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From Individual Preference to Collective Choice: A Case Study of Parents at SDIT Al-Marhamah

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Abstract

Studies on parental school choice generally emphasize individual motivations and determinants, while the process by which personal preferences develop into collective choice patterns remains insufficiently examined. This study analyzes how parents' preferences for SDIT Al-Marhamah are shaped, socially validated, and reinforced within family and community networks. Employing a qualitative case-study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis involving five parents, the foundation chairperson, the school principal, and two teachers. The data were analyzed thematically and validated through source and technique triangulation and member checking. The findings demonstrate that religious orientation provides the initial foundation for school choice, while the integrated curriculum and expectations of character formation translate such values into concrete educational considerations. Religious habituation, teacher exemplarity, school safety, and responsive communication subsequently generate institutional trust. Parents' experiences are circulated through recommendations from families, other parents, alumni, and community members, transforming personal evaluations into shared social references. This study conceptualizes collective school choice as the convergence of value-based individual judgments mediated by institutional trust, reputation, and social networks.

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Introduction

The selection of an elementary school has increasingly become a multidimensional family decision. Parents no longer consider academic achievement alone; they also take into account teacher quality, school safety, the social environment, character development, school culture, and the alignment between the school's values and those upheld by the family. From this perspective, schools are no longer viewed merely as institutions for the transmission of knowledge but also as social spaces that help shape children's habits, character, and life orientations (Syari, 2025). A systematic review by Bekele and Kenea (2024) indicates that school choice is influenced by the interaction of multiple factors, including school characteristics, family needs, moral values, safety considerations, and socio-cultural contexts. Similarly, academic reputation, teacher quality, school

communication, and the learning environment have been identified as important considerations in parental decision-making processes (Faizuddin et al., 2016; Fauyan et al., 2024; Santosa & Aida, 2022).

In the context of Indonesian Muslim communities, these considerations extend beyond the quality of general education to include the integration of academic learning, religious education, and moral development (Khasbulloh, 2020; Pusztai dkk., 2023; Putra & Silfiana, 2023). Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools (Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu or SDIT) have emerged as educational institutions that combine the national curriculum with Islamic education through classroom instruction, worship practices, role modeling, and a religious school culture. Nevertheless, parents' decisions to choose SDITs are not solely driven by religious orientation. Such decisions are also shaped by perceptions of educational quality, school culture, institutional reputation, and the experiences shared by families and community members who have previously interacted with the school (Jonathan et al., 2023; Nugroho dkk., 2024; OECD, 2021; Rizki dkk., 2019).

This phenomenon can be observed in the development of Islamic elementary education in Langsa City. Between 2014 and 2026, approximately 7 SDITs, or equivalent Islamic elementary schools, were established and developed as educational alternatives for the community. Among them, SDIT Al-Marhamah was the first SDIT established in Langsa City in 2014. This position makes the school a relevant case for examining how parental preferences toward an educational institution are formed and sustained over time.

School documentation indicates a gradual increase in student enrollment at SDIT Al-Marhamah, from 365 students in 2021 to 372 in 2022, 375 in 2023, 380 in 2024, and 395 in 2025. Overall, enrollment increased by 30 students, or approximately 8.2%, during the 2021-2025 period. This growth occurred despite the increasing availability of Islamic elementary school options in Langsa City. Furthermore, students enrolled at SDIT Al-Marhamah come not only from the surrounding area in West Langsa District but also from other districts and even from outside Langsa City. Although the increase in student enrollment cannot be directly interpreted as evidence of growing public trust, it represents an important empirical phenomenon that warrants further investigation: how a school acquires and maintains its attractiveness amid an increasingly competitive educational landscape (SDIT Al-Marhamah Documentation, 2025).

This question is particularly significant because school choice decisions are often made under conditions of incomplete information. Parents obtain information not only from schools themselves but also from other families' experiences, personal recommendations, and reputations circulating within social networks. Fong (2019) argues that the credibility of information sources is a critical consideration in parents' school selection processes. González dkk., (2023) emphasize the important role of personal relationships in shaping perceptions of educational institutions. Consequently, a family's experience may extend beyond the private sphere when it is shared, exchanged, and validated by other families. When similar evaluations are repeatedly reproduced through social interactions, individual experiences may contribute to the formation of reputation, trust, and broader patterns of school preference. This suggests that school choice is not merely an aggregation of individual decisions but also a social process that gains legitimacy through family networks (Education, 2021; Unesco, 2024).

Despite this, most previous studies have focused primarily on identifying factors influencing parents' school choices, such as religious orientation, curriculum quality, character development, safety, teacher quality, and value congruence. While these perspectives are important for explaining preference formation at the individual level, they do not fully explain how individual preferences

evolve into broader patterns of choice within a community. In other words, limited attention has been given to the social mechanisms that connect family experiences, information exchange, recommendations, reputation, and trust formation in the school selection process.

This gap becomes particularly relevant in the context of SDIT Al-Marhamah. The growth in student enrollment and the expanding geographic origins of students provide an empirical setting for examining how individual experiences are reinforced through social interaction and gradually develop into shared patterns of preference. Therefore, this study focuses not only on why parents choose SDIT Al-Marhamah but also on the social processes through which individual assessments gain legitimacy and broader acceptance within family networks.

In this study, the concept of collective choice patterns is defined narrowly as the tendency toward convergence in parents' evaluations and reasons for choosing SDIT Al-Marhamah, reinforced through the exchange of experiences, recommendations, and social interactions within family and parent networks. This concept does not refer to the decisions of all residents of Langsa City, nor to a simple tendency to follow the majority's choices. Operationally, collective choice patterns are examined through three main indicators: 1) similarities or convergence in reasons for school selection; 2) the use of other families' experiences and recommendations as a basis for decision legitimacy; and 3) the formation of the school's reputation within the social networks of informants. In this context, the increase in student enrollment is viewed as a developmental background factor rather than direct evidence of collective choice formation.

Previous studies suggest that parents' preferences for Islamic schools are shaped by a combination of value-based considerations and educational rationality. Rusadi and Fauzi (2022) found that parents' decisions to choose SDITs are associated with perceived educational benefits, school quality, and expectations regarding their children's future. Similarly, Sari et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of religious motivation, moral character development, and aspirations for balancing worldly and spiritual success. At the institutional level, Apriliani et al. (2025) identified integrated curricula, teacher quality, school environment, and religious culture as important determinants of parental choice. Likewise, Fauyan et al. (2024) and Jonathan et al. (2023) reported that educational quality, religious orientation, school environment, service quality, and compatibility with family needs significantly influence parents' school preferences. However, these studies generally focus on the foundations of choice formation at the individual level.

A social perspective complements these explanations by demonstrating that school choice is not always the result of isolated individual evaluations. Fong (2019) found that social networks are important sources of information that influence school selection, while Robertson et al. (2022) emphasized the role of personal relationships in constructing meanings and assessments of schools. In this regard, one family's experience may serve as a reference point for another family, be reinforced by similar experiences, and eventually contribute to perceptions of institutional credibility. School reputation, therefore, should not be viewed solely as an attribute inherent to an institution but also as the cumulative outcome of experiences and evaluations exchanged through social networks.

Nevertheless, the existing literature continues to focus more on why parents choose particular schools than on how individual choices receive social reinforcement and develop into shared tendencies of school selection. The relationships among value orientations, satisfaction evaluations, family experiences, information exchange, recommendations, and reputation formation have rarely been examined as an interconnected and continuous process. This study seeks to address this gap by conceptualizing collective choice patterns as the result of a sequence of mechanisms involving

individual preferences, experiences, and evaluations of schools; information exchange; recommendations; trust formation; and the subsequent development of reputation and shared patterns of choice. This framework does not assume uniformity of choices but instead understands collective patterns as a limited convergence emerging through social interaction.

Given that this study focuses on a single school and involves nine informants, collective choice patterns are understood as patterns emerging within the informants' social networks rather than as a basis for generalizing the choices of all parents in Langsa City. Accordingly, the contribution of this study lies in shifting the focus of analysis from merely cataloging factors influencing school choice to explaining the social mechanisms linking individual preferences with the formation of reputation and shared tendencies of school selection.

The novelty of this study lies in its development of an analytical perspective that views school choice as a social process rather than merely an individual decision. Previous studies have generally explained parental school choice in terms of religiosity, academic quality, curriculum characteristics, and institutional attributes. In contrast, this study seeks to explain how individual preferences gain social reinforcement through experiences, recommendations, trust, and reputation that circulate within parental social networks, and subsequently evolve into collective choice patterns.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study addresses two main research questions. First, how do parents construct individual preferences for choosing SDIT Al-Marhamah based on religious orientation, integrated curriculum, character development, and school culture? Second, how do experiences, reputation, recommendations, and interactions among families transform these individual preferences into collective choice tendencies toward SDIT Al-Marhamah? The objective of this study is to analyze how individual parental preferences are transformed into collective choice patterns in school selection. Theoretically, this research contributes by integrating value-based rationality and social network mechanisms in explaining school choice. Empirically, it provides insights into the formation of trust and reputation within the context of an integrated Islamic school at the local level. Practically, the findings may serve as a basis for school administrators to strengthen service quality, information transparency, communication with families, and the consistency between institutional identity and educational practices.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to analyze how individual preferences develop into parental choice patterns toward SDIT Al-Marhamah. The case study design was selected to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within its real-life context by considering the interrelationships among participants' experiences, contextual factors, and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The school was purposively selected because it was the first Integrated Islamic Elementary School (SDIT) established in Langsa City in 2014 and demonstrated growth in student enrollment, increasing from 365 students in 2021 to 395 students in 2025, despite the growing number of Islamic elementary school alternatives in the region.

Nine informants were purposively selected: five parents of enrolled students, the chairperson of the foundation, the principal, and two teachers. The five parents were chosen based on variations in the length of their children's enrollment, their level of involvement in school activities, their experiences in obtaining or providing recommendations, and the diversity of family backgrounds relevant to the study's focus. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews; observations of classroom learning activities, religious habituation practices, school culture, and

school-parent interactions; and document analysis of institutional profiles, curricula, character education programs, and student enrollment development records.

Data were analyzed thematically through repeated reading, initial coding, categorization of codes, theme development, and interpretation of findings. This process followed the principles of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke, (2006), which emphasize data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review and definition, and report writing as integral components of a systematic and reflexive analytical process. Initial codes included religious orientation, integrated curriculum, character development, school culture, family experiences, trust, reputation, and social recommendations. These codes were subsequently compared across informants and cross-checked against observational and documentary data to identify recurring patterns and relationships among themes.

The credibility of the findings was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing the perspectives of parents, foundation representatives, the principal, and teachers, and through methodological triangulation by comparing interview, observation, and documentary data. Any inconsistencies identified in the data were further examined through source verification and member checking with key informants to enhance confidence in the interpretations, consistent with the principles of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017).

The study was conducted after obtaining permission from the school and foundation authorities and informed consent from all participants. Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, the use of research data, their right to decline answering any question, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. To protect confidentiality, all participant identities were anonymized when reporting findings.

Findings

Analysis of interviews with nine informants, observations of school activities, and documentation revealed that parents' choices for SDIT Al-Marhamah were shaped by a series of interrelated considerations. Five themes were found in the data: religious orientation as the basis for preferences; integrated curriculum and character-building expectations; school culture and educational experience as a form of trust; reputation and recommendations as a decision-enforcer; and the convergence of individual experiences as a pattern of choice in social networks. The five themes do not show that all parents have the same reasons, but show that there is a common point of assessment among informants that is the basis for the formation of patterns of choice in the social networks studied.

Religious Orientation in School Choice Decisions

Religious orientation emerged as a consistent consideration in parents' decisions to choose SDIT Al-Marhamah. For the parent informants, selecting a school was closely associated with their aspiration for their children's education to take place within an environment that nurtures Islamic values. They viewed the school as an extension of the family's role in reinforcing religious habits and practices already introduced at home. One parent explained that the decision to enroll a child in the school stemmed from a desire for the child to receive an education that would foster not only academic knowledge but also religious commitment and behavior aligned with Islamic teachings (P1, personal communication, 2025).

Interview findings revealed that this religious orientation was reflected in parents' attention to the school's regularly implemented religious programs. Activities such as tahsin (Qur'anic recitation

improvement), *tahfiz* (Qur'an memorization), congregational prayers, daily supplications, and Qur'an reading practices were regarded as integral components of the educational process rather than supplementary activities. One informant noted that these routines were particularly important because they created a learning environment that closely reflected the religious values expected within the family (P2, personal communication, 2025). For many parents, the existence of such programs indicated the extent to which the school's educational approach aligned with their family values and aspirations.

Observational data further illustrated how religious orientation was embedded in the school's daily practices. Religious values were evident not only during formal worship activities but also throughout classroom learning and everyday interactions. Teachers consistently encouraged students to use polite language, demonstrate discipline, and exhibit respectful behavior. These values were cultivated through recurring routines and daily practices across the school environment. Consequently, parents' perceptions of the school were shaped not solely by information provided in institutional profiles or promotional materials but also by what they directly observed and experienced through their interactions with the school community.

At the family level, religious considerations were closely linked to the desire for continuity between home education and the school environment. Several informants emphasized the importance of ensuring that the values instilled in the family would continue to be reinforced throughout their children's formal education. One parent emphasized that SDIT Al-Marhamah was chosen because its educational approach was perceived as consistent with the family's expectations for the development of children's attitudes, behavior, and everyday habits (P3, personal communication, 2025). This finding suggests that religious orientation in school selection is associated with parents' efforts to maintain coherence between family values and their children's educational experiences.

At the same time, the findings indicate that parents did not regard a school's Islamic identity as a sufficient measure of educational quality. Instead, they paid close attention to how religious values were translated into everyday educational practices. Aspects such as teacher role modeling, student discipline, communication between the school and parents, and the way children were treated became important points of evaluation. One informant remarked that the key issue was not the number of religious activities offered by the school, but the extent to which those activities shaped children's daily behavior and habits (P4, personal communication, 2025). This observation suggests that parents assessed the school's religious character primarily through their children's lived experiences rather than through symbolic representations or institutional labels.

Overall, religious orientation functioned as an initial reference point in parents' evaluation of SDIT Al-Marhamah. Family-based religious values motivated parents to seek a school that reflected their educational ideals, while their experiences with the school's religious programs and practices helped strengthen confidence in that choice. Among the informants, these experiences frequently became topics of discussion and exchange within networks of parents and families. Through such interactions, individual assessments gained broader social validation and were shared with others through recommendations and personal narratives. This pattern provides the foundation for the subsequent finding that decisions initially rooted in individual preferences can acquire stronger legitimacy through social experiences and recommendations circulating within parental networks.

Integrated Curriculum and Expectations for Character Development

Parents' considerations regarding the integrated curriculum reflect a shift in how educational quality is understood and evaluated. Educational quality is no longer assessed solely through academic achievement but also through the school's capacity to foster character development in a sustained and meaningful manner. For many parents, a quality school is one that supports children's intellectual growth while simultaneously cultivating positive habits, attitudes, and values that can be practiced in everyday life. One informant explained that the decision about which school to choose was closely connected to the expectation that education should contribute to the holistic development of the child rather than focusing exclusively on academic performance (P1, personal communication, 2025).

This perspective became more apparent when parents described the significance of an integrated curriculum in their children's educational experiences. Values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and social concern were viewed as qualities that cannot be effectively developed through instruction or advice alone. Instead, they need to be cultivated through consistent practice embedded within the learning process. One parent noted that integrating character values across various subjects and school activities allowed character formation to occur more continuously and naturally throughout the school experience (P2, personal communication, 2025). This finding suggests that parents evaluate a curriculum not merely on its structure or official documentation but on the extent to which it translates into meaningful learning experiences for their children.

Teacher consistency emerged as a crucial element in this evaluation. Parents believed that an integrated curriculum would lose its significance if the school's values were not reflected in daily teaching practices and interactions. Teachers' approaches to fostering discipline, assigning responsibilities, encouraging honesty, and treating students fairly formed an important part of the educational experience observed by families. One informant identified teacher consistency as a key indicator of the quality of education the child receives (P3, personal communication, 2025). From the teachers' perspective, this view was reinforced by the explanation that character development was pursued by integrating values into classroom instruction and daily routines rather than through isolated or stand-alone activities (G1, personal communication, 2025).

Observational findings further revealed that learning and character development were closely intertwined through classroom rules, teacher-student interactions, the assignment of responsibilities, and habitual practices embedded within school activities. Within this framework, character was not treated as a topic to be taught and completed but as a set of behaviors that evolved through repeated experiences and continuous reinforcement. According to one teacher, the success of character-building efforts depended largely on the consistent implementation of school rules and the example provided by teachers in their daily interactions with students (G2, personal communication, 2025). These findings indicate that, for parents, the value of an integrated curriculum becomes evident when they observe a clear connection between school programs and the experiences their children encounter each day.

Beyond classroom instruction, parents also highlighted the importance of the school environment as part of the educational experience. A supportive, inclusive, and character-oriented environment was perceived as essential for creating a sense of safety and comfort that enables children to learn effectively and interact positively with peers and teachers. One informant linked the school environment to children's social and emotional development, emphasizing that elementary education is a critical stage in which habits and patterns of interaction are formed

intensively (P4, personal communication, 2025). From the perspective of school leadership, the principal likewise regarded character development as an essential aspect of education that must be maintained through the integration of school programs, instructional practices, and school culture (K1, personal communication, 2025).

The integrated curriculum, therefore, serves as one of the key foundations parents use to evaluate a school's compatibility with their educational expectations. Their assessments extend beyond curriculum documents to encompass teaching practices, children's lived experiences, and the broader school environment. In other words, parents are concerned not only with what programs a school offers but also with how consistently those programs are implemented in practice. Within this context, the integrated curriculum contributes to the formation of parents' evaluations and trust in the school, which, in turn, relates to the broader role of school culture as a foundation for parental confidence and support.

School Culture as a Foundation of Parents' Trust

Parents' trust in SDIT Al-Marhamah was not shaped solely by information about its programs and curriculum. Rather, it developed through their experiences with a school culture that was consistently practiced in everyday life. Interview data revealed that parents paid close attention to how the school's values were reflected in daily routines, disciplinary practices, teacher-student interactions, and communication with families. For the informants, trust emerged when there was a clear alignment between the school's stated commitments and what they actually observed in practice. One parent explained that confidence in the school grew from seeing how the institution's values were reflected in the habits formed and the treatment their child received during the school day (P2, personal communication, 2025).

These experiences were particularly evident in the regular routines that characterized school life. Religious activities, discipline-building practices, structured learning processes, and interactions among students formed part of the environment closely observed by parents. Classroom observations indicated that these routines were not implemented as isolated programs but were embedded within the daily life of the school. Such consistency enabled parents to evaluate the school based on lived experiences rather than relying solely on the information they had received when initially choosing the institution. One informant noted that the orderly implementation of activities and the positive habits encouraged among students were among the reasons for maintaining confidence in the school (P3, personal communication, 2025).

The relationship between teachers and students also played a significant role in the development of parental trust. Parents paid attention to how teachers communicated with children, provided guidance, responded to student behavior, and fostered discipline. In the informants' view, teachers served not merely as instructors but as individuals who demonstrated the application of school values through their everyday actions. One teacher explained that character development was cultivated through role modeling, habitual practice, and ongoing communication with students, ensuring that moral values were experienced rather than simply conveyed verbally (G1, personal communication, 2025). This finding suggests that parents' trust was closely linked to their perceptions of the quality of their children's interactions in the school environment.

Communication between the school and parents was another important dimension of trust-building. Information about children's development, school activities, and issues requiring joint attention gave parents opportunities to understand how the school fulfilled its responsibilities. One parent stated that open communication enabled families to remain informed about their children's

experiences at school and made it easier to discuss any concerns that arose (P4, personal communication, 2025). From the school's perspective, maintaining communication with families was regarded as an essential strategy to ensure continuity between school-based and home-based educational experiences (K1, personal communication, 2025).

The findings also indicated that trust did not imply that parents viewed every aspect of the school positively or without critical reflection. Parents continued to hold expectations regarding improvements in instructional quality, discipline, communication, and educational services. Differences in individual experiences led informants to evaluate certain aspects of the school differently. However, these differences did not necessarily diminish their trust, as long as they perceived the school as responsive to students' needs and willing to engage in communication when problems arose. In this sense, trust is better understood as the outcome of an ongoing evaluative process rather than as the unquestioning acceptance of all school policies and practices.

From an institutional perspective, this culture was sustained through the involvement of various stakeholders within the school and the foundation. The chairperson of the foundation emphasized that the school's identity and core values needed to be consistently reflected in teaching practices, daily routines, and relationships with parents so that public trust would be grounded in actual experiences rather than institutional image alone (Y1, personal communication, 2025). These findings suggest that parents' trust emerged from the convergence of the school's promoted values, families' practices, and the institution's responsiveness to parental concerns. Over time, these experiences became a form of social capital that enabled parents to discuss and share their evaluations of the school with other families. Through this process, school culture became closely linked to the formation of reputation and the circulation of recommendations within parental social networks.

Reputation and Recommendations as Mechanisms Reinforcing School Choice

Parents' trust in SDIT Al-Marhamah extended beyond personal experience and gradually contributed to the school's reputation within parental social networks. Interview findings indicated that information about the school was obtained not only through official channels but also from families whose children had already attended the school. For many informants, firsthand accounts from other parents were viewed as more credible because they reflected actual experiences rather than promotional information about school programs (P1, personal communication, 2025).

These recommendations typically circulated through informal conversations among relatives, friends, and fellow parents. Stories about children's development, learning experiences, religious programs, discipline, and teacher-student relationships often shaped parents' initial perceptions of the school. One informant explained that confidence in choosing SDIT Al-Marhamah increased after hearing positive experiences from parents who had previously enrolled their children there (P5, personal communication, 2025). In this regard, recommendations served as a source of social information that helped parents reduce uncertainty when evaluating the school.

The findings also suggest that reputation is developed through an ongoing process of validation. Parents compared information received from others with their own experiences after their children entered the school. Recommendations gained credibility when actual experiences corresponded with prior expectations. As one parent noted, observing the child's learning experiences and participation in school activities became a basis for assessing the accuracy of information previously obtained from other families (P3, personal communication, 2025).

From the school's perspective, parental experiences played an important role in increasing public awareness of the institution. The principal explained that many families first learned about SDIT Al-Marhamah through parents or relatives with direct experience at the school (K1, personal communication, 2025). This suggests that the school's reputation was shaped not only by institutional communication but also by the experiences shared within family and community networks.

Enrollment data provide additional context for this pattern. School records show that student enrollment increased from 365 in 2021 to 395 in 2025 (SDIT Al-Marhamah Langsa Documentation, 2025). While this growth cannot be attributed directly to recommendations, it coincided with the expansion of social networks familiar with the school and the wider circulation of information about its educational practices.

Interestingly, parents did not emphasize a single reason for choosing the school. Some highlighted its religious environment, others focused on character education, curriculum quality, or their children's experiences. What was common among informants was a tendency to use other parents' experiences as a reference to validate their own decisions. Therefore, reputation in this study is understood as a shared evaluation that circulates within parental networks rather than a representation of the views of the broader Langsa community.

Overall, recommendations served as a mechanism linking personal experience to broader social validation. Experiences generated trust, which was communicated through conversations and recommendations, and those recommendations influenced other families' decisions. Through this process, individual preferences gained social reinforcement and gradually contributed to a shared pattern of school choice among the parents involved in this study.

From Individual Preferences to Collective Choice Patterns

The findings suggest that parents initially chose SDIT Al-Marhamah based on their own educational priorities. While some emphasized religious values, others focused on character development, the integrated curriculum, the learning environment, or their children's educational experiences (P1; P3, personal communication, 2025). These differences indicate that school choice emerged from individual evaluations rather than from a single shared consideration.

As parents gained experience with the school, their evaluations extended beyond the family sphere and became part of broader social interactions. Information about learning activities, religious programs, discipline, teacher-student relationships, and the school environment circulated through conversations among relatives, friends, and fellow parents. One informant explained that the experiences shared by other families served as an important reference when assessing the school's suitability for their child (P4, personal communication, 2025). This finding highlights the social dimension of school choice, where individual experiences become a source of information for others.

A recurring pattern of reinforcement was evident in the informants' accounts. Recommendations gained credibility when parents' actual experiences corresponded with the information they had previously received. Positive experiences often encouraged parents to recommend the school to others, while new families used these recommendations as a basis for evaluating the school (P5, personal communication, 2025). The principal likewise noted that many parents first became familiar with SDIT Al-Marhamah through families who had already enrolled their children there (K1, personal communication, 2025).

School records showing an increase in enrollment from 365 students in 2021 to 395 in 2025 provide additional context for this pattern. Although these data do not demonstrate a direct causal relationship between recommendations and enrollment growth, they indicate that school choice continued to be reproduced as social networks familiar with the school expanded. According to the foundation chairperson, maintaining public trust depends on the school's ability to consistently uphold its educational values, programs, and services (Y1, personal communication, 2025).

Despite differences in parental priorities, a common pattern emerged across informants. Parents formed preferences based on their own values and needs, drew on information from social networks, evaluated that information through direct experience, and subsequently shared their experiences with others. As one teacher observed, conversations among families about their children's educational experiences helped shape broader perceptions of the school (G1, personal communication, 2025). Thus, the convergence identified in this study lies less in shared reasons for choosing the school and more in a shared process of evaluation and decision-making.

Overall, the findings indicate that collective choice patterns develop through a sequence of interconnected processes: family preferences, school experiences, trust formation, information exchange, recommendations, and reputation building. Within this process, individual decisions acquire social legitimacy as the experiences of one family become references for others. The study, therefore, identifies a social mechanism of choice reinforcement, whereby educational experiences generate trust, trust is communicated through recommendations, and recommendations contribute to the formation of a reputation that influences subsequent parental decisions. This mechanism explains how individual preferences gradually evolve into collective choice patterns within the context of SDIT Al-Marhamah.

Discussion

The findings indicate that parents' decisions to choose SDIT Al-Marhamah cannot be explained solely by religious orientation or personal educational preferences. Religious values provide an important framework that guides parents' educational aspirations for their children; however, the actual choice of school is shaped through evaluations of curriculum quality, teacher competence, character education, school safety, and the learning environment. In this context, religiosity and rational considerations operate in a complementary manner rather than as opposing orientations, forming what may be described as value-based rationality. Parents use religious values to determine the direction of their children's education and subsequently assess whether a school's educational quality aligns with those values and the needs of their children. These findings extend the work of Rusadi and Fauzi (2022), who examined school choice through the lens of social action rationality, and Sari et al. (2019), who emphasized religious motivation and moral development. The findings are also consistent with Jonathan et al. (2023), Fauyan et al. (2024), and Bekele and Kenea (2024), who argue that the choice of faith-based schools is shaped by a combination of family values, academic quality, learning environments, and institutional characteristics. This study further demonstrates that religious values function not merely as one factor among many but as an evaluative framework through which parents assess other educational attributes.

Parents' evaluations became more concrete when considering the implementation of the integrated curriculum. The curriculum was not perceived as an administrative document but as a framework that should be reflected in children's daily educational experiences. The integration of general and religious education gained meaning through routines, discipline, teacher role modeling, social interactions, and the broader learning environment. Accordingly, parental trust was not

generated simply by the existence of an integrated curriculum; rather, it depended on the consistency between institutional plans, educational practices, and students' lived experiences. These findings reinforce the work of Apriliani et al. (2025), which highlighted the importance of integrated curricula and religious environments in shaping parental preferences, and suggest that curriculum effectiveness is closely linked to school culture. Character formation, therefore, occurs through repeated experiences that transform values into habit (Aruan et al., 2021; Islami & A'yun, 2024; Puspita et al., 2025). This interpretation aligns with Purwaningsih and Syamsudin (2022) and Khotimah et al. (2025), who identify school culture as a critical medium for developing religious character.

The study also reveals that parental trust develops gradually rather than emerging at the point of school enrollment. Trust is constructed through continuous evaluations of the relationship between parental expectations, available information, and children's actual experiences at school. When school practices correspond with the values and identity communicated by the institution, trust tends to strengthen. Conversely, inconsistencies may prompt parents to reassess their perceptions. Trust, therefore, should be understood as a dynamic evaluative process rather than passive acceptance of a school's image. This finding supports Eba & Geta (2022) the argument that school preferences are negotiated through experience and social interaction, particularly when parents face uncertainty about a school's suitability for their children. In the context of Islamic schooling, the findings suggest that school culture serves as the medium through which institutional claims are transformed into experiences that families perceive as credible.

As these experiences accumulate, they extend beyond individual families and become embedded within wider social networks. Parents frequently share stories about teachers, learning processes, discipline, school environments, and children's development with relatives, friends, and other parents. Information communicated through these networks possesses a different form of influence than official school communications because it combines firsthand experience with social credibility. This observation is consistent with the findings of Fong (2019) and Robertson et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of trusted information sources in school-choice processes. The present study further demonstrates that recommendations serve not only as channels of information but also as mechanisms of social validation. Decisions initially based on family evaluations gain additional legitimacy when supported by the experiences of others perceived as trustworthy and relevant.

This process of social validation helps explain the gradual formation of school reputation. When one family's experience confirms previously received information, that experience is shared with others (Bhattacharya, 2023; Dallavis, 2024; Jutara & Jesus, 2024). Subsequent families then conduct their own evaluations, generating new experiences that may reinforce or revise existing perceptions (Sukmawati, 2025; Thoyyibah dkk., 2022). School reputation, therefore, should not be viewed simply as an image constructed by the institution itself but as the outcome of interactions between institutional experiences and social communication (Borger dkk., 2024; Boterman, 2021). In this regard, the growth in student enrollment at SDIT Al-Marhamah, from 365 students in 2021 to 395 in 2025, provides contextual evidence that school choice continued to be reproduced throughout the study period. Although these data do not establish a causal relationship between recommendations and enrollment growth, they illustrate a broader process through which experiences become conversations, conversations generate recommendations, recommendations become references, and references inform the evaluations of subsequent families.

The principal contribution of this study lies in shifting attention from factors influencing school choice to the social mechanisms through which those choices are constructed and reinforced. Previous studies have identified religiosity, academic quality, curriculum, teachers, learning environments, and reputation as important determinants of parental decision-making. This study connects these elements within a dynamic process. Family values shape initial preferences; experiences with school attributes generate evaluations; consistent evaluations foster trust; trust encourages recommendations; recommendations strengthen reputation; and reputation subsequently influences other families' choices. Within this framework, collective choice patterns are not understood as situations in which parents share identical reasons or simply follow majority preferences. Instead, they emerge through networks of trust that reinforce individual evaluations and create convergent tendencies in school selection (Cash & Oppenheimer, 2024).

Conceptually, these findings offer a more process-oriented understanding of school choice. Family preferences represent the starting point rather than the endpoint of decision-making. Religious orientation provides value direction, while curriculum implementation and school culture generate educational experiences. These experiences shape evaluations and trust, and trust gives credibility to recommendations exchanged within social networks. The circulation of recommendations subsequently contributes to the formation of reputation and increasingly convergent patterns of choice. This mechanism constitutes the study's primary contribution because it explains how individual preferences acquire a collective dimension without eliminating the diversity of motivations among parents. In this sense, the study moves beyond identifying factors associated with parental school choice and instead explains the social processes through which shared patterns of preference emerge.

The findings also carry practical implications. School reputation should be understood as an outcome of educational practice rather than merely institutional promotion. Consistency between religious values, pedagogical quality, teacher competence, and role modeling, character formation, school safety, and communication with families creates the conditions under which positive experiences gain social legitimacy. At the same time, recommendations do not necessarily produce uniform choices because families differ in their needs, resources, experiences, and access to information. Consequently, the collective choice pattern identified in this study should be interpreted within its specific context rather than as a universal representation of parental behavior in Langsa. The study, therefore, offers analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization. Future research involving multiple Islamic schools, families from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and longitudinal enrollment data would help determine whether the mechanisms of values, experience, trust, recommendations, reputation, and choice convergence identified in this study operate consistently across different contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that parents' decisions to choose SDIT Al-Marhamah evolve from individual preferences into collective choice patterns through educational experiences, trust, and the circulation of reputation and recommendations within parental social networks. Religious orientation serves as the initial basis for decision-making and is subsequently evaluated through parents' experiences with the integrated curriculum, character development programs, teacher role modeling, religious habituation, school safety, and school-family communication. Collective choice patterns do not imply uniformity in parents' reasons for selecting the school; rather, they reflect a

convergence of family evaluations regarding religious values, educational quality, and trust in the institution.

The findings are context-specific to SDIT Al-Marhamah and should not be generalized statistically to broader populations. Several limitations should be acknowledged, including the single-case study design, the limited number of informants, the predominance of perception-based data, and the restricted capacity to examine collective choice patterns on a wider scale. Future research should consider comparative studies involving multiple Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools (SDITs), include parents from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and use longitudinal enrollment data or quantitative surveys to examine the variation, dynamics, and sustainability of collective choice patterns across educational contexts.

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