look like, lest we see hypocrisy in the school’s democratic mission.

The SVS model supports this logistical methodology through the lens of developmental theory. This may seem counterintuitive at first, as one often conflates developmental theory with Piagetian stages that seem to be more in tune with the traditional grade levels not found at SVS. After all, if children of a certain age group are at a developmental level different from students younger or older, should they not be isolated and educated amongst only themselves?

The SVS shows that this may not necessarily be the case. The SVS, with its Judicial Committees where students act as arbitrators and jurors, shows how moral development may occur best when it takes place in an age-mixed environment. Feldman (2001) conducted another study at Sudbury Valley School, this time looking at the importance of the Judicial Committee as a backdrop for moral development in adolescents. In his study he noted the use of the JC as vital to the development of moral reasoning, as Kohlberg stated that this development requires

31 The democratic votes in Assembly and School Meeting are a majority rule process, where each member of the community has a single vote.
“a democratic environment that allows discussion of day-to-day conflicts and problems” (Feldman, 2001, p. 24).

The JC, as Feldman (2001) notes, not only brings together students with adults in an attempt to mediate disputes, but more importantly brings together students of different ages. For example, an older child may speak on behalf of a younger child too timid or shy to vocalize that he is being teased. In another example, an older student is required to put her personal feelings aside as she explains the punishment to a younger child who has been found guilty of an offense. It is in these varied age interactions that students begin to develop their moral reasoning, as they are required to extend their understanding of choice, responsibility, and action beyond a tight circle comprised of similarly experienced peers.

5.2.2 The Sudbury Valley School as a Democratic School

In the previous section, the basic beliefs and philosophies of the Sudbury Valley School were described. Each of those philosophies is a pillar that helps support the “roof”—an all-encompassing idea—that the Sudbury Valley School is first and foremost a democratic school. In this section I will discuss the specific aims and approaches that the school uses to develop this “roof.”

It can be deduced through the school’s mission that the goal is to raise students who, by the time they matriculate, are:

1. Responsible, caring and community-minded individuals;
2. Able to think independently and be part of a team;
3. Prepared to take whichever life path they choose.

Of course, many would argue that these goals are shared by schools most students attend, which is not false. The difference lies in the methodology: SVS nurtures these attributes through student-chosen curriculum and student-directed learning (as well as student involvement in
school decisions and operations), as opposed to state-centred syllabi or enforcement of rules developed by adults. Each of the three aforementioned aims fits within the school’s philosophy because each allows for the practice of democracy in one form or another.

**Responsible, caring, and community minded.** At the school, students are involved with the operation of the school, with judicial matters, and consistently interact with students of different ages. In so doing, they develop affection for their community and empathy for others that, one would hope, they would carry with them after they leave the school. This gives an extra dimension to the school’s ethos; the daily involvement in process outlined above makes the school a site of democracy in education, but its aims centred on community-mindedness display an eye toward educating for democratic citizenship.

Feldman (1997) concluded that in this free-choice environment, older students routinely took responsibility for younger ones. Furthermore, he noted on several occasions that learning took place when children of different ages worked together to make an activity or game work. Fogelman (1997) notes that citizenship education emphasizes collaborative and cooperative methodologies as well as an increased use of projects, student-led efforts, and resources beyond the classroom. Thus, a connection can be seen between moral reasoning and educational learning at SVS; being a responsible citizen could be considered one of the school’s educational aims.

The Sudbury Valley School considers this an important part of being a democratic school, as students who are asked to take part in decisions regarding the operations of a school must understand that it is a community-based process. “In a democratic school it is true that all of those directly involved in the school, including young people, have the right to participate in

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32 This is discussed in detail in “An alternative to neoconservative pedagogy” later in this chapter.
33 The demarcation between democracy in education and educating for democracy is outlined in Pinto (2013).
the process of decision making” (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 9). They must respect the opinions and choices of those who differ from their own, give input that has the best interests of the school at heart, and think of their peers’ learning outcomes as just as important as their own. When a student takes part in a vote regarding a school decision, the school reflects a majority-rule or representative democracy; his or her vote has just as much weight as the votes of others in the community.

**Independent thinkers and teamwork.** By nature of the student-directed curriculum model, the school also develops students who think independently and are given chances to practice making choices; this is not necessarily a priority in traditional schools. As the Sudbury Valley School (1970) states:

> By substituting the educator’s judgment for the child’s judgment, we are teaching the child something much more far-reaching than a specific subject: we are teaching the child to rely on others for guidance, rather than on his own sense of direction. What a child really learns is not the core curriculum – that he may or may not master, depending on how good a student he is – but rather the idea that it is up to others, more “expert” than he, to determine what he really needs to know. (p. 58)

Of course, once a student has decided on a topic that he or she wishes to pursue, he or she may find a need to consult with and get assistance from other students.

The SVS aims to ensure students have faith in their own choices and are able to think independently. They should be free to study that which interests them and not feel that they must always wait for direction. They are not only learning the material that they chose to study themselves, but also something much more important: their voice has relevance. It is these learned behaviours and qualities that are necessary to promote self-esteem, encourage love of learning, and create new leaders.
Many students will work with others on their personal topics of interest. A student who wishes to learn to play the piano may ask an older child experienced with the piano for help; these requests for help are rarely denied (Feldman, 1997). This teamwork paradigm is an educational aim in itself as students learn a skill set necessary for success in postsecondary education, the workforce, family life, in friendships, and in life.

**Preparing for post-SVS life.** In what ways does the Sudbury Valley School prepare students for life once they leave the school? As mentioned previously in this section, ensuring feelings of responsibility and embarking on self-directed learning give students the foundation they need for life after SVS. In order to bring all this together, students are required to complete and discuss a paper on a topic of their own choosing, known as the thesis, prior to graduation (Sadofsky & Greenberg, 1994). It is through this activity that students can practice and hone their skills with respect to choosing a topic of interest, research (via both texts and discussions with others), writing and editing, and discussing/defending.

Considerations of joining the non-SVS world after graduation are often the basis for another major criticism. How will these students survive in jobs or future study without the fundamental knowledge taught in the traditional school’s prescribed curriculum? Studies of SVS alumni show that this is not necessarily a problem; these graduates are often self-motivated and are adept at working independently. Gray and Chanoff (1986) have noted that SVS alumni often were highly successful in jobs and careers. Even more surprisingly, they note:

They have also done well in college. Not having taken the usual high school courses, many if not most of these individuals must have been behind most of their college classmates in knowledge of the materials taught in such courses, yet they seem to have had little trouble catching up. As we have seen, the graduates themselves explain this in terms of their positive attitude about learning, their feeling of responsibility for their own
learning, their ability to find things out on their own, and their lack of inhibitions about communicating with professors and asking for help when needed – characteristics that they regard as having been fostered by their SVS experience. (p. 211)

At Sudbury Valley School, the aims of personal responsibility, independent decision-making, and preparation for life after the school are all centred on the belief that students who create their own curriculum create a life path best not only for themselves but also for the community in which they live. Again, this connects to the importance of personal decision-making; students who are given freedom regarding their own choices will transfer those skills to learning experiences beyond the SVS.

5.2.3 The Sudbury Valley School: a Critical Analysis

While I have discussed and given credence to many of the positive aspects of the Sudbury Valley School, one should not marginalize the possible negative implications of a democratic school-based individual democracy (curriculum development) and participatory democracy (involvement in school decision-making).34 This is not to say that the model should not exist, nor am I arguing that all schools should shift to the SVS model in spite of these considerations. Simply, they are points of discussion that should be considered in the application and improvement of the nontraditional educational model.

An alternative to neoconservative pedagogy. Perhaps we must consider the societal model from which schools such as the SVS wish to “escape.” An approach geared towards democratic education that allows each student to create knowledge in areas of interest poses a problem for neoconservative governments or regulatory agencies that may wish to use education as a tool for their own power reproduction. One could make the argument that a government has

34 For a deeper understanding of participatory democracy, see “Participatory Democracy in an Age of Global Capitalism” (Graham, 2001).
more control over its electorate when it selects curricula and decides when and how students will be assessed, doing so via standardized tests, approved materials, and centralized administration.

The development of a personal curriculum for each student at SVS allows for knowledge creation that is relevant and lasting. It also fosters learning through a variety of means, including peer discussion and collaborative work and play. It gives each student the platform to not only study what he or she deems interesting, but to have the tools and skills necessary to take the appropriate steps later in life when he or she begins to choose career paths. It is not an environment where students are exempt from learning or the curriculum studied at other schools. Instead, each student plays the role of education minister, choosing what will be studied, when, and why such topics are important.

Glass (2005) stresses the importance of schooling citizens/students in the critique of dominant ideologies. He explains the importance of utilizing democratic education in this regard:

Democratic education enables students to develop the capacities needed to challenge the limits of the current situation and transform the world toward a vision of a more just democratic community . . . [a] democratic education worthy of the name refuses to make a nobody of anybody. (p. 84)

Glass argues that a proper democratic education levels the playing field and gives all students the same opportunities and choices. By the same token, Apple and Beane (1995) characterize the democratic school as one that eliminates institutional barriers of race, gender, and socioeconomic status from its students. They posit that democratic teachers “tie their understanding of undemocratic practice inside the school to larger conditions on the outside” (pp. 11–12).
Similar notions of democratic schooling are argued by Goodman (1992), who speaks to the importance of noting and fighting societal inequalities, Boler (2004), specifies the educational need to “represent marginalized voices fairly by challenging dominant voices in the classroom” (p. 4), and others focus on intersubjectivity (Bai, 2001) as well as critical democratic education (hooks, 2003; Kincheloe, 1999).

The SVS brings this theory into practice by developing each student’s personal democracy when choosing topics to study and their representative democracy when making decisions that affect the entire school. In either case, each student is championed in the same way, regardless of how their personal desires or views may interact with any particular government or authority.

**Comparisons to Summerhill.** The SVS model roots itself in a democratic pedagogy (where students play a role in the running of the school) and incorporates freedom and choice (in the selection of topics to study or how to use time). This could be viewed as a school microcosm of negative liberty (Berlin, 1969) where any constraints to freedom are removed on behalf of the subject. This brings us back to Summerhill in the United Kingdom. It mimics the SVS in some ways: meetings regarding daily school operation where each member has one vote, student selected criteria, rules and regulations that must be followed.

However Neill’s logic behind his philosophy is questionable. He writes of a student who uses Neill’s tools and leaves them to rust outside. His description of his reasons for being upset is puzzling—he notes that he is upset not due to the student’s lack of respect for another person or that person’s property, but rather simply that he no longer has tools to use. Can removal of constraints to freedom also remove understanding of responsibility towards others? Neill attempts to argue this is not the case in *Freedom - Not License* (1966). However others have
stated his definition of freedom, as well as its implementation at Summerhill, do not reflect his argument (Barrett, 1981).

The question then remains, at what point does a student-driven, freedom-embracing environment lose touch with the responsibility society wishes to instill in students? It seems to me that Neill’s extreme libertarianism helps frame the SVS philosophy as a democratic school driven by specific aims. Neill’s primary (and seemingly only) pedagogical aim is to remove obstacles. The SVS uses representative and individual democracy to help students determine for themselves how to navigate obstacles upon graduation, as caring members of a community who can think both individually and as part of a collective.

**Consequences and self-awareness.** As mentioned in this section, the school discusses and mediates disputes daily through use of a Judicial Committee (JC), based on Kohlberg’s argument that consistent discourse regarding actions and conflicts is necessary for moral reasoning. While this is relevant for the strengthening of interpersonal relations and decisions, is there any reflection for intrapersonal decisions a student makes?

For example, let us say Henry teases a younger student named Steven. Henry may be called before the JC, and protocol will be followed. Henry may be found guilty of his actions, and along the way reasons why his actions were unacceptable for the community may have been understood. Henry would likely stop teasing Steven (or anyone else) due to a combination of empathy for the teased party but also distaste for the punishment he received for doing so.

Now let us say Henry decided he hated fractions and was never going to learn them. At SVS this is perfectly acceptable, and much of the literature on the school (including its website) states that students will learn what is important to them when they realize they need it. Then one day Henry decides to join a few other students in making a cake from recipe. He becomes
agitated with his inability to help; he does not understand what “a half cup” means, nor can he “adjust the recipe” for a different number of people. Ideally, Henry would reflect on this stumbling block (perhaps on his own or through the aid of another) and realize that his poor knowledge of fractions is what led to the negative experience. He would then be more likely to want to learn them. If this reflection did not occur he would simply be upset and never learn them, despite the fact that the knowledge would benefit him. Are there reflections and discussions on the consequences of individual choices that do not affect others? If not, one could make the argument that the student-driven curricula might cause problems for children not in a position to reflect, ex post facto, on the consequences of what they chose not to learn.

**Comfort zone and missed opportunity.** Finally, one must consider the “tunnel vision” a student may encounter at a school where he or she chooses the curriculum. Is a school with this model encouraging students to take risks or step outside of their comfort zones? Part of the telos of the school is to prepare students for whichever path they may take. What will happen to students who have graduated and find themselves in a situation where they are required to read/study something in which they have no interest in order to satisfy a larger goal? Will they have problems with this?

On a personal level, I recall my days as a high school student. I remember fondly my science and mathematics classes: solving equations, graphing trends, performing experiments, and writing lab reports. Yet some of my most exciting memories come from social science courses I was required to take, where I learned about government and history, debated with classmates, and appreciated the postmodern view that a set algorithm or methodology does not automatically exist in many situations. A student at the Sudbury Valley School may never have
the opportunity to appreciate something he or she may not have considered interesting due to the lack of a prescribed curriculum.

Conflicting democratic theories. There are several considerations which create a metaphorical grey area surrounding the labelling of the SVS as a democratic school. The terminology used in this paper noted that the SVS uses certain philosophical beliefs (pillars) to aid students in their overall growth and development as individuals who can work with others or on their own, but always do so as contributing members of a community.

One of the school’s requirements for graduation is the development and oral presentation of a thesis (on a subject of the student’s choosing), which then must be defended by answering questions asked by the audience (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). After several years of experiencing individualistic liberal democracy and sparing students from prescribed curriculum, such a thesis could be viewed as out of place with the school’s mission. One could make the argument that a school cannot call itself democratic if it requires its students to take part in a specific rite of passage in order to receive a graduation diploma.

This line of thought could be viewed in an even broader context when one considers the innate hypocrisy between making decisions for oneself and the idea of education as a paternalistic endeavour. How many of the students at the SVS wished to attend school in the first place? While the school itself may be a democratic environment in its functioning, is this still an appropriate characterization for a school that did not allow the students there the choice of attending in the first place?

Finally, if the SVS labels itself as a democratic school, then as mentioned earlier it would require fair and equitable access to all students, regardless of external factors. Can a school mirror the desired democratic model it seeks within its walls if it does not necessarily work with a community of students drawn from all walks of life? One cannot help but question
the true democratic nature of a school that charges $9,500 per year tuition (Sudbury Valley School, 2017a); it is quite likely that the voices of working class students are not well represented at the SVS.

5.3 Canadian Exemplars of Student Decision-Making

The two schools discussed earlier in this chapter are well-established referents with respect to democratic schooling and student decision-making; however, neither school is a Canadian institution. Since the SDMM proposed in the next chapter is developed with Ontario schools in mind, in this section I look at examples of schools that implement student decision-making policies in Canada.

Eight Canadian schools are part of the Canadian Coalition of Self-Directed Learning (CCSDL). These schools undertake joint research projects, review best practices, and implement self-directed learning principles for their students. The CCSDL recognizes five pillars that form the basis for self-directed learning (Canadian Coalition of Self-Directed Learning, 2018):

1. independent study, whereby self-study packages replace teacher lectures;
2. teacher-advisors who meet daily with students to review their progress;
3. self-paced learning, which allows students to begin or complete courses at any time during the academic year;
4. individual schedules which favour learning centres over formalized classes and master schedules;
5. teachers and school assistants who, as subject experts, assist students throughout the day with content.

While the coalition may only be made up of eight Canadian schools, these institutions substantially integrate student decision-making into their daily routines, while working within the required frameworks of their respective Ministries of Education.
In British Columbia, Thomas Haney Secondary School in Maple Ridge (a CCSDL member) implements a vast array of student decision-making opportunities for students in Grades 9 to 12. Students meet with their advisor teacher each morning to plan out their day. A student’s daily schedule may include some formal class time (in Grades 10 to 12 students attend a class for each course for one hour per week). Predominately, each student’s day consists of time to work individually or collaboratively on assigned tasks; it is up to the student (with teacher guidance) to determine how he or she wishes to approach the completion of their tasks (Sherlock, 2013).

Two Ontario schools that are also members of the CCSDL are Mary Ward Catholic Secondary School in Scarborough (part of the Greater Toronto Area), and Westmount Secondary in Hamilton. At Mary Ward, the five pillars of the CCSDL program are integrated fully, and the result is an educational institute that is comparable to the Sudbury Valley School, since, as noted in the Ontario College of Teachers publication Professionally Speaking at this school:

There is no master timetable. There are no bells, no periods, no semesters and no traditional classrooms. Instead, courses based on the standard curriculum are divided into 18 learning units. Students work independently through one unit at a time, following a mastery learning philosophy that requires them to achieve a minimum of 60 per cent on all evaluated work before they can move on to the next unit. The 18th unit is the final evaluation and involves an exam or culminating activity or a combination of the two, just as at most schools. (Brune & Miller, 2010, para. 6)

Much like the SDMM outlined in chapter six, Mary Ward’s model puts students at the centre of the decision-making process, while still working within the boundaries of the OME. Students are asked to decide for themselves what they will work on, when and where they will do so, and
with whom they will work. The expectations and requirements do not change, but each student is given more latitude to plan his or her path to meeting those requirements.

Westmount does not provide opportunities for decision-making to the same comprehensive extent that Mary Ward does, but explicitly supports students as they make decisions regarding what is the best use of their time. While Westmount still operates a semestered system where each student is timetabled into eight traditional courses, flexibility is given within that schema. For example, if a student feels he or she needs time to work on Course B during Course A, he or she may ask Course A teacher’s permission to do so. If permission is granted, he or she can “sign-out” of Course A and go work on Course B in another area of the school (Brune & Miller, 2010). Students are still responsible for any work missed, and this approach is similar to the Time Use Exemplar I give as part of the SDMM in chapter six.

The three examples given above show that student decision-making can be a part of a mainstream educational system. Many students (and their parents) select these schools because they believe that the model provided matches with the student’s learning style (Sherlock, 2013). One could make the argument that such a model is not for every child, and as a result, some children may not receive these decision-making opportunities, and develop the skills that come with them, if they do not attend these schools. The SDMM in the next chapter adapts several of the five pillars of these schools, but does so in a more flexible manner that could potentially reach any student in any Ontario school. The model allows for specific adjustments to better meet the needs of individual students, and encourages a formal process for reflecting on choices and considering them for the future (see the Time Use Exemplar in section 6.2).

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, models for incorporating student decision-making into education were examined. The Summerhill and Sudbury Valley Schools encountered fewer obstructions to this
approach, as they were free from the regulations of external governments or bodies. In either institution, students play a large role with respect to determining what they will study, when they will do so, and with whom they will work. They also are asked to be a part of the daily operations at the school; students are part of the process that decides budgets, maintains facilities, and administers discipline. Both schools take this approach as a direct result of their belief in that the best interest of the student is met when the student’s voice is heard as equal to or more important than that of the adult with respect to the student’s educational experience.

Summerhill uses a libertarian philosophy—to allow students to thrive, it is the role of the school to remove any potential barriers to student liberty. In practice, this means students are not required to attend classes, follow a set curriculum, or take part in specific activities. It is argued that learning still takes place without affixing these parameters externally.

The Sudbury Valley School works on a similar philosophy to Summerhill, but the degree to which it allows student choice to be the driving force behind decisions made is not as pronounced. Like Summerhill, there is no set curriculum, and students use their time to learn as they see fit. Students also take part in operational decisions for the school and play a role in disciplinary actions. Yet, the inclusion of the graduating thesis, the Judiciary Council, and more regimented meetings to discuss school matters (Assembly, School Meeting) give the school elements that mimic the structure of governmental or regulatory bodies in the mainstream school system. The difference is the SVS creates that structure internally, with input from the students. The school itself sums up its philosophy: “Can anyone really say what a child of six needs to learn today to be an effective adult twenty years from now?” (1970, p. 57)

Both schools also focus on educating the student as a person, focusing more on desires, interests, and values and less on standardized test measures, preselected curricula, and externally created regulations. Additionally, neither school would find success, in its current form, in
passing inspection by the OME, which requires all public schools as well as independent schools seeking to pass inspection to abide by policies laid out in OME documents. These include the OME’s curriculum documents, which determine which courses may be offered at which level, what the prerequisites are, and what topics must be covered in each course. OME-inspected schools must also comply with the Policy and Program Requirements, which outline the educational experience for students, including specifics such as how many hours of class time are required each year. They must also keep their assessment, evaluating, and reporting of student achievement policies in line with the OME’s Growing Success document (Private Schools Policy and Procedures Manual, 2017a).

Schools such as the Sudbury Valley School and Summerhill display a commendable respect for the student decision-making process, but their logistical day-to-day operations and policies are not in line with these OME requirements. As such, basing a model for implementation in Ontario solely on the template laid out by these schools would be problematic, as any school going to such lengths could, at best, qualify as a noninspected private school and thus not grant OSSD credits to students. The drawback of these schools is that students who do not earn an OSSD have limited postsecondary options.35

Near the end of the chapter, I looked at three Canadian institutions that also implement student decision-making opportunities to a substantial extent. These schools, as part of the Canadian Coalition of Self-Directed Learning, use some of the key principals of the Sudbury Valley School and Summerhill, but do so in a way that does meet OME requirements. They provide students with a path towards the OSSD, but their benefits only reach a small percentage of Ontario students.

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35 In fact, as of March 2017, over 500 of the 1,230 private schools in Ontario were inspected and given authority to grant OSSD credits (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a), along with 100% of public secondary schools in Ontario which do so.
The question then becomes, what would be the key elements of a model which honours student decision-making as seen in these schools, but does so in such a way that any school in Ontario could implement them in a flexible manner to meet the needs of all students? Or more importantly, is a culture shift required that questions, and perhaps alters or eliminates certain elements of OME requirements in order to put students at the centre of their own learning?

In the next and final chapter, I aim to outline what such a model would look like, developing a set of guidelines that could be used to create a new model which exists in the overlapping area between the two circles in Figure 1 (chapter one), but to a lesser extent in the non-overlapping areas of the circles as well. A model which truly recognizes and values the importance of student decision-making as part of educational culture, and does so in a way that makes it wholly accessible to as many Ontario Secondary School students as possible, even if it requires a change to the structure as it currently exists.
CHAPTER SIX: THE STUDENT DECISION-MAKING MODEL

In the first five chapters of this thesis, I have summarized, analyzed, and critically discussed a variety of different conceptions of student decision-making as seen through a democratic education lens. Some conceptions are broader in nature, while other theories offer overarching guidelines or beliefs. Moreover, I have also looked at six different models that propose specific sets of strategies or tools that codify how student decision-making could be (and has been) realized within schools. Specifically in chapters four and five, I looked more closely at models of student decision-making in education which more clearly set out the methods and procedures to develop each student’s inherent ability in this area.

In this chapter, I aim to bring relevant elements of the theories of decision-making within education and models, placed within the philosophical frameworks of decision-making and autonomy laid out in this thesis, to develop a model of my own which could be implemented at the secondary level in Ontario. The model would not, even if adopted on a large scale by a school or school board, threaten a school’s ability to grant Ontario Secondary School Diplomas via the OME. As such, if an entity were to adopt the model in such a way that would require changes to OME structure (for example, a school board that wishes to no longer follow the 110-hour course requirement), these changes would have to be adopted at the governmental level. As noted in the conceptual framework in chapter one, changes to the culture of education with respect to students as decision-makers may happen at the OME level or the school/classroom level.

I begin this chapter by elaborating further on the key pieces of a new model, which I refer to as the Student Decision-Making Model (SDMM), by first using the research in this thesis to show how and why certain pieces have been selected. I will explain what would change from or stay the same as the status quo in this new model, as well as suggest what the duties and
responsibilities of key groups are. These groups include students, teachers, administrators, guidance counsellors, and, to a lesser extent, parents. An exemplar of the model is then given—a specific and applicable set of strategies that allow students more latitude in determining how to use their time in class and how teachers can support students in this regard. With respect to the conceptual framework in chapter one, this exemplar, known as the *Time Use Exemplar (TUE)*, falls in the overlapping area of the Venn diagram in Figure 1. The TUE is a method for increasing student choice opportunity in the classroom, which also happens to align with current OME regulations.

The chapter will then conclude by identifying and addressing possible criticisms of the model as well as outlining what areas should be explored to further improve the implementation of student decision-making opportunities in Ontario schools. This model is intended to address educators’ concerns on a professional level. It is a model that considers the logistical and educational issues that arise when adjustments to the current culture of education are made. At the same time, it lays out what the possible next steps could be, in a practical way, while still leaving the door open for teachers and administrators to implement the model in ways that they feel would best serve their students.

### 6.1 Reconsidering the Accepted Culture of Decision-Making in Schools

So why develop a new model? Why not simply encourage the Ontario government to adopt a Sudbury Valley or Summerhill School model across the province? The response to this would be twofold. First, it may not be necessary to adopt all elements of either model. For the Sudbury Valley School, some schools or school boards may focus more on the decision-making elements with respect to curricular content while others may look to develop more robust character education programs through Judicial Councils, for example. Changing the culture of Ontario schools to something akin to Summerhill would be a logistical nightmare; the lack of
any structure would put principals at risk of not meeting their legal obligations for student care, as they act in loco parentis.

Second, the two models both lack any formal manner of explicit decision-making education. That is to say, while both models give ample opportunities for students to make decisions, there is no learning occurring with respect to how decisions should be made. Student learning with respect to the decision-making process occurs passively and haphazardly. An educational structure can exist that incorporates more student choice (as the models in chapter five do), but does so in a way that clarifies the roles of the different stakeholders in the model and outlines not only how students can make decisions but how to reflect on the effectiveness of their choices.

As one looks through the different models and theories analyzed in this thesis, it becomes easier to put together a set of characteristics that would exist in any school that wishes to implement the SDMM. As noted earlier, exactly how each school would bring these characteristics to life would depend on their individual needs.

6.1.1 The Four Components of a Model

As I noted in chapter one, the Student Decision-Making Model is organized using four components that existing models were found to have in common. In this subsection, I will present these four components in more detail. In the following subsection, I will place the elements of the SDMM within each one, further subcategorizing them into two categories of elements: key and additional.

Organizational culture and values. Models for change (be they educational or otherwise) are often built upon common beliefs and assumptions of those involved in implementation, as noted in Edgar Schein’s (1990) definition in chapter two. One example is seen in a model for inclusive education that is “organized with regard to the individual
characteristics of students” (Rasskazov & Muller, 2017, p. 551). A teaching and learning model put forth by Proctor (1984) recognizes the potentially negative impact that socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic background, and previous academic records can have on teacher expectation. His model calls for a culture that challenges these assumptions and wherein teachers view all students as equally able to learn. In my model, an educational culture is envisioned in which students are viewed as the central voice in their own decision-making, and they are encouraged to consider their own interests and values in making decisions.

Roles of stakeholders. The different groups of people who interact within the model are its stakeholders. Talk About Curing Autism (TACA) is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting families affected by autism. They combined a medical model to support the physical needs of the child with an educational mode centred on the learning requirements of the student. Their model notes, for example, the role of the physician is to initiate referrals, while the role of the school district is to determine whether support is needed for educational success. It also states the role of the parent, which is to obtain needed services and to cover expenses (Talk About Curing Autism [TACA], n.d.).

In the Ideal Education System proposed by Aithal and Aithal (2015), the role of the student is not only as learner (who receives content he or she will use in the workforce) but also as a decision-maker. Students should be able to select the specific courses and service providers that they deem best for their purposes, even if that means a combination of different schools, online learning providers, and specific courses. In the SDMM, the roles of parents, administrators, teachers, and students are outlined, as seen in the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

Pedagogical approaches, curriculum, and assessment. Many models will give specific strategies that should be used as part of the model. These are often actions undertaken by certain
stakeholders which, in education, may be methods for teaching, specific curricular content, or assessment practices. As seen in the Montessori model in chapter four, ensuring students have adequate time to master concepts is important (Bloom, 1971; Carroll, 1963), as are unit organization, developing learning objectives, utilizing assessments for and of learning, and implementing classroom teaching strategies (Bloom, 1971).

Leslie Owen Wilson (2018) identifies that many educational models share common features, such as frameworks for creating educational experiences, required elements for specific lessons, and the usage of research to inform practice and implementation. The SDMM outlined in the next subsection also outlines specific strategies and approaches, including how to give more students more decision-making opportunities and how to assist them in reflecting on their choices. The Time Use Exemplar (presented later in this chapter) outlines how pedagogical approaches could be implemented as part of the SDMM.

**Structure.** As noted in chapter one, structure plays a dual role in the SDMM. While OME regulations play a role with respect to how student decision-making can be implemented, the concept of structure is a component of other models as well. In the medical versus educational model, eligibility for educational support is determined by the school district and the student’s IEP team (TACA, n.d.). The Ideal Education System calls for a model “relatively free of all kinds of government regulations or restrictions” (Aithal & Aithal, 2015, p. 2465).

As seen in chapter five, the Summerhill School eschews regulatory structure in favour of internal structure, while the Sudbury Valley School also works within its own regulatory parameters but works with its governmental regulatory body to maintain accreditation. The Student Decision-Making Model also considers the existing structure in Ontario and how it can be used and/or adjusted as part of the model’s implementation.
6.1.2 Connecting the Components with SDMM Elements

The four components above are used in this section to categorize the elements I have compiled that are specific to this model. At the same time, not all elements need to be implemented at once by an organization wishing to use the model. Indeed, to make all elements of the decision-making model mandatory would be counterintuitive as it would deny educators and administrators the opportunity to model decision-making themselves.

As a result, I have split the elements of the SDMM, organized by components, even further using two categories. An overview of this categorization can be seen in Table 1. The first category is made up of the **key elements**, which are concerned with the decisions each student makes with respect to his or her own learning. They are easier to implement and require little to no change to OME structure. As such, individual classroom teachers and school principals may find the key elements to be an appropriate starting place.

I have termed the second category as the **additional elements**, which could involve students making decisions as a collective that affect the day-to-day procedures of the entire school. They are more challenging to implement and could require significant change to the structure as it currently exists. As a result, the additional elements may require input from, or lobbying of, superintendents, OME officials, and/or legislators.

The **key elements** of the SDMM are:

1. Students are encouraged to make decisions that align with their own interests and values, even if those interests and values lead the student to choose to not make an individual choice at times. [Organizational Culture and Values]
2. A culture exists that focuses on the process of decision-making and growth over time, rather than extrinsic rewards, such as good grades. [Organizational Culture and Values]
3. Teachers and administrators create learning environments that encourage students to
Table 1

*Components of a model and elements of SDMM*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of model</th>
<th>Key elements</th>
<th>Additional Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational culture and values</strong></td>
<td>• Students make decisions aligned with interest beliefs</td>
<td>• Role of the student to make decisions surrounding discipline, events, strategy, and hiring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intrinsic motivation rather than rewards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Roles of stakeholders</strong></td>
<td>• Role of the teacher in creating an environment that supports student decision-making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Role of the student to make decisions surrounding discipline, events, strategy, and hiring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pedagogical approaches, curriculum, and assessment</strong></td>
<td>• Students make decisions regarding what to work on, where, when, and for how long</td>
<td>• Students select which assessments to complete over year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• An included element of student self-reflection on decisions made</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td>• Utilizing curricular themes rather than specific content</td>
<td>• Questioning certain OME requirements (such as 110 hours of instructional time, or streaming by age)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Questioning certain OME requirements (such as 110 hours of instructional time, or streaming by age)</td>
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make decisions regarding their own personal experience at school, with adult facilitation as required. [Roles of Stakeholders].

4. Students are given more latitude to determine what tasks they will work on and for how long, where in the school they will do so, and at what times of the day.36 [Pedagogical Approaches, Curriculum, and Assessment]

5. Student decisions should be subject to self-reflection, preferably in a formalized, teacher-facilitated manner, to aid in future decision-making scenarios. [Pedagogical Approaches, Curriculum, and Assessment]

As an example, teachers may wish to extend the idea of choice to how a student displays his or her knowledge for an assessment. Instead of having only one option (for example, a written test), students may work with teachers to construct ways their knowledge can be shown through oral discussions, projects, presentations, and the like. While this likely occurs in classrooms already, the element of reflection noted in element 5 above would provide an opportunity for students to actively and consciously consider why they are choosing the method they are choosing and to reflect on its usefulness after submission and evaluation. In psychological terms, this would display reflectivity (use of a careful and reasoned response) as opposed to making a choice on impulse.

Other examples of new layers of decision-making could be self-directed lessons where students select the order in which they wish to cover the material; this could be done individually or even as a classroom discussion whereby the group comes to consensus on the order in which the material will be taught. If the physical layout and available resources of the school permit, teachers should consider extending the decision-making process to where the

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36 For a detailed example of what implementing student decision-making in this regard would look like, please see the Time Use Exemplar later in the chapter.
student works. While students may be comfortable at individual desks, others may wish to work in pods, at the blackboard, on the floor or carpet, in student common areas, even in the hallways or outside. Provided the teacher knows where each student is, students may gain more insight into their own effective study practices by being open to experiences they have not experienced before.

The **additional elements** of the SDMM are:

1. Bringing student voice into aspects of student discipline, planning of special events, and development of school strategy. [Roles of Stakeholders]
2. Asking students to sit on committees to screen, interview, and give feedback on potential new teachers and administrators. [Roles of Stakeholders]
3. Allowing students to work with teachers to decide which assessments they will complete over the course of the year. [Pedagogical Approaches, Curriculum, and Assessment]
4. A greater focus on general themes to be learned in each course, rather than specific topics mandated in the curriculum documents, allowing students more choice in curriculum content. [Structure]
5. Adjusting or eliminating seemingly arbitrary requirements, such as set bell schedules, the OME 110-hour requirement, or classes separated by student age. [Structure]

Those who feel the existing structure in Ontario is too restrictive may wish to examine ways to collaborate with the OME to adjust some of the requirements. Suggestions could be made with respect to curriculum content to transition the curriculum documents from requirements to guidelines. For example, a theme of “civil unrest” could replace specific revolutions or movements and allow students the freedom to research, select, and present knowledge in an individual way.
Alternatively, the OME could develop curriculum documents whereby, for one given unit, students choose among three possibilities (something similar is done in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program curricula). Outside of curriculum, students could be consulted and asked to make decisions regarding which guest speakers their school would invite that year, given the budget available. Any of the changes made in service of the additional elements would not affect the model or its underlying conceptual framework. The Venn diagram shown in the introduction would still exist; it would just allow for a larger area of overlap between the two circles.

While the SDMM puts forth several potential changes to the current OME structure, it should be noted that certain elements of education would not necessarily need to be changed for the model to flourish. Teacher certification and professional development, the physical layout of school buildings, report card layouts, assessment and evaluation requirements, and the like could certainly stay as is. This is what separates the SDMM from the alternative schools discussed in chapter five; Summerhill and SVS do not have standardized assessment protocols, report card procedures, or even classrooms and bell schedules.

The theory behind the implementation of the SDMM, without going to the “extreme” end, can be viewed from two different angles. The first is that such a model is in the best interest of the individual student; it allows him or her to practice the skill of decision-making in an environment where he or she has relatively strong support and adult facilitation. Furthermore, it allows the student to complete required tasks in a manner consistent with personal strengths and to feel, legitimately, that his or her voice is respected when it comes to one’s own educational journey. These are important points informed by the educational models of Glasser, the Montessori Schools, and the Self-Determination Theory.
The second angle is a quantitative one. Due to the more challenging nature of accrediting an alternative school to grant OSSD credits, one must consider the overall value to society that comes from limiting the model to alternative schools. The vast majority of students in Ontario attend either public schools or private schools that grant the OSSD. Incorporating a new model into the existing structure, even if it means adjusting the structure somewhat, reaches a far greater number of students. Students currently studying in alternative schools would already be in a position to benefit from such a model, as they have more latitude when it comes to their own learning. Do we not owe all students the same opportunity? This is what makes the SDMM, for lack of a better word, superior to other models that work only in certain settings. It is a large-scale, customizable, and OME-compliant model that has the potential to reach, and therefore benefit, the maximum number of students.

6.1.3 Connecting the Autonomy Conception with the SDMM

In chapter three of this thesis, I presented several authors and their work regarding decision-making in educational theories, including those who wrote on the broader concept of autonomy. The purpose of doing so was two-fold. First, the analysis of the different authors and their positions were placed on a spectrum (please see Figure 2 at the beginning of chapter three). This allowed for a relative comparison of the degree to which each theory placed student decision-making or external structure at its core. In developing this spectrum I make the argument that the SDMM, as described in the previous subsection, could “fall” anywhere within the three theories on the left-hand side, depending how many of the key and additional elements are implemented, and the way in which the implementation occurs. Furthermore, the spectrum also allows for a placement of the Time Use Exemplar given in the next section.

The purpose for doing so is to give the reader context for just how the Student Decision-Making Model would go about affecting change within the educational schema. Utilizing the
spectrum allows the reader to conclude that any implementation of the SDMM still recognizes the importance of structure, even if this means adjustments to the existing structure, as part of an increase in student decision-making opportunities. By extension, the reader can also see that any use of the SDMM in a practical sense would not promote a libertarian or unschooling theoretical construct.

Second, some of the authors analyzed in chapter three formulate theories of autonomy and decision-making that have helped shape the SDMM. Callan’s argument for increased autonomy in schools is a justification for my model that grants students more opportunities to make decisions that guide their own learning. Callan defines autonomy as one’s own ability to control and regulate their will, and the model creates an environment whereby a student can have his or her autonomy recognized via opportunities to make rational decisions after deliberate consideration. A student who makes a rational choice, and possesses Frankfurt’s second order desire while doing so, is a central character in a shifting educational culture.

John Dewey’s progressive theory of education highlights experience as a key component of learning. Educators must consider their approach to content, and what experiences they are providing for their students, as more important than the content itself. I posit that how students learn from these experiences, and use them to develop their decision-making skills, is a part of the SDMM inspired by Dewey’s writing—an example of this is the key element in the pedagogical approaches subcategory, which calls for an act of student reflection with each decision that allows for more nuanced decision-making in the future.

Paolo Freire’s critical pedagogy approach also informed the SDMM. His work defined autonomy as both a disposition, as well as a skill to be developed. His focus on autonomy as a tool to support the oppressed was used as a platform in the model for the structure subcategory in the additional elements; perhaps decisions that students wish to make regarding their
education may require a concerted effort to change or eliminate current laws, policies, or regulations that were developed by adults.

My review of the work of R. S. Peters noted his argument that there is still a need for authority, as part of the structure, in education. He argues that the role of these educators should be to assist students in the process of decision-making; this is seen in both the Time Use Exemplar, as well as in the Roles of Stakeholders key element of the model. The unschooling or deschooling concepts of Holt, Illich, and Rousseau were included for reference but do not necessarily inform the model, as they call for changes to current educational structure that go beyond what would be feasible for schools that presumably still wish to grant OSSD credits.

6.2 An Exemplar of the Model: Student Time Use

In this section, I present an example of a set of strategies that could be implemented in service of increased student decision-making opportunities. I refer to it as the Time Use Exemplar (TUE). I begin by explaining how it relates to the concepts, theories, and models discussed in chapters two, three, and four. I also will discuss how certain elements were left out of the model (as they may interfere with the OME structure in place\(^{37}\)). Finally, I lay out the example itself. The procedures, protocols, roles of each community member are presented as a guideline for how this particular example could be implemented in an Ontario secondary school or classroom.

While I personally have not implemented the TUE exactly as written, I have used parts of it with my students, and anecdotal remarks from those experiences are noted. Through the concepts, theories, and models analyzed in this thesis, I have developed the model, as well as this exemplar, which is a strategy of how it can come to life and be implemented within a

\(^{37}\) This does not mean that any changes that promote student decision-making must do so without upsetting the status quo of OME regulations. Rather, this particular example simply does not need to do so.
secondary school in Ontario. The intended end result should be something easily implemented by school boards, administrators, and/or teachers.

The exemplar aims, as noted in the conceptual framework, to exist in the overlapping area between educational structure, and decision-making opportunities (the green and orange circles in the Venn diagram). With this in mind, I use the visual in Figure 2 (chapter three) to help locate where the TUE would be able to thrive, by comparing it to existing theories of education that recognize, to varying extents, the student’s right to make decisions that affect his or her own learning. Looking at the work of different authors, for example Callan and Dewey, helps set the stage for where this example falls on the decision-making theory spectrum. A focus on decision-making in the classroom which is based on student interest and personal goal achievement could be located somewhere in the liberal/progressive area of the chart. The example seeks to work within the logistical and state-mandated structures that exist, and as such it would not be accurate to label it as critical pedagogy; it does not serve to subvert or overthrow the system. Instead, it aims to find a way to improve the quality of student decision-making opportunities within the system.

Other methods of implementation of the model may aim to make significant changes to the status quo with respect to structure. These methods could be seen as critical pedagogy; for example, a school or school board which focuses on additional element 4 may seek to include curricular themes of highly controversial issues such as international conflicts or race relations. Such curricular themes may require major changes to a regulatory body’s mission and vision for education.

The TUE also uses some of the research discussed in chapter four, especially that of the Self-Determination Theory. Students should receive clear expectations as well as the rationale behind the choices they are given. They should have uninterrupted work time once a choice has
been made and should not be overwhelmed with too much choice. Additionally, the choices outlined should align with student interests, and teachers will assist students to make decisions based on what motivates them intrinsically as opposed to offering rewards.

As noted earlier in this section, this particular exemplar ensures the educational structure, discussed in chapter one, is left intact (though this need not always be the case). Students would still be required to attend classes, write assessments, and receive instruction guided by the OME curriculum expectations. Any new choices they receive as a result of the TUE’s implementation would exist within the classroom in concert with teacher facilitation. Allowing opportunities outside of the set schedule for students to decide how to use their time could lead to some of the challenges encountered by the Dutch study house (discussed in chapter four).

Before looking at the details of the exemplar, we must first determine how it is to be brought to schools. In both independent and publically funded schools, principals or individual teachers could become aware of the SDMM through professional development. It would be best practice for any teacher who wishes to initiate the implementation of student decision-making strategies to collaborate with his or her principal or academic director first. Alternatively, it is possible the implementation of the TUE comes to fruition as a result of a wide-reaching policy enacted by the OME. In either case, the exemplar given in this section is merely an example, and not a required element of the SDMM.

In fact, to compel all schools and teachers to implement this specific exemplar would run counter to the philosophy behind the model itself. Each principal and teacher must decide for him- or herself how any attempt to bring decision-making into the school or classroom, would best be implemented. If as educators one of the arguments for recognizing student decision-making is that it is a necessary step to preparing them for the many individual decisions they
will have to make in the future, then doing so using the same mandated method would be counterintuitive. By encouraging principals and teachers to determine how they wish to implement strategies in support of the SDMM, they are modelling the rationale for their students before the specifics are even introduced.

6.2.1 Introducing the TUE to the Students

Once the decision to implement this exemplar has been made, the teacher should, as soon as possible, explicitly explain to students what the Time Use Exemplar is and, just as importantly, why it is being used. As the research from the Self-Determination Theory has shown, students respond best when expectations are clear and rationales are given. This could be done orally, but could be supplemented with a “one-pager” that could also be posted in the classroom (see Figure 3). Once the TUE is introduced, group discussion time could follow, where students would ask questions to fully understand the new approach.

One thing that is not included in the one pager is the rationale (or reasoning) for the increased decision-making strategy being implemented. This is by design; teachers should begin to introduce the exemplar and then solicit thoughts from students regarding why they think it is being introduced. From this, teachers can help guide the discussion surrounding why such a set of strategies is in their best interest. This may include such things as “it will help us prepare for university,” “it will allow us to enjoy class more,” “it will help us practice making decisions and thinking back about whether we made good choices,” and “it will lower our stress level.” Some teachers may choose to do a group brainstorming exercise where students and teacher coconstruct the “reasons and rules” of the new methods; these could be noted on poster paper and affixed to a classroom wall as well.

6.2.2 What Changes and What Stays the Same

As noted in the SDMM, other exemplars that serve the model may vary with respect to
Bringing Student Choice into our Classroom!

What is it?
An opportunity for you to practice and develop your decision-making skills, with a little help from your teacher!

How does it work?
In each class, I will let you know specifically when I am finished “instructing” (in other words, need your attention and to be working on the task I assign). After that, you are free to work on any school work you wish to do, whether it is for this class or not!

So I can do whatever I want?
Not quite. You need to be working on something assigned for one of your school subjects. There are several things you should consider, among them:

- What are my options? What other items do I have to work on?
- When are things due?
- If I work on something for another class, will I miss the opportunity to ask my teacher questions?
- If I work on something for another class, could I be negatively impacting groupmates in this class?
- Do I have all the materials I need to choose the option I want?

What else is changing?
Nothing. The content we will cover in this class remains the same, as do all required assessments (tests, projects, labs, etc.). Due dates do not change, nor do any classroom expectations regarding respectful behaviour.

How will I know if this is helping me?
Next class, I will give you two more sheets to keep in your binder: a choice log and a reflection journal. Each time you elect to work on something for another class, fill out a line in the log. Every few weeks, I will meet with each of you for a 5-minute “choice debrief.” We will discuss and reflect on how your choices helped or hindered your goal achievement; you will write up a summary of our discussion in the reflection journal.

Good luck! I look forward to helping you make choices about your own time use.

Figure 3. The time use exemplar “one pager.”
how much changes from the status quo. In the TUE, the student should be made aware that the only change that is called for is a greater element of personal choice during noninstructional class time. In order to maintain the integrity of prescribed elements of the OME structure, other factors remain the same. Schools will still develop timetables for students which allow them to study multiple subjects each day at set times. This is important not only to meet the province’s 110 hour requirement but also to ensure the whereabouts of each student can be confirmed in case of events such as family emergencies, lockdowns, or fire drills.38

Student assessment will continue to follow the methods outlined in the Growing Success document. Utilizing assessments as learning and assessments for learning will help students determine how they are progressing in class. They may wish to use their results from these assessments, as well as assessments of learning, as considerations when they are choosing what to work on in class. The material covered also stays the same; students simply have the opportunity to plan, in a more individual way, their approach to completing assignments. Course credit requirements for graduation, literacy tests such as the OSSLT, and community service hours are also all unaffected by this exemplar.

Change can occur within the classrooms throughout the province. In general terms, the current pedagogical best practice of inquiry-based learning would ostensibly reduce the amount of “stand and deliver” instruction occurring in class. That being said, many courses, particularly senior level courses that prepare students for university, will still have an element of teacher instruction. If a teacher needs this time, he or she may still use it as needed. When it is time for students to work individually (or in small groups) on a given task, this is when the TUE would become “active.”

38For similar reasons, teachers should designate acceptable work areas when implementing the TUE, not only for safety but also to monitor progress and to keep students from interrupting other classes.
While each teacher would have his or her own way of introducing not only the TUE itself but also the student-centred portion of each class, it is recommended that the teacher reminds all students that they now have the option of working on the assigned task for their current class or work for another class. The teacher should remind students of the questions to consider that are given in the “one-pager.” Students may choose to take some time to weigh out their options with their goals and interests in mind. Individual discussions with the teacher are absolutely appropriate, though I would caution teachers from allowing students to use this decision as a reason to visit their guidance counsellor.\footnote{While the SDMM (and TUE) encourage students to see themselves as central in their decision-making, adult facilitation to understand the effectiveness of choices in concert with roles of adults is important. Guidance counsellors provide social-emotional support and long-term planning advice. A student wishing to consult with his or her guidance counsellor about what to work on in a single period is misusing the adult resources to which he or she has access and sacrificing valuable minutes in class.} As these conversations do not necessarily cover course content, they should not be used towards the “products-observations-conversations” assessment pieces noted in Growing Success. Yet, it would be appropriate to use a student’s approach to these decisions as part of a teacher’s assessment of the student’s learning skills and work habits, specifically those in organization and self-regulation.

6.2.3 Keeping Track Using the Choice Log

The next step would be for students to keep track of the choices they made, when they made them, and why they made them. The reason for this is it gives students the evidence they need to reflect upon their decisions so that they may ask themselves if there is alignment between the choices they made and their own personal goals. Teachers would remind students, as they make a decision, to record it in a log they can keep in their binder. In Table 2, I give a template for what this log could look like (though teachers may tweak it for their own purposes), along with a recommended “exemplar line.”

Optimally, students would look back on past choices each time they are in a position to
### The Time Use Exemplar Student Choice Log

#### Student Choice Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Assignment/Course Chosen</th>
<th>My reasoning for this choice is:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sep 12</td>
<td>English poem analysis</td>
<td>It is due next class, and I feel very comfortable with the math from this class (I can spend a little extra time after school completing it)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
make another one. By doing so, they can informally make connections between the choices they made and their self-evaluated effectiveness that resulted. Teachers may also ask students to confer with one another at certain points throughout the year so that students can share their reasons and reflections with their peers. On a more formal level (discussed later in this section), teachers will use these logs to meet with students regularly over the course of the year to discuss the ways in which the new approach is helping (or harming) them as students.

The utilization of a logging device can also lead to challenges that need to be considered. Some students may, out of an abundance of caution or simply out of habit, always elect to work on the material from the class they are in. As such, their log sheet would be blank. Teachers can use this as an opportunity to meet with that student and discuss his or her reasons for doing so. This exemplar allows for choice, which means that the option of not electing work on a task for another class is just as legitimate as choosing to do so.40 This student could still complete the journal reflection down the road, in a slightly altered format.

Some students may choose to take advantage of the choice afforded by the model but not complete the log, others may not be completely honest with themselves when completing the log, and some may simply lose the log altogether! No matter what the issue is, teachers should remind students that how they use the log does not directly affect their overall grade in the course. It is a form of assessment as learning, which they should use to develop their own decision-making skills. Doing so should assist with student buy-in, as it meets the self-determination theory requirement that choice is most effective when it speaks to a student’s internal motivation as opposed to external rewards (like grades). It also fits the Montessori

40 In my experience, I have often observed that when given the choice, it is not uncommon for at least half the students to work on the task assigned in that class, even when they have work to complete for other classes. This does not mean they were denied an opportunity for decision-making. Rather, they have made a decision to work on material for their current class.
expectation that students have ownership over their own learning and a block of uninterrupted time to work on the task they choose.

6.2.4 Student Reflection and the “Choice Debrief”

After the logistics of the TUE have been implemented and have run for a set amount of time (selected by the teacher, but potentially after 2–3 weeks), the teacher should begin meeting with students individually to determine how the student is progressing in the new environment and how he or she can support the student going forward. This is an important element of the TUE, as it gives students an opportunity to determine the relationships that exist between the choices they made and the results of those choices.

The first step in the reflection is for the student to complete one page of his or her “reflection journal,” focusing primarily on his or her more recent log entries. This journal, seen in Figure 4, is a series of prompts that the student completes to begin the process of reflection. As with the “one pager” and choice log, each teacher would be free to adjust it as he or she sees best fit.

Once this is done, the student will be asked by the teacher to sit down for 5 minutes to discuss the journal entry, at a meeting known as the “choice debrief.” At this meeting, the student can consider what he or she has written and, with the teacher facilitating, consider how this could affect the choices he or she will make over the rest of the year. The choice debrief may happen in class during noninstructional time or outside of class at the teacher’s discretion. Some teachers may opt to keep notes of these choice debriefs in their own files. The number of cycles (and thus, choice debriefs) occurring over the year will depend on the teacher as well as on course subject and age group of students.

As some teachers may find this to be overly time-consuming, other members of the school community could support the student as well. While the classroom teacher is most likely to be
Student Reflection Journal

Name:                                      Date:

Please answer the following questions honestly; there are no right or wrong answers. If you do not have any new choice log entries since your last choice debrief, please speak with your teacher.

*Look at the more recent lines of your choice log (i.e. those since your last choice debrief). Do you notice any patterns (i.e. did you choose work for other classes often? Was it usually for the same class?)*

*Which of the entries do you feel were good choices that helped you achieve any of your own goals? Explain your response.*

*Which entries do you feel were perhaps not the best choices, which led to more challenging issues as a result? Explain your response.*

*Given what you have learned about the choices you made, what additional criteria will you keep in mind next time you are given the opportunity to choose how to use your time?*

Your teacher will discuss these answers with you at your next choice debrief.

Choice debrief completion date:              Teacher initials/signature:

*Figure 4. Student reflection journal.*
the “point person” for implementing and monitoring the TUE’s success, it is not necessary to ask that teacher to be the sole adult involved. Depending on the teacher’s desires and the school’s resources, students may wish to consult with advisors, guidance counsellors, social workers, administrators, or even parents about their progress. As the student will use the reflection journal entry as the basis for the choice debrief, there is a space at the bottom of the journal entry for the student to note when the meeting took place, and with whom. The adult can then sign or initial it to complete the process.

Ultimately, the TUE is a cyclical model consisting of four pieces:

1. Introduction: The “one pager” leads to discussion and coconstruction of reasons and rules.
2. Choice log: Students continuously and independently keep track of times they elected to spend their time working on an assignment for another course.
3. Reflection journal: Student individually completes prior to meeting with teacher/adult, based on a recent entry from his or her choice log.
4. Choice debrief: Student meets individually with teacher or another adult to discuss the alignment between choices made and the actual outcomes.

It is possible that teachers may, after completing all their choice debriefs, choose to bypass the introduction and go straight to the choice log again. I submit that there is no reason why a teacher could not revisit the entire cycle with the students. It is quite likely that with this experience, students will have suggestions and ideas for how to improve the process going forward.41 A diagram sketching the TUE visually is seen in Figure 5.

By implementing the Time Use Exemplar, one would hope that students would begin to make connections between the choices they made in individual classes and the possible effects

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41 In one class, I had students complete their own choice log and do a self-assessment each month on the alignment between their choices and their desired outcome. Two students told me they found it more useful to do this as a peer assessment, leading me to make this an option for all students.
Figure 5. The timeline of the time use exemplar.
these choices had on their desired outcomes (whether that be conceptual understanding of a
topic, positive group work experiences, or grades on assessments). Students should also feel that
they have more ownership over their own learning and will remark that they feel trusted by the
adults to make their own decisions regarding time use. Finally, it is believed that students will
begin to speak with one another about the choices they made and the subsequent results, so they
may better inform one another of different factors to consider when making a decision. In so
doing, students are developing the skill of decision-making in an explicit and well-supported
manner.

6.3 Potential Critiques and Future Areas of Inquiry of the Model and Exemplar

As with any model that proposes widespread change amongst a large community, there
are likely to be many critiques (of both the model and the exemplar) which should be given
consideration. Additionally, there are future areas of inquiry that may become more relevant as
one continues to use the model and exemplar. In this section, I aim to look at some of these
critiques and areas of future inquiry and offer responses that are in line with the design of the
model and the degree to which student decision-making opportunities would be implemented.

6.3.1 Critiques of the SDMM

Those who advocate for a radical version of student decision-making would question
whether the SDMM goes far enough. One may query why a model that is supposed to maximize
student opportunity to make decisions and learn from them still leaves doors open for schools to
make decisions on behalf of the student in certain areas. As noted earlier, why not simply do
away with OME requirements and require all schools to give full decision-making authority to
the students? Logistically, this would be very difficult, as one would first have to ask where the
line would be drawn. Would students now be in charge of school budgets? Could they alter the
physical layout of the school? Would the duty of care that school administrators have be in
jeopardy due to a lack of routine and order? Even the Summerhill and Sudbury Valley Schools had elements in place to ensure the proliferation of student choice was not left unchecked. To go to that extreme, while potentially possible, would be beyond the scope of this model, as the considerable changes that would be required would likely detract from the more focused vision of the SDMM.

Another challenge that the SDMM could present surrounds the evidence teachers require to assess students. Should students determine for themselves that they will not complete any tasks, do any projects, complete any essays, or write any tests, how would the student know if he or she was improving and ultimately mastering his or her grasp of the content? Not only would this be a curricular issue, but many students would use their understanding of the material as one of the measuring sticks by which they can reflect upon the decisions they made. A student who finds himself or herself struggling to understand concepts in a subject he or she routinely found manageable may wish to question what choices he or she made recently that may have led to such a change.

Another critique is whether the SDMM is even necessary. The paternalistic justification for education puts the responsibility on the adult to determine to what extent students can make decisions and that this already occurs in informal ways without the need for a more formal model, thus negating the need for specific approaches to student decision-making.

While I concede that certain elements of the model are likely taking place, growth and change can only take place if a model like the SDMM is codified into policy. By implementing the model, schools, school boards, and even governmental departments can begin to learn more about individual student needs as well as collective best practice. With the model as a central focus, different groups of educators can share their experiences and learn from the different
methods employed in model implementation. As it has been noted many times, one of the most dangerous responses to querying practice is “this is how we have always done it.”

A final critique may come in questioning whether high school is, in fact, a safe environment for what some may term an “experiment” with decision-making. One may question whether students in Grade 11 or Grade 12, whose achievement in their courses will directly affect their chances of obtaining university admission, would benefit from such a model in the short term. They may learn much about themselves and grow on a personal level from the lessons learned upon reflection on their decisions. Yet, what if the cost of such growth is a small dip in achievement that could mean the difference between acceptance and rejection in such a competitive postsecondary admissions environment? The model does have a framework that theoretically could mitigate this possibility, and it still allows for students to make the choice to continue to work on what was specifically assigned. Still, it does bring up a potential next step in the model whereby senior level student–teacher–curriculum interactions are limited in such a way as to protect students from more damaging decisions.

6.3.2 Criticisms of the Time Use Exemplar

Other criticisms of the exemplar specifically exist on a logistical level. One such criticism could be the (potentially negative) effect the exemplar could have on group work projects and activities. For example, a teacher may assign a group assignment and then let the students begin to work on it. If this time is considered student centred work time, a student who chooses to select a task from another class could be putting his or her group at a disadvantage. The spirit of the exemplar, and by extension the model, is to enrich each individual student’s learning experience, not be detrimental to the educational environment as a whole. As such, teachers will have to determine on a case-by-case basis how to avoid such issues.
One way to solve this problem could be for a teacher to not allow group work time to be considered student-centred work time. As a result, the time would not be subject to the choices outlined in the TUE, and group work would be protected. Another method would be a compromise, where students who choose to work on another task are required to meet with their group first. This way, the group could discuss what needs to be done and the member(s) working on other tasks could plan so that they fulfill any obligations they may have to the group. Teachers may also choose to ask students to include this in their log and reflections so that it may be discussed as part of the choice debrief.

Similar issues could occur in classes where collaboration is a key element of the curriculum and course content. For example, physical education, drama, and music teachers may find the TUE more difficult to implement. How do you find meaningful ways to allow students to work on a task for another class when their role in their current class is to be a member of an ensemble or team? As with the group work issues noted above, the teacher’s professional judgment should be respected. It may be best in such circumstances for teachers to either use this exemplar less frequently or develop another set of strategies consistent with the SDMM that aligns more closely with the needs of the course.

Alternatively, teachers may choose to adjust their unit and lesson plans to accommodate the exemplar. For example, a physical education teacher may opt to limit implementation of the TUE to classroom-based lessons in the health units as opposed to those on the fields or in the gym. A music teacher may choose to do something similar when covering theory as opposed to having the class practice as an orchestra. The implementation of decision-making opportunities with respect to the SDMM can find success only if each teacher modifies them to meet the unique needs of his or her subject and class.
Finally, the same critique that is often leveled on the Sudbury Valley School is considered: “What if a student chooses to do nothing?” In the given exemplar that still operates within the educational structure, it is not sufficient to give the same response as the SVS, which is that by doing nothing, they are still doing something, and learning from it. Students engaged with the TUE model are still required to complete tasks that have been assigned by their teachers.

That being said, it is plausible that with this newfound “freedom,” students may elect to use the time provided as part of the TUE to avoid doing any kind of work. In these cases, it is important that teachers continue to be vigilant and ensure students are on task, whether it is for the current class or an assignment for another class a student has put in his or her choice log. When a teacher does encounter a student attempting to not work at all, it can be viewed as an opportunity for the teacher and student to have a conversation about the wisest way to use that time. It is hoped that students will be less inclined to “waste” their time, since they have more options than they would have had in a traditional classroom.

6.3.3 Future Areas of Inquiry

One potential area for development of the model would be to consider ways to expand the model to encourage group decision-making and consensus building. Currently, the key elements of the SDMM are more geared towards the individual student making decisions about his or her own learning. This minimizes the effect on others and allows students to make choices that they feel would best support their own individual needs. Considering the importance of collaboration in both postsecondary education and the workforce, it would be a reasonable next step to address the needs of schools which chose to implement the additional elements.

This topic was touched on briefly in the critique of the Time Use Exemplar in the next section. On a broader scale, how do we aid students in making decisions that affect a larger
number of people? Students asked to sit on interview committees, to make choices on school strategy, or sit on judicial councils to help resolve disciplinary issues all need to work with others to come to consensus that is best not only for those involved in the specific situation but for the community as a whole. Any development of the Student Decision-Making Model should include more detail on how the model would work in such a collaborative atmosphere.

Another such consideration could be to develop the model to consider any differences that may occur with respect to gender identity. Are there differences with respect to the model’s usefulness for boys versus girls? To use the specific example given in this chapter, what changes could be made to the TUE and its cycle in order to accommodate these differences? Teachers in coeducational settings may notice that certain elements of the process seem to be more helpful for boys, while others gain more traction with girls. This is not to imply in any way that one gender is superior or may find the TUE useful while the other would not. Rather, gender differences in learning may become evident, and understanding these differences could be useful for future iterations of the model.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to outline the key characteristics of the Student Decision-Making model and the Time Use Exemplar. In order to do this, elements (discussed in chapter one) that make up the structure in Ontario (for example those specifically prescribed by the OME) may need to be reexamined. By doing so, the model could then be developed in such a way as to work either within our outside of the parameters set forth by the OME. This aligns with the conceptual framework laid out in the introduction—a model that recognizes student decision-

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42 For the purpose of this section, I use the term gender identity purposefully, to be inclusive of transgender students.
making in an explicit way, while considering to what degree to challenge or ignore the requirements that govern OME-inspected, OSSD-granting schools in Ontario.

The model itself aims to place the student at the centre of the decision-making process in the educational environment. While still respecting the paternalistic nature of education and understanding that any proposed changes should consider the OME structure already in place, it asks educational professionals from teachers to government representatives to consider ways to optimize student opportunity for decision-making. Not only is this a skill that needs practice like any other, it allows the student to tailor his or her educational choices to match individual strengths as well as interests and desires.

The model is split up into two sections. The first is centred more on decisions that can be made by the individual student that affect only the student making the decision. I refer to these as the key elements, and they would ideally be the starting point for any school or board that wishes to implement the model. The key elements focus on the students deciding what they will work on, when and where they will do so, making choices that align with their own interests and values, and undergoing a formal reflection process to evaluate the outcomes of their decisions.

The second section is the additional elements, which would be more likely to be implemented by schools or organizations that have already found success with the key elements. They go beyond the individual to groups of students making decisions as a team that could affect a large group of people or even the entire school community. Examples of this include student committees for areas such as discipline/conflict resolution, school strategy, or faculty hiring.

The model was presented via an example based on student decisions regarding time use. As noted above, there are times in class when students are given time to complete a task assigned for that class. This exemplar asks schools and teachers to give students the option to
work on tasks for other classes during that time, utilizing a set of tools to govern the process and draw conclusions on the effectiveness of choices made. Once the teacher has introduced the new process, students will keep track of each time they choose to work on a task for another class, and their reason for doing so. From this, students can, at set times of the year, complete a reflection on the choices they made and what alignment (if any) the effects of those choices had with their own goals. Finally, students and teachers sit together in individual meetings to discuss the learning that has taken place and how said learning can be applied towards future decision-making opportunities.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

In the introduction chapter of this thesis, I noted several different possibilities for the purpose of education. In this thesis, I did not aim to try to add to this vast discussion or determine what the true purpose of education is. Instead, I argued that no matter what the purpose (or purposes) of education may be, it could be universally accepted that at some point students will receive less direct instruction. At around the same time, students will be given more opportunities to make decisions that directly affect their own learning. This continues after high school graduation when the student decides to enter college, university, or the workforce.

In this thesis, it was my aim to look at the implementation of student decision-making opportunity through a series of different approaches, while each time focusing on what this could mean for a practical application within schools and the classroom. I deliberately looked at educational theories (defined in this thesis as broader philosophical views) and models (more specific approaches often associated with specific strategies), both within the classroom and outside of it. From this analysis, I found patterns and common factors that have proven successful in other contexts and used these commonalities to develop a model which could allow for a more formal implementation of student decision-making opportunities in Ontario schools. In order to limit the scope of the model and ease its implementation, I focused on secondary (Grade 9–12) students in Ontario schools.

The Student Decision-Making Model (along with this entire thesis that informs it) is significant because it is a unique, customizable, and large-scale approach to changing the current approach to secondary education in Ontario. While numerous OME documents are written and even implemented each year surrounding teaching methodology, assessment practices, and curriculum content, this model starts not with the adult or the material but with the student.
The model has the potential to reach every student in an Ontario secondary school. It contains specific strategies (as well as an exemplar of how it could be implemented) that could be used by school boards, individual schools, and even individual teachers within a short time frame. It does not require specialized professional development, as the flexible nature of the model allows each person or group wishing to implement the model to customize it to suit their own needs. Some schools may wish to focus only on individual student choice with respect to one area, while others may apply student decision-making opportunities to both individual students and the larger community as students make decisions that affect the entire school. Indeed, chapter six of this model could stand on its own and be used by an educator or administrator as a reference for implementing more student decision-making opportunities. It is a professional development piece on its own—it is not merely theory, it is applicable action.

Most importantly, the model recognizes the student as the most important member of the educational process, and does so explicitly. While other educational models and OME documents can be assumed to be done with the interests of the student in mind, they are still adult-generated documents that strengthen the educational structure as it currently exists. Any call for action in other documents is top-down, and the student is still the passive recipient in it. Ideally, any educational system is created and maintained for the student. It is for his or her benefit, and thus he or she should have a voice in the experience. This model makes that impossible to avoid—the only choice the adult has is how much choice he or she wishes to bestow upon the student.

This model also questions the structure, but rather than argue for subversion of government policy, it encourages discourse with legislators to update or adjust existing regulations to allow for increased student decision-making opportunity. The Sudbury Valley School in the United States would be considered an alternative school for its “radical” approach
pretty much anywhere in the country, but it is accredited by its state’s regulatory body due to the ongoing discussions that occur between state representatives and the school.

Some may say this is already happening. Some may argue, at the risk of oversimplifying, that all teachers want their students to succeed and learn and because of this will grant them choice if they feel it is in the student’s best interest. While this is admirable, and likely true to some extent, it is still not the explicit policy and expectation of the OME. In order for a culture shift to occur that entrusts the students with decisions about their own learning, it is vital that all stakeholders, at their discretion, take steps to make the culture shift a reality. Legislators can review the Education Act and OME documents. School boards can reconsider policies and write memoranda for principals. Principals and educators can look to the key elements of the model and determine which ones can be implemented to best serve the students.

Not every student will have the same experience or be granted the same opportunities to make decisions. This is entirely understandable and in fact desired—standardization is not synonymous with higher standards. The determining factor is that all students have access to the same opportunities for decision-making at school. An element of paternalism exists to allow adults to determine how much access is necessary for the child’s own good. The model is what makes this thesis significant. It can be implemented within a reasonable time frame. It gives the students more opportunity to practice making decisions, reflect upon consequences, and monitor their own improvement, which does not occur in a widespread fashion currently in schools.

This thesis relies on adult input for the development of the model. While the model is meant to provide students with more decision-making opportunities, it is still created and developed by adults. Inclusion of student input into the model itself would be a logical next step in the development and implementation of the SDMM proposed in chapter six of this thesis. The
OME currently runs a Student Voice program, in which students are encouraged to share their own thoughts on how to improve their education.

Using the Student Voice program, students could introduce and help shape the SDMM in Ontario through the Minister’s Student Advisory Council, a group of students in Grades 7 to 12 who are selected to advise on the OME’s programs and policies. At the school level, formal student-teacher research teams can inform the OME after completing action research projects on questions that are relevant to them. Additionally, the OME promotes SpeakUp projects that encourage students to advertise and refine ideas at the school level (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). An approach that uses the Student Voice initiative could be effective in improving and implementing the SDMM in a manner that the students themselves would find useful.

In considering how students could benefit from the model, a conceptual framework was developed that spoke to several elements, with the student at the centre. It calls for the student to be supported by teachers, parents, and administrators. The student would then interact with a model that would aim to increase the number of opportunities the student had to make decisions that directly affected his or her own learning process. The model noted which decisions would align with current OME structure and which would not, allowing for a more robust model that would consider the limitations of, and potential benefits to, making adjustments to OME regulations.

The elements of the model itself are informed by philosophical and educational theory, focusing on the student not just as a learner but also as a person. It focuses on four areas which I determined to be common to other models both within and outside of the educational sphere:

1. organizational culture and values
2. roles of stakeholders
3. pedagogical approaches, curriculum, and assessment

4. structure

It would also require a change to school culture, which currently does not explicitly value the student as the key stakeholder in his or her own decisions.

This conceptual framework supports a model wherein students are asked to make numerous decisions daily in multiple facets of their educational experience. The question then became, should this model be developed in such a way as to not challenge the current OME structure and regulations? I found myself answering my own question by looking back at my conceptual framework—any model that asked for those involved to revisit the existing culture should also query whether the formalized OME requirements are in the best interests of the students as well.

In the end, any changes to OME requirements would still need to occur as needed to ensure the model would continue to be useful to schools inspected by the OME. To move forward without considering OME requirements would automatically disqualify all publically funded schools as well as a large percentage of private schools. The model would then become an exercise for alternative schools, and while those students are as deserving as any others to reap the benefits that may come from the model, they are still a small percentage of students in Ontario.

My goal in developing the model was to reach as many students as possible. Thus, it was vital that any model developed was flexible enough to recognize the importance of student as decision-maker while at the same time meeting the prescribed elements of education in the province. Using this approach, I considered the different theories and models of decision-making (discussed in chapters two through five) as well as the current structure of education (discussed in chapter one) to espouse a model that could potentially be implemented in schools...
across Ontario. To give context, I developed an example of how the model could be implemented that focused on student time use. For simplicity, I purposely chose this topic because it did not require any changes to the OME structure; the example lives within the overlapping area of the two circles in the conceptual framework (see Figure 1). This would allow the model to be implemented in any school in Ontario, potentially reaching every student, without the added consideration of how the OME would respond.

As noted above, I began my analysis of decision-making by looking at the concept from a philosophical standpoint, using authors whose works look at the student as a person as well as a learner. Amy Gutmann, Harry Brighouse, and Meira Levinson all spoke to the importance of education as a tool for preparing students to be citizens in a democratic society. They note that education’s paternalistic approach justifies the process of adults making decisions on behalf of students for their own good. They also speak to the importance of education as a tool to develop critical thinking skills and to allow students to flourish as people, not simply as productive members of a society. As such, these arguments set the stage for why it is important to implement decision-making opportunities for students—the chances to make choices with regards to their own learning reifies their need to grow as learners not just of content but of the self.

In chapter three, I examined several different theories that were more explicitly tied to the educational construct. I started with more liberal theories that contain elements more compatible with existing educational structure. These included Callan’s liberal interpretation and John Dewey’s experience and education. I then moved on to less compatible (but still relevant) theories, including Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy. The chapter ended with theories that eschew the structure altogether, namely Illich’s and Holt’s unschooling/deschooling movements, as well as the work of Rousseau in Emile. By developing a spectrum organized in
this manner, I was able to give a locus for the SDMM by noting it has more in common with liberal theories of student as decision-maker and less with those that challenge the structure. The SDMM does not reject any conception; it merely leans more to one side than the other.

In chapter four, I moved from theories to models, or theories that contain more specific policies, strategies, and outlines with respect to student decision-making implementation. The work of Bill Glasser’s Choice Theory helped inform parts of my model. Even more helpful were the models of the Montessori program as well as Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory. Each of these models noted elements that were found to aid students by recognizing that students are best served when they are given agency over decisions that directly affect their learning as individuals, provided it is done in a supportive environment. These elements included uninterrupted work time, clear expectations, options that aligned with student interest, and a focus on intrinsic motivation rather than external rewards. An examination of a Dutch decision-making model opened the door to what not to include—opportunities for choice outside of the classroom that could pit members of the community against one another and thus lead to more logistical problems than solutions.

Continuing with the theme of what may not be optimal for the SDMM, in chapter five I looked at two schools that explicitly recognize the student’s inherent authority to make decisions every day and, in doing so have based educational systems around it. The Sudbury Valley School and the Summerhill School both contain numerous opportunities for students to make choices that affect their own learning, and the broader educational community, in areas such as a judicial council (for dispute resolution) and weekly school meetings that include democratic voting. Their approaches, while effective for their students, would not be appropriate for an OME-compliant model.
Any attempt to implement these models as they currently exist would require not just an adjustment but a massive overhaul of culture and OME regulation, which is highly unlikely in Ontario. Certain elements of daily life at the schools were useful for the model; for example, both schools extensively use adult–student conversations as part of their culture. These interactions formed the basis for the reflection element of the SDMM, as noted in the Time Use Exemplar. I also presented three Canadian schools (two of which are in Ontario) that use self-directed learning as the framework for implementing varying degrees of student decision-making opportunities into their daily routines. These schools are all OME-inspected and approved, though as separate institutions, their contributions reach a very small percentage of students.

The above chapters all played a role, to some degree, in the development of the Student Decision-Making Model described in chapter six. The goal of the model was to recognize student agency while not threatening to subvert the structure in which the student learns (though it leaves the door open for changes to the structure, agreed upon by all parties). The model calls for more opportunities for all students in Ontario to make decisions and reflect on the subsequent consequences of their decisions. One of the important features of the model is that it is wholly customizable—it should not be standardized amongst all schools. The areas of focus as well as the degree to which the model is implemented can be left up to individual teachers, schools, or even school boards, so that in bringing the model to life they are doing so in a way they believe will best benefit their students.

The model distills the many characteristics of the theories and models analyzed into what are termed the key elements, five major points (divided into three categories) that can be used as a basis for the implementation of the model. These elements call for the student to make decisions that affect his or her own learning in an individual context and require little to no
change to existing OME structure. Doing so allows the student more say in his or her learning so that he or she may make decisions more in line with personal interests and desires while still accepting that there are elements of education that he or she must still contend with, such as due dates and assessments of learning. Any school or board that wishes to take the model further can also look at the additional elements in chapter six (again, five major points divided into three categories) which call for group decisions to be made by students that affect larger groups and/or the entire school community.

The model is presented alongside an exemplar—a potential way for a school to implement the key elements via a specific focus on how students use their time in class. The Time Use Exemplar employs a cyclical process: The teacher introduces the inclusion of more choice opportunities to the class, and any rules or reasons are coconstructed with students. Students who choose to take advantage of the new approach record what they chose and why in a log. Periodically, students look at their log to complete a reflection on the relationship between their choices and their goals. Finally, each student meets individually with his or her teacher to discuss the student’s progress and learning from the model. The end result, one would hope, would be an increased recognition of the capacity for student decision-making by educators, students who feel more comfortable and confident making decisions, and, in this case, a structure left intact so that schools may still offer OSSD credits and pass any OME inspections without requiring any regulatory adjustments.

Why do we formally educate students in the first place? Developing a singular answer, accepted by all, would seem a practical impossibility. Yet, could one possible reason be to help students prepare for life, both during schooling and after it? If so, and provided we also accept that part of life involves making decisions for ourselves, then formal education should contain within it opportunities for students to make those decisions, not just follow instructions. The
theory-informed model laid out in this thesis allows for these opportunities to take place and for said opportunities to be monitored in an effective and practical way. For when all is said and done, what better preparation for life can a student have than to feel confident in the face of that ubiquitous question: “What would you do?”
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