

Walking the Road of Learning: A Qualitative Descriptive Study of Indigenous Youth Sunday Schoolers Educational Journey

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ABSTRACT

Self-doubt kills success. I used descriptive qualitative design in exploring the academic journey of Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers. Using a purposive sampling technique, I selected the participants for this study and conducted interviews with 10 Indigenous youth. I then analyzed the data gathered using thematic analysis. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, my study highlighted autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key dimensions of the academic journey of the indigenous students. Educators and school leaders may empower Indigenous learners by adopting empathetic, culturally responsive, and inclusive practices that address their psychological, cultural, and socio-economic needs. Future research may use multiple linear regression and exploratory factor analyses to develop instruments examining autonomy, competence, and relatedness as predictors of self-determination of Indigenous youth as criterion variable.

Keywords: Walking the road of learning, qualitative descriptive, indigenous youth Sunday schoolers, educational journey

INTRODUCTION

The Problem and Its setting

I observed that self-doubt acted as a psychological barrier that reduced motivation among Indigenous youth. It seemed to function like an invisible wall that gradually weakened their confidence, causing hesitation in taking on new challenges and limiting their full engagement in academic tasks. Over time, this self-doubt became a heavy burden that hindered their progress and obstructed their path toward educational achievement. This leads to low academic self-concept, directly linked to patterns of disengagement and dropout among indigenous youth (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2006).

I noted that globally, Indigenous participants faced similar barriers. In Malaysia, indigenous students reported university difficulties with social and academic adaptation, adversely affected their self-esteem and motivation. In Canada, the historic legacy of residential schools and curricular approaches contributed to distrust in education and reinforced low achievement. Youth completed high school (63%) and attended post-secondary education (37%) at markedly lower rates than non-indigenous youth (Statistics Canada). This indicated that lower self-esteem and pervasive self-doubt undermined Indigenous students' academic persistence, while fostering resilience and cultural pride supported goal achievement and educational continuity (Tylor, 2020).

Within the Philippines, I observed that the Dumagat Indigenous People highlighted how educational marginalization fosters a mindset of "powerlessness and dependency," which, in turn, perpetuates self-doubt (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). In Davao City, thirteen Indigenous groups, including the Manobo, Ata, Bagobo Ubo Manobo, Tagabawa, Matigsalog, Kalagan, B'laan, Mandaya, Mansaka, Dibabawon, Tagakaolo, and Mamanwa, face educational challenges that are closely linked to self-doubt, which serves as a significant internal barrier affecting academic confidence and success.

A 2024 study involving 96 Indigenous college students from University of Mindanao Digos College found that psychological barriers, particularly self-doubt (i.e., lack of self-confidence), reduce academic confidence and achievement among Indigenous students. This ultimately affects their motivation and learning outcomes (Sugue Jr. et al., 2024).

I believed that addressing self-doubt among Indigenous youth in education is an urgent priority due to the persistent achievement gaps, systematic inequities, and deep-rooted cultural marginalization these communities faced. The findings of this research aim to address the gap by examining the experiences of the Indigenous Youth, inspiring and motivating more Indigenous youth to continue their education and work toward achieving their goals.

Significance of the Study

This study was of great significance to educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in educational institutions, as it highlighted their crucial role in transforming indigenous youth's self-doubt into hope and aspiration through professional development, practice, and reflection in Social Studies education. Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on Quality Education (UNESCO, 2016), it emphasized the importance of continuous teacher growth in ensuring inclusive and equitable education. The findings may assist teachers in deeply understanding the often-unheard struggles and dreams of Indigenous youth, enabling them to transform students' self-doubt into genuine aspiration as they continue their education. Additionally, the insights may aid school administrators in improving professional development programs and institutional policies to provide more effective support for educators facing these unique challenges. Most importantly, this study may deepen academic understanding, while offering a practical and empathetic approach to help transform self-doubt into aspiration, inspiring positive change in both education settings and the wider community.

Statement of the Problem

I explored the academic journey of Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers. Specifically, I sought answers to this question:

- What are the perceptions of indigenous youth Sunday schoolers on their academic journey in the urban area?

Assumption of the study

I assumed that Indigenous youth involved in Sunday school are capable of achieving their educational aspirations, despite facing self-doubt influenced by larger social, cultural, and systematic issues rather than a deficiency in ability. I assumed that these students can turn self-doubt into strength and ambition when they are provided with supportive settings like Sunday school, culturally relevant teaching, and positive relationships. I also assumed that participants will communicate sincere and significant experiences, offering valuable perspectives on their educational paths, and that these perspectives may assist educators and stakeholders in establishing more inclusive, supportive, and empowering educational environment for indigenous youth.

Theoretical Lens

This study is aligned with Self-determination Theory (SDT) of Motivation, which explores the intrinsic driver of human behavior through the framework of basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The theory highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the three pillars essential for fostering self-motivated behavior. By satisfying these core needs, individuals are more likely to achieve optimal functioning and personal well-being. This study may offer valuable insights in understanding on how internal motivation foster the growth, fulfillment, and optimal functioning necessary for personal success.

Conceptual Paradigm

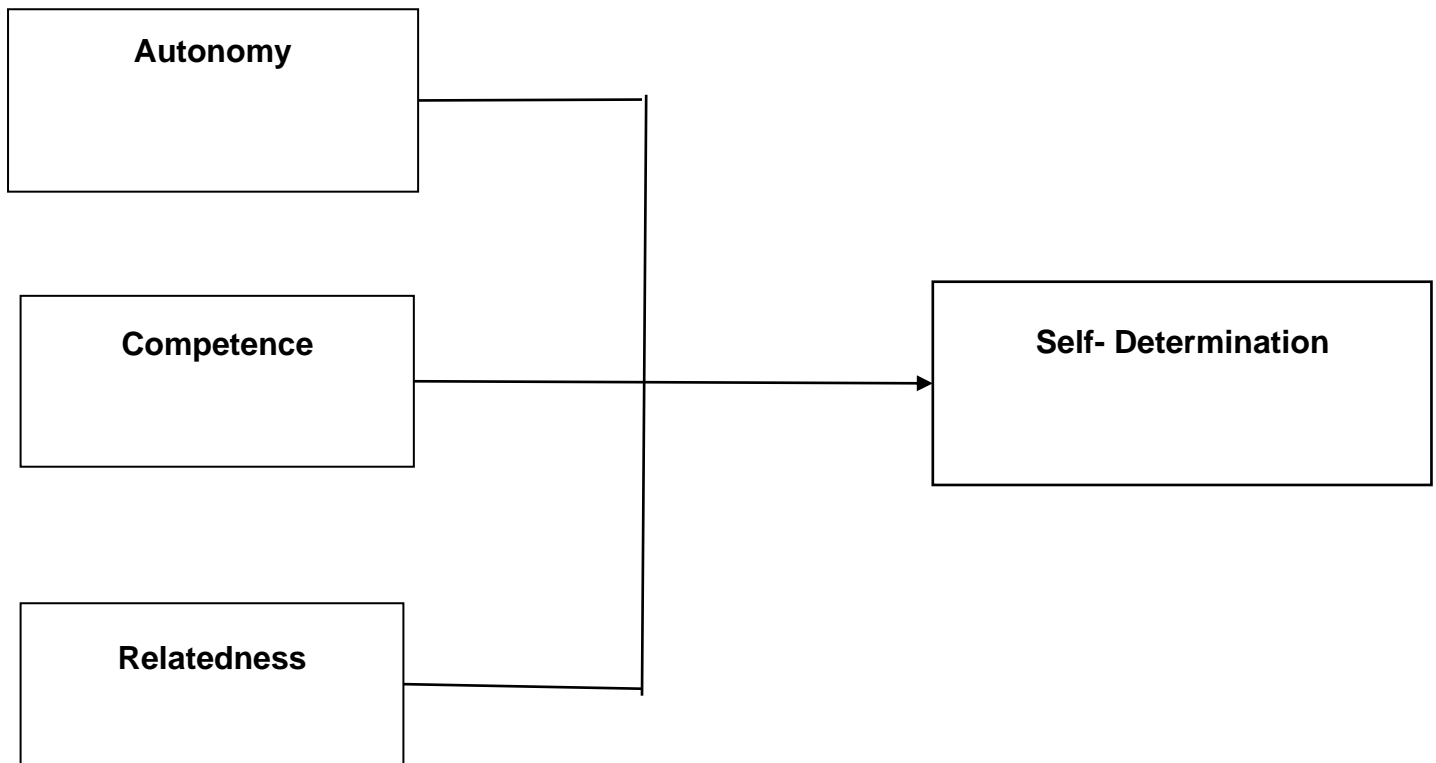


Figure 1: Paradigm based on Self-determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains how people are motivated to make choices and take control of their lives. According to SDT, students are more likely to stay engaged and motivated when they feel a sense of autonomy. For Indigenous youth, when they have a goal they want to achieve, they felt the need to take action in order to reach that goal. Their motivation was driven by a sense of self-determination, which helped them turn their aspirations into real steps and actions toward success.

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I presented the research design, locale of the study, sample and sampling, data gathering procedure, and data analysis used to find answers to the questions posed in the previous chapter.

Research Design

Descriptive Qualitative design is a research approach that aims to explore and present participants' perception in their natural context using non-numerical data (Creswell, 2013). It focuses on providing a clear and straightforward description of how individuals understand a particular phenomenon. The design is appropriate for the study as it captures the perspectives of Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers regarding their educational realities. It allows for the inclusion of diverse viewpoints while remaining grounded in the participants' social and cultural contexts. Additionally, it fits well with Indigenous ways of knowing because it gives space for their voices to be heard and understood, allowing their experiences and aspirations to be shared in a genuine and meaningful way.

Locale of the Study

My study was conducted in the Division of Davao City, located in the southeastern part of Mindanao, Philippines. Davao City is the largest city in the country in terms of land area and served as the regional center of Region XI (Davao Region). It was known for its cultural diversity, being home to various recognized Indigenous Peoples (IP) groups, including the Bagobo, Ata, Matigsalug, Klata, and Tagabawa tribes (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), 2020). These communities were spread across the city's three congressional districts, where many schools implemented Sunday School Programs.

Davao City was purposely selected as the research locale to ensure access to a sufficient and diverse number of Indigenous youth participants actively participated in Sunday School Program. This made the location ideal for exploring the perceptions of Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers, particularly in relation to their educational career goals. Conducting the study in this context allowed for a deeper understanding of how cultural identity and community support intersected in shaping the lives and future dreams of Indigenous youth.

Sample and Sampling

The target number of participants for my study is 10 Indigenous youths from different tribes or communities. According to Creswell (2013) and Saadeh (n.d.), qualitative research does not have strict rules regarding sample size; however, they suggested that a sample of around seven participants could be sufficient for obtaining meaningful insights in specific contexts.

The participants were divided into two groups to allow for data corroboration and richer natives. Five (5) participants took part in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), which promoted interactive dialogue and shared experiences. Another five (5) participants engaged in In-Depth Interviews (IDIs), allowing for more personal and detailed of exploration of individual experiences.

To achieve this, I used the purposive sampling technique, which involved identifying individuals based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. It was also known as judgmental sampling or selective sampling. This method was used to ensure that participants had firsthand knowledge or experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation.

The selection of participants was based on the following criteria: (1) The participants had to be an Indigenous youth currently enrolled in a Sunday School program within Davao City; (2) The participants must be 18 years old or above; and (3) The participants must be available and willing to participate in the data collection process. These criteria ensured that participants are directly involved in the context of the study and can provide relevant insights into their educational and career aspirations as Indigenous Sunday schoolers.

By applying this approach, this study guaranteed an unbiased selection of participants across the different schools of Davao City, enhancing the validity and reliability of the research outcomes. The inclusion criteria were strictly followed to ensure that the purposive participants were the appropriate population to achieve the purpose of the study. Based on these criteria, I selected the participants who best meet the study's objectives, ensuring that the chosen participants provided relevant and meaningful insights on their aspirations for the indigenous youth.

Research Instrument

The research utilized semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews is a research method designed to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' feelings and beliefs about specific topics. Semi-structured interviews involved preparing open-ended questions in advance while allowing flexibility in the conversation to enable interviewers to adjust the order or add questions based on the participants' responses (Heath, 2023). This approach created a natural and conversational flow, fostering a more comfortable environment for the participants to share their insights. By combining structured elements with freedom to explore the topic deeper, semi-structured interviews effectively captured qualitative data for understanding complex issues and topics such as the Aspirations of Indigenous Youth Sunday Schoolers.

Data Gathering Technique

To ensure a systematic and orderly collection of data for this study, the researcher followed these steps and procedures in gathering the data:

Asking Permission to Conduct the Study. An endorsement letter with the adviser's consent was requested from the dean of the graduate school of Holy Cross of Davao College to conduct a study on the aspirations of the

Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers. Once approved, a letter was prepared and sent to Cluster 1, DepEd Division of Davao City, requesting permission to conduct the survey in their respective areas.

Administration of the Informed Consent. This was administered face-to-face after informing the Sunday school officer-in-charge. Participants were asked to sign or tick a box if they agree with the consent provisions. I explained the content of the consent clearly and in simple, local language. Participants were informed of any risks involved with their participation, and I requested their signature on a hard copy if they agreed.

Data Gathering and Transcription. Using a prepared questionnaire and voice recorder, the interview was conducted as an In-depth Interview (IDI) and through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) based on the scheduled time and date. The results were collected, checked, and reviewed.

After the interviews, I reviewed the responses of the participants to check the accuracy of their answers. Confidentiality of the collected information and the identities of the participants was properly observed. Lastly, the responses of the participants were transcribed and carefully examined.

Data Analysis Technique

I used thematic analysis to accurately describe and examine the data gathered. This method enabled me to identify significant codes and themes that can efficiently explained the results of the study. I utilized thematic analysis to accurately describe and examine the data gathered and followed the six steps of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013).

In the first step, familiarization with the data, I repeatedly read the raw responses to fully understand the ideas and experiences shared. Next, in the second step of generating codes, various codes were identified and organized according to the context and concepts within the responses. The third step involved generating themes by combining the initial codes to form broader themes. The fourth step consisted of reviewing themes, which allowed me to assess the accuracy and relevance to the study. In the fifth step, defining and naming themes, I finalized and elaborated on the themes, ensuring that each name accurately reflected its content and relevance to the study. Finally, in the interpretation and reporting step, I explained and discussed the descriptions of the themes within the context of the study. Throughout the process, I acted as a facilitator, interviewer and documenter of the study.

Trustworthiness of the Study

My study underwent a thorough review by the Society for Integrity and Legal Ethics (SMILE) to ensure compliance as it explored the experiences of the Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers in Davao City regarding their autonomy, competence, and relatedness in education. Informed consent was obtained with clear explanations about voluntary participation and withdrawal rights; while participant confidentiality was strictly protected through anonymized data and secure storage. Interview questions were designed to be respectful and relevant, with support measures in place for any discomfort. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed multiple strategies: credibility was established through triangulating data from focus groups and interviews, member checking, and audio recording; dependability was ensured by thorough documentation, cultural sensitivity, and peer debriefing; transferability was supported by rich descriptions and participants' verbatim quotes; and confirmability was maintained through an audit trail, reflexive journaling, and alignment with Self-Determination Theory and Indigenous values. These combined strategies ensured that the findings authentically represented the participants' realities, uphold the study's integrity, and to transformed self-doubt into ambition, providing valuable insights for educators and communities.

RESULTS

In this chapter, I presented the perception gathered from the responses of the participants, the Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers' educational journey. Themes and subthemes were generated from IDIs and FGDs. I also provided the summary of the findings along with the modified paradigm, as illustrated below:

Modified Paradigm

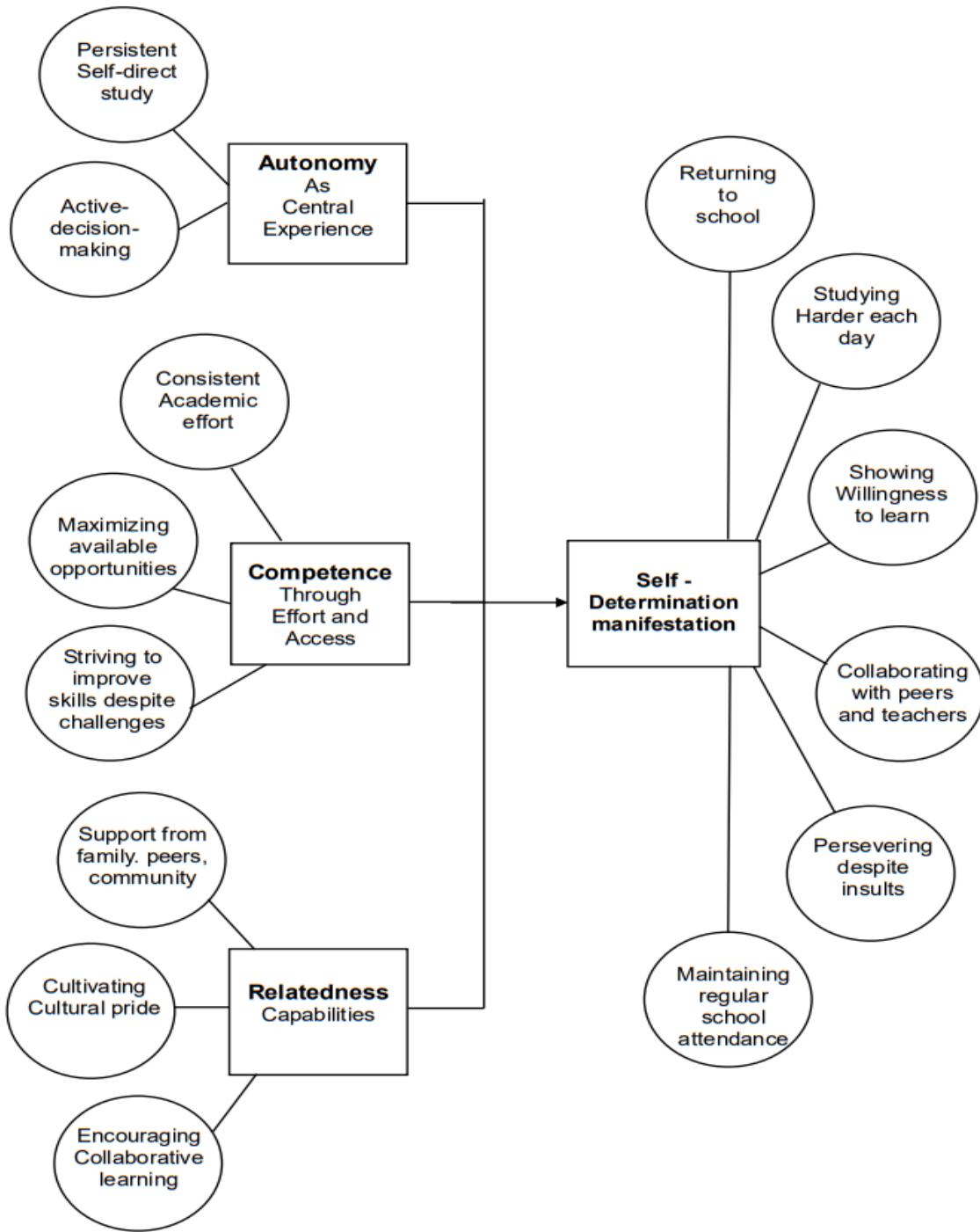


Figure 2: Thematic Analysis Results through the Lens of Self-determination theory (SDT) by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (2000)

Perceptions of Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers on their academic journey in urban area

The self-determination of the Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers is manifested by exercising autonomy, competence and relatedness. In my conversations with my study participants, I explored their perceptions on their educational journey. One of the participants said:

Ako po nagapili kay akong inahan nagkuan siya kanang kanang tawag ani sinaunang tao sila unya walay alam sa school-IDI-3 (I am the one who chos es because my mother is what do you call this ancient people, and does not know about school) -IDI-3

As I listened to her sharing, another participant shared:

Umm, ako lang ang naga desisyon para sa akong sarili kay ako nalang man pud ug wala nakoy mama ug papa-IDI-4 (I am the one who made the decision since I don't have my mom and dad)-IDI -4

Another participant stated:

Usually, ma'am wala naga bawal or nagapili gyud sa akoang choice kung unsa akong kuhaon usually akong sarili lang kung unsa akong kuhaon na choice. -IDI-5 (Usually ma'am, no one forbids or chooses for me: it is usually just myself deciding on what path to take) -IDI-5

Another participant highlighted:

Naa maam hapit mi gipaundang ni mama kay di daw sya kakaya mugasto sa akoo kay tungod kay pobre man pud mi. Naghilak ko sa kwarto ma'am -IDI-3 (There is ma'am, as my mother almost made me stop school because she said she couldn't afford the expenses for me since we are poor: I just cried in my room, ma'am) -IDI-3

While this participant stated:

Actually akong akong amo ana siya nganong mag-eskwela pa daw ko kay wala man daw kanang man daw kabalo kanang mga ignorante man daw mi nganong moeskwela pa daw mig balik mas wala nalang ko naminaw sa iyaha bahalagyawyaw siya sa iyang mga gipangsulti sa amoa sa bisan gina ginabuli niya among mga tribo.- IDI-1 (Actually, my employer asked why I'm studying, saying we don't know anything and calling us ignorant: I just chose not to listen to the insults, even though they were bullying my tribe)-IDI-1

As for this participant, she shared about the reason why she run to the city and continue her education, saying:

Kato nga time tungod ni sa atong pagbuya sa akoo og gusto ko nila pamilyon kanang ibuya, kasagaran sa tribo kay gina buya bisan dili nimo gusto ang usa ka laki gibuya gyud ka nila kung magkasinabot ang mga parents di gyud ka makaatras kay pwede ka nila patyon if di ka mosugot pero nakadecide ko time maglayas para walay gubot pwede ra man kuno ibalik ang gugma, sa ang gugma daw sa laki kanang bayad mao to ni layas nalang ko. Mao to niabot ko diria sa Davao magtrabaho bilang working student.-IDI-1 (At that time, they wanted me to undergo buya (arranged marriage), a tribal tradition where you are forced to marry a man even if you don't like him: if the parents agree, you cannot back out because you could be killed for refusing, so I decided to run away to Davao to become a working student instead)-IDI- 1

Similarly, one participant mentioned:

When I was 13 years old, one morning umm, nagsturya mi sa akong papa kay about lagi umm, kumbaga giistorya ko sa akong papa kay ingnan na naa na daw siyay gikasabot na umm kauban ra gihapon namo sa among tribong niana na nagkasinabot na da sila sa pamilya atong na ingana na ipakasal or kumbaga ilaha ming minyoon. Tapos umm, siyempre naspeechless ko ato na time kay akong hunahuna is umm, bata pa kayo ko tapos if mosugot pud ko umm, unsa nalang ang future sa among pamilya if pareha lang mi nga umm, members sa Lumad tapos pareha mi na walay nakat-unan umm-IDI-4 (When I was 13 years old, my father told me he had already made agreement with another family in our tribe for me to be married: Was speechless because I thought about how young I was and what would happen to the future of my family if we were both Lumad members who had learned nothing in school) -IDI-4

Across these narratives, autonomy is manifested through courageous decisions such as “*ako gyud nagpili na moeskwela,*” prioritizing education over arranged marriage; “*Unsa nalang ang among ugma if pareho mi lumad unya walay nakat-unan,*” resisting bias and continuing learning amid hardship, often repeatedly stirring the feelings of sadness, awe, respect, and inspiration as they assert control over their futures; and “*pangandoy*” reflecting a powerful self-governed vision that redefines their identity, dignity, and life trajectory toward personal and collective empowerment. Ultimately, autonomy emerges not only as independence in decision-making but as a resilient and purposeful commitment to education.

As the conversations goes on and when I asked if they want to share more in their educational journey as Sunday school students, this participant shared:

Ang akong mga nalisdan na subject kay science gyud kay lisud kaayo pero ginakaya gihapon nako nga matun-an nako taman kanang bahalag nagkalisodlisud napadayon gihapon nako nga challenge gyud akong life-IDI-5 (The subject I find truly difficult is Science because it’s very hard, but I still manage to do my best to learn it. No matter how difficult it gets, I still continue: my life is really a challenge) -IDI-5

Another participant shared about the difficulty she encountered, as she mentioned:

Para nako og makaagi man ko og mga lisud nga subject nga feeling nako dili nako kaya for me is tabangan nako akong self nga mag study study hard para masabtan or maelearn nako ang mga bag o like dili nako ma gets na mga subject or bag o nga mga bag ong hagit sa akong life gusto nako nga learn tanan-FGD-3 (For me, if I encounter difficult subjects that I feel are beyond my capacity, I will help myself by studying hard so I can understand or learn new things like subjects I don’t get or new challenges in life. I want to learn everything) - FGD-3

While having the conversation, another participant stood up to share about her perception, saying:

Gibuhat man nako best nako nga ma gets nako to or mamaster nako to nga lesson even dili nako to sya familiar o mga bag o sya na mga fightings sa akong life pero hibuhat nako ang tanan ma learn to sya and hantud nga master ko. Like lisud, maghatag kog sample math, math maam kay ngano math is super lisud but if ma'am hatagan gani nimo syag kanang mo focus ka unsa hatagan Ninyo syag time nga mofocus ka magets nimo sya-FGD-4 (I did my best to understand and master that lesson, even if it was unfamiliar or represented new challenges in my life: I did everything to learn until I reached mastery. For example, math is incredibly difficult, but if you truly focus and dedicate time to it, you will eventually understand it) -FGD-4

Additionally, this participant shared:

So thankful pud ko sa iyaha, tapos umm, gigrab napud nako na opportunity nga naa koy amo nga ingana na andam mopaeskwela sa akoo, so nagenroll ko diria sa Davao City National High School-IDI-4 (I am so thankful to them, umm, I grabbed that opportunity since I have an employer who is willing to send me to school, so I enrolled here at Davao City National High school. -IDI- 4)

Likewise, another participant proudly shared:

Para sa akoo ma'am ang nagpili gyud ani kay actually akong amo kay kabalo siya sa akoang experience sa bukid unya maong iya kong gipadayon pag eskwela okey rapud sa akoo maam kay ang akong parents dili na pud sila ka kuan sa akoo dili na sila makapaeskwela sa akoo kay tungod sa tungod sa pagka pagka um tungod amoang pagkalumad-FGD-5 (For me ma'am, the one who chose this is actually my employer because they know about my experience in the mountains, so they encouraged me to continue my schooling. It's okey with me ma'am because of because of our identity as Lumad (Indigenous People)- FGD-5

One participant added:

Umm...para sa akoo ang akong parents gyud ang una then ang akong amo gipaeskwela ko nila the gina suportahan ko nila then kabalo sila na kanang kanang dili gyud daw lalim ang walay grado mao ang ginapa eskwela ko nila ginasuportahan ko-FGD-4 (Umm... for me, my parents were the first ones, then my employer: they are all supported me in my schooling because they knew that- that- it is truly not easy to be without an education. That is why they put me in school and supported me)- FGD-4

The participants statements revealed that competence is cultivated through sustained effort, where the participants confront unfamiliar subjects, and personal struggles persist in mastering them. One of them said, “*Gibuhat man nako best nako nga ma gets nako to or mamaster nako to nga lesson.*” Participants may experiences marked of hesitation, subtle gestures and growing confidence show that education becomes a vital part of their lives,

reflecting a strong drive to overcome challenges and achieve mastery. Competence is expressed not only through skill development but also through the belief that Indigenous identity does not limit intellectual potential. Their self-reliance and resilience transform vulnerability into motivation for academic excellence. Competence is further strengthened by seizing educational opportunities, especially with support from their community. Thus, competence emerges as both a personal and socially supported process of striving and succeeding despite structural barriers.

The conversations continued and one of the participants said:

Kay gusto nako ipakita sa tanan nga ang mga tribong b'laan kaya nilang magpalampos ug eskwela Kato nga panahon mam nga nagdecide ko nga nay control kutob ra ko sa grade 10 tapos sa panghitabo nato maam naguol ko dili ko malipay tapos nagdecide ko nga magtrabaho ko diri sa Davao para makaeskwela ko-IDI-3 (because I want to show to everyone that B'laan tribe is capable of finishing school. At that time, ma'am, when it was decided that I would only reach grade 10 because of what happened to us, I was sad and unhappy: so, I decided to work here in Davao so I could go to school)-IDI-3

Another participant shared:

Gusto pud nakong kanang mahimong maestra para makatabang ko sa akong mga kauban kauban na lumad dili pud baya tanan lumad maam walay maabtan sa kinabuhi if maningkamot gyud ka ug maayo naa gyud kay maabtan sa imong kinabuhi-IDI-1 (I also want to become a teacher so I can help my fellow Lumad. Not all Lumad ma'am, fail to reach their goals in life, if you really work hard, you will achieve something in your life)-IDI-1

This participant added:

Akong ikaingon lang gyud ma'am magpadayon lang gyud bisan magkalisud lisud even walang wala gyud magpadyaon para sa atong future para pud sa atong tribo-FGD-1 (What I can only say, ma'am, is to just keep going even if it's really difficult, even if you absolutely nothing, keep going for our future and also for our tribe) -FGD-1

Another participant expressed:

Naa ma'am pero encourage kay naa pud koy isa ka auntie na naga support ginatagaan ko niyag kuan bugas, kwarta bisag gamay pero na appreciate gyud nako ilang pagkamaayo-IDI-3 (There is ma'am, but I am encouraged because I also have an aunt who supports me, she gives me rice and money, even if it's just small amount, but I truly appreciate their kindness) -IDI-3

Another participant shared:

Ang gihatag nilang suporta sa akong ma'am even dili sya financial kondi kaning mga advice, motivation then na realized pud nako sa akong sarili nga katong motivation makahatag gyud og kaning kusog para molaban gyud ma'am-IDI-2 (The support they gave me, ma'am, even if it wasn't financial but rather advice and motivation made me realize within myself that such motivation truly gives me the strength to keep fighting, ma'am) -IDI-2

One more participant shared:

Actually, gyud ang akoang usahay ang akong classmate kay usahay ang akoang teacher pud kay ang teacher kay usahay mag ingon sya nga magstudy gyud moi ng ani ing ana kay para makuha Ninyo ang lesson, ang classmate pud ma'am is usahay maki kuan gyud sya mag study mi, mangayo sya og magshare sya sa akong nga ing ani imong buhaton magstudy ta para makapasar ta ing ana-IDI-5 (Actually, sometimes it's my classmates and sometimes my teacher too. My teachers tell me, you really need to study this way so you can understand the lesson. My classmates also collaborate with me, we study together, and they share tips like, this is what you should do, let's study so we can pass) – IDI-5

This was mentioned by another participant:

Mas giencourage nako ang akong kaugalingon ma'am nga moeskwela gyud kog tarong para makab ot nako ang akong sarili og para naa koy trabaho puhon unya makatabang ko sa akong mga higala og pamilya-IDI-3 (I encourage myself more, ma'am to study hard so that I can achieve my goals for myself and so that I will have a job in the future to help my friends and family)-IDI-3

This was added by another participant:

Nalipay ko ma'am tungod kay bisan munamuna na gyud muna muna nga paningkamot gina go gihapon nako para sa akong sarili dili lang pud para sa akong sarili ang naa sa akong huna huna para pud sa akong mga parents po para makapadayon ko wala ko nag tan aw nga bahalag lisud na- IDI-5 (I am happy ma'am, because even though it takes extreme effort, I still keep going for myself. It is not just myself that I am thinking of, but also my parents, so that I continue: I don't focus on how difficult it has become) – IDI- 5

Another participant said:

Um first gyud akong gusto himuon is if ever makahuman ko sap ag eskwela makabalik ko sa akong community is gusto nako sila iencourage nga moeskwela para dili mi magpadayon sa ing ana nga situwasyon lang-IDI-4 (Um, the first thing I really want to do, if ever I finish my studies, is to go back to my community, I want to encourage them to go to school so that we don't just remain in this kind of situation) IDI-4

Added the by one more participant:

Gusto pud nako na kanang kanang magpatukod og eskwelahan sa among lugar para para pud sa ilaha para para matudluan nako silag maayo para para makita pud nila kung unsa ang maging pagsulat pagbasa- IDI-1 (I want to establish a school in our area for them, so that I can teach them properly and so they can discover the methods of reading and writing)- IDI- 1

As this was also supported by another statement of the participant:

Kung siguro maka graduate ko gusto ko nga motudlo para makatabang pud ko sa ila ug mashare nak ouns akong kaagi para ma challenge pud sila-FGD-5 (If ever I graduate, I want to teach so that I can help them and share my experiences to challenge them as well.)- FGD-5

This statement from one of the participants may become an inspiration to other:

Ang akoang masulti gyud maam is kung unsa man ta og asa ta gikan dili gyud diay nato ikaulaw even naa man ta diri sa syudad I proud nato kung unsa ta. -IDI-2 (What I can really say, ma'am is that no matter who we are we come from, we should never be ashamed, even if we are here in the city: we should be proud of who we are) – IDI-

Another participant shared:

Para sa ako maam kay para sa akong mga kaubanan sa tribe Matigsalug magpadayon lang gyud ta sa atoang goal sa atong kinabuhi ug mapadayon ta pag eskwela and and dapat para makatabang ta sa atong kapwa tao nga pareho sa atoang tribo nga Matigsalug dapat dili ta maulaw sa atoang inistoryahan- FGD-5 (For me ma'am, to my fellow members of the Matigsalug tribe, let us just continue pursuing our life goals and education; in order to truly help our fellow Matigsalugs, we must never be ashamed of our native language.)-FGD-5

The participants transform discrimination and limitations into motivation, cultivating pride in themselves and their community while striving to inspire others in saying, “*magpadayon lang gyud ta sa atong goal.*” Their persistence is strengthened by relatedness, as a support from family, peers, and teachers provides emotional, social, and even material encouragement that sustains their engagement in education. This connection reinforced their resilience and commitment to succeed not only for themselves but for collective upliftment.

As we continue with the active conversation, the participants motivation to pursue their goal was evident as one of the participants shared:

Para po sa akua ma'am, ako pong choice ma'am nga magpadayon ko sa akong pag-eskwela tungod kay wala may makapugong sa akua kung magpadayon ko sa akong pag eskwela then choice nako nga pillion nga magpadayon bisan ingon ani na akong edad 19 years old unta nga kani nga pangidaron college na unta, but karon magpadayon ko kay sa akong pag gusto akong pangandoy-FGD-2 (For me ma'am, It is my choice to continue my schooling because no one can stop me: even though I am 19 and should be in college by now, I choose to go on because this is my desire and my dream.) FGD - 2

Another statement was stated by one participant:

Ang akong maingon sa kapwa nako ka tribo padayon mo sa inyong best then ayaw ikaulaw nga ubu manobo ta magpadayon ta then dili babag ang atong tribes nga magsurender ta padayon ra gyud- FGD-2 (What I can say to my fellow tribe members is to keep doing your best and never be ashamed that we are Obo Manobo: we must persevere because our tribal identity is not a reason to give up , we must simply keep going) -FGD-2

Another participant added:

Para sa ako ma'am is maka graduate ko puhon ma'am is kung naa man koy makit an nga estudyante pud nga kagaya nako unya kagaya pud sa kong mga experience karon ma'am and mga kaagi nako ma'am gusto nako iingon sa ilaha nga ayaw mo pag give up kay ing ani akong kaagi sa una pobre ra mi bisag wala mi bisag wala mi baon naga eskwela mi gihapon maong ayaw gyud mo give up kay mahaw as gyudd mo puhon- FGD-3 (For me, ma'am hope to graduate someday, and if I ever see students who share the same experiences and hardships I have now, I want to tell them not to give up. I would tell them that despite being poor and even going to school without allowance, I kept going so they should never give up, because they will surely rise above their situation one day.) FGD-3

Participants showed that self-determination is manifested through consistent engagement in their education despite challenges. They demonstrated this through returning to school, maintaining regular attendance, and showing willingness to learn. Persistence is also evident in their effort to study harder, collaborate with peers and teachers, and endure insult without giving up.

Summary of Findings

The Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers perceive their academic journey in urban area as characterized by autonomy to learn in the urban, to attaining their goals to learn.

1. The participants demonstrated autonomy as their central experience, expressed through persistent self-directed study, and active decision-making in their education, including defying limitations to continue pursuing schooling.
2. The participants showed competence by exerting consistent academic effort, maximizing available opportunities, and striving to improve their skills despite challenges.
3. The participants describe their relatedness capabilities in the way they get support from family, peers, and community, while cultivating cultural pride and encouraging collective learning with in their indigenous community.
4. The participants manifestation of self-determination were evident in their actions such as returning to school, studying harder each day, showing willingness to learn, collaborating with peers and teachers, persevering despite insults, and maintaining regular school attendance.

DISCUSSION

In this section, I discussed of the findings of the study, implications for practice, and future direction.

My encounter with my study participants turned out to be a moment of truth about Indigenous Peoples (IP) journey on education. From their sharing I found, that the Indigenous youth demonstrated autonomy as their central experience, expressed through persistent self-directed study, and active decision-making in their education, including defying limitations to continue pursuing schooling. My study result aligns with Ye and McCoy (2024), who found that students' self-determination is strongly shaped by their ability to make independent educational decisions and exercise agency in navigating challenges, emphasizing that decision-making plays a central role in sustaining educational participation. Similarly, my finding supports D'Arrigo et al. (2024), who reported that autonomy in decision-making significantly influences students' academic engagement and performance, demonstrating that learners who actively take control of their educational choices are more likely to persist and succeed.

I also found that the IP students showed competence by exerting consistent academic effort, maximizing available opportunities, and striving to improve their skills despite challenges. My study aligns with Zhou and Zhang (2024), who reported that students who actively engage in self-directed learning and utilize available resources showed sustained academic effort and continuous skill development, reinforcing the role of competence in academic persistence. My study is parallel to this finding, emphasizing that effort, opportunity use, and skill improvement are key indicators of competence.

However, contrasting evidence is presented by the longitudinal study on autonomy and competence (2025), which found that the relationship between competence and persistence is not always consistent, as outcomes may vary depending on contextual factors and individual self-regulation capacity. This suggests that competence alone may not guarantee sustained academic effort, as other psychological or environmental factors may influence student outcomes.

I also found that relatedness capabilities are reflected in how participants receive support from their families, peers, and community, while also cultivating cultural pride and encouraging collective learning within their Indigenous communities. My study aligns with Parrish et al. (2024), who found that students with higher self-determined motivation are more likely to sustain engagement and continue participation in school activities, particularly when autonomy is supported. I support Cao and Lyu (2024), who reported that autonomous motivation significantly predicts perseverance, indicating that individuals who are self-determined are more likely to persist in tasks despite challenges. These findings are parallel to my study, highlighting that self-determination is reflected in sustained effort, participation, and resilience.

However, contrasting evidence suggests that such behaviors may not always be consistent across contexts. A study on students' perseverance trajectories found that motivation and persistence vary significantly among learners, with some exhibiting declining or fluctuating levels of engagement over time rather than stable self-determined behavior. This implies that while self-determination can lead to positive academic behaviors, it may not uniformly result in sustained engagement for all students, as contextual and developmental factors also play a role.

I also found that manifestation of self-determination was evident in the actions of Indigenous youth Sunday schoolers, such as returning to school, studying harder each day, showing willingness to learn, collaborating with peers and teachers, persevering despite insults, and maintaining regular school attendance. My study aligns with Li et al. (2024), who found that resilience, self-regulation, and social support from peers and teachers significantly enhance students' academic performance, showing that learners who study consistently, demonstrate willingness to learn, collaborate with others, and persevere despite challenges tend to achieve better outcomes. Similarly, I support, Shao et al. (2024), who reported that peer relationships, motivation, and active engagement in school are strongly linked to improved academic achievement, supporting the idea that returning to school, maintaining attendance, and collaborating with peers contribute positively to students' learning experiences. However, a study by the OECD (2025) presented a contrasting view, indicating that while perseverance and socio-emotional skills support academic resilience, collaboration may not always lead to positive academic outcomes and, in some contexts, may even have a negative association with resilience.

Implication for Practice

Educators and school administrators may play a transformative role by adopting empathetic, student-centered approaches that go beyond traditional curriculum delivery. Professional development may help teachers understand the psychological challenges and cultural marginalization experienced by Indigenous youth. Schools may also address students' economic vulnerabilities by strengthening partnerships with families and local employers to support continued access to education. At the same time, school leaders may foster inclusive environments that celebrate Indigenous identities to reduce stigma and prevent disengagement. Integrating Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and languages into the curriculum is essential to ensure that students do not have to sacrifice their cultural heritage for academic success. Through these efforts, schools may create more equitable and culturally responsive learning environments that empower Indigenous learners.

Future Directions

Based on my findings, I see the potential to use a multiple regression design where autonomy is treated as the central experience, while competence (through effort and access) and relatedness capabilities are examined as predictive variables of self-determination outcomes. In addition, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) may be conducted to develop and validate quantitative instruments intended to assess support systems for Indigenous youth, including the interaction and collaboration among teachers, peers, and the community. The identified sub-themes may be operationalized as indicators in constructing these measurement tools. Future studies may also increase the sample size by including participants from different Indigenous communities, provide richer contextual details regarding participants' cultural and socio-economic backgrounds in order to gain a deeper understanding of and better support the educational journey of Indigenous learners in the future.

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