

Understanding Parents' School Selection Preferences: A Case Study of Sekolah Dasar and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in Tulungagung

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Abstract

This study analyses parent's perceptions in choosing Public Primary School (SD Negeri) and Islamic Primary School (MI) in Bandung sub-district, Tulungagung district. The decrease in the number of students at SDN and an increase at Islamic Primary School in recent years indicates a shift in community interest in educational institutions managed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation using descriptive qualitative methods. The results show that parents at SDN 1 Bandung prioritize academic achievement at an affordable cost, while parents at MI Al Azhaar Bandung prioritize religious and moral education, despite the higher costs, which adequate school facilities and services offset. Factors such as teacher competence, teaching quality, facilities, curriculum, student achievement, school environment, and tuition fees are key determinants in parent's decisions. This research highlights the importance of adapting educational approaches to community expectations and local needs and how these factors influence parent's school choices.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis persepsi orang tua dalam memilih Sekolah Dasar Negeri (SDN) dan Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) di Kecamatan Bandung, Kabupaten Tulungagung. Penurunan jumlah siswa di SDN dan peningkatan di MI dalam beberapa tahun terakhir mengindikasikan pergeseran minat masyarakat terhadap lembaga pendidikan yang dikelola oleh Kementerian Agama. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa orang tua di SDN 1 Bandung lebih mengutamakan pencapaian akademik dengan biaya pendidikan yang terjangkau, sementara orang tua di MI Al Azhaar Bandung memprioritaskan pendidikan agama dan akhlak, meskipun dengan biaya yang lebih tinggi, yang diimbangi oleh fasilitas dan layanan sekolah yang memadai. Faktor-faktor seperti kompetensi guru, kualitas pengajaran, fasilitas, kurikulum, prestasi siswa, lingkungan sekolah, dan biaya pendidikan menjadi penentu utama dalam keputusan orang tua. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya menyesuaikan pendekatan pendidikan dengan harapan masyarakat dan kebutuhan lokal, serta bagaimana faktor-faktor tersebut mempengaruhi pilihan sekolah orang tua.

Keywords

Parent's perception, quality of education, school selection factors

Introduction

The development of educational institutions has become an interesting phenomenon, especially for public primary schools (SD Negeri) and Islamic elementary schools (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah), both managed by the state and the private sector. There are several reasons for this interest. Among them is that primary schools are educational institutions where children acquire the basics of knowledge, skills and values that are important for their future lives. During this time, children are at a critical period in their social and emotional development. Children develop self-confidence, start working in a team, and build close relationships with their peers and teachers while at school (Hong, 2017). In short, during this period, children develop their own character with their peers.

The next reason is that in Public Primary Schools, children begin to discover their talents and hobbies through various activities such as art, music, sports, and science. On the other hand, children also come into direct contact with societal goals and socially interact with the environment in which they grow and develop. It is therefore not surprising that parents are very selective in choosing primary schools for their children. The decision to choose a school for some people is certainly not an easy one. Some parents prioritize their children's education and have the perception that public primary schools are the best choice. While some other parents prefer madrasah as a place of education for their children.

Parents value certain factors in schools such as a strong academic program, the right school climate and culture, diversity, and a safe and secure environment. For the consideration of choosing public schools, parents believe that their children can achieve good grades when studying in these schools (Khan et al., 2015). They believe that by sending their children to public schools, they will get better knowledge because in public schools the learning process is superior to other schools. However, there are also parents who have concerns about public schools, especially regarding school discipline and safety (Mowen 2015). In addition, the safety factor is crucial for the physical protection of children in primary school who are still growing up and are very vulnerable to physical risks, such as accidents, bullying, and other threats. Overall, parent's feelings about public schools vary depending on their individual experiences and perceptions (Duman et al., 2024).

Parents have varying opinions on whether to send their children to Islamic primary school. Some parents believe that Islamic primary school provide a strong Islamic foundation for their children. Islamic primary school teach them about morals and values in addition to academic subjects (Setiowati, 2020). Parents consider that these morals and values will shape their children's good character for the future (Haryadi & Cludia, 2021). Parents appreciate the emphasis on religious education and want their children to have a good understanding of the principles and teachings of Islam (Suryadin et al., 2022). Other parents appreciate the integration of general and religious education in these schools, seeing it as a way for their children to develop academically while still maintaining their religious identity (Nugroho & Kristiawan, 2024). In addition, parents appreciate the Quran memorization program offered by the Islamic primary school, as it is seen as a key distinguishing feature of these schools (Hayati 2019). Overall, parents who choose Islamic primary school for their children, recognise the importance of internalising Islamic education and creating an Islamic environment both at school and at home (Budiyanti et al., 2024).

Every parent has a tendency to provide the best for their children. Educational institutions that consider themselves quality often charge exorbitant fees. This can pose a challenge for some parents who do not have sufficient income. It is undeniable that tuition fees play an important role in ensuring the existence of high-quality education infrastructure, as it serves to facilitate the smooth operation of school programmes. Prospective guardians will tend to compare tuition fees with the quality of education that will be provided to their children. As a general rule, parents will choose schools that offer more affordable tuition fees compared to other educational institutions (Astuti, 2020).

The existence of these two different educational institutions gives the community a wider choice. With this choice, there is a tendency to compare the two. This is where the general public perceives that educational institutions managed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Islamic primary school) are of lower quality, compared to educational institutions under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture (Public Primary Schools). However, in Bandung Sub-district, Tulungagung Regency, the perception of primary schools and Islamic primary school has shifted. Islamic elementary school, which initially received the assumption of less quality from the community, are now actually experiencing development. Data on the number of students in public primary schools in Bandung-Tulungagung District over the last four years has decreased by an average of 6.8% per year in each school, while the number of students in Islamic elementary schools has increased by an average of 5.6% per year in each Islamic primary school.

From these data, it can be concluded that in the last four years, there has been a decrease in the number of students in primary schools and an increase in the number of students in Islamic primary school. This increase in the number of students in Islamic primary school is another indicator of the increasing public interest in educational institutions under the scope of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This also raises an interesting fact that the madrasahs that are in high demand actually charge high tuition fees. This fact contradicts the initial fact that parents will choose schools with more affordable fees.

Based on the author's search database, the following are presented several previous studies with aspects relevant to the research to be carried out. First, research was conducted by Suryadin (2022) entitled *Parents' Perceptions of Students' Guardians on Education Services at Yaumi Fatimah Kudus Integrated Islamic Elementary School*. This study discusses the perceptions of student guardians of education services at SDIT Yaumi Fatimah by looking at several aspects, such as learning services, administration, filing, infrastructure and financing. From several aspects, all of them look good except for the aspect of financing which is considered quite expensive by parents of students so that it has an impact on reducing the number of students in the school.

Second, research by Budiyanti (2022) entitled *Parents' Motivation for Choosing a Faith-Based School at Al-Azhar Islamic Elementary School, Cirebon City*. This paper discusses the factors that influence parents' motivation to choose Al Azhar Islamic Elementary School. The factors are reviewed from facilities, curriculum, services, location, religious education, quality of educators, environment, family, and alumni achievement. Of these factors, the most

dominant is the quality of educators, namely the professionalism and skills of teachers in teaching, as well as facilities in schools such as classrooms for student learning.

Third, research with the title “Education studies: parents’ preference for private schools over public schools” (Perwita & Widuri, 2023). The results found several strong reasons for parents to choose private schools over public schools. These reasons are dominated by factors such as academic achievement, school facilities, teacher quality, school performance, the number of graduates accepted by reputable universities, discipline, strategic location, complete school facilities, some family members went to school there first, religious values, education costs, and private schools with Islamic nuances are very concerned about ideological motives, educational motives, structuralist motives, economic motives, and pragmatic motives (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

From the studies that have been conducted, there are differences with the research that the researcher wants to do, namely knowing the perceptions of parents of several public primary schools and Islamic elementary school in one area of Bandung sub-district, Tulungagung Regency, which is located close to each educational institution. Based on the background that has been described above, as well as comparisons with previous research, researchers have an interest in conducting research with the title “*Analysis of Parents’ Perceptions in Primary Schools and Islamic Primary Schools in Tulungagung: A Case Study of School Selection Tendencies.*”

Method

Based on the objectives to be achieved and the title taken by the researcher, namely Analysis of Parents’ Perceptions on the Quality of Public primary schools and Islamic primary school in Tulungagung: A Case Study of School Selection Tendencies, the research method to be used is descriptive qualitative method. The descriptive approach was chosen in this study because the main focus of the research is to understand perceptions of school quality. According to (Moleong, 2010), descriptive qualitative approach is a term used in qualitative research to examine a phenomenon in depth. This approach is commonly used in social phenomenology because it allows researchers to build and discover the essence of participants’ experiences, either with or without the researcher’s direct involvement in the phenomenon. This research was conducted at Sekolah Dasar Negeri 1 Bandung and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Al Azhaar Bandung, Tulungagung Regency. The research subjects included parents, teachers, and school principals. Data collection was conducted through three methods: interviews, observation, and documentation. This interview follows predetermined parameters and is a process of gathering information through direct interaction between the interviewer and the informant or source (Moleong 2016). Data analysis was conducted through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

Results and Discussion

Parents' Perception of Education Quality

Parents' perceptions of quality education are influenced by several things. These influences can come from internal parents themselves or from external parties or from the surrounding environment. Internal influences from the parents themselves include the needs and expectations of parents for their children's education. This is in accordance with Suhono & Utama's finding, which states that parents' needs and expectations for their children's education, such as the quality of teaching, facilities and learning environment, greatly influence their perceptions (Suhono & Utama, 2017).

In addition, parents' previous education can also influence their perceptions of the educational institutions that will be the choice for their children. Parents who have higher education are likely to choose the best educational institution for their children. This is in accordance with Schunk's opinion, which states that parents' experience with previous educational institutions can influence their perceptions of new educational institutions (Schunk et al., 2014). Especially if the parents also have a middle to upper economic background. Surely they have high expectations of educational institutions for their children's success. This is in accordance with research conducted by Bellibaş & Gümüş found that parents with higher economic backgrounds tend to have higher expectations of educational institutions (Bellibaş & Gümüş, 2013).

External influences, on the other hand, come from the neighbourhood and the community with which parents have direct contact. With the growth of various media that can be easily accessed by the public, educational institutions also take advantage of this. Through the media, educational institutions can provide information and promotions to be better known by the wider community. In addition, recommendations from other parties are also very influential, especially if the informant is a trusted party or has a good relationship with prospective student guardians. This is in accordance with the opinion of Kotler & Keller, who state that information obtained from the media, friend recommendations, or official reports can influence parents' perceptions of the quality and reputation of educational institutions (Kotler 2016).

Education is fundamentally important for children, serving as a foundation for their future development and well-being. Various theories underscore the necessity of education, emphasising its role in shaping moral, mental, and social capacities. Abdullah Nasih Ulwan highlights that education is essential for nurturing faith, morals, and identity in children, ensuring they grow into responsible adults (Imamah et al., 2023).

Another related opinion states that quality education goes beyond mere cognitive ability, emphasising the importance of character development and moral values. Character-based education theory states that educational institutions should foster not only academic skills but also ethical and social competencies. According to Ki Hajar Dewantara, education is an effort to advance the growth of the character (inner strength, character), mind (intellect) and body (body) of the child, with the aim of advancing the perfection of the child's life, namely the life of the child in accordance with his world (Dewantara, 1967).

This parental perspective is in line with Nuryani's research which says that schools should foster moral awareness and provide an environment conducive to understanding good values, thus improving character in addition to cognitive skills (Nuryani, 2024). Similarly, some parents argue that the important thing for their children is religious education and moral formation. The quality of education is seen from the extent to which educational institutions can form good character for their children.

Factors Influencing Parents in Choosing a School

1. Teacher Competence and Teaching Quality

Teacher competence and teaching quality are important factors that influence parents' school choice, in line with the Expectations-Values Theory in education. Jacquelynne S. Eccles' Expectations and Values Theory significantly influences parents' school choice as it emphasises how parents' beliefs and values shape their decisions. The theory states that parents' expectations for their children's success and the values they associate with education are important factors in choosing a school (Eccles & Wigfield, 2024). In this case parents have the expectation that competent teachers will educate their child well, thereby increasing the child's chances of academic success at the school. Parents thus place a high value on teacher competence as they see teachers as a key factor in their child's intellectual and social development. Schools with competent teachers are considered more valuable and worth choosing.

These two schools demonstrate that the quality of teaching is not only seen from the academic aspect but also from the teachers' ability to create a learning environment that is enjoyable, balanced, and supportive of children's all-round development. This shows that both SDN 1 Bandung and MI Al Azhaar Bandung are able to fulfill parents' expectations in providing quality education, albeit with different approaches.

2. School Facilities

According to Teddlie, adequate facilities and resources available in schools, such as laboratories, libraries, and educational technology, play an important role in shaping parents' perceptions of education quality (Teddlie 2000). Based on this theory, the author concludes that the theory and the conditions in the field are consistent. Facilities in schools do play an important role in shaping parents' perceptions of the quality of education. At SDN 1 Bandung, the facilities are considered adequate enough to create positive perceptions, although not luxurious. Whereas at MI Al Azhaar, the more complete and sophisticated facilities had a very strong influence on parents' choices and their perceptions of the quality of education offered. This suggests that while the level of luxury of the facilities differs, what matters is how they fulfil educational needs and provide added value for students. Supportive facilities, even if considered standard, can have a significant positive impact on parents' perceptions. Conversely, superior and diverse facilities, such as at MI Al Azhaar, can improve parents' perceptions of the quality of education and make the school more attractive in their eyes.

3. Curriculum

A curriculum that meets the needs of the times and is able to develop students' potential to the fullest is another important factor. Parents want a curriculum that not only focuses on academic aspects but also character development (Fullan 2007). Based on this theory, the author concludes that the theory and the conditions in the field are consistent. At SD Negeri 1 Bandung, the curriculum used is the National Curriculum, with a gradual transition process from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. Parents in this school feel that the learning duration is effective enough to provide adequate learning focus for children without making them feel exhausted.

However, they also realise the shortcomings in religious learning, which makes them look for additional solutions outside of school, such as sending children to Qur'an Learning Center or private religious classes. Meanwhile, MI Al Azhaar implements the Merdeka Curriculum with religious-based components to fulfill the school's vision and mission. In addition, MI Al Azhaar offers a special program with an international curriculum for one selected class. These innovations in learning demonstrate the school's efforts to ensure that each student can develop according to their level of ability, which is very much in line with Fullan's theory on the importance of a curriculum that can accommodate the individual needs and potential of students (Fullan, 2023).

4. Student Achievement

Student achievement in various competitions is one of the indicators that show the quality of an educational institution. SD Negeri 1 Bandung, although actively participating in various competitions, has limitations in achieving first place consistently due to the limited number of students. This shows that the school is not very prominent in terms of academic or non-academic achievements. According to Bosetti's theory, parents who seek competitive advantage through achievement may not consider SD Negeri 1 Bandung as a top choice if they prioritize academic achievement as a deciding factor.

However, parents in this school focus more on other aspects, such as affordable tuition fees and a comfortable learning environment. This is in line with Bosetti's view that economic factors often take priority for parents from lower economic backgrounds, who may not have access to or a strong interest in schools with a higher academic reputation if it means a large financial burden (Bosetti & and Pyryt, 2024).

Meanwhile, MI Al Azhaar utilizes student achievement as an important asset that is always promoted to the wider community, especially through social media. Any awards or achievements obtained by students, both in academics and non-academics, are actively publicized, strengthening the school's reputation as a quality institution. According to Bosetti, parents who prioritize academic reputation will be attracted to a school like MI Al Azhaar because they see it as a place that can provide a competitive edge for their children.

5. School Environment

Hill and Taylor found that physical and emotional safety in the school environment is an important factor for parents when choosing a school, especially at the primary school level (Hill and Taylor 2004). Parents tend to choose schools that they believe can provide a safe and comfortable environment for their children. Parents' choice of school is not only

based on academic performance but also on their perception of how the school can support the child's overall well-being, including safety and comfort.

At SDN 1 Bandung, the safety of the school environment is one of the main reasons that encourage parents to choose this school. According to Hill and Taylor's theory, parents strongly consider physical safety factors when choosing a school, especially at the primary school level where children are still very vulnerable. At MI Al Azhaar, security is also a priority, but with a more structured and layered approach. MI Al Azhaar takes this approach by providing security guards who monitor the school entrance, guarding children from traffic hazards, and ensuring that only legal guardians can pick up children. MI Al Azhaar proactively creates an environment where violence is not tolerated and delinquency is dealt with swiftly by teachers or homeroom teachers, ensuring an environment conducive to learning.

An interesting point is how the MI Al Azhaar also uses social media to monitor and communicate school activities to parents. This creates transparency and allows parents to stay involved despite not being able to be physically present, adding a layer of emotional security for parents. They feel confident that their children are not only safe but also thriving in a positive environment.

6. Education Costs

Socio-economic differences influence parental decisions, with parents from higher economic backgrounds often having access to more school options and being able to choose more expensive or more prestigious schools. School fees and family financial means also play an important role. Schools with higher fees may be perceived as offering better quality, but this also depends on the financial means of the family (Bosetti & and Pyryt, 2024).

SDN 1 Bandung does not charge monthly fees such as tuition fees, building fees, or registration fees, making it a very attractive option for families with economic limitations. This affordability reduces financial stress for families and ensures that children from different economic backgrounds can get an education without putting a strain on family finances. MI Al Azhaar charges quite high tuition fees but many parents choose this school because they are confident in the quality of education offered. MI Al Azhaar appeals to parents who prioritize investing in quality education despite the high cost.

Although the cost of education at MI Al Azhaar is high, the school shows flexibility by offering cross-subsidization and fee waivers for families in need. This reflects the school's endeavor to create inclusive access to education, allowing parents from different economic backgrounds to choose this school if they have the desire and motivation. This approach underlines that MI Al Azhaar endeavors to reduce financial barriers and support economic diversity among students.

7. Parental Involvement

Parents' active participation in school activities and their children's education is believed to improve the quality of education. Collaboration between schools and parents is important to create an optimal learning environment (Epstein, 2018). At SDN 1 Bandung, parental involvement is facilitated through structured communication between teachers and

parents. Each class has a communication group which is the main means of conveying information related to child development, school policies, and on going activities.

At MI Al Azhaar, parental involvement is more integrated with various activities designed to build cooperation between school and family. The Parenting Programme held at the beginning of the semester aims to equip parents with knowledge and skills that support their children's development at home. In addition, the home visit program conducted by the MI Al Azhaar shows the school's efforts to understand the students' family environment more deeply and provide more personalized support according to students' needs. Family gathering activities also strengthen relationships between students' families and between parents and teachers. This activity not only builds a stronger community among parents but also supports harmonious relationships between families and schools, which according to (Hamlin 2022) can positively influence parental engagement and improve the quality of education. This suggests that proactive and organized parental involvement can improve the overall quality of education, in line with the theory that collaboration between schools and parents is important to create an optimal learning environment.

8. Values and Character

By instilling good habits such as greetings and good manners, as well as religious customs such as congregational prayer, SDN 1 Bandung helps shape students into mentally, morally, and spiritually balanced individuals. This approach, in accordance with Agus Zaenul's opinion, shows that the quality of education is not only measured by academic achievement, but also by how well students develop positive character (Fitri 2012). Character education contributes to better academic achievement by creating a more harmonious and supportive learning environment.

By building a holistic educational environment, MI Al Azhaar focuses not only on academic achievement but also on moral and religious development, which makes the school a top choice for parents who want a well-rounded education. MI Al Azhaar's approach also reflects Ki Hajar Dewantara's educational principles, where education should encompass the development of character (manners), intellect, and physicality (Dewantara, 1967).

9. Parent Satisfaction

According to Epstein, improving effective communication, transparency, and service can help build positive perceptions that result in increased student numbers and parent satisfaction (Epstein 2011). This research shows that parent satisfaction in both schools is influenced by how the school fulfills their expectations. At SDN 1 Bandung, although parental satisfaction exists, communication and transparency could be improved to transform higher expectations and more active participation from parents. At MI Al Azhaar Bandung, transparency and effective communication have created high satisfaction and positive perceptions of the school.

Conclusion

In general, parents' perceptions of school quality in public primary schools and Islamic elementary school in Tulungagung are influenced by various internal and external factors. Internal factors include parents' needs, expectations, and educational and economic

backgrounds. Parents with higher education and a good economy tend to have greater expectations of the quality of educational institutions. External factors include environmental influences, media, and recommendations from trusted parties, which also shape parents' perceptions of education quality. In addition, this study shows that there is a difference in focus between parents in public primary schools and Islamic elementary school in assessing the quality of education. Parents in public primary schools emphasize cognitive aspects and academic achievement at an affordable cost, while parents in Islamic elementary school emphasize religious education and moral formation despite the high cost. Factors that influence parents in deciding on a school include: a) teacher competence and teaching quality: the quality of teaching that is balanced and supports children's development is a major attraction for parents; b) school facilities: adequate facilities, such as at MI al-Azhaar, improve parents' perception of the quality of education; c) curriculum: a curriculum that is relevant and able to develop students' potential, as implemented at MI al-Azhaar, is an important factor; d) student achievement: academic achievement is a key indicator of school quality; e) school environment: a safe and comfortable environment is a major consideration; f) cost of education: differences in cost influence parents' choices according to their economic background; g) parental involvement: active involvement of parents improves the quality of education; h) values and character: the school's commitment to instil moral values is a priority for parents; i) parent satisfaction: satisfaction is influenced by how schools fulfil parents' expectations, especially in terms of communication and transparency.

On the cost factor, this study found other facts that were different from previous research conducted by Suryadin, which suggested that the financing aspect, which was considered quite expensive by parents, had an impact on reducing the number of students in the school (Wiranata et al. 2022). In this study, public primary schools that eliminated tuition fees actually experienced a decrease in students each year. On the contrary, private Islamic elementary school with high tuition fees attract the attention of many parents for their children's schooling by referring to other factors that are the advantages of Islamic elementary school. This research indicates that although these factors vary in priority, they all contribute significantly to parents' decisions when choosing a school for their child. MI Al Azhaar Bandung is more desirable to the community because it can offer a more holistic education that is orientated towards character-building and religious values. Parents are attracted to the transparency and well-measured quality of teaching, innovative learning programs, and commitment to inclusivity and social care. This more comprehensive approach to education gives MI Al Azhaar a competitive advantage over primary schools, which while having a strong academic curriculum, may not offer as holistic or personalized an educational experience as Islamic elementary school. This makes MI Al Azhaar Bandung a more attractive option for many parents who want the best for their children's academic and moral development.

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Conflict of Interests

There are no disclosed conflicts of interest for the authors. I attest that the submission is unique and is not already being considered by another publisher.

Ethical Considerations

The sources of this research—articles, books, research papers, and scientific forum proceedings—are all free of copyright violations.

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