

AN ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL BRANDING AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES AT PAUD SEKOLAH ALAM UNGARAN (SAUNG)

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Keywords: <i>Institutional Branding; Service Characteristics; Early Childhood Education; Nature-Based School</i>	<i>The increasing competition among Early Childhood Education (ECE) institutions has encouraged schools to establish strong institutional branding and deliver high-quality educational services to gain public trust. Institutional branding is not only associated with a school's identity and image but is also influenced by the characteristics of educational services perceived by children and their parents. Therefore, this study aims to analyze institutional branding and the characteristics of early childhood education services at PAUD Sekolah Alam Ungaran (SAUNG).</i> <i>This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. The research participants consisted of one principal, two teachers, and one parent, who were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. Data trustworthiness was ensured through source and technique triangulation, while data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.</i> <i>The findings indicate that the institutional branding of PAUD SAUNG is established through its identity as a nature-based early childhood education institution, reflected in its nature-oriented learning approach, supportive learning environment, flagship programs, and school culture that promotes children's holistic development. The characteristics of educational services are demonstrated through child-friendly practices, open communication with parents, child-centered learning, and a safe and supportive learning environment. Interview findings from the principal, teachers, and parents reveal that consistent service quality is the primary factor in building a positive institutional image and strengthening public trust.</i> <i>This study concludes that institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services are closely interconnected. Strong institutional branding is developed through high-quality educational services, while professional, responsive, and child-oriented services reinforce the institution's positive reputation within the community. Therefore, branding strategies should be integrated with continuous improvements in educational service quality to sustain public trust and enhance the overall quality of early childhood education.</i>

A. Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a strategic role in establishing the foundation for children's development across various domains, including religious and moral values, physical-motor development, cognitive abilities, language, social-emotional skills, and artistic expression (Nurachadijat & Selvia, 2023). Early childhood is widely recognized as the golden age, a critical period during which brain development and children's potential progress rapidly. Consequently, children require educational services that are of high quality, well-planned, and aligned with their developmental characteristics. Therefore, ECE institutions are expected not only to deliver effective learning experiences but also to provide professional, safe, comfortable, and child- and family-centered educational services.

As the number of Early Childhood Education institutions in Indonesia continues to grow, competition among educational providers has become increasingly intense. This situation encourages each institution to establish a strong identity in order to gain public trust. One of the most widely adopted strategies is institutional branding. In the educational context, branding extends beyond the use of a school's name, logo, or slogan. Instead, it represents the overall image developed through the institution's vision, mission, organizational culture, service quality, flagship programs, and the educational experiences perceived by children and their parents (Mahmudah et al., 2026). Strong institutional branding fosters positive public perceptions of educational quality, thereby increasing parents' trust and their willingness to enroll their children in the institution (Karsono et al., 2021).

Within the educational sector, branding has become an essential component of institutional management strategies. Educational institutions with a distinctive and well-defined identity are generally more recognizable, trusted, and preferred by the community. Consistent branding also strengthens an institution's reputation through the delivery of high-quality educational programs, effective communication with parents, and services that prioritize children's satisfaction and well-being. Consequently, branding functions not merely as a promotional tool but also as a representation of the quality of educational services provided by the institution.

According to (Angelia et al., 2025), the characteristics of educational services constitute a fundamental factor in determining the quality of Early Childhood Education. Educational services encompass interactions between teachers and children, communication with parents, administrative management, the provision of a safe and enjoyable learning environment, and the institution's ability to support children's holistic development (Yanuarsari et al., 2026). High-quality educational services are characterized by responsiveness to children's needs, empathy, reliability in service delivery, assurance of safety, and the availability of adequate facilities and infrastructure that effectively support the learning process. These service characteristics contribute to parental satisfaction while simultaneously strengthening public confidence in educational institutions.

The relationship between institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services has become increasingly important to examine because a positive institutional image cannot be separated from the quality of services provided (Mundiri, 2016). Effective branding must be supported by consistent educational services to ensure that public perceptions accurately reflect the experiences of children and their families. Conversely, strong branding without corresponding service quality may result in dissatisfaction and diminish public trust. Therefore,

the success of institutional branding is largely determined by how educational services are implemented in everyday school practices.

PAUD Saung is one of the early childhood education institutions that adopts a nature-based learning approach, emphasizing direct, hands-on experiences as the foundation of children's learning. The institution possesses distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from conventional ECE institutions, including its learning environment, instructional approach, and active parental involvement in the educational process. These unique characteristics form an integral part of the institution's identity and have the potential to establish a positive institutional brand within the community. Furthermore, the educational services provided to children and parents play a crucial role in maintaining public trust in the institution.

Preliminary observations indicate that PAUD Saung has actively developed its institutional branding through the implementation of nature-based learning activities, the creation of a child-friendly learning environment, intensive communication with parents, and various programs designed to support children's holistic development. At the same time, the characteristics of its educational services are reflected in the warm interactions between teachers and children, responsive administrative services, and active parental participation in school activities. These findings suggest that institutional branding is established not only through promotional efforts but also through the quality of educational services directly experienced by all members of the school community.

Nevertheless, studies examining the relationship between institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services in Early Childhood Education remain relatively limited, particularly in institutions that adopt the nature school concept. Most previous studies have focused separately on educational marketing strategies or service quality, without providing a comprehensive understanding of how institutional branding is developed through educational service characteristics. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services within Early Childhood Education institutions.

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services at PAUD Saung. Data were collected through interviews with the principal, teachers, and parents, supported by observations and documentation. This approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices as they naturally occur within the educational setting.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. From a theoretical perspective, the study is expected to enrich the literature on institutional branding and educational service quality in Early Childhood Education. Practically, the findings are anticipated to provide valuable insights for ECE administrators in developing branding strategies that are aligned with continuous improvements in educational service quality, thereby strengthening public trust and enhancing the overall quality of early childhood education. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services at PAUD Sekolah Alam Ungaran (SAUNG).

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive research design (Sugiyono, 2013). This approach was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services at PAUD Saung based on the experiences, perspectives, and practices of individuals directly involved in

the implementation of educational services. Qualitative research enables researchers to investigate phenomena within their natural settings, thereby providing a comprehensive description of actual conditions in the field.

The study was conducted at PAUD Sekolah Alam Ungaran (SAUNG). The research site was purposively selected because the institution is characterized by its nature-based learning approach and its distinctive institutional identity, which has become one of its main attractions within the community. Accordingly, the study focused on the implementation of institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services provided to children and their parents.

Research participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, whereby informants were chosen based on their knowledge and experience relevant to the research objectives. The participants consisted of one principal, two teachers, and one parent. The principal was selected because of his or her responsibility for developing institutional policies and branding strategies. Teachers were included because they are directly involved in delivering educational services, while the parent was selected to provide insights from the perspective of an educational service recipient.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with all participants using an interview guide developed in accordance with the research indicators. Observations were undertaken to examine educational service practices, interactions between teachers and children, the learning environment, and various school activities that reflected the institution's branding. Documentation was used to complement the collected data, including the institutional profile, vision and mission statements, school programs, promotional media, photographs of school activities, and other relevant documents related to the research focus.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed source triangulation and method triangulation. According to (Sugiyono, 2013), source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the principal, teachers, and the parent, while method triangulation involved comparing data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The combination of these triangulation techniques enhanced the credibility and reliability of the research findings.

This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics principles. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the institution and informed consent was secured from all participants. Participants' identities were kept confidential, their participation was entirely voluntary, and all collected data were used solely for academic purposes. By adhering to these ethical standards, the study was expected to produce findings that are credible, objective, and respectful of the rights and dignity of all participants.

C. Results and Discussion

This study aimed to examine institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services at PAUD Sekolah Alam Ungaran (SAUNG). The data were collected through interviews with one principal, two teachers, and one parent, supported by observations and documentation.

1. Institutional Branding at PAUD SAUNG

The findings indicate that PAUD SAUNG has established a strong institutional brand as a nature-based early childhood education institution. This identity is reflected in the institution's name, educational philosophy, learning environment, flagship programs, and school culture, all of which emphasize contextual learning through direct interaction with nature. Observational findings revealed that the school environment

is dominated by green open spaces, playgrounds constructed from natural materials, educational gardens, and a variety of learning resources that utilize the surrounding natural environment. These characteristics distinguish PAUD SAUNG from other early childhood education institutions. The principal explained that the institution's branding is developed not merely through promotional activities but primarily through the quality of educational services experienced directly by the community.

"We want the community to recognize SAUNG not only as a nature school but also as a place where children can learn in a safe, enjoyable, and nurturing environment that supports their holistic development. Our branding is built through the learning experiences that children and parents encounter every day."

The first teacher also emphasized that every learning activity is designed in accordance with the school's identity as a nature-based institution.

"Every learning theme is connected to the surrounding environment so that children learn through direct experiences rather than merely listening to the teacher's explanations."

The second teacher added that all educators are committed to maintaining the institution's positive image by providing professional educational services.

"We always strive to provide the best possible services for both children and parents because they are part of our extended school family."

Parents also highlighted that the institution's distinctive learning approach was the primary reason for choosing PAUD SAUNG.

"I chose SAUNG because my child has the opportunity to learn directly from nature. In addition, the teachers are friendly, communicative, and consistently provide information about my child's development."

These findings demonstrate that the institutional branding of PAUD SAUNG is established through the integration of its institutional identity, educational quality, learning environment, and the educational services provided to children and their parents.

2. Characteristics of Educational Services

The findings further reveal that educational services at PAUD SAUNG are characterized by several key attributes, including child-friendly services, open communication with parents, a safe learning environment, and child-centered learning practices. Observations indicated that teachers welcome children every morning, actively facilitate classroom learning, and provide individual attention according to each child's developmental needs. Communication between the school and parents is maintained through communication groups, home-school communication books, and face-to-face discussions whenever necessary.

The principal emphasized that educational service quality is the institution's highest priority.

"We believe that excellent educational services build public trust. Therefore, every teacher is expected not only to teach but also to guide children and maintain effective communication with parents."

The first teacher explained that educational services are tailored to the developmental characteristics of each child.

"We pay close attention to each child's individual characteristics because every child has different abilities and developmental needs."

The second teacher emphasized the importance of parental involvement in the educational process.

"We regularly provide parents with updates on their children's development so they remain informed about their learning progress at school."

Parents also expressed positive perceptions of the services provided by the institution.

"The teachers are easy to contact whenever we have questions about our child's development. This kind of communication makes us feel actively involved in our child's education."

These findings indicate that educational services at PAUD SAUNG extend beyond classroom instruction by fostering harmonious partnerships among the school, children, and their families.



Picture 1.1 Documentation of Interviews Conducted at PAUD SAUNG

The findings demonstrate that the institutional branding of PAUD SAUNG is established through its identity as a nature-based school that integrates the surrounding environment into the learning process. These findings are consistent with (Astutik et al., 2026), who argue that educational institution branding is developed through institutional identity, school culture, and the educational experiences perceived by the community. Branding is reflected not only in the institution's name but also in its school culture, learning programs, physical environment, and the quality of services provided. Consequently, institutional branding represents the institution's values, vision, and the experiences of both children and their parents.

The principal's statement that "our branding is built through the learning experiences that children and parents encounter every day" highlights that an institution's image is formed not merely through promotional efforts but through consistently delivering high-quality educational services. This finding supports the study conducted by (Febriyani & Krisnanto, 2026), which explains that parents' positive experiences with school services significantly influence the development of an educational institution's reputation and image.

The first teacher's explanation that learning activities are consistently connected with the surrounding environment demonstrates that the institution's identity as a nature-based school is genuinely implemented in classroom practice. Meanwhile, the second teacher emphasized that providing high-quality services to both children and parents is an essential strategy for maintaining the institution's positive image. These findings indicate a strong alignment between the institution's vision and its daily educational practices.

From the parents' perspective, PAUD SAUNG's institutional branding is primarily perceived through their direct experiences while their children participate in educational activities. Parents identified the nature-based learning approach, effective teacher-parent communication, and regular updates on children's development as the primary reasons for choosing the institution. These findings suggest that positive public perceptions of institutional branding are strongly influenced by the quality of educational services received. This conclusion is supported by (Amanda, 2026), who found that intensive communication between teachers and parents enhances trust and satisfaction with early childhood education services.

The study also found that the characteristics of educational services at PAUD SAUNG are reflected in responsive service delivery, open communication, a safe learning environment, and child-centered instructional practices. The principal's statement that "every teacher is expected not only to teach but also to guide children" demonstrates that educational services are regarded as an integral component of the educational process. Furthermore, the first teacher explained that educational services are adapted to each child's developmental characteristics. This finding reflects the fundamental principles of early childhood education, which emphasize respect for children's individuality and the provision of developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

Meanwhile, the second teacher highlighted the importance of continuous communication with parents as a strategy for strengthening public trust in the institution.

Interview findings with parents further indicate that accessible communication and transparency regarding children's developmental progress are the most valued aspects of educational services. These findings suggest that parental satisfaction is determined not only by children's learning outcomes but also by the quality of interactions established between the school and families.

Overall, the findings demonstrate a close relationship between institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services at PAUD SAUNG. Strong institutional branding is developed through consistently high-quality educational services, while excellent service quality further strengthens the institution's positive image within the community. These findings are consistent with (Saputri et al., 2025), who concluded that consistent service quality is one of the primary determinants of institutional reputation and positive educational branding. Therefore, PAUD SAUNG's ability to maintain public trust depends not only on its nature-based educational philosophy but also on the collective commitment of the entire school community to providing professional, child-friendly, and family-oriented educational services.

D. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that institutional branding at PAUD Sekolah Alam Ungaran (SAUNG) has been successfully established through its distinctive identity as a nature-based early childhood education institution, supported by a learning environment that integrates natural resources into the educational process, child-centered learning practices, and educational programs that promote children's holistic development. The institution's branding extends beyond promotional activities, as it is consistently reflected in the quality of educational services experienced directly by children and their parents.

The characteristics of educational services at PAUD SAUNG are demonstrated through responsive and child-friendly learning practices, effective communication between teachers and parents, a safe and supportive learning environment, and educational services tailored to the developmental needs of each child. These service characteristics have contributed to strengthening parents' trust and satisfaction while reinforcing the institution's positive reputation within the community.

The study also reveals a strong relationship between institutional branding and the characteristics of educational services. A positive institutional image is developed through the consistent delivery of high-quality educational services, while excellent service quality further enhances public trust and strengthens the institution's competitive position among early childhood education providers. Therefore, institutional branding should be viewed not merely as a marketing strategy but as an integral component of educational management that must be supported by professional, consistent, and sustainable educational services.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that PAUD SAUNG continue to strengthen its institutional branding by maintaining the quality of its educational services, fostering innovation in nature-based learning programs, enhancing teachers' professional competencies, and promoting active collaboration with parents and the wider community. Such efforts are expected to sustain public trust, improve the quality of educational services, and support children's optimal growth and development within a holistic and meaningful learning environment.

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