RECONCEPTUALIZING EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT THROUGH A CRITICAL PARADIGM: A KNOWLEDGE-BASED LITERATURE STUDY

[1] Saprudin, [2] Nuryati, [3] Evi Gustini, [4] Tuti Alawiah, [5] Murnasih
Universitas Bina Bangsa
ust.saprudin@gmail.com, nuryatimamah98@yahoo.com,
evigustini2019@gmail.com, talawiah123@gmail.com, sulthanmurnasih@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The growing complexity of contemporary education systems has intensified the demand for effective educational management; however, prevailing practices remain largely dominated by technocratic and administrative rationalities that prioritize efficiency, accountability, and measurable performance. Such approaches tend to instrumentalize knowledge and marginalize the epistemological, ethical, and social dimensions of education. This study aims to reconceptualize educational management through a critical paradigm by examining how knowledge-based management is conceptualized, legitimized, and practiced within contemporary scholarly discourse. Employing a qualitative Systematic Literature Review with a critical–conceptual orientation, this study synthesizes peer-reviewed literature published between 2016 and 2025, with particular emphasis on recent studies. Data were analyzed through thematic content analysis and critical synthesis to identify dominant managerial assumptions, epistemological orientations, power relations, and their implications for educational management theory and practice. The findings reveal that while knowledge-based management has gained prominence, it is predominantly framed within instrumental and performance-oriented logics that reinforce hierarchical governance and limit participatory practices. By contrast, the critical paradigm repositions educational management as a knowledge-based social practice that is inherently value-laden, politically situated, and oriented toward reflexivity, dialogue, and social justice. This study contributes theoretically by integrating knowledge-based educational management with critical epistemology and offers a reflective framework for reorienting educational management from administrative effectiveness toward transformative and emancipatory practice.

Keywords: educational management; management; critical paradigm; social justice

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, educational management has undergone a significant transformation as education systems worldwide face increasing complexity driven by globalization, digitalization, and performance-based accountability regimes. In many national contexts, including developing countries, educational management practices have increasingly been shaped by technocratic and administrative rationalities that prioritize efficiency, standardization, and measurable outcomes as indicators of institutional quality (Rizvi & Lingard, 2019; Williamson et al., 2020). While such approaches have contributed to organizational stability and managerial control, recent studies suggest they tend to marginalize the epistemological, ethical, and social dimensions of education as a humanistic, knowledge-producing practice (Widodo, 2020; Widaningsih, 2025).

The current state of the art in educational management research reveals two dominant and often disconnected strands of scholarship. The first strand emphasizes effectiveness-oriented educational management, knowledge management systems, and digital innovation as strategic tools to enhance institutional performance and decision-making processes (Saeed et al., 2022; Amelia et al., 2024). Within this framework, knowledge is primarily treated as an organizational asset that can be managed instrumentally to improve competitiveness and efficiency. The second strand, emerging from critical education policy and management studies, challenges the assumption of value-neutrality in managerial practices by foregrounding issues of power, ideology, and political interests embedded in educational governance and institutional

management (Rizvi & Lingard, 2019; Apple, 2018). However, the literature indicates that these two strands rarely intersect, resulting in a fragmented understanding of knowledge-based educational management that lacks a comprehensive critical epistemological foundation.

This fragmentation points to a central problem in contemporary educational management: the instrumental use of knowledge without sufficient critical reflection on its epistemological assumptions and social consequences. Several recent studies in national contexts have demonstrated that educational management remains heavily oriented toward administrative compliance and performance indicators, often at the expense of participatory decision-making, ethical reflection, and social justice considerations (Hanif et al., 2025; Ulfa et al., 2025). Such conditions risk transforming educational management into a mechanism for reproducing structural inequalities rather than serving as a means for institutional learning and social transformation. Consequently, there is an urgent need to rethink educational management as a knowledge-based practice grounded in reflective and critical inquiry.

The urgency of this reconceptualization is further intensified by the growing influence of global policy discourses that promote market-oriented governance, digital surveillance, and standardized accountability in education. Recent literature warns that, without a critical epistemological orientation, the integration of knowledge management and digital technologies may reinforce neoliberal logics and narrow the educational mission to economic productivity alone (Williamson et al., 2020; Widodo, 2020). In this context, the critical paradigm offers a powerful analytical lens for examining how knowledge is produced, legitimized, and mobilized within educational management, as well as for interrogating whose interests are served by dominant managerial practices (Rizvi & Lingard, 2019). From this perspective, educational management cannot be understood merely as a technical function but must be examined as a social practice embedded in power relations and ideological structures.

Previous studies have laid important groundwork for this inquiry. Saeed et al. (2022) demonstrated that knowledge management practices in higher education institutions contribute to improved organizational effectiveness and decision-making quality; however, their analysis largely remained within an instrumental framework and did not address the ideological implications of knowledge use. Similarly, Amelia et al. (2024), through a systematic literature review, emphasized the role of knowledge management across educational levels in Indonesia but focused primarily on implementation strategies rather than critical epistemological concerns. Meanwhile, Widaningsih (2025) offered a critical analysis of contemporary educational management practices in Indonesia through a humanistic and Freirean lens, highlighting the dominance of technocratic management. Nevertheless, this study did not explicitly integrate the concept of knowledge-based educational management within a broader critical epistemological framework. Taken together, these studies provide valuable insights while simultaneously revealing conceptual limitations in linking knowledge-based management with critical paradigmatic analysis.

The review of prior research thus reveals a significant research gap. Although educational management, knowledge management, and critical perspectives have each been extensively discussed, there remains a lack of integrative studies that systematically reconceptualize educational management as a knowledge-based practice within a critical paradigm. Existing scholarship tends to treat knowledge management as a technical solution or address critical concerns in a largely normative manner, without synthesizing both dimensions into a coherent conceptual framework. This gap underscores the need for a literature-based study that bridges instrumental knowledge management approaches and critical educational theory.

The novelty of this study lies in its explicit effort to reconceptualize educational management by situating knowledge-based practices within a critical paradigm. Unlike previous studies that frame knowledge primarily as an organizational resource, this study positions knowledge as a reflective, value-laden, and socially constructed foundation for educational management. Through a critical synthesis of recent literature, the article advances an alternative

understanding of educational management as a social and epistemic practice oriented toward institutional transformation and social justice. By doing so, the study contributes to the field of educational management and responds to the contemporary challenges posed by globalized, technocratic governance models.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to analyze and reconceptualize educational management through a critical paradigm by examining its epistemological foundations, power relations, and implications for theory and practice. Drawing on a comprehensive knowledge-based literature review, this study aims to offer a reflective framework that reorients educational management from administrative effectiveness toward participatory, ethical, and socially just practices.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with a critical–conceptual orientation to reconceptualize educational management through a critical paradigm. The SLR approach was chosen to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability in the review and synthesis of scholarly literature, while allowing for in-depth critical interpretation rather than statistical aggregation of findings. Unlike empirical systematic reviews that focus primarily on measuring effects or testing causal relationships, this study adopted an interpretive–critical SLR design to conceptualize, examine, and synthesize knowledge in educational management.

The review was explicitly guided by the critical paradigm, which conceptualizes knowledge as socially constructed, inherently value-laden, and embedded within broader relations of power and ideology. From this standpoint, the purpose of the review extended beyond identifying trends or dominant themes in the literature. Instead, it sought to interrogate the underlying assumptions, ideological orientations, and managerial rationalities that shape contemporary educational management discourse. By adopting this paradigm, the review positioned educational management not as a neutral technical practice, but as a social and epistemic activity that both reflects and reproduces particular power structures.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using a range of established academic databases and indexing platforms to ensure comprehensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed sources. These sources included Scopus-indexed journals, Google Scholar, nationally accredited journals, and publications from reputable international academic publishers. This multi-source strategy was employed to capture both global and contextual perspectives on educational management, knowledge-based practices, and critical educational theory.

The search strategy combined key terms related to educational management, knowledge-based management, and critical paradigms to ensure conceptual breadth and interdisciplinary relevance. Search terms such as educational management, knowledge-based management, knowledge management in education, critical paradigm, critical educational management, and education policy and power were systematically applied. Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine and combine keywords, enabling the retrieval of literature that explicitly addressed the intersection between management practices, knowledge production, and critical perspectives in education.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain both relevance and scholarly quality, the selection of literature was guided by clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The review focused on publications released between 2016 and 2025, with particular emphasis on studies published in the last five years to

reflect current academic debates and contemporary developments in educational management research. The included sources were peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books that were explicitly relevant to educational management, knowledge management, or critical perspectives in education. Both conceptual and empirical studies were considered, provided that they contributed meaningfully to epistemological, managerial, or education policy discussions. Publications written in English or Indonesian were included to accommodate both international and national scholarly contexts.

Conversely, sources were excluded if they lacked academic rigor or conceptual clarity. This included non-scholarly publications such as opinion blogs or policy briefs without a clear academic foundation, studies that focused exclusively on technical management tools without engaging in theoretical or critical discussion, and publications that did not present a coherent methodological or conceptual framework. These criteria were consistently applied to ensure that the final corpus of literature met acceptable academic standards and aligned with the study's critical orientation.

Literature Screening and Selection Process

The literature screening process followed a systematic, iterative approach. In the initial stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed to assess their relevance to the research focus and alignment with the critical paradigm. This preliminary screening allowed for the elimination of clearly irrelevant sources at an early stage. Subsequently, full-text screening was conducted to evaluate the conceptual depth, methodological transparency, and theoretical contribution of each publication. During this stage, particular attention was given to how studies conceptualized knowledge, management, and power relations within educational contexts. Duplicate records were removed, and only sources that fully met the inclusion criteria were retained for analysis. The final corpus consisted of peer-reviewed articles and scholarly works that collectively represented dominant managerial perspectives, alternative approaches, and explicitly critical viewpoints on educational management and knowledge-based practices. This diversity of perspectives was essential for enabling a robust critical synthesis.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted through thematic content analysis combined with critical synthesis. Each selected study was examined to identify its underlying epistemological assumptions, conceptualizations of knowledge and educational management, representations of power relations and ideological orientations, and implications for educational management theory and practice. The analysis proceeded through three interrelated stages: coding, categorization, and critical synthesis.

In the initial coding stage, recurring concepts, arguments, and analytical patterns were identified across the selected literature. These codes were then grouped into broader analytical categories that reflected key themes emerging from the data. In the final stage, these themes were critically interpreted to uncover patterns, tensions, contradictions, and conceptual gaps within the existing body of research. The critical synthesis integrated these insights into a coherent reconceptualization of educational management as a knowledge-based social practice grounded in a critical paradigm.

Analytical Instrument

To ensure analytical consistency and transparency, an analytical instrument was developed to guide the review and synthesis process. The instrument operationalized key dimensions derived from critical theory and educational management literature, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical Instrument for the Systematic Literature Review

Analytical Dimension	Indicators	Analytical Focus
Epistemological Orientation	Assumptions about knowledge and truth	How knowledge is defined, legitimized, and used in educational management
Conceptualization of Educational Management	Managerial roles and objectives	Whether management is framed as technical control or reflective social practice
Knowledge-Based Practices	Forms of knowledge utilization	Instrumental use vs. reflective and dialogical use of knowledge
Power Relations	Policy influence and organizational hierarchy	Identification of dominant actors, decision-making structures, and exclusions
Ideological Orientation	Underlying values and norms	Presence of neoliberal, technocratic, humanistic, or emancipatory ideologies
Implications for Practice	Managerial and institutional outcomes	Effects on participation, equity, and institutional transformation

Validity and Trustworthiness

The review's trustworthiness was ensured through several strategies. First, source triangulation was applied by incorporating literature from diverse contexts and theoretical traditions. Second, analytical transparency was maintained through clearly articulated inclusion criteria and analytical dimensions. Third, logical coherence and theoretical consistency were emphasized to ensure alignment among the research objectives, the analytical framework, and the synthesized findings. Rather than statistical validity, the study prioritized theoretical robustness and critical plausibility, which are central to qualitative and conceptual SLRs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this systematic literature review are organized into four interrelated analytical themes that emerged from the critical synthesis of the selected studies. These themes reflect dominant patterns in how educational management is conceptualized, how knowledge is positioned within managerial practices, how power relations shape educational governance, and how a critical paradigm reframes the theoretical and practical orientation of educational management. The findings are presented thematically and supported by analytical tables to enhance transparency and coherence.

Dominant Conceptualizations of Educational Management in the Literature

The first major finding indicates that contemporary educational management literature is still predominantly shaped by technical–administrative and instrumental rationalities. In many of the reviewed studies, educational management is conceptualized primarily as a set of managerial functions aimed at ensuring organizational efficiency, accountability, and performance optimization. In this framework, management practices are largely evaluated by measurable outcomes, such as institutional effectiveness, compliance with standards, and the achievement of predefined performance indicators.

Although recent literature increasingly incorporates the language of innovation and knowledge management, these concepts are often embedded within an instrumental logic that treats knowledge as a tool for improving organizational competitiveness rather than as a reflective or emancipatory resource. This dominant orientation suggests that educational management remains framed as a neutral, technical activity, with limited attention to its epistemological and ideological dimensions.

Table 2. Dominant Conceptualizations of Educational Management

Conceptual Orientation	Core Characteristics	Managerial Focus	Epistemological Assumption
Technical–Administrative	Emphasis on planning, control, and evaluation	Efficiency and compliance	Knowledge as objective and neutral
Performance-Based	Accountability, indicators, benchmarking	Organizational outcomes	Knowledge as a measurable resource
Knowledge-Instrumental	Knowledge management systems	Decision support	Knowledge as a managerial tool

This pattern demonstrates that while knowledge-based approaches are increasingly adopted, they are rarely detached from technocratic assumptions. Knowledge is predominantly mobilized to support managerial control rather than to foster critical reflection or participatory governance.

Knowledge-Based Educational Management: Instrumental Versus Reflective Approaches

The second theme highlights a clear conceptual distinction between instrumental and reflective approaches to knowledge-based educational management. Instrumental approaches conceptualize knowledge as an organizational asset that must be captured, stored, and utilized to enhance decision-making efficiency. These approaches emphasize technological systems, procedural optimization, and human resource development as mechanisms for improving institutional performance. In contrast, a smaller but significant body of literature advances a reflective understanding of knowledge, emphasizing its socially constructed and context-dependent nature. Within this perspective, knowledge-based management is understood as an ongoing process of collective learning, dialogue, and critical inquiry. However, the findings indicate that reflective approaches remain marginal within mainstream educational management discourse.

Table 3. Approaches to Knowledge-Based Educational Management

Approach	Role of Knowledge	Managerial Orientation	Implication for Practice
Instrumental	Organizational asset	Control and optimization	Efficiency-focused management
Reflective	Social and contextual construct	Learning and dialogue	Participatory decision-making
Critical–Reflective	Value-laden and political	Emancipation and justice	Transformative management

The limited presence of reflective and critical–reflective approaches suggests that knowledge-based educational management has not yet fully realized its potential as a transformative practice. Instead, it often reinforces existing managerial logics.

Power Relations and Ideological Structures in Educational Management Practices

A third major finding reveals that educational management practices are deeply embedded within power relations and ideological frameworks, particularly those associated with neoliberal governance and performance accountability. The literature consistently demonstrates that policies related to standardization, evaluation, and accountability function as instruments of power, shaping managerial behavior and institutional priorities. Hierarchical organizational structures further reinforce these power dynamics by centralizing decision-making authority among managerial elites, while limiting the participation of teachers, academic staff, and learners. Critical studies emphasize that such structures normalize managerial dominance and marginalize alternative forms of knowledge and local educational needs.

Table 4. Power Relations in Educational Management

Dimension	Manifestation	Dominant Actors	Impact
Policy Governance	Standardization and audits	State and global agencies	Reduced institutional autonomy
Organizational Structure	Hierarchical decision-making	Managers and administrators	Limited participation

Dimension	Manifestation	Dominant Actors	Impact
Accountability Systems	Performance indicators	Regulatory bodies	Reproduction of inequality

These findings underscore that educational management cannot be separated from political and ideological contexts. Without critical awareness, managerial practices risk reinforcing structural inequalities and silencing marginalized voices within educational institutions.

Implications of the Critical Paradigm for Reconceptualizing Educational Management

The fourth theme highlights how the critical paradigm offers an alternative framework for reconceptualizing educational management as a knowledge-based social practice. Studies adopting a critical orientation emphasize epistemological reflexivity, ethical responsibility, and social justice as core principles of management. In this framework, managers are not merely administrators but facilitators of dialogue, collective learning, and institutional transformation. The critical paradigm also reframes the purpose of educational management from organizational efficiency toward broader educational and social goals. This reconceptualization positions educational management as a site of struggle and possibility, where dominant ideologies can be challenged, and alternative practices can emerge.

Table 5. Reconceptualization of Educational Management through a Critical Paradigm

Aspect	Conventional Management	Critical Paradigm
Role of Knowledge	Instrumental	Reflective and emancipatory
Managerial Role	Controller	Facilitator and critical agent
Decision-Making	Top-down	Participatory and dialogical
Primary Goal	Efficiency	Social justice and transformation

This shift represents a fundamental reorientation of educational management theory and practice. By embedding knowledge within critical reflection and ethical deliberation, educational management becomes a transformative rather than merely administrative endeavor. Overall, the findings demonstrate a persistent dominance of instrumental and technocratic approaches in educational management literature, despite growing recognition of knowledge-based practices. The integration of a critical paradigm exposes the limitations of existing frameworks and highlights the need for a reconceptualization that foregrounds epistemology, power, and social justice. Through critical synthesis, this study identifies educational management as a contested and value-laden practice, calling for a shift toward reflective, participatory, and emancipatory forms of knowledge-based management.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to reconceptualize educational management through a critical paradigm by synthesizing recent knowledge-based management literature. The findings reveal a persistent dominance of instrumental and technocratic rationalities in educational management, despite increasing references to knowledge, innovation, and learning organizations. When interpreted through broader theoretical lenses, these findings resonate strongly with critical social theory, critical management studies, and contemporary critical policy scholarship, which collectively emphasize that organizational practices are never epistemologically neutral but are deeply embedded in power relations and ideological structures.

From the perspective of critical social theory, particularly traditions influenced by Habermasian and post-Marxian thought, the instrumentalization of knowledge identified in this study reflects what scholars describe as the colonization of communicative and educational rationality by instrumental rationality (Brookfield, 2020; Alvesson & Spicer, 2020). Educational management practices that prioritize efficiency, accountability, and performance indicators tend to reduce knowledge to a functional resource, thereby marginalizing its dialogical, ethical, and emancipatory dimensions. The results of this review align with recent theoretical arguments

suggesting that such managerial logics contribute to the depoliticization of education and obscure the normative purposes of educational institutions (Giroux, 2020).

The distinction identified between instrumental and reflective approaches to knowledge-based educational management can also be situated within critical management studies (CMS). CMS scholars argue that mainstream management theories often legitimize managerial control while presenting themselves as objective and value-free (Grey et al., 2021). The findings of this study echo this critique, showing that even when knowledge management is adopted in educational contexts, it frequently operates within a narrow, efficiency-oriented framework. Reflective and critical approaches, by contrast, align with CMS calls for management practices that foreground reflexivity, ethical responsibility, and democratic participation (Fournier & Grey, 2020). This suggests that educational management theory remains structurally constrained by dominant managerial discourses, limiting the transformative potential of knowledge-based practices.

The analysis of power relations and ideological structures in educational management further connects this study to critical policy sociology. Contemporary policy scholarship highlights how global education reforms, accountability regimes, and audit cultures function as technologies of governance that reshape institutional behavior and professional identities (Ozga, 2021; Ball, 2021). The findings of this review reinforce these insights by demonstrating how standardized evaluation systems and hierarchical organizational structures centralize authority and marginalize alternative forms of knowledge. This confirms recent arguments that educational management operates as a key site where global policy logics are translated into local institutional practices, often reproducing inequality and limiting professional autonomy (Lingard et al., 2021).

Importantly, the reconceptualization proposed through the critical paradigm resonates with transformative and emancipatory theories of educational leadership. Recent scholarship emphasizes that leadership and management in education should be understood as relational, ethical, and politically situated practices rather than technical functions (Shields, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2023). The findings suggest that repositioning managers as facilitators of dialogue and collective learning aligns educational management with broader democratic and social justice–oriented theories of leadership. In this sense, the critical paradigm does not reject knowledge-based management but reframes it as a reflective social practice oriented toward institutional transformation rather than control.

At a theoretical level, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the role of theory in educational management research. Rather than treating theory as a predictive or instrumental tool, the critical synthesis supports the view that theory functions as a form of critical consciousness, enabling actors to question taken-for-granted assumptions and envision alternative futures (Biesta, 2021). By integrating knowledge-based management with critical epistemology, this study advances a more reflexive theoretical orientation that challenges the dominance of technocratic management models in education.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a qualitative systematic literature review, the findings are inherently dependent on the scope, selection, and interpretation of existing literature. Although rigorous inclusion criteria and critical synthesis were applied, relevant studies may have been excluded due to database limitations or publication bias. Second, the study prioritizes conceptual and epistemological analysis over empirical validation, limiting its ability to assess how critically knowledge-based management practices are enacted in specific institutional contexts. Third, while the review includes both international and national literature, contextual variations across education systems may not be fully captured within a single conceptual framework.

These limitations point to important directions for future research. Empirical studies examining how educational leaders negotiate knowledge, power, and critical reflection in practice complement the conceptual insights offered here. Comparative research across national

contexts could further illuminate the extent to which different policy environments shape knowledge-based management. Finally, mixed-methods approaches help bridge the gap between critical theory and managerial practice, strengthening the practical relevance of critical educational management scholarship.

CONCLUSION

This study reconceptualizes educational management through a critical paradigm by synthesizing recent knowledge-based management literature. It demonstrates that contemporary educational management remains largely dominated by instrumental and technocratic rationalities that prioritize efficiency, accountability, and performance measurement while marginalizing epistemological reflexivity, ethical considerations, and social justice. Although knowledge-based approaches are increasingly adopted, they are often embedded in value-neutral managerial frameworks that treat knowledge as a technical resource rather than as a socially constructed, power-laden foundation of practice. By applying a critical lens, this study reveals educational management as a knowledge-based social practice shaped by ideological and power relations. It highlights the potential of the critical paradigm to reorient managerial practices toward dialogical, participatory, and transformative approaches. Ultimately, the findings underscore the need to reposition educational management beyond administrative effectiveness toward a reflective and emancipatory practice that integrates organizational effectiveness with broader educational and social purposes.

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