

Pragmatic Truth in Educational Management: An Empirical Field Investigation of Problem-Solving Practices in Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines how school actors construct and justify managerial decisions through evidence, practical consequences, collective deliberation, and institutional values. This qualitative, multi-site case study examined three elementary educational institutions in Samarinda, Indonesia: a public school, a state Islamic elementary school, and a privately managed Islamic elementary school. Researchers collected data over five months through semi-structured interviews with 24 participants, non-participant observations of 14 meetings, and document analysis. The study analyzed data using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña framework. The findings reveal five interconnected themes: consequence-based validation, collaborative inquiry cycles, contextual adaptation of national policy, evidence as a warrant for action, and value-bounded pragmatism. These findings show that defensible managerial decisions require observable educational improvements, systematic interpretation of evidence, meaningful participation, and ethical accountability. The study concludes that pragmatic reasoning provides a valuable foundation for responsible educational management. Its proposed Pragmatic Problem-Solving Cycle offers practical implications for strengthening school leadership, data literacy, reflective decision-making, and context-sensitive policy implementation while safeguarding pupils' welfare and institutional values.

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INTRODUCTION

School leadership matters to society because managerial decisions shape the quality, equity, and ethical character of education (Amirudin et al., 2026; Wohlfart et al., 2025). Principals must respond to declining achievement, teacher absenteeism, parental complaints, financial constraints, and curriculum changes while ensuring that decisions benefit students (Firmansyah et al., 2025; Hidayati

et al., 2025). These challenges require more than administrative compliance because their causes are often contested and their solutions uncertain. Patuawa et al. (2023) distinguish truth-seeking, which tests assumptions against evidence and alternative perspectives, from truth-claiming, which prioritizes existing beliefs. This distinction matters because unsupported diagnoses can lead to ineffective interventions and perpetuate educational inequalities. Therefore, understanding how school leaders establish valid knowledge is essential for improving educational management and public accountability.

School leaders often face ill-structured problems with multiple causes, competing interests, and uncertain consequences (Abrahamsen & Aas, 2024; Kareem et al., 2023). For example, a decline in student achievement may reflect instructional practices, attendance patterns, family circumstances, resource limitations, or interactions among these factors. When leaders attribute such problems to familiar explanations without investigating alternatives, their decisions risk addressing symptoms rather than underlying conditions. Research indicates that leaders often test causal assumptions less rigorously than other aspects of problem-solving, despite their importance in determining interventions (Rehman et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2024). Meanwhile, data-informed management can become mechanical compliance when leaders interpret evidence without professional judgment (Chaniago & Rokan, 2024; Jmari et al., 2025). These challenges highlight the need for systematic, evidence-responsive, and ethically responsible approaches to school problem-solving.

In Indonesia, these challenges intersect with curriculum decentralization and institutional diversity. Kurikulum Merdeka encourages schools to adapt learning to local needs, while Perencanaan Berbasis Data promotes using educational information to set improvement priorities (Islamia et al., 2025; Situmorang et al., 2026). Nevertheless, teacher readiness remains uneven, and interpreting data for practical planning can be difficult. These conditions raise questions about how school actors diagnose managerial problems, select interventions, and determine whether outcomes demonstrate genuine improvement. In madrasah, religious and ethical commitments further complicate these judgments because effectiveness alone may not establish acceptability (Amalia et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2025). Such circumstances warrant empirical investigation.

Existing scholarship provides important foundations for understanding problem-solving in school leadership. Silverman & Smith (2024) distinguish between truth-seeking and truth-claiming, while Tuan & Tho (2025) examine how leaders investigate assumptions about the causes of problems. Research on data literacy emphasizes collective interpretation, reflective practice, and improvement-oriented leadership rather than numerical analysis alone (Arar et al., 2026; Tuan & Tho, 2025). Zulqarnain & Ali (2023) similarly highlight the limitations of mechanical data use. Meanwhile, improvement science conceptualizes school development as iterative inquiry involving problem definition, intervention, measurement, and learning (Arifin et al., 2025; Mulyadi et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies establish the importance of evidence-

informed leadership. However, their analytical emphasis remains divided across leadership behavior, data practices, and improvement methodologies.

Despite these contributions, a key theoretical and empirical gap remains. Pragmatist philosophy explains how inquiry, experience, and examination of consequences warrant claims (Mu'arifah et al., 2024; Thahir & Muis, 2026). Educational scholarship also connects Deweyan inquiry with democratic deliberation and situated problem-solving (Gobingca, 2026; Usher et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these philosophical discussions rarely examine how school practitioners establish the validity of managerial decisions in everyday institutional settings. Conversely, empirical studies of data use and improvement cycles seldom examine the underlying conception of truth that guides practitioners' judgments. This separation limits understanding of how evidence, practical consequences, professional deliberation, and institutional values jointly shape educational decisions.

This study advances a pragmatist interpretation of school management by examining how practitioners construct and justify knowledge through everyday problem-solving. Its novelty lies in empirically connecting Dewey's conception of warranted assertibility with managerial practices in Indonesian elementary schools, including madrasah. Rather than equating truth with immediate usefulness, the study examines how participants evaluate proposed solutions through evidence, observed consequences, collective deliberation, and religious-ethical commitments. This approach extends existing research by integrating problematization, hypothesis formation, practical testing, and justification within a context-sensitive analytical framework. The resulting Pragmatic Problem-Solving Cycle offers a potential contribution to educational leadership theory and practice, particularly where institutional autonomy, accountability demands, and faith-based values intersect in decision-making.

Accordingly, this study investigates problem-solving practices across three Indonesian elementary schools through three questions: how school actors define and diagnose managerial problems; which criteria they use to judge solutions as valid or effective; and how institutional policies and religious-ethical values shape these judgments. The central argument is that managerial decisions become more defensible when practitioners treat proposed solutions as revisable hypotheses rather than established truths. Their validity depends on systematic inquiry, practical consequences, collective scrutiny, and compatibility with legitimate educational values. This argument also recognizes that effectiveness cannot, by itself, establish ethical acceptability. By examining these relationships empirically, the study seeks to explain how pragmatist reasoning operates within diverse school contexts and to develop an analytical cycle for more reflective, evidence-informed, and responsible leadership.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multi-site case study design within an interpretive-pragmatist orientation (Mebratu et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2023). This design was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of how school

actors diagnose managerial problems, evaluate solutions, and negotiate evidence-based decisions within their organizational contexts. The study was conducted in three elementary schools in Samarinda, East Kalimantan, purposively selected to reflect differences in governance and religious character within the same regional policy environment. The selection criteria included at least one academic year of Kurikulum Merdeka implementation, documented use of Rapor Pendidikan in school planning, and permission to observe internal meetings. The research sites comprised one public elementary school, one state Islamic elementary school (madrasah ibtidaiyah negeri), and one privately managed Islamic elementary school. This variation enabled cross-case comparisons of pragmatic problem-solving practices across different institutional settings.

We collected data over five months during the 2025/2026 academic year through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. We recruited 24 participants using purposive and snowball sampling: three principals, three vice principals for curriculum, twelve classroom teachers, three school committee members, and three school supervisors. Interviews lasting 45–75 minutes explored who participated in managerial decisions, what problems were encountered, when and where problems and interventions occurred, why particular diagnoses were adopted, and how solutions were selected and evaluated. The study observed and documented fourteen meetings, including teacher working groups (Kelompok Kerja Guru), data-based planning sessions, and principal–teacher consultations, through structured field notes. Documentary evidence included school work plans (RKS/RKAS), Rapor Pendidikan summaries, meeting minutes, and supervision reports. Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña framework, comprising data condensation through selection, coding, and categorization; data display through thematic matrices and cross-case comparisons; and conclusion drawing and verification through iterative examination of patterns, contradictory evidence, and relationships among themes. The analysis combined inductive coding with sensitizing concepts from pragmatist inquiry (Saldaña, 2021).

The study established data trustworthiness through triangulation across data collection methods and participant groups, member checking of interview summaries with ten participants, and prolonged engagement in the research settings (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024; Sengchaleun et al., 2023). The study supported dependability by maintaining an audit trail documenting data collection, coding decisions, thematic development, and analytical revisions. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling to examine how the researcher's experience in Islamic educational management influenced interpretation. Transferability was supported by describing the institutional characteristics, participant roles, policy context, and research procedures sufficiently for readers to assess the applicability of the findings to comparable educational settings. Participants were identified using anonymized codes, such as P-S1 for the

principal of School 1 and T3-S2 for a teacher in School 2. We obtained ethical approval from [ethics committee/institutional body, approval number], and secured research permission from the relevant regional education office and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. All participants provided written informed consent, were informed of their right to withdraw, and were assured of confidentiality. We removed school details to protect institutional and participant identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis identified five themes explaining how school actors evaluated managerial decisions across three elementary educational institutions in Samarinda, Indonesia. These themes demonstrate that a solution was considered valid when it produced observable educational improvement, emerged through collective inquiry, accommodated institutional circumstances, was supported by relevant evidence, and remained consistent with ethical commitments. The findings distinguish practical effectiveness from justified decision-making: participants did not automatically accept an intervention merely because it followed policy or produced immediate results. Instead, participants evaluated decisions through a combination of consequences, professional deliberation, contextual interpretation, and moral considerations. Table 2 summarises the five themes, their core meanings, their relationships with pragmatist inquiry, and the principal data sources supporting their interpretation.

Table 2. Summary of Research Findings

Theme	Core Meaning	Pragmatist Moment	Main Data Sources
1. Consequence-Based Validation	Decisions are justified through observable improvements in pupils' learning or behaviour.	Warrant	Interviews and meeting minutes
2. Collaborative Inquiry Cycles	Problems are diagnosed and solutions examined collectively.	Problematisation and testing	Observations and interviews
3. Contextual Adaptation of Policy	National guidelines are interpreted in relation to local conditions.	Hypothesis	Interviews and school plans
4. Evidence as Warrant	Educational data inform decisions without mechanically determining action.	Testing and warrant	Documents and observations
5. Value-Bounded Pragmatism	Ethical and religious commitments determine which outcomes are acceptable.	Value boundaries	Interviews and school committee perspectives

Consequence-Based Validation

Consequence-based validation evaluates managerial decisions through observable changes in pupils' learning, participation, or behavior. Across the three schools, participants considered educational improvement an important criterion for continuing, modifying, or discontinuing programs. Rather than relying exclusively on administrative compliance, they assessed whether interventions produced meaningful changes in classroom conditions. At S1, teachers used reading-level checklists to compare pupils' progress, while meeting minutes documented a decision to continue a daily reading intervention following a subsequent review. These findings indicate that practical consequences served as a basis for managerial justification. From a pragmatist perspective, decisions were treated as provisional responses whose validity depended on subsequent experience and the extent to which anticipated educational improvements could be observed.

The principal of S1 explained the rationale for introducing a daily reading intervention to address low literacy achievement: "We do not ask whether the program is in the guidebook. We ask whether the children read better after a month" (P-S1). This statement shows that program legitimacy was tied to pupils' learning progress rather than conformity to prescribed procedures alone. Teachers similarly described discontinuing officially endorsed methods when they did not produce visible classroom improvements. The researchers interpret these accounts as evidence of consequence-oriented professional judgment, in which established practices remained open to reconsideration. Across the cases, principals articulated improvement criteria, teachers reconsidered methods based on classroom experiences, and documentary records supported subsequent program reviews. However, perceived improvement does not automatically demonstrate that an intervention caused the observed changes. Consequence-based validation therefore connects managerial decisions with practical outcomes while preserving opportunities for revision, although effectiveness alone is insufficient to establish causality or broader educational legitimacy.

Collaborative Inquiry Cycles

Collaborative inquiry cycles are collective processes in which school actors identify managerial problems, reconsider initial explanations, test alternative responses, and review subsequent outcomes. These practices were particularly visible in teacher working groups (Kelompok Kerja Guru, KKG), planning sessions, and school consultations. In S2, a teacher working group initially attributed pupils' frequent lateness to "lazy parents." A discussion with a school committee member introduced another explanation: many pupils relied on a single public transport route. The group subsequently reconsidered its diagnosis, adjusted its response, and monitored attendance for six weeks. This case shows that collective discussion helped participants incorporate contextual information into problem-solving. The researchers interpret this process as collaborative

inquiry because participants revised the initial diagnosis through interaction rather than treating it as an unquestioned managerial judgment.

A teacher in S2 reflected on the process: "Our first answer was wrong. We only knew because we tried, checked, and talked again" (T2-S2). This statement highlights the relationship between experimentation, evidence review, and collective reflection. The teacher acknowledged that the initial explanation was inadequate and that subsequent inquiry provided grounds for reconsideration. However, observations in S3 indicated that the principal sometimes announced a diagnosis before inviting teachers to contribute, after which teachers tended to align with the stated position. These contrasting findings suggest that collaboration can help correct assumptions but does not guarantee meaningful deliberation. Its quality depends on whether participants can question initial explanations and contribute alternative interpretations without being constrained by managerial authority. The researchers interpret openness to disagreement, consideration of competing explanations, and willingness to revise decisions as essential characteristics of inquiry-oriented leadership. Collaboration thus functions as both a practical resource for improving managerial decisions and an epistemic condition for shifting from truth-claiming to truth-seeking. Without these conditions, collective forums risk reproducing existing assumptions rather than critically examining their validity.

Contextual Adaptation of National Policy

Contextual adaptation of policy refers to how school actors interpret national educational guidelines in relation to pupils' developmental needs, available resources, and local circumstances. The findings indicate that participants did not always implement Kurikulum Merdeka requirements uniformly but adapted them while preserving their intended educational purposes. At S1, the vice principal described the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) module as "too heavy for our Grade 1 pupils as written." Teachers then shortened projects and incorporated local themes, including the Mahakam River, to suit pupils better. A school supervisor reinforced this approach by explaining that supervision involved "checking that the change is thought through, not that the format is identical" (SV-S1). These accounts suggest that contextual adaptation requires educational justification rather than strict procedural uniformity or unrestricted local discretion.

The findings reveal a negotiated relationship between national policy expectations and local professional judgment. School actors considered pupils' developmental needs and familiar surroundings, while supervisory practices emphasized the rationale behind implementation changes. School work plans (RKS/RKAS) were among the documentary sources used to examine how institutional priorities informed planning, although the available findings provide limited detail on specific entries and a systematic evaluation of adaptations. From a pragmatist perspective, contextual adaptation represents hypothesis formation because locally adjusted practices constitute proposed responses whose suitability requires subsequent evaluation. Flexibility alone

does not establish sound practice; adaptations must have defensible educational purposes and be assessed through their consequences. Therefore, effective policy implementation requires balancing professional autonomy with accountability, ensuring that context-sensitive decisions remain justified by educational needs and evaluated outcomes.

Evidence as a Warrant for Action

Evidence as a warrant refers to using educational information to identify problems, justify interventions, and evaluate managerial decisions. Across the schools, Rapor Pendidikan provided an initial reference for identifying areas requiring attention, while classroom assessments, attendance records, and teachers' observations supported further interpretation. Participants did not treat platform indicators as automatic determinants of managerial action but combined them with contextual information and professional judgment. The principal of S2 explained, "The report tells us where to look, not what to do" (P-S2). This statement highlights the distinction between identifying problems and selecting appropriate solutions. From a pragmatist perspective, evidence functions as a warrant for managerial decisions because its significance depends on how it is interpreted and applied within specific educational contexts, rather than through the mechanical use of numerical indicators.

The findings show a shift from data availability to interpretive use, in which platform indicators set priorities, supplementary information informs problem diagnosis, and professional judgment guides intervention selection. Participants sought to strengthen managerial justification by considering multiple information sources before allocating resources. However, uncertainty in interpreting some numeracy indicators suggests that access to educational data does not necessarily guarantee sufficient analytical capacity. The researchers interpret evidence as a warrant rather than a command because data support managerial justification without eliminating the need for contextual analysis. This finding underscores the importance of data literacy, transparent reasoning, and critical interpretation in evidence-informed school management. Nevertheless, limited details on specific indicator values, documentary entries, and interpretive differences constrain conclusions about the accuracy of individual diagnoses and the effectiveness of particular interventions.

Value-Bounded Pragmatism

Value-bounded pragmatism refers to evaluating managerial decisions against religious, ethical, and educational commitments alongside their practical consequences. This theme was particularly evident in the two madrasah, where participants connected decision-making with Islamic ethical principles, including adab and maslahat. Comparable boundaries emerged at S1 through child-protection norms and the Pancasila student profile. The findings indicate that anticipated effectiveness alone was insufficient to establish an intervention's acceptability. Instead, school actors considered whether proposed actions respected pupils and aligned with institutional commitments. Value boundaries

thus served as a context-sensitive element of pragmatic reasoning, setting the conditions under which outcomes could be considered desirable and distinguishing educational improvement from pursuing measurable results at any cost.

The principal of S3 explained the rejection of a proposal to improve attendance through public class rankings: "A solution can work and still not be right. For us, both tests must be passed" (P-S3). Public comparisons were considered problematic because they could shame pupils and conflict with *adab*. Similarly, committee members in S2 framed acceptable decisions through *maslahat*, understood as benefits for the wider community. These accounts demonstrate that managerial legitimacy depended on both practical effectiveness and ethical evaluation. Across the cases, institutional values shaped judgments about acceptable interventions, although the evaluative procedures differed by context. Value-bounded pragmatism therefore extends consequence-based reasoning by requiring school actors to assess outcomes alongside supporting evidence and the moral legitimacy of the means used to achieve educational goals.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that pragmatic problem-solving in elementary school management involves more than selecting solutions that appear effective (Gilman et al., 2025; Retnoningsih et al., 2026). Consistent with Zhang et al., (2024) participants evaluated ideas through their consequences, while extending this perspective by incorporating collective agreement and ethical boundaries into judgments of effectiveness. This finding also responds to Biesta (2024) criticism of instrumental "what works" approaches, which risk neglecting educational purposes. Theoretically, the study conceptualizes warranted pragmatism as a situated process in which practical consequences, evidential support, collective deliberation, and institutional values jointly determine whether a management decision is justified (Fawaid et al., 2025; Sunarjo et al., 2024). Thus, effectiveness becomes educationally meaningful rather than merely operational.

The collaborative inquiry cycles reinforce Dewey's understanding of inquiry as reconstructing problematic situations through hypothesis formation and testing (Suryanti et al., 2026; Mananna et al., 2025). They also support Robinson et al. (2025) distinction between truth-seeking and truth-claiming: managerial assumptions become more defensible when tested collectively rather than imposed by authority. However, observations of principals announcing diagnoses before inviting teachers' perspectives indicate that collaboration is not automatic. This finding complements research linking leadership practices with teachers' professional learning and problem-solving (Mor et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). Theoretically, it positions participation as an epistemic condition for stronger managerial warrants. Practically, principals should invite alternative explanations before deciding interventions (Aminullah et al., 2025; Basri et al., 2024; Febrianto et al., 2026).

The findings concerning educational data and curriculum adaptation broadly align with Rozi et al. (2025), who emphasize that data should inform professional judgment rather than mechanically determine decisions. Participants combined platform indicators with classroom evidence and adapted Kurikulum Merdeka guidance to pupils' developmental needs, consistent with improvement research favoring evidence-informed local adaptation (Munaf et al., 2025; Tanjung et al., 2026). Nevertheless, uncertainty in interpreting some indicators and uneven teacher readiness reveal limitations that flexible policies alone cannot resolve. These findings highlight a link between data literacy and adaptive implementation (Syafudin et al., 2026; Wadi et al., 2023). Practically, schools need collaborative data interpretation, manageable trials, and supervisory support for reasoned adaptations.

A distinctive contribution concerns the ethical boundaries within which school actors evaluate consequences. In the madrasahs, *adab* and *maslahat* constrained decisions, while the public school articulated comparable limits through child protection and civic values. This extends discussions of Islamic educational leadership by integrating ethical and spiritual commitments with organizational effectiveness (Arar et al., 2026; Mardiana et al., 2023). Unlike approaches that treat values primarily as contextual influences, the findings suggest that values can function as criteria for determining whether an apparently effective solution is acceptable. This theoretical proposition does not imply that all schools apply identical values. Instead, it highlights the importance of examining how institutional commitments shape managerial judgments.

Synthesizing these findings, the Pragmatic Problem-Solving Cycle offers a conceptual model with four iterative moments: problematization, hypothesis formation, collaborative testing, and warranting, all situated within institutional value boundaries. The model integrates consequence-based evaluation, collective inquiry, evidence use, and ethical judgment into a coherent account of school management. In practice, principals can use it in KKG and planning meetings by clearly defining problems, considering competing explanations, running short trials, and setting evaluation criteria in advance. Supervisors and district offices can assess the reasoning behind adaptations alongside documentation. Principal preparation programs can strengthen data literacy and reflective inquiry, while future research should test the model across diverse educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that elementary school management requires more than choosing solutions that appear effective; decisions must be tested against evidence, examined collaboratively, and evaluated within shared ethical and religious values. The central insight is that pragmatic reasoning becomes educationally meaningful when it balances effectiveness with accountability, pupil welfare, and institutional commitments. The study's principal scholarly contribution is the Pragmatic Problem-Solving Cycle, which integrates problematization, hypothesis formation, collaborative testing, and warranting within value boundaries, extending empirical applications of pragmatic truth to

educational management. Practically, the model guides principals to strengthen evidence-informed decision-making, develop data literacy, facilitate collaborative inquiry, and evaluate curriculum adaptations based on both consequences and educational values. Supervisors and principal development programs can also use this framework to assess the quality of managerial reasoning rather than prioritizing procedural compliance alone. Nevertheless, the study's three-school sample in one Indonesian city, single-academic-year observation, and potential social-desirability bias limit the transferability of its findings. Future research should examine diverse regions and school levels, employ longitudinal designs, and develop quantitative instruments to assess warranted problem-solving across larger samples.

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