



Socio-Cultural Dominance in School-Choice Intentions: The Moderating Role of Environmental Conditions in a PLS-SEM Model

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Abstract

Parents' Ability to Choose School reflects a complex decision-making process that goes beyond administrative considerations and involves social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors. This study aims to examine the effects of socio-cultural factors, economic conditions, and environmental conditions on parents' Ability to School Choose, as well as to test the moderating role of socio-cultural factors. A quantitative explanatory design was employed with data collected from parents in Payakumbuh City, West Sumatra, using an online questionnaire. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling. The results indicate that sociocultural factors and environmental conditions have significant effects on parents' ability to choose a school, while economic factors do not show a significant direct effect. Furthermore, sociocultural factors significantly moderate the relationship between environmental conditions and the ability to choose a school but do not moderate the relationship between economic factors and the ability to choose a school. These findings highlight the dominant role of the sociocultural context in shaping school choice decisions and underscore the importance of culturally sensitive educational policies.

Keywords: Ability to School Choice, Socio-Cultural Factors, Environmental Conditions, Economic Factors, PLS SEM

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Introduction

Parents' Ability to Choice School (ACS) ideally reflects a rational, reflective, and future-oriented capacity to determine the best educational environment for their children (Hofflinger et al., 2020; Rohde et al., 2019; Yazdani, 2025). In the context of modern education, ACS is not merely understood as an administrative decision regarding school placement, but as a complex psychosocial process involving considerations of values, expectations, resources, and the alignment between the child's personality and the school's characteristics (Bekele & Kenea, 2024; Pöysä et al., 2024). Parents with good ACS are expected to be able to assess academic quality, school climate, the alignment of educational values with family culture, and the long-term impact of education on the child's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Beuermann et al., 2023; Burgess et al., 2015; Jonathan et al., 2023; Shahzad et al., 2020). Thus, the decision to choose a school becomes part of a strategic and meaningful educational investment, not merely a pragmatic choice or a tradition passed down through generations.

However, the reality on the ground shows that the school selection process is often far from this ideal picture. Many parents face information gaps, social pressures, and structural conditions that limit their

options (Borger et al., 2024; Gortázar et al., 2023; Jheng et al., 2022). School selection decisions are often based on geographical proximity, recommendations from the local community, or the social image of a particular school, without undergoing a thorough evaluation of the child's needs (Prieto et al., 2019; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). In some regions, this phenomenon becomes increasingly complex when school choices are framed by perceptions of social status, family prestige, or strong community norms (Berends, 2015; Lei & Yu, 2025). Consequently, parents' ACS does not fully reflect rational and pedagogical considerations but is influenced by contextual and symbolic external factors.

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in societies with high social and cultural diversity. Differences in family backgrounds, cultural values, and environmental conditions create significant variations in how parents interpret education and select schools (Mutgan et al., 2025; Pratama & Sugiarto, 2023; Rasool et al., 2024). In this context, ACS does not stand as an individual ability alone, but is closely tied to the social structures that frame educational choices (Kelley, 2021; Tayne et al., 2021; Weber et al., 2025). Parents often must negotiate between their ideal aspirations for their children's future and the socioeconomic realities they face daily (Jakob & Combet, 2020; Lee, 1993; M. Zhang et al., 2023). It is this tension between expectations and reality that makes the study of ACS relevant and important to understand empirically.

A number of studies indicate that socio-cultural (SC) factors play a central role in shaping parents' educational preferences and decisions (Durà-Vilà & Hodes, 2017; Rasheed et al., 2021; Roudsari et al., 2017). Cultural values, community norms, family traditions, and collective views on education determine how schools are perceived and prioritized (Allothman et al., 2024; Purwaningsih & Ridha, 2024). In societies with strong social bonds, school choices often follow socially accepted patterns, so individual decisions tend to align with community expectations. SC also influences the definition of what constitutes a "good" school whether it emphasizes academic achievement, discipline, religious values, or alignment with a specific cultural identity (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020; Horwitz, 2021). Therefore, ACS cannot be separated from the sociocultural framework that shapes how parents understand the goals and meaning of education.

In addition to SC, economic (E) factors are also predicted to significantly influence ACS (Jheng et al., 2022; Tarkhishvili et al., 2022; Yaacob et al., 2015). Family economic conditions determine access to information, the ability to pay for education, and the opportunity to choose schools with specific facilities and reputations (Holmes Erickson, 2017). Parents with better economic resources generally have a wider range of choices, including access to top-tier private schools or schools with specialized programs (Önder & Önder, 2022; Rosenqvist & Brandén, 2025). Conversely, economic constraints can narrow options and lead parents to prioritize cost and affordability over educational quality or suitability. However, the influence of economics on ACS is not always linear, as educational decisions often involve considerations of values and aspirations that go beyond mere financial calculations.

Another equally important factor is Environmental Conditions (EC). The physical and social environment surrounding the school, such as safety, transportation access, distance from home, and community support, also influence parental decisions (Kotoula et al., 2021; Sukmayasa et al., 2025; van den Berg et al., 2020). Schools located in safe and conducive environments tend to be perceived as more supportive of children's development, thereby increasing parents' interest in choosing them (Rojas Lopez & Wong, 2017). Additionally, a positive social environment, including harmonious relationships between the school and the community, can strengthen parents' trust in the educational institution (Calp, 2020). Thus, EC serves as a contextual factor that facilitates or limits the actualization of ACS in practice.

Although SC, E, and EC are theoretically predicted to influence ACS, the relationships among these factors are not always independent. In many contexts, SC actually functions as an interpretive framework that modulates how parents respond to economic and environmental conditions. Specific cultural values can strengthen or weaken the influence of economic factors on ACS (Keijer, 2021; R. Zhang et al., 2025). For example, in communities that highly value education as a moral value and a marker of social identity, economic constraints do not always prevent parents from striving to choose what they consider the best school. Conversely, in more pragmatic cultural contexts, economic conditions may be the primary determinant of educational decisions.

Similarly, SC is hypothesized to moderate the relationship between EC and ACS. A school environment that is objectively conducive may not necessarily be perceived positively if it is not aligned with the cultural values of the family and community. Conversely, a school with physical limitations may still be chosen when it possesses strong social and cultural legitimacy in the eyes of the community. This suggests that SC acts as a social lens that influences how parents assess and interpret environmental conditions in the school-selection process.

Based on the theoretical review and the discussion above, the following research hypothesis can be formulated:

H1: Sociocultural factors influence the ability to choose a school.

H2: Economics influences the Ability to Choose a School.

H3: Environmental conditions influence the ability to choose a school.

H4: Sociocultural factors moderate the relationship between economic factors and the ability to choose a school.

H5: Sociocultural factors moderate the relationship between Environmental Conditions and the Ability to Choose a School.

A study of ACS is important for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of parental educational decision-making. This study is based on the assumption that ACS is influenced by SC, E, and EC, with SC acting not only as a direct predictor but also as a moderator that strengthens or alters the relationship between E and ACS as well as between EC and ACS. By testing these direct and moderating relationships, this study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how structural and cultural factors interact in shaping parents' ability to choose a school, as well as to provide an empirical basis for the formulation of educational policies that are more sensitive to the sociocultural context of the community.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design to examine the causal relationship between Sociocultural Factors, Economic Factors, Environmental Conditions, and the Ability to Choose a School, including the moderating role of Sociocultural Factors (Thomas & Zubkov, 2023). This design was chosen because it allows researchers to empirically test the direct effects and interactions among latent variables based on data collected from respondents. Data were analyzed using a Partial Least Squares (PLS)-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach, which is suitable for research models involving latent constructs, complex structural relationships, and predictive objectives. This approach is also relevant for simultaneously evaluating the quality of measurement models and structural models, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing parents' ability to choose a school.

Population and Sample

This study was conducted in Payakumbuh City, West Sumatra, with the research subjects being parents who have children and are currently or have previously been directly involved in the school selection process. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, which involves selecting a sample based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Tajik et al., 2025). Respondent criteria included parents who have at least one school-aged child and have experience or involvement in choosing a school for their child. This technique was chosen because it allows researchers to obtain respondents who truly possess the information and experience necessary to explain the Ability to Choose School more accurately and contextually.

Table 1. Research Respondent Demographics

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency
Gender	Female	441
	Male	84
Age	< 25 years	5
	25–34 years	113
	35–44 years	299
	45–54 years	91
	55 years and older	19
Educational Background	High School	128
	Diploma	52
	Bachelor's Degree	259
	Graduate Degree	44
Occupation	Civil Servant	364
	Private Sector Employee	56
	Entrepreneur	46

	Farmer	28
	Housewife	21
	Others	10
Number of Children Enrolled in School	1 child	130
	2 children	219
	3 children	113
	More than 3 children	60
Religion	Islam	509
	Christian	11
	Catholic	8
	Buddhist	1

Based on the data collection results, the study respondents exhibited diverse demographic characteristics, as presented in Table 1. The majority of respondents were female, reflecting the dominant role of mothers in decision-making regarding children's education at the family level. In terms of age, most respondents were in the productive age range, with educational backgrounds varying from secondary school to postgraduate levels. Variations in occupation and the number of school-aged children indicate the socioeconomic heterogeneity of the respondents, while the predominance of religious backgrounds reflects the local sociocultural context of Payakumbuh City. This diversity of characteristics provides a sufficient basis for analyzing the influence of sociocultural, economic, and environmental conditions on parents' ability to choose a school.

Instruments

The research instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire to measure four main variables: Ability to School Choose, Sociocultural, Economic, and Environmental Conditions. Each variable was measured using a set of scales developed based on theoretical indicators relevant to the context of school selection by parents. All statement items were formulated as Likert scales with five response options representing the respondent's level of agreement with each statement, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. A five-point scale was chosen because it can capture variations in respondents' perceptions more sensitively while facilitating quantitative analysis in the Structural Equation Modeling framework.

Data Collection

Data collection in this study was conducted online using an online questionnaire. The instrument was distributed to respondents meeting the study criteria via digital media, thereby enabling a broader and more efficient reach of respondents within the geographical context of Payakumbuh City. This approach was chosen to facilitate respondent participation, maintain flexibility in completion timing, and minimize administrative challenges in the data collection process. All respondents provided voluntary consent before completing the questionnaire, and the collected data was subsequently processed anonymously to ensure confidentiality and research ethics.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using a Structural Equation Modeling approach based on Partial Least Squares. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for testing causal relationships among latent constructs, including the testing of moderating effects, and is capable of handling complex research models with data distributions that do not necessarily have to be normal (Hair & Alamer, 2022). The analysis was conducted in stages to ensure that the constructed model met the criteria for acceptability in terms of both measurement and structure before hypothesis testing was performed. The initial evaluation focused on the overall model fit through model fit indicators as a basis for proceeding with the subsequent analysis.

Table 2. Model Fit

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.071	0.071
d_ULS	0.685	0.685
d_G	3.126	3.126
Chi-square	5061.291	5061.291
NFI	0.658	0.658

The model fit evaluation results indicate that the research model is at an acceptable level of validity. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual value is below the recommended threshold, while other indicator values such as χ^2 , ΔG , chi-square, and the Normed Fit Index demonstrate consistency between the estimated model and the saturated model. These findings indicate that the constructed model structure adequately represents the empirical data, allowing analysis of the outer and inner models to proceed for interpreting the effects of Sociocultural, Economic, and Environmental Conditions on Ability to School Choose, including the moderating role of Sociocultural factors in the relationships among these variables.

The analysis process begins with an evaluation of the outer model aimed at assessing the quality of the measurement instruments. At this stage, convergent validity is tested using factor loadings and average variance extracted, discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and construct reliability using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Subsequently, the analysis proceeds to the inner model to test the structural relationships among latent variables. This stage includes evaluating the R-squared value to assess the model's predictive ability, testing path coefficients to evaluate the direction and strength of influence among variables, and testing the significance of direct effects and moderation effects via t-statistics and p-values based on bootstrapping procedures.

Results and Discussion

The research model was evaluated to describe the structural relationships between Sociocultural Factors, Economic Factors, Environmental Conditions, and Ability to Choose a School, including the moderating role of Sociocultural Factors. The visualization of this model aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the direction of relationships among the latent constructs tested in the study.

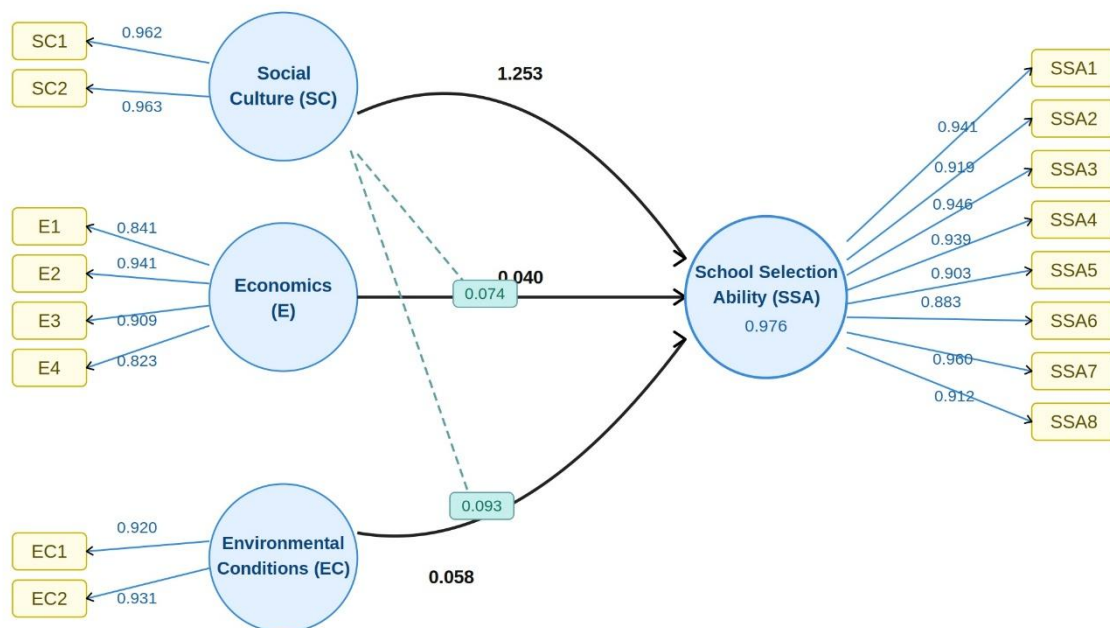


Figure 1. Research Model Evaluation

The discussion will always connect to the introduction by way of the research questions or hypotheses you posed and the literature you reviewed, but it does not simply repeat or rearrange the introduction; the discussion should always explain how your study has moved the reader's understanding of the research problem forward from where you left them at the end of the introduction.

The model evaluation figure shows that all latent constructs are interconnected in accordance with the proposed conceptual framework. This model represents the direct effects of Sociocultural, Economic, and Environmental Conditions on Ability to School Choose, and demonstrates the role of Sociocultural as a moderating variable in strengthening the relationships among these variables.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity testing was conducted to ensure that each indicator adequately represents the latent construct it measures. Convergent validity was evaluated through the factor loadings of each indicator, with the criterion that factor loadings must be greater than 0.7 for an indicator to be considered strongly related to the latent construct it represents.

Table 3. Convergent Validity Test Results (Factor Loadings)

	Economic (E)	Ability to Choose School (ACS)	Environmental Conditions (EC)	Social Culture (SC)
E1	0.841			
E2	0.941			
E3	0.909			
E4	0.823			
ACS1		0.941		
ACS2		0.919		
ACS3		0.946		
ACS4		0.939		
ACS5		0.903		
ACS6		0.883		
ACS7		0.960		
ACS8		0.912		
L1			0.920	
L2			0.931	
SC1				0.962
SC2				0.963

The results of the convergent validity test show that all indicators in the Social-Cultural, Economic, Environmental Conditions, and Ability to Choose School constructs have factor loadings above 0.7. These findings confirm that each indicator meets the criteria for convergent validity and makes an adequate contribution to explaining its respective latent construct, making the research instrument suitable for further analysis.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity testing was conducted to ensure that each latent construct in the research model has conceptual uniqueness and can be empirically distinguished from other constructs. Discriminant validity in this study was evaluated using the Fornell-Lacker criteria, namely by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct with the correlation value between constructs.

Table 4. Results of the Discriminant Validity Test (Fornell-Lacker Criteria)

	Economic (E)	Ability to Choose School (ACS)	Environmental Conditions (EC)	Social Culture (SC)
Economic (E)	0.880			
Ability to Choose School (ACS)	0.846	0.926		
Environmental Conditions (EC)	0.815	0.927	0.926	

The results of the discriminant validity test show that the root mean square error of prediction for each construct is higher than the correlations between other constructs. This finding indicates that each latent variable has good discrimination and is able to explain phenomena that are distinct from one another, so the measurement model is deemed to meet the criteria for discriminant validity.

Reliability

Reliability testing was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the instrument in measuring each latent construct. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, where values above 0.7 indicate that the indicators within a single construct have a good level of consistency.

Table 5. Instrument Reliability Test Results

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Economic (E)	0.902	0.915	0.932	0.774

Ability to School Choice (ACS)	0.976	0.977	0.980	0.857
Environmental Conditions (EC)	0.833	0.836	0.923	0.857
Social and Cultural (SC)	0.920	0.920	0.962	0.926

The reliability test results indicate that all constructs in this study have Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeding the recommended minimum thresholds. These findings confirm that the research instrument possesses strong internal consistency and is reliable for accurately measuring Social-Cultural, Economic, Environmental Conditions, and Ability to School Choose.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing was conducted to evaluate the direct effects of Sociocultural, Economic, and Environmental Conditions on the Ability to Choose a School, as well as to test the moderating role of Sociocultural factors in the relationship between Economic factors and the Ability to Choose a School, and between Environmental Conditions and the Ability to Choose a School. Significance testing was performed based on the t-statistic and p-value obtained through the bootstrapping procedure.

Table 6. Hypothesis Test Results

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-statistics (O/STDEV)	P-values
Social Culture (SC) -> Ability to Choose School (ACS)	1.253	1.278	0.195	6.423	0.000
Economic (E) -> Ability to Choose School (ACS)	0.040	0.038	0.021	1.853	0.064
Environmental Conditions (EC) -> Ability to Choose School (ACS)	0.058	0.056	0.017	3.314	0.001
Social Culture (SC) x Economic (E) -> Ability to School Choice (ACS)	0.074	0.078	0.039	1.910	0.056
Social Culture (SC) x Environmental Conditions (EC) -> Ability to Choose School (ACS)	0.093	0.099	0.042	2.195	0.028

The results of the hypothesis testing indicate that Sociocultural and Environmental Conditions have a significant effect on the Ability to Choose a School, whereas Economic Factors do not show a significant direct effect. Furthermore, Sociocultural factors were found to moderate the relationship between Environmental Conditions and Ability to School Choose, but did not moderate the relationship between Economic Factors and Ability to School Choose. These findings indicate that sociocultural factors play a dominant role, both directly and in amplifying the influence of the environmental context on parents' ability to choose a school.

R-Square

An evaluation of the coefficient of determination was conducted to assess the ability of the independent variables to explain the variation in the ability to choose a school. The R-square value was used as an indicator of the structural model's explanatory power regarding the dependent variable under study.

Table 7. R-Square Value

	R-Square	Adjusted R-square
Tendency to Choose a School (ACS)	0.976	0.976

The evaluation results show that the R-square value for Ability to Choose School falls into the very high category, indicating that Sociocultural, Economic, and Environmental Conditions simultaneously possess strong predictive power in explaining variations in parents' ability to choose a school. These findings confirm that the structural model constructed has excellent explanatory power.

This discussion section examines the research findings by situating them within the theoretical framework and empirical context of parents' school choice. The analysis results show that the Ability to Choose School is a decision construct strongly influenced by social and environmental factors, while economic factors do not always function as the primary determinants. These findings confirm that the ability to choose a school is not purely instrumental-rational in nature, but is shaped through the interaction of values, norms, and the social context surrounding parents in their daily lives (Yazdani, 2025).

One of the most notable findings is the strong influence of sociocultural factors on the ability to choose a school. This influence indicates that cultural values, community norms, and collective societal views play a dominant role in shaping parents' educational preferences and decisions. In communities with high social cohesion, the decision to choose a school is often not entirely individual in nature, but rather integrated with social expectations and the family's cultural identity. Parents tend to choose schools perceived to align with the moral, religious, or traditional values embraced by their community. This finding reinforces the view that education is understood not only as an academic tool but also as a vehicle for transmitting values and shaping children's social identity (Rasheed et al., 2021).

The research results also indicate that Environmental Conditions have a significant influence on the Ability to Choose a School, although the strength of this influence is smaller compared to sociocultural factors. A safe, easily accessible school environment supported by the surrounding community enhances parents' trust in educational institutions (Mann et al., 2024). This finding confirms that environmental factors serve as a supportive context that facilitates parental decision-making (Kotoula et al., 2021). A conducive environment provides a sense of safety and comfort, which are important considerations in assessing a school's suitability for a child. Thus, the ability to choose a school is determined not only by the school's internal quality but also by external conditions inherent to its location and social environment.

Conversely, economic factors do not show a significant direct influence on the Ability to School Choose. This finding is intriguing because, theoretically, economics is often considered the primary determinant in educational choices. However, the results of this study indicate that, in certain contexts, economic limitations or advantages do not automatically determine parents' ability to choose a school. Parents with limited economic means can still demonstrate a strong ability to choose a school when driven by strong socio-cultural values and high educational aspirations (Kazemianpur et al., 2015; Ulfa, 2022). This suggests that educational decisions do not always follow a linear cost-benefit logic but are influenced by non-material factors such as future expectations and social legitimacy.

Moderation findings make an important contribution to understanding the dynamics of the relationships between variables. Analysis results indicate that Sociocultural moderates the relationship between Environmental Conditions and Ability to School Choose. This means that the influence of the environment on the ability to choose a school becomes stronger when supported by sociocultural values that align with it. In communities with strong trust and social bonds toward a particular school, favorable environmental conditions further reinforce parents' confidence in making school choices. Conversely, a relatively less-than-ideal environment can still be accepted if the school possesses strong socio-cultural legitimacy in the eyes of the community. This finding underscores the role of socio-cultural factors as an interpretive lens that frames how parents assess and interpret environmental conditions (Jonathan et al., 2023).

However, socio-cultural factors do not significantly moderate the relationship between economic status and the ability to choose a school. This finding suggests that the economic influence on the ability to choose a school is relatively stable and not significantly affected by the sociocultural context. In other words, economic limitations or advantages remain objective conditions that are difficult to modify through cultural values. This indicates that while sociocultural factors can reinforce educational aspirations and preferences, economic factors still have certain structural limits that cannot be fully negotiated through social values.

These research results enrich our understanding of school choice by emphasizing that the Ability to Choose School is the result of a complex interaction between structural and cultural factors. The dominance of sociocultural factors suggests that education policies focused solely on economic aspects, such as subsidies or financial aid, may not be sufficiently effective unless accompanied by contextual social and cultural approaches. Educational outreach programs, community leader engagement, and strengthening public trust in schools are key strategies for enhancing parents' ability to make more reflective and meaningful educational decisions.

The practical implications of these findings suggest that schools and policymakers need to understand the community's sociocultural context as a foundation for designing educational programs. Efforts to improve the quality of the school environment must be integrated with the reinforcement of cultural values and

identities relevant to the local community. Furthermore, although economics has not been proven to have a significant direct impact, economic interventions remain necessary to ensure equitable access to education, particularly for vulnerable groups. Thus, a holistic and contextual approach is key to supporting parents in developing the Ability to School Chooses that are not only rational but also aligned with the community's social values and needs.

Conclusion

This study confirms that parents' ability to choose a school is a decision-making process predominantly influenced by sociocultural factors, supported by environmental conditions, while economic factors do not act as direct determinants. Sociocultural factors not only function as the primary predictor but also amplify the influence of environmental conditions on the ability to choose a school, meaning that parents' educational decisions are heavily shaped by the values, norms, and social legitimacy that emerge within the community. These findings indicate that improving the ability to choose a school cannot be achieved through an economic approach alone but requires strategies sensitive to the sociocultural context and the educational environment. Consequently, educational policies and practices must be directed toward strengthening social trust, community engagement, and creating a conducive school environment so that school choice decisions truly reflect the best interests for children's development and the sustainability of community education.

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