A Proposed Framework to Enhance Management Accounting Practice in Schools Management

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper develops a theoretically grounded framework to strengthen Management Accounting Practices (MAPs) in schools. Although management accounting is widely applied in the corporate sector, its adoption in educational settings remains limited, resulting in weak analytical decision-making, inadequate financial transparency, and inefficient budgeting. Drawing on Contingency Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and principles of public-sector accountability, this study conceptualises how contextual conditions shape the design and quality of Management Accounting Information (MAI), and how decision-making capability and financial innovation mediate the relationship between MAI and school performance. The proposed framework integrates budgeting cycles, cost measurement tools, reporting systems, and performance indicators to offer a more systematic and evidence-based approach to school financial governance. It also provides a foundation for future empirical validation through pilot studies, qualitative interviews, and quantitative modelling. By positioning MAPs as strategic enablers rather than administrative routines, the model offers practical guidance for school leaders and policymakers seeking to enhance transparency, resource optimisation, and data-driven decision-making in alignment with Malaysia’s education transformation agenda.

Keywords: management accounting practices, decision-making capability, financial innovation, school performance, public-sector accountability

INTRODUCTION

Education institutions are increasingly needed to demonstrate accountability, efficiency, and transparency in resource management. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education underlines financial integrity and evidence-based decision-making at the school level. Despite this, many schools still depend on basic bookkeeping and compliance-oriented financial reporting, rather than strategic management accounting.

Management Accounting Practices (MAPs) which involve budgeting, cost control, performance measurement, and decision support can provide a structured approach to enhance school governance and performance. However, challenges such as inadequate training, limited digital tools, and fragmented data systems often hinder effective implementation. Therefore, this paper aims to propose a framework for enhancing management accounting practices in schools, integrating both contextual and behavioral perspectives.

Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Examine the factors influencing the implementation of MAPs in schools.
2. Explore the mediating roles of decision-making capability and innovation in financial management.
3. Develop a conceptual framework for improving school financial and non-financial performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Management Accounting in Nonprofit and Educational Settings

Recent studies emphasize that management accounting practices in nonprofit and educational institutions differ substantially from those in the private sector. Hyndman & McKillop (2019) and Grossi et al. (2022) show that nonprofits rely heavily on budgeting and performance measurement systems to demonstrate accountability rather than profitability. Similarly, Broadbent, Jacobs & Laughlin (2020) argue that educational organisations require accounting systems that integrate financial indicators with pedagogical and stakeholder measures. In school contexts, research in Australia (Caldwell, 2021), the UK (Day & Smethem, 2023), and Indonesia (Anas, 2024; Maslufi, 2025) demonstrates that budgeting, cost monitoring, internal control, and digital reporting systems significantly influence school performance and resource allocation decisions.

Management Accounting Practices in the School Context

Management Accounting Practices (MAPs) refer to the processes that generate financial and non-financial information to support managerial decisions (Drury, 2018). While widely adopted in the private sector, the education sector often underutilizes such practices (Broadbent & Guthrie, 2008). In schools, MAPs can improve resource allocation, promote cost awareness, and enhance accountability.

School-based financial and management accounting practices have gained increasing attention across Southeast Asia as governments move toward decentralised and accountable education systems. In Malaysia, several studies have established frameworks for effective school-based financial management (Radzi, Ghani, & Siraj, 2013, 2015, 2017), highlighting budgeting, cost control, and reporting as core elements that enhance transparency and decision quality. Complementary research by Kenayathulla et al. (2017) and the Institut Aminuddin Baki (n.d.) confirmed that continuous training in financial management significantly strengthens principals' capacity to implement sound accounting procedures. Radzi (2016) further emphasised strategic financial planning as essential for resource optimisation in national schools. Parallel findings in Thailand (Wongkhiaw, 2025) and Indonesia (Anas, 2024; Maslufi, 2025) demonstrate that accountability audits, transparency, and ICT integration improve financial governance and school performance. Similarly, Rint (2024) identified budgeting and internal control as persistent challenges under school-based management reforms in the Philippines. Collectively, these studies reveal that management accounting practices at the school level are pivotal to educational effectiveness, fiscal integrity, and sustainable institutional performance.

Dimensions of Management Accounting Information (MAI)

The construct of Management Accounting Information (MAI) refers to the quality and characteristics of accounting information that support managerial decision-making, control, and planning. Chenhall and Morris (1986) identified four core dimensions of MAI: broad scope, timeliness, aggregation, and integration. These dimensions describe how accounting systems differ in the type, frequency, and level of data provided to managers.

Broad scope refers to information that goes beyond traditional financial data to include non-financial, external, and future-oriented information (Chenhall & Morris, 1986; Mia & Chenhall, 1994). It enables managers to anticipate changes in environmental and competitive conditions, making it essential for decision-making in dynamic settings such as schools and SMEs.

Timeliness concerns how quickly information is provided to managers for decision-making and control (Chenhall & Morris, 1986). Timely data improve responsiveness and the ability to implement corrective actions (Chong, 1996; Gul & Chia, 1994). In educational institutions, timely reporting supports efficient budget control and resource management.

Aggregated information refers to the extent to which data are summarized by functional area, time period, or decision relevance (Chenhall & Morris, 1986; Hall, 2011). High aggregation helps school managers compare performance across departments or time frames, facilitating strategic decisions. Integration indicates how

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accounting systems link information across departments, functions, and activities (Chenhall & Morris, 1986; Otley, 2016). Integrated information enables coordination between administrative, academic, and financial units — crucial for complex organizations like schools.

Later studies (e.g., Chong & Eggleton, 2003; Hall, 2011; Bouwens & Abernethy, 2000) confirmed that these dimensions influence managerial performance, innovation, and decision quality, especially under conditions of uncertainty. In educational management, these dimensions underpin budgeting systems, performance indicators, and school-based financial management frameworks, ensuring that accounting information supports not just compliance but also strategic educational outcomes.

Decision-Making Capability

Decision-making capability refers to an organization's or manager's capacity to make timely, informed, and effective decisions using reliable management accounting information. According to Nielsen (2015), decision capability is enhanced when management accounting systems are deeply embedded within strategic and operational processes, allowing managers to interpret financial and non-financial signals coherently. Jalal (2022) found that efficient collection and communication of accounting information improve decision outcomes, while delays or excessive data complexity weaken managers' responsiveness. Similarly, Trevisan (2023) highlighted that decision capability is influenced by how accounting systems accommodate diverse values and ambiguity, especially in non-profit or creative environments such as education. Dahal (2024) empirically demonstrated that management accounting practices mediate the relationship between decision quality and organizational performance, reinforcing that decision-making capability depends on both information quality and contextual alignment.

The American Accounting Association (2022) further emphasized that decision capability arises from integrating planning, budgeting, and performance measurement within managerial processes. In the education sector, school leaders' ability to allocate resources, monitor budgets, and evaluate performance relies on the same principles—high-quality, timely, and integrated information strengthens school management effectiveness and accountability. Decision-making capability reflects the ability of school leaders to interpret accounting information and translate it into strategic actions. According to Eisenhardt and Martin (2000), effective decision-making is a dynamic capability that allows organizations to adapt to changes and allocate resources effectively.

Innovation in Financial Management

Innovation in financial management refers to the process of applying new ideas, technologies, and methods to improve the efficiency, transparency, and responsiveness of financial decision-making. According to Teece (1986), innovation capability is a dynamic resource that allows organizations to reconfigure internal processes to achieve superior performance and sustained competitiveness. Within financial management, such innovation manifests through the adoption of digital budgeting platforms, automated accounting systems, and performance dashboards that provide real-time financial insights (Bhimani & Willcocks, 2014; Scapens & Jazayeri, 2003). These tools enhance data accuracy, reduce manual errors, and enable evidence-based decision-making.

Bhimani (2020) further notes that the digital transformation of management accounting—through cloud-based reporting, analytics, and AI integration—has reshaped how organizations plan, control, and report their finances. In educational institutions, financial innovation supports school-based management reforms by streamlining resource allocation, promoting accountability, and facilitating stakeholder reporting (Radzi, Ghani, & Siraj, 2017). Similarly, Karanja and Nzulwa (2020) argue that embracing financial innovation fosters agility in resource utilization and improves performance, especially under budget constraints. Therefore, innovative financial management is not merely a technological upgrade but a strategic capability that aligns accounting practices with institutional goals, enhances decision-making, and promotes sustainable performance in schools.

School Performance

School performance represents a multidimensional construct encompassing financial, operational, learning, and stakeholder outcomes. Kaplan and Norton's (1996) Balanced Scorecard (BSC) provides a comprehensive framework to measure performance from four perspectives—financial efficiency, internal process effectiveness, learning and growth, and stakeholder satisfaction. In the school context, this framework allows administrators to move beyond traditional financial indicators by integrating non-financial measures such as teaching quality, curriculum innovation, student achievement, and community engagement (Mavragani, Nikolaou, & Tsagarakis, 2016). Hoque (2014) argues that the Balanced Scorecard aligns educational objectives with strategic goals by linking resources, performance indicators, and accountability measures.

Empirical studies have shown that management accounting practices (MAPs) act as the mechanism connecting financial information to these performance dimensions (Mokhtar & Jusoh, 2017; Radzi, Ghani, & Siraj, 2017). Through budgeting, performance evaluation, and variance analysis, MAPs translate school objectives into measurable outcomes. Moreover, Pang (2019) and Nguyen (2021) demonstrate that integrating BSC with MAP enhances school governance and decision quality by ensuring that data-driven insights inform both pedagogical and administrative decisions. In Malaysia, the application of MAPs within the Balanced Scorecard approach has improved school-based management, resource efficiency, and accountability (Aziz & Said, 2022). Therefore, adopting BSC as a performance measurement tool enables schools to monitor progress holistically, balancing financial prudence with academic excellence and stakeholder trust.

Theoretical Foundations

To strengthen the conceptual foundation, this framework integrates three theoretical perspectives commonly applied in public-sector financial management: Contingency Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT), and Public Sector Accounting and Accountability Theory.

Contingency Theory (Otley, 1980; Chenhall, 2003) explains that the design and usefulness of management accounting systems depend on contextual factors such as school size, governance structure, environmental uncertainty, and technological readiness. This theory justifies the inclusion of contextual factors as antecedents in the proposed model. Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997) emphasizes an organization's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure resources to respond to change. In school settings, this relates to the leadership's capability to use MAI for strategic decision-making and financial innovation. Thus, DCT provides the logic for positioning decision-making capability and innovation as mediators. Finally, Public Sector Accounting and Accountability Theory (Broadbent & Guthrie, 2008; Hood, 1995) explains how transparency, stewardship, and performance reporting shape financial behaviour in public institutions, including schools. This perspective positions the framework within the broader context of public accountability, reinforcing school performance as a multidimensional outcome. Together, these theories provide a strong justification for the relationships proposed in the framework.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework (figure 1) postulates that contextual factors—such as organizational structure, information technology, leadership support, and environmental uncertainty—influence the Management Accounting Information (MAI) available within schools. According to Chenhall and Morris (1986), these contextual conditions determine the extent to which accounting systems provide broad, timely, aggregated, and integrated information. Schools operating in complex or dynamic environments require more sophisticated MAI to support decision-making and accountability.

Enhanced MAI subsequently improves decision-making capability, as decision quality depends on the availability of accurate, relevant, and timely data (Nielsen, 2015; Jalal, 2022). High-quality MAI facilitates analytical reasoning, strategic responsiveness, and evidence-based judgment, enabling school leaders to make informed financial and administrative decisions. Effective decision-making also acts as a catalyst for innovation, particularly in financial management. When managers possess strong analytical and interpretive

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capabilities, they are more likely to adopt innovative tools such as digital budgeting systems, performance dashboards, and data-driven reporting (Teece, 1986; Bhimani, 2020).

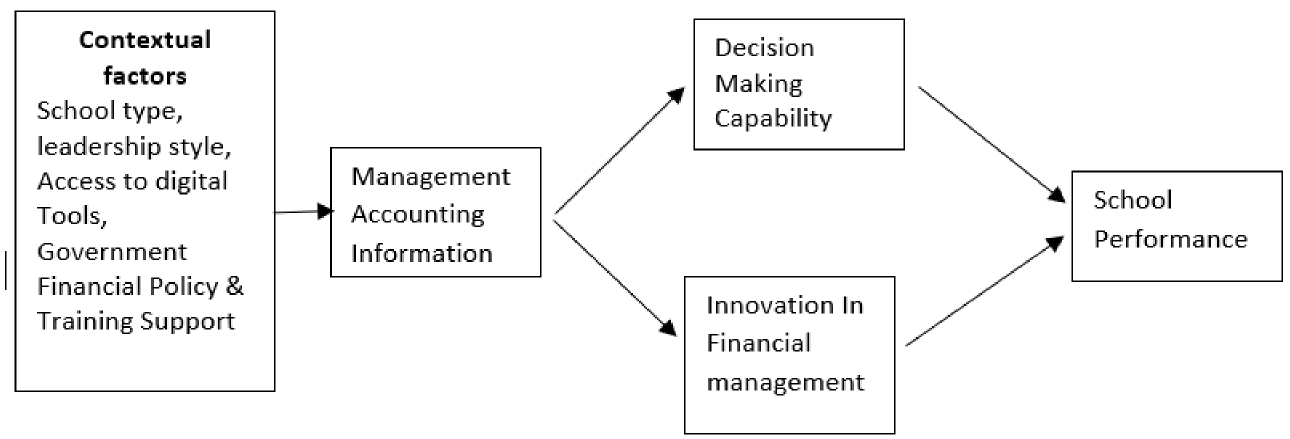
In turn, innovation in financial management contributes directly to school performance by improving resource utilization, accountability, and operational efficiency. This aligns with Kaplan and Norton's (1996) Balanced Scorecard perspectives, which emphasize the interconnectedness of internal processes, learning and growth, financial efficiency, and stakeholder satisfaction. Furthermore, MAI also has a direct effect on school performance by providing the informational foundation for planning, monitoring, and performance evaluation, even independent of decision-making or innovation mechanisms.

Finally, both decision-making capability and financial innovation serve as mediating variables in this framework. They explain how information quality (MAI) is transformed into actionable strategies that enhance institutional outcomes. Strong MAI systems enable superior decisions, which then promote innovation in managing educational resources, ultimately driving sustainable improvements in school performance. Hence, this integrative model positions management accounting information as the cornerstone linking contextual conditions, managerial behavior, and innovation-driven performance outcomes in educational institutions.

Operational Definitions of Key Constructs

For clarity and conceptual precision, the key constructs in the proposed framework are operationally defined based on established accounting and educational management literature. Budgeting cycles refer to the structured annual processes through which schools plan, allocate, monitor, and review financial resources to support pedagogical and administrative activities. Cost measurement tools encompass methods such as programme costing, variance analysis, and activity-based costing that allow schools to identify, classify, and evaluate expenditures associated with teaching, infrastructure, and student activities. The reporting system denotes the mechanisms—both manual and digital—used to record, summarise, and communicate financial information to internal and external stakeholders, including platforms such as school accounting modules and MOE-approved digital systems. Management Accounting Information (MAI) is defined as decision-relevant financial and non-financial information characterised by broad scope, timeliness, aggregation, and integration, consistent with the dimensions proposed by Chenhall and Morris (1986). Decision-making capability refers to the ability of school leaders to interpret MAI, assess alternatives, and apply evidence-based judgment in resource allocation and strategic planning. Innovation in financial management reflects the adoption of new technologies, digital tools, and modern practices—such as automated budgeting systems, dashboards, and analytics—that enhance efficiency, accuracy, and transparency in school financial processes. Finally, school performance is conceptualised as a multidimensional construct capturing financial efficiency, internal process effectiveness, human capital development, teaching and learning quality, and stakeholder satisfaction, aligned with the Balanced Scorecard perspectives. These operational definitions establish a consistent foundation for understanding how each construct functions within the proposed framework.

Figure 1 : A Proposed Framework To Enhance Management Accounting Practices in School Management



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DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Future Validation Plan

To strengthen the applicability and credibility of the proposed framework, future research should incorporate an empirical validation process using a multi-method approach. A small-scale pilot study could first be conducted in one or two schools—preferably representing different contexts such as urban and rural settings—to assess the practicality of implementing key components of the framework, including budgeting processes, reporting mechanisms, and management accounting information flows. Semi-structured interviews with principals, senior assistants, finance clerks, and school accountants would provide deeper insights into existing practices, challenges, and readiness for adopting enhanced MAPs. These qualitative findings can be complemented by a comparative analysis with established school financial management models to examine areas of alignment and divergence. Building on this groundwork, a broader quantitative study may be undertaken using survey instruments designed to measure contextual factors, MAI dimensions, decision-making capability, innovation in financial management, and school performance. Structural Equation Modelling (e.g., SEM-PLS) can then be employed to statistically test the relationships proposed in the framework and evaluate the mediating effects of decision-making capability and innovation. Together, this staged validation strategy ensures that the framework is not only theoretically sound but also practical, feasible, and empirically supported for implementation in real school environments.

Theoretical Implications

This proposed framework integrates Contingency Theory and Dynamic Capabilities Theory to provide a holistic explanation of how contextual factors and internal capabilities interact to enhance school performance. From the perspective of Contingency Theory (Chenhall, 2003; Otley, 2016), the framework recognizes that the effectiveness of Management Accounting Information (MAI) depends on the fit between contextual variables—such as school environment, size, governance, and technological readiness—and the information systems adopted. This theory underscores that there is no universally optimal management accounting system; rather, its usefulness is contingent upon the specific circumstances in which schools operate. Thus, contextual alignment shapes the design and utilization of MAI, influencing how schools collect, process, and apply information for managerial purposes.

Complementing this, Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) explains how schools develop internal competencies to sense opportunities, seize innovations, and reconfigure resources to achieve superior performance. Within this framework, decision-making capability and innovation in financial management are conceptualized as dynamic capabilities that enable schools to adapt to changes in educational policy, funding mechanisms, and stakeholder expectations. The integration of these theories positions Management Accounting Practices (MAPs) not merely as administrative routines but as strategic enablers that enhance agility, learning, and continuous improvement. By linking information quality (MAI) with decision-making and innovation processes, the framework extends traditional management accounting discourse into the domain of educational performance, where strategic and adaptive capabilities are increasingly critical.

In essence, this theoretical integration advances the literature by bridging structural contingencies with dynamic managerial competencies. It contributes to both management accounting and educational leadership scholarship by illustrating that effective school performance emerges from the interaction between contextual fit and the institution’s ability to transform accounting information into strategic actions and innovative practices. Future empirical research can further validate these relationships to enrich theory on the role of management accounting in dynamic, knowledge-based public institutions such as schools.

This framework integrates Contingency Theory and Dynamic Capabilities Theory to explain how contextual and internal capabilities interact to enhance school performance. It expands existing literature by positioning MAPs as a strategic enabler rather than an administrative tool.

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Practical Implications

In implementing the proposed framework, schools must recognise that strengthened management accounting practices require not only improved systems but also the development of human and organizational capabilities. Effective adoption depends heavily on continuous training for principals, senior assistants, and finance personnel, particularly in areas such as budgeting, cost analysis, digital reporting, and data interpretation. This underscores the need for structured professional development programmes and coaching initiatives that equip school leaders with the competencies needed to shift from compliance-oriented routines to evidence-based financial decision-making. Equally important is the presence of robust change-management strategies, including clear communication pathways, stakeholder engagement, and gradual integration of new processes to minimize resistance among staff. To support long-term sustainability, schools must also ensure alignment with digital management systems endorsed by the Ministry of Education, such as cloud-based accounting modules, electronic reporting tools, and integrated school information systems. The integration of these digital technologies enhances transparency, accuracy, and auditability while enabling real-time access to management accounting information. Collectively, these practical considerations highlight that the successful implementation of the framework requires investment in people, processes, and technology, ensuring that financial innovation and managerial capabilities effectively translate into improved school governance and performance.

For School Leaders

This framework emphasizes the importance of evidence-based decision-making supported by reliable and timely management accounting information (MAI). School principals and senior administrators should enhance their data literacy and analytical skills to interpret financial and non-financial indicators effectively. By utilizing budgeting data, performance dashboards, and cost analysis reports, school leaders can make more strategic decisions concerning resource allocation, staff deployment, and program evaluation. Furthermore, embedding decision-making processes within a culture of accountability can strengthen transparency and stakeholder confidence in financial governance.

For Policymakers and Educational Authorities

The framework highlights the necessity for the Ministry of Education and state education departments to invest in digital accounting infrastructure and capacity building for school financial officers. Policymakers should promote the adoption of cloud-based accounting systems, digital budgeting platforms, and automated reporting tools to enhance timeliness, accuracy, and auditability of school financial data. Additionally, structured training programs through institutions such as the Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB) can ensure that principals and accountants possess the competencies to apply management accounting practices (MAPs) strategically rather than administratively. These policy initiatives can support a nationwide shift toward data-driven school management.

For Educators and Academic Staff

Teachers and department heads play a vital role in linking financial management decisions to learning outcomes. By fostering a culture of innovation and accountability, educators can participate in designing cost-effective instructional programs and resource-efficient teaching practices. Collaboration between financial and academic teams enables schools to align spending decisions with pedagogical priorities, thus improving both performance outcomes and sustainability. Encouraging innovation—such as using digital tools for tracking classroom expenditures or measuring program impact—empowers educators to act as partners in institutional improvement.

Overall, the framework provides actionable guidance for practitioners at multiple levels of the education system. It promotes a shift from compliance-oriented financial management toward strategic, innovation-driven governance, ensuring that every financial decision contributes meaningfully to educational quality and long-term institutional performance.

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Policy Implications

The proposed framework has strong policy relevance as it aligns with national efforts to strengthen educational governance, accountability, and performance through evidence-based management. It supports the aspirations outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025), which emphasizes school autonomy, professional accountability, and the effective use of data to improve student outcomes. By integrating Management Accounting Information (MAI) and innovation in financial management within the decision-making process, the framework reinforces the Ministry of Education's (MOE) commitment to enhancing transparency, efficiency, and fiscal discipline across schools.

From a governance perspective, the framework complements the MOE Financial Governance Standards and School-Based Management (SBM) policy initiatives by promoting accurate, timely, and integrated reporting mechanisms. Through digital transformation and data-driven systems, schools can improve monitoring and compliance with public sector financial regulations while ensuring resources are aligned with educational priorities. The proposed model also supports Malaysia's broader agenda for digital government transformation and Education 5.0@UPSI, where digital innovation and analytics are central to institutional improvement and accountability.

Moreover, this framework provides a structured reference for policymakers to design capacity-building programs that strengthen financial literacy and managerial competencies among school leaders. Establishing standardized management accounting systems and performance dashboards across schools could enable the MOE to benchmark efficiency and identify best practices at both district and national levels. By institutionalizing these practices, policymakers can ensure that financial decisions are not only compliant but also strategic—directly contributing to improved educational quality and sustainable performance.

In sum, this framework offers policymakers a roadmap to bridge financial governance, data analytics, and innovation in education management. It advocates a paradigm shift from procedural oversight to strategic value creation, ensuring that every ringgit invested in education yields measurable outcomes in student learning, institutional performance, and societal development.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper proposes a conceptual framework to enhance management accounting practices in schools by integrating contextual, informational, and behavioral components. It argues that effective use of management accounting information—mediated by decision-making capability and innovation—can significantly improve both financial and non-financial performance.

Future research should empirically validate this framework through quantitative methods (e.g., SEM-PLS) using survey data from school leaders, or through qualitative case studies exploring implementation dynamics across urban and rural contexts.

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