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COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES IN A PRIVATE KINDERGARTEN : A CASE STUDY OF A RAUDHATUL ATHFAL IN MALANG

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ABSTRAK

Sekolah Taman Kanak-Kanak (TK) di lokasi yang kurang strategis sering menghadapi tantangan besar dalam menarik jumlah siswa yang memadai. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi keunggulan bersaing yang diterapkan oleh sebuah yayasan dalam mengelola sekolah Taman Kanak-Kanak (TK) yang menghadapi tantangan seperti lokasi sekolah kurang strategis dan jumlah siswa yang belum optimal. Penelitian ini membahas strategi pengembangan yang unggul yang dapat diterapkan untuk meningkatkan daya saing dan keberlanjutan sekolah, termasuk diferensiasi program, peningkatan kualitas layanan, strategi pemasaran yang inovatif, serta penguatan hubungan dengan komunitas lokal. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus pada satu sekolah Raudhatul Athfal (RA) di bawah naungan yayasan di kota Malang. Data-data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi keunggulan bersaing yang efektif meliputi pendekatan personal kepada orang tua, program unggulan berbasis nilai, pemanfaatan media sosial untuk branding, dan kebijakan biaya yang fleksibel. Strategi diferensiasi berbasis nilai terbukti meningkatkan persepsi positif masyarakat dan secara bertahap berpengaruh pada peningkatan jumlah siswa. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi praktis bagi pengelola sekolah dan yayasan dalam merancang strategi yang relevan di tengah keterbatasan sumber daya yang ada.

Kata Kunci : Keunggulan Bersaing, Sekolah TK, Strategi Yayasan, Diferensiasi, Studi Kasus



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ABSTRACT

Kindergartens located in less strategic areas often face significant challenges in attracting a sufficient number of students. This study aims to analyze the competitive advantage strategies implemented by a foundation in managing a kindergarten facing such challenges, particularly concerning its location and suboptimal student enrollment. The research focuses on identifying superior development strategies to enhance the school's competitiveness and sustainability, including program differentiation, service quality improvement, innovative marketing approaches, and strengthening relationships with the local community. A qualitative case study method was employed at a Raudhatul Athfal (RA) school under a foundation in Malang, Indonesia. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The findings indicate that effective competitive strategies include personal approaches to parents, value-based flagship programs, the use of social media for branding, and flexible tuition policies. Value-based differentiation strategies have proven to enhance the community's positive perception, gradually contributing to increased student enrollment. This study provides practical insights for school administrators and foundations in designing relevant strategies despite limited resources.

Keywords : *Competitive Advantage, Kindergarten, Foundation Strategy, Differentiation, Case Study*

INTRODUCTION

Competition in the early childhood education sector has intensified in recent years, in line with increasing public awareness of the importance of early education. However, not all educational institutions especially Raudhatul Athfal (RA) schools, are strategically located or have an adequate number of students. RA schools situated in less accessible or low density areas often face challenges in attracting parents, particularly when competing with similar institutions that are more accessible or have already established a strong reputation.

In such circumstances, it is essential for school managers to develop competitive advantage strategies that do not solely rely on physical location, but also emphasize the quality of interactions, service differentiation, and personalized approaches for both students and parents. According to Porter (1985), competitive advantage can be achieved through differentiation, focus, or cost leadership strategies. In the context of RA or kindergarten level schools, differentiation



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strategies such as unique programs, character-building activities, or community involvement can be key factors in survival and growth ¹.

Furthermore, Kotler and Fox (1995) emphasize in their research on educational service marketing that parents' perceptions of educational quality are often shaped by direct experiences and effective interpersonal communication. Therefore, schools that are able to build trust, provide friendly services, and maintain two way communication can enhance their appeal, even if they are not geographically advantaged ².

Kresnawaty et al. (2022) assert that PAUD/TK/RA institutions serve as the foundation for preparing future generations for the next educational levels. They argue that early childhood education is a critical stage for fostering cognitive, language, motor, socio-emotional, religious, moral, and artistic development ³.

RA schools play a vital role in shaping children's character, cognitive skills, and social behaviors. Nevertheless, not all early childhood institutions operate under ideal conditions. Schools managed by foundations, particularly those located in peripheral or less strategic areas, often face challenges such as low enrollment numbers, limited public exposure, and constrained resources. These conditions can negatively affect public perception regarding school quality, despite the school's internal potential.

To address these challenges, competitive advantage strategies are crucial. These strategies include all efforts made to distinguish a school from its competitors, such as flagship programs, teacher quality, personalized approaches to parents, and curriculum innovation. With the right strategies, even lesser-known schools can build a strong reputation and attract greater community interest.

According to the daftarsekolah.net database, there are 104 RA schools in Malang City, East Java. All of them (100%) are privately managed, with none under government ownership ⁴. In terms of accreditation, only 6 RA schools (5.77%) are accredited A, 18 schools (17.31%) are accredited B, 1 school (0.96%) is accredited C, and the rest (75.96%) have not yet been accredited. Regarding standardization,

¹ Michael E. Porter, *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*, vols. (California: Free Press, 1985).

² P. Kotler and K. Fox, *Strategic marketing for educational institutions (2nd ed.)*, vols. (Upper Saddle River New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1995).

³ Anita Kresnawaty et al., "Institutional Management Planning In Improving The Quality Of Paud In Kindergarten Naurahhuda Karawang" *International Journal Of Humanities Education and Social Sciences (IJHESS)*. 1.4 (2022): 519–523.

⁴ [Daftarsekolah.net](http://daftarsekolah.net), "Daftar Sekolah RA di Kota Malang Jawa Timur Tahun 2025" daftarsekolah.net, 2025.



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none of the RA schools in Malang City have obtained ISO 9001:2000 or ISO 9001:2008 certification. Accreditation, as described by Asmani (2011), is a fact-based evaluation conducted by assessors to assess the performance of an institution in providing education⁵. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (Depag RI, 2008) explains that the aim of accreditation is to provide a clear picture of an institution's educational performance and to serve as a foundation for guidance and development toward improving education quality⁶.

The increasingly competitive nature of early childhood education demands serious attention from institutions seeking sustainability and excellence. RA and TK schools are now expected not only to deliver quality teaching services but also to compete effectively with peer institutions in gaining public trust. This challenge is more significant for foundation-run schools located in less strategic areas with low student enrollment. Schools that are not situated in central residential or busy areas often struggle to attract prospective students. Moreover, a limited number of students may influence public perception regarding school quality and pose a threat to the school's sustainability.

Wahyudi (2017) emphasizes that educational institutions today must be capable of competing by meeting or exceeding public expectations, which requires continuous improvement in all aspects of education⁷. Aziz et al. (2021) further stress that early childhood institutions must be well-managed in order to achieve high standards of educational quality⁸.

Although numerous studies have examined competitive advantage strategies in educational institutions, most of them focus on schools with favorable locations, strong branding, or relatively stable student enrollment. Previous research generally emphasizes competitive advantage from a macro perspective, such as marketing strategies, institutional management, or service quality in well-established or urban-centered schools. However, limited attention has been given to early childhood education institutions, particularly Raudhatul Athfal (RA) schools managed by foundations that operate under structural constraints, such as unstrategic locations, low student enrollment, and suboptimal accreditation status. Existing studies rarely

⁵ Jamal Ma'mur Asmani, *Tips Praktis Membangun dan Mengolah Administrasi Sekolah*, vols. (Yogyakarta: Diva Press, 2011).

⁶ Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, *Pedoman Akreditasi Madrasah*, vols. (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kelembagaan Agama Islam, 2008).

⁷ Kacung Wahyudi, "Manajemen Pemasaran Pendidikan" *Kariman: Jurnal Pendidikan Keislaman*. 4.2 (2018): 99–116.

⁸ Abdul Aziz et al., "Manajemen Strategi Pembelajaran Lembaga Anak Usia Dini Pada Masa Pandemi Covid-19" *Al-Athfaal: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*. 4.2 (2021): 213–232.



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explore how competitive advantage strategies are practically developed and implemented by schools that lack geographical and market advantages.

Furthermore, empirical studies that specifically investigate competitive advantage strategies at the RA level in the context of Islamic early childhood education in Indonesia especially through an in-depth case study approach remain scarce. As a result, there is a lack of contextual and applicable models that can be replicated by similarly disadvantaged RA institutions. This research addresses this gap by analyzing competitive advantage strategies implemented by RA Al Munawaroh Malang, an Islamic kindergarten facing locational and enrollment challenges, with the aim of generating a practical and context-sensitive strategic model for foundation-managed RA schools. Autrozi (2024) states that a vision of competitive excellence includes achieving high levels of human and technical development, effective management, and sustainable institutional growth through talent and innovation⁹. Kresnawaty et al. (2022) also emphasize the need for clear planning and standardized management practices for better governance in early childhood education institutions¹⁰. This study differs from previous research in several important aspects. First, while prior studies on competitive advantage in early childhood education institutions predominantly examine general management practices or marketing strategies in well-established schools, this research specifically focuses on a foundation-managed RA school operating under disadvantaged conditions, including an unstrategic location and low student enrollment.

Second, unlike earlier studies that tend to analyze competitive advantage at a conceptual or macro level, this research adopts an in-depth case study approach to explore how competitive advantage strategies are practically designed and implemented in a real-world context. This allows for a deeper understanding of adaptive strategies developed by schools with limited resources. Third, this study integrates the perspectives of competitive strategy theory (Porter) and educational service marketing (Kotler & Fox) within the specific context of Islamic early childhood education, which has received limited scholarly attention. By doing so, this research provides a contextualized and applicable strategic model that can serve as a reference for other RA institutions facing similar challenges.

⁹ Bashayer Suleiman Al-Atrouzi, "Competitive Advantage in Managing Kindergarten Institutions in the State of Kuwait Dr. Bashayer Suleiman Al-Atrouzi *" *Yordanian Association for Educational Science*. (2024): 97–116.

¹⁰ Kresnawaty et al., "Institutional Management Planning In Improving The Quality Of Paud In Kindergarten Naurahhuda Karawang."



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The novelty of this study lies in its focus on developing a competitive advantage strategy model for foundation-managed RA schools operating in non-strategic locations with limited student enrollment. By emphasizing internal strengths, service differentiation, and personalized stakeholder engagement, this research offers a context-specific strategic framework that has not been sufficiently addressed in previous studies.

This research seeks to identify and analyze competitive advantage strategies implemented by RA schools that face strategic and enrollment challenges, with the goal of offering a replicable model for similarly situated schools.

1. Research Questions

Based on the background described above, the research questions addressed in this study are as follows :

- a. What challenges are faced by foundations in managing kindergarten schools located in less strategic areas with a limited number of students?
- b. What competitive advantage strategies have been or can be implemented by the school to attract community interest?
- c. How effective are these strategies in increasing student enrollment and improving the school's image?

2. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- a. To identify the main challenges faced by kindergarten schools located in less strategic areas.
- b. To analyze relevant and applicable competitive advantage strategies for schools under such conditions.
- c. To evaluate the impact of these strategies on school development, particularly in terms of student enrollment, community trust, and quality of educational services.

3. Significance of The Study

- a. **Theoretical Significance:** This study contributes to the development of literature in the field of educational management, particularly regarding competitive advantage strategies in early childhood education institutions (PAUD).
- b. **Practical Significance:** The findings may serve as a reference for foundation managers or kindergarten principals in designing appropriate strategies to enhance school competitiveness, despite limitations in location and student numbers.



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RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design, as the research was directed toward obtaining an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of competitive advantage strategies implemented by an educational foundation in managing a kindergarten facing limited student enrollment and an unstrategic location. The case study approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to explore real conditions, management practices, and strategic efforts within a specific institutional context. The subjects of the study consisted of foundation managers, the school principal, and teachers, while the object of the study focused on the strategies used to build competitive advantage under conditions of geographical and enrollment constraints. The research was conducted at a private kindergarten under a foundation in Malang City, which was purposively selected due to its relatively low number of students and its location in an area with limited social and community activity.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with foundation board members, the school principal, teachers, and parents to obtain detailed information regarding experiences, perceptions, and strategic actions related to school competitiveness. Direct observation was carried out to examine daily school activities and environmental conditions, allowing the researcher to capture contextual realities and operational practices. Documentation, including school brochures, activity reports, student enrollment records, and the foundation's institutional profile, was analyzed to support and corroborate data obtained from interviews and observations. Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, in which relevant information was selected and summarized, organized into systematic narratives and matrices, and interpreted to identify patterns and assess the effectiveness of the strategies implemented. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation by cross-checking information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation to enhance the credibility and consistency of the findings.



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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on documentation analysis and direct observation, RA “Al Munawaroh” is an early childhood education institution managed by the Al Munawaroh Foundation and located on the outskirts of Malang City, specifically in Dinoyo Sub-district, Lowokwaru District. The school is not situated on a main road and can only be accessed through a narrow residential alley, which significantly limits its visibility. During field observation, the school was found to be relatively hidden from public view, with no large signage that could easily attract passersby.

Interview data with foundation managers revealed that the school’s location has long been perceived as a structural limitation. One informant stated that “many parents only know the school after being personally informed, not because they pass by the location.” This condition is supported by enrollment documentation from 2020 to 2024, which shows that the number of active students ranged between 15 and 25 children per academic year, a figure considerably lower than other RA and kindergarten institutions within the same district.

Despite these limitations, classroom observations indicate that learning activities are conducted in an orderly and emotionally supportive environment. Teachers were consistently observed engaging in close interpersonal interactions with students, emphasizing patience, affection, and individualized attention. Interview results with teachers confirmed that small class sizes allow them to focus more intensively on each child’s development. This suggests that while the school lacks physical and locational advantages, it compensates through relational and value-oriented educational practices.

Based on triangulated data from interviews, observation, and documentation, several major challenges were identified. First, accessibility remains a significant issue. Interviews with parents revealed that limited access by public transportation discourages some families from enrolling their children. One parent explained that “the school is good, but transportation is difficult, especially for working parents.”

Second, observational data confirm that competing schools in the same district generally possess more modern facilities and are located in more strategic and visible environments. Foundation managers acknowledged during interviews that comparisons with nearby schools are inevitable, particularly when parents prioritize physical infrastructure as a symbol of quality. This competitive pressure creates challenges for RA Al Munawaroh, which operates with modest facilities.

Third, interview data indicate that public perception initially labels the school as “quiet” or “less active.” This perception was linked to limited promotional activities and the school’s unobtrusive physical presence. However, several parents



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noted that their perception changed after direct interaction with teachers and participation in school activities, indicating a gap between external image and internal educational practices.

Personalized Approach to Parents

Interview data with foundation managers, the principal, and teachers consistently indicate that personalized engagement with parents is a core strategy. This includes home visits, informal consultations, and continuous communication regarding children's development. One teacher stated that "parents feel more comfortable when we visit them directly and discuss their child personally." Observational data support this finding, as frequent informal interactions between teachers and parents were observed before and after school hours. Documentation of school programs also confirms the regular organization of joint activities such as recreational outings and collective voluntary work. Analytically, these practices strengthen emotional bonds and foster parental trust, which becomes a critical non-physical source of competitiveness.

Value-Based Flagship Programs

Based on interviews and document review, RA Al Munawaroh has developed value-based flagship programs emphasizing religious character, independence, and basic entrepreneurial skills. Teachers explained that programs such as "Children's Independence Day" are designed to build confidence and responsibility from an early age.¹¹ Observations during these activities revealed active student participation and supportive teacher facilitation. Religious routines such as communal Dhuha prayers, dhikr, and supplication were consistently observed as part of daily school life. Interviews with parents indicate that these programs are perceived as distinctive and meaningful. From an analytical perspective, these value-based programs function as symbolic and experiential differentiation strategies rather than structural or infrastructural ones.

Social Media Utilization and Flexible Tuition Policy

Interview data reveal that the school actively uses WhatsApp and Facebook to document daily activities and communicate with parents. Teachers stated that this approach helps maintain transparency and parental involvement. Documentation analysis shows consistent digital updates, which coincide with a gradual increase in student enrollment over the last two academic years. Additionally, financial documents and interviews confirm the implementation of a flexible tuition policy. Parents emphasized that the absence of building fees and the availability of installment options were decisive factors in their enrollment decisions. Analytically, this policy expands access and reinforces



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the school's inclusive image within the local community¹¹. Entrepreneurial based kindergartens support life skills development through flagship programs such as *Market Day*, which positively influences various aspects of early childhood development.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the competitive advantage of RA Al Munawaroh is not primarily determined by physical location or infrastructural superiority, but by relational, value-based, and adaptive management strategies. Despite being situated in a less strategic area with limited accessibility, the school demonstrates the ability to maintain operational sustainability through non-physical forms of differentiation. This supports the argument that in early childhood education, competitiveness is constructed through trust, service quality, and value alignment rather than spatial advantage alone¹². The qualitative data reveal that parents prioritize emotional security, moral education, and interpersonal engagement over visible infrastructure, particularly when selecting schools for early childhood education.

One of the most prominent findings relates to the personalized approach to parents, which consistently emerged from interview data. Parents described feeling respected and valued due to direct communication¹², home visits, and ongoing consultations regarding their children's development. This finding confirms that relational strategies serve as a critical mechanism for building institutional trust and long-term parental loyalty. Educational service marketing literature emphasizes that direct interaction between schools and parents significantly shapes perceptions of educational quality and credibility¹³. In the case of RA Al Munawaroh, personalized engagement compensates for structural limitations and reduces the comparative advantage of competing schools with better facilities.

The implementation of value-based flagship programs further strengthens the school's differentiation strategy. Observational data show that religious routines, character education, and independence-oriented activities are embedded into daily learning practices rather than treated as supplementary programs. This integration enhances program authenticity and reinforces the school's identity as a values-

¹¹ Amal Siteha, "The role of environmental education in achieving the goals of sustainable development in the light of Egypt's vision 2030" *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Educational Studies*. 4.2 (2023): 1–10.

¹² Porter, *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*.



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driven institution. According to differentiation theory, sustainable competitive advantage arises when an organization offers unique, meaningful value that is difficult for competitors to replicate¹⁴. The moral and spiritual orientation of RA Al Munawaroh thus functions as an intangible strategic asset that enhances institutional distinctiveness. Enrollment documentation indicates a gradual increase in student numbers over the past three academic years, suggesting that the implemented strategies are beginning to yield positive outcomes. Although growth remains modest, this pattern reflects the cumulative effect of trust-based and value-driven strategies. Research on parental decision-making in early childhood education highlights that enrollment growth often occurs incrementally, as parents rely on word-of-mouth recommendations and observed experiences rather than short-term promotional efforts¹⁵. Therefore, the observed enrollment trend reflects growing community confidence rather than immediate market expansion.¹³

Another important finding concerns the strategic use of social media for branding and communication. Despite limited physical visibility, the school actively disseminates information about student activities and school programs through digital platforms. Interview data suggest that this practice enhances transparency and strengthens emotional connection between parents and the school. Studies on digital leadership in early childhood education emphasize that effective use of digital communication tools can enhance institutional legitimacy and public trust, particularly for schools operating in non-strategic locations¹⁶. In this context, social media serves as a strategic extension of interpersonal communication rather than a substitute for face-to-face engagement.

The flexible tuition policy adopted by RA Al Munawaroh also contributes significantly to its competitive positioning. By minimizing financial barriers and offering affordable tuition schemes, the school aligns its services with the socioeconomic conditions of the surrounding community. Prior studies indicate that affordability becomes a competitive advantage when combined with perceived service quality and strong relational engagement¹⁷. This approach not only expands

¹¹Amal Siteha, "The role of environmental education in achieving the goals of sustainable development in the light of Egypt's vision 2030" *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Educational Studies*. 4.2 (2023): 1–10.

¹² Porter, *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*.

¹³ Porter, *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*.

¹⁴ Kotler and Fox, *Strategic marketing for educational institutions (2nd ed.)*.

¹⁵Farid Fauzi and Dewi Apriliani, "Building A Brand Image Strategy in Integrated Islamic Kindergarten at Central Aceh District" *Al-Fikra : Jurnal Ilmiah Keislaman*. 22.1 (2023): 104–115.



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access to education but also reinforces the school's image as a socially responsive institution. Beyond the primary strategies identified, the findings suggest that several supporting variables may further strengthen the relationship between competitive strategy and institutional sustainability. Teacher competence and consistency in service delivery appear to enhance the effectiveness of relational and value-based strategies.

Previous research has demonstrated that teacher professionalism and pedagogical consistency significantly influence parental trust and institutional reputation¹⁸. Without adequate human resource quality, relational strategies alone may not produce sustained competitive advantage.¹⁴ Community collaboration also emerges as a potential reinforcing factor. Although still limited in scope, informal engagement with local residents and community activities contributes to the school's social legitimacy. Studies on stakeholder engagement emphasize that schools that actively involve local communities are better positioned to build long-term trust and institutional resilience¹⁹. Strengthening this aspect may further enhance the school's competitive standing. Overall, the findings affirm that competitive advantage in early childhood education is multidimensional and context-dependent. Strategic management practices enable schools with structural limitations to remain viable and relevant²⁰. Emotional and relational engagement plays a decisive role in shaping parental trust and school reputation. Curriculum relevance and value-based education strengthen institutional differentiation. Effective communication and branding extend institutional reach beyond physical constraints. Finally, financial accessibility supports inclusivity and sustainability within diverse socioeconomic contexts.

¹⁴ Zhenchen Li et al., "Constructing the Basic Theoretical Framework of Kindergarten-based Curriculum Development: Definition, History, Characteristics and Approaches" *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. 14.4 (2024): 1225–1235.

¹⁵Desi Afriwanti and Himyar Pasrizal, "Marketing Strategy for Education Services in Integrated Islamic-Based Junior High Schools" *Journal of Islamic Education Students (JIES)*. 1.2 (2021): 48–57.

¹⁶Eleftheria Palla et al., "The Beneficial Relationship Between Marketing Services and Schools" *Administrative Sciences*. 15.3 (2025): 1–15.

¹⁷Maria Alonso Luaces et al., "An Urban School District-University-Industry Partnership to Increase Diversity in the Health Professions: Lesson Learned from the University of Kansas Health Science Academy." *Journal of Best Practices in Health Professions Diversity: Education, Research & Policy*. 12.2 (2019): 111–127.

¹⁸Taryn W. Morrissey, Scott W. Allard, and Elizabeth Pelletier, "Access to Early Care and Education in Rural Communities: Implications for Children's School Readiness" *Rsf*. 8.3 (2022): 100–122.



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CONCLUSION

This study concludes that RA Al Munawaroh is able to build competitive advantage despite its non-strategic location and limited student enrollment by emphasizing personalized parental engagement, value-based educational programs, digital communication, and flexible tuition policies. These strategies strengthen parental trust, differentiate the school from competitors, and gradually improve its public image. Overall, the findings confirm that relational and value-driven approaches play a decisive role in sustaining competitiveness in early childhood education institutions.

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