



## Quality as Ideology: Criticism of Instrumental Rationality in Internal Quality Assurance at School

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61987/jemr.v5i1.1787>

### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

Internal Quality Assurance; Educational Management; Instrumental Rationality

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This study aims to examine internal quality assurance as an ideology constructed through instrumental rationality and to analyze its implications for educational management, pedagogical practices, and student learning experiences. Employing a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm, this study explores how quality assurance is socially constructed and enacted in school management. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with school leaders, teachers, and administrative staff, participatory observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to managerial rationality, quality discourse, and pedagogical consequences. Trustworthiness was ensured through source and method triangulation, informant verification, and contextual interpretation. The findings reveal that internal quality assurance is predominantly framed as an administrative and symbolic mechanism to achieve institutional legitimacy. Quality management practices emphasize documentation, reporting, and quantitative indicators, while pedagogical depth and student learning experiences receive less attention. This technocratic orientation constrains teacher autonomy, limits pedagogical innovation, and creates tensions between managerial accountability and instructional responsiveness. The study highlights the need to reform quality assurance systems in educational management by balancing administrative compliance with pedagogical development, empowering teachers, and repositioning student learning experiences as the core objective of quality improvement.

#### Article History:

Received: November 2025; Revised: December 2025; Accepted: January 2025

#### Please cite this article in APA style as:

Wahyudi, M. I., & Aimah, S. (2026). Quality as Ideology: Criticism of Instrumental Rationality in Internal Quality Assurance at School. *Journal of Educational Management Research*, 5(1), 789-801.

## INTRODUCTION

Educational quality has become a central concern in contemporary societies as it is closely linked to human capital development, social mobility, and national competitiveness. Governments and educational institutions increasingly rely on internal quality assurance systems to ensure accountability and

continuous improvement (Maulana et al., 2025). However, the growing dominance of managerial and technocratic approaches in educational management has raised critical questions about whether quality assurance genuinely enhances learning or merely fulfills administrative expectations. Empirical evidence suggests that quality is often reduced to measurable indicators, reports, and compliance mechanisms, rather than meaningful educational outcomes (Ko et al., 2025; Mcheka & Mislav, 2025). Consequently, this issue is socially significant because it affects how schools define success, how teachers perform their professional roles, and how students experience learning. Understanding educational quality beyond technical rationality is therefore essential for ensuring that quality assurance contributes to substantive educational improvement rather than symbolic legitimacy.

A major problem faced by contemporary education systems is the dominance of instrumental rationality in managing educational quality. In many schools, internal quality assurance is implemented primarily as a managerial tool to meet standards, accreditation requirements, and external evaluations, rather than as a reflective process aimed at improving teaching and learning (Bohlens, 2025; Mtitu, 2025). This condition creates a managerial culture in which compliance is prioritized over critical reflection, and efficiency is valued more than pedagogical meaning (Syafiih, 2025). As a result, educational management practices tend to emphasize documentation, performance indicators, and quantitative targets, often overlooking students' holistic development. This problem is not merely technical but social, as it shapes the behavior, priorities, and interactions of educational actors (Hamdanah et al., 2025). When quality is narrowly interpreted through administrative logic, schools risk losing their core educational mission.

At the school level, the phenomenon of educational quality demonstrates social complexity that extends beyond technical indicators. In daily practice, internal quality assurance is frequently perceived as an administrative obligation rather than a transformative educational process (Bohlens, 2025; Norman et al., 2025). Teachers, principals, and administrative staff often function as implementers of formal procedures, focusing on meeting internal assessment targets and producing required documents (Ghafur, 2024). Activities such as curriculum development, learning evaluation, and teacher professional development are guided by standard indicators instead of reflective consideration of students' learning needs (Zulaikah et al., 2024). This situation marginalizes pedagogical interaction and reduces opportunities for innovation. Consequently, quality becomes an ideology – symbolically acknowledged within educational management discourse but practically reduced to quantitative measurements that affirm institutional legitimacy rather than enrich learning experiences.

Previous studies have extensively examined the relationship between quality assurance and instrumental rationality in educational management. Khairani et al. (2023) found that internal quality assurance in secondary schools is predominantly oriented toward fulfilling formal indicators and accreditation demands, leading teachers to prioritize administrative tasks over pedagogical reflection. Similarly, Zakiyyah (2023) highlighted that technocratic approaches in quality management tend to shift attention away from teaching–learning interactions and student competency development toward measurable outputs. These studies contribute valuable insights into how managerial rationality shapes school practices. However, most of them focus on procedural compliance and administrative efficiency, paying limited attention to the deeper socio-cultural and ideological meanings of quality within school organizations.

Further research by Praptiningsih (2023) demonstrates that bureaucratic culture in schools constrains teacher creativity and reinforces compliance-oriented behavior, as quality is understood primarily as a symbol of institutional legitimacy. (Lim, 2025) also argue that internal quality assurance should be understood as a social phenomenon, yet empirical studies rarely explore this perspective in depth. Collectively, existing literature reveals a significant research gap: while instrumental rationality is widely recognized as dominant in educational quality management, its role in constructing quality as an ideology that shapes pedagogical practices and social interactions remains underexplored. Moreover, few studies critically examine how this ideological construction affects student learning experiences within specific educational and cultural contexts.

The novelty of this study lies in its critical reinterpretation of internal quality assurance as an ideology embedded in educational management practices. Unlike prior studies that emphasize compliance with formal standards, this research examines how instrumental rationality shapes the meanings of quality internalized by school actors. It highlights the substantive dimension of quality by analyzing how managerial logic influences decision-making, pedagogical practices, and social relations within schools. By positioning quality as a socio-ideological construct rather than a purely technical instrument, this study offers a state-of-the-art perspective that bridges critical educational theory and educational management. Addressing this issue is crucial, as it opens pathways for developing more reflective and humanistic quality assurance models.

Based on the identified gaps, this study addresses the question of how internal quality assurance is practiced as an ideology constructed through instrumental rationality and how it influences pedagogical practices and student learning experiences. The central argument is that quality assurance dominated by managerial logic tends to prioritize administrative legitimacy over

meaningful learning. By adopting a critical perspective, this study contributes theoretically to the discourse on educational management by reconceptualizing quality as a social and ideological phenomenon. Practically, it offers insights for school leaders and policymakers to design quality assurance strategies that balance accountability with pedagogical integrity, thereby repositioning student learning experiences as the core objective of educational quality improvement.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm, selected to explore how internal quality assurance is socially constructed and understood by educational actors. The interpretive approach is appropriate because the study seeks to uncover meanings, perceptions, and practices embedded in everyday school management rather than to test variables or measure outcomes quantitatively. This design enables an in-depth examination of quality assurance as an ideological practice shaped by instrumental rationality, allowing the researcher to interpret how managerial logic influences pedagogical orientations, decision-making processes, and social interactions within the educational management context.

The research was conducted at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi, which was selected purposively due to its active implementation of internal quality assurance mechanisms and its strong organizational structure integrating managerial, pedagogical, and religious values. This setting provides a relevant context for examining tensions between administrative accountability and educational substance. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, teachers, and administrative staff; participatory observation of quality assurance and instructional activities; and document analysis of internal quality guidelines, evaluation reports, and curriculum documents. These techniques enabled a comprehensive understanding of both formal management practices and lived pedagogical experiences, while also supporting data triangulation to enhance credibility (Alaslan, 2023).

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach, involving stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were systematically reduced and coded to identify recurring themes related to instrumental rationality, ideological constructions of quality, and their implications for teaching and learning. Analytical displays were used to organize patterns and relationships across data sources, while verification was achieved through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and member checking with key informants (Sulistiyo, 2023). Attention was also given to the

school's socio-cultural and organizational context, ensuring a nuanced interpretation of internal quality assurance as a social and managerial practice rather than a purely administrative procedure (Hasan et al., 2025; Prabowo & Ekanigsih, 2025).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

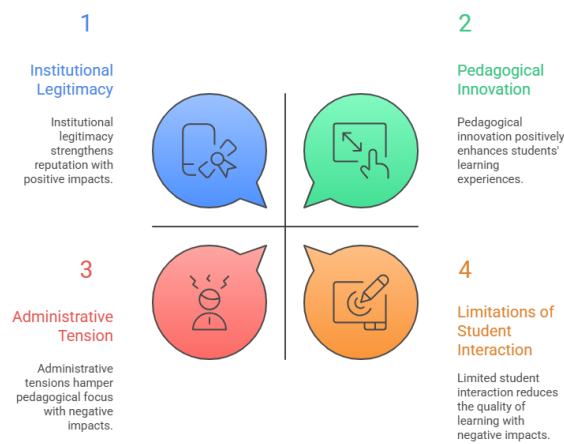
#### Quality as a Symbol of Institutional Legitimacy

The first finding of this study highlights how internal quality assurance at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi is more often carried out as a symbol of institutional legitimacy rather than as a tool for substantive improvement in learning quality. In practice, teachers and principals tend to focus on fulfilling formal indicators, accreditation documents, and administrative procedures, so that quality functions as a tool to assert compliance with standards, rather than as a means for educational transformation focused on student learning experiences. This reflects that the understanding of quality in schools has become ingrained as a social symbol that strengthens institutional legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders, including parents and accreditation bodies, but is not always translated into pedagogical innovation or deep interaction with students. The interview results support this finding. One of the principals stated,

*"We often prepare quality assurance documents and reports before accreditation so that the school appears to meet standards. In fact, many teachers want to innovate, but their time and focus are often consumed by formal administration."*

Interview data from other teachers also reinforced this finding, as they acknowledged that quality assurance activities were often directed at fulfilling checklists and documents rather than conducting in-depth evaluations of learning. All informants, both principals and teachers, consistently stated that the emphasis on document formalities was the main orientation, while pedagogical reflection and improving the quality of student learning were sometimes secondary priorities. This fact confirms that quality at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi has been internalized as a symbol of institutional legitimacy, which shapes the school's behavior and orientation in managing internal quality assurance, while also creating tension between administrative formalities and more substantive pedagogical needs.

To facilitate readers' understanding of these findings, visual indicators can be used to show how schools focus more on documents, reports, and formal indicators, while pedagogical reflection and learning innovation are secondary priorities. This indicator image presents the school's orientation and the distribution of attention between institutional legitimacy and student learning quality.



**Figure 1; Priorities and Impacts in Education Accreditation**

This indicator confirms that internal quality assurance at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi functions more as a tool for formal legitimacy than for educational transformation. The focus on documents and administrative procedures limits pedagogical innovation and in-depth interaction with students. The tension between formalities and learning needs demonstrates the need for an approach that balances institutional accountability with improving the quality of the student learning experience.

The interpretation of the findings that quality is implemented as a symbol of institutional legitimacy shows that internal quality assurance at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi is more of a formal ritual than meaningful educational substance for students. From the perspective of organizational and educational theory, this phenomenon is in line with the concept of institutional theory by (Panda, 2025)(Simanjuntak et al., 2022), which emphasizes that organizations tend to imitate widely accepted practices to gain social legitimacy, not solely for efficiency or internal quality improvement. In the school context, accreditation and standard documents become instruments of legitimacy, so teachers and principals adjust their behavior to meet external expectations. Additionally, these findings can be analyzed through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital from Rahayu, (2024) , where formal quality functions as symbolic capital that strengthens the institution's status in the eyes of stakeholders, even though it does not always improve pedagogical quality in real terms.

From an educational management perspective, this also reflects the logic of rational choice vs. symbolic action by Nugraha et al., (2025) , where schools tend to follow rules and procedures to gain formal recognition, while substantive values such as student learning experiences become a secondary priority. This interpretation confirms that quality assurance practices cannot be separated from

socio-cultural and ideological dimensions, as the orientation towards formality and documentation shapes teachers' behavior, decisions, and interactions in the classroom. In other words, quality, which should be a tool for educational transformation, is reduced to an administrative symbol that maintains institutional legitimacy. This theoretical understanding reinforces the research argument that internal quality assurance needs to be reformed to balance formal legitimacy with substantive pedagogical quality, so that student learning experiences remain the main focus of education in schools.

### **The Dominance of Instrumental Rationality in Quality Practices**

The second finding of this study reveals that internal quality assurance practices at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi are heavily dominated by technocratic logic and instrumental rationality. Every policy, evaluation, and report is carried out according to formal procedures and quantitative targets, so that the orientation towards students' pedagogical needs and teacher innovation is often neglected. This dominance of instrumental rationality makes quality practices emphasize measurement, documentation, and fulfillment of administrative standards rather than substantive improvement in the quality of learning experiences. These findings are consistent with observations in the field, where teachers and principals realize that even though they have the intention to innovate in the teaching and learning process, administrative demands take priority. For example, one teacher revealed,

*"Every quality assurance activity must be reported in accordance with the specified format, from learning evaluations to administrative reports. Often, creative ideas for developing new learning methods have to be put on hold because time is spent on documents and reports."*

All informants interviewed, including school principals and administrative staff, gave a similar impression, namely that formal procedures and quantitative targets were the main framework governing all quality assurance activities. In addition, field observations showed that quality evaluation meetings and data collection focused more on numbers and checklists than on pedagogical reflection. The results of these interviews and observations confirm that instrumental rationality is not only a way of thinking, but also shapes daily practices, influences teachers' priorities, and limits their flexibility in developing learning strategies that are more responsive and contextual to students' needs. Thus, the dominance of this technocratic logic is one of the main characteristics of internal quality practices in schools and creates tension between administrative formalities and substantive educational goals.

The interpretation of the findings that internal quality assurance practices at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi are heavily dominated by instrumental rationality shows that technocratic logic has systematically shaped the school's framework of thinking and behavior. From the perspective of bureaucracy theory by Raharjo, (2023) , this phenomenon reflects how formal rules, standard procedures, and quantitative targets have become the pillars of organizational control, where the focus on administrative efficiency is prioritized over pedagogical innovation and in-depth interaction with students. This dominance of instrumental rationality also aligns with New Public Management, which emphasizes performance measurement through formal indicators and administrative accountability, yet often overlooks the social context and learning needs of students (Khoir & Amaliyah, 2025) . From an educational sociology perspective, these findings can be analyzed using the theory of instrumental rationality Prabowo et al., (2024) , where organizational actions are directed toward achieving technical and operational goals, rather than substantive values or social meaning.

As a result, internal quality practices tend to focus on documentation, checklists, and numbers, while the quality of the student learning experience becomes a secondary priority. These findings confirm that instrumental rationality not only influences administrative procedures, but also shapes teacher orientation, teaching decisions, and pedagogical interactions, so that innovation and responsiveness to student needs are often limited. This theoretical understanding emphasizes the need for a balance between technocratic logic and substantive educational orientation, so that internal quality assurance does not only become a formal control mechanism, but also functions as a tool for educational transformation that encourages more meaningful and contextual learning experiences. Thus, this study reveals the structural tension between administrative formalities and humanistic educational goals as a social phenomenon that needs to be addressed in school quality management.

### **Tension between Administration and Pedagogical Practice**

The third finding of this study highlights the real tension between administrative demands and pedagogical practices at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi. Teachers and school staff face pressure to meet formal quality assurance requirements, including report writing, evaluation documentation, and fulfillment of accreditation indicators, while the time and energy available for in-depth interaction with students is very limited. This situation sometimes reduces the quality of the students' learning experience, as the school focuses

more on fulfilling formal procedures than on pedagogical reflection and the development of creative teaching strategies. This fact is reinforced by the results of an interview with a classroom teacher, who stated,

*Sometimes I want to develop more interesting learning methods for students, but most of my time is spent completing documents and quality assurance reports. As a result, my interaction with students becomes limited and less than optimal.*

All informants, including teachers, principals, and administrative staff, consistently acknowledged that administrative demands were a significant burden, limiting teachers' flexibility in implementing in-depth pedagogical practices. Field observations also showed that quality evaluation meetings and monitoring activities emphasized numbers, checklists, and formal procedures rather than discussions of learning innovations or pedagogical reflection. The results of these interviews and observations confirm that the tension between administrative formalities and pedagogical practices is not merely an individual teacher issue, but a structural phenomenon inherent in the implementation of internal quality assurance in schools. These findings indicate the need for reforming quality assurance practices that not only emphasize documents and indicators, but also provide space for teachers to substantively improve the quality of learning interactions and student educational experiences.

The interpretation of the third finding shows that the tension between administrative demands and pedagogical practices at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi reflects a structural conflict inherent in the implementation of internal quality assurance. From the perspective of Weberian bureaucracy theory from (Hasan, 2025), the pressure to comply with formal procedures, reports, and accreditation indicators creates a control mechanism that emphasizes compliance with rules and administrative efficiency, while the flexibility and creativity of teachers in pedagogical practices are marginalized. This tension can also be analyzed through the lens of New Public Management, which emphasizes performance measurement through quantitative indicators and formal accountability, but tends to overlook the social context, students' learning needs, and pedagogical innovation (Maione et al., 2025). Furthermore, the critical pedagogy perspective by Yuana et al., (2025) highlights that an excessive administrative orientation can limit teachers' ability to develop humanistic and participatory learning experiences, so that the learning process not only loses its pedagogical meaning but also reduces the empowerment of students as active learning subjects.

From the perspective of educational sociology, this phenomenon is also relevant to the theory of instrumental rationality by Hakim, (2025) , which focuses on the achievement of technical and procedural goals rather than the

substantive values and social meaning of education. These findings confirm that the tension between administrative formalities and pedagogical practices is not merely an individual teacher issue, but a systemic phenomenon that shapes school culture and structure. Therefore, this theoretical understanding emphasizes the need for a balance between administrative and pedagogical orientations, so that internal quality assurance can function not only as a formal accountability mechanism, but also as a tool for educational transformation that supports students' substantive and contextual learning experiences.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study confirms that internal quality assurance practices at SMP Plus Darussalam Banyuwangi are more complex than simply meeting formal standards. The first finding shows that quality is often understood and implemented as a symbol of institutional legitimacy, where the school's main focus is on documents, reports, and formal indicators to obtain external recognition, while the substance of education and student learning experiences often take a back seat. The second finding reveals that quality assurance practices are dominated by technocratic logic and an orientation towards procedures and quantitative targets, so that pedagogical innovation and responsiveness to student needs are often neglected.

Furthermore, the third finding highlights the inherent tension between administrative demands and pedagogical practices, where teachers and school staff focus on fulfilling formal requirements, thereby limiting the time and energy available for in-depth interaction with students, which affects the quality of the learning experience. The results of the study show that an excessive orientation towards administrative formalities shapes teachers' behavior, decisions, and priorities, while limiting their flexibility in developing more creative and contextual teaching strategies. Overall, this study emphasizes the need for reforming internal quality assurance practices that balance compliance with standards with improving the quality of education, providing space for teacher innovation, and placing the student learning experience at the center of attention. With a more balanced approach, internal quality assurance becomes not only a formal mechanism for accountability, but also serves as a tool for meaningful educational transformation, supporting student competency development and substantially improving the quality of learning in schools.

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