



# Systemic Failures in Educational Management and the Normalisation of Child Exploitation among Vulnerable Learners

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## ABSTRACT

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This study aims to analyse the exploitation of street children as a manifestation of dysfunctional educational management and weak coordination among educational organisations, rather than merely as a poverty-related social issue. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving street children active around the Kriyan gas station area in Jepara. The data were analysed using an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification. The findings reveal that child exploitation is sustained through normalised parental consent, institutional tolerance of child labour within schools, and community silence that morally legitimises these practices. Although children remain structurally enrolled in formal and non-formal education, they experience functional exclusion in the form of unequal learning time and persistent disruptions to the educational process. These conditions indicate a cycle of failure in educational management rooted in organisational complexity and weak ethical decision-making. This study contributes to educational management scholarship by introducing the concept of the educational complicity loop as an analytical framework, while offering practical implications for strengthening school leadership, improving cross-institutional coordination, and reinforcing ethical governance in education systems to better protect vulnerable learners.

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## INTRODUCTION

The involvement of children in informal and hazardous work activities remains a persistent global issue that poses serious challenges to education systems and social governance, both in the Global South and the Global North (Kundu & Roy, 2025; Olayiwola, 2021; Singh et al., 2023). This issue is socially

significant because children's participation in labour directly undermines their right to education, psychosocial development, and long-term life opportunities. International reports consistently show that millions of school-age children remain trapped in work environments that disrupt schooling continuity and compromise well-being (Pirkle et al., 2024; Thi et al., 2023). Increasingly, child labour is no longer understood merely as a household-level economic survival strategy, but as an indicator of systemic weaknesses in education governance, child protection mechanisms, and inter-institutional coordination (Shanahan & Doyle, 2025). In the broader context of sustainable development, the exclusion of children from meaningful learning threatens the achievement of human development goals, social justice, and the sustainability of education systems themselves (Bhimavarapu, 2025; Kavanagh et al., 2021; Serpell & Mukela, 2018). Therefore, examining child labour through the lens of education management is crucial for societal transformation.

Despite global commitments to inclusive and equitable education, many education systems continue to struggle with protecting vulnerable learners from exploitation. In many contexts, education institutions operate within fragmented governance structures where responsibilities for child welfare, schooling, and social protection are poorly coordinated. This fragmentation results in blurred accountability among schools, families, communities, and government agencies, allowing child labour to persist without effective intervention. The problem is compounded by managerial practices that prioritise administrative compliance and enrolment statistics over substantive learning conditions and student well-being. As a result, children may remain formally registered in schools while simultaneously being engaged in labour that limits learning time and disrupts educational participation. These conditions reflect a deeper governance problem in which education management fails to function as a protective system for children. Consequently, child exploitation becomes normalised as an unavoidable social reality rather than recognised as a failure of educational leadership, organisational decision-making, and ethical governance within the education system.

Empirical observations in various local contexts reveal how child labour is embedded in everyday social and educational practices. In community-based informal economic spaces, such as transportation hubs, markets, and fuel stations, children are often visibly engaged in work while still being nominally enrolled in schools. These children navigate dual roles as students and workers, resulting in fragmented learning experiences and chronic educational disruption. Schools frequently tolerate irregular attendance and reduced learning engagement, while families justify child labour as a moral obligation or economic necessity. Communities, in turn, often remain silent, perceiving these practices as culturally acceptable or inevitable. This phenomenon illustrates how child exploitation is sustained through relational dynamics between families, schools,

and communities rather than through coercion alone. Structurally, the education system appears functional, as children are registered in formal or non-formal education. Functionally, however, learning time inequality and educational exclusion persist, revealing a deeper organisational failure within education management practices.

Previous studies on street children and child labour have approached the issue from diverse perspectives, including political economy, social policy, and development studies (Ali et al., 2004; Katav Herz & Epstein, 2022). Most research emphasises structural determinants such as poverty, urbanisation, and economic inequality as primary drivers of children's involvement in informal work. Another body of literature focuses on legal frameworks and child protection policies, highlighting the persistent gap between normative regulations and local implementation (Hariyanto et al., 2024a; Kisbiyanto, 2025; Setyawan et al., 2025). Additionally, education is frequently positioned as a corrective instrument through alternative schooling models, non-formal education programs, and community-based interventions (Almeida & Morais, 2025; D'Angelo et al., 2022; Eacott & Wainer, 2023). While these studies offer valuable insights, they often conceptualise education as a neutral solution-oriented institution, rather than as an organisational system susceptible to internal failure and ethical compromise.

Although the literature on child labour is extensive, empirical studies that explicitly analyse child exploitation as a consequence of failed education management and governance remain limited. Few studies critically examine how school-level managerial decisions, leadership attitudes, and organisational cultures contribute to the normalisation of child labour in everyday educational practice (Jeynes, 2007, 2019; Nyatuka, 2017; Ushakov, 2018). As a result, child exploitation is frequently framed as an external social problem impacting education, rather than as an outcome of internal dysfunction within the education system itself. This gap is particularly evident in educational management and organisational behaviour studies, where issues of child protection, ethical decision-making, and learning time justice receive limited analytical attention (Biesta, 2015; Eacott & Wainer, 2023). Addressing this gap is essential to reframe child labour as a governance failure that demands accountability from educational institutions and leadership structures.

This study advances the state of the art by positioning child exploitation as an organisational and managerial failure within education systems, rather than solely as a socio-economic phenomenon. Drawing on educational management and governance perspectives, this research introduces the concept of the educational complicity loop as a novel analytical framework (Ball, 2012; Christenson et al., 2012; Jacobson et al., 2019). This framework captures how leadership failure, moral justification in decision-making, and weak inter-institutional coordination interact to normalise exploitative practices. By foregrounding child protection and learning time justice as core elements of

responsible education governance, this study responds to calls for more ethically grounded and context-sensitive educational management research. The empirical focus on community-based informal economic spaces within religious and non-formal education settings further strengthens the novelty and relevance of the study.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyse the exploitation of street children as a manifestation of educational management failure and weak governance of educational organisations (Liu, 2024; Salazar et al., 2018; Setyowati et al., 2024). Focusing on Central Java, Indonesia, this research examines how child labour is normalised through parental consent, institutional tolerance by schools, and community silence, and how these dynamics produce learning time inequality and educational disruption (Abdullah et al., 2024; Khandelwal & Yadav, 2024). The central argument of this study is that child exploitation persists not merely due to poverty, but because of systemic managerial dysfunction within education systems. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, this research contributes theoretically by integrating child protection into educational management discourse, and practically by offering insights for strengthening educational leadership, ethical governance, and cross-institutional coordination.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, perceptions, and decision-making practices of educational actors in responding to children's involvement in informal work (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). The phenomenological approach is selected because the research seeks to explore how educational management dysfunction is experienced, interpreted, and rationalised by stakeholders at the micro-organisational level, rather than to measure variables or produce statistical generalisations. Phenomenology enables the exploration of meaning-making processes through which school leaders, teachers, parents, and children negotiate moral considerations, institutional tolerance, and managerial decisions in everyday educational practice. This approach is particularly relevant for uncovering how exploitative practices become normalised within education systems through routine interactions and informal governance mechanisms, making it suitable for analysing ethical and organisational dimensions of educational management failure.

The research was conducted in the Kriyan Gas Station area, Jepara Regency, Central Java, Indonesia, a socio-economic space characterised by high levels of informal economic activity and visible involvement of children in such activities. This location was purposively selected because it represents a convergence of formal education institutions, family economic strategies, and community-based informal labour practices. The site provides a relevant

empirical context for examining how educational management, school governance, and community norms interact in shaping children's educational experiences. Moreover, the area reflects broader structural conditions commonly found in semi-urban regions of Indonesia, where children remain formally enrolled in schools while simultaneously participating in informal work. This makes the location analytically appropriate for investigating the dynamics of educational tolerance, managerial decision-making, and child protection within everyday education settings.

Data were collected through non-participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews during the field research period (Knott et al., 2022; Walsh, 2020). Observations focused on 23 children engaged in informal work activities, capturing patterns of work involvement, learning time disruption, and interactions with educational and social environments. In-depth interviews were conducted with 5 parents, 4 teachers, 2 school principals, 2 school committee members, and 5 children. Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement and relevance to the research objectives. The interview guides were designed to be flexible, allowing participants to articulate their experiences, moral reasoning, informal policies, and managerial considerations related to children's work and schooling. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring sufficient depth and credibility of findings.

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive qualitative analysis model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Denzin, 2012; Marlina et al., 2024). Data condensation involved the processes of transcribing, coding, and reducing raw data to focus on key themes related to educational management practices, institutional tolerance, and children's lived experiences. Data display was carried out through thematic matrices and narrative descriptions to identify relational patterns between managerial decisions, school policies, family rationales, and community norms. The final stage involved verification and interpretation, where emerging themes were continuously compared across data sources to ensure analytical consistency. The analysis process was iterative, occurring concurrently with data collection to refine interpretations and strengthen the trustworthiness of findings.

To ensure data validity and trustworthiness, this study employed source and method triangulation, as well as limited member checking with key informants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations (Denzin, 2012; Marlina et al., 2024). Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring anonymity, and maintaining data confidentiality, particularly given the vulnerability of child participants. While the study is

limited by its single-site qualitative design and does not aim for broad generalisation, the findings offer strong analytical relevance and conceptual transferability for educational management and governance studies in similar contexts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main empirical findings from phenomenological qualitative research on child exploitation in informal work as a manifestation of educational management failure. The presentation of results is organised inductively and systematically, beginning with an overview of the findings, followed by a presentation of results in line with the research questions, a presentation of empirical evidence based on field data, a brief explanation of the scope of the results, and concluding with a summary of key findings. The analysis is based on observations of 23 children, in-depth interviews with parents, teachers, principals, school committees, and children directly involved, supplemented by field documentation.

In general, the results of the study show that child exploitation does not occur solely as a hidden or illegal practice, but rather as an activity that is normalised through mutually reinforcing social and managerial mechanisms. Schools, families, and communities do not act as corrective actors; rather, they form a pattern of collective neglect that results in lost learning time, physical and psychological exhaustion of children, and a disconnect from the meaning of education. The following findings are organised into three main themes that represent key dimensions of educational management failure, along with a section synthesising the findings.

### Normalisation of Child Labour through Family Approval and Moral Justification

The first finding shows that families perceive children's involvement in informal work as a normal, even positive, practice. Parents describe children's work as a form of learning independence, responsibility, and a light economic contribution, not as exploitation. In this context, parents' decisions are not independent but are influenced by community norms and the absence of firm intervention from educational institutions.

Table 1. Normalisation of child labour at the family level

Data Source	Main Theme	Empirical Excerpt	Interpretation
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<b>Parents (5)</b>	Work as learning	"Let children know what it feels like to be tired from work, so that they appreciate the importance of school."	Work is understood as an educational value, not a risk
<b>Children (5)</b>	The normality of work	"Many of my friends also work, not just me"	Normalization through social comparison
<b>Observation</b>	Daily routine	Children working before/after school	Work integrated into daily life
<b>Documentation</b>	Field notes	No explicit prohibition from the family	Absence of family control

Source: Data analysis by Researchers

Table 1 shows that the normalisation of child labour at the family level occurs through consistent and repeated moral justification mechanisms. Interview data with parents shows that child labour is understood as a means of learning positive values, such as independence, responsibility, and respect for school. This work not as a risk or a form of exploitation, but as an educational experience that complements the formal education process. This perspective is reinforced by children's statements that view work as a normal practice because it is done collectively by peers. This social comparison functions as an internal legitimation mechanism, treating child labour as part of the general norm rather than an aberration to be questioned.

The results of observation and documentation further confirm that child labour has been integrated into the daily routine of families. Children work before or after school hours without clear time restrictions, indicating that work activities have become a structural part of daily life. The absence of explicit prohibitions or family rules regarding children's involvement in informal work suggests a lack of parental protective control. This condition shows that families are not only permissive but also indirectly reproduce child labour practices through systematic neglect. Thus, this table confirms that the normalisation of child labour is deeply rooted in the moral construction of the family, which then opens the door for the continued exploitation of children's learning time without it being recognised as an educational problem.

### **School Institutional Tolerance and Educational Leadership Dysfunction**

The second finding reveals that schools do not actively perform a protective function for children involved in informal work. Teachers and school leaders are aware of child labour practices, but respond with permissiveness and administrative rationalisation. The absence of clear school policies and weak leadership are the main factors contributing to this institutional tolerance.

Table 2. School tolerance of child labour

Data Source	Main Theme	Empirical Excerpt	Interpretation
Teachers (4)	Pedagogical neglect	"As long as they attend school diligently, we consider them safe."	Physical presence is equated with learning participation
Principal (2)	Limitations of authority	"That is the responsibility of the family; the school cannot interfere too much."	Transfer of responsibility
School committee (2)	Absence of advocacy	"This issue has never been specifically discussed in relation to working children here."	The issue is not on the institutional agenda
Documentation	School policy	There are no detailed SOPs for child protection.	Structural managerial failure

Source: Data analysis by Researchers

Finding 2 shows that schools' tolerance of child labour is consistent across various levels of educational actors, from teachers and principals to school committees, and is reinforced by the absence of formal policy documents. Teachers' statements equating physical presence with safety and learning success reflect a reduction in the meaning of educational participation to mere administrative attendance. In this logic, the dimensions of fatigue, fairness of learning time, and the impact of informal work on children's readiness to learn are not considered relevant pedagogical indicators. This data confirms that pedagogical neglect is not caused by ignorance, but by an institutional perspective that narrows the school's responsibility to the technical aspects of teaching.

At the leadership and governance level, the statements of the principal and the school committee in the table show a structural transfer of responsibility. The principal positions children's work as a private family matter, while the school committee does not make the issue part of its institutional agenda. The absence of SOPs or child protection policies further emphasises that this tolerance is not merely a personal attitude, but part of systemic managerial failure. The combination of rationalisation of authority, absence of advocacy, and lack of internal regulations creates an organisational environment that is permissive of practices that harm children. Thus, this table reinforces the argument that dysfunctional educational leadership plays a central role in perpetuating child exploitation through institutionalised mechanisms of neglect.

### Community Silence and Fragmentation of Social Responsibility

The third finding highlights the passive and permissive role of local communities towards child exploitation. The surrounding community views child labour as part of everyday economic reality, so there is no social pressure on schools or families to make changes. This fragmentation of responsibility reinforces the continuation of child labour practices.

Table 3. Empirical findings related to the role of the community

Data Source	Main Theme	Empirical Excerpt	Interpretation
Interview	Social normalization	"This phenomenon has been common here since long ago."	Child labor is considered a tradition
Observation	Environmental response	No reprimands or concern from residents	Collective neglect
Documentation	Community activities	No significant child protection forums	Absence of social mechanisms

Source: Data analysis by Researchers

Table 3 shows that local communities act as spaces for social normalisation, reinforcing children's involvement in informal work as a normal and recurring practice. Residents' statements referring to child labour as a phenomenon that has "always been common" indicate the existence of a collective meaning that positions child exploitation not as a social deviation, but as part of local tradition and economic adaptation. This normalisation creates a high threshold of social tolerance, so that child labour is no longer perceived as a problem requiring correction or intervention. Under these conditions, child labour loses its status as a protection issue and shifts to become a reality that is accepted without social resistance.

The results of the observation and documentation in the table further confirm that the community's silence is not merely an individual attitude but a collectively neglected social institution. The absence of reprimands, attention, or child protection forums indicates the absence of social mechanisms that function as normative controls on practices that harm children. When the community does not provide a space for deliberation or social control, responsibility for child protection becomes fragmented and scattered, lacking a central coordinating body. This condition allows families and schools to maintain their permissive attitudes without external pressure, so that the community indirectly contributes to the continuation of child exploitation through silent but effective social legitimisation.

### Synthesis of Findings: Educational Complicity Loop Pattern

The synthesis of findings reveals a mutually reinforcing relational pattern between families, schools, and communities in perpetuating child exploitation. This pattern forms what this study refers to as the educational complicity loop, a cycle of organisational complexity that operates through moral justification, institutional neglect, and social legitimacy.

Table 4. Educational Complicity Loop

Actor	Form of Role	Main Mechanism	Impact on Children
Family	Consent	Moral rationalization	Loss of study time
School	Tolerance	Leadership synergy dysfunction	Fatigue and disengagement
Community	Neglect	Social normalization	Reproduction of exploitation

Source: Data analysis by Researchers

This synthesis confirms that child exploitation cannot be understood as an individual failure, but rather as a collective failure of the education management system. These findings position child protection as a key indicator of the quality of education governance.

In summary, the results of the study show that (1) child labor is normalized through moral justification by the family, (2) schools fail to perform their protective function due to dysfunctional leadership and policies, (3) the community acts as a passive actor that legitimizes exploitative practices, and (4) these three actors form a cycle of ongoing organizational complexity. These findings form the analytical basis for the theoretical discussion and managerial implications in the following section.

## Discussion

This discussion reaffirms the study's central finding that child exploitation in informal work is not an individual deviation or a social anomaly, but a practice normalised through interconnected organisational relationships among families, schools, and communities. Moral justification at the family level, institutional tolerance at the school level, and collective neglect at the community level form a recurring cycle of educational complexity. This cycle explains why children remain involved in informal labour despite being formally enrolled in schools, and why the loss of learning time and psychosocial fatigue are rarely recognised as serious educational failures.

The significance of this finding lies in shifting the understanding of child exploitation from an external social problem to an internal dysfunction of educational governance. Education cannot be positioned merely as a neutral

normative solution, but must be understood as an organisational system that may passively or actively contribute to the reproduction of injustice for vulnerable learners (Corbella & Úcar, 2019, 2022; Iromea & Reynolds, 2021). In this context, pragmatic managerial decisions such as permitting children to work as long as they remain enrolled constitute ethical and organisational failures with structural consequences for children's educational rights (Biesta, 2015; Hallinger & Kovačević, 2022; Priestley et al., 2015).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings can be explained through the lens of organisational behaviour and educational governance. The normalisation of child labour reflects what Scott (2014) describes as institutional logics, in which harmful practices become legitimate when aligned with dominant community norms and when they do not explicitly violate formal regulations. At the school level, leadership dysfunction corresponds with Hallinger and Kovačević's (2022) argument that weak educational leadership tends to avoid morally sensitive issues requiring ethical courage and cross-actor coordination, resulting in schools prioritising administrative compliance over their protective mandate.

Community tolerance toward child labour further reinforces this cycle through mechanisms of symbolic capital and symbolic power, as conceptualised by Bourdieu (Eloire, 2018; Sapiro, 2015). When child labour is framed as part of local work ethics or tradition, questioning the practice is perceived as socially disruptive. This cultural legitimacy fragments responsibility and weakens accountability, as no single actor perceives themselves as having the moral or organisational authority to intervene (Jakobsen et al., 2023; Pereira, 2025; Spillane, 2012).

Compared to previous studies that predominantly explain child labour as a consequence of poverty, economic inequality, or macro-level policy failure (Ravetti et al., 2024; Sasmal & Sasmal, 2020; Wahba, 2015), or that position education as a remedial solution through alternative and non-formal schooling (Bhimavarapu, 2025; Hariyanto et al., 2024b; Kavanagh et al., 2021; Liestyasari et al., 2023; Serpell & Mukela, 2018), this study offers a distinct contribution. It demonstrates that child exploitation can persist even within formal educational systems when educational management fails to enact its ethical and protective responsibilities, thereby reframing child labour as a governance issue rather than merely an access problem.

The primary novelty of this study lies in the development of the educational complicity loop as an analytical framework for understanding child exploitation from an educational management perspective. This concept integrates relational mechanisms linking family moral justification, school-level institutional tolerance, and community-level social legitimacy, while

theoretically extending educational management discourse by embedding child protection and fairness in learning time within governance and organisational ethics (Biesta, 2015; Scott, 2014). Practically, these findings underscore the need for value-oriented and socially responsible educational leadership (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2022; Liu, 2024; Salazar et al., 2018; Setyowati et al., 2024), while acknowledging the study's limitations as a single-context qualitative inquiry and encouraging future comparative and mixed-methods research to further examine the role of education policy in disrupting cycles of educational complicity.

## CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that child exploitation within informal work is not merely a consequence of economic necessity, but a structural outcome of dysfunctional education management and governance. This research reveals a recurring pattern in which moral justification at the family level, institutional tolerance at the school level, and social neglect within the community collectively normalise child labour while eroding learning time equity and the educational meaning for children. The key lesson drawn from this study is that the presence of children in school does not automatically signify educational protection; rather, effective protection depends on ethical leadership, organisational responsibility, and active intervention by educational institutions. In this regard, education systems that prioritise administrative compliance over moral accountability inadvertently become complicit in sustaining exploitative practices, highlighting the urgent need to reposition child protection as a core principle of educational governance.

This study's primary strength lies in its theoretical and empirical contribution to educational management scholarship through the development of the educational complicity loop concept, which explains how ethical failures and organisational weaknesses are reproduced through interactions among educational actors. By situating child protection and learning time justice at the centre of educational management analysis, this research extends existing literature that often treats child labour as an external social problem. However, this study is limited by its single-site focus and qualitative design, which do not allow for broad generalisation. Future research is encouraged to expand the empirical context through comparative or mixed-methods approaches and to examine the role of local and national education policies in disrupting cycles of educational complicity. Such efforts would deepen understanding of governance reforms needed to strengthen ethical leadership and child-centred education systems.

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