



## Modeling Educational Service Quality and Parental Word of Mouth Intention in Early Childhood Education

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

Educational Service Quality, Parental Satisfaction, Word of Mouth Intention

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This study aims to examine the influence of Educational Service Quality on Parents' Word of Mouth (WOM) Intention through Parental Satisfaction in Early Childhood Education. Educational service quality is conceptualized as a second-order construct formed by the five SERVQUAL dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. A quantitative explanatory design was employed using a survey method involving parents of children enrolled in a private early childhood education institution in Surabaya, Indonesia. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). The results reveal that Educational Service Quality has a strong positive effect on Parental Satisfaction, which in turn significantly influences Parents' WOM Intention. Mediation analysis confirms that Parental Satisfaction serves as a significant intervening variable in transmitting the effect of service quality on WOM intention. At the dimensional level, Reliability and Responsiveness emerge as the strongest contributors to perceived service quality. These findings imply that early childhood education institutions should prioritize satisfaction-oriented service management by strengthening reliable administrative systems and responsive communication practices to enhance parental advocacy, institutional legitimacy, and sustainable competitiveness.

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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary service societies, trust has become a decisive factor influencing institutional sustainability, particularly in sectors characterized by high intangibility such as education. The central point is that word of mouth (WOM) remains a critical mechanism shaping public trust despite the rapid expansion of digital marketing channels (Holidi, 2025; Khofsah, 2025; Manshur, 2026; Syafiih, 2025). The reason lies in the fact that interpersonal communication

is perceived as more credible than formal promotional messages, especially when decisions involve long-term developmental consequences for children. Evidence suggests that WOM is grounded in personal experience and interpersonal trust, making it one of the most persuasive forms of communication in service industries (Rasheed & Rashid, 2024). In education, where outcomes are uncertain and evaluation is complex, parents often prioritize recommendations from other parents. Therefore, understanding the determinants of positive WOM is socially important because it influences enrolment stability, institutional legitimacy, and broader public confidence in early childhood education systems.

Despite the recognized importance of WOM, many early childhood education institutions struggle to systematically manage the factors that generate positive parental recommendations (Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Kusumawati, 2025). The general problem faced by society is the increasing competitiveness among educational providers, which intensifies pressure on institutions to maintain enrolment and public credibility (Dewi et al., 2024; Maulidy, 2025; Zain & Mustofa, 2024; Zuhdi & Faridy, 2024). Early childhood education services are inherently intangible, experiential, and future-oriented, increasing perceived risk among parents (Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Kusumawati, 2025). Consequently, dissatisfaction whether related to communication, administrative reliability, or classroom experience can easily translate into negative WOM, complaints, or withdrawal. Empirical studies indicate that peer recommendations significantly influence parental perceptions and enrolment decisions (Manyanga et al., 2022). However, institutions often focus more on promotional strategies than on strengthening service quality foundations that shape parental satisfaction. This imbalance creates vulnerability, as unsatisfied parents may disseminate negative experiences more rapidly than institutions can repair reputational damage, thereby affecting long-term sustainability and stakeholder trust.

In practice, early childhood education institutions operate in environments where parental involvement is intensive and continuous. Parents regularly interact with teachers and administrators, evaluate curriculum relevance, observe facilities, and assess responsiveness to concerns. These interactions create cumulative service experiences that shape satisfaction and future behavioural intentions (Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Kusumawati, 2025). Field observations in competitive urban settings show that parents frequently exchange information through informal conversations, parenting communities, and digital messaging platforms. Positive experiences related to reliability and responsiveness often generate strong advocacy, whereas delays in communication or inconsistent service delivery may quickly lead to dissatisfaction (Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Kusumawati, 2025). This phenomenon indicates that parental perceptions are not formed solely by tangible facilities but by the overall quality of relational and

administrative processes (Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Kusumawati, 2025). Such realities highlight the need to examine how educational service quality systematically influences parental satisfaction and ultimately drives WOM intention within early childhood education contexts characterized by high parental engagement and evaluative scrutiny.

Previous research has consistently identified parental satisfaction as a key antecedent of positive WOM in educational services. Satisfaction emerges when perceived performance confirms or exceeds expectations, as explained by Expectation–Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980), and satisfied customers are more likely to recommend services to others (Buttle, 1998). In educational contexts, empirical studies demonstrate that service quality significantly influences parental satisfaction and behavioural outcomes, including loyalty and WOM (Budiyanto et al., 2021; Sugiharto et al., 2023; Widianingsih et al., 2025). The SERVQUAL framework conceptualizes service quality through five dimensions tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and has been widely applied in education research. These studies provide valuable insights into how individual service attributes affect satisfaction and recommendation behaviour (Islamiyah et al., 2024; Nazilah et al., 2024; Rahmatillah & Andayani, 2025; Sain et al., 2024; Sain & Abdullah, 2024). However, most of them conceptualize service quality as separate first-order constructs rather than as a unified higher-order perception.

Although prior studies have examined the mediating role of parental satisfaction between service quality and WOM, they rarely integrate satisfaction within a second-order service quality framework. For example, Utama et al. (2024) confirmed the mediating role of parental satisfaction in early childhood education, yet service quality was modeled as a single-level construct. Similarly, other studies treat SERVQUAL dimensions as independent predictors (Savira et al., 2022; Wibowo & Pradiani, 2024), potentially fragmenting the holistic nature of service quality perception. This approach may create conceptual inconsistency, as theoretically service quality represents an overarching evaluation formed by interrelated dimensions rather than isolated attributes. While higher-order modeling has been increasingly applied in other service sectors (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022), its application in early childhood education remains limited. This gap is significant because inadequate modeling may restrict explanatory power and obscure how service dimensions collectively shape satisfaction and WOM intention.

Responding to these gaps, this study introduces a state-of-the-art approach by conceptualizing educational service quality as a second-order construct within the SERVQUAL framework and examining its indirect effect on WOM intention through parental satisfaction. By applying Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS), this research aligns theoretical assumptions with empirical measurement, enabling a more comprehensive

representation of how service quality dimensions collectively form parental perceptions. This higher-order modeling approach advances existing educational management literature by moving beyond fragmented dimensional analyses toward an integrated structural framework. The novelty lies not only in methodological refinement but also in theoretical integration, positioning parental satisfaction as a central psychological mechanism linking multidimensional service quality to behavioural outcomes. Such integration is essential for strengthening theoretical coherence and improving predictive accuracy in early childhood education research.

Based on the identified gaps, the central research problem is whether educational service quality, conceptualized as a second-order construct, significantly influences parents' WOM intention through parental satisfaction in early childhood education. This study argues that service quality does not directly translate into WOM behaviour without first shaping parental satisfaction as an evaluative response. Accordingly, parental satisfaction is proposed as a mediating mechanism that transmits the effect of multidimensional service quality perceptions into positive recommendation intentions. By empirically testing this structural relationship, the study contributes theoretically by validating higher-order service quality modeling and practically by identifying priority dimensions that strengthen parental advocacy. Ultimately, the research provides evidence-based insights for educational managers seeking to enhance institutional legitimacy, maintain enrolment stability, and foster sustainable competitiveness through satisfaction-oriented service quality management.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative explanatory research design to investigate the structural relationships among educational service quality, parental satisfaction, and word of mouth (WOM) intention in early childhood education (Ghanad, 2023; Gul, 2023; Sardana et al., 2023). A quantitative approach was selected because the research aims to test hypothesized causal relationships among latent constructs using numerical data and statistical modeling (Creswell, 2014). Explanatory research is particularly appropriate for examining predictive and causal linkages within theoretically grounded models, especially in studies related to service quality and behavioral intention (Hair et al., 2019). By applying a structured and objective analytical framework, this design enables systematic hypothesis testing and theory extension within educational management research.

The study was conducted at a private early childhood education institution in Surabaya, Indonesia, operating within a multilingual learning environment. This institution was selected purposively because it functions in a competitive educational market where parental perceptions, satisfaction, and

recommendations significantly influence enrolment sustainability. Early childhood education settings are characterized by high parental involvement and continuous interaction between families and school management, making them particularly relevant for examining service quality and WOM intention. The competitive context and the institution's emphasis on service differentiation provide an appropriate setting to analyze how multidimensional service quality shapes parental satisfaction and recommendation behavior.

The population consisted of all parents registered at the institution during the 2025–2026 academic year, totaling 258 individuals. Data were collected using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire distributed online via Google Forms to ensure accessibility and response efficiency. From the distributed questionnaires, 90 valid responses were obtained and included in the analysis. The use of online surveys is considered effective for gathering perceptual data in a timely and cost-efficient manner while maintaining respondent convenience (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Educational service quality was operationalized as a second-order construct consisting of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988), while parental satisfaction and WOM intention were measured as reflective constructs.

Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). PLS-SEM was chosen because it is suitable for prediction-oriented research, accommodates complex structural models with higher-order constructs, and performs well with relatively small to medium sample sizes (Hair et al., 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2022). Moreover, PLS-SEM is appropriate when the objective is theory development or extension rather than strict covariance-based theory confirmation. The analysis involved estimating path coefficients to test direct and indirect relationships, calculating coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ ) to assess explanatory power, and examining mediating effects to evaluate the role of parental satisfaction in linking service quality and WOM intention.

To ensure data credibility and robustness, the analysis followed a two-stage evaluation process. First, the measurement model was assessed by examining indicator reliability (outer loadings), internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted/AVE), and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). Second, the structural model was evaluated by analyzing path coefficients, significance levels obtained through bootstrapping procedures, and  $R^2$  values to determine predictive relevance. These systematic validation procedures enhance the reliability, validity, and overall trustworthiness of the empirical findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that educational service quality plays a central role in shaping parents' word of mouth (WOM) intention through parental satisfaction in early childhood education. The results indicate that parents' evaluative responses to service experiences are critical in translating perceived service quality into positive WOM behaviour, highlighting parental satisfaction as a key explanatory mechanism.

The measurement model evaluation (see Table 1) indicates that all constructs met the required reliability and validity criteria. Indicator reliability was achieved, as the indicators demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity. Internal consistency reliability was confirmed through composite reliability values above the acceptable level, while convergent validity was established by average variance extracted (AVE) values greater than 0.50. Discriminant validity was also confirmed, indicating that each construct measured a distinct concept. These results demonstrate that the measurement instruments used in this study were appropriate for assessing educational service quality, parental satisfaction, and WOM intention.

**Table 1. Measurement Model Evaluation Results**

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
WOM Intention (Y)	0,961	0,969	0,837
Parent Satisfaction (Z)	0,922	0,939	0,72
Service Quality (X)	0,946	0,953	0,59
Tangibles (X1)	0,836	0,89	0,671
Reliability (X2)	0,836	0,901	0,753
Responsiveness (X3)	0,786	0,875	0,701
Assurance (X4)	0,816	0,915	0,843
Empathy (X5)	0,859	0,904	0,703

**Source: Processed primary data, 2025**

Table 2 presents the evaluation results of the second-order construct for educational service quality. All SERVQUAL dimensions load significantly onto

the higher-order service quality construct, with loading values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Among these dimensions, reliability and responsiveness exhibit the strongest loadings, indicating that consistency in service delivery and timely responsiveness are the most influential contributors to parents' perceptions of educational service quality. These findings provide empirical support for modeling educational service quality as a second-order construct.

**Table 2. Second-Order Construct Loadings of Educational Service Quality**

Path	Loading (O)	t-value	p-value
Service Quality-Tangibles	0,873	24,947	0,000
Service Quality-Reliability	0,893	51,017	0,000
Service Quality-Responsiveness	0,898	34,026	0,000
Service Quality-Assurance	0,748	13,630	0,000
Service Quality-Empathy	0,856	29,394	0,000

Source: Processed primary data, 2025

The structural model analysis demonstrates that educational service quality has a strong and positive effect on parental satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.816$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as shown in Table 3. This finding indicates that higher perceived service quality leads to higher levels of parental satisfaction, supporting prior research that positions service quality as a primary determinant of satisfaction in educational services characterized by high levels of trust and intangibility.

Parental satisfaction also exerts a strong positive effect on WOM intention ( $\beta = 0.804$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This result suggests that satisfied parents are more inclined to recommend the institution to others and to share positive experiences within their social networks. In early childhood education contexts, where school selection decisions are strongly influenced by interpersonal recommendations, parental satisfaction plays a pivotal role in shaping WOM behaviour.

**Table 3. Structural Model Path Coefficients**

Path	Original Sample ( $\beta$ )	t-value	p-value
Parental Satisfaction- WOM Intention	0,804	16,878	< 0,001
Service Quality- Parental Satisfaction	0,816	22,000	< 0.001

Source: Processed primary data, 2025

The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) values indicate that educational service quality explains a substantial proportion of variance in parental satisfaction ( $R^2 = 0.666$ ), while parental satisfaction explains a meaningful proportion of variance in WOM intention ( $R^2 = 0.647$ ), as shown in Table 4. These results suggest that the proposed model demonstrates adequate explanatory power.

**Table 4. R-Square Values**

Path	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted
Parental Satisfaction	0,666	0,663
WOM Intention	0,647	0,643

Source: Processed primary data, 2025

The indirect effect analysis confirms that parental satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between educational service quality and WOM intention ( $\beta = 0.657$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as presented in Table 5. This finding indicates that educational service quality influences WOM intention primarily through parental satisfaction, rather than through a direct effect alone.

**Table : 5 Indirect Effect Results**  
(Service Quality  $\rightarrow$  Parental Satisfaction  $\rightarrow$  WOM Intention)

Indirect Path	Indirect Effect ( $\beta$ )	t-value	p-value
Service Quality – Satisfaction – WOM	0,657	13,493	0,000

Source: Processed primary data, 2025

The mediating role of parental satisfaction is consistent with Expectation–Confirmation Theory, which posits that satisfaction arises from evaluations of perceived performance relative to expectations and subsequently influences behavioural intentions. In this study, parental satisfaction functions as a psychological mechanism that translates service quality perceptions into favourable WOM behaviour.

The findings further reinforce the theoretical argument that educational service quality should be conceptualized as a multidimensional, higher-order construct rather than as isolated service attributes. By modeling service quality as a second-order SERVQUAL construct, this study offers stronger empirical support for a holistic evaluation of parents' service experiences compared to first-order modeling approaches commonly adopted in previous research.

The prominence of reliability and responsiveness suggests that parents prioritize consistent service delivery, prompt communication, and responsiveness to concerns. In early childhood education, where trust and reassurance are fundamental, deficiencies in these dimensions may quickly lead to dissatisfaction and negative WOM. Conversely, reliable and responsive service practices foster parental confidence and encourage positive recommendations.

Finally, the significant mediating role of parental satisfaction extends prior research by demonstrating that satisfaction operates as a critical mechanism within a second-order service quality framework. This finding addresses limitations in earlier studies that examined satisfaction as a mediator without integrating higher-order service quality modeling. By aligning theoretical assumptions with empirical measurement, this study provides improved explanatory power in understanding parental word of mouth (WOM) behaviour. From a managerial perspective, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening reliable administrative processes and responsive communication systems to enhance parental satisfaction and foster positive WOM, thereby supporting institutional legitimacy and sustainable competitiveness in early childhood education environments.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that educational service quality, when conceptualized as a second-order SERVQUAL construct, plays a decisive role in shaping parental satisfaction and subsequently encouraging positive word of mouth (WOM) intention in early childhood education. The most important lesson derived from this research is that parental satisfaction functions as a critical psychological mechanism that translates multidimensional service experiences into recommendation behavior. Among the service quality

dimensions, reliability and responsiveness emerge as the strongest contributors, indicating that consistent service delivery and timely communication are central to building parental trust and advocacy. The strength of this study lies in its theoretical contribution to educational management literature by integrating parental satisfaction within a higher-order service quality framework. By aligning theoretical assumptions with empirical modeling through SEM-PLS, the study advances a more holistic and conceptually robust explanation of how service quality influences behavioral intentions in educational contexts.

Despite these contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a single early childhood education institution, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings across different institutional types or cultural settings. The cross-sectional design also restricts the ability to capture changes in parental perceptions over time. Future research is therefore recommended to replicate the second-order service quality model in diverse educational contexts, including public and non-urban institutions, and to employ longitudinal approaches to examine dynamic shifts in satisfaction and WOM intention. Additionally, subsequent studies may extend the model by incorporating other behavioral outcomes such as parental loyalty, continued enrolment decisions, or institutional image. Such efforts would further strengthen theoretical refinement and practical application within the broader field of educational service management.

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