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The Legitimacy Paradox of AI-Supported School Management: Justice, Trust, and the 'Black Box' in Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

This study examines how teachers with primary school experience evaluate AI-supported managerial decisions through the lenses of justice, trust, transparency, and acceptance. Rather than treating artificial intelligence solely as a technological innovation, it focuses on how algorithmic support interacts with institutional power relations, professional judgment, and the legitimacy of school-level decisions. A qualitative case study design was employed with six participants selected through criterion sampling. Data were generated in a single 49-minute scenario-based focus group in which four hypothetical cases enabled comparison between traditional human-centered and AI-supported decisions, and were analyzed through qualitative content analysis in MAXQDA 2026, considering manifest and latent meanings together.

The findings point to what this study conceptualizes as a legitimacy paradox. Participants were attracted to AI-supported decisions because data-driven procedures appeared capable of reducing seniority pressure, favoritism, and personal discretion. Yet the same decisions lost legitimacy when the data, criteria, or reasoning behind algorithmic outputs became opaque or when classifications risked stigmatizing students. Justice and trust emerged as central evaluative criteria across both traditional and AI-supported scenarios. Participants' views were not uniform: some emphasized data-driven accuracy and others the contextual superiority of human judgment, but a hybrid decision-support model, articulated most explicitly by one participant, offered a way of reconciling these positions, with AI contributing consistency and analytical capacity while contextual, pedagogical, and ethical responsibility remains human. The study suggests that legitimate AI-supported school management depends not only on technical accuracy but on explainability, equitable criteria, and meaningful human oversight. In the authors' interpretation, these conditions also call for contestability and accountability mechanisms, which participants did not explicitly voice.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, educational management, managerial legitimacy, decision-making, justice, trust, transparency, human oversight



Introduction

Artificial intelligence is moving from the margins of educational technology into the core of educational management, where it can shape how information is interpreted, risks are identified, resources are allocated, and managerial decisions are justified. This shift is consequential because management is not merely the coordination of people and resources; it also involves authority, power, and decisions made on behalf of others (Türkel, 1981; Aydın Kula, 2021). In educational organizations, the legitimacy of such decisions depends not only on formal authority but also on how organizational members perceive the fairness, transparency, and trustworthiness of the process (Bursaloğlu, 2022). The growing use of AI-supported systems therefore raises a managerial question as much as a technological one: under what conditions can algorithmically supported decisions be regarded as legitimate in schools?

This study addresses that question through scenario-based comparisons of traditional human-centered and AI-supported managerial decisions. Its analytical starting point is a tension that may be described as a legitimacy paradox: the very features that make AI attractive as a response to human inconsistency—standardization, data-driven analysis, and relative distance from interpersonal influence—may also weaken legitimacy when the system's criteria are opaque, classifications are difficult to challenge, or responsibility for the final decision becomes unclear. The study therefore examines not whether AI is simply 'better' than human judgment, but how teachers negotiate the competing claims of objectivity, context, justice, transparency, accountability, and professional responsibility in school management.

Conceptual Framework

Management thought has progressively expanded beyond classical concerns with rationality, efficiency, and centralized authority toward approaches that recognize organizations as social and open systems shaped by human relations, environmental interaction, and changing information structures (Aydın Kula, 2021; Jamali, 2005; Bursaloğlu, 2022). After the 1980s, technological change and globalization further encouraged more flexible, networked, and information-intensive forms of management (Seçtim & Erkul, 2020). For educational organizations, this development is especially significant because managerial decisions are embedded in relationships among administrators, teachers, students, families, and institutional expectations rather than being purely technical choices.

Educational Management, Authority, and Decision Legitimacy

Educational management applies general management principles within a context in which administrative, social, and pedagogical responsibilities are inseparable (Bursaloğlu, 2022; Das et al., 2023). School management translates broader educational objectives into day-to-day decisions concerning teachers, students, resources, participation, and organizational climate. Accordingly, the school principal exercises formal authority while also managing communication, collaboration, leadership, and participation processes (Burgess & Newton, 2015; Bairašauskienė, 2018). Contemporary leadership approaches differ in emphasis, but trust,

communication, justice, collaboration, and participation remain recurring elements of effective educational management (Töremen & Karakuş, 2008; Taşçı, 2022; Geylani, 2013). When organizational members cannot meaningfully participate or perceive favoritism and silence, the legitimacy of managerial decisions may be weakened (Aydın, 2016).

Decision-making lies at the center of this managerial process. Bursaloğlu (2021) describes it as a cyclical process of defining a problem, gathering and analyzing information, evaluating alternatives, implementing a decision, and reviewing its consequences. Simon's bounded rationality perspective further suggests that decision-makers operate under limitations of information, time, and cognitive capacity and therefore cannot evaluate every alternative exhaustively (cited in Bursaloğlu, 2021). Human judgment may also vary under conditions such as fatigue and time pressure (Redelmeier, 2024). These limitations create a plausible role for AI-supported analysis; however, in schools, decision quality cannot be reduced to technical optimization because decisions also carry ethical, relational, and pedagogical consequences.

AI-Supported Educational Management: Promise and Risk

Digitalization has already transformed administrative communication, information access, and data use in educational institutions (İnce, 2005; Örs & Tetik, 2010). More recent AI applications extend this transformation through decision-support systems, learning analytics, risk prediction, and resource planning (Alam, 2021). By analyzing indicators such as teaching loads, attendance, student performance, or classroom profiles, such systems may enable faster access to information and more systematic consideration of multiple variables. At the same time, data-driven management depends on how data are collected, interpreted, and connected to organizational decisions (Selwyn & Gašević, 2020). Technology therefore does not eliminate managerial judgment; it changes the informational conditions under which that judgment is exercised.

The opportunities of AI-supported management are accompanied by substantial risks. Algorithmic systems are constrained by the quality of the data and criteria on which they operate, and educational data practices may reproduce bias, reduce complex human experiences to measurable indicators, or shift from support toward surveillance and control (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017; Kirmani, 2020; Selwyn, 2019; Selwyn & Gašević, 2020). These concerns are especially important when systems classify students or generate recommendations with consequences for educational opportunity. An apparently objective output may still be difficult to trust if stakeholders cannot understand which data were used, how criteria were weighted, or how exceptions are handled. Transparency, explainability, accountability, and data privacy thus become conditions of managerial legitimacy rather than merely technical design features.

Human-Centered Decision Support as the Analytical Lens

A human-centered approach positions artificial intelligence not as an autonomous authority but as a mechanism that extends access to information and analytical capacity while preserving professional responsibility (Alam, 2021; Selwyn & Gašević, 2020). This position is compatible with the open-systems view of educational organizations and with the Getzels and Guba Social Systems Model, which emphasizes the interaction between institutional roles and individual needs and

expectations (Bursalıoğlu, 2022). It also recognizes that managerial decisions are produced within formal and informal relations of power and authority (Aydın Kula, 2021). Building on this perspective, the present study uses managerial legitimacy as its central analytical lens. The proposed legitimacy paradox refers to the possibility that AI can gain acceptance by appearing to reduce human arbitrariness while simultaneously losing acceptance when its own decision logic becomes opaque, difficult to contest, or detached from contextual and ethical judgment.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers perceive the legitimacy of AI-supported managerial decisions in primary schools, with particular attention to justice, trust, transparency, acceptance, and human oversight. Four research questions guide the study: (1) How do teachers evaluate AI-supported managerial decisions in comparison with traditional human-centered decisions? (2) How do these two decision modes shape teachers' perceptions of justice and trust? (3) What concerns do teachers express regarding transparency, algorithmic opacity, classification, and other ethical consequences of AI-supported decisions? (4) Under what conditions do teachers regard artificial intelligence as an acceptable and legitimate form of decision support in school management?

Methodology

This section addresses the research design and its rationale, the boundaries of the case examined, the study group, the data collection instruments and process, data analysis, the role of the researcher, credibility and transferability, and ethical principles.

Research Design

This study was designed as a qualitative case study to examine how teachers interpret AI-supported managerial decisions within the relational and institutional context of primary schools. Case study research is appropriate for examining a bounded phenomenon in depth and in relation to its context (Berg & Lune, 2019, pp. 423–424). The case was operationalized through four hypothetical managerial scenarios rather than through an abstract discussion of artificial intelligence. Drawing on Merriam (2013), Yin (2017), and Berg and Lune (2019), the scenarios were constructed to make visible a central tension in educational management: the promise of data-driven consistency versus the human, bureaucratic, ethical, and relational dimensions of managerial judgment. The design is therefore instrumental in that the scenarios function as a bounded vehicle for examining teachers' meaning-making around AI-supported decisions.

In line with Merriam's (2013, pp. 43–44) criteria for case studies, the research focuses not on a general discussion of artificial intelligence but on concrete managerial situations in primary school administration, such as merit, seniority pressure, and labeling. The descriptive dimension of the study involves presenting teachers' views and responses to the scenarios, while the interpretive dimension involves making sense of these responses in relation to justice, trust, transparency, acceptance, and differences between human and AI-supported decisions. The focus group interview conducted with multiple participants around the same scenarios enabled

different perspectives to be brought together within the context of the same situation (Berg & Lune, 2019, p. 426).

Delimitation of the Case

The case examined in the study concerns how teachers perceive and make sense of AI-supported and traditional decision-making processes in two decision-making areas at the primary school level: the allocation of courses/classes and the identification of students at risk (Merriam, 2013, pp. 40–41; Yin, 2017, pp. 32–33). The study was institutionally and spatially delimited to the primary school level, the micro-political relations within the teachers' room, and the decision-making mechanisms of school administration. Functionally, Scenarios A and B, which address perceptions of justice regarding the allocation of courses and classes among teachers, and Scenarios C and D, which address the identification and pedagogical monitoring of students at risk, were included within the scope of the study. Thus, the ways in which AI-supported and traditional decision-making processes are evaluated in different managerial contexts were examined within a bounded case.

Study Group

The study group consisted of six participants selected through criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods. The criteria used to select the participants were having active teaching or research experience at the primary school level, having direct experience with hierarchical relations in the teachers' room and managerial decision-making processes, and possessing pedagogical awareness of digital transformation in education and artificial intelligence tools. To protect confidentiality, participants were coded as Participant_1 to Participant_6. Because the group is small and the participants could be identifiable within their professional settings, demographic and professional details such as gender, years of experience, and workplace were deliberately not reported. The four hypothetical scenarios used in the study were structured to enable a comparison of traditional human-centered and AI-supported decision-making processes. Scenarios A and C represented traditional decision-making processes, whereas Scenarios B and D represented AI-supported decision-making processes. This structure enabled a comparison of how participants evaluated similar managerial problems under different decision-making mechanisms. The number of participants was not based on the notion of statistical representation used in quantitative research. It was evaluated in terms of the quality of the detailed and contextual data generated by participants who met the predetermined criteria through their responses to the scenarios.

Data Collection Instrument and Process

The empirical data of the study were collected through the focus group interview technique, which enabled participants to discuss their professional experiences through interaction with the views of other participants (Berg & Lune, 2019, p. 174). In focus group interviews, data encompass not only participants' individual statements but also the interpretations that emerge during group discussion and interaction (Berg & Lune, 2019). The interview process was conducted using the Scenario-Based Focus Group Interview Form, which was developed by the researcher and revised in accordance with expert opinions. Participants were presented with four hypothetical scenarios (A, B, C, and D) that

enabled a comparison between traditional human-centered and AI-supported decision-making processes. The interview lasted a total of 49 minutes, and both audio and textual records were obtained. The researcher conducted the interview as the moderator and used open-ended and non-directive questions in line with the principles of semi-structured moderation proposed by Berg and Lune (2019, pp. 182–185). A neutral interview environment was established that allowed participants to express their views freely, respond to one another's perspectives, and discuss the scenarios.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, transparently presenting the researcher's position and role throughout the research process is important for evaluating the trustworthiness of the study (Merriam, 2013, p. 16). In this study, the researcher served as the moderator during the focus group interview. The researcher avoided questions that could direct participants toward a particular viewpoint and refrained from steering the discussion toward a predetermined outcome, adopting a neutral moderation approach that allowed participants to discuss the scenarios according to their own experiences and evaluations.

During data analysis, the researcher personally conducted the coding process by examining the interview transcripts line by line. Decisions regarding coding and the consolidation of codes under themes were systematically documented, thereby supporting the traceability of the analysis process.

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the focus group interview were imported into MAXQDA (Version 2026) and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. MAXQDA was used as an analytical tool for storing, coding, organizing, and visualizing the data. During the analysis process, manifest and latent levels of content were considered together (Berg & Lune, 2019, pp. 378–379). Participants' direct statements regarding the use of artificial intelligence, time savings, and professional contributions were coded at the manifest level, whereas implicit meanings related to institutional hierarchy, power relations, and decision-making processes that emerged in accounts concerning issues of justice were interpreted at the latent level. Data analysis was conducted in three stages (Berg & Lune, 2019, pp. 381–385). In the first stage, the transcripts were read multiple times, and meaningful data units were identified and separated through open coding in accordance with the research questions and theoretical framework. In the second stage, the codes were compared according to their similarities and relationships and organized under higher-level themes. In the third stage, relationships among codes and themes were examined using MAXQDA's Code Relations Browser, and code frequencies were comparatively evaluated together with thematic patterns identified at the latent level. Thus, similarities and differences in teachers' perceptions across the four scenarios were systematically compared. The f values reported in the findings indicate the frequency with which the relevant code occurred in the dataset and do not represent the number of participants.

Credibility and Transferability

Credibility, transferability, and consistency were used as criteria for supporting the qualitative quality of the study. To ensure credibility, direct quotations from participants were included in the findings section, the codes and themes developed were reviewed in accordance with expert opinions, and the research context and data collection process were described in detail (Merriam, 2013). In this way, the study aimed to make explicit the connection between the findings and the research data, as well as the interpretation process. Regarding transferability, the research context, the criteria used to select participants, the data collection process, and the stages of analysis were described. Participants' demographic details were not reported to protect their anonymity, which readers should consider when judging the transferability of the findings. This description enables readers to compare the context and findings of the study with those of their own research or practice contexts (Merriam, 2013, pp. 50–51). To support consistency, coding decisions, the rationale for grouping codes under themes, and the stages of analysis were systematically documented. In addition, participants' individual statements and interactions during the focus group interview were evaluated together; code frequencies and relationships among codes obtained through MAXQDA were considered alongside thematic interpretations conducted at the latent level (Berg & Lune, 2019, p. 425). Thus, the traceability of the analysis process and the integration of interpretations with different representations of the data were supported.

Ethical Principles

The fundamental principles of research and publication ethics were followed throughout the research process. Before the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the interview process, and the use of the data within the scope of scientific research, and an Informed Consent Form was obtained on the basis of voluntary participation. Participants were informed of their right not to participate in the study and to withdraw from the interview process.

The confidentiality of participants' personal information was protected, and participants were coded as Participant_1–Participant_6. Personal information that could directly or indirectly lead to the identification of participants was not included in the research text. Audio recordings, transcripts, and other research documents obtained during the interview were stored in secure digital environments and were not used for purposes other than the research.

Findings

The analysis produced eight interrelated themes that together trace a movement from everyday professional use of artificial intelligence to judgments about the legitimacy of AI-supported managerial decisions. The first themes establish how participants experience AI as a practical support tool and where they perceive its limitations; subsequent themes show how those experiences intersect with school hierarchy, perceptions of objectivity, algorithmic opacity, ethical concerns, and competing decision models. The final themes bring these strands together around justice and trust. Rather than treating the eight themes as independent categories, the findings therefore read them as components of a broader legitimacy process.

Findings Regarding the Purposes of Using Artificial Intelligence Tools

An examination of the data concerning the purposes for which primary school teachers use artificial intelligence technologies in their professional lives shows that usage patterns are concentrated in two main dimensions: “Research” (f=14) and “Planning” (f=14). These two dimensions indicate that participants position artificial intelligence both as a tool for accessing information and generating content and as a tool for planning educational processes.

Access to Information and Content Generation: The Research Dimension

Participants’ statements indicate that artificial intelligence is used particularly to gain rapid access to current pedagogical information, benefit from sources in foreign languages, and receive support in generating professional knowledge. Compared with the information overload encountered in traditional search engines, participants regarded AI’s ability to present information in a more organized and summarized form as a facilitating feature.

Referring to the difficulty of developing individualized approaches for each student in crowded classrooms, Participant_1 expressed the support provided by artificial intelligence in this process as follows:

"In our country, there are approximately 30 students per teacher on average. It would not be very possible to try different approaches for the individual characteristics of each student. But AI tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Sora, and Grok... are extremely helpful." (Participant_1, Position 37)

This statement indicates that teachers particularly perceive artificial intelligence as a tool that facilitates access to information and suggestions concerning the diverse characteristics of students.

Structuring Educational Processes: The Planning Dimension

The “Planning” dimension also appears with high frequency among the purposes of using artificial intelligence (f=14). This dimension encompasses uses related to structuring educational processes, such as preparing lesson plans, developing activities, and creating assessment and evaluation tools. Participants’ accounts indicate that they perceive artificial intelligence as facilitating time-consuming preparation processes and potentially increasing the time teachers can devote to pedagogical activities.

Participant_4 stated that artificial intelligence may change how certain tasks are carried out rather than eliminate the teaching profession, as follows:

"First of all, from a positive perspective, artificial intelligence can significantly reduce teachers’ workload. Time-consuming tasks such as preparing lesson plans, developing activities, creating assessment and evaluation tools, and analyzing student performance can be completed more quickly." (Participant_4, Position 40)

This account shows that teachers particularly view artificial intelligence as a supportive tool for time-consuming tasks such as planning, material development, and assessment preparation.

Overall, the equal frequency of the “Research” and “Planning” codes indicates that participants referred to the use of artificial intelligence to a similar extent in the context of both accessing information and generating content and preparing educational processes. The findings show that, at this stage, artificial intelligence is positioned primarily as a supportive and facilitating tool in teachers’ professional practices.

Read together, Participant_1 and Participant_4 show that teachers do not separate information access from instructional planning. Participant_1 emphasizes AI as a way of widening the range of responses available for heterogeneous classrooms, whereas Participant_4 emphasizes the compression of preparation time. The two accounts therefore frame AI less as an autonomous pedagogical actor than as an infrastructure for extending teachers’ informational and planning capacity. This distinction becomes important for the later findings: acceptance is strongest when AI expands professional capacity without displacing professional judgment.

Findings Regarding the Contributions of Artificial Intelligence to the Teaching Profession

When the implications of integrating artificial intelligence technologies into educational environments for the teaching profession are examined, the subcode “Savings” (f=18) has the highest frequency, followed by the subcode “Motivation” (f=3). This distribution indicates that participants primarily evaluated the professional contributions of artificial intelligence in terms of the conveniences it provides with regard to time and workload.

Reducing Operational Workload: Saving Time and Energy

In participants’ statements, artificial intelligence was regarded as a tool that can facilitate time-consuming tasks such as material production, official correspondence, and individual student monitoring and thereby reduce workload. Participants noted that AI-supported tools may help teachers carry out certain tasks more easily, particularly in situations where the physical facilities of the school are inadequate. Participant_1 explained this situation as follows:

"Yes, I have encountered this, and since the physical conditions of the school were generally very poor, having AI-supported tools would have significantly reduced my workload." (Participant_1, Position 44)

This statement shows that the participant viewed AI-supported tools as a support mechanism that could reduce workload under conditions where physical facilities are inadequate.

Psychological Relief and Feeling Secure: The Motivation Dimension

The “Motivation” subcode occurred less frequently than the “Savings” code (f=3). In participants’ statements, motivation was associated particularly with monitoring student development and making this process more visible to teachers. Participant_3 stated that a monitoring system could contribute to teachers feeling more positive about themselves, as follows:

"...the weak aspect is that the teacher’s motivation decreases, while the strong aspect is that the monitoring system makes the teacher feel happier." (Participant_3, Position 45)

This statement indicates that data and monitoring systems can be associated with positive feelings regarding teachers’ professional experiences. However, the low frequency of statements related to

motivation suggests that this dimension had a more limited place in participants' professional evaluations of artificial intelligence compared with the savings dimension.

Findings Regarding the Limitations of AI Integration

An examination of how the limitations of integrating artificial intelligence into the education system are reflected in participants' statements shows that the findings are concentrated in two main dimensions: "Inadequacy" (f=7) and "Dependency" (f=3). The "Inadequacy" code reflects concerns about the digital and AI literacy of teachers and school administrators, whereas the "Dependency" code reflects concerns about excessive reliance on ready-made AI outputs and the possible erosion of teachers' originality and professional judgment. Together, these dimensions indicate that participants evaluated the limitations of AI both in terms of the competencies required to use it and the professional risks that may arise from how it is used.

Digital Divide and Lack of Literacy: The Inadequacy Dimension

The "Inadequacy" subcode emerged with a higher frequency among the limitations associated with AI integration (f=7). Participants particularly expressed concerns regarding the basic computer skills and levels of digital and artificial intelligence literacy of teachers and school administrators. Participant_5 expressed this concern with regard to both teachers and school administrators as follows:

"I do not think that teachers who do not have basic computer skills will be able to understand and make sense of newly emerging systems as well. Moreover, creating something integrated into the lesson is a process that also requires AI literacy and digital literacy skills... Administrators also struggle considerably even with basic computer knowledge to a similar extent." (Participant_5, Position 13)

This statement indicates that the effective integration of AI tools into educational processes depends not only on the accessibility of technology but also on whether teachers and administrators possess the necessary digital competencies.

Loss of Originality and Overreliance on Convenience: The Dependency Dimension

The "Dependency" subcode (f=3) reflects participants' concerns regarding the extensive use of ready-made solutions provided by artificial intelligence. Participants' statements included evaluations suggesting that using AI-generated content without questioning it or adding personal contributions may limit teachers' processes of producing original content.

Participant_2 described the potential problem created by teachers' reliance on similar AI-generated outputs in terms of originality as follows:

"Actually, everyone generally does the same thing, so you can easily tell that it is artificial intelligence... It has taken over the teachers. They make it do everything. I do not actually think this is right either. People should add a little of themselves as well." (Participant_2, Position 10)

This statement points to a perception that extensive use of ready-made AI outputs may push teachers' own contributions and original production into the background.

Participant_1 also expressed concerns about the potential long-term risks of AI use in terms of originality and personal development (Participant_1, Position 44). This assessment indicates that the “Dependency” code encompasses not only intensive use of the technology but also concerns about the potential effects of excessive reliance on ready-made content obtained from artificial intelligence on teachers’ own production processes.

Participant_6 extended this concern from the originality of AI-generated content to the potential long-term effects of how technological tools are used on teachers’ pedagogical evaluation processes:

“There is also a risk that teachers’ pedagogical reflexes and intuitions may become diminished.” (Participant_6, Position 42)

This statement indicates that overreliance on artificial intelligence is perceived as a limitation not only because it may reduce original production but also because it may affect how teachers’ professional knowledge, experience, and pedagogical intuition are engaged in practice.

The contrast with the “Inadequacy” dimension is analytically important. Participant_5 locates the immediate barrier in teachers’ and administrators’ digital competence, while Participant_6 moves the concern from competence to professional judgment itself. Taken together, the statements suggest two different levels of risk: insufficient literacy may prevent meaningful use of AI, whereas uncritical or excessive use may gradually narrow the very pedagogical reflexes required to evaluate AI-generated recommendations.

Findings Regarding Institutional Hierarchy and Decision-Making Processes in the School Environment

An examination of participants’ statements regarding institutional hierarchy and decision-making processes in the school environment shows that the data are concentrated around the codes “Seniority” (f=13), “Dismissive Handling” (f=8), “Encountered Difficulties” (f=4), “Reactive Behaviors” (f=4), and “Inability to Remain Silent” (f=3). Participants’ accounts particularly highlight the influence of seniority on decision-making processes, the shaping of managerial decisions through individual initiative, and the different responses developed by teachers in the face of perceived injustice.

Reflection of Seniority on Decision-Making Processes

The high frequency of the “Seniority” code (f=13) indicates that participants frequently referred to seniority relations when evaluating decision-making processes in the school environment. Participants’ statements show that decisions concerning the preparation of class schedules, the allocation of classes, and the distribution of challenging classes were considered in connection with seniority relations.

In Scenario A, Participant_4 evaluated the assignment of challenging classes to newly appointed teachers and the absence of explicit criteria underlying such decisions as follows:

“In Scenario A, continuously assigning challenging classes to new teachers demonstrates an inequality normalized under the name of ‘experience’... In both situations, decisions are not based on explicit criteria; rather, habits, generalizations, and social pressures become decisive. This undermines the sense of justice for both teachers and students.” (Participant_4, Position 47)

This statement indicates that the participant questioned allocations made on the basis of seniority and experience in terms of explicit and shared criteria.

Participant_1, in turn, associated practices based on seniority with favoritism and mobbing:

"Unfortunately, these kinds of practices, which are concealed under the name of seniority in the teaching profession but actually involve explicit favoritism and mobbing, are quite widespread." (Participant_1, Position 23)

This assessment indicates that seniority may be perceived not merely as an indicator of experience but also as a factor associated with power relations among teachers and perceptions of inequality.

Administrative Insensitivity and Bureaucracy: Dismissive Handling and Reactive Behaviors

The "Dismissive Handling" code (f=8) was the second most frequent code under this theme after "Seniority." Participants' accounts indicate that the school administration's response to situations perceived as unjust or problematic influenced how decisions were perceived. Evaluations concerning the concentration of final decision-making authority in the school principal's individual discretion also emerged prominently in this context.

Participant_5 expressed the view that different behavioral patterns and managerial decisions within the school may be related to the school principal's personal approach as follows:

"These are situations that can occur in schools. Everyone develops behaviors according to their own character. However, unfortunately, the school principal makes the final decision. At this point, the principal's character and work ethic come into play." (Participant_5, Position 48)

This statement reveals a perception that the administrator's individual discretion may become decisive at the final stage of the decision-making process.

Participants' responses to situations they perceived as unjust also varied. Participant_6 drew attention to teachers remaining silent because of environmental and institutional pressures and to the limited nature of administrative intervention:

"Even though the primary school teacher knows what is right, remaining silent out of fear of neighborhood pressure and the administration's failure to intervene in the process are rationally unethical... Since there is no institutional transparency in primary schools, it is presumably highly prevalent and structurally widespread." (Participant_6, Positions 42 and 49)

This account indicates that the participant establishes a relationship between the lack of transparency in decision-making processes and teachers' tendency to remain silent.

In contrast, Participant_5 expressed a personal tendency to speak out in situations perceived as unjust:

"Of course, we encounter injustices in our own school; when it happened to someone else, I also spoke up." (Participant_5, Position 48)

Taken together, these two accounts show that participants expressed divergent responses to perceived injustice in the school environment, ranging from remaining silent to objecting and speaking out.

These accounts also clarify why algorithmic decision support becomes attractive in the subsequent scenarios. Participant_4 and Participant_1 describe seniority-based allocation as a normalized form of inequality, while Participant_5 and Participant_6 locate the persistence of such practices in managerial discretion, weak intervention, and limited transparency. The perceived value of AI-supported allocation is therefore relational: participants are not responding to an abstract promise of technological neutrality, but to concrete dissatisfaction with informal and insufficiently accountable human decision processes.

Findings Regarding Perceptions of the Nature and Functioning of Artificial Intelligence Algorithms

An examination of participants' statements regarding the nature and functioning of AI-supported decision-making mechanisms shows that the data are concentrated around the subcodes "Objectivity" (f=14) and "Black Box" (f=9). In participants' accounts, artificial intelligence was viewed, on the one hand, as a mechanism that could provide an alternative to subjective evaluations and personal relationships that may arise in human decision-making, while, on the other hand, it was associated with uncertainty and problems of trust because of insufficient knowledge about how algorithmic decisions are generated.

A Fair Ground Free from Human Fallibility: Perceptions of Algorithmic Objectivity

The high frequency of the "Objectivity" subcode (f=14) indicates that participants made substantial references to the subjective aspects of human decision-making when evaluating AI-supported decisions. Some participants regarded artificial intelligence as a decision-making mechanism that could reduce human-induced influences such as group affiliations, favoritism, and personal relationships.

Participant_2 stated that individual perspectives and emotions may influence human decision-making, whereas artificial intelligence could provide stronger decision support in this respect:

"Everyone has a different perspective; they will inevitably discriminate if their sense of justice is not strong enough. But this does not exist in artificial intelligence... I think AI is stronger in terms of making the right decision. People can let their emotions come into play and make mistakes." (Participant_2 and Participant_5, Positions 38 and 48)

Participant_6, in turn, evaluated the AI-supported decision-making mechanism in Scenario B as potentially reducing the influence of behind-the-scenes maneuvering and personal relationships within the school:

"Scenario B breaks this cycle by distributing equality mathematically and rationally... As people become accustomed to a rational system, they will realize that behind-the-scenes maneuvering will not work, and the climate will turn into a healthy form of sharing... Artificial intelligence, on the other hand, provides an objective and fair ground free from personal relationships." (Participant_6, Positions 35 and 49)

These statements indicate that some participants perceived artificial intelligence not merely as a technical tool but also as a mechanism that could reduce the influence of personal relationships and subjective evaluations in decision-making processes.

Algorithmic Opacity and the Problem of Trust: The Black Box Problem

The “Black Box” subcode (f=9) encompasses participants’ evaluations concerning their lack of knowledge about how algorithmic decisions are generated. In participants’ statements, insufficient knowledge about which data the system uses and which criteria underlie its decisions was associated with questions regarding the reliability and legitimacy of AI-supported decisions.

Participant_6 expressed this duality in evaluating trust in the AI-supported decision-making mechanism as follows:

"There is a paradoxical situation regarding trust; although I trust Scenario B more methodologically, not knowing exactly how the algorithm works casts a shadow over trust... While there is deliberate injustice and avoidance of responsibility in human-centered scenarios, there is technical uncertainty and a 'black box' problem in AI-centered scenarios." (Participant_6, Positions 35 and 49)

This statement indicates that the same participant considered the AI-supported decision-making mechanism more trustworthy from a methodological perspective while simultaneously regarding the lack of knowledge about how the algorithm operates as a separate problem in terms of trust.

Participant_5 expressed the uncertainty surrounding the ethical boundaries of artificial intelligence as follows:

"I cannot answer this. Because the ethical aspect of artificial intelligence is still uncertain for me. What should its limits be, what should be the stopping point, or where the boundaries of its rules should be are still unclear; therefore, I cannot evaluate it from an ethical perspective." (Participant_5, Position 41)

This statement indicates that the lack of clear and established ethical boundaries for algorithmic systems is perceived as a factor that makes it difficult to evaluate AI-supported decision-making processes.

Overall, the findings emerging under this theme indicate that participants evaluated AI-supported decisions through a two-sided perception: artificial intelligence was positively positioned as a decision-making mechanism relatively independent of personal relationships and subjective evaluations, while insufficient transparency regarding how the algorithm generates decisions simultaneously raised questions about trust and legitimacy concerning the same decision-making mechanism.

The tension is especially visible when Participant_2/Participant_5 and Participant_6 are considered together. The former emphasize the possibility of removing emotion and discrimination from decision-making, while Participant_6 simultaneously trusts the method and questions the opacity of the mechanism. Algorithmic objectivity is therefore not experienced as self-evident objectivity. It is treated as a potential procedural advantage whose legitimacy remains conditional on the

visibility of the data, criteria, and reasoning through which an output is produced.

Findings Regarding Ethical Concerns Arising from AI-Supported Decision-Making Mechanisms

An examination of ethical concerns regarding AI-supported decision-making mechanisms shows that the findings are concentrated around the subcodes “Stigmatization” (f=10) and “Privacy” (f=1). This distribution indicates that concerns regarding the classification and labeling of students were particularly prominent in participants’ ethical evaluations.

The Risk of Making Digital Identities Permanent: Stigmatization

The high frequency of the “Stigmatization” subcode (f=10) indicates that participants’ concerns regarding the labeling and classification of students constituted an important aspect of this theme. Participants’ statements included concerns about both biased labeling arising from human-centered evaluations and potential risks associated with AI-supported classifications.

Participant_4 stated that generalizations about a student’s family or background may lead to the student’s individual needs being overlooked:

"Labeling a student as 'coming from a problematic family' causes their individual needs to be pushed into the background. Over time, this approach becomes institutionalized and turns into an exclusionary attitude toward the student. The most critical ethical problem here is the combination of 'labeling + low expectations + failure to intervene.'" (Participant_4, Position 40)

Participant_6 evaluated the human-centered approach in Scenario C as potentially leading to the formation of prejudices about the student and the student’s exclusion from the educational process:

"The human-centered approach in Scenario C is a complete pedagogical ethical disaster; the development of a terrible prejudice in the teachers' room about a child, such as 'they already come from a problematic family, so they are not worth the effort,' means that the child is pushed out of the system at the very beginning." (Participant_6, Position 42)

Participants’ concerns regarding AI-supported classifications, in turn, particularly focused on the possibility that a student might become associated with a particular category within the system as a result of an inaccurate or incomplete assessment. Participant_5 expressed this concern as follows:

"There may be risks such as whether there is a basis for the diagnosis it provides, and what happens if that basis is not valid for some students and the student remains labeled in the system." (Participant_5, Position 41)

This statement reveals a concern that if an AI-generated classification is based on an inaccurate or inappropriate assessment of a student, it may result in a lasting label concerning the student’s position within the system. Therefore, the “Stigmatization” code encompasses not only concerns about the reproduction of existing biases but also potential risks of labeling students through AI-supported classifications.

The three participant accounts reveal a meaningful distinction between human and algorithmic stigmatization. Participant_4 and Participant_6 describe human labeling as a social process that lowers expectations and

may normalize non-intervention, whereas Participant_5 highlights the possibility that an algorithmic classification may become durable inside a digital system. Thus, participants do not treat technology as the origin of stigmatization; rather, they question whether AI might formalize, preserve, or amplify a labeling process that is already possible in human-centered school cultures.

Data-Driven Monitoring and Privacy: The Privacy Dimension

The “Privacy” subcode occurred at a lower frequency ($f=1$). Nevertheless, it reveals a dimension concerning the ethical evaluation of data-driven student monitoring systems. Participant_3 evaluated the monitoring of student development positively from an ethical perspective and emphasized the importance of making the monitoring system visible:

"Honestly, the second situation is more ethical because the student should be monitored through a monitoring system, and this should also be visible." (Participant_3, Position 39)

This statement indicates that the participant did not directly perceive data-driven monitoring as a violation of privacy; rather, the participant viewed monitoring students and making the monitoring process visible as ethically positive. Therefore, the finding concerning the privacy dimension points not only to the risk of surveillance but also to evaluations of how student data are monitored and used and the extent to which the process is visible.

Findings Regarding Decision-Making Models and Perceptions of Accuracy in Educational Management

An examination of participants' views on how critical decisions should be made in educational management shows that the data are concentrated around the codes “Data-Driven Decision-Making” ($f=17$), “Decision-Support System” ($f=10$), and “Human Decision-Making” ($f=8$). Participants emphasized the strengths of data-driven decisions in terms of accuracy and objectivity, while also highlighting the importance of human decision-making for contextual evaluation, empathy, and pedagogical intuition. In addition, a hybrid approach was expressed in which artificial intelligence is positioned as a decision-support mechanism rather than as the decision-maker.

Rationality Free from Emotional Errors: The Data-Driven Decision-Making Model

Some participants emphasized the view that data-driven decisions may be more reliable and accurate in comparison with the potential bias and emotional influences involved in human decision-making. Participant_2 expressed this view explicitly as follows:

"When comparing the accuracy of decisions, data-driven decision-making is definitely more accurate." (Participant_2, Position 38)

Participant_5 explained that emotions may influence human decisions and that relying solely on human flexibility may be problematic, particularly in situations involving risk:

"In terms of accuracy, I believe that data-driven decisions are more accurate in every situation. When humans become involved, emotions come into play... but when there are threatening elements, we should not simply

dismiss them by saying 'it is just a child,' nor should we take things too lightly. There can be dangerous consequences." (Participant_5, Position 41)

These statements indicate that some participants viewed data-driven decisions as advantageous particularly in terms of objectivity, accuracy, and independence from emotional influences.

Context, Empathy, and Intuition: The Human Decision-Making Model

In contrast, some participants emphasized the importance of human decision-making because it allows the specific circumstances of the student, classroom relationships, social factors, and pedagogical responsibility to be taken into consideration during decision-making processes. Participant_4 explained the capacity of human decisions to evaluate context as follows:

"In terms of the accuracy of decisions, I think human decisions are more accurate. Human decisions are superior in terms of understanding context, evaluating emotional states, recognizing exceptions, and assuming ethical responsibility. People can consider not only numbers but also the specific circumstances experienced by the student, classroom relationships, and social factors." (Participant_4, Position 40)

This assessment indicates that the participant regarded human decision-making not merely as an emotional process but also as a form of decision-making that incorporates contextual knowledge, the evaluation of exceptions, and ethical responsibility.

Decision-Support Mechanism and Human-Machine Partnership

A third approach emerging from participants' statements was the use of artificial intelligence as a mechanism supporting human decision-making rather than as a system that makes decisions autonomously. Drawing attention to the relationship between data and human evaluation, Participant_1 stated:

"Since the data are also collected based on human perceptions, I think the two are interdependent in a cycle. Ultimately, human decisions seem to be more effective and accurate." (Participant_1, Position 37)

Participant_6 explained the use of AI-generated data together with human pedagogical evaluation through a decision-support approach:

"Data-driven decisions are much more accurate and reliable as a starting point. But it is still the human pedagogical conscience that can soften the cold nature of the data and turn that 'label' into help rather than punishment. The best approach is to use AI data to draw the roadmap but leave the final steering to humans... I would definitely want such a system to be implemented in my school, but not as a 'decision-maker'; rather, as a 'decision-support mechanism' that puts an objective data map in front of us." (Participant_6, Positions 42 and 49)

These statements indicate that some participants supported the use of AI-generated data in decision-making processes while emphasizing that the final evaluation should be made by humans. Thus, an approach emerges that combines data-driven analysis with human contextual and pedagogical evaluation in the decision-making process.

This synthesis also reconciles the apparently opposing views of Participant_2/Participant_5 and Participant_4. Preference for data-driven

accuracy and preference for human contextual judgment are not necessarily mutually exclusive once AI is positioned as decision support. In that arrangement, data can challenge inconsistency and bias at the starting point, while human judgment remains responsible for exceptions, contextual interpretation, ethical consequences, and the final decision.

Final Evaluation Criteria in Artificial Intelligence and Institutional Decision-Making Processes: Justice and Trust

In the eighth theme, the data are concentrated around the codes “Justice” (f=19) and “Trust” (f=15). “Justice” is the most frequently occurring code in the entire dataset, and “Trust” is among the most frequent codes, following only “Savings” (f=18) and “Data-Driven Decision-Making” (f=17). This indicates that participants placed considerable emphasis on the concepts of justice and trust when evaluating both traditional management processes and AI-supported decision-making mechanisms.

Perception of Justice

In participants’ statements, justice emerged as a prominent criterion for evaluating both traditional and AI-supported decision-making processes. In evaluations of traditional decision-making processes, factors such as group affiliations, seniority relations, and the dismissive handling of managerial decisions were associated with perceptions of justice. At the same time, participants expressed the view that AI-supported systems could contribute to a more balanced distribution of decisions.

Participant_5 compared the AI-supported decision-making mechanism in Scenario B with Scenario A and evaluated it as follows:

"Definitely, Scenario 2 is more just. In the first one, a superior-subordinate relationship has emerged, whereas a teacher is a teacher. In the second one, there is a balanced distribution by someone who is not part of the system, even if it is artificial intelligence... But I think the second one would create a more positive school climate." (Participant_5, Position 34)

This statement indicates that the participant regarded the AI-supported allocation mechanism as a more balanced decision-making process that was relatively independent of personal and hierarchical relationships.

Participant_4 expressed the importance of justice and trust in their professional and interpersonal evaluations as follows:

"Justice and trust are always important to me; I can say that they are at the top of my priorities in my interpersonal relationships and professional life." (Participant_4, Position 47)

This assessment indicates that justice and trust were positioned not merely as concepts related to a particular scenario but also as important principles in the participant’s broader approach to professional life.

The Criterion of Trust

In participants’ statements, the “Trust” code was associated with the evaluation of both institutional decision-making processes and AI-supported systems. Participants’ accounts indicate that trust was considered in relation to the use of data, the establishment of justice, and the sustainability of decision-making systems.

Participant_1 expressed the importance of trust in decision-making processes as follows:

"Absolutely, TRUST is the most important criterion for me. Because trust is the foundation of data, justice, and experience. If there is trust in systems, those systems can be sustained." (Participant_1, Position 44)

Participant_3, in turn, stated that data and experience alone would not be sufficient in environments where justice and trust cannot be established:

"...in environments where justice and trust cannot be ensured, neither experience nor data will be sufficient." (Participant_3, Position 46)

These statements indicate that participants did not evaluate trust merely as trust in technology but rather considered it in conjunction with the fair conduct of decision-making processes and trust in the information used within those processes.

Justice, Data, and Experience: Participants' Integrated Evaluation

Participants' statements indicate that justice, data, and experience were evaluated as interrelated elements within decision-making processes. Participant_6 explained this relationship by considering justice as the overarching framework and data and experience as elements used to establish justice:

"For me too, Justice is definitely the overarching concept among these concepts. Data and experience are the two strong pillars that enable us to build that justice in schools. Trust, meanwhile, is the climate of peace that naturally emerges where justice is established." (Participant_6, Position 49)

This assessment indicates that the participant considered AI-supported decision-making processes not merely in terms of the use of data but also in terms of how data are connected with experience and justice.

Integrative Finding: The Legitimacy Paradox

Across the scenarios, participants' evaluations reveal a recurrent reversal. Human-centered decisions lost legitimacy when seniority, personal relationships, informal pressure, or individual discretion appeared to determine outcomes without explicit criteria. AI-supported decisions initially gained legitimacy because they were imagined as more consistent and less exposed to these interpersonal influences. However, this advantage weakened when participants could not see how the algorithm reached a conclusion, when data-driven categories risked becoming durable labels, or when it was unclear how an erroneous classification could be corrected. In this sense, AI does not remove the problem of legitimacy; it relocates it from the visible discretion of the human decision-maker to the less visible architecture of data, criteria, and algorithmic reasoning.

The resulting pattern constitutes the legitimacy paradox identified in this study: greater procedural distance from human bias can increase perceived fairness, yet greater distance from understandable human reasoning can reduce trust and acceptance. Participants resolved this tension by favoring a hybrid arrangement in which AI provides structured information and analytical consistency while educators retain the authority and responsibility to interpret context, question outputs, recognize exceptions, and make the final decision. Thus, the legitimacy of AI-supported school management depends on the combination of procedural consistency and meaningful human accountability rather than on automation itself.

Discussion and Conclusion

From Technical Utility to Managerial Legitimacy

The central finding of this study is that the participating teachers did not evaluate AI-supported managerial decisions primarily through technological usefulness. Their evaluations were organized around the legitimacy of the decision process. Artificial intelligence is welcomed where it appears to reduce workload, organize information, and constrain the effects of seniority, favoritism, personal relationships, or inconsistent discretion; yet the same participants become cautious when the logic of an algorithm is opaque or when a data-based classification may become a durable label. This two-sided pattern shifts the discussion from whether artificial intelligence is simply beneficial or harmful toward a more consequential question: under what conditions can AI-supported managerial decisions be regarded as justifiable, understandable, and trustworthy in schools?

Participants' interest in algorithmic objectivity is closely connected to their experiences of organizational relations. The prominence of seniority, informal power, and administrative discretion suggests that expectations of AI are partly shaped by perceived weaknesses in existing human-centered decision processes. Weberian conceptions of authority and legitimacy, together with approaches that locate power and divergent interests within organizational relations, help explain why a formally valid managerial decision may still be experienced as unfair (cited in Aydın Kula, 2021; Töremen & Karakuş, 2008). This interpretation is also consistent with Selwyn and Gašević's (2020) argument that educational technologies cannot be understood independently of the institutional and social contexts in which they are introduced. AI, in other words, is not entering a neutral decision environment; it is entering an already structured field of authority, hierarchy, and trust.

Participant accounts make this institutional origin of technological expectations explicit. Participant_4 characterized repeated assignment of difficult classes to new teachers as an inequality normalized under the language of "experience," while Participant_1 described similar seniority practices as forms of favoritism and mobbing. Participant_5 further stressed that "the school principal makes the final decision," making the principal's character and work ethic decisive in practice. These statements help explain why some teachers subsequently perceive an externalized, rule-based system as potentially fairer. In this sense, the appeal of AI is not evidence that teachers reject human leadership; rather, it reflects a demand for decision criteria that are visible, consistent, and less vulnerable to informal power. This reading is compatible with Bursalıoğlu's (2021, 2022) emphasis on decision processes and organizational legitimacy and with Aydın Kula's (2021) discussion of power and authority.

The Legitimacy Paradox: Objectivity Without Explainability

The simultaneous prominence of the "Objectivity" (f=14) and "Black Box" (f=9) codes provides the clearest evidence of the legitimacy paradox. Data-driven systems were sometimes regarded as less vulnerable to emotional reactions, interpersonal alliances, and inconsistent human judgment; however, the perceived gain in objectivity did not automatically produce trust. When participants could not know which data were used or which criteria underlay a decision, the source of uncertainty shifted from the

person making the decision to the system itself. The critical issue is therefore not objectivity alone, but whether an ostensibly objective process is explainable and open to human scrutiny.

The paradox can be observed directly in the focus-group language. Participant_6 described the AI-supported scenario as capable of creating an “objective and fair ground free from personal relationships,” yet in the same statement noted that not knowing how the algorithm works “casts a shadow over trust.” Participant_5’s uncertainty about where the ethical boundaries of AI should begin and end points in the same direction, although it was expressed in relation to ethical evaluation more broadly. Although participants did not explicitly distinguish procedural regularity from legitimate authority, their accounts can be interpreted in this way: a system may appear more consistent than human discretion and still fail to generate trust if its operation remains unclear. This interpretation is consistent with Selwyn and Gašević’s (2020) emphasis on transparency, and suggests that explainability may be not only an informational requirement but also an organizational condition for trust.

This distinction is especially important because algorithmic systems may formalize rather than eliminate prior assumptions. Historical or incomplete data, narrow indicators, and rigid categories can reproduce existing inequalities or omit contextual characteristics (Kirmani, 2020; Selwyn & Gašević, 2020). The participants’ concern about stigmatization makes this risk concrete at the student level. Human-centered labeling may exclude a student through prejudice, while algorithmic labeling may give the same exclusion an appearance of technical authority. In both cases, the ethical problem arises when a category displaces the student’s changing, contextual, and multidimensional characteristics. The Getzels–Guba emphasis on balancing institutional expectations and individual dimensions is useful here because it highlights why a technically consistent classification can still be pedagogically inadequate (Bursalioğlu, 2022).

Participant_4’s formulation of “labeling + low expectations + failure to intervene” and Participant_6’s description of a child being pushed out of the system show that stigmatization is already a human-organizational risk. Participant_5 adds a specifically algorithmic concern: an invalid classification may leave the student “labeled in the system.” Read together, these views suggest that AI may change the form of labeling. Informal prejudice may be situational and relational, whereas a classification recorded in a system may be more durable; the authors interpret this durability as a potential obstacle to correction, although participants did not explicitly address correction procedures. This reading is consistent with concerns about datafication and model reductionism raised by the Alberta Teachers’ Association (2017), Kirmani (2020), and Selwyn and Gašević (2020).

Resolving the Paradox Through Hybrid Human–AI Responsibility

Participants’ views were not uniform: Participant_2 and Participant_5 emphasized data-driven accuracy, whereas Participant_4 and Participant_1 emphasized human judgment. A hybrid decision-support model was articulated most explicitly by Participant_6, and it offers a way of reconciling these positions: artificial intelligence can organize information, reveal patterns, and provide a more systematic starting point,

while final interpretation and responsibility remain human. This model is consistent with a human-centered approach to digital management in which algorithmic capacity complements rather than replaces contextual, pedagogical, and ethical judgment (Alam, 2021; Selwyn & Gašević, 2020). It also aligns with Bursalıoğlu's (2021) treatment of educational decision-making as a process that cannot be reduced to quantitative optimization. In schools, the administrator or teacher must still interpret exceptions, weigh competing values, and remain accountable for the consequences of a decision.

Participant_6 captures the logic of this hybrid arrangement particularly clearly: AI-generated data can “draw the roadmap,” but “the final steering” should remain with humans. Participant_1 similarly notes that data are themselves collected through human perceptions, making the two forms of judgment interdependent. These statements are important because they move the debate beyond a binary comparison of human versus machine accuracy. The model distributes functions: AI contributes consistency, pattern recognition, and informational breadth; educators contribute contextual interpretation, pedagogical conscience, exception handling, and ethical responsibility. This division of responsibility closely matches the human-centered decision-support position developed by Alam (2021) and Selwyn and Gašević (2020).

Justice and trust provide the normative architecture of this hybrid model. Participants treated justice as a criterion for how decisions are distributed and justified, and trust as a condition for whether both institutional and technological systems can be sustained. These findings correspond with educational management perspectives that connect justice, participation, transparency, and trust to the quality of organizational relationships and decision processes (Bursalıoğlu, 2022; Das et al., 2023). Importantly, trust in AI was not simply trust in technical performance. It depended on whether the process was comprehensible, whether equitable criteria were used, and whether human oversight was preserved.

The participants' own hierarchy of criteria reinforces this conclusion. Participant_1 called trust the foundation of “data, justice, and experience”; Participant_3 argued that neither experience nor data are sufficient where justice and trust are absent; and Participant_6 positioned justice as the overarching principle, with data and experience as its supporting pillars. These are not simply favorable attitudes toward AI. They indicate that technological acceptance is nested within a broader moral evaluation of the school organization. AI-supported decisions are acceptable to the extent that they can be incorporated into a trustworthy institutional process rather than treated as authoritative merely because they are data-driven.

Conditions of Legitimate AI-Supported School Management

Across themes, participants' accounts point less to a judgment that AI is inherently fair or accurate than to a set of legitimacy conditions. Participant_2 and Participant_5 foreground the appeal of data-driven consistency; Participant_4 foregrounds context, empathy, and ethical responsibility; Participant_6 repeatedly connects objective data with pedagogical conscience; and Participant_1 and Participant_3 emphasize trust as the condition that makes both data and experience usable. These positions become complementary when the decision process is separated

into information generation, interpretation, and final responsibility; the authors further interpret contestation and accountability as implied conditions of this model. The resulting model is not 'AI instead of the manager,' but transparent AI support embedded in accountable human governance. In this model, legitimacy is produced through the conjunction of consistent procedures, explainable criteria, and identifiable human responsibility; the possibility of review is proposed here as an analytical implication.

Theoretical Contribution, Limitations, and Conclusion

The study contributes to discussions of artificial intelligence in educational management by proposing the legitimacy paradox as an analytical lens for interpreting teachers' responses to AI-supported managerial decisions. The paradox captures a double movement: AI may gain legitimacy because it appears to reduce the arbitrariness associated with informal power, seniority, favoritism, and variable human judgment; yet it may lose legitimacy when its criteria become opaque or its classifications risk becoming durable labels. This reframing shifts the analytical question from technological adoption or perceived usefulness to the institutional conditions under which algorithmic support can be accepted as a legitimate component of school governance. Justice, trust, transparency, and human oversight emerged directly from participants' accounts as interconnected evaluative criteria. Contestability, accountability, and data privacy were not explicitly voiced by participants; they are proposed here as analytical implications of participants' concerns about opacity and labeling and of the related literature, and they require further empirical testing.

The findings should be interpreted within the boundaries of the study. The study group consisted of six participants selected through criterion sampling, and the data were generated through a single focus group organized around hypothetical scenarios. Detailed demographic information was not reported in order to protect anonymity in a small group, which limits readers' ability to assess how participant characteristics may have shaped the views expressed. Because one of the selection criteria was pedagogical awareness of artificial intelligence, participants may have been more familiar with, or more favorably disposed toward, AI than teachers in general. The coding was carried out by a single researcher, and participants did not uniformly endorse the hybrid decision-support model: some emphasized the accuracy of data-driven decisions, others the contextual superiority of human judgment, and the hybrid position was articulated most explicitly by one participant. The purpose was therefore not statistical generalization but an in-depth examination of meaning-making within a bounded qualitative case. Scenario responses may also differ from decisions made under real institutional consequences. At the same time, the use of contrasting scenarios allowed participants to articulate assumptions and concerns that may remain implicit in routine practice. Future studies across different school types, participant groups, and actual AI-supported decision settings can test the transferability of the analytical patterns identified here.

In conclusion, among the participants of this study, acceptance of AI-supported managerial decisions was conditional rather than absolute, and it is best understood through the legitimacy paradox identified here.

Artificial intelligence can gain legitimacy when it helps reduce arbitrary interpersonal influence, organizes complex information, and makes decision criteria more consistent. The same system can lose legitimacy when its reasoning is opaque or when its classifications risk becoming durable labels. Drawing on participants' accounts and on the literature, the authors argue that the most defensible role of AI in educational management is accountable decision support: AI can structure evidence and reveal patterns, but contextual interpretation, ethical judgment, and final responsibility should remain meaningfully human. The central challenge for school management is not to choose between human and algorithmic decision-making, but to design decision processes in which data-driven consistency and human accountability reinforce rather than undermine one another.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from participants' accounts and from the authors' interpretation of them; given the exploratory nature of the study, they should be treated as tentative.

Implementation. Participants who addressed the issue favored positioning AI as a source of structured information rather than as the final decision-maker, a stance articulated most explicitly by Participant_6. AI-supported systems in school management could therefore be designed and implemented as decision-support tools, with final responsibility remaining under identifiable human oversight. In decisions such as course or class allocation and student risk assessment, participants' criticism of unexplained criteria in human-centered scenarios (Participant_4) and their concerns about the "black box" (f=9) suggest that the criteria underlying algorithmic outputs should be made explicit and understandable to those affected. Although participants did not explicitly discuss review or appeal procedures, their concerns about opacity and durable labeling suggest that mechanisms for questioning and correcting disputed outputs may be worth considering; this recommendation rests on the authors' interpretation and on the literature (Selwyn & Gašević, 2020) rather than on direct participant statements.

Professional development. Participants raised concerns about teachers' and administrators' digital and AI literacy ("Inadequacy," f=7) and about the possible erosion of originality and pedagogical judgment ("Dependency," f=3). Professional development should therefore address not only technical use but also the pedagogical, ethical, and critical evaluation of AI-generated outputs.

Policy and safeguards. Policy makers and school administrators could establish institutional principles for transparency, explainability, and the review of algorithmic classifications. Participants' concerns about stigmatization ("Stigmatization," f=10), including Participant_5's concern about students remaining "labeled in the system," indicate that algorithmic outputs concerning student risk should be treated as provisional indicators, interpreted alongside individual characteristics, contextual knowledge, and pedagogical evaluation rather than becoming fixed labels. Data privacy was raised only once by participants (f=1) and in relation to the visibility of monitoring; the literature nevertheless identifies data protection as a core concern in educational data use (Alberta

Teachers' Association, 2017; Selwyn & Gašević, 2020), and it is included here on that basis.

Future research. Future studies should examine AI-supported managerial decision-making across different school types, participant groups, and institutional contexts, including participants with limited prior familiarity with AI. Longitudinal, experimental, and qualitative studies may further clarify how explainability, human oversight, organizational power relations, and actual use of algorithmic decision-support systems shape perceptions of justice, trust, and acceptance. Future work may also examine directly whether contestability, accountability, and data privacy, which were not explicitly voiced by participants in this study, emerge as legitimacy conditions in other samples.

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