



CONSTRUCTING MADRASAH TRUST: FROM RELIGIOUS SCHOOLING TO STRATEGIC EDUCATIONAL CHOICE AMONG URBAN MUSLIMS

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Abstract: This study aims to examine how urban Muslim communities in Indonesia construct trust in madrasahs and understand the transformation of madrasahs from being perceived as second-class religious schools into strategic educational choices. This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological orientation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed using an interactive model with Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality as the interpretive framework. The findings reveal that educational trust in madrasahs is constructed through four interconnected processes: lived educational evidence, social reputation circulation, alumni trajectories, and individual confidence in educational choice. Parents' direct experiences of their children's academic, moral, religious, and behavioral development provide concrete evidence of educational quality. These experiences are subsequently circulated through family, neighborhood, and community networks, transforming individual evaluations into shared reputational knowledge. Alumni trajectories further strengthen institutional credibility by providing visible evidence of academic, professional, social, and religious outcomes. The findings imply that madrasahs need to strengthen educational quality, communication with parents and communities, alumni engagement, and systematic documentation of graduate outcomes to sustain public trust, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and position madrasahs as strategic educational choices among urban Muslim communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic education in contemporary Indonesia is undergoing a significant transformation in institutional status, educational orientation, and public expectations (Rusydi, 2025; Yaqin et al., 2021). Madrasahs, which historically developed as Islamic educational institutions emphasizing religious instruction, are now formally embedded within the national education system and

increasingly expected to meet standards of academic achievement, institutional accountability, technological adaptation, and graduate competitiveness comparable to those of general schools (Adnan, 2022). Contemporary Islamic education policy has gradually shifted from merely accommodating religious education toward integrating Islamic institutions more comprehensively into national educational development (Asror et al., 2023; Junaidi et al., 2025). This institutional restructuring has also affected the ways madrasahs negotiate tradition, government regulation, curricular modernization, and public expectations (Altinyelken, 2021). Recent curriculum reforms demonstrate that madrasahs are increasingly required to exercise educational autonomy while adapting the *Kurikulum Merdeka* to their religious and institutional characteristics (Jusubaidi et al., 2024; Zuhdi et al., 2024). At the institutional level, *Madrasah Aliyah* faces increasingly complex demands related to teacher capacity, infrastructure, student expectations, institutional competitiveness, and educational quality (Ataman & Safitri, 2024). Similar dynamics in Islamic schooling elsewhere suggest that institutional sustainability is closely related to the relationship between religious identity, institutional autonomy, state policy, and community support.

This transformation matters because Islamic educational institutions can no longer sustain their legitimacy solely through religious identity. Contemporary Muslim parents increasingly assess educational institutions by multiple criteria, including academic outcomes, character formation, institutional reputation, facilities, teacher professionalism, curriculum relevance, and graduates' perceived prospects. Adaptive curriculum management can shape public trust when parents perceive that an institution responds to social change while maintaining its normative identity (Fardous, 2024; Utama & Akbar, 2023). Comparative evidence likewise suggests that successful Islamic educational institutions increasingly seek to reconcile contemporary pedagogical demands with Islamic values rather than treating the two as mutually exclusive (Islamic et al., 2024). Curriculum transformation in Islamic educational institutions therefore reflects a broader negotiation between tradition and contemporary educational requirements (Elice et al., 2025). Among middle-class Muslim families, this negotiation may also influence institutional preferences as Islamic education is increasingly expected to provide religious piety, modern educational quality, and opportunities for social mobility simultaneously (Madum & Daimah, 2024). The proliferation of new Islamic school models among urban Muslims further demonstrates that school choice has become intertwined with religious identity, lifestyle, social aspirations, and changing forms of Muslim religiosity.

One of the central strengths associated with contemporary madrasahs is their claim to combine academic learning with religious and moral formation. Studies have documented madrasahs' role in constructing students' character through prophetic education (Kosim et al., 2024), structured character-education practices (Munir & Ulfatin, 2023), teacher professionalism (Komarudin, 2021), and integrative models that connect knowledge with *akhlak karimah* values (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021). Religious character is not produced solely through formal religious subjects; it is also cultivated through school culture, habitual practices,

teacher modeling, and institutional routines (Syaharuddin et al., 2024). More recent evidence indicates that madrasahs can cultivate moderate Islamic character through integrated curricular and institutional strategies linking teacher recruitment, learning processes, religious culture, and organizational policy (Fatmawati et al., 2024). Such evidence challenges simplistic representations of madrasahs as educational institutions primarily concerned with religious transmission. Instead, it portrays them as institutions seeking to develop students' intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social capacities simultaneously. However, evidence of producing these educational outcomes does not, by itself, explain how communities recognize them as evidence of institutional quality.

The increasing importance of families and communities further complicates the meaning of educational quality. Educational legitimacy is not created only within the school; it is also negotiated through interactions among institutions, parents, students, and wider communities. Family engagement has been shown to shape students' learning and character development, particularly when parents participate actively in educational processes rather than functioning as passive recipients of school services (Fasinro, 2024). In Islamic educational contexts, synergy among family, school, and community can reinforce shared values, communication, trust, and collective responsibility (Qoyum et al., 2022). More broadly, family-school partnership research cautions against reducing parental engagement to attendance at formal school events, emphasizing instead reciprocal relationships, recognition, and participation in children's educational development (Fitrah et al., 2025). Perceptions of school climate also vary among teachers, parents, and students, suggesting that institutional reputation is formed through multiple social positions rather than through a single official narrative (Huguley et al., 2022). Importantly, parental satisfaction and institutional trust can translate into positive word-of-mouth recommendations, influencing how other families evaluate and choose educational institutions (Maulana et al., 2025). These studies indicate that educational reputation is not exclusively an institutional product but is also shaped through social interaction and stakeholder interpretation.

At the same time, the diversification of Islamic education has intensified competition for legitimacy among *pesantren*, madrasahs, integrated Islamic schools, Sunnah schools, and other forms of faith-based education. Salafi-based Islamic schools, for example, demonstrate how educational institutions strategically construct distinctive religious identities while also engaging with formal curricula and changing social demand (Arifin et al., 2024). Madrasah-*pesantren* institutions have also been studied as spaces where religious and national values are negotiated and institutionalized, while enculturated education illustrates how religious schooling can combine identity formation, civic values, cooperation, and character education (Schofer et al., 2021). Curriculum contextualization similarly demonstrates that Islamic education becomes more socially relevant when formal religious knowledge is connected to students' actual environments and contemporary learning needs (Malisi et al., 2024). Digital transformation has further intensified these pressures, requiring Islamic

educational institutions to reconsider instructional models and adapt to new technologies (Rohman, 2023). The integration of traditional Islamic educational practices with modern school curricula also suggests that contemporary Islamic institutions continually negotiate continuity and change. However, while these studies illuminate institutional adaptation and diversification, they offer less insight into how communities interpret these changes and turn them into judgments about whether a madrasah is a desirable educational choice.

These developments make teacher quality and institutional credibility increasingly central to public judgment. Professional development for Islamic religious education and madrasah teachers has been positioned as an important mechanism for improving professional competence and educational quality (Noer, 2023). Module-based professional development similarly emphasizes that institutional improvement requires strengthening teachers' pedagogical and professional capacity rather than relying exclusively on symbolic religious identity (Hutasuhut et al., 2023). At the same time, incorporating religious moderation and diversity tolerance into madrasah culture indicates that contemporary Islamic schools are responding to broader social expectations concerning citizenship and coexistence (Cardozo et al., 2022). Graduate quality has also become a strategic institutional concern.. Taken together, these studies reveal that public evaluation of Islamic education increasingly operates at the intersection of piety, educational quality, social relevance, and future opportunity. However, an important question remains: how do these institutional characteristics and educational outcomes become socially recognized as credible evidence of madrasah quality?

Despite the growing literature on Islamic educational transformation, three important gaps remain. First, much of the recent scholarship has examined what madrasahs do internally, including curriculum reform, teacher development, character education, religious moderation, institutional governance, and modernization. These studies provide valuable evidence concerning institutional transformation but offer less explanation of how communities interpret observable educational outcomes and convert them into shared perceptions of institutional quality. Second, studies addressing public trust frequently focus on institutional strategies used to create trust, such as adaptive curricula, service quality, management, or school branding. This perspective tends to position trust primarily as an outcome of what schools intentionally provide, giving less attention to the social processes through which parents and communities produce, circulate, negotiate, and stabilize meanings about an educational institution. Third, research on urban Muslim educational choice has highlighted class, lifestyle, religious orientation, institutional diversification, and market responsiveness. However, relatively little research has connected direct parental experience, informal social networks and word-of-mouth, and visible alumni trajectories as interconnected mechanisms through which an older "second-class school" perception can be reconstructed into an understanding of madrasah as a strategic educational choice.

This study addresses these gaps by employing Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality as its main theoretical lens. In this framework, social reality is neither imposed by institutions nor independently produced by isolated individuals; rather, it develops dialectically through externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Applied to educational choice, this perspective makes it possible to understand public trust not merely as an individual psychological attitude but as socially produced and shared knowledge. Families articulate expectations concerning morality, religion, academic competence, and children's futures; educational experiences provide observable material through which these expectations are evaluated; experiences are then communicated through interpersonal networks; and repeated narratives may become socially recognized representations of institutional quality. These representations can subsequently be internalized as credible grounds for educational decision-making. This theoretical perspective therefore connects individual experience with collective reputation and, ultimately, with school choice.

The novelty of this study lies in proposing an evidence-mediated social construction of educational trust. Rather than viewing trust as a direct consequence of institutional quality or religious identity, the study conceptualizes trust as emerging through the interaction of lived educational evidence, social reputation circulation, and alumni trajectories. Lived educational evidence refers to parents' direct observation of changes in children's religious practices, discipline, politeness, responsibility, and academic development. Social reputation circulation describes how these experiences are communicated and reinforced through relatives, neighbors, other parents, teachers, and community networks. Alumni trajectories provide longer-term reputational validation by making the educational consequences of madrasah visible in higher education, employment, community participation, and sustained religious-moral conduct. Through these interconnected processes, individual experiences can acquire collective meaning and become internalized as a basis for educational choice. The study therefore asks: How is the transformation of madrasah from a perceived second-class religious school into a strategic educational choice socially constructed among urban Muslim communities in Kendari, Indonesia?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed qualitative field research with a phenomenological orientation to explore how parents and community members experienced and interpreted madrasah education amid changing educational preferences (Chand, 2025). The research was conducted in Kendari City, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, where families encounter diverse educational options, including general schools, madrasahs, pesantren, and other Islamic institutions. Participants were purposively selected from parents and community members, madrasah teachers, and educational or community figures based on their experience and knowledge of madrasah education. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, with emphasis on participants' experiences,

perceptions of educational quality, student development, institutional reputation, and graduate outcomes. The data were analyzed by comparing perspectives across participant groups to identify converging patterns in the construction of madrasah trust. To protect confidentiality, participants were identified using role-based codes: P for parents or community members, T for teachers, and E for educational or community figures.

Table 1. Participants and Data Sources

Participant Group	Code	N	Main Information Provided	Data Source
Parents and community members	P	7	Initial perceptions of madrasah, reasons for school choice, children's religious and behavioral development, academic development, family experiences, and community recommendations	In-depth and unstructured interviews; observation; relevant documentation
Madrasah teachers	T	6	Educational practices, student behavioral changes, religious habituation, discipline, teacher-student interaction, communication with parents, and perceptions of graduate development	In-depth and unstructured interviews; observation; institutional documentation
Educational and community figures	E	3	Broader changes in public perception, institutional reputation, educational competition, community expectations, and perceived graduate outcomes	In-depth and unstructured interviews; documentation
Documentary and observational sources	—	—	School activities, religious practices, educational programs, teacher-student interactions, community engagement, and institutional activities	Field observation, photographs, institutional documents, and activity records

Note: Participant codes are used to protect identities. Documentary and observational materials were treated as complementary sources for contextualizing and cross-checking interview accounts.

Data were generated through three complementary techniques: in-depth unstructured interviews, observation, and documentation, enabling the study to examine participants' perceptions alongside educational practices and institutional activities. Interviews explored participants' initial perceptions of madrasahs, reasons for choosing madrasah education, perceptions of teachers and curriculum, children's academic and behavioral development, information received through family and community networks, and perceptions of graduates. Observation focused on teacher-student interactions, religious practices, discipline, cleanliness, student behavior, school routines, and community involvement, while documentation included institutional records, photographs,

and relevant activity materials. Fieldwork was conducted in Kendari in 2026, with substantial interview data collected in February 2026. Data were analyzed using the interactive framework of Miles et al. (2015), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Coding focused on educational experiences, student development, social recommendations, alumni outcomes, institutional reputation, and changing perceptions of madrasahs. Related codes were organized into thematic patterns and compared across participant groups and data sources to identify convergent and divergent interpretations. Finally, Berger and Luckmann's concepts of externalization, objectivation, and internalization were applied as an interpretive framework to explain how individual educational experiences became socially shared meanings, representations of madrasah quality, and ultimately grounds for educational choice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Lived Educational Evidence

Trust in madrasah begins with what parents can see and experience in their children's everyday lives. For parents, institutional claims about religious education, character formation, discipline, and academic development become meaningful when reflected in changes they can observe at home. Rather than relying only on the formal image of the madrasah, parents evaluate the institution through the gradual changes they encounter in their children's behavior, habits, and learning. For some parents, this experience began with uncertainty. Madrasah was not necessarily the first educational option they considered, and initial expectations were sometimes shaped by limited knowledge of what contemporary madrasah education could offer. Direct experience gradually altered these perceptions. One parent described this change,

"At first I had doubts, but after seeing my child's development, especially in attitude and worship, I became convinced that the madrasah provides good education. It is not only about lessons but also about character." (P1)

What persuaded the parent was therefore not simply the institution's religious identity. The parent's confidence emerged after seeing something tangible in the child's development. Religious practice and character became evidence through which the school's quality could be assessed. Another parent described the change more intimately, referring to everyday interactions within the family,

"I could see the difference before and after my child entered the madrasah. Now he respects his parents more, cares more about his younger sibling, and usually recites the Qur'an after returning home." (P2)

The importance of this account lies in where the change was observed. The parent did not describe an improvement visible only inside the classroom. The effects were noticed at home, in the child's relationship with parents and siblings and in everyday religious practice. In this sense, the home became an informal space for evaluating the educational consequences of madrasah schooling. A third parent connected behavioral development with academic progress,

"Previously I thought that all schools were more or less the same. After my child entered the madrasah, I saw real change. The grades improved, but the way the child spoke also became more polite and responsible at home."
(P3)

This account illustrates an important feature of parental evaluation. Academic achievement was appreciated, but it was not considered sufficient on its own. The parent placed improved grades alongside politeness and responsibility. Educational quality was therefore understood holistically, through the combination of academic development and everyday character formation. Across these accounts, four forms of evidence repeatedly appeared in the parents' experiences: religious practice, interpersonal conduct, discipline and responsibility, and academic development. These dimensions were not necessarily experienced separately. Parents often interpreted them together as signs that the child was developing in ways that matched their expectations for a good education.

Table 2. Lived Educational Evidence of Madrasah

Dimension	Evidence Observed by Parents	Where The Change Becomes Visible	Meaning Attributed to Madrasah Education
Religious practice	Qur'an recitation, worship habits, greater religious awareness	Home and everyday routines	Madrasah supports religious formation
Interpersonal conduct	Respect toward parents, politeness, care for siblings and others	Family and social interactions	Education contributes to akhlak and social behavior
Discipline and responsibility	More responsible behavior, regular routines, greater self-control	Home and school activities	Madrasah develops habits that extend beyond the classroom
Academic development	Improved or sustained grades and learning progress	School performance and parental observation	Religious education is perceived as compatible with academic development

Table 2 shows that parental confidence was grounded in observable educational evidence rather than abstract institutional claims. Importantly, the

evidence spanned different areas of children's lives. Religious development could be observed through worship and Qur'an recitation; character development appeared in how children interacted with family members; discipline was reflected in everyday routines; and academic development could be seen through school performance. The teachers' accounts provide a complementary perspective. Teachers explained that these changes were not accidental but were cultivated through repeated practices embedded in the madrasah's everyday culture. One teacher described the process,

"When students first enter, some still need to be reminded to greet others or maintain cleanliness. After some time, these practices become habits because they are part of the culture of the madrasah." (T1)

The teacher's account helps explain why parents may observe changes outside the school. Practices such as greeting others, maintaining cleanliness, and following routines are repeated until they become part of students' everyday behavior. What parents experience at home can therefore be connected to routines that students encounter repeatedly at school. Another teacher emphasized that the institution deliberately defined educational success more broadly than academic achievement,

"We do not pursue academic achievement alone. Every day we habituate students to discipline, honesty, respect for teachers, and responsibility. From year to year we can observe those changes." (T2)

The parents' accounts while also revealing the institutional logic behind them. The teachers understood character formation as a gradual process of habituation rather than a one-time lesson. Academic achievement remained important, but it was situated alongside discipline, honesty, respect, and responsibility. Parents become more confident when the promises associated with Islamic education are translated into recognizable changes in their children's lives. Religious practice, politeness, discipline, responsibility, and academic development become meaningful not as abstract institutional ideals but as experiences that parents can see, interpret, and discuss within their families. A parent may become convinced because of what happens to his or her own child, but that experience does not yet constitute a broader community reputation.

Social Reputation Circulation

Parents' personal experiences did not remain within individual households. Madrasah education experiences were shared through relatives, neighbors, other parents, teachers, and members of the wider community. Through these everyday conversations, individual experiences gradually became shared knowledge about the institution. For several parents, information from people they already knew mattered before they had any direct experience with the madrasah. One parent

recalled that the decision to consider madrasah education was initially influenced by what was happening among families in the surrounding neighborhood,

"At first I did not know much about madrasah. Many neighbors sent their children there and told me that their children had become more disciplined and more diligent in worship. That was what made me interested in enrolling my child." (P4)

This account illustrates how educational choice can begin with someone else's experience. The parent had not yet experienced the madrasah directly, but stories from neighbors provided an initial basis for curiosity and trust. What mattered was that the claims were attached to children whom the parent could recognize and observe within the same social environment. Another parent described a similar process, this time emphasizing both educational and behavioral outcomes among children of relatives and neighbors,

"We chose the madrasah because many neighbors and relatives had children who succeeded after studying there. They were not only academically capable but also polite and diligent in worship." (P5)

The statement is revealing because the parent did not rely on a single indicator of success. Academic ability, politeness, and religious practice were considered together. In the parent's view, the experiences of other families provided an informal point of comparison. Rather than asking only what the school claimed to offer, the parent could look at what had happened to children who had already attended the institution. This process was also visible from the teachers' perspective. Teachers frequently encountered parents who had already formed an impression of the madrasah before contacting the school. One teacher explained,

"Many parents register their children because they first hear stories from families or neighbors. Usually they already know positive experiences from people who sent their children here earlier." (T3)

The teacher's observation confirms that parents' decisions were not formed exclusively through formal school communication. Information about the madrasah was already circulating within the community before parents arrived at the school. In this sense, the community itself became an informal channel through which the institution's reputation was communicated. Another teacher described how visible changes among children contributed to this process,

"Parents often say they chose the madrasah after seeing children of neighbors or relatives change positively, both in attitude and learning achievement." (T4)

Social circulation is not simply the circulation of stories. It also involves social observation. Parents may hear that a neighbor's child has improved, but they can also see the child's behavior, manners, academic progress, or religious practices in everyday encounters. The boundary between "hearing" and "seeing" therefore becomes blurred. A community member may first hear a positive story and then encounter evidence of that story in everyday social life. This makes word-of-mouth in the madrasah context more than a promotional mechanism. It functions as informal social verification. Parents tend to attach greater meaning to information when it comes from people they know and when the outcomes described can be observed in real life.

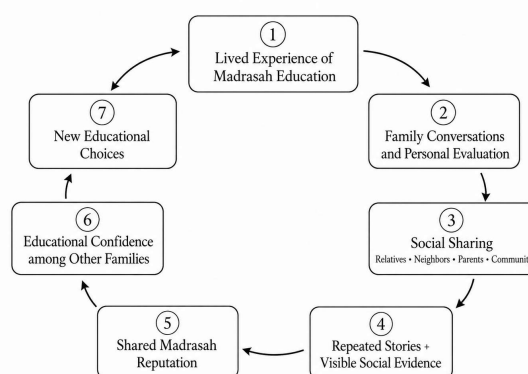


Figure 1. Social Reputation Circulation

Figure 1 shows that families who choose the madrasah subsequently generate new experiences. Those experiences can again be shared with relatives and neighbors, thereby reproducing and potentially strengthening the institution's reputation. Reputation does not emerge simply because many people happen to have positive opinions. It develops through repeated interpersonal encounters in which people communicate, compare, and recognize experiences. The movement between the two is central to constructing institutional reputation. Once similar experiences are repeatedly communicated across families, individual observations can become attached to the institution as a whole. This process appears to operate through ordinary social relationships rather than formal communication structures. Parents talk with neighbors, relatives discuss their children's education, teachers hear why new families have enrolled, and community members observe former and current students in everyday settings. Through these interactions, information about the madrasah becomes embedded in the social environment.

Alumni Trajectories

The strongest foundation for changing perceptions was parents' direct experience after enrolling their children in madrasahs. Several parents reported that their earlier judgments were characterized by uncertainty or by the assumption that madrasahs were not substantially different from other schools. Such assumptions changed when they observed behavioral and academic developments in their children. One parent explained,

"I have seen former madrasah students continue to university and find employment. They do not become arrogant; they remain respectful and friendly. That made me confident about sending my child to a madrasah." (P6)

This account is important because the parent's assessment of alumni is not limited to educational attainment. Entering university and obtaining employment are interpreted together with humility, respect, and interpersonal conduct. In other words, academic and occupational achievement becomes more convincing when accompanied by the moral qualities that parents associate with madrasah education. A similar interpretation appeared in the account of another community member. Rather than describing alumni success only in terms of formal achievement, the informant paid attention to how former students continued to participate in religious and community life,

"The madrasah alumni in our environment are not only intelligent; many are active in the mosque and community activities. For me, that shows that the madrasah succeeds in shaping their character." (P7)

For this informant, the mosque and community become spaces in which the longer-term effects of education can be observed. The school is no longer the only place where educational outcomes are judged. Alumni carry the image of the madrasah into public life, where their behavior can be seen by neighbors and community members who may never have interacted directly with the institution. Teachers also described alumni success in multidimensional terms. Rather than defining success through examination scores alone, teachers emphasized the continuity between educational achievement and character. One teacher stated,

"Success is not only measured by examination results. We are proud when alumni maintain their character, continue their education, and are well accepted in society." (T5)

This perspective suggests that teachers themselves understand educational effectiveness as extending beyond the period of formal schooling. Continuing education, maintaining character, and being accepted within society are treated as interconnected indicators of successful educational formation. Another teacher similarly emphasized the combination of academic competitiveness and religious-moral continuity,

"Our alumni can compete academically with graduates from other schools, but more importantly they continue to be known as polite people, able to interact with others, and consistent in worship." (T6)

The statement illustrates an important feature of the madrasah identity described by the informants. Academic competitiveness is not presented as

replacing religious formation. Instead, the two are understood as complementary outcomes. The value of madrasah education becomes particularly visible when graduates are perceived as capable of entering competitive educational environments while retaining the manners and religious practices associated with their schooling. Educational figures interpreted these alumni trajectories as evidence that had accumulated over time. One informant explained,

“Public confidence becomes stronger because people can see the results. Madrasah graduates are able to compete academically with graduates from other schools, but they also possess character as an added value.” (E1)

The phrase “people can see the results” captures the distinctive role of alumni in the construction of institutional reputation. Unlike a curriculum document, school program, or institutional promise, alumni are visible outside the formal boundaries of the madrasah. Their subsequent lives allow community members to make judgments about whether the educational claims of the institution are credible. This point was made even more explicitly by another educational figure, who described a shift in how madrasah graduates were perceived,

“In the past, people tended to see madrasahs primarily from the religious-education side. Now the assessment has changed. People see graduates entering good universities, succeeding in employment, and still maintaining good ethics. Perceptions change because people see real evidence.” (E2)

This account is particularly significant for understanding the changing position of madrasahs in the community. The perceived value of madrasah education is no longer derived solely from its religious orientation. Rather, its legitimacy is increasingly associated with the ability of graduates to navigate higher education, employment, and social life without losing the ethical and religious dispositions valued by the community.

Table 3. Alumni Trajectories as Reputational Evidence

Alumni Trajectory	What Communities Observe	Meaning Attributed to Madrasah Education
Higher education	Graduates continue to universities and compete academically	Madrasah can provide a pathway to further academic development
Employment	Graduates enter employment and demonstrate practical competence	Madrasah education is relevant to future opportunities
Social adaptability	Graduates are perceived as friendly, respectful, and accepted in society	Madrasah develops interpersonal and social competence
Religious continuity	Graduates remain active in worship, mosque activities, and religious life	Religious formation continues beyond school

Moral conduct	Graduates maintain politeness, humility, responsibility, and ethical behavior	Character formation is perceived as a lasting educational outcome
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Table 3 indicates that alumni trajectories function as multidimensional evidence. No single achievement is sufficient to establish the reputation of the institution. Rather, community members bring together several visible indicators when evaluating former students. A graduate who enters university but is perceived to lack good conduct may not represent the ideal outcome described by the informants. Conversely, religious commitment alone is also insufficient to demonstrate the broader competitiveness expected from contemporary madrasah education. The strongest reputational effect emerges when academic, professional, social, and moral trajectories converge. This convergence is important because alumni occupy a different position from current students. Parents can observe their children's development directly, but alumni allow the community to look beyond the immediate school experience and imagine longer-term possibilities. In this sense, alumni become a socially visible reference point for the future.

Discussion

Trust in madrasas among urban Muslim communities is built not through institutional claims, but through the accumulation and interpretation of educational evidence. Parents do not simply assume that madrasas are trustworthy because they are Islamic institutions or because they formally operate within the national education system. Rather, trust develops when parents can connect institutional practices with observable changes in their children, particularly in religious practice, discipline, politeness, responsibility, and academic development. Adaptive curricula can contribute to public trust when Islamic schools respond to community expectations through curriculum innovation, extracurricular programs, and institutional responsiveness (Avelar et al., 2023; Lesiak et al., 2024). Quality-oriented programs do not automatically generate trust in education; it emerges when educational practices become visible as credible outcomes in the daily lives of students and their families.

Parents appear to evaluate madrasah education through a combination of religious, moral, academic, and future-oriented expectations. Their interest is not simply in receiving religious instruction, but in finding an institution that connects religious formation with academic development and future opportunities. Islamic education among middle-class Muslims increasingly intersects with aspirations for quality education, modern services, and future-oriented forms of piety (Hidayah, 2021). Parents not only consume the Islamic educational credentials offered by schools; they evaluate whether those credentials are accompanied by outcomes they deem valuable. Therefore, the legitimacy of madrasas rests on the perceived alignment between what families desire from education and what they actually observe in their children's development.

The visibility of character development is crucial in explaining this process. Character formation in madrasas is achieved through habituation, teacher

modeling, institutional culture, and integrating religious values into daily educational practices (Rosi et al., 2022; You et al., 2023). Character formation also has reputational consequences beyond the students. When parents observe their children becoming more disciplined, respectful, responsible, and consistent in religious practices, these changes become evidence used to evaluate the broader educational institution. Character becomes reputational capital when it is evident in family and community life. Consequently, the effectiveness of madrasa education depends in part on whether its educational outcomes extend beyond the classroom and become known in the social environment in which students live.

Parents' perceptions are shaped not only by what happens to their own children, but also by what they hear and observe among relatives, neighbors, and other families. Satisfaction is an important antecedent of positive word-of-mouth and trust in educational contexts (Sun & Pan, 2023). Social circulation functions as informal verification because parents often receive information from people whose children they know and whose development they can observe. Through repeated communication and observation, this process helps explain why an institution's reputation can influence families who have not experienced the school directly. Interactions can extend beyond formal school-family partnerships to everyday neighborhood and community networks, where educational experiences are compared, interpreted, and gradually stabilized as shared reputational knowledge.

Alum trajectories provide a form of long-term reputation validation. While parents' observations of current students provide direct evidence, alums enable the community to assess whether the perceived effects of madrasah education persist after students leave the institution. Graduate success is understood multidimensionally, encompassing access to higher education, employment, social adaptability, community participation, religious sustainability, and ethical behavior (Alawiyah et al., 2023). Their journeys allow the community to compare the institution's promises with long-term social realities. A graduate who enters university or the workforce while maintaining the ethical and religious qualities society values provides stronger evidence of education's effectiveness than any promotional statements made by the institution itself.

Families articulate educational expectations concerning academic competence, religious practice, moral protection, and future opportunity. These expectations are expressed through educational choices, conversations, evaluations, and recommendations. Through repeated interaction, individual experiences become socially recognizable meanings, corresponding to the process of objectivation. When parents and community members repeatedly associate madrasahs with discipline, religious commitment, academic competence, and positive graduate outcomes, these characteristics become attached to the institution as relatively stable social knowledge. Internalization occurs when such socially available meanings become incorporated into individual judgments and eventually influence educational decisions. The present study therefore extends Berger and Luckmann's framework by identifying educational evidence as a

mediating mechanism between individual experience and institutional legitimacy. The theoretical contribution is not simply that madrasah trust is socially constructed, but that this construction is evidence-mediated: experiences must become observable, communicable, and repeatedly validated before they acquire the status of credible institutional knowledge.

Practical Implications

These findings imply that strengthening madrasa legitimacy requires educational strategies that prioritize demonstrable outcomes over mere symbolic promotion. Madrasa leaders must strengthen the quality of learning and character formation while developing systematic mechanisms to communicate students' academic, religious, and social development to parents in a meaningful, rather than merely administrative, manner. Parental engagement should be treated as part of building institutional trust, as families are not only recipients of educational services but also important interpreters and disseminators of institutional reputation. Alums should also be positioned as long-term educational stakeholders through sustainable alum networks and systematic documentation of graduates' educational, professional, social, and religious journeys.

CONCLUSION

Madrasah is increasingly constructed as a strategic educational choice among urban Muslim communities in Kendari through four interconnected processes: Lived Educational Evidence, Social Reputation Circulation, Alumni Trajectories, and Individual Confidence Choice. Parents' direct observations of children's religious, behavioral, and academic development, the circulation of positive experiences through social networks, and the visible trajectories of graduates collectively strengthen institutional trust and reshape the former "second-class" perception of madrasah. Through Berger and Luckmann's perspective, these findings demonstrate that educational experiences become shared social meanings and are eventually internalized as grounds for school choice, supporting the concept of evidence-mediated social construction of educational trust. The study is limited by its qualitative focus on one urban setting and its reliance primarily on participants' accounts and locally observable experiences, which limits the transferability of the findings to other contexts. Future research should examine this model across different cities, socioeconomic groups, and types of Islamic educational institutions, while incorporating comparative and longitudinal approaches to investigate how trust and alums reputation develop over time.

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