



Reconstructing Public Educational Administration through Indigenous Knowledge Systems: A Critical Integrative Synthesis and Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Public educational administration is expected to promote educational quality, equity, inclusion, cultural relevance, sustainability, accountability and meaningful community participation. Yet many administrative arrangements continue to rely predominantly on bureaucratic, managerial and technocratic assumptions that may marginalise locally grounded knowledge, relationships, histories, languages, ecological understandings and community authority. This article presents a critical integrative synthesis of scholarship on Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous and decolonising educational leadership, postcolonial educational administration, relational governance, sustainability education and epistemic justice. Rather than treating Indigenous knowledge as cultural content to be inserted into established administrative structures, the synthesis examines its potential contribution to institutional reasoning, authority, relationships, stewardship and educational purpose. The analysis identifies six analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions of Indigenous Knowledge-Informed Public Education Administration and Management (IK-IPEAM): contextual and place-responsive administration; relational and participatory governance; intergenerational knowledge stewardship; ethical and holistic institutional stewardship; ecological and reciprocal resource management; and adaptive epistemic pluralism. The article argues that these dimensions address different administrative questions and therefore should not be collapsed into a single construct of “Indigenous administration.” Professional and administrative judgement is positioned as the cross-cutting interpretive mechanism through which administrators negotiate these dimensions in relation to policy, professional standards, community expectations, knowledge legitimacy and public accountability. Unlike conventional administrative discretion, which primarily concerns the permissible latitude available within established rules, professional and administrative judgement in IK-IPEAM concerns the reasoned interpretation of multiple knowledge claims, relationships, responsibilities and institutional obligations. The article further distinguishes Indigenous knowledge from decolonisation, relationality, sustainability and epistemic justice, while demonstrating their conceptual connections. Four tensions—integration versus transformation, participation versus public accountability, Indigenous knowledge versus scientific knowledge, and cultural recognition versus institutional power—define the critical boundaries of the framework. IK-IPEAM is presented neither as a universal Indigenous administrative model nor as an empirically validated causal framework. Rather, it is a theoretically derived framework intended to guide context-specific empirical inquiry. Kenya provides an application context because of its plural knowledge traditions, public education structures and continuing concerns with relevance, participation, equity and accountability. The article concludes that meaningful reconstruction requires public educational institutions to reconsider not only what knowledge they recognise, but also who is authorised to define knowledge, how authority is exercised, how relationships are sustained, and how institutional responsibilities are interpreted.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge systems; public educational administration; educational leadership; decolonisation; relational governance; epistemic justice; professional judgement; Kenya; IK-IPEAM

INTRODUCTION

Public educational administration constitutes a major mechanism through which educational purposes are



translated into institutional action. It influences how policies are interpreted, how authority is exercised, how resources are allocated, how accountability is organised, how professionals are supported and how educational institutions relate to learners, families and communities. Contemporary public education systems are expected to achieve these functions while simultaneously promoting quality, equity, inclusion, cultural relevance, sustainability and participation (United Nations General Assembly, 2015; Ministry of Education, Kenya, 2024).

However, educational administration is not culturally neutral. Administrative concepts such as authority, accountability, efficiency, professionalism, evidence, participation and institutional effectiveness are interpreted through particular historical and epistemological traditions. In many postcolonial contexts, educational governance continues to bear the imprint of bureaucratic, hierarchical and technocratic arrangements associated with colonial administration and subsequent managerial models. Such arrangements can provide important mechanisms for coordination, standardisation and public accountability. The critical question is therefore not whether bureaucratic administration is wholly inappropriate, but whether its dominance leaves insufficient institutional space for other legitimate ways of understanding knowledge, authority, relationships, responsibility and educational purpose.

Postcolonial scholarship has drawn attention to this problem in educational leadership. Moorosi (2021), for example, demonstrates the importance of reading representations of school leadership and management in Africa through a postcolonial lens. Khalifa et al. (2019) similarly argue that Indigenous and decolonising school leadership requires attention to ancestral knowledge, community empowerment, self-determination and culturally grounded relationships. More recent scholarship has extended the discussion toward Indigenous ethics, epistemic pluralism, co-creation, relational accountability and institutional transformation. Arar et al. (2025) conceptualise Indigenous ethics as a basis for rethinking educational leadership through relationality, collective participation and moral obligation. Thiessen (2025) makes a parallel argument in public administration, distinguishing transformational co-creation and relational accountability from tokenistic consultation. Babalola and Ayeni (2026) similarly argue that decolonising African educational leadership requires confronting bureaucratic, hierarchical and technocratic structures that marginalise Indigenous epistemologies.

These developments suggest that the central issue has moved beyond whether Indigenous knowledge should be “included” in education. The more consequential question is whether Indigenous knowledge can contribute to reconsidering the institutional assumptions through which public educational administration itself is organised.

Indigenous knowledge systems are relevant to this question because knowledge is frequently embedded within relationships among people, place, community, environment, identity, memory, responsibility and intergenerational continuity (Battiste, 2002; Cajete, 1994). Such understandings challenge a narrow conception of administration as the technical implementation of predetermined rules. They invite attention to the interpretive questions that precede administrative action: What knowledge is considered legitimate? Whose experience matters? Who has authority to interpret a problem? What responsibilities accompany institutional authority? How should decisions account for relationships, community wellbeing and future generations? The administrative significance of Indigenous knowledge therefore lies not simply in its content but in its potential to influence institutional reasoning.

The article develops this argument through a critical integrative synthesis. It proposes the Indigenous Knowledge-Informed Public Education Administration and Management Framework (IK-IPEAM) as a conceptual framework for examining how Indigenous and local knowledge may inform public educational administration without being treated as homogeneous, universally transferable or inherently superior to other knowledge traditions.

The article makes five contributions. First, it conceptualises Indigenous knowledge as a possible source of administrative intelligence, rather than treating it solely as cultural or curricular content. Second, it identifies six dimensions through which Indigenous knowledge-informed administration may be expressed. Third, it establishes clearer conceptual boundaries among these dimensions. Fourth, it positions professional and administrative



nistrative judgement as the cross-cutting mechanism through which administrators interpret and negotiate the dimensions in practice. Fifth, it distinguishes Indigenous knowledge, decolonisation, relationality, sustainability and epistemic justice as related but non-equivalent concepts.

The central proposition is that reconstruction does not occur simply when an institution incorporates more Indigenous knowledge. It occurs when relevant Indigenous and local knowledge is able to influence institutional reasoning, relationships, authority and accountability under ethically governed conditions.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION: A CRITICAL INTEGRATIVE SYNTHESIS

Why a critical integrative synthesis?

This article adopts a critical integrative synthesis. It brings theoretically and conceptually relevant scholarship from several related fields into dialogue in order to identify conceptual convergences, tensions, boundaries and gaps from which a new framework can be developed. The integrative orientation is appropriate because the literature relevant to Indigenous knowledge-informed educational administration is distributed across several intellectual domains rather than concentrated within one established research field. Relevant scholarship includes Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous and decolonising educational leadership, postcolonial educational administration, public administration, relational governance, sustainability education, community participation and epistemic justice.

The critical component is equally important. The synthesis does not assume that every reference to Indigenous knowledge represents meaningful decolonisation or institutional transformation. It asks how knowledge is positioned, who exercises authority over it, whether participation has decision-making consequences, whether institutional power changes, and whether the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge risks extraction, appropriation or decontextualisation.

Literature domains

The conceptual corpus was organised around six overlapping literature domains:

- i. Indigenous knowledge systems and Indigenous epistemologies;
- ii. Indigenous, decolonising and culturally responsive educational leadership;
- iii. Postcolonial educational administration and governance;
- iv. Relational and participatory public administration;
- v. Indigenous and local knowledge in sustainability and ecological education; and
- vi. Epistemic justice, knowledge pluralism and co-creation.

The literature was considered conceptually relevant where it addressed one or more of the following issues: the legitimacy of Indigenous or local knowledge; community authority and participation; relationships between institutions and communities; leadership and governance; intergenerational knowledge transmission; ecological responsibility; institutional stewardship; knowledge pluralism; decolonisation; or the distribution of epistemic and institutional power. The purpose of this approach was not to calculate an effect size or establish the prevalence of particular findings. It was to identify conceptual resources capable of informing a framework for public educational administration.

Analytical procedure

The synthesis proceeded through five analytical stages.



Stage 1: Conceptual mapping. Literature was examined for recurring concepts concerning knowledge, authority, relationships, participation, stewardship, ecology, accountability and institutional transformation.

Stage 2: Thematic clustering. Related concepts were grouped according to the administrative problem they addressed. For example, place, culture and contextual responsiveness were grouped around the question of how institutions interpret their contexts, whereas participation, co-governance and relational accountability were grouped around the question of who participates in institutional authority.

Stage 3: Boundary analysis. Candidate concepts were examined for conceptual overlap. This step was necessary because terms such as relationality, decolonisation, sustainability and epistemic justice are sometimes used together in the literature even though they answer different theoretical questions.

Stage 4: Integrative abstraction. Recurring concepts were elevated into six dimensions of the proposed framework. A dimension was retained when it represented a sufficiently distinctive administrative question while also having a plausible relationship with the other dimensions.

Stage 5: Critical synthesis and proposition development. The six dimensions were connected through the proposed mechanism of professional and administrative judgement, and theoretical propositions were developed for future empirical testing.

This procedure means that the six dimensions are author-developed conceptual abstractions from the literature, rather than pre-existing validated constructs. The framework should therefore be regarded as a conceptual contribution requiring empirical examination.

Criteria for conceptual relevance

The synthesis privileged literature that met at least one of four conditions: it offered a substantive conceptualisation of Indigenous or local knowledge; it examined leadership, administration or governance through Indigenous or decolonising perspectives; it addressed institutional relationships between knowledge and authority; or it provided evidence concerning the interaction of Indigenous/local knowledge with education, sustainability or public governance. The synthesis also deliberately retained literature that exposed limitations or contradictions in Indigenous knowledge integration. This is important because a critical integrative synthesis should not select only literature that confirms the proposed framework. For example, Druker-Ibáñez and Cáceres-Jensen (2022) show that the integration of Indigenous and local knowledge into sustainability education varies in how legitimacy and agency are distributed. Their review identified 182 unique records and reduced these to 20 articles for qualitative thematic analysis, demonstrating that “integration” itself can take substantially different forms. This distinction is directly relevant to the present framework because the mere presence of Indigenous knowledge does not establish epistemic justice or institutional transformation.

Limits of inference

The synthesis does not establish that Indigenous knowledge-informed administration causes better educational outcomes. Nor does it demonstrate that the six dimensions are empirically independent. The propositions developed later are theoretical propositions derived from conceptual integration.

This methodological boundary is essential. The article's contribution is therefore theory construction and conceptual clarification, not empirical validation.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: FIVE RELATED BUT DISTINCT IDEAS

A major conceptual problem in scholarship on Indigenous knowledge and educational administration is the tendency to move rapidly among Indigenous knowledge, decolonisation, relationality, sustainability and epistemic justice as though they were interchangeable. They are related, but they answer different questions.



Indigenous knowledge systems

Indigenous knowledge systems concern knowledge. They refer to culturally and historically situated ways of knowing, interpreting, transmitting and relating to the world. They may encompass ecological knowledge, social memory, language, values, practices, institutions and understandings of relationships between people and place (Battiste, 2002; Cajete, 1994). The key administrative question is: What knowledge is relevant to understanding and responding to an institutional problem? Indigenous knowledge is therefore primarily an epistemic and cultural category.

Decolonisation

Decolonisation concerns power and the transformation of inherited structures of knowledge and authority. It asks how colonial histories continue to shape whose knowledge is privileged, whose authority is recognised and whose institutional arrangements are treated as normal. The key question is: Which inherited structures of knowledge and authority require critical examination or transformation? Decolonisation therefore cannot be reduced to adding Indigenous content to an existing institution. This distinction is supported by recent African scholarship. Babalola and Ayeni (2026), for example, explicitly connect decolonising educational leadership with confronting bureaucratic, hierarchical and technocratic structures rather than simply adding Indigenous content. Barasa et al. (2026) similarly identify the reorganisation of power dynamics and decision-making as central to decolonising educational leadership in African institutions.

Relationality

Relationality concerns the nature and quality of relationships. It emphasises that individuals and institutions exist within networks of social, cultural, ecological and intergenerational relationships. The central question is: How should institutional actors relate to one another and to the communities and environments with which they are connected? Relationality therefore provides an ethical and governance orientation. It is not itself equivalent to Indigenous knowledge. Arar et al. (2025), for example, position relationality, mutual engagement and Indigenous ethics at the centre of their conceptual framework for educational leadership.

Sustainability

Sustainability concerns continuity, stewardship and the capacity to maintain social and ecological conditions over time. The central question is: How can present institutional decisions protect the capacity of people, communities and environments to flourish over time? Indigenous knowledge may contribute to sustainability, but Indigenous knowledge is not synonymous with sustainability. Druker-Ibáñez and Cáceres-Jensen (2022) demonstrate that Indigenous and local knowledge can contribute to sustainability education, while also showing that integration raises questions of legitimacy, agency and epistemological justice.

Epistemic justice

Epistemic justice concerns the distribution of credibility, recognition and authority in knowledge-making. The central questions are: Whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate? Who is heard? Who has authority to define what counts as knowledge? Epistemic justice is therefore fundamentally concerned with knowledge-related power. Thiessen (2025) explicitly links relational accountability, epistemological pluralism and co-creation with the need to challenge the exclusion of Indigenous knowledge from public administration.

Their relationship within IK-IPEAM

These concepts therefore occupy different analytical positions:

Concept	Primary concern	Core question	Role in IK-IPEAM
Indigenous knowledge	Knowledge	What knowledge is relevant and legitimate?	Epistemic resource
Decolonisation	Power and	Which inherited structures of authority	Critical orientation



	institutional transformation	require transformation?	
Relationality	Relationships	How should institutions relate to people, communities and place?	Relational orientation
Sustainability	Continuity and stewardship	What responsibilities extend across time and ecological systems?	Stewardship orientation
Epistemic justice	Knowledge authority	Who is recognised, heard and authorised to define knowledge?	Justice criterion

This distinction significantly strengthens the theoretical coherence of IK-IPEAM. Indigenous knowledge provides potential knowledge resources; decolonisation interrogates power; relationality structures relationships; sustainability addresses continuity and stewardship; and epistemic justice evaluates the fairness of knowledge recognition and authority.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AS ADMINISTRATIVE INTELLIGENCE

The central conceptual proposition of this article is that Indigenous knowledge can function as a source of administrative intelligence. Administrative intelligence is defined here as: the institutional capacity to interpret educational purposes, problems, relationships, authority, resources and responsibilities through multiple legitimate forms of knowledge while remaining contextually responsive, ethically responsible and publicly accountable. This definition deliberately differs from conventional meanings of administrative intelligence as information processing or managerial efficiency. Indigenous knowledge becomes administratively significant when it contributes to how institutions understand problems and make decisions. For example, a conventional administrative approach to a school-community conflict may focus on policy compliance, formal procedures and disciplinary authority. An IKS-informed approach may additionally consider historical relationships, community expectations, culturally recognised authority, local understandings of responsibility and the effects of the decision on longer-term relationships. This does not mean that Indigenous knowledge replaces professional, scientific or policy knowledge. Instead, it broadens the interpretive resources available to administrators. The concept also guards against romanticisation. Indigenous knowledge should not automatically be treated as correct merely because it is Indigenous. Relevant knowledge must be engaged ethically, contextually and in accordance with appropriate community authority. Likewise, scientific knowledge should not automatically be treated as universally superior simply because it has institutional recognition. Administrative intelligence therefore depends on judicious knowledge engagement, not knowledge substitution.

THE SIX DIMENSIONS OF IK-IPEAM

The six dimensions were developed by grouping recurring concepts according to the distinct administrative question each addresses. Their conceptual boundaries are therefore deliberate.

Contextual and Place-Responsive Administration

This dimension concerns how institutions interpret their particular social, cultural, historical, linguistic and ecological contexts. Its central question is: How should educational administration respond to the specific characteristics of the place and community in which an institution operates? The dimension is distinct because its primary object is context. It does not primarily concern who participates in governance, how knowledge is transmitted, or how resources are managed. Those issues belong to other dimensions. Contextual responsiveness

means that administrators interpret policies and institutional challenges in relation to local realities rather than applying general rules mechanically. Moorosi (2021) and Khalifa et al. (2019) provide important foundations for understanding why educational leadership must be situated within historical and cultural contexts.



Relational and Participatory Governance

This dimension concerns the distribution and quality of institutional relationships and participation. Its central question is: Who has legitimate standing to participate in institutional decision-making, and what kind of relationship should the institution sustain with those actors? The distinctive object is therefore relationship and participation. This dimension moves beyond consultation. Thiessen (2025) distinguishes tokenistic consultation from authentic co-creation and relational accountability in public administration. Golledge et al. (2026) similarly emphasise culturally nourishing leadership through community engagement, co-leadership and movement beyond tokenistic partnership. Participation becomes substantively meaningful when institutional processes provide an identifiable pathway through which community knowledge and interests can influence decisions.

Intergenerational Knowledge Stewardship

This dimension concerns knowledge continuity across generations. Its central question is: How can relevant knowledge be transmitted, protected, renewed and responsibly connected with educational practice across generations? Its distinctive object is knowledge continuity. It differs from contextual responsiveness because it focuses on temporal continuity rather than geographical or cultural context. It differs from epistemic pluralism because it concerns the stewardship and transmission of knowledge rather than the negotiation of different knowledge traditions. The concept also establishes an important ethical boundary: institutional engagement with Indigenous knowledge does not automatically confer institutional ownership over that knowledge.

Ethical and Holistic Institutional Stewardship

This dimension concerns the responsibilities attached to institutional authority. Its central question is: What responsibilities accompany the exercise of institutional authority and control over educational decisions and resources? Its distinctive object is ethical responsibility. The dimension extends accountability beyond compliance and efficiency to consider consequences for people, relationships, communities, institutional integrity and future generations. It does not reject conventional accountability; it seeks to broaden its ethical interpretation.

Ecological and Reciprocal Resource Management

This dimension concerns the relationship between institutional resources, environments and reciprocal responsibilities. Its central question is: How should educational institutions manage resources and environments in ways that are sustainable, reciprocal and contextually responsible? Its distinctive object is resource and ecological stewardship. Resources are understood broadly to include financial, physical, environmental, cultural and relational resources. This dimension therefore differs from ethical stewardship: ethical stewardship concerns the responsibilities of authority generally, while ecological and reciprocal resource management focuses specifically on the governance and sustainability of institutional resources and environments.

Adaptive Epistemic Pluralism

This dimension concerns the institutional management of multiple knowledge traditions. Its central question is: How can Indigenous, local, professional and scientific knowledge traditions inform institutional reasoning without one being automatically privileged or the differences among them being erased? Its distinctive object is knowledge interaction and legitimacy. The word *adaptive* is crucial. Epistemic pluralism does not mean placing different knowledge systems side by side and declaring them equally applicable to every problem. It

means developing institutional capacity to determine which knowledge is relevant, how different knowledge claims relate, how disagreements are negotiated and who has legitimate authority over particular forms of knowledge. Druker-Ibáñez and Cáceres-Jensen (2022) demonstrate why this distinction matters: approaches to Indigenous and local knowledge integration differ in the distribution of legitimacy and agency.



WHY THE SIX DIMENSIONS ARE DISTINCT YET INTERCONNECTED

The six dimensions should neither be collapsed into a single construct nor treated as independent administrative functions. Their boundaries can be clarified through the following analytical sequence: *Context* asks where and under what circumstances administration occurs. *Relational governance* asks who participates and how institutional relationships are organised. *Intergenerational stewardship* asks how relevant knowledge and responsibility are maintained across time. *Ethical stewardship* asks what responsibilities accompany institutional authority. *Ecological and reciprocal resource management* asks how institutional resources and environments are responsibly governed. *Adaptive epistemic pluralism* asks how different knowledge traditions enter institutional reasoning. They therefore represent different questions about administration. At the same time, the dimensions are mutually reinforcing.

Contextual administration requires relationships with communities capable of interpreting context. Relational governance requires recognition of whose knowledge and authority matter. Intergenerational stewardship requires ethical rules concerning who may transmit or use knowledge. Ecological management depends partly upon contextual and local knowledge. Epistemic pluralism requires relational processes through which knowledge claims can be discussed and negotiated. Ethical stewardship provides the normative orientation that prevents knowledge pluralism from becoming mere institutional instrumentalism.

PROFESSIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGEMENT AS THE INTERPRETIVE MECHANISM

Professional and administrative judgement occupies the central position in IK-IPEAM because the six dimensions do not automatically determine administrative action. An institution may recognise local knowledge, establish participatory structures, engage knowledge holders and acknowledge ecological responsibility, yet administrators must still decide how those considerations should influence a particular decision. This is where professional and administrative judgement operates. It is defined here as: the reasoned capacity of educational administrators to interpret and negotiate policy requirements, professional standards, multiple knowledge claims, community expectations, ethical responsibilities and institutional circumstances in making contextually defensible decisions.

Professional and administrative judgement, as conceptualised here, concerns the quality of reasoning through which administrators determine how different obligations, knowledge claims, relationships and contextual conditions should be interpreted before selecting an appropriate action. Thus, discretion asks: What choices are permitted? While Judgement asks: What should be done, given the relevant knowledge, relationships, responsibilities, context and constraints?

The distinction can be illustrated through a school-community policy decision. An administrator may possess discretion regarding how a policy is implemented. Conventional discretion concerns which implementation option is legally and administratively permissible. IK-IPEAM judgement goes further by requiring the administrator to consider whether relevant community knowledge exists, whether affected communities have legitimate standing, whether cultural protocols apply, what professional obligations remain binding, whether implementation could damage institutional relationships, and how different knowledge claims should be weighed.

Judgement therefore operates within accountability, not outside it. It does not authorise administrators to ignore legislation, professional standards, financial controls or educational requirements. Rather, it requires administrators to interpret these obligations intelligently and ethically within context.

Four components of IK-IPEAM judgement

The proposed mechanism can be understood through four interrelated capacities: *Epistemic discernment*: the ability to identify relevant knowledge claims and recognise their different foundations. *Contextual interpretation*: the ability to understand how policy and institutional problems are situated within particular



communities and circumstances. *Ethical reasoning*: the ability to consider consent, responsibility, reciprocity, fairness, cultural authority and potential consequences. *Accountable negotiation*: the ability to reconcile community participation and knowledge pluralism with statutory, professional and institutional obligations. These capacities help explain why the mere presence of Indigenous knowledge does not necessarily change administrative practice.

FROM INCLUSION TO INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The distinction between inclusion and transformation is central to the framework. An institution may include Indigenous knowledge by adding cultural content to a curriculum, inviting an elder to an institutional event or establishing a community consultation meeting. Such actions can be valuable. However, they do not necessarily alter the institutional assumptions governing authority, knowledge legitimacy or decision-making. Transformation occurs when recognition influences institutional reasoning and relationships of authority. Recent scholarship supports this distinction. Babalola and Ayeni (2026) locate decolonising educational leadership in structural transformation rather than simple inclusion. Barasa et al. (2026) similarly emphasise changes in power dynamics, decision-making and institutional values. Thiessen (2025) distinguishes relational co-creation from tokenistic consultation in public administration. IK-IPEAM therefore asks six transformation questions:

- i. Does relevant Indigenous or local knowledge influence institutional decisions?
- ii. Do legitimate community actors possess meaningful opportunities to shape decisions?
- iii. Are knowledge holders recognised as legitimate contributors rather than symbolic participants?
- iv. Are knowledge sovereignty, consent and cultural protocols protected?
- v. Does participation have identifiable consequences for institutional priorities?
- vi. Does recognition alter relationships of institutional authority?

The significance of Indigenous knowledge should consequently be evaluated not by its visibility alone but by its institutional consequence.

PRODUCTIVE TENSIONS AND CRITICAL BOUNDARIES

A theoretically robust framework must identify not only what it proposes but also where its claims stop.

Integration versus transformation

Integration can make institutional recognition possible, but integration may also assimilate Indigenous knowledge into existing bureaucratic categories. The issue is therefore not whether integration is inherently wrong. The issue is whether integration occurs without reciprocal institutional change. IK-IPEAM supports integration where appropriate but asks whether the institution is also willing to reconsider assumptions concerning authority, knowledge and participation.

Participation versus public accountability

Public educational institutions operate under legal, professional and financial obligations. Community participation cannot mean that statutory accountability disappears. At the same time, statutory accountability should not be used to justify excluding communities from decisions affecting them. IK-IPEAM therefore conceptualises participation as potentially strengthening public accountability when communities have meaningful and appropriately bounded roles in institutional decision-making. The challenge is to develop arrangements in which community authority and statutory authority are coordinated rather than artificially opposed.

Indigenous knowledge versus scientific knowledge

IK-IPEAM rejects both epistemic replacement and epistemic hierarchy. It does not propose that Indigenous knowledge should replace scientific knowledge. Nor does it assume that scientific knowledge should

automatically override Indigenous knowledge. Instead, adaptive epistemic pluralism asks which knowledge is relevant to a particular problem, how its legitimacy is established, and how different knowledge traditions can enter dialogue without erasing their distinctive foundations.

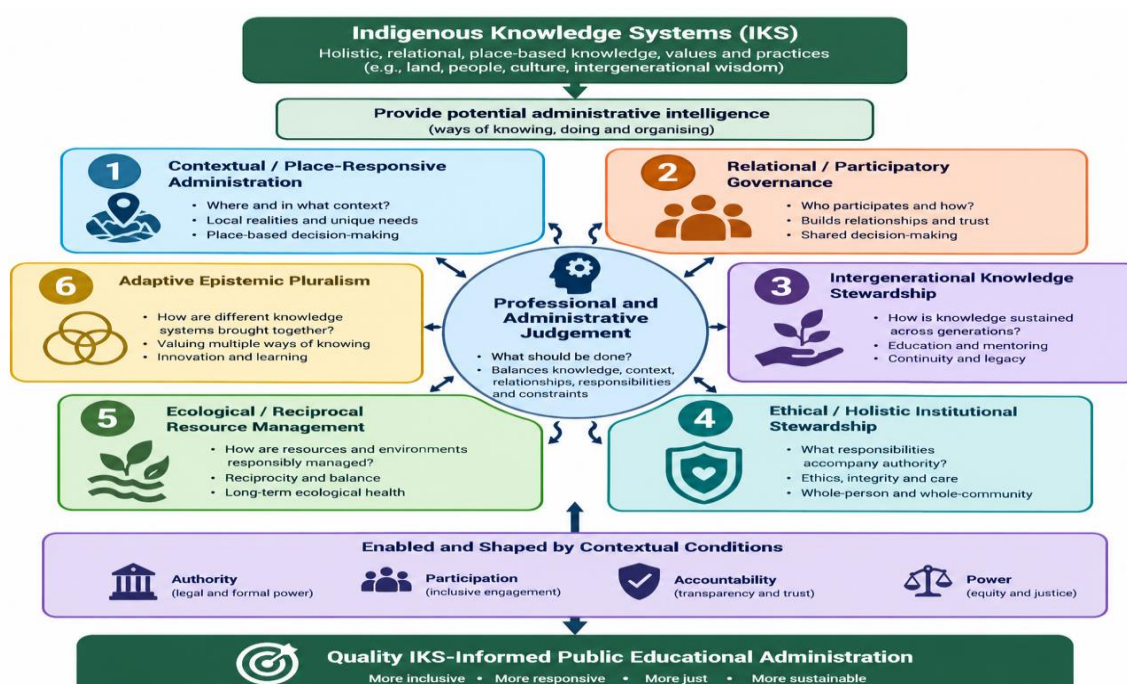
Cultural recognition versus institutional power

Recognition can occur without redistribution of authority. An institution may publicly celebrate Indigenous culture while retaining unilateral control over knowledge, policy interpretation and decision-making. This is why power is not an optional theme within IK-IPEAM. It is a condition of evaluating whether knowledge recognition is substantively transformative. The relevant questions include: Who defines the knowledge? Who validates it? Who controls its use? Who benefits? Who has the authority to refuse its use? Who participates in decisions about its institutional application? These questions connect Indigenous knowledge with epistemic justice.

THE IK-IPEAM CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The preceding analysis establishes that Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) can contribute to public educational administration not simply as cultural content to be incorporated into existing administrative structures, but as a source of knowledge, values, relationships and practices capable of informing how educational institutions understand problems, exercise authority, engage communities and manage resources. The six dimensions developed in this synthesis provide distinct but interconnected pathways through which IKS can inform administrative practice. However, their application is not automatic. Professional and administrative judgement provides the cross-cutting interpretive mechanism through which administrators assess the relevance of different knowledge claims, interpret contextual circumstances, negotiate relationships and responsibilities, and make decisions that remain consistent with institutional mandates and public accountability. The framework therefore positions IKS as a potential source of administrative intelligence whose contribution to educational administration is mediated by judgement and shaped by conditions of authority, participation, accountability and power. **Figure 1** presents the proposed Indigenous Knowledge-Informed Public Educational Administration and Management (IK-IPEAM) conceptual framework.

Figure 1. *The Indigenous Knowledge-Informed Public Educational Administration and Management (IK-IPEAM) Conceptual Framework*



Source: Researcher, (2026)

Figure 1 illustrates the overall logic of the IK-IPEAM framework. At the foundation is Indigenous Knowledge Systems, understood as holistic, relational, place-based and intergenerational forms of knowing, valuing and doing. These provide potential administrative intelligence that can inform six distinct but interconnected dimensions: contextual and place-responsive administration; relational and participatory governance; intergenerational knowledge stewardship; ethical and holistic institutional stewardship; ecological and reciprocal resource management; and adaptive epistemic pluralism. The six dimensions converge around professional and administrative judgement, which serves as the interpretive mechanism through which administrators determine what should be done in particular institutional circumstances. The exercise of judgement is, in turn, shaped by authority, participation, accountability and power. The framework consequently proposes that the integration of IKS can contribute to more inclusive, responsive, just and sustainable public educational administration when it influences institutional reasoning, relationships, decision-making and responsibility rather than functioning merely as symbolic cultural recognition. The six dimensions and the judgement mechanism can now be differentiated clearly.

Table 1. Analytical architecture of IK-IPEAM

IK-IPEAM dimension	Primary object	Central administrative question	Distinctive contribution	Key boundary
Contextual and place-responsive administration	Context	How should administration respond to local histories, cultures, languages, environments and circumstances?	Context-sensitive interpretation of policy and institutional problems	Does not by itself determine who participates
Relational and participatory governance	Relationships and participation	Who has legitimate standing to participate and how should relationships be sustained?	Meaningful participation, trust and relational legitimacy	Does not by itself determine which knowledge is valid
Intergenerational knowledge stewardship	Knowledge continuity	How can relevant knowledge be transmitted, protected and renewed?	Cultural continuity and responsible knowledge transmission	Does not imply institutional ownership of community knowledge
Ethical and holistic institutional stewardship	Responsibility	What responsibilities accompany institutional authority?	Broadens accountability toward ethical and longer-term consequences	Does not replace statutory accountability
Ecological and reciprocal resource management	Resources and environment	How should resources and environments be governed responsibly?	Sustainability, reciprocity and ecological responsibility	Does not make ecological knowledge automatically decisive
Adaptive epistemic pluralism	Knowledge interaction	How should different knowledge traditions inform institutional reasoning?	Negotiation of knowledge legitimacy and relevance	Does not imply that all knowledge claims are identical or equally applicable



Cross-cutting mechanism: Professional and administrative judgement

The framework therefore has a deliberately asymmetric structure. The six dimensions identify substantive domains of administrative reconstruction, whereas professional and administrative judgement explains the mechanism through which those domains are interpreted and translated into institutional action.

KENYA AS AN APPLICATION CONTEXT

Kenya provides a useful context for examining IK-IPEAM because public education operates within a highly diverse social and cultural environment while being governed through national standards, professional requirements and public accountability mechanisms. The National Education Sector Strategic Plan 2023–2027 emphasises educational quality, relevance, equity, inclusion, governance and stakeholder engagement (Ministry of Education, Kenya, 2024). These priorities provide an institutional context within which questions concerning local knowledge, participation and contextual responsiveness can be examined. However, Kenya should not be conceptualised as possessing a single Indigenous knowledge system. Different communities have distinct histories, languages, ecological settings, social institutions and knowledge traditions. Accordingly, IK-IPEAM does not prescribe a national Indigenous administrative model. Instead, it provides questions for context-specific inquiry:

- Who are the legitimate knowledge holders in a particular setting?
- Which forms of local knowledge are relevant to the institutional problem?
- What forms of participation are culturally and institutionally appropriate?
- Which knowledge requires consent before institutional use?
- How should community authority interact with statutory institutional authority?
- How can relevant knowledge contribute without being extracted or appropriated?
- How should administrators negotiate conflicts among knowledge claims?
- What mechanisms ensure that participation has meaningful consequences?

These questions position Indigenous knowledge as a resource for contextual administrative intelligence rather than as a substitute for national educational standards.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION OF IK-IPEAM

The framework makes five principal theoretical contributions. First, it extends Indigenous knowledge scholarship from curriculum and pedagogy toward institutional reasoning. Indigenous knowledge is considered not only something learners study but also something that may inform how institutions interpret educational problems and responsibilities. Second, the framework distinguishes knowledge from power. Indigenous knowledge constitutes a knowledge resource, whereas decolonisation concerns the transformation of structures that determine which knowledge and authority are privileged. Third, it distinguishes relationality from participation. Participation concerns involvement in decision-making; relationality concerns the quality, continuity and ethical character of relationships within which participation occurs. Fourth, it distinguishes sustainability from ecological management. Sustainability provides a longer-term orientation toward continuity and responsibility, while ecological and reciprocal resource management provides a specific domain through which that orientation can influence institutional resource decisions. Fifth, it connects epistemic pluralism with professional and administrative judgement. Multiple knowledge traditions do not automatically produce better decisions. Administrators require capacities to interpret relevance, negotiate tensions, recognise legitimate authority and remain accountable.



The framework therefore advances the following central proposition: The contribution of Indigenous knowledge to public educational administration depends less on the quantity of Indigenous knowledge incorporated than on the extent to which relevant knowledge is recognised, interpreted and operationalised through legitimate relationships of authority, participation, accountability and professional judgement. This proposition differentiates IK-IPEAM from approaches that conceptualise Indigenous knowledge primarily as an additional cultural resource.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

The framework has implications for policy, governance, leadership preparation, institutional practice and research.

Policy

Education authorities should create ethically governed opportunities for relevant Indigenous and local knowledge to inform policy interpretation and implementation. Such arrangements should specify representation, consent, knowledge protection, accountability and the boundaries of community authority.

Institutional governance

Schools and universities can develop sustained structures through which legitimate community knowledge holders contribute to institutional planning, governance, evaluation and development. Such participation should have identifiable institutional pathways rather than remain ceremonial.

Leadership preparation

Educational leadership programmes should expand beyond technical management competencies to include cultural humility, epistemic awareness, relational leadership, community engagement, ethical reasoning and context-sensitive professional judgement.

Administrative practice

Administrators can move beyond asking only whether a policy has been implemented correctly and ask whether its implementation is contextually meaningful, relationally legitimate, ethically defensible and consistent with relevant community knowledge and authority.

Research

Researchers should examine not simply whether Indigenous knowledge is present but whether its presence changes institutional decision-making, authority and relationships. Research involving community knowledge should also address consent, ownership, representation, reciprocity and knowledge sovereignty.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The article has several limitations. First, it is a critical integrative synthesis, not a systematic review. It therefore does not claim exhaustive identification of all scholarship on Indigenous knowledge and public educational administration. Second, the literature spans substantially different Indigenous and postcolonial contexts. The framework should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that Māori, First Nations, African or other Indigenous traditions are interchangeable. Third, the six dimensions are author-developed conceptual abstractions rather than empirically validated scales. Their empirical distinctiveness remains to be established. Fourth, professional and administrative judgement is proposed as a mechanism rather than demonstrated empirically. Future research should examine whether and how judgement mediates the relationship between Indigenous knowledge recognition and administrative practice. Fifth, institutional engagement with Indigenous



knowledge carries risks of extraction, appropriation, commodification and decontextualisation. Future research should therefore examine who controls knowledge, who benefits from its use, who may refuse its use, and whether communities possess meaningful authority over institutional applications. Sixth, the propositions require empirical testing across institutional levels and contexts. Particular attention should be given to whether the framework operates differently in schools, universities, teacher education institutions and public education agencies.

Future research should therefore move through three stages. First, qualitative and participatory studies should investigate how the six dimensions are understood in particular communities. Second, instrument-development studies should assess whether the dimensions can be measured as distinguishable constructs. Third, quantitative and mixed-methods research should test the propositions and examine the proposed mediating role of professional and administrative judgement.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Indigenous knowledge systems have significance for public educational administration beyond their treatment as cultural or curricular resources. The critical integrative synthesis demonstrates conceptual connections among Indigenous knowledge, contextual responsiveness, relationality, community participation, intergenerational continuity, ethical responsibility, ecological stewardship and epistemic pluralism.

The proposed Indigenous Knowledge-Informed Public Education Administration and Management Framework (IK-IPEAM) translates these connections into six analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions: contextual and place-responsive administration; relational and participatory governance; intergenerational knowledge stewardship; ethical and holistic institutional stewardship; ecological and reciprocal resource management; and adaptive epistemic pluralism.

The framework deliberately does not treat these dimensions as interchangeable. Each addresses a different administrative question. Contextual responsiveness concerns the interpretation of place and circumstance; relational governance concerns participation and institutional relationships; intergenerational stewardship concerns knowledge continuity; ethical stewardship concerns responsibility attached to authority; ecological and reciprocal resource management concerns the governance of resources and environments; and adaptive epistemic pluralism concerns the interaction and legitimacy of different knowledge traditions.

Professional and administrative judgement provides the cross-cutting interpretive mechanism through which these dimensions can influence practice. This judgement differs from conventional administrative discretion because it concerns not merely the latitude to choose among permissible options but the reasoned interpretation of knowledge, context, relationships, ethics and institutional obligations within the boundaries of public accountability.

The article also distinguishes Indigenous knowledge from decolonisation, relationality, sustainability and epistemic justice. Indigenous knowledge concerns knowledge systems; decolonisation interrogates inherited structures of power and authority; relationality concerns relationships; sustainability concerns continuity and stewardship; and epistemic justice concerns the fair recognition and distribution of knowledge authority. Their conceptual intersection provides the intellectual foundation for IK-IPEAM, but their analytical distinction prevents conceptual conflation.

The framework does not claim that Indigenous knowledge is homogeneous, universally transferable or inherently superior to scientific or professional knowledge. Nor does it claim empirical validation. Its contribution is conceptual: it offers a framework for examining how public educational institutions might reconsider knowledge, authority, relationships, resources and responsibility.

The central challenge is therefore to move beyond symbolic recognition. An institution can include Indigenous knowledge without changing who makes decisions. It can invite communities to participate without giving participation meaningful institutional consequence. It can celebrate cultural diversity while retaining



epistemological hierarchies that determine whose knowledge counts. It can therefore achieve cultural recognition without institutional transformation.

IK-IPEAM proposes a more demanding standard. Meaningful reconstruction occurs when relevant Indigenous and local knowledge can legitimately influence institutional reasoning; when participation has identifiable consequences; when knowledge holders retain appropriate authority over their knowledge; when professional judgement is exercised reflexively and ethically; and when community relationships are treated as part of public accountability rather than as peripheral to it. For Kenya and other postcolonial educational systems, this does not require replacing national educational standards, professional accountability or scientific knowledge. It requires developing institutions capable of interpreting those requirements in dialogue with legitimate local knowledge, community relationships and contextual realities. The ultimate contribution of IK-IPEAM is therefore a shift in the question asked of public educational administration. The question is no longer only: *How efficiently can educational institutions implement established policy?* It becomes: *How can public educational institutions exercise authority, interpret knowledge and make decisions in ways that are contextually legitimate, relationally responsible, epistemically plural, ethically defensible and publicly accountable?* Indigenous knowledge can contribute to answering that question when it is engaged not as an institutional resource to be extracted, but as knowledge embedded within relationships, responsibilities, histories and legitimate forms of authority.

The reconstruction of public educational administration therefore depends not simply on adding Indigenous knowledge to existing systems, but on reconsidering the relationships among knowledge, power, judgement, authority, participation and responsibility through which those systems operate.

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