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The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Pragmatist Approach to Educational Management

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatism in educational management emphasizes the practical effectiveness of beliefs and theories. Drawing on Dewey and James, this article examines the theoretical foundations and applications of pragmatism in educational administration. From this view, the value of any idea depends on its practical consequences, and truth is not fixed or absolute but constructed through experience and interaction with the environment. Pragmatic educational management offers key benefits: it moves managers beyond a merely administrative role to become facilitators, learning leaders, and agents of change, and transforms schools into learning organizations where teachers and students achieve continuous improvement through interaction, reflection, and practical experimentation. However, it also has limitations: relativism in ethical and religious values, lack of fixed criteria and excessive variability in decisions, strong dependence on managers' abilities, difficulty evaluating long-term educational outcomes such as morality and responsibility, and the risk of short-term objectives overshadowing long-term, quality-oriented goals. The article concludes that despite its high effectiveness in addressing real and dynamic challenges in educational systems, successful implementation requires managers with strong analytical, leadership, and communication skills, and must be accompanied by a critical perspective and attention to ethical and long-term concerns to avoid the traps of relativism and short-term decision-making.

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Intruduction

Let us begin this article with a statement commonly attributed to John Dewey: *"If we teach today as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow."* This statement also recalls a well-known saying attributed to one of the eminent figures of Islam, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, who stated that *if your today is the same as your yesterday, then you are in loss and deprivation.* This notion of loss refers to the consequences or outcomes of one's actions in relation to the past, present, and future. In this context, change—and the rejection of remaining the same—signifies the effectiveness and usefulness of an action or belief, an idea that inherently reflects a pragmatic mode of thinking. In other words, embedded within these two statements, originating from two distinct traditions and cultures (Western and Islamic), lies a fundamentally pragmatic insight: the validity of a belief or action depends on its consequences and practical outcomes. If a change in a belief does not lead to a corresponding change in its outcomes, that belief is considered ineffective, and change should occur only to address a problem or fulfill a genuine need. Since, within pragmatic philosophy, action, the practical consequences of belief, and its utility for individuals and society constitute decisive criteria, educational management likewise regards utility for those it serves as a determining principle. From this perspective, utility-oriented educational management represents a central concern of the pragmatic approach—an aspect that this article seeks to highlight while simultaneously examining its limitations.

As noted above, educational management founded on effectiveness and practical usefulness for members of the educational community is widely regarded as one of the most important determinants of the success of educational systems. Furthermore, the selection of an appropriate managerial approach from a philosophical perspective has a direct impact on the quality of teaching, learning, and the organizational development of schools (Hoy et al., 2017). Leonard and colleagues, in *Pragmatic Adaptive Leadership* (2025), argue that traditional models of educational management are based on linear planning, control, and predictability. Schools, however, operate within environments characterized by continuous change. Consequently, educational leaders should prioritize continuous learning, adaptability, and the ongoing revision of decisions rather than searching for a single "definitive solution." This perspective is directly inspired by the philosophy of pragmatism, which regards truth as the product of action, experience, and practical consequences (Leonard et al., 2025).

Moreover, educational research should not be concerned solely with the discovery of "absolute truth"; rather, it should contribute to solving the real problems confronting education. From a pragmatic perspective, the value of any theory is ultimately determined by its capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning in practice (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

Therefore, it is evident that educational management is founded upon various philosophical perspectives, including Idealism, Realism, Pragmatism, and Existentialism**.** Each of these

schools of thought offers a distinct view of human nature, knowledge, learning, the aims of education, and the role of the educational leader, thereby giving rise to different approaches to the management and administration of educational organizations. An understanding of these philosophical foundations enables educational leaders to make more informed decisions regarding planning, decision-making, human resource management, and the improvement of educational processes. However, the present article focuses exclusively on the pragmatist foundations of educational management.

Among the major philosophical approaches of the modern era, pragmatism occupies a distinctive position. As noted in the introduction, both classical and contemporary pragmatist thinkers maintain that the value of any idea depends on its effectiveness in practice (Dewey, 1916). In other words, the central tenet of pragmatism is that the meaning and value of ideas are best understood through their practical consequences. Dewey argued that philosophy should serve as an instrument for solving human problems rather than merely constituting a body of abstract theories. This perspective also challenges traditional epistemologies that define truth solely as correspondence with reality or coherence within a system of beliefs. From the pragmatist viewpoint, truth is neither fixed nor absolute. Rather, as William James argued, truth emerges through experience, interaction with the environment, and practical experimentation (James, 1907). Consequently, educational leaders should not rely exclusively on rigid rules and predetermined procedures; instead, they should analyze specific circumstances, draw upon experience, and engage relevant stakeholders in order to develop effective solutions to the diverse challenges encountered in schools and educational and research institutions.

Theoretical Foundations of Pragmatism in Educational Management

If we are to discuss the philosophical foundations of pragmatism in educational management, five fundamental principles may be identified as the major strengths of the pragmatist approach.

1. Learning Through Experience: Learning through experience undoubtedly transforms educational leaders from mere implementers of prescribed regulations into professional learners and transformational leaders in practice. Today, transformational leadership has become a major focus within educational institutions. There is broad consensus among scholars of educational leadership that experience becomes truly valuable only when it is accompanied by critical reflection, evidence-based decision-making, professional dialogue, and action research. Consequently, many contemporary educational leadership preparation programs emphasize experiential learning and systematic reflection rather than relying exclusively on theoretical instruction.

Within this approach, an educational leader in a school or university is no longer viewed merely as an executor of policies, regulations, and directives issued by central authorities or ministries of education. Instead, the leader becomes a professional who continuously analyzes contextual conditions, experiments with alternative solutions, utilizes empirical evidence and

stakeholder feedback, and engages in ongoing learning to improve decision-making. Such a process strengthens professional judgment, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and the capacity to adapt to the complex and dynamic nature of educational systems. Moreover, educational leaders are expected to promote this perspective throughout the organizations they lead.

Recent studies also demonstrate that experiential learning, when combined with critical reflection, enhances educational leaders' capacity for informed decision-making, innovation, organizational collaboration, and continuous professional development. Under these conditions, the school principal is no longer simply responsible for implementing regulations; rather, he or she becomes a learning leader who cultivates a culture of organizational learning, encourages teachers to engage in reflective practice and collaborative learning, and creates conditions for the continuous improvement of educational quality. From this perspective, a school is not merely a bureaucratic organization but a learning organization, in which all members achieve personal and organizational growth through experience, reflection, and the continuous refinement of practice.

From another perspective, pragmatism is fundamentally a philosophy that emphasizes the realization of ideas through action. It seeks ideas in practice rather than treating practice as subordinate to abstract ideas. The movement from ideas to action and practical consequences constitutes a common thread running through both classical pragmatists—such as Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and William James—and contemporary pragmatists, including Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and Robert Brandom. Among these thinkers, Dewey, James, and later Rorty all emphasize the central role of experience and action in the learning process. As Asghari (2022) argues, the strength of William James's pragmatic philosophy of education lies in its emphasis on integrating practical elements into the learning process.

From William James's pragmatist perspective, learning is not simply the acquisition and retention of theoretical knowledge, as was common in traditional schools. Rather, it is an active process through which individuals develop deeper understanding by engaging in experience, action, and real-world problem-solving. His philosophy of pragmatism maintains that the value of an idea or concept should be judged according to its practical application and its effectiveness in real life.

Accordingly, from the perspective of pragmatist philosophy, education should move beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and instead provide opportunities for experience, experimentation, problem-solving, and the integration of theoretical concepts with practical situations. Within this framework, students become active participants in the learning process, and learning itself becomes dynamic, meaningful, and closely connected to the realities of everyday life. This educational philosophy enables learners to engage in direct experiences while allowing education to be personalized according to individual needs and circumstances.

Such an approach represents one of the fundamental principles of William James's pragmatic educational philosophy (Kien & Dung, 2026).

Ultimately, according to William James's criterion of practicality, the effectiveness of education should be evaluated by assessing the extent to which knowledge enables learners to act effectively in real-world contexts (James, 1907). From a pragmatist perspective, learning through experience is one of the most effective approaches to professional development in educational management. Within this framework, the educational leader is not merely a director or administrator but also a facilitator of learning, a creator of opportunities for meaningful experience, and a promoter of reflective practice. Consequently, the school is transformed into a learning organization in which its members achieve continuous improvement through experience, interaction, and the collaborative resolution of authentic educational problems.

2. Problem-Solving as the Core of Learning: In contemporary educational management, problem-solving is not merely a managerial skill but also a fundamental mechanism of learning. Educational leaders who analyze authentic school problems, learn from experience, and develop evidence-based solutions are better equipped to lead educational transformation. Consequently, many educational leadership preparation programs around the world have shifted toward problem-based learning, experiential learning, and action research conducted in authentic workplace settings.

From a pragmatist perspective, learning becomes meaningful only when it emerges from the real problems of everyday life and the educational environment (Dewey, 1916). John Dewey argued that “We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience.” Elsewhere, he maintained that learning from experience means establishing a connection between what we do and the consequences we undergo as a result of those actions (Dewey, 1916).

Accordingly, problem-solving constitutes the central principle of the teaching–learning process. Students acquire knowledge by engaging with authentic situations, thinking critically, experimenting, testing hypotheses, and evaluating the outcomes of their actions. Within educational management, this approach requires school leaders to create collaborative and problem-centered learning environments in which teachers and students work together to develop effective solutions to educational challenges (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Such collaboration is also strongly emphasized in Nel Noddings' philosophy of education (Mohajjel, 2025).

John Dewey further argued that education should be grounded in experience and the resolution of real-life problems. He maintained that learning is not simply the transmission of information but an active process through which learners construct knowledge by thinking, experimenting, and reflecting on their experiences. Accordingly, educational leaders—whether in elementary schools, secondary schools, high schools, or colleges—should create conditions

that enable students to participate actively in research activities, collaborative projects, and educational decision-making.

Participation, however, is not merely a neutral organizational concept; it also embodies important ethical and normative values. Consequently, an emphasis on problem-solving inherently represents an ethical approach to educational practice. In this sense, when pragmatism transforms educational management from a purely administrative function into a process of addressing authentic educational problems, it simultaneously reveals the moral significance of educational decision-making (Gutek, 2014).

Recent research further demonstrates that professional development programs for educational leaders based on experiential learning, critical reflection, and the resolution of authentic school problems have a stronger impact on improving decision-making quality, enhancing leadership effectiveness, fostering a culture of organizational learning, and improving overall school performance. These findings are fully consistent with the philosophical foundations of pragmatism, as both emphasize that the value of knowledge lies not in abstract theorizing but in its capacity to solve real-world problems and bring about meaningful change in practice (Robinson & Leigh, 2025).

3. Flexibility in Decision-Making: Fortunately, educational management in the 21st century has encountered an environment characterized by complexity, uncertainty, technological changes, diversity in learners' needs, and unpredictable crises, which are fundamentally different from traditional conditions. In such circumstances, decision-making based solely on fixed regulations and traditional procedures cannot adequately address the challenges faced by schools and educational institutions. Consequently, "flexibility in decision-making" has emerged as one of the essential competencies of educational leaders. Recent research in educational leadership indicates that effective leaders are those who, while maintaining organizational goals and values, have the ability to rapidly adjust strategies, accept new information, and involve stakeholders in the decision-making process. A successful educational leader is not someone who always makes fixed and definitive decisions; rather, it is someone who can adapt to changing circumstances within the framework of educational goals, learn from data and experiences, and continuously improve decisions. In the era of digital transformation and increasing educational complexity, flexibility has become a strategic capability for effective school leadership (Dai, Thomas, & Rawolle, 2025).

In the pragmatic approach, flexibility in decision-making is considered one of the fundamental characteristics of educational management. In other words, within this approach, flexibility in decision-making represents the ability of educational leaders to align their decisions with the changing realities of schools. This approach emphasizes experience, experimentation, reflection, and continuous improvement. Therefore, a pragmatic educational leader is not an individual without principles; rather, it is a leader who refines and develops

principles through interaction with reality, evidence, and practical experiences. From this perspective, managerial decisions should not be based on rigid and unchangeable rules; instead, they should be modified according to contextual conditions, learners' needs, evidence, and outcomes derived from experience. Pragmatism maintains that the value of any decision lies in its effectiveness and practical consequences; therefore, educational leaders should be prepared to reconsider and modify their decisions based on feedback and emerging circumstances.

John Dewey viewed education as a social process that should prepare individuals for participation in a democratic society (Dewey, 1916). From this perspective, the educational leader plays the role of a learning-oriented leader and should create an environment in which teachers and students can develop through interaction, experience, and critical thinking (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). Therefore, one of the most important characteristics of pragmatic management is the ability to adapt to changing conditions. Managers can select the most appropriate strategies based on the characteristics of the school, students, and the surrounding environment (Hoy et al., 2017). This characteristic enhances the effectiveness of management in dynamic and evolving educational environments.

4. Participation in Decision-Making: Participation in decision-making is one of the fundamental components of modern educational management, emphasizing the active involvement of administrators, teachers, staff, students, and other stakeholders in the decision-making process. In this approach, decision-making is not merely the responsibility of the manager; rather, it is regarded as a collective process for knowledge creation, increasing organizational commitment, and improving the quality of school performance (Bush, 2022).

An essential requirement for participatory decision-making is that the manager should not approach decision-making with a dogmatic or rigid mindset; instead, issues should be shared and discussed with individuals who possess expertise in educational or administrative fields. In general, this approach emphasizes the participation of teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders in decision-making processes. Participation enhances a sense of belonging, responsibility, and acceptance of managerial decisions (Hoy et al., 2017). In other words, participatory decision-making reflects the spirit of democratic management. Dewey writes:

> To say that democracy is only a form of government is like saying that a home is more or less a geometric arrangement of bricks and mortar, or that a church is merely a building consisting of benches, pulpit, and spire. This is true; they certainly are such things. Yet it is false; they are infinitely more than these. Democracy, like every form of government, consists of a memory of the historical past, an awareness of the living present, and an ideal of the future that is yet to come. Democracy, in a word, is an ethical and social concept, and its moral meaning is based upon its meaning as a form of government.

> Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual community (Dewey, 2008, 240).

By connecting democracy with human lived experience, Dewey sought, in the next step, to define thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability to change (Dewey, 1916; Gutek, 2014).

Limitations and Shortcomings of the Pragmatic Approach

Considering what has been discussed so far, pragmatism can be regarded as a useful philosophy for educational management and educational practices; however, every philosophical approach encounters certain limitations when applied to real-world conditions. Some of these limitations are discussed below:

a. Relativism in Values: It is known that pragmatists do not accept absolute truths and fixed values. William James argued that truth is something that proves useful in practice and that believing in it produces beneficial consequences. In other words, for William James, truth is not a single, fixed entity; rather, it is pluralistic, dynamic, and dependent on social and human contexts (James, 1907). However, on the other hand, many members of society generally believe in the existence of absolute values. Therefore, critics argue that excessive emphasis on practical outcomes may weaken moral, cultural, and religious values commonly accepted within a society, because the primary criterion for success becomes practical effectiveness (Gutek, 2014).

Pragmatism is based on the principle that the usefulness, efficiency, and practicality of ideas and policies are the criteria for evaluating their value. Furthermore, pragmatism accepts the principle of utility: something is considered valuable only if it is useful, satisfactory, and effective for human beings. Therefore, pragmatism places theory within practical activities and develops a normative approach for evaluating human purposes and objectives.

b. The Absence of Fixed Criteria: When fixed and absolute truth is rejected, relativism becomes more prominent, and permanent criteria are no longer considered acceptable. Although flexibility is regarded as a positive characteristic for educational managers, excessive changes in decision-making may reduce organizational efficiency and weaken employees' trust in managers. In other words, excessive flexibility may sometimes lead managers to lack a clear framework for decision-making, resulting in frequent changes in educational policies and strategies (Hoy et al., 2017).

From James's perspective, the ultimate goal of every educational policy is the "improvement of the lived experience of teachers and students." If a change fails to achieve this goal in the long term, even if it is innovative, it should be considered a failure from a pragmatic perspective.

c. Dependence on the Manager's Abilities: If an organization relies heavily on a manager as the final decision-maker and the manager does not genuinely accept the participation of others—or accepts it but does not practically consider their views—organizational members

may perceive the success of organizational processes as dependent on the manager's personal abilities. However, if the manager lacks competence or fails to manage organizational affairs effectively, employees' trust in the manager will decline.

The successful implementation of pragmatic management requires managers to possess analytical skills, leadership abilities, effective communication skills, and decision-making competence. In the absence of strong managerial capabilities, this approach may fail to achieve desirable outcomes (Bush, 2020).

e. Difficulty in Measuring Long-Term Outcomes: From a pragmatic perspective, evaluating the effects of a belief or theory in practice requires examining its consequences over time, which is a relatively difficult task. Many educational goals, such as morality, responsibility, identity formation, and critical thinking, cannot be measured in the short term and reveal their effects only in the long term.

For example, virtue-based education requires sufficient time to achieve desirable moral outcomes. In other words, self-regulation and ethical decision-making are examples of moral competencies that can be developed through learning approaches involving group discussions and real-life situations. Creating a learning environment that encourages ethical reflection and active participation can increase students' motivation and willingness to practice moral values and gradually help them accept ethical principles as part of their identity. However, as noted, achieving such outcomes requires considerable time (Yazdani, Ahmadiasl, & Nourmohammadi, 2026, 646). Ultimately, researchers in the field of educational management argue that evaluating educational success solely based on immediate outcomes may provide an incomplete picture of educational effectiveness (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018).

f. The Possibility of Dominance of Short-Term Goals: As commonly observed, in many educational systems, including our own, managers often prioritize short-term objectives in order to gain recognition from higher-level administrators and strengthen their professional records. Unfortunately, this tendency can become a challenge within educational systems.
In other words, Bush (2020), in *Theories of Educational Leadership and Management*, argues that excessive focus on practical effectiveness may encourage managers to make decisions that are beneficial in the short term but potentially harmful to educational quality or equity in the long term (Bush, 2020).

From a pragmatic perspective, the usefulness of a belief or theory in practice is often associated with achieving immediate and short-term objectives, and this is closely connected with individuals' intentions and motivations. This philosophical approach evaluates the usefulness of beliefs and theories based on their practical effectiveness in achieving specific goals. Accepting this perspective naturally directs pragmatism in educational management toward evaluating beliefs within a short-term horizon and in relation to individual intentions and motivations. In other words, from a pragmatic viewpoint, a belief is considered useful to

the extent that it can satisfy the immediate practical needs of the actor—needs that are defined by the actor themselves.

Conclusion

As discussed, pragmatism, as one of the most influential philosophical approaches in the contemporary era, by moving beyond epistemological dogmatism and emphasizing practical contexts and experiential learning, provides a dynamic and effective perspective for educational management systems. This approach, through its fundamental principles such as learning through experience, flexibility in decision-making, the development of innovation, and other related principles, elevates educational managers from the position of mere implementers of administrative regulations to the role of "learning leaders" and "facilitators of change." Within such a paradigm, the school is no longer viewed as a rigid bureaucratic structure; rather, it becomes a dynamic and learning-oriented organization in which teachers and students continuously advance their growth and development through interaction, reflection, and practical experimentation. These characteristics are particularly valuable in today's rapidly changing world, where educational systems face complex, multidimensional, and unpredictable challenges.

However, as discussed in detail in the section on limitations, relying exclusively on the criterion of practical utility and immediate efficiency is not without risks. Relativism regarding ethical and religious values, the absence of fixed criteria and frequent policy changes that may contribute to organizational instability, excessive dependence on the personal capabilities of managers, the difficulty of evaluating long-term outcomes such as moral development and identity formation, and the danger of short-term, symbolic goals overshadowing qualitative and equity-oriented educational visions are among the concerns that cannot be ignored. Particularly within the cultural and religious context of Iranian society, where human dignity and enduring moral principles hold a significant position, applying a purely Western pragmatic approach without contextual adaptation and attention to spiritual and identity-related dimensions may lead to educational reductionism and undermine the ultimate purposes of education in favor of temporary and immediate interests.

Therefore, the final conclusion of this article is that although pragmatism, as a "rational instrument and an experiential method," is highly valuable and effective for addressing practical challenges in educational management, it should never be regarded as a "philosophical dogma" or as a replacement for value-based foundations. A wise and balanced strategy is to integrate the strengths of this approach—such as flexibility, participation, and experiential learning—with indigenous ethical and cultural frameworks as well as long-term educational objectives.

To achieve such integration, three essential recommendations can be proposed: First, the systematic empowerment of educational managers in areas such as situational analysis, transformational leadership, communication skills, and decision-making competencies.

Second, the design of comprehensive evaluation systems that simultaneously assess short-term practical outcomes and long-term qualitative achievements, including the development of critical thinking, social responsibility, and ethical commitment.

Third, the institutionalization of participatory processes that utilize the collective intelligence of teachers, parents, and students, reduce excessive dependence of decision-making on individual managerial abilities, and strengthen organizational trust.

Ultimately, pragmatism can serve as a bridge between theory and practice; however, this bridge will remain stable only when its foundations are built upon ethical, cultural, and justice-oriented principles. Ultimately, the future of children in this society depends not only on changing methods and approaches but also on preserving human and spiritual values within the framework of rational adaptability and meaningful transformation.

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