

UNPACKING THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL ATTRACTIVENESS

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji persepsi internal siswa dan guru terhadap rendahnya daya tarik institusional di sebuah sekolah menengah atas negeri di Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis Grounded Theory, wawancara dengan empat siswa dan dua guru mengungkap enam tema utama, termasuk persepsi terhadap kualitas akademik, penggunaan fasilitas, hubungan siswa-guru, kolaborasi staf, tantangan eksternal, dan usulan perbaikan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun fasilitas sekolah memadai, rendahnya keterlibatan siswa, lemahnya kohesi staf, prestasi kompetitif yang terbatas, serta kurangnya promosi publik menghambat daya tarik sekolah. Implikasi praktis menekankan perlunya strategi terpadu yang menggabungkan peningkatan akademik, keterlibatan komunitas, dan pemasaran institusional. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada diskusi lebih luas tentang peningkatan sekolah dalam konteks pendidikan pascabencana dan desentralisasi.

Kata Kunci: daya tarik institusi; isu promosi pendidikan; iklim sekolah; keterlibatan siswa

Abstract

This study examines the internal perceptions of students and teachers regarding the limited institutional appeal of a public high school in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Using a qualitative Grounded Theory approach, interviews with four students and two teachers revealed six major themes, including perceptions of academic quality, facility usage, teacher-student relationships, staff collaboration, external challenges, and proposed improvements. Findings highlight that despite adequate infrastructure, low student engagement, weak staff cohesion, limited competitiveness, and insufficient public promotion hinder the school's attractiveness. Practical implications emphasize the need for integrated strategies combining academic improvement, community engagement, and institutional marketing. This research contributes to broader discussions on school improvement in post-disaster and decentralized education systems.

Keywords: institutional appeal; marketing education issues; school climate; student engagement

A. INTRODUCTION

Institutional appeal in the education sector is fundamentally linked to how stakeholders, notably students and parents, perceive a school. This appeal is influenced by multiple factors including academic quality, the effectiveness of school governance, and the physical and



social environment of the school. These elements significantly impact a school's ability to attract and retain students, thus affecting its overall success (Hoy & Miskel, 2013).

Schools with high institutional appeal often report better student engagement, enhanced academic performance, and lower dropout rates. These outcomes highlight the critical role of positive perceptions in educational success and institutional sustainability (Goddard et al., 2004). In competitive educational markets, particularly in urban areas, a strong institutional appeal is essential to attract sufficient enrolment and secure necessary funding (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Urban schools face unique challenges in this regard, including diverse student demographics and more pronounced socioeconomic disparities. These challenges can affect public perceptions negatively, making it harder for these schools to enhance their appeal (Kozol, 2012). Additionally, issues such as resource limitations and infrastructure constraints can impede efforts to improve the attractiveness and functionality of urban schools (Owens & Valesky, 2011).

Effective management of a school's appeal requires strategic improvements not just in tangible assets like buildings and equipment, but also in intangible aspects such as school culture and community relations. Addressing these dimensions can lead to significant improvements in how a school is perceived within its community (Fullan, 2016).

Indonesia, as a developing country with a decentralized education system, continues to face significant disparities in education quality across regions. Although the government has implemented various reforms such as the School Based Management (SBM) approach and the National Education Standards challenges remain in ensuring equitable access and consistent quality of education, particularly outside of major urban centers (Chang et al., 2014; Rosser, 2018). Issues such as underqualified teachers, uneven resource allocation, and regional policy implementation gaps still persist, limiting the effectiveness of national education efforts.

In this national context, Aceh Province stands out with its own complex educational challenges. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Aceh experienced significant international and national educational investment. However, despite infrastructural reconstruction, many schools in Aceh continue to struggle with issues related to teacher competency, curriculum implementation, and student achievement (Muchsin et al., 2022; Murniati et al., 2023). Teacher professional development is limited (Kamarullah & Sarinauli, 2023), and integration of modern pedagogies, especially the use of ICT, is still underdeveloped (Kamarullah, Fadhilah, et al., 2024; Kamarullah, Sarinauli, et al., 2024), contributing to a stagnant educational climate in many schools across the province, not to mention fulfilling particular administrative documents (Kamarullah, Istiarsyah, et al., 2024).

Zooming into Banda Aceh, the capital of the province, the situation remains uneven. A case study by Usman et al. (2023) on senior high schools in Banda Aceh found that, despite being in the urban center, the institutions still face issues such as inadequate facilities, limited extracurricular programming, and low public interest in enrolment. These conditions are exacerbated by social perceptions of school quality, which are often shaped by socioeconomic and post-disaster recovery factors rather than objective educational performance. Moreover, as noted by Sakurai et al. (2018), efforts to apply Total Quality

Management (TQM) in Banda Aceh's high schools showed potential in improving institutional performance, but practical implementation is inconsistent.

Therefore, understanding the internal perspectives of students and teachers becomes crucial in uncovering the subtle and often underexplored factors that affect a school's appeal. This study aims to explore these perspectives to shed light on the internal challenges influencing institutional attractiveness in one such urban high school setting.

Despite having adequate infrastructure, strategic locations, and substantial government investment, several public high schools in Banda Aceh, which must remain unnamed for confidentiality reasons, continue to face low enrolment and limited public interest. Some schools indeed are equipped with relatively sufficient facilities such as science laboratories, dormitories, and central city access. Yet, these schools remain underpopulated and less favored by local families.

This contradiction between facility availability and public disinterest highlights a deeper issue: why are these schools under-chosen despite being well-resourced? While external factors—such as socioeconomic background, parental education level, or access to private alternatives—may influence school choice, internal factors are often overlooked. The perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of internal stakeholders, particularly students and teachers, play a critical role in shaping the institutional appeal of a school. When ignored, these internal dynamics can silently undermine even the most well-intentioned infrastructural investments.

This research is significant for both practical and academic reasons. For education stakeholders in Aceh, especially the Aceh Provincial Government, the findings will offer grounded insights into why school development efforts may not translate into increased enrolment or improved school reputation. For school leaders, this study provides a reflective tool to design more responsive strategies based on the real experiences of school members. For policy makers, it proposes a shift in focus from infrastructure-centered interventions to more qualitative, community-informed approaches, such as enhancing school climate, fostering leadership engagement, and strengthening teacher-student relations. Academically, the study contributes to the literature on educational equity and institutional trust, particularly within post-disaster and decentralized education systems like Indonesia's. Therefore, this study aims to explore how students and teachers perceive the academic quality, school leadership, and social environment of a public high school in Banda Aceh; to identify recurring internal challenges that may contribute to the institution's limited appeal; and to develop a grounded conceptual understanding of the internal factors affecting institutional attractiveness in under-enrolled urban high schools.

B. METHODS

This study utilized a qualitative research design, which based on Grounded Theory (GT), an approach suitable for developing conceptual understanding from participants lived experiences and perceptions (Charmaz, 2014a). GT enables the systematic generation of theory derived directly from data through iterative coding and comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2014b; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The study was conducted at a public high school located in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. The selected school exemplifies conditions shared with

other urban state schools in the city, which experience consistently low enrolment despite adequate facilities provided by the Aceh Provincial Government.

Participants were purposively selected to include 6 informants, comprising 4 students and 2 teachers, who could offer rich, relevant insights into the school's internal dynamics (Cohen et al., 2007). The students represented different academic achievement levels and grade levels, while teachers represented diverse subjects and teaching experience. Demographic details of the participants are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Participant type	Initials	Sex	Grade (Students) / Subjects (Teachers)
Students	MF	F	XI
	EH	F	XI
	KZ	M	XII
	LD	M	XII
Teachers	SW	F	Physics
	EM	F	Chemistry

Participant selection was guided by clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, which are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria type	Description
Inclusion	Students currently enrolled for ≥ 1 year
	Teachers with ≥ 2 years teaching experience at the school
	Willing to participate voluntarily and provide consent
Exclusion	Newly enrolled students or newly transferred teachers
	Participants with family relationships to school administrators or research team

Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews to capture detailed personal accounts related to school perceptions, challenges, and suggestions for improvement (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Interviews lasted between 30–45 minutes and were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to facilitate clear and accurate expression. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview guides were specifically designed to explore key topics: perceptions of academic quality, school management, learning environment, institutional challenges, and proposed areas for improvement.

Data analysis followed GT's systematic coding processes outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2015). First, open coding was conducted to identify initial themes and concepts emerging from participants' responses. Next, axial coding grouped these initial codes into broader categories based on conceptual relationships. Finally, selective coding synthesized these categories into a cohesive explanatory framework. Throughout the analysis, constant comparative methods ensured ongoing refinement of themes and verification of theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014a).

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the qualitative findings derived from in-depth interviews with teachers and students regarding the internal perspectives on the school's appeal. Interviews conducted with two teachers (SW and EM) and four students (MF, EH, KZ, LD) provided comprehensive insights into various dimensions influencing the perceived attractiveness and educational effectiveness of the school. The findings have been organized into several thematic categories identified through careful analysis of interview transcripts, including academic quality, facilities, relationships within the school community, collaboration among school staff, challenges impacting the school's popularity, and recommendations for improvement.

Theme 1: Perceptions on Academic Quality and Educational Effectiveness

Participants expressed mixed perceptions regarding academic quality and educational effectiveness at the school. Teachers generally conveyed concerns about declining student motivation and engagement. In Excerpt 1 (E1), SW explicitly rated the school's educational quality as moderate (6 out of 10), attributing this primarily to the lack of student enthusiasm.

E1: *"I have never seen students running around looking for a teacher for a lesson, never. So, if you say that good quality means that children are thirsty for education, then yes, that is true."* (SW)

EM expressed frustration regarding student behavior and attitudes towards learning, highlighting the impact on educational quality, as shown in E2.

E2: *"The children are lazy. There are many things that disappoint me. Even when the teacher tells them to do something, they don't seem to do it properly, so sometimes I don't know what to do."* (EM)

Conversely, students generally perceived academic quality more positively. EH described the school's educational quality as very effective, emphasizing the supportive role played by teachers. This is shown in E3.

E3: *"The quality of education here is very good because everything that students need is available. The teachers are also very close to the students and do not discriminate against anyone."* (EH)

Similarly, LD, as reflected in E4, highlighted that the school has adequate learning resources but pointed out student attitudes as the primary barrier to fully utilizing available opportunities.

E4: *"Actually, the facilities are very good, very supportive even. But it comes back to our students; sometimes we organize activities and there are still some who don't want to participate."* (LD)

Meanwhile, MF viewed the educational quality as 'pretty good,' praising the teaching quality compared to previous experiences but noting some areas for improvement in teaching methods. In E5 does MD admit this.

E5: *"It's pretty good because the teachers are also good compared to when I was studying there... but it's still lacking. It's like they just explain and take notes. Just like that."* (MF)

These varied perceptions suggest a significant gap between teacher expectations and student experiences. Teachers perceived student attitudes and behaviors as crucial determinants of educational quality, while students were generally satisfied with teacher engagement and instructional quality but noted areas for improvement in methods and learning activities. Acknowledging these differing perspectives provides crucial insight for addressing underlying issues related to academic effectiveness, particularly concerning student motivation and teacher-student interaction dynamics.

Theme 2: Assessment of School Facilities and Infrastructure

Participants consistently recognized the availability and overall adequacy of the school's infrastructure provided by the government, including classrooms, laboratories, and recreational spaces. However, detailed feedback highlighted specific areas needing improvement or expansion. Both teachers and students mentioned concerns regarding the practical use of these resources, suggesting that despite being physically available, certain facilities remained underutilized or inadequately managed.

In E6, MF explicitly pointed out shortages in sports equipment and insufficient amenities affecting comfort in classrooms, including specific needs like musala (prayer room), mentioned in E7.

E6: *"The sports section is still lacking; there aren't enough balls. Also, there's only one fan in the classroom, so I'm getting hot."* (MF)

E7: *"The prayer room is quite small. We would like it to be bigger. Other schools have an auditorium, right? Not everything is in the prayer room. The prayer room is only for reciting the Quran or praying. That's the downside."* (MF)

Student EH similarly identified deficiencies, focusing specifically on the sports and recreational facilities. EH noted the limited availability and size of sports facilities, which restricted the students' engagement and enjoyment in extracurricular activities (see E8).

E8: *"The facilities here are still lacking, because there are many sports, but the facilities are incomplete. For example, we rarely play badminton. We only have one volleyball. If we want to play soccer, the field is too small."* (EH)

Furthermore, as reflected in E9, EH highlighted the aesthetic and practical issues of the school's physical appearance and grounds management, suggesting that these aspects significantly influenced external perceptions of the institution.

E9: *"The building isn't very attractive, there aren't many students, and the facilities are incomplete. The colors shouldn't be too bright. The unused buildings should be put back into use so they don't look abandoned. The long grass should be cut, tidied up, or turned into something that can be used or sold to the community. That could be a source of income for the school."* (EH)

Conversely, student LD acknowledged the general adequacy of available facilities but emphasized student reluctance as the primary barrier to optimal utilization. LD perceived that while resources were indeed sufficient, students' lack of engagement prevented full exploitation of these amenities. This opinion is displayed in E10.

E10: *“Actually, the facilities and resources are very good, very supportive in fact. But it comes back to our students. Sometimes we organize activities, but there are still some who don’t want to participate. We have tried to provide support so that the activities run smoothly, but the students are still reluctant and unwilling.”* (LD)

SW provided additional insights, confirming substantial availability of laboratory equipment but identifying persistent issues in its utilization. According to SW, laboratory facilities, although comprehensive, remained largely unused due to challenges faced by teachers in managing students within practical sessions (see E11).

E11: *“If the resources are exceptional, that’s very good. But most of them are probably of mediocre quality, so they are not considered to be utilized effectively. For example, the labs are still divided into boxes and are not being used. The reason may be that the teachers think that learning in the classroom is complicated enough, let alone in a lab like that.”* (SW)

In summary, informants perceived school infrastructure and facilities as fundamentally adequate but identified critical shortcomings related to maintenance, management, and student engagement. Addressing these gaps through targeted enhancements and improved facility management practices emerged as essential recommendations to improve the school’s physical appeal and effective utilization of resources.

Theme 3: Teacher-Student Relationships and School Climate

Furthermore, findings from the interviews indicate varied perceptions concerning teacher-student relationships and the overall school climate. While certain participants highlighted strong relationships characterized by friendliness and close interaction, others identified significant interpersonal challenges that negatively impacted the learning environment.

EM expressed deep disappointment with student behavior, describing students as generally disrespectful and unmotivated. In E12, EM emphasized that such behaviors substantially hindered teaching effectiveness.

E12: *“The students are lazy; perhaps only about 20 percent are active, and even that activity is based on their personal initiative. But the others are laid-back, disrespectful, and impolite. There are many things that disappoint me, honestly.”* (EM)

In contrast, EH presented a distinctly positive view, highlighting the friendliness and attentiveness of teachers and the supportive role of the school’s principal. According to EH (see E13), the positive interactions fostered a welcoming and harmonious environment

E13: *“What I like here is that the teachers are friendly. Teachers first. Then the students don’t tease each other. Relationships are thankfully good. Even if there is a problem, teachers quickly resolve it. Especially the principal here, who is very caring towards students.”* (EH)

Further elaborating on interpersonal issues, MF acknowledged occasional conflicts and strained relationships between teachers and students, specifically highlighting uncomfortable interactions that created distractions during lessons. She expressed this argument in E14.

E14: *“Some relationships are not very close; some don’t match well, but only partially. Not all students and teachers get along. There are some issues, like teachers who dislike students or vice versa... It doesn’t really affect lessons, but the conversations make things uncomfortable. Instead of studying, arguments happen.”* (MF)

Moreover, LD echoed concerns about communication breakdowns, criticizing the disrespectful attitudes exhibited by some students when interacting with teachers, especially when receiving feedback (see E15).

E15: *“Here it’s a bit sarcastic because students, when criticized or asked for suggestions to improve, remain stubborn and even yell at teachers, saying they don’t like to do it.”* (LD)

Despite these criticisms, KZ, reflected in E16, recognized overall good communication, indicating that most interactions between teachers and students were productive and involved meaningful discussions and feedback.

E16: *“From my perspective, the communication between teachers and students is quite good. We communicate with teachers, exchange arguments, give opinions, and share insights. Communication is generally good, though not perfect; overall, it’s smooth.”* (KZ)

In summary, the findings highlight contrasting views on teacher-student relationships. While positive interactions marked by friendliness and supportive leadership exist, significant interpersonal tensions persist, creating a mixed and occasionally challenging school climate. Strengthening respectful communication and addressing interpersonal issues emerged as necessary to foster a more conducive learning environment.

Theme 4: Internal Collaboration and Staff Relationships

The interviews highlighted critical internal collaboration and staff relationship issues within the school, significantly influencing institutional dynamics. Despite acknowledging the positive intentions among teachers and school staff, informants articulated notable challenges, including interpersonal frictions, limited teamwork, and constrained professional autonomy, potentially undermining collective efforts to enhance school quality.

SW in E17 articulated substantial concerns about the internal dynamics, explicitly mentioning that relationships among staff were somewhat strained, marked by mutual suspicion rather than supportive cooperation. According to her, such an environment considerably hindered professional growth and school-wide initiatives.

E17: *“Not harmonious. Relationships are strained, marked by mutual suspicion. Unable to progress. If someone tries to do something beyond expectations, it becomes a problem. Generally, it’s still fine since we remain civil whenever we meet.”* (SW)

SW further explained how such internal dynamics impeded collective decision-making and innovation among teachers, emphasizing how professional initiatives were frequently discouraged or misunderstood, thus limiting individual enthusiasm for contributing beyond basic responsibilities (see E18).

E18: *“That’s how it is. If I try doing something extra, it becomes problematic. Therefore, I tend to avoid it. I just do my basic duties and don’t try to exceed expectations because it creates personal issues.”* (SW)

Meanwhile, LD in E19 presented a contrasting view, asserting positively that collaboration among school personnel, including teachers, administrative staff, and the school principal, appeared cohesive. LD observed that these staff collectively shared strong aspirations for school improvement, illustrating potential strengths within existing internal relationships.

E19: *“In my opinion, collaboration among teachers, principal, and administrative staff is very cohesive in improving the school, proven by the various activities already conducted. It’s good enough. If teachers weren’t cohesive, activities wouldn’t run smoothly.”* (LD)

Nevertheless, as shown in E20, EM offered additional insights reflecting significant dissatisfaction with the administrative aspects of collaboration, particularly emphasizing inconsistent leadership and communication among school administrators and teachers. EM specifically noted that administrative support was frequently insufficient, causing difficulties in maintaining professionalism and high morale among teachers.

E20: *“Administration isn’t smooth; communication is sometimes hindered, resulting in difficulties carrying out certain tasks. If administrative support was stronger and communication clearer, perhaps we teachers would be more enthusiastic in performing our duties.”* (EM)

In summary, internal collaboration and staff relationships within the school revealed substantial variability. Positive interactions and collective enthusiasm for improvement were acknowledged by some informants, yet significant barriers—such as strained interpersonal dynamics, limited administrative support, and restricted professional autonomy—emerged as substantial obstacles. Enhancing trust, clarifying roles, and improving communication practices are critical areas identified for improving internal collaboration and optimizing the overall school environment.

Theme 5: Challenges Impacting Institutional Appeal

The informants collectively acknowledged significant challenges impacting the institutional appeal of the school, particularly highlighting limited student achievements, low competitiveness compared to neighboring schools, and perceptions held by the local community. These factors have been identified as key reasons why, despite sufficient facilities, the school continues to face enrolment difficulties and diminished interest from prospective students and their parents.

In E21, SW highlighted the critical issue of competition from surrounding schools. According to SW, the school’s location near more popular and established schools significantly affected its attractiveness, placing it at a considerable disadvantage

E21: *“Located along a route with many schools, competition is fierce. The community prefers – mentioning nearby popular schools, which are better known. Thus, even though our facilities are good, there’s nothing particularly attractive to draw them to choose this school.”* (SW)

Additionally, EM strongly emphasized students' low academic performance and weak competitive achievements as critical internal challenges. EM, as shown in E22, identified these factors as major deterrents, contributing directly to reduced public interest in enrolling at the school.

E2: *"The main issue is student competitiveness. Their achievements are very poor. Compared to other schools, we lag far behind. Consequently, the community isn't interested in enrolling their children here."* (EM)

Corroborating these views, EH as a student, pointed directly to students' poor performance in competitions as a primary cause of diminished school appeal. In E23, EH noted parents generally evaluate schools based on academic reputation and competition achievements, which currently placed the school at a significant disadvantage:

E23: *"When we participate in competitions, we rarely win; competitiveness is lacking. Parents are reluctant to enrol their children because the school lacks achievements and has nothing commendable to show the community."* (EH)

Similarly, MF offered additional perspectives, noting that societal perceptions of the student demographic significantly affected the school's attractiveness. According to MF, the perception that the school primarily attracted lower-performing students perpetuated negative stereotypes, deterring academically motivated students and parents (see E24).

E24: *"People think our school is a place for students who aren't very bright. So academically strong or ambitious students usually prefer to attend other schools known for better academic reputations."* (MF)

KZ similarly pointed out insufficient promotion and public awareness as exacerbating factors. Reflected in E25, KZ argued the school had not effectively communicated its strengths to the community, thus limiting its appeal.

E25: *"Our school lacks promotion, so the community isn't aware that there are actually good facilities and dedicated teachers here. Therefore, they're reluctant to choose our school."* (KZ)

In summary, informants clearly articulated various interconnected challenges negatively affecting the school's institutional appeal. These included inadequate competitiveness in student achievements, unfavorable comparisons with nearby schools, negative public perceptions of student capability, and limited promotional efforts. Addressing these core issues through targeted interventions is crucial for enhancing the school's attractiveness and reversing the trend of declining student interest and enrolment.

Theme 6: Suggestions for Improving School Appeal

The informants provided practical suggestions aimed at enhancing the school's appeal, specifically emphasizing improvements in student discipline, extracurricular activities, promotion efforts, and stakeholder collaboration. Participants expressed optimism that implementing these recommendations could positively reshape community perceptions and ultimately boost enrolment.

SW identified extracurricular programs and student achievement as pivotal aspects requiring urgent improvement. In E26, SW emphasized the need for structured extracurricular activities and effective promotional strategies to showcase student

accomplishments, thus making the school more attractive to prospective students and parents.

E26: *“Expand extracurricular activities, enhance promotion, and improve student quality. Good extracurricular activities lead to student achievements. With achievements, the community will naturally be interested in our school.”* (SW)

EM echoed similar sentiments, stressing that improvements in school discipline and the overall student environment could significantly enhance the school’s attractiveness. As revealed in E27, EM highlighted the need for consistent implementation of clear rules and regulations to shape a disciplined and conducive learning atmosphere.

E27: *“Enforce clear regulations and strict student discipline. Clear rules will enhance the learning environment. Consequently, the community will observe positive changes and be interested in enrolling here.”* (EM)

KZ provided additional insight in E28, advocating for systematic improvements in disciplinary practices and greater parental involvement. According to KZ, engaging parents more deeply in school activities and decision-making processes would foster stronger relationships and collective responsibility, ultimately boosting the school’s reputation.

E28: *“Discipline needs to be more systematically enhanced. Interaction with students and increased parental involvement is necessary for better cooperation between teachers and parents. Active parental participation would indirectly promote our school.”* (KZ)

Additionally, MF in E29 recommended enhancing the school’s physical attractiveness and facility management. Too, LD stressed the significance of showcasing internal collaboration among teachers, administrators, and students through various community-oriented activities (see E30).

E29: *“Enlarge the prayer room, improve the hall or sports field. Promoting good facilities externally will definitely attract prospective students and parents.”* (MF)

E30: *“Showcase more collaborative activities between teachers and students to the community. If the community sees positive teacher-student relationships, they will definitely be interested in enrolling their children here.”* (LD)

In summary, informants presented clear, actionable recommendations to improve the school’s appeal. These suggestions emphasized strengthening student discipline, expanding extracurricular offerings, actively engaging parents, strategically enhancing physical facilities, and effectively promoting the school’s positive internal dynamics. Collectively, these recommendations underscore the necessity of multidimensional improvements to meaningfully enhance the institution’s attractiveness and overall public perception.

Discussion

This study explored the internal perceptions of students and teachers regarding the factors contributing to the limited institutional appeal of a public high school in Banda Aceh. Through qualitative interviews analyzed using a GT approach (Charmaz, 2014a; Corbin & Strauss, 2015), six major themes were identified: perceptions of academic quality, assessment of facilities, teacher-student relationships, internal collaboration, challenges to institutional appeal, and suggested improvements. Overall, the findings revealed that

although infrastructural and resource support were relatively sufficient, deeper issues related to student motivation, interpersonal dynamics, institutional reputation, and community engagement hindered the school's appeal.

These findings align with Hoy and Miskel's (2013) argument that institutional quality is perceived not only through resources but also through the social and relational environment within the school. Similarly, the results reflect observations by Bryk and Schneider (2002) that trust, collaboration, and school culture are pivotal factors influencing school performance and public reputation. In the context of Aceh, where infrastructural investments have been prioritized post-disaster (Murniati et al., 2023; Usman et al., 2023), this study highlights the ongoing need to balance physical development with qualitative improvements in educational processes, school management, and stakeholder relationships.

Perceptions on Academic Quality and Educational Effectiveness

The findings revealed a nuanced perception of academic quality among participants. Some students considered the school environment supportive, while teachers expressed concern over the students' low motivation and passive learning behaviors. For instance, a teacher in E1 emphasized the lack of enthusiasm among students to engage beyond classroom activities, rating the overall educational quality at "6 out of 10". The teacher lamented that students were not proactively seeking academic growth, contrasting ideal learning behaviors with the observed apathy.

These observations align with Hoy and Miskel's (2013) assertion that the vitality of an educational institution is not merely determined by resources or infrastructure but heavily influenced by students' engagement and drive to learn. Academic environments thrive when learners exhibit curiosity and active participation, traits that appeared lacking based on the internal perspectives.

Additionally, the concern that students only minimally absorbed classroom material without deeper inquiry reflects the challenges described by Goddard et al. (2004), who stressed that collective student efficacy—a shared belief among students in their capability to succeed—is crucial for a high-functioning school climate. The findings from this study, particularly excerpts E2 and E3 from students, where students expressed passive acceptance of lessons without strong enthusiasm, further support this theoretical framing.

The broader educational context in Indonesia reinforces these internal findings. Despite decentralization reforms and school-based management policies intended to foster educational quality (Chang et al., 2014; Rosser, 2018), many schools outside major urban centers still struggle to cultivate dynamic learning environments. This is particularly evident in Aceh Province, where Muchsin et al. (2022) and Murniati et al. (2023) noted that despite post-disaster reconstruction and investment, student engagement and educational innovation remain subdued. Moreover, recent findings by Kamarullah, Sarinauli, et al. (2024) highlight that while there have been advancements in administrative and technological infrastructures, pedagogical transformations—especially those fostering active, student-centered learning—are yet to be fully realized.

Therefore, as illustrated by the voices in E1–E5, institutional appeal in this urban public school cannot be elevated solely through infrastructural investments or administrative

reforms. Sustainable improvement requires deliberate efforts to build a culture of academic enthusiasm, foster student agency, and reinforce collective efficacy among students and teachers alike.

Assessment of Facilities and Infrastructure

Although school facilities were generally acknowledged as adequate, findings indicated significant underutilization and perceived inadequacies in specific areas. Several students highlighted direct infrastructure shortcomings affecting their school experience. For instance, a student in E6 pointed out the limited sports facilities and discomfort in classrooms due to insufficient ventilation, while another emphasized the small size of the prayer room and the absence of a multipurpose hall for broader activities (see E7).

These concerns are consistent with Kozol (2012) observation that disparities in facility management—not just availability—can impact students' school experience and perceptions of institutional quality. Although the school infrastructure exists, the lack of functionality or adequacy in meeting student needs diminishes its positive effect on the school's appeal.

Further elaborations from students in E9 underlined that the physical appearance and maintenance of the school grounds played a vital role in shaping perceptions. Suggestions to revitalize abandoned buildings, tidy green spaces, and beautify the environment align with Bryk and Schneider's (2002) theory that a school's physical environment reflects institutional care, affecting stakeholder trust and attractiveness.

Conversely, there were acknowledgments that the school had provided basic academic resources sufficiently. One student in E10 remarked that the school had prepared learning resources adequately, but the real problem lay in students' lack of initiative to utilize them effectively. This internal observation aligns with findings from Murniati et al. (2023) in Aceh, noting that infrastructural recovery post-tsunami often outpaced the development of student-centered learning cultures.

A teacher's comment in E11 reinforced the critical issue of underutilization, pointing out that laboratory equipment, although available, was rarely used due to teachers' hesitancy and management challenges. This reflects Fullan's (2016) argument that educational change efforts often falter not because of resource shortages, but because of the human and cultural resistance to changing pedagogical practices. Further supporting this, Earthman (2002) found that the condition and usability of school facilities directly impact student performance and institutional reputation. Simply having resources without active, meaningful use results in missed opportunities for institutional improvement.

Thus, as emphasized across E6–E11, while physical facilities form an essential foundation, maximizing institutional appeal requires strategic management, active maintenance, meaningful utilization, and student-centered facility planning to ensure resources truly enhance educational experiences and public perceptions.

Teacher-Student Relationships and School Climate

The findings revealed contrasting perceptions regarding the quality of teacher-student relationships and the overall school climate. On the one hand, positive interactions were

recognized, with some students appreciating the teachers' approachability and the school leadership's responsiveness. For instance, a student E13 described teachers as friendly and highlighted the principal's proactive role in resolving student issues.

This positive perception resonates with Bryk and Schneider's (2002) emphasis on relational trust within schools, where respectful, caring interactions between teachers, students, and school leaders are critical for creating a productive and appealing educational environment. Schools with strong relational trust foster greater student engagement, cooperation, and institutional loyalty.

However, negative aspects of school climate were also prominent. Teachers voiced frustration over students' lack of discipline and respect. One teacher in E12 described student behavior as disrespectful and apathetic, expressing disappointment with the general student attitude towards learning and authority. Similarly, a student in E14 recognized that some teacher-student relationships were strained, noting that friction sometimes led to confrontational exchanges instead of conducive learning.

These findings align with Owens and Valesky's (2011) theory that organizational behavior within schools significantly affects the psychological environment, influencing both student outcomes and institutional reputation. Where teacher-student relationships are tense or where misbehavior is normalized, schools struggle to maintain an environment conducive to academic excellence and positive public perception.

Further, another student in E15 noted that communication breakdowns could sometimes escalate due to students' defensive or rebellious attitudes when receiving criticism. Such dynamics mirror Fullan's (2016) observations that sustainable school improvement depends not only on strategic planning but also on building deep cultural norms of respect, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Kamarullah, Sarinauli, et al. (2024) also emphasized that educational initiatives—especially in contexts like Aceh—must address interpersonal relationships and communication patterns to drive real improvements in school performance. Without nurturing respectful teacher-student interactions, infrastructural or policy reforms alone are unlikely to succeed.

Thus, as illustrated by E12–E16, while positive cases of relational trust and supportive leadership exist, tensions in the school climate remain a significant barrier. Improving institutional appeal requires deliberate strategies to enhance respectful communication, strengthen emotional support systems, and rebuild mutual trust between students and teachers across all interactions.

Internal Collaboration and Staff Relationship

The findings highlighted both strengths and substantial weaknesses in internal collaboration and staff relationships. Several teachers expressed frustration over a lack of genuine teamwork and described an environment marked by mistrust and reluctance to support professional innovation. As noted in one teacher's account (see E17), attempts to exceed standard expectations often resulted in conflict rather than support.

Such perceptions strongly align with Bryk and Schneider's (2002) framework, where relational trust among staff is a critical driver for collective school improvement. When teachers feel unsupported or constrained by peer dynamics, they are less likely to engage in

innovative practices, resulting in institutional stagnation. This corresponds to Owens and Valesky's (2011) assertion that organizational dysfunction—such as poor staff collaboration—negatively impacts the broader school climate and institutional performance.

One teacher further emphasized a defensive professional stance, choosing to perform only minimum duties to avoid interpersonal conflict (E18). This defensive professionalism reflects Fullan's (2016) insights into educational change resistance: that without strong collaborative cultures, teachers retreat into isolated practices, undermining collective capacity building.

In contrast, some students perceived internal staff relationships more positively. An opinion from student in E19 praised the evident collaboration among teachers, administrators, and staff, linking it to the successful execution of school events and activities. The voice suggests that while collaboration may be weak at deeper levels (e.g., professional development, pedagogical innovation), it is still visible in surface-level operational aspects like event organization. This contrast between teacher and student perceptions supports the findings of Kamarullah, Fadhilah, et al. (2024) that while many Indonesian schools succeed in visible administrative tasks, deeper collaborative practices around pedagogy and professional growth often remain limited.

Furthermore, international evidence from Ronfeldt et al. (2015) reinforces these conclusions: they found that strong teacher collaboration improves student achievement, but collaboration must focus on instructional practice, not merely administrative cooperation. Thus, as reflected in E17–E20, internal collaboration at the case study school remains fragmented. While administrative teamwork exists at a superficial level, deeper instructional collaboration, mutual professional support, and trust-building among teachers require significant strengthening to sustainably enhance institutional performance and public perception.

Challenges Impacting Institutional Appeal

The findings indicated several interrelated challenges undermining the institutional appeal of the school. One prominent issue was the school's perceived inferiority compared to neighboring institutions. A teacher in E21 directly linked the school's low attractiveness to its location in a highly competitive area where more prominent schools dominate public preference.

This observation is strongly supported by Bryk and Schneider's (2002) findings, which argue that a school's external reputation—shaped by comparative perceptions within the community—plays a critical role in maintaining enrolment and public trust. When stakeholders perceive neighboring schools as superior academically or socially, less competitive schools struggle to retain their attractiveness regardless of their internal efforts.

Furthermore, teachers represented in E22 pointed out that the students' low academic competitiveness was a major deterrent for potential enrollees. This finding parallels the broader pattern discussed by Chang et al. (2014) and Rosser (2018), who noted that despite systemic reforms in Indonesia, actual learning outcomes and school prestige remain highly variable, often disadvantaging public schools serving lower-performing demographics.

Students' perspectives confirmed these internal weaknesses. For instance, as proven in E23, a student emphasized the lack of competitive achievements in academic and extracurricular competitions, suggesting that this damaged the school's public image. Another student in E24 identified a broader social stereotype that the school was primarily attended by lower-performing students, contributing to a vicious cycle of low enrolment and limited institutional prestige. This finding aligns with Kozol's (2012) description of the reputational traps that schools serving marginalized populations often face, where public assumptions about student quality diminish institutional credibility, regardless of actual educational potential or improvements.

Additionally, in E25, a student remarked that limited promotional efforts exacerbated the school's challenges. Inadequate communication with the broader community about the school's strengths reinforces low visibility and unfavorable assumptions. This aligns with Fullan's (2016) insistence that successful school change initiatives must be accompanied by deliberate public engagement strategies to reframe community perceptions. Recent international research by Arifin and Drysdale (2015) further reinforce these findings. They emphasized that strategic marketing and community engagement are essential for schools seeking to overcome entrenched negative perceptions and reposition themselves competitively.

Thus, as revealed in E21–E25, challenges to institutional appeal at the school stem from a combination of intense local competition, weak student achievement profiles, entrenched public stereotypes, and insufficient promotional activities. Addressing these issues requires strategic interventions that improve academic competitiveness, actively reshape public narratives, and enhance the school's external visibility and reputation.

Suggestions for Improving School Appeal

The final theme captured a range of actionable suggestions from teachers and students aimed at enhancing the school's institutional appeal. A recurring recommendation was the expansion and intensification of extracurricular activities. A teacher in E26 emphasized that by offering more structured and competitive extracurricular programs, the school could foster student achievement and strengthen its public image. This strategy aligns with Fullan's (2016) theory that school improvement requires developing both academic and non-academic dimensions of student life to promote holistic development and institutional attractiveness. Successful schools often position extracurricular success as a visible marker of overall quality, enhancing their appeal beyond standardized academic measures.

Improving discipline and reinforcing a strong behavioral culture also emerged as critical. A teacher in E27 highlighted the necessity of clear rules and consistent enforcement to foster a positive and orderly environment that parents and prospective students would find attractive. This observation supports Hoy and Miskel's (2013) assertion that maintaining an effective school climate is foundational for building external trust and institutional prestige.

Reciprocally, students echoed these sentiments. One student in E28 emphasized the importance of systematic discipline combined with stronger parental involvement in school governance and activities. Such insights reinforce the findings of Bryk and Schneider (2002)

that parent-school-community collaboration is vital for institutional success and reputation building.

Infrastructure improvements were also seen as essential to enhance aesthetic appeal and functionality. Students suggested renovating school facilities such as the *musala*, sports fields, and other public spaces to present a more inviting environment (see E29). Their views parallel Earthman's (2002) findings that the physical quality and maintenance of school facilities significantly influence stakeholders' impressions and students' sense of belonging.

Another key suggestion focused on promoting internal successes externally. One student in E30 recommended that the school showcase positive internal collaborations and relationships as a marketing tool to change community perceptions. This suggestion aligns well with Arifin and Drysdale (2015), who advocate for strategic school branding and active promotion of positive internal achievements to reshape external reputation.

Thus, as illustrated through E26–E30, participants articulated a coherent and multi-dimensional set of strategies: strengthening student achievement through extracurriculars, maintaining disciplined environments, enhancing physical spaces, deepening community engagement, and conducting strategic promotional activities. Collectively, these recommendations highlight that revitalizing institutional appeal demands an integrated approach, addressing both internal practices and external perceptions simultaneously.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study offer interconnected practical and theoretical implications for improving the institutional appeal of urban public schools, particularly in challenging contexts like Banda Aceh. At the practical level, school leaders must recognize that strengthening internal educational culture is essential. As reflected in E1–E5 and E12–E16, fostering student engagement, relational trust, and professional collaboration among teachers directly impacts how a school is perceived externally. Hoy and Miskel (2013), and Goddard et al. (2004) emphasize that successful institutions are built not only on resource availability but also on cultivating collective efficacy and internal motivation. Therefore, strategic interventions must go beyond infrastructure improvements, addressing student-centered learning, effective discipline systems, and teacher-student rapport to enhance academic vibrancy and school climate.

Similarly, improving internal collaboration among staff (E17–E20) is critical. Professional isolation, as identified in this study, undermines innovation and school-wide progress. This supports Bryk and Schneider's (2002) relational trust theory, which asserts that internal trust is foundational for institutional improvement. Schools must thus foster open communication, shared leadership, and continuous professional development initiatives aligned with Ronfeldt et al. (2015).

From the perspective of policy makers, there is a strong need for integrated school improvement policies. Investment should not only target facility construction but also ensure programs that cultivate competitive student achievements, active parental engagement, and effective school promotion (E21–E25, E30). The neglected dimension of public visibility and branding, as emphasized by Arifin and Drysdale (2015), is crucial for repositioning under-enrolled schools in competitive urban settings.

In the meantime, at the theoretical level, this study confirms and extends existing models of school effectiveness. It corroborates the theories of Bryk and Schneider (2002), and Fullan (2016) by demonstrating that institutional appeal emerges from the interplay of material, cultural, and relational factors. Additionally, it adds to the growing body of research (Arifin & Drysdale, 2015; Earthman, 2002) suggesting that infrastructural adequacy must be coupled with human-centered management to achieve sustainable institutional improvements.

In the specific Indonesian and post-disaster educational context (Chang et al., 2014; Muchsin et al., 2022; Murniati et al., 2023), these findings highlight the limitations of infrastructure-focused reforms and the pressing need for culturally grounded, context-sensitive school development strategies. Building institutional appeal thus demands an integrated model, one that strengthens internal dynamics, actively reshapes public perceptions, and consistently fosters a high-trust, high-performance school culture.

D. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the internal perceptions of students and teachers regarding the factors contributing to the limited institutional appeal of an urban public high school in Banda Aceh. Through a qualitative GT approach, six key themes were identified: perceptions of academic quality, assessment of facilities, teacher-student relationships, internal collaboration, external challenges, and suggested improvements.

The findings highlighted that while infrastructural and resource provisions were relatively adequate, they were insufficient to overcome deeper challenges rooted in student motivation, relational trust, staff collaboration, public perception, and strategic communication. These results affirm theoretical frameworks emphasizing that school appeal depends not merely on tangible resources but critically on internal school culture, stakeholder relationships, and community engagement.

Despite the richness of the data collected, this study acknowledges several limitations. Due to logistical constraints, only a portion of the planned interviews were completed, potentially limiting the diversity of internal perspectives captured. The study was also confined to a single urban high school, which may restrict the generalizability of findings to other settings. Future research could broaden the sample across multiple schools and explore longitudinal changes following intervention strategies to strengthen institutional appeal.

Ultimately, improving school attractiveness in urban public education contexts—particularly in post-disaster regions like Aceh—requires a multidimensional strategy. Beyond facilities, it demands cultivating vibrant learning communities, nurturing relational trust, engaging stakeholders proactively, and consistently promoting school successes to the wider public. Only through such integrated efforts can schools realize their full potential and secure a stronger position within competitive educational landscapes.

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