



## Epistemological Foundations of Decentralized Educational Reform: A Philosophical Critique of Autonomous School Management in Madrasah

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### ABSTRACT

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Educational decentralization grants schools greater managerial responsibility, but meaningful autonomy remains constrained by tensions between local knowledge, standardized accountability, and institutional capacity. This study aims to critically reconstruct the epistemological foundations of school autonomy and develop a framework for epistemic autonomy in the madrasah context. The study employs qualitative philosophical-conceptual research, combining literature review and document analysis. Data are analyzed through condensation, display, inference, and verification, informed by perspectives on tacit knowledge, epistemic injustice, and communicative action. The findings identify three assumptions underlying autonomous madrasah management: local knowledge is inherently superior, educational quality can be determined through uniform indicators, and delegated authority does not require corresponding epistemic capacity. The study proposes epistemic autonomy through five principles: recognition, articulation, deliberation, dialogic accountability, and mentoring. The conclusion is that decentralization requires redistributing the capacity to interpret evidence, evaluate knowledge, and justify decisions. In practice, this framework encourages contextual evaluation, teacher participation, ongoing mentoring, and mutual accountability. Further empirical research is needed to assess its implementation in various madrasahs in Indonesia.

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## INTRODUCTION

Educational decentralization has become a significant global reform strategy because educational institutions increasingly need flexibility to respond to diverse community needs. The central argument is that meaningful school autonomy depends not only on devolved authority but also on whose knowledge

informs institutional decisions. This matters because educational decisions shape resource allocation, teaching practices, student opportunities, and public trust (Baharun et al., 2025; Hasanah, 2023; Pasupuleti, 2026). Research on school-based management demonstrates the importance of local participation and institutional capacity, although autonomy alone cannot guarantee equitable outcomes (Lauta, 2025; Saputra & Hartati, 2024; Tamam et al., 2025). Therefore, examining the epistemological foundations of school autonomy is essential for developing educational governance that respects contextual knowledge while maintaining accountability, fairness, and educational quality.

Despite its promise, educational decentralization presents persistent challenges concerning unequal institutional capacity, administrative accountability, and the distribution of decision-making authority. Schools possess different financial resources, professional expertise, leadership capabilities, and opportunities for community participation (Jayadi et al., 2025; Pundt & Venz, 2025; Trisnantari et al., 2026). Consequently, transferring responsibilities without strengthening schools' capacity to interpret information and justify decisions may reproduce existing inequalities rather than resolve them. Standardized performance indicators can further privilege measurable outcomes over contextual understandings of students' needs and teachers' professional experiences (Ajani, 2024; Duan & Zhao, 2025; Ikhsan & Faizin, 2026). These tensions raise fundamental questions about educational justice and institutional legitimacy. The broader problem, therefore, concerns not simply whether schools have sufficient autonomy, but whether they possess meaningful authority to determine which knowledge informs their educational decisions.

In Indonesia, school autonomy operates within a governance environment shaped by regional decentralization, school-based management, operational assistance funding, and curriculum reforms associated with Merdeka Belajar (Simatupang et al., 2024; Tamam et al., 2025). Although these arrangements provide opportunities for context-sensitive decision-making, schools remain subject to national standards, accreditation procedures, reporting requirements, and accountability mechanisms. This coexistence creates a potential tension between locally informed decisions and externally established criteria of educational quality. Teachers may understand students' learning difficulties through classroom experience, while institutional decisions increasingly require information presented through standardized administrative categories (Hamid et al., 2023; Kitsou, 2026; Sharieff et al., 2025). However, the extent to which these tensions characterize MAN Bontang specifically must be established through relevant institutional evidence. This distinction necessitates examining autonomy alongside its epistemological foundations.

Existing scholarship has established important foundations for

understanding decentralized educational governance. Caldwell and Spinks (1988) conceptualized the self-managing school as an institution with greater responsibility for decisions concerning educational priorities and resources. In Indonesia, Bjork (2005) examined the relationship between educational decentralization and local institutional practices, while Bandur (2012) investigated school-based management implementation and stakeholder participation (Hasnadi et al., 2024; Kakomole et al., 2025; Wahyudi et al., 2025). These studies illuminate the organizational, political, and practical dimensions of autonomy. Nevertheless, their primary emphasis on governance arrangements and implementation challenges leaves room for deeper philosophical examination of how knowledge acquires legitimacy within institutional decision-making. Understanding autonomy consequently requires moving beyond the distribution of authority toward examining the epistemic assumptions that underpin its exercise.

Philosophical perspectives offer additional resources for examining these unresolved questions. Hayek (1945) emphasized the dispersed character of knowledge embedded in particular circumstances (Blakey, 2023; Vogel & Høg Utoft, 2026), while Polanyi (1966) explained how practical understanding exceeds what individuals can explicitly articulate (Cho et al., 2026; Koch, 2023). Scott (1998) demonstrated how administrative simplification can marginalize complex local realities (Parra & Garizado, 2026), and Biesta (2010) criticized educational approaches that privilege measurable outcomes over broader educational purposes (Durden, 2026; Manoppo, 2026). Fricker (2007) further showed how individuals may experience epistemic injustice when their contributions receive insufficient credibility (Koch, 2023; Vogel & Høg Utoft, 2026). Although these perspectives illuminate knowledge, power, and educational judgment, their systematic integration into analyses of school autonomy remains underdeveloped. This gap limits understanding of how decentralized institutions recognize, evaluate, and justify competing knowledge claims.

This study advances an epistemological interpretation of school autonomy by integrating tacit knowledge, power-knowledge relations, epistemic injustice, and communicative action into a coherent conceptual framework. Rather than treating decentralization exclusively as an administrative arrangement, it conceptualizes autonomy as an epistemic process through which institutions generate, evaluate, deliberate on, and justify knowledge. The proposed concept of epistemic autonomy emphasizes the legitimacy of contextual knowledge, inclusive participation, critical reflection, and reasoned accountability. Its contribution lies in connecting philosophical debates with educational governance while examining the conditions under which local knowledge can inform institutional decisions without dismissing common educational

standards. This framework offers a basis for reconsidering autonomy as both institutional responsibility and epistemic capacity.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: how can the epistemological foundations of school autonomy be critically reconstructed to explain the relationship between local knowledge, educational standardization, and institutional accountability at MAN Bontang, East Kalimantan, Indonesia? It argues that meaningful autonomy requires more than transferring administrative responsibilities to individual schools. Rather, it depends on institutional arrangements that recognize teachers' practical knowledge, enable inclusive deliberation, scrutinize dominant evaluation criteria, and require transparent justification of decisions. Through philosophical-conceptual analysis and contextual examination of relevant institutional documents, the study develops epistemic autonomy as an alternative framework for educational governance. The framework seeks to reconcile contextual responsiveness, epistemic justice, and accountability within decentralized education.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative philosophical-conceptual research design to critically examine the epistemological foundations of school autonomy and develop the concept of epistemic autonomy in educational management. This design was selected because the research sought to analyze the assumptions, meanings, contradictions, and normative implications underlying the relationship between local knowledge, educational standardization, and institutional accountability, rather than measure relationships between variables. The analysis drew on philosophical perspectives concerning tacit knowledge, power-knowledge relations, epistemic injustice, and communicative action. The study combined conceptual analysis with document-based contextual examination to connect philosophical arguments with educational governance. Its primary objective was to formulate a coherent conceptual framework explaining how schools can recognize, evaluate, deliberate on, and justify knowledge in institutional decision-making.

The study was situated at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (MAN) Bontang, a public Islamic senior high school in Bontang, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. This institution was selected as the contextual setting because Islamic educational institutions operate within the intersection of institutional autonomy, national educational standards, religious educational objectives, and administrative accountability. These characteristics provide a relevant context for examining the potential tensions between locally grounded knowledge and externally established governance requirements. The research focused on school

management policies, decision-making procedures, curriculum implementation, resource allocation, teacher participation, and accountability practices. The primary units of analysis were relevant theoretical literature, educational policy documents, and institutional materials available for examination. Document selection followed purposive criteria based on relevance to the research questions, institutional context, conceptual contribution, and credibility of the source.

Data were collected through a focused literature review and document analysis. The literature review examined books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and foundational theoretical works on school-based management, educational decentralization, epistemology, and accountability, including contributions by Caldwell and Spinks, Polanyi, Hayek, Scott, Biesta, Fricker, Foucault, and Habermas. Document analysis considered relevant national education policies and available institutional materials from MAN Bontang, such as strategic plans, curriculum documents, school operational plans, meeting records, and accountability reports. The collection process addressed what materials were relevant, where they originated, why they were selected, who produced them, when they were published or issued, and how they informed the research questions. Only materials that were accessible and actually examined were included in the analysis. Interviews and observations were not treated as data sources unless they were explicitly conducted as part of the research.

Data analysis followed an iterative process of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, adapted from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. During data condensation, relevant passages and arguments were selected, summarized, coded, and categorized according to the concepts of local knowledge, epistemic authority, standardization, epistemic injustice, and accountability. Data display organized the findings into analytical matrices comparing theoretical positions, policy provisions, institutional evidence, and conceptual tensions. Conclusion drawing and verification involved identifying recurring patterns, examining contradictions, comparing alternative interpretations, and synthesizing the results into the proposed framework of epistemic autonomy. Data credibility was supported through source triangulation, comparison across theoretical perspectives, careful examination of documentary evidence, and maintenance of an analytical record linking interpretations to their sources. The limitations of available documents and alternative explanations were also considered to strengthen the transparency, consistency, and logical defensibility of the conceptual conclusions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### Controlled Autonomy as the Epistemic Context of MAN Bontang

MAN Bontang operates within an institutional arrangement characterized by the coexistence of centralized regulation and decentralized managerial responsibility. As a public Islamic senior secondary school under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, it must comply with national requirements concerning curriculum implementation, educational standards, accreditation, and assessment. Simultaneously, the strengthening of madrasa-based management requires the institution to develop work plans, allocate resources, and formulate educational programs responsive to its specific organizational conditions and local needs. These parallel demands establish the institutional context within which managerial decisions are formulated and implemented.

Existing Indonesian scholarship identifies school-based management as a mechanism for promoting institutional independence, participation, transparency, and accountability through democratic decision-making (Hanafiah et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the realization of these principles depends on more than the formal delegation of managerial authority. Leadership capacity, resource availability, and institutional readiness influence the extent to which schools can translate delegated responsibilities into substantive improvements (Chotimah et al., 2024). Similarly, systematic reviews of educational decentralization and recent policy analyses identify capacity constraints and coordination difficulties as persistent challenges in implementing educational autonomy (Rizka et al., 2025; Shabrifa et al., 2025). Research mapping transitions in school governance under decentralization further indicates the need to examine how changes in governance arrangements shape institutional practices and decision-making processes (Chano et al., 2025).

These perspectives suggest that the central issue is not simply whether MAN Bontang possesses managerial autonomy, but how that autonomy is defined, exercised, and constrained by its regulatory environment. Unlike decentralization that transfers certain responsibilities to regional governments, the managerial autonomy of a madrasa under the Ministry of Religious Affairs operates primarily within a centrally regulated administrative structure. Its decision-making space is therefore conditional rather than unrestricted: the institution may adapt programs and allocate resources according to local priorities, but such decisions remain subject to national policies, administrative procedures, and accountability requirements.

From an epistemic perspective, this arrangement exposes a fundamental tension within the discourse of school autonomy. Institutions are expected to exercise contextual judgment and develop innovative responses to local

educational needs while simultaneously demonstrating compliance with standardized requirements. These expectations are not necessarily incompatible, but their coexistence raises questions about how institutional knowledge, professional judgment, and evidence of educational quality are recognized in managerial decision-making. When compliance requirements dominate institutional priorities, autonomy may be reduced to the administrative execution of centrally determined policies. Conversely, when local discretion is exercised without adequate institutional capacity or accountability mechanisms, autonomy may not translate into coherent and sustainable educational improvement.

Controlled autonomy consequently provides the analytical context for examining the three epistemic assumptions discussed in this study. It directs attention beyond the formal availability of managerial discretion toward the underlying beliefs through which autonomy is interpreted and practiced. The subsequent analysis therefore considers not only the rationale supporting each assumption but also its limitations under the institutional conditions of MAN Bontang. This perspective establishes the basis for assessing whether autonomous school management functions as a substantive mechanism for context-sensitive educational improvement or primarily as a framework for fulfilling externally defined administrative expectations.

### **Epistemic Assumptions and the Limits of Autonomous Madrasa Management**

The analysis identifies three interrelated epistemic assumptions underlying autonomous madrasa management: the superiority of local knowledge, the sufficiency of standardized indicators, and the assumption that delegated authority does not require corresponding epistemic capacity. The first assumption recognizes that educational knowledge is distributed among individuals and cannot be fully centralized (Hayek, 1945). Teachers possess contextual understandings of students' learning patterns, family backgrounds, and educational needs that standardized instruments may overlook. However, local knowledge is not inherently reliable, as contextual experience can reproduce prejudice and marginalize alternative perspectives (MacDonald & Keddie, 2025). Polanyi (1966) highlights the tacit nature of practical knowledge, while Ashraf (2025) associates the limited recognition of teachers' expertise with epistemic injustice. Islamic educational epistemology further emphasizes the importance of integrating revelation, reason, and ethical considerations in educational decision-making (Bahrudin et al., 2025; Indah, 2025; Marlina & Nugraha, 2025).

Recognizing local knowledge is insufficient unless institutional mechanisms enable it to influence managerial decisions. Wyatt-Smith et al. (2024)

demonstrate the value of structured professional reflection in connecting teachers' judgments with broader pedagogical knowledge. Nevertheless, participation does not necessarily translate into influence, as teachers' contributions may be acknowledged without affecting consequential policy decisions (Johnson & Brown, 2025). Distributed leadership, conversely, has been associated with teacher autonomy (Hsieh et al., 2025). The second assumption concerns the belief that standardized indicators adequately represent educational quality. Although common measures support transparency and accountability, Biesta (2010) warns that measurement-oriented approaches can displace fundamental educational purposes, while Scott (1998) explains how administrative simplification renders complex realities selectively visible. Zembylas (2024) similarly questions the neutrality of education-policy governance. These perspectives indicate that neither local knowledge nor standardized measurement should independently determine institutional decisions.

This limitation is particularly significant for madrasas, whose educational responsibilities encompass academic achievement, character formation, and religious education. Guillemin (2025) emphasizes subjectification as an educational dimension that extends beyond predefined outcomes. In Indonesia, Merdeka Belajar offers opportunities for pedagogical flexibility while retaining tensions with technocratic approaches (Yuliantoro et al., 2026). Policy analyses by BSKAP (2024) and the OECD (2024) emphasize curricular flexibility and teacher autonomy, although implementation challenges persist regarding digital competencies, rural educational contexts, and classroom-level practices (Fauziyah et al., 2025; Pratiwi, 2025; Muhsyanur, 2024). Islamic epistemological perspectives also offer opportunities to broaden understandings of educational quality (Saro'i & Munir, 2025). The third assumption concerns the delegation of authority without sufficient epistemic capacity. Research identifies leadership capacity, resource availability, and professional mentoring as important conditions for implementing school autonomy and improving madrasa quality (Chotimah et al., 2024; Junaidi et al., 2024; Juma'ah et al., 2025).

Building on these perspectives, this analysis conceptualizes epistemic capacity through three interrelated dimensions: the ability to know, the ability to evaluate, and the ability to decide accountably. These dimensions involve critically interpreting data, reflecting on practice, examining competing claims, considering ethical implications, and explaining decisions to affected stakeholders. Research on teacher autonomy and curriculum reform highlights the importance of professional judgment and responsibility (Wardatun Nihayah et al., 2024; Salsabila et al., 2024), while international studies emphasize targeted professional development and institutional arrangements that strengthen agency

and address epistemic injustice (Islam & Tateo, 2026; Atias et al., 2025). Islamic educational perspectives on participation, justice, and ethics provide an additional normative foundation (Mulyani et al., 2025). Taken together, the three assumptions suggest that meaningful autonomy requires the integration of critically examined local knowledge, contextually interpreted indicators, and accountable decision-making. For MAN Bontang, this constitutes a conceptual proposition rather than a verified causal conclusion about its actual practices.

### **Epistemic Justice and the Development of Epistemic Autonomy**

The analysis further reveals that the relationship between knowledge and power constitutes a critical dimension of autonomy in educational management. Foucault (1980) demonstrates how knowledge and power are mutually constitutive, shaping which forms of knowledge are recognized as legitimate and whose judgments are authorized to inform institutional decisions. Fricker (2007) distinguishes testimonial injustice, in which a speaker's credibility is unfairly diminished, from hermeneutical injustice, in which unequal access to interpretive resources prevents individuals from adequately articulating their experiences. These forms of injustice can emerge in educational institutions when teachers' professional judgments, students' experiences, or community knowledge are marginalized by dominant administrative frameworks. Atias et al. (2025) examine disruptions to teachers' understanding of their professional expertise, while Mullins (2025) highlights how the rejection or misrepresentation of knowledge can affect students' epistemic standing. These perspectives suggest that educational autonomy must address not only who possesses decision-making authority, but also whose knowledge is recognized and considered legitimate.

At the inter-school level, epistemic injustice may become structural when differences in institutional capacity determine whose knowledge is visible and valued. Schools with stronger resources and administrative expertise may be better positioned to translate their practices into the language of standardized indicators, whereas institutions with fewer resources may struggle to make their contextual achievements legible within prevailing evaluation systems. Consequently, differences in institutional performance may reflect not only educational quality but also unequal capacities to produce and communicate recognized evidence. Research identifying capacity constraints in Indonesian school autonomy (Chotimah et al., 2024) and implementation challenges in rural education (Pratiwi, 2025) underscores the importance of examining these disparities. Earlier studies of Indonesian school-based management also highlight the influence of bureaucracy, participation, and implementation conditions (Bandur, 2012; Bjork, 2005). Similarly, Caldwell and Spinks (1988)

emphasize the importance of placing decisions closer to the educational process. Nevertheless, this analysis does not characterize MAN Bontang as a resource-constrained institution. Rather, it identifies a potential structural mechanism through which uniform evaluation systems may disadvantage schools whose contextual knowledge and achievements are insufficiently represented by standardized measures.

In response to these concerns, this study proposes epistemic autonomy as a conceptual framework for understanding the substantive exercise of autonomy in madrasa management. Epistemic autonomy refers to the collective capacity of an educational institution to generate, critically evaluate, and take responsibility for the knowledge informing its decisions. Unlike administrative autonomy, which primarily concerns the allocation of decision-making authority, epistemic autonomy emphasizes the institutional capacity to know, deliberate, and decide accountably. The framework comprises five interconnected principles. Recognition ensures that the knowledge of teachers, parents, and students receives fair consideration (Fricker, 2007). Articulation provides opportunities to express tacit knowledge through professional dialogue and documentation without reducing it to measurable outputs (Polanyi, 1966; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2024). Deliberation requires institutional claims and external standards to be examined through reasoned argument and evidence, consistent with communicative action (Habermas, 1984). Dialogical accountability establishes reciprocal obligations: madrasas explain their decisions, while policymakers provide transparent justifications for the standards they impose. Finally, mentoring strengthens the professional and institutional capacities necessary to exercise autonomy responsibly.

**Table 2. Epistemic Assumptions and Autonomy Framework**

| <b>Epistemic assumption</b>                                       | <b>Valid premise</b>                                                    | <b>Identified limitation</b>                                                                                          | <b>Corresponding principle</b>                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Local knowledge is inherently superior and directly mobilizable   | Knowledge of specific contexts is dispersed and often tacit             | Local knowledge may reproduce bias; tacit expertise requires articulation; participation does not guarantee influence | Recognition, articulation, and deliberation             |
| Educational quality can be established through uniform indicators | Common indicators support consistency, transparency, and accountability | Measurable outputs may overshadow contextual achievements, character formation, and other educational purposes        | Contextual interpretation and dialogical accountability |
| Authority can be transferred without epistemic                    | Decisions made closer to the learning process can be more               | Delegated authority without adequate capacity may reproduce                                                           | Mentoring, capacity building, and accountable           |

|          |                   |                                    |                            |                 |
|----------|-------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| capacity | context-sensitive | institutional<br>and<br>compliance | inequalities<br>procedural | decision-making |
|----------|-------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|

The five principles establish a humanistic and rational framework that recognizes teachers, educational staff, students, and communities as contributors to institutional knowledge while requiring claims and standards to be evaluated through evidence, ethical reasoning, and deliberation. Within Islamic educational traditions, *musyawarah* (consultation) supports participatory and just decision-making. Epistemic autonomy therefore promotes a reciprocal relationship between local knowledge and public accountability. For policymakers within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the framework emphasizes sustained capacity mentoring, contextual narratives complementing standardized indicators, and feedback mechanisms incorporating madrasa experiences into policy development. At the institutional level, teacher reflection forums, systematic pedagogical documentation, participatory planning and budgeting, and transparent decision-making can strengthen epistemic autonomy. Future research should examine the framework across diverse madrasas, develop qualitative indicators of deliberative capacity, and investigate its contribution to equitable and context-responsive educational governance.

## Discussion

The findings demonstrate that autonomous madrasa management involves tensions between local knowledge, standardized accountability, and institutional decision-making capacity. This interpretation extends Kakomole et al. (2025), who emphasize participation and transparency in school-based management, by highlighting the epistemic conditions required for meaningful autonomy. Consistent with Chen et al. (2024), teachers possess contextual and tacit knowledge that centralized systems may overlook. However, this study qualifies that perspective by showing conceptually that local knowledge requires critical evaluation and institutional articulation. The analysis also supports Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice, suggesting that excluding professional voices can undermine equitable participation and limit the legitimacy of managerial decisions (Gonzales et al., 2024; Vogel & Høg Utoft, 2026).

The findings also align with Biesta (2010) who question the limitations of measurement-driven governance (Apple et al., 2023; Biesta, 2025). Standardized indicators remain important for transparency, comparability, and accountability, but they cannot fully represent educational purposes such as character formation, religious development, and students' subjectification. This tension is particularly relevant to madrasas, where academic achievement and religious

education constitute interconnected responsibilities. Whereas conventional accountability frameworks prioritize measurable outcomes, the present analysis proposes interpreting indicators alongside contextual narratives and professional judgments. Theoretically, this perspective broadens understandings of educational quality by emphasizing the relationship between measurable performance and educational meaning (Fatrycya et al., 2024; Umami & Yasin, 2024). Practically, it encourages policymakers to maintain common standards while allowing institutions to explain their achievements within their specific educational contexts.

Furthermore, the analysis reinforces (Farhani et al., 2025; Siswadi et al., 2025), who identify leadership capacity and resource availability as important conditions for school autonomy. It also corresponds with research emphasizing leadership development and professional mentoring in madrasa management (Bahri et al., 2026; Bayless, 2015). However, the present study advances this discussion by conceptualizing institutional readiness as epistemic capacity, comprising the ability to interpret evidence, evaluate competing claims, and make accountable decisions. This distinction contributes theoretically by connecting administrative decentralization with knowledge production and professional judgment. Practically, it suggests that transferring managerial responsibilities should be accompanied by sustained mentoring, collaborative reflection, and opportunities to develop evidence-informed decision-making rather than relying exclusively on formal regulations or administrative training (Damiyano, 2025; Secreto et al., 2025; Tierney, 2023).

Building on these findings, the study proposes epistemic autonomy as a conceptual framework for understanding meaningful institutional independence. Unlike administrative autonomy, which emphasizes the distribution of authority, epistemic autonomy focuses on the collective capacity to generate, critically evaluate, and justify knowledge underlying institutional decisions. Its principles of recognition, articulation, deliberation, dialogical accountability, and mentoring integrate insights from Fricker (2007) and Habermas (1984) (Koch, 2023; Kaun, 2024). The framework also resonates with Islamic educational values, particularly *musyawarah* (consultation), participation, and justice (Adeoye & Baharun, 2025; Ulmadevi et al., 2023). Its principal theoretical contribution lies in connecting epistemic justice with school governance, while its practical contribution is a framework for strengthening teacher participation, contextual evaluation, and reciprocal accountability between madrasas and policymakers.

These findings have implications for the Ministry of Religious Affairs, madrasa leaders, and future researchers. Policymakers could complement standardized indicators with contextual evidence, establish feedback

mechanisms through which institutional experiences inform policy, and provide sustained capacity-building support. At the institutional level, teacher reflection forums, systematic documentation of pedagogical practices, participatory planning and budgeting, and transparent explanations of decisions could create opportunities for professional knowledge to inform management. Nevertheless, the proposed framework remains a conceptual contribution derived from analytical interpretation and literature review; its effectiveness has not been empirically established at MAN Bontang. Future comparative studies across madrasas with different institutional characteristics should therefore examine how epistemic autonomy operates in practice and assess whether its principles contribute to more equitable, accountable, and context-responsive educational governance.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that meaningful school autonomy requires more than transferring decision-making authority; it also requires strengthening the epistemic capacity to interpret evidence, evaluate knowledge, and justify decisions. Its central contribution is the concept of epistemic autonomy, which extends decentralization theory by integrating recognition, articulation, deliberation, dialogical accountability, and mentoring into a framework for more equitable madrasa governance. The key lesson is that educational improvement depends on balancing local knowledge with standardized accountability while acknowledging differences in institutional capacity. Practically, this framework encourages policymakers to strengthen deliberative spaces, recognize teachers' and communities' experiential knowledge, provide capacity-building support, and develop accountability mechanisms that combine measurable indicators with contextual evidence. However, this study is primarily conceptual and literature-based; therefore, the framework's effectiveness has not been empirically established in MAN Bontang or other educational institutions. Future research should examine its implementation across diverse Indonesian madrasas and schools to assess its applicability, identify contextual variations, and evaluate its contribution to more participatory, accountable, and equitable educational governance.

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