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Beyond the Price Tag: How Quality Transformation Drives Parental Trust and School Choice in Islamic Education

Ivan Fanani Qomusuddin[1], Nur Fatimah[2], Wina Sapitri[3], Siti Latifah[4], Bambang Samsul Arifin[5], A-eshah Wemama[6]
[1]Islamic Education Department, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah At-Taqwa Ciparay Bandung, West Java, Indonesia
[2]Islamic Educational Management Department, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah Al Ihsan Baleendah, West Java, Indonesia
[3,4,5]Islamic Education Department, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, West Java, Indonesia
[6]Education Department, Princess of Naradhiwas University, Thailand
Email: ivanfanani1980@gmail.com[1], nurfatimah@stitalihsan.ac.id[2], winasapitri@gmail.com[4], sitilatifah@gmail.com[5], bambangsamsularifin@uinsgd.ac.id[5], aeshah.w@pnu.ac.th[6]

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the influence of education costs and school quality on school choice decisions and to examine the mediating role of school quality in this relationship in the context of Islamic primary education. This study used a quantitative approach, administering a Likert-scale questionnaire to 168 parents of students. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling with the Partial Least Squares approach in SmartPLS to test direct and indirect relationships among variables. The results showed that education costs had a positive and significant effect on school choice decisions ($\beta = 0.187$; $p < 0.05$) and on school quality ($\beta = 0.554$; $p < 0.001$). In addition, school quality had a strong effect on school choice decisions ($\beta = 0.663$; $p < 0.001$) and significantly mediated the relationship between education costs and school choice decisions ($\beta = 0.368$; $p < 0.001$). This research provides implications that strategies to improve school quality should be prioritized in Islamic basic education policies, accompanied by transparency in the management of education costs, to increase parental trust and strengthen the competitiveness of educational institutions in a sustainable manner.

Keywords: *Educational Costs, School Quality, School Choice Decisions*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pengaruh biaya pendidikan dan kualitas sekolah terhadap keputusan memilih sekolah serta menguji peran mediasi kualitas sekolah dalam hubungan tersebut dalam konteks pendidikan dasar Islam. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif melalui survei dengan kuesioner skala Likert yang diberikan kepada 168 orang tua siswa. Data dianalisis menggunakan Structural Equation Modeling dengan pendekatan Partial Least Squares melalui perangkat lunak SmartPLS untuk menguji hubungan langsung dan tidak langsung antarvariabel. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa biaya pendidikan berpengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap keputusan memilih sekolah ($\beta = 0{,}187$; $p < 0{,}05$) serta terhadap kualitas sekolah ($\beta = 0{,}554$; $p < 0{,}001$). Selain itu, kualitas sekolah berpengaruh kuat terhadap keputusan memilih sekolah ($\beta = 0{,}663$; $p < 0{,}001$) dan secara signifikan memediasi hubungan antara biaya

pendidikan dan keputusan memilih sekolah (β = 0,368; p < 0,001). Penelitian ini memberikan implikasi bahwa strategi peningkatan kualitas sekolah perlu diprioritaskan dalam kebijakan pendidikan dasar Islam, disertai transparansi pengelolaan biaya pendidikan guna meningkatkan kepercayaan orang tua serta memperkuat daya saing lembaga pendidikan secara berkelanjutan.
Kata Kunci: *Biaya Pendidikan, Mutu Sekolah, Keputusan Memilih Sekolah*

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INTRODUCTION

Educational decision-making has become an increasingly important issue in contemporary society as parents seek schools that can best support their children's academic and moral development. In many educational systems, parents act as primary decision-makers who evaluate various school options based on multiple considerations (Caplan, 2024; Chang et al., 2022; Meri et al., 2023). From a consumer behavior perspective, school selection can be understood as a decision-making process involving problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, decision-making, and post-decision evaluation. In the context of basic education, these decisions are particularly significant because early educational experiences influence children's long-term academic trajectories and social development (Featherston et al., 2024; Fu et al., 2023; Kyriazopoulou et al., 2023). Consequently, understanding the factors shaping parental school-choice decisions is crucial not only for educational institutions but also for policymakers and communities seeking to ensure equitable and high-quality education.

Despite the importance of parental decision-making in education, many families face complex considerations when selecting schools for their children. Educational costs have become a prominent concern, particularly at private institutions where parents must cover tuition, registration fees, uniforms, learning materials, and other related expenses (Azmi et al., 2023; Jebahi et al., 2022). At the same time, parents increasingly prioritize school quality, including teachers' competence, learning facilities, curriculum design, and the overall educational environment. In competitive educational environments, these considerations often create dilemmas for parents who must balance their financial capacity with expectations for educational quality (Hidayat et al., 2022; Procko et al., 2023). This situation is especially evident in private elementary schools that rely on tuition-based funding systems.

Previous studies have examined various factors influencing parental school choice decisions. Telnov et al. (2022) and Berechman et al. (2023) emphasize that consumer decisions are shaped by economic, social, and psychological considerations that influence how individuals evaluate service providers. Similarly, Restrepo et al. (2021) explain that decision-making in service consumption involves systematic evaluation of alternatives based on perceived value. In the field of education, Herlina (2024) and Eleftheriadou et al. (2023) found that school image significantly influences parents' decisions about selecting educational institutions, while Wang et al. (2022) and Aziz et al. (2024) reported that price perception and institutional reputation positively affect parents' school

choices. Furthermore, Bao et al. (2024) and Pomytkina et al. (2021) highlight that perceived educational quality often plays a more dominant role than cost considerations in school selection. Although these studies provide valuable insights, most examine educational costs and school quality as independent factors, rarely investigating the mediating relationships between them.

The interaction between educational costs and school quality remains an important yet underexplored area of research, particularly within the context of Islamic elementary education. Private Islamic elementary schools, commonly known as Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Swasta, possess distinctive institutional characteristics, including the integration of Islamic values into educational practices and financial dependence on parental contributions rather than government funding (Anggoro et al., 2024; Bashori et al., 2026). These conditions create a unique environment in which parents must carefully evaluate whether the financial costs required by a school align with the perceived quality of the education offered. While previous studies acknowledge the importance of both cost and quality in educational decision-making, empirical research has examined how perceptions of school quality mediate the relationship between educational costs and parental school-choice decisions (Subaidi et al., 2023; Zien et al., 2024). Addressing this gap is important for understanding how parents interpret educational value within faith-based educational institutions.

Al-Firdaus Private Islamic Elementary School in Bandung provides empirical context on the dynamics of parents' school-choice decisions. Since its establishment in 2014, the school has experienced steady growth in student enrollment, reaching 325 students in the 2024/2025 academic year. However, despite the increasing number of students, the school has consistently recorded a small but persistent number of unfilled class quotas in recent years. This condition suggests a potential mismatch between institutional capacity and parental demand in the local education market. In a competitive educational environment where parents have access to multiple school alternatives, decisions to enroll children in a particular school are likely influenced by perceptions of both educational costs and school quality. Understanding how these factors interact is therefore crucial for explaining why certain schools continue to face remaining enrollment capacity.

Based on these considerations, this study examines the effects of educational costs and school quality on parents' school-choice decisions, while investigating the mediating role of school quality in this relationship. The central argument of this research is that educational costs influence parental school choice not only directly but also indirectly through parents' perceptions of school quality. When parents perceive that higher educational costs are associated with better teaching quality, facilities, and educational outcomes, they may be more likely to select a particular school. Conversely, if the perceived quality does not justify the required financial investment, parents may choose to enroll their child in an alternative institution. The originality of this study lies in its examination of the structural relationships among educational costs, school quality, and school choice decisions using a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach within the context of Islamic elementary education, thereby contributing both theoretically

and managerially to discussions on the governance and sustainability of private Islamic schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine the relationships among educational costs, school quality, and parents' school-choice decisions (Luoma et al., 2024). A quantitative approach was selected because it enables objective measurement of relationships between variables and allows the testing of theoretical models using statistical analysis. Survey research is particularly appropriate for capturing perceptions and decision-making patterns from a relatively large number of respondents in a structured manner. The design allows the study to analyze how parents evaluate educational costs and school quality when deciding to enroll their children in a particular educational institution.

The study population consisted of all parents of students enrolled at Al-Firdaus Private Islamic Elementary School (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Swasta) in Bandung, Indonesia. Parents were selected as the target respondents because they are the primary decision-makers in determining their children's school enrollment. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that respondents had direct experience in making school selection decisions. A total of 168 parents participated in the survey (Rachmad, 2024). This sample size is considered adequate for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is suitable for relatively small to medium sample sizes and complex structural models. Nevertheless, because the data were collected from a single private Islamic elementary school, the findings should be interpreted within the specific institutional context of the study.

The research instrument was a questionnaire compiled based on the research variables. There are three variables in this study: the exogenous variable (independent variable), the cost of education variable; the endogenous variable (dependent variable), the decision to choose a school; and the mediating variable, the quality of the school (Ivan et al., 2022; Zamhuri et al., 2025). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements presented in each variable, using a five-point scale (from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5). The data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach, implemented in SmartPLS 3.0. SEM-PLS was selected because it is suitable for models with complex latent constructs, does not require multivariate normal data, and is appropriate for relatively small sample sizes. All constructs in this study were specified as reflective measurement models, with indicators reflecting the underlying latent variables.

The measurement model was evaluated by assessing construct validity and reliability. The rho-A value is used to assess internal consistency. According to Makrakis (2024), the higher the rho-A estimate, the greater the model's reliability. A rho-A value above 0.7 is considered sufficient to indicate reliability, but if it is more than 0.95, it can cause a reduction in construct validity. Convergent validity was examined using Average Variance Extracted (AVE); the obtained AVE

exceeded 0.5, providing strong support. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). All HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.85, indicating adequate discriminant validity for all constructs. Construct reliability was evaluated using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha. In addition, collinearity among latent variables was examined using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) to assess the absence of multicollinearity. A VIF value greater than 5.00 indicates collinearity in the structural model.

The structural model was assessed using a bootstrapping procedure with a specified number of resamples to obtain path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values for both direct and indirect effects (Hair et al., 2021). The significance of the mediating effects was evaluated using bootstrapped indirect effects. Furthermore, the strength of the relationships between constructs was assessed using effect size (f^2), while the predictive relevance of the model was evaluated using the Stone–Geisser Q^2 value. The Stone–Geisser Q^2 value (cross-validated redundancy) was used to assess the model's predictive relevance. Q^2 values are greater than zero, confirming that the model has adequate predictive relevance. The coefficient of determination (R^2) measures how well the independent variable explains the dependent variable. The R^2 value ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater accuracy in a research model. Costa et al. (2022) said that an R2 value greater than or equal to 0.25 indicates a strong influence; however, according to Qiu et al. (2022), in marketing matters, an R2 value above 0.75 is considered strong, between 0.5 and 0.75 is considered moderate, and below 0.5 is considered weak.

Table 1. Research Variables

Variabel	Indicators	Measurement Scale
Educational Costs (EC)	1. Registration Fee (EC1) 2. Educational Development Contribution (EC2) 3. Facilities and Infrastructure Fee (EC3) 4. Additional Fees (EC 4) 5. Relief and Scholarships (EC 5)	Likert scale
School Quality (SQ)	1. Teacher and Teaching Quality (SQ1) 2. Facilities and Infrastructure (SQ2) 3. Curriculum and Academic Programs (SQ3) 4. School Environment and Culture (SQ4) 5. School Services and Administration (SQ5)	Likert scale
School Choice Decision (SC)	1. Need Recognition (SC1) 2. Information Search (SC2) 3. Alternative Evaluation (SC3) 4. Purchase Decision (SC4) 5. Post-Purchase Evaluation (SC5)	Likert scale

Based on the conceptual research framework in Figure 1, the hypotheses in this study are as follows:

H1: School Choice Decision is positively and significantly influenced by educational costs.

H2: School quality is positively and significantly influenced by educational costs.

H3: School Choice Decision is positively and significantly influenced by school quality.

H4: School Choice Decision is positively and significantly influenced by educational costs through school quality.

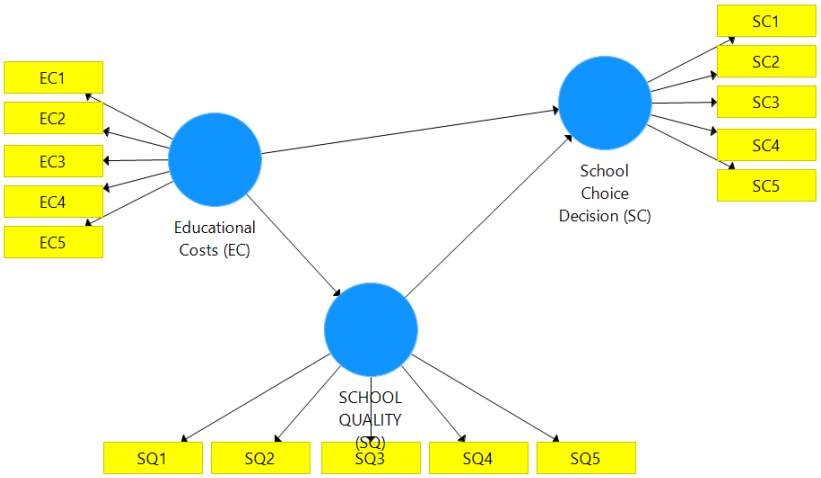

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study, which examines the relationships among educational costs, school quality, and parents' school-choice decisions. In this model, educational costs (EC) are treated as the exogenous variable that directly influences school choice decisions (SC) and indirectly affects them through school quality (SQ), serving as a mediating variable. Educational costs are represented by five indicators related to financial components of schooling, including registration fees, educational development contributions, facilities and infrastructure fees, additional fees, and scholarship or financial relief opportunities.

School quality is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct reflecting parents' perceptions of teacher competence, school facilities, curriculum and academic programs, school environment, and administrative services. Meanwhile, the school choice decision serves as the outcome variable, measured across the stages of the consumer decision-making process: need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation. The framework proposes that educational costs not only directly influence parents' decisions but also shape their perceptions of school quality, which, in turn, affects their final school choice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the study's empirical findings, based on analysis of survey data collected from parents at Al-Firdaus Private Islamic Elementary School in Bandung. The results are organized into several stages, including the respondent profile, measurement model evaluation, and structural model analysis. These analyses examine the relationships among educational costs, school quality, and parents' school-choice decisions.

Respondent Profile

Based on the data in Table 3, the majority of respondents in this study were male (13 people, 92.3%), while only 7.7% were female. This disparity indicates that more men than women completed the survey, which may reflect a family custom in which fathers are more often involved in administrative decisions or surveys related to children's education. In terms of parental age, the largest age group was 35-45 years old, with 110 people (66.1%). Meanwhile, 30 parents (17.9%) were aged 25-35, and 27 people (16.1%) were over 45 years old. No respondents were under 25 years old, indicating that the majority of parents who send their children to MIS (Private Elementary Madrasah) Al Firdaus Bandung are mature and productive. This also indicates that most of the children attending this school were likely born when their parents were already in a more stable phase of life, both economically and emotionally.

Regarding occupation, the majority of respondents were homemakers, totaling 79 people (47.0%). Other fairly dominant professions were private employees (22.0%) and self-employed (17.9%). Meanwhile, the number of parents working as civil servants (7.7%), teachers (3.6%), and BUMN employees (1.8%) was lower than in the other categories. The dominance of homemakers as respondents indicates that many families have a system where mothers focus more on household management and children's education. At the same time, fathers work in both the formal and informal sectors. The presence of a relatively large group of private employees and self-employed also indicates that parents' work backgrounds are quite diverse, with a balance between the formal and informal sectors.

Regarding the number of children attending MIS Al Firdaus Bandung, the majority of parents have one child attending the school, namely 144 people (91.4%). A total of 16 parents (5.6%) have two children attending the same school, while only 8 parents (4.8%) have more than two children attending the same school. This data shows that MIS Al Firdaus Bandung is more often chosen as a school for the first child in the family, and parents likely consider various factors before sending their other children to the same school.

Tabel 2. Respondent Profile

Items	Profile	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	13	92,3%
	Female	155	7,7%
Parental Age	Under 25 years	0	90,7%
	25 – 35 years	30	17,9%
	35 – 45 years	110	66,1%
	Over 45 years	27	16,1%
Jobs	Employees BUMN	3	1.8%
	Teachers	6	3.6%
	Private Sector Employees	37	22.0%
	Self-Employed	30	17.9%
	Housewives	79	47.0%
	Civil Servants	13	7.7%
Number of children	1 child	144	91,4 %

attending MIS Al Firdaus Bandung	2 children	16	5,6%
	More than 2	8	4,8%
Socioeconomic Status	Very Good	21	12.5%
	Good	129	76.8%
	Average	18	10.7%
	Poor	0	0%
	Very Poor	0	0%

In terms of socioeconomic status, the majority of parents were in the "good" economic category (76.8%), followed by "very good" (12.5%) and "moderate" (10.7%). No respondents were in the "poor" or "very poor" categories, indicating that most families had relatively stable economic conditions. This indicates that parents at MIS Al Firdaus Bandung generally have strong purchasing power and can meet their children's educational needs without significant economic constraints.

Overall, these data indicate that the majority of parents at MIS Al Firdaus Bandung come from relatively good economic backgrounds, hold diverse occupations, and are of sufficient age to support their children's education. The predominance of homemakers as their primary profession indicates a gender-based pattern in childcare and education. Furthermore, the majority of parents have only one child attending the school, which may reflect educational preferences or economic considerations in choosing an educational institution for their children. The combination of economic stability, diverse occupational backgrounds, and relatively mature parental age may be contributing factors to the educational and developmental patterns of children at MIS Al Firdaus Bandung.

Measurement model (*Outer Model*)

The Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique was used through SmartPLS 3.0 software to analyze the data and test the mediation effect. In PLS-SEM, the analysis proceeds in several stages, beginning with the measurement model (outer model). The final stage of the analysis focuses on the structural model and testing the initial hypothesis using the bootstrapping method. Based on Figure 2 and Table 4, all indicators have factor loadings above the minimum limit of 0.4, and factor loadings in the range of 0.6–0.7 are still acceptable.

Table 3. PLS-Algorithm Results

Variables	Indicators	*Loading Factor*	*Construct Reliability*	*rho_A*	*Cronbach's alpha*	*Average Variance Extract*
Educational Costs (EC)	EC1	0.760	0,880	0,874	0,841	0,617
	EC2	0.768				
	EC3	0.886				
	EC4	0.867				
	EC5	0.619				
School Choice Decision (SC)	SC1	0.781	0,885	0,880	0,838	0,610
	SC2	0.663				
	SC3	0.639				
	SC4	0.891				
	SC5	0.893				

School Quality (SQ)	SQ1	0.855	0,936	0,918	0,914	0,745
	SQ2	0.809				
	SQ3	0.905				
	SQ4	0.859				
	SQ5	0.884				

Table 3 presents the results of the measurement model evaluation. The factor loadings for all indicators exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.60, indicating that each indicator adequately represents its respective construct. The reliability of the constructs is supported by Composite Reliability, rho_A, and Cronbach's alpha values, all of which are above the recommended threshold of 0.70. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for Educational Costs (0.617), School Choice Decision (0.610), and School Quality (0.745) exceed the minimum criterion of 0.50, demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity. These results indicate that the measurement model meets the required standards of reliability and validity, allowing the analysis to proceed to the structural model evaluation.

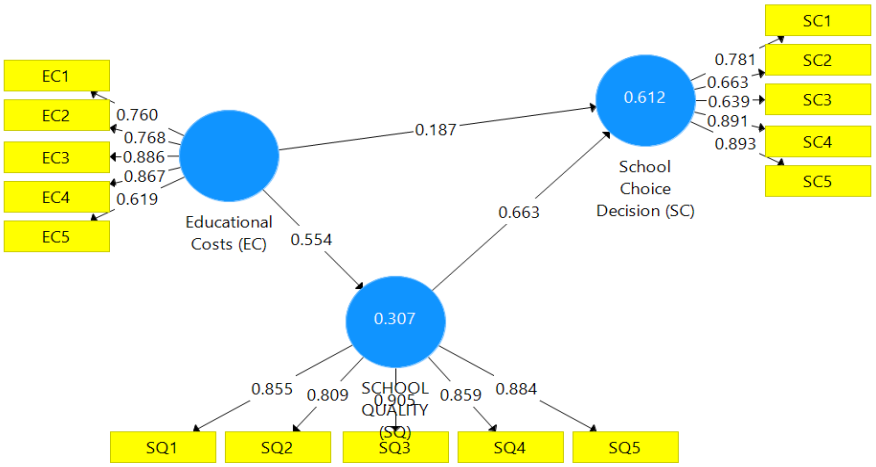

Figure 2. PLS-Algorithm Results

Based on the research results, the tested model has the lowest rho-A value of 0.874 and the highest of 0.918, indicating that the items within the construct exhibit high consistency. In addition to rho-A, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency, with a recommended value of>0.700. From the analysis results, the lowest Cronbach's alpha value was 0.841. The Cronbach's alpha and rho-A values met the reliability criteria, indicating that the model had adequate internal consistency. In addition, the AVE value obtained was more than 0.5, indicating that convergent validity was well fulfilled. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the ratio *heterotrait-monotrait* (HTMT). Table 5 shows that the HTMT value is below 0.85. indicating adequate discriminant validity for all constructs.

Table 4. ***Discriminant validity*** **(HTMT)**

	Educational Costs (EC)	School Choice Decision (SC)	School Quality (SQ)
Educational Costs (EC)			
School Choice Decision (SC)	0.660		
School Quality (SQ)	0.619	0.833	

Once the measurement model meets reliability and validity criteria, the next step is to examine the structural relationships between the research constructs. This evaluation aims to test the hypothesis and analyze the extent to which the independent variables influence the dependent variables in the developed model.

Structural Model (*Inner Model*)

The structural model assessment process begins with analyzing collinearity issues. This step is then continued with a relationship analysis using path coefficients based on t- and p-values. To determine the extent to which this model can explain education costs and school quality on school choice decisions, further analysis was carried out on several main indicators, namely: Coefficient of determination (R^2), Effect size (F^2), and Predictive relevance (Q^2). The collinearity among latent variables was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). Based on Table 5, all VIF values are below 5, indicating no collinearity in this research model.

Table 5. Collinearity

Construct	VIF	Construct	VIF
EC1	1.947	SQ1	2.520
EC2	1.788	SQ2	2.227
EC3	2.725	SQ3	3.407
EC4	2.276	SQ4	2.740
EC5	1.336	SQ5	3.114
SC1	1.768		
SC2	1.550		
SC3	1.555		
SC4	3.360		
SC5	3.262		

Based on the SmartPLS results, all dependent variables in the model exhibit good predictive accuracy, with R^2 values in the moderate category, as shown in Table 7. The R^2 value for the School Choice Decision is 0.612, which means that the exogenous variable explains the endogenous variable by 61.2% and 38.8% is influenced by other variables not included in the study, while the R^2 value for School Quality is 0.307, which means that the exogenous variable explains the endogenous variable by 30.7% and 69.3% is influenced by other variables not included in the study.

Table 6. R^2

	R Square	R Square Adjusted	Interpretation
School Choice Decision (SC)	0.612	0.607	Moderate
School Quality (SQ)	0.307	0.303	Moderate

In addition to R^2, the f^2 value is used to assess the dominant variables that influence the endogenous variables. In Table 7, the f2 value for School Quality is the exogenous variable with the greatest influence on the Decision to Choose a School variable. The Stone–Geisser Q^2 value (cross-validated redundancy) is used to measure predictive relevance. This study obtained cross-validated redundancy

values of 0.354 and 0.218 for the two variables, as shown in Table 9. All Q^2 values are greater than zero. Thus, the model shows acceptable fit and high predictive relevance.

Table 7. f Square

	Educational Costs (EC)	School Choice Decision (SC)	School Quality (SQ)
Educational Costs (EC)		0.062	0.443
School Choice Decision (SC)			
School Quality (SQ)		0.786	

Table 8. Stone–Geisser Q^2 *(cross-validated redundancy)*

	SSO	SSE	Q^2
Educational Costs (EC)	840.000	840.000	
School Choice Decision (SC)	840.000	542.919	0.354
School Quality (SQ)	840.000	657.109	0.218

The results of the study show that, as shown in Figure 3 and Table 9, Educational Costs (p-value = 0,000, p < 0,01) and School Quality (p-value = 0,008, p < 0,01) have a positive and significant influence on the school choice decision. Furthermore, the mediating factor of school quality can act as a mediator between educational costs and school choice decision (*p-value = 0,000, p < 0,01*).

Table 9. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	*Original Sample*	*t-value*	*p-value*	Decision
Hypothesis I	Educational Costs - School Choice Decision	0,187	2,684	0.008	significant
Hypothesis II	Educational Costs – School Quality	0,554	8,425	0,000	significant
Hypothesis II	School Quality - School Choice Decision	0,663	12,365	0,000	significant
Hypothesis IV	Educational Costs - School Quality - School Choice Decision	0,368	7,886	0,000	significant

Table 9 presents the results of the hypothesis testing using the bootstrapping procedure. The findings indicate that educational costs have a positive and significant effect on school choice decisions ($\beta = 0.187$, $p < 0.05$), supporting Hypothesis I. Educational costs also significantly influence school quality ($\beta = 0.554$, $p < 0.001$), confirming Hypothesis II. Furthermore, school quality shows a strong positive effect on school choice decision ($\beta = 0.663$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis III. In addition, the indirect effect analysis demonstrates that educational costs significantly influence school choice decisions through school quality ($\beta = 0.368$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the mediating role of school quality and supporting Hypothesis IV. These results indicate that school quality plays an important role in strengthening the relationship between educational costs and parents' school selection decisions.

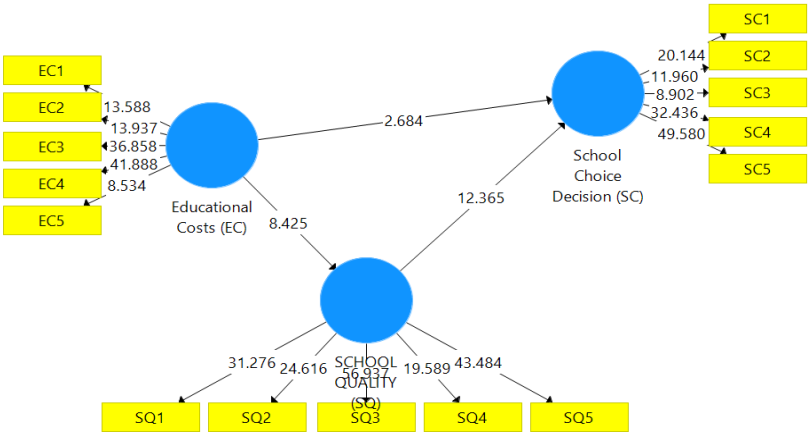

Figure 3. ***Path Coefficients***

The developed model aims to predict factors influencing parents' school-choice decisions, specifically the effects of educational costs and school quality. Based on the PLS algorithm, four hypotheses are supported, with two main factors, namely education costs and school quality. Education costs have a direct positive effect of 18.7% on the school choice decision. The higher the education costs that parents can afford, the more likely they are to choose that school, and education costs have a direct effect of 55.4% on school quality. This means that schools with higher costs tend to have better education quality in terms of facilities, teaching staff, and academic programs. School quality has a direct positive effect of 66.3% on the decision to choose a school. Parents are more likely to choose schools they perceive as having good educational quality. School quality mediates the relationship between educational costs and school choice decisions by 36.8%. In other words, higher educational costs enable schools to improve the quality of education, which then influences parents' decisions about which schools to choose for their children.

DISCUSSION

This structural model successfully validated and analyzed the factors underlying parents' school choice decisions. Furthermore, it provided deeper insight into the key factors influencing parental preferences, thus contributing to improvements in the education system at MIS Al Firdaus Bandung. In terms of school choice decisions, educational cost and school quality were shown to have a significant influence. (Harahap et al., 2025; Qomusuddin et al., 2021; Tjay et al., 2025). The results of the structural model analysis also show that several indicators of education costs and school quality significantly influence parents' decisions to choose MIS Al-Firdaus Bandung. Regarding education costs, considerations related to school facilities and infrastructure (EC3) emerged as an important factor, as parents believed that the quality of these facilities and infrastructure reflects the school's commitment to student comfort and the effectiveness of the learning process.

Within the school quality variable, the quality of teaching staff and instruction (SQ1) is a highly significant dimension. Parents place significant importance on teacher competence, teaching methods, and teacher dedication as indicators of educational quality (Clarence et al., 2021; Stella et al., 2024). This

finding aligns with research at Karya Yosef Catholic Elementary School in Pontianak, where teacher quality and school image significantly influenced parents' decisions about which school to choose (Rudy Yanuarto, 2025). Curriculum and academic program indicators (SQ3) also play a significant role: parents tend to choose schools that offer a strong curriculum, diverse academic programs, and clear outcomes (e.g., student achievement). This is reinforced by the "educational quality" factor, which appears in many school choice studies, including those that examine curriculum as part of educational quality. For example, in a study of elementary school selection factors in the Society 5.0 era, curriculum was among the factors parents considered, along with facilities and teacher quality. (Bambang Irawan, 2023).

Furthermore, the school environment and culture (SQ4) also play a significant role: parents prefer schools with a safe, positive climate and a supportive, ethical culture. While not all local studies explicitly mention "school culture," several studies indicate that aspects of the school environment (facilities, school climate, and academic atmosphere) are among parents' primary considerations when choosing an elementary school. For example, in the analysis of school selection factors at Santo Nicholas Elementary School in Medan, "a positive learning environment" was cited as a reason for parents' decision (Faridi et al., 2021; Stella et al., 2024; Steyn, 2023). The school service and administration indicator (SQ5) also proved influential: the quality of school administration services, communication between the school and parents, and the professionalism of administrative staff were part of parents' perceptions of school quality. Several studies conducted in elementary school contexts have demonstrated that school services significantly influence parents' school choice decisions (Norhikmah et al., 2025; Zhunisbayeva et al., 2025). This finding suggests that the quality of school services plays an important role in shaping parents' perceptions and, ultimately, in influencing their decisions when selecting educational institutions for their children.

Overall, this narrative confirms that while educational costs (such as facilities and additional fees) remain an important consideration for parents, school quality plays a more dominant role in shaping parental preferences. In particular, teacher competence, curriculum quality, a positive school climate, and efficient administrative services significantly influence parents' perceptions when selecting an educational institution for their children. These findings indicate that parents tend to evaluate the value of educational costs in relation to the quality of services and learning outcomes offered by the school. The practical implication of this finding is that MIS Al-Firdaus should prioritize continuous investment in teacher professional development, improvements in administrative services, and maintenance of school facilities and infrastructure. At the same time, implementing a transparent and affordable fee policy may strengthen parental trust and help attract and retain students in an increasingly competitive educational environment.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the empirical data were collected from a single private Islamic elementary school; therefore, the results are context-specific and

should be interpreted within the institutional setting examined in this study. As such, the findings are not intended to be generalized to Islamic elementary schools in broader or different contexts. Second, this study focuses on two key determinants of school choice: educational costs and school quality. In contrast, other potentially relevant factors, such as school reputation, religious orientation, or social environmental influences, were not included in the model. Future studies are encouraged to involve multiple schools and incorporate additional explanatory variables to enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of parental school choice behavior in Islamic elementary education.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that parents' decisions regarding which elementary school their children attend are significantly influenced by educational costs and school quality, with school quality emerging as the most influential determinant. The SEM-PLS results show that educational costs affect school choice decisions both directly and indirectly through school quality, indicating a mediating mechanism. These findings suggest that parents evaluate educational costs in relation to the perceived quality of education, including the learning environment and school services. Consequently, school quality plays a central role in shaping final school choice decisions.

Academically, this study contributes to the school choice literature by providing empirical evidence on the mediating role of school quality in the relationship between educational costs and parental decisions, particularly in the context of Islamic elementary education. However, the study is limited to a single private Islamic elementary school and examines only two determinants. Future research is therefore encouraged to involve multiple schools and additional variables to improve the generalizability and comprehensiveness of findings on parental school choice behavior.

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