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Autonomy-Rich Schooling and Lifelong Self-Determination: Narratives of Reflective Agency in Sudbury School Graduates

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how experiences of autonomy-rich schooling are interpreted by graduates in relation to their learning trajectories, identity development, and sense of agency across the life course. Drawing on interviews with 14 adult graduates of Sudbury model schools—educational environments characterized by high levels of learner autonomy and self-direction—the study explores how participants make meaning of their schooling in light of their subsequent educational, professional, and personal pathways. Interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The analysis identified themes of boredom, reflective practices, flexible approaches to learning, and a sustained orientation toward self-directed engagement grounded in personal values. Participants frequently described early experiences of boredom and unstructured time as prompting reflection and internal questioning, which they retrospectively understood as contributing to the development of self-directed motivation, decision-making, and identity. These processes were often described as ongoing in adulthood, shaping how participants approached learning and life choices.

Interpreted through Self-Determination Theory as a sensitizing framework, the findings point to processes of internalization and the gradual development of autonomous forms of self-regulation. Rather than establishing causal relationships, the study offers insight into how individuals interpret and integrate experiences of autonomy, boredom, and self-direction into their evolving sense of self and agency. The study contributes to discussions on the role of educational experience in lifelong learning and the development of self-directed agency.

Introduction

Human motivation plays a central role in educational engagement and personal development. At the same time, how individuals come to experience themselves as agents in their own lives—and how such experiences are shaped through educational contexts—remains a central question for understanding human development. Self-Determination Theory (SDT: Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) proposes that motivation is shaped by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the experience of volition and self-endorsement in one's actions, competence concerns feeling effective in interacting with the environment, and relatedness involves experiencing meaningful connections and a sense of belonging with others. Educational environments vary in the extent to which they support or constrain these needs, with implications for students' engagement, well-being, and long-term motivational development (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009).

While much research on motivation has focused on processes within formal schooling, less attention has been given to how dispositions such as agency, self-direction, and reflective capacity endure beyond institutional contexts and shape individuals' approaches to learning and life over time. In particular, relatively little is known about how individuals make sense of these experiences in retrospect and how they become integrated into ongoing narratives of self and development. This raises questions about

how educational environments may contribute to the development of such enduring orientations and how these continue to influence individuals beyond formal education.

Conventional schooling structures are often characterized by prescribed curricula, schedules, and assessment systems that limit opportunities for autonomous decision-making. Research grounded in SDT suggests that environments perceived as autonomy-supportive tend to foster higher levels of intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In contrast, environments characterized by strong external control have been associated with disengagement and boredom (van Hooft & van Hooff, 2018). Within this broader discussion, alternative educational models that emphasize learner autonomy have attracted increasing scholarly attention.

One example is the Sudbury model school, first established with the founding of the Sudbury Valley School in 1968 in Framingham, Massachusetts (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008; Greenberg, 2007). Schools working according to this model typically operate without a prescribed curriculum and allow students to determine how they spend their time. Governance is organized democratically, with students and staff participating in school meetings responsible for decision-making related to rules, budgeting, and staffing (Traxler, 2015). In these settings, learning activities are largely self-directed and participation in structured instruction is voluntary. Rather than focusing solely on institutional characteristics, such environments can also be understood as lived contexts in which individuals encounter extended periods of unstructured time, responsibility, and decision-making. These conditions may shape not only what individuals do, but how they come to understand themselves as agents in relation to their actions.

Advocates of Sudbury schooling suggest that such environments may foster self-direction, responsibility, and intrinsic motivation. However, empirical research examining these claims remains limited. Much of the existing literature consists of descriptive accounts or philosophical discussions of the model rather than systematic investigation of students' retrospective meaning-making or longer-term developmental outcomes.

One frequently discussed aspect of Sudbury schooling is the experience of boredom arising from the absence of imposed curricular activities. From a phenomenological perspective, boredom may represent a disruption of habitual engagement that invites reflection on meaning, direction, and personal priorities. Proponents suggest that periods of unstructured time may encourage reflection, exploration, and self-directed engagement. Previous research suggests that such experiences may contribute to taking ownership of one's life (Hartkamp-Bakker & Martens, 2024). Yet the emotional and motivational role of boredom in highly autonomous educational environments has received relatively little empirical attention.

The present study explores how graduates from Sudbury model schools interpret their schooling experiences in relation to their subsequent learning trajectories, identity development, and orientations toward lifelong learning. Rather than treating these experiences as fixed outcomes of schooling, the study approaches them as processes of meaning-making through which individuals interpret and integrate past experiences into their ongoing lives. Drawing on SDT as a conceptual lens, the study

examines how participants describe experiences of autonomy, boredom, and self-direction during their schooling and how they interpret the influence of these experiences on their later motivational development.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- • How do Sudbury school graduates describe their experiences of boredom and unstructured time during their schooling?
- • How do graduates interpret these experiences in retrospect?
- • How do participants perceive these experiences in relation to their later motivation, reflective habits, identity development, and sense of agency?

By examining retrospective accounts of Sudbury graduates, this study aims to contribute to lifelong learning debates on how early educational environments shape enduring capacities for self-directed learning, identity formation, and agency across the life course.

Self-Determination Theory and Educational Contexts

SDT provides a widely used framework for understanding motivation in educational settings (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020). In this study, SDT is used as a sensitizing framework to interpret how participants describe their experiences of motivation, agency, and self-regulation, rather than as a model to be tested directly. According to SDT, human motivation exists along a continuum ranging from amotivation to intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to engagement in activities for their inherent interest or enjoyment, whereas extrinsic motivation involves engagement driven by external outcomes or pressures. Forms of extrinsic motivation can become more autonomous when individuals internalize the value of an activity and integrate it with their sense of self.

SDT proposes that motivation is shaped by the extent to which environments support individuals' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Educational environments differ in the extent to which they support these needs. Autonomy-supportive contexts tend to encourage exploration, initiative, and intrinsic motivation, whereas environments characterized by strong external control may undermine motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017). From this theoretical perspective, environments that afford high levels of autonomy—when accompanied by support for competence and relatedness—may be expected to support the development of self-directed learning and reflective agency beyond formal education.

Autonomy and Sudbury Model School Environments

Within the broader field of educational research, several alternative schooling models emphasize greater learner autonomy and self-directed learning. Among these are democratic schools and other forms of

self-directed education in which students exercise substantial control over their learning activities and daily routines (Gray, 2023).

Sudbury model schools represent one example of such an educational approach. Originating with the Sudbury Valley School in the United States, these schools typically operate without a prescribed curriculum, mandatory classes, grades, or standardized testing (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008; Greenberg, 2007). Students determine how to spend their time and may pursue activities individually or collaboratively. Staff members generally act as facilitators or mentors rather than traditional instructors.

Governance in Sudbury schools is organized democratically through school meetings in which students and staff have equal voting rights. These meetings are responsible for decisions related to rules, school operations, and staffing. Within this structure, students participate directly in institutional decision-making processes, which may contribute to experiences of agency and responsibility. In addition, Sudbury schools operate peer-led judicial committees that address rule violations and conflicts within the school community. These committees are responsible for maintaining a safe environment by ensuring equal access to justice and fair procedures for all members of the school. Together, these governance structures provide a shared institutional framework within which students exercise autonomy and participate in maintaining the social order of the school, while also creating conditions that support ongoing negotiation of roles, responsibilities, and participation (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008; Hartkamp-Bakker & Martens, 2026a; Traxler, 2015). These practices may be understood not only as institutional arrangements, but as contexts in which individuals encounter and negotiate questions of responsibility, participation, and self-direction in everyday life.

Although Sudbury schools have attracted interest within discussions of learner autonomy and democratic education, systematic empirical research examining student experiences within these environments remains limited. Much of the existing literature consists of descriptive accounts or philosophical discussions of the model’s principles.

Boredom and Motivational Processes

Boredom has traditionally been conceptualized as a negative psychological state associated with disengagement, dissatisfaction, and lack of stimulation (Eastwood et al., 2012; Iso-Ahola & Weissinger, 1990). In educational contexts, boredom is often linked to environments in which individuals perceive limited autonomy or meaning in their activities (van Hooft & van Hooff, 2018).

However, recent research suggests that boredom may also serve adaptive motivational functions. Bench and Lench (2019) argue that boredom can signal a lack of meaningful engagement and prompt individuals to seek alternative activities that better satisfy their psychological needs. In this sense, boredom may not only indicate a lack of engagement but also open a space for individuals to re-evaluate their situation and reorient their actions.

In educational environments characterized by substantial autonomy, boredom may therefore play a different role than in highly structured settings. Some accounts of democratic schooling suggest that periods of unstructured time can encourage reflection, exploration, and the development of self-directed interests. Nevertheless, empirical evidence examining how individuals experience and respond to boredom in such contexts remains limited.

Research on democratic schooling provides some preliminary insights. Studies of alternative educational environments suggest that unstructured time may support emotional regulation, reflection, and self-directed engagement when it occurs within supportive social contexts characterized by mutual respect and autonomy (Lees, 2017). These findings highlight the potential importance of relational and contextual factors in shaping how individuals experience and respond to boredom.

Reflective Processes, Identity Development, and Motivation

Processes of self-awareness and reflection may play an important role in the development of self-directed motivation. Research suggests that individuals' awareness of their values, interests, and emotional responses can influence how they interpret experiences and make decisions about future actions (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Morin, 2005, 2018). Reflective processes may therefore contribute to the development of personally meaningful goals and a stronger sense of agency. Such processes may play a central role in how individuals come to understand themselves as agents capable of directing their own lives.

Within the SDT framework, motivational development is closely linked to the internalization of values and the integration of goals into one's sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan et al., 2021). When individuals pursue goals that are aligned with their intrinsic values, they are more likely to experience sustained engagement, persistence, and well-being.

Early engagement with personally meaningful activities has also been associated with later identity development and life satisfaction (Burrow & Hill, 2011). However, the processes through which individuals develop such engagement in highly autonomous educational environments remain insufficiently understood.

The Complex Role of Autonomy in Education

While autonomy-supportive environments in SDT are associated with positive motivational and developmental outcomes, this concept is analytically distinct from autonomy-rich educational environments that emphasize high levels of learner self-direction and choice. The role of such autonomy-rich approaches in education remains a subject of debate. Some scholars have argued that highly autonomy-rich educational models may present challenges related to structure, guidance, and collective responsibility (Wilson, 2016). More broadly, critics have also raised concerns that educational approaches emphasizing individual choice and self-direction may unintentionally align with wider

discourses of individual responsibility associated with neoliberal educational reforms (Hill, 2018; Tougas, 2024). Understanding how individuals experience and navigate such environments therefore requires attention not only to their potential benefits, but also to the tensions and critiques that surround autonomy-rich educational approaches.

Research Gap

Despite increasing interest in self-directed education and democratic schooling, empirical research examining the lived experiences of students in these environments remains limited. In particular, there is limited insight into how individuals interpret and integrate experiences of autonomy, boredom, and self-direction into their broader life narratives and sense of self over time.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the retrospective accounts of Sudbury model school graduates, focusing on how they describe the role of autonomy, boredom, and reflective processes in their educational experiences and subsequent personal development and evolving sense of self.

Methodology

Research Design

This study forms part of a broader qualitative research project examining the long-term experiences of graduates from Sudbury model schools. The overarching research question guiding the larger project was: How do graduates make sense of their experiences of Sudbury schooling in relation to their adult lives? The present article focuses specifically on participants' reflections on experiences of autonomy, boredom, and self-direction and how these were perceived to influence their later motivation and sense of agency.

A qualitative design was adopted to explore how participants made sense of their schooling experiences in relation to later life. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), allowing for the interpretation of recurring patterns of meaning across participants' retrospective accounts. SDT served as a sensitizing conceptual framework during interpretation, rather than as a predetermined coding scheme.

The data presented here are drawn from interviews with 14 graduates from Sudbury model schools located in the Netherlands, Israel, and the United States.

Site Selection and Participant Recruitment

Schools were identified through an initial mapping of 55 schools in 13 countries describing themselves as Sudbury schools or operating comparably. Schools were included if they had been operating long enough to have graduates with several years of post-school experience, shared core Sudbury operational

principles (no prescribed curriculum, voluntary participation, and democratic governance), and used a language accessible to the researcher.

Based on these criteria, eight schools agreed to participate in the study, six in the USA, two in Israel, and two in the Netherlands. Each school designated a contact person who distributed an invitation to eligible graduates. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University Ethics Committee, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. The contact persons were instructed to select participants of varying genders, backgrounds, school experiences, and career paths to minimize selection bias. In addition, participants were required to have attended the school for at least five years and to have a minimum of five years of post-school experience to allow reflection on longer-term outcomes, with a few exceptions allowed. Participants contacted the researcher directly and were informed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the procedures for data anonymization.

Participants

The final sample consisted of 14 graduates aged approximately 20 to 40 years at the time of the interviews. Participants had attended their respective schools for periods ranging from five years to their entire childhood, with one participant attending for two years.

Participants also differed in their relationships to the schools. Seven participants had parents who had been involved in the school as founders or staff members at some point, while the remaining seven reported no familial involvement with the school. The schools themselves varied in size during the participants' attendance, with student populations ranging from approximately 20 to more than 80 students.

To protect participants' identities, all names used in the findings are pseudonyms. In sections describing participants' current life contexts, identifying details were intentionally aggregated (e.g., referring to numbers of participants rather than individuals) to reduce the risk of indirect identification.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021 using Microsoft Teams. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview guide included questions about participants' reasons for attending the school, experiences of daily life and school culture, reflections on autonomy and decision-making, experiences of unstructured time and boredom, and perceptions of how their schooling influenced later life experiences.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using an intelligent verbatim transcription approach (Bailey, 2008), which captures the meaning of spoken language while removing minor repetitions and filler words. Transcripts were anonymized and returned to participants for review to allow corrections or clarifications where necessary.

Positionality

The primary researcher has professional experience working as a staff member in Sudbury model schools. This background provided familiarity with the educational context but also required attention to potential bias during data collection and analysis. Four participants were previously known to the researcher: one was a close relative and three were former students encountered through earlier professional interactions. Although these connections facilitated initial rapport, professional boundaries were maintained throughout the research process.

To support reflexivity, analytic decisions and emerging interpretations were discussed with collaborating researchers who were not affiliated with Sudbury schools, and reflexive notes were maintained during data analysis. Given the researcher's prior involvement in Sudbury model schools, reflexivity was treated as an ongoing part of the research process rather than a discrete procedural step.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to develop familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated to capture meaningful segments of text related to participants' experiences of autonomy, boredom, and self-direction. Coding was conducted using Atlas.ti software.

During theme development, particular attention was given to meanings that recurred across participants from different schools and national contexts. In practice, themes were typically developed when similar interpretations were expressed by at least three participants who had attended different schools, often across at least two countries. In subsequent stages of analysis, related codes were grouped into broader candidate themes. These themes were reviewed and refined through iterative comparison with the full dataset to ensure that they accurately represented participants' narratives and captured shared patterns across cases. In later stages of analysis, subsequent interviews contributed further nuance and depth to existing themes rather than substantially altering the developing thematic structure.

Interviews conducted in Dutch were translated into English by the researcher for reporting purposes. Particular care was taken to retain the intended meaning of participants' statements during translation (Temple & Young, 2004).

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts to confirm accuracy. Reflexive thematic analysis involved iterative engagement with the data and continual refinement of interpretations. In addition, analytic discussions with collaborating researchers provided opportunities to reflect critically on coding decisions and theme development. Particular attention was given to distinguishing participants' retrospective interpretations from claims about causal educational effects.

Findings

Participants’ Life Contexts

Before presenting the thematic findings, a brief overview of participants’ life contexts at the time of interview is provided. These descriptions situate the themes that follow by illustrating the professional trajectories, personal routines, and social commitments within which participants made sense of their schooling experiences and life choices.

To protect participants’ identities, all names used in the findings are pseudonyms. Because the sample is small and some professional trajectories could potentially identify individuals within their school communities, descriptions of participants’ current life contexts are presented in aggregated form rather than linking specific individuals to particular professions.

Employment Situations

Participants’ employment situations reflected a wide range of professional fields and work arrangements. At the time of the interviews, participants were employed in areas including technology and cybersecurity, education and the arts, healthcare and caregiving, law, public administration, and small business management. Several participants combined multiple roles, freelance work, or part-time employment, reflecting diverse pathways into adulthood.

The largest occupational group was in technology-related fields, with four participants working in areas such as IT consultancy, cybersecurity testing, endpoint support, and data protection analysis. These roles ranged from independent consulting to managerial positions within specialized companies. For two, their interest in IT started while in school, the found their interest in this field later.

Three participants were engaged in creative or educational professions, including dance performance and instruction, photojournalism, and work in alternative education settings. For these individuals, professional activities were closely connected to long-standing personal interests and commitments already while in school.

Three participants had experience in healthcare or caregiving fields, including maternity care, administrative work in psychiatric services, and family therapy. Interest in working with people originated from working in the age-mixed environment of the school. One participant with a background in therapy was temporarily outside paid employment while caring for young children and volunteering in a democratic school.

Two other participants worked in fields such as human rights law, public administration combined with university studies in political science and history, or administrative roles in family businesses and philanthropic organizations. Both chose these direction on basis of working in the democratic system of the school.

Several participants described flexible or transitional work arrangements. Approximately four participants combined freelance or part-time employment with other professional pursuits, and two participants were actively engaged in further education or re-skilling, including preparation for the GED and independent training in 3D design. These trajectories often involved ongoing exploration of career directions alongside practical economic considerations.

Personal Lives and Interests

Outside of work and study, participants described active personal lives shaped by creative, social, and community-oriented activities.

Many participants (10 of 14) regularly engaged in physical or outdoor activities such as hiking, cycling, climbing, horseback riding, skateboarding, or dance. These pursuits were often described as important sources of well-being and personal balance, and in some cases involved shared activities within local communities.

Creative practices were also common. At least nine participants reported engaging in activities such as painting, woodworking, leather crafting, music, or photography. For some individuals these practices remained hobbies, while for others they were connected to professional or entrepreneurial activities.

Social relationships played a central role in participants' daily lives. Nearly all participants described spending regular time with friends, partners, or family through activities such as cooking together, playing games, attending festivals, or informal gatherings.

Several participants were also involved in forms of civic engagement. Approximately half reported participating in volunteering, activism, or community initiatives, including youth leadership programs, feminist translation projects, democratic school governance, and grassroots organizing.

In addition, some participants described ongoing informal learning activities, such as language study, reading, or exploring topics of personal interest. Others reported engaging in hands-on projects such as technology tinkering, home maintenance, or self-directed learning projects.

These diverse professional and personal contexts provide background for understanding how participants reflected on their schooling experiences during the interviews, and how these reflections were embedded in their ongoing lives and sense of self. Many of these reflections centered on how students navigated the freedom to structure their own time, including the challenges and opportunities associated with periods of boredom.

Experiences of Boredom

Boredom was one of the most frequently discussed aspects of participants' experiences at school. Thirteen of the 14 participants mentioned boredom when describing how they spent their time or when reflecting on challenging aspects of their schooling.

Participants often described boredom as an initial difficulty associated with the responsibility of structuring their own time in the absence of externally imposed schedules or activities.

Boredom as a Challenge

Five participants described boredom as uncomfortable or difficult, particularly during their early experiences at school. Helen recalled the challenge of organizing her own daily activities, “You had to think for yourself. That is of course not always easy.”

Suzanne described realizing that responsibility for structuring time rested entirely with the student, “If I don't do anything, nothing will happen. No one is coming to entertain me, and no one is coming to determine for me what I'm going to do… That was definitely difficult.” Similarly, Marcia reflected on the emotional experience of boredom, “It's kind of scary… to be really bored. This was difficult.”

These accounts suggest that the absence of externally structured activities initially created uncertainty, requiring participants to confront the responsibility of directing their own time and actions..

Boredom and Exploration

While participants described boredom as challenging, 13 participants reported that these experiences prompted them to reflect on their interests and seek out activities. Andrew explained, “I feel like, not constant, but occasional boredom is critical in growth and figuring out what it is you want to do with yourself and what excites you in the world.” Suzanne similarly described boredom as part of a process that eventually led to action, “There will come a point when you get bored. So bored that you're going to do something.”

Several participants described boredom as triggering internal questioning in which moments of inactivity prompted reflection on interests, goals, and possible directions. Helen described how boredom triggered asking herself, “What do I want? … What do I want in a few years?” Philip reflected that boredom sometimes encouraged him to try new activities, “Maybe it pushed me to achieve stuff, to do something, to not be bored… maybe brought me to doing stuff I wouldn’t do otherwise.”

Contemporary Challenges

Two participants also noted that digital technologies sometimes altered the experience of boredom. Andrew observed, “It’s really hard to be bored when you have a smartphone in your pocket. It’s really easy to pass time in a completely meaningless way.” Beth, the youngest participant, described becoming aware of how screen time could influence her use of time, “There are days where I literally just did nothing but be on my phone… It’s my personal thing that I get on to myself about productivity.”

Overall, participants described boredom both as a challenge and as a condition that sometimes prompted reflection, exploration, or changes in activity.

Reflective Habits in Decision-Making

Another recurring theme in participants' accounts, closely connected to feelings of boredom and uncertainty arising from their experiences with unstructured time, concerned the development of reflective habits and approaches to decision-making. Eight participants described regularly reflecting on their choices and evaluating whether their activities aligned with their interests or values. Claire explained, "I do think that a kind of general reflection process has been learned… I try very hard to think about the choices that I make in my personal life and in my work." Helen similarly described spending time reflecting on personal priorities, "You can spend a lot of time on what you want, what you find important, what kind of person you are."

Some participants reported that this form of reflection had become a routine part of their decision-making. Rachel described regularly reassessing situations when something felt unsatisfactory, "If I feel uncomfortable… I need to sit down and examine this and come up with a new plan." Leo described applying similar reflections when considering job opportunities, "Really asking myself every time before I take a job: 'Do I really want to do this?'"

Three participants explicitly contrasted their reflective habits with those of peers from more conventional educational backgrounds, suggesting that they perceived these practices as developing earlier in their own lives.

Flexible Mindsets in Approaching Life Challenges

Nine participants described approaching decisions with a sense that multiple options were possible. Ella explained, "If I don't like the way things are, I actually am in an agentive position to think about them and do something differently." Rachel described a similar sense of personal influence over life direction, "I have control… I have the power to make my life be one that is satisfying." Ted described applying this perspective to everyday situations, "If there's something that I don't like, I can find ways to make that better."

These accounts suggest that many participants approached decisions with an underlying sense of agency, viewing their circumstances as open to revision and change.

Confidence in Learning New Skills

A related theme concerned participants' confidence in their ability to learn independently, often described as an openness to experimentation and learning through action. Five participants explicitly described strong confidence in their ability to learn new skills or navigate unfamiliar situations.

Ella explained, "I don't end with what I have now, and if I am simply drawn to something, that is a good enough start." Stephen described approaching unfamiliar tasks without excessive concern, "I didn't totally freak out when I had to learn something new." Lillian similarly emphasized experimentation as part of learning, "Anything I want to learn, I can just go do it… I might mess up at first."

Perceived Effects on Motivation, Life Choices, and Identity

Participants also reflected on how their schooling influenced their motivations, educational choices, and sense of self.

Understanding Personal Preferences

Six participants described making educational or career decisions based on their preferred ways of learning. Claire explained, “It had more of an effect on what kind of course I went to… on why I picked it very specifically.” Suzanne described selecting programs that matched her learning preferences, “I only selected courses that suit me.” Ted chose an alternative route, “Just based on the experience I had at [the school], I thought that I could probably figure out whatever job I wanted to do without needing college.”

Others described quitting programs that did not align with their interests. Like how Ella described leaving a music program because it did not match her expectations about how she wanted to learn, “I just felt like I was doing technical work… I hated it.”

Values and Life Priorities

Nine participants emphasized the importance of personal values in shaping their life choices. Rachel reflected, “I need to try my best to be happy… and that affected how I chose my career.” Leo similarly emphasized the importance of enjoyment and meaning in work, “You can work, you can make money, but not enjoying it… it’s not worth it.” Philip explained that his motivation for pursuing a second academic study came from genuine interest, “not because I want a career in it, or I need to.”

Perseverance and Ownership

Six participants linked persistence in pursuing goals to the sense that their decisions were self-chosen. Philip remarked how his experience from school supported the realization, “You are there [course program] not because you need to, but because you want to.” Helen described this relationship between choice and persistence, “Because you chose it yourself, you just do it… and you adapt.” Rachel described how experience in school with working through difficult tasks, “... helped me get used to doing tedious and boring things… to get to a larger goal.”

Identity and Self-Concept

Ten participants described their schooling as influential in shaping aspects of their identity and confidence, often in ways that were difficult to separate from their broader sense of self. For example, Ted stated, “It probably influenced just about every aspect of the person I am today.” Lillian similarly remarked, “I wouldn’t really be who I am without it,” or Philip said, “I think it did a lot to build who I am today in a good way.” Claire, moved to tears, said “I think I really wouldn't be where I am now or the person I am today if I hadn't gone to this school.”

At the same time, several participants noted the difficulty of determining the extent to which their schooling influenced their later lives. Claire noted that it was difficult to determine the school's influence because she had no basis for comparison. Suzanne reflected, "I have no idea where I would have been if I hadn't had it." Andrew and Lillian, who attended from a very young age, acknowledged the school's deep but inseparable role in their development: "This is just what I've known."

Taken together, these findings illustrate how participants described navigating autonomy, decision-making, and personal development during and after their schooling. Rather than presenting fixed outcomes, participants' accounts reflect ongoing processes of interpreting and integrating their experiences into their lives. While participants often attributed aspects of their motivation, reflection, and identity to their educational experiences, they also acknowledged the complexity of disentangling these influences from other factors in their lives.

General Discussion

This study explored how graduates of Sudbury model schools reflect on their educational experiences and interpret these experiences in relation to their subsequent learning trajectories, identity development, and sense of agency across the life course. In these environments, participants were expected to manage their time, navigate boredom, and make decisions with real consequences. Participants' accounts highlighted several psychological processes—including navigating boredom, developing reflective habits, adopting flexible approaches to decision-making and learning, and aligning life choices with personal values—which are consistent with the processes of self-growth described by Jain et al. (2015). They also described increasing confidence in their ability to initiate, direct, and sustain their own learning over time, suggesting experiences consistent with the development of competence. Within SDT, such confidence is closely linked to more autonomous forms of regulation, which have been associated with deeper engagement and more effective learning, particularly in contexts with fewer external constraints (Ryan & Connell, 1989). In contrast, more controlled forms of regulation have been shown to relate less consistently to adaptive competence beliefs, highlighting the importance of autonomy-supportive conditions for the development of self-directed learning.

The contextual descriptions of participants' adult lives also provide an important backdrop for interpreting these psychological themes. Participants' professional and personal trajectories were diverse, ranging from careers in technology, healthcare, law, and education to freelance and transitional pathways that combined work, caregiving, and ongoing learning. Many participants described active personal lives involving creative practices, civic engagement, and continued skill development. These life contexts illustrate how reflective habits, flexible mindsets, and value-driven decision-making are enacted in adulthood, as part of broader processes of learning and identity formation beyond formal education.

Boredom as a Catalyst for Self-Directed Action

One of the most striking findings concerned participants' experiences of boredom during their schooling. Thirteen of the fourteen participants described boredom as a recurring aspect of their time in school, often linked to the responsibility of structuring their own daily activities in the absence of externally imposed curricula.

Participants frequently described boredom as uncomfortable at first, but also as a condition that prompted reflection and exploration. Several described asking themselves questions such as "What do I want to do?" or "What should I do next?" when confronted with periods of inactivity. Boredom appeared less as a passive state and more as a trigger for internal dialogue and self-directed decision-making.

The experience of boredom described by participants echoes research on unstructured time in a comparable alternative educational setting. Lees (2017), argued that moments of "not doing much" in democratic schools such as Summerhill can create space for reflection, emotional regulation, and personal initiative. Participants' accounts in this study suggest similar dynamics: boredom was often remembered as a challenging but potentially generative experience that encouraged self-directed action.

Two participants pointed to the potential influence of digital technologies—particularly smartphones and social media—on experiences of boredom. While one questioned whether such technologies might limit opportunities for constructive boredom, another described feelings of dissatisfaction after a day spent on her phone. This latter account did not reflect boredom as such, but rather a retrospective awareness of unfulfilling time use, suggesting that reflection may still emerge even in the absence of boredom. Overall, unstructured time was consistently associated with the development of reflective habits and self-monitoring.

Reflective Habits and the Development of Self-Monitoring

Closely related to experiences of unstructured time and boredom, a recurring theme in participants' narratives was the development of reflective habits. Eight participants described regularly evaluating their decisions and questioning whether their actions aligned with their interests, values, or long-term goals. Several explicitly linked moments of boredom to this process, noting that periods of inactivity prompted them to reconsider their priorities and next steps. Over time, such reflection was described as becoming a routine aspect of adult decision-making.

These accounts point to the development of ongoing self-monitoring of personal choices and circumstances. Participants described pausing to reassess career decisions, reconsider situations that felt unsatisfactory, and reflect on their priorities before committing to new directions.

From a SDT perspective, these reflective practices can be understood as part of the process of internalization and the development of an internal perceived locus of causality (Ryan & Connell, 1989). To the extent that individuals experience themselves as the origin of their actions, they are more likely to regulate their behavior in accordance with internalized values rather than external contingencies. In this sense, the reflective habits described by participants may support a shift toward more autonomous forms of self-regulation.

Participants' descriptions of inner questioning also resemble what Morin (2018) conceptualizes as inner speech or self-talk, which plays a role in self-awareness and decision-making. Through such internal dialogue, individuals can evaluate their actions, align behavior with personal values, and adapt to changing circumstances.

Although causal relationships cannot be established, these findings suggest that educational environments placing responsibility for decision-making on learners may support the development of reflective habits into adulthood.

Flexible Mindsets in Decision-Making and Learning

Beyond reflection, many participants described broader attitudes toward life challenges characterized by flexibility, initiative, and confidence in their ability to adapt. These accounts appeared in two forms: flexible approaches to life decisions and confidence in learning new skills.

Nine participants described approaching life decisions with the expectation that change and adaptation were possible. Participants spoke about the ability to reconsider choices, redirect their careers, or reshape their circumstances when situations no longer aligned with their values. Rather than viewing decisions as fixed or irreversible, many described their lives as open to revision.

In addition, five participants described strong confidence in their ability to learn independently. Several participants expressed the belief that new skills could be acquired when needed, even without formal instruction. Learning was often described as an exploratory process involving experimentation and trial and error.

These attitudes resemble elements of Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy concept of self-efficacy and research on growth mindset (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Yeager, 2019), while also reflecting, from an SDT perspective, the development of perceived competence alongside more autonomous forms of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

However, participants' descriptions suggest that persistence was often grounded in personal meaning rather than in abstract ideals of effort or productivity. Their willingness to persevere through difficulty appeared closely tied to the sense that their goals were self-chosen and personally meaningful.

Motivation, Identity, and Value-Driven Life Choices

Participants also described ways in which their schooling appeared to influence their motivations, career decisions, and sense of self. Many participants reported making educational and professional choices based on their interests, preferred learning styles, or broader life values that had already begun to develop during their time in school (Hartkamp-Bakker & Martens, 2026b).

For example, several participants described leaving educational programs or career paths that did not align with their expectations or values. Others described pursuing careers or studies motivated by curiosity, passion, or personal meaning rather than by external expectations.

These accounts align with research on self-concordant goals, which suggests that individuals who pursue goals aligned with their internal values tend to experience higher levels of motivation and well-being (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Within SDT, such patterns are associated with integrated motivation, in which behavior is guided by personally endorsed values rather than external rewards or pressures (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Participants' narratives also suggested a deeper sense of inner clarity regarding their personal values and life direction. Several described making decisions by reflecting on what felt meaningful or consistent with their sense of self. This orientation resembles what Rogers (1961) described as the *organismic valuing process*, in which individuals rely on an internal evaluative compass to guide choices toward personally meaningful goals rather than externally imposed expectations. Interpreted through the lens of SDT, such descriptions are consistent with the concept of eudaimonic well-being, which emphasizes acting in accordance with internal values and authentic interests (Ryan et al., 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan & Martela, 2016).

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that such alignment cannot be assumed to emerge automatically from autonomy alone. Research suggests that when autonomy is not accompanied by adequate social or emotional support, highly unstructured environments may also produce uncertainty or anxiety for some learners (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

In addition, participants' narratives highlight the complexity of interpreting long-term educational influences. While many participants described their schooling as shaping aspects of their identity or confidence, several also acknowledged the difficulty of determining the extent to which these outcomes could be attributed to their schooling alone. As some participants noted that it was difficult to assess the school's influence without any basis for comparison, since they had no experience of a different educational environment.

Autonomy, Relatedness, and the Social Dimensions of Self-Directed Education

Although autonomy and competence were central in participants' narratives, relatedness—one of SDT's three basic psychological needs—did not appear to play a direct role in these findings. This aligns with SDT research suggesting that, while essential, relatedness may operate more distally in supporting intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). At the same time, autonomy-support is understood to function most effectively when embedded in relationships that provide trust, safety, and recognition (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This is reflected in research on Sudbury model schools, where organizational structures may foster close staff–student relationships that support autonomous learning (Hartkamp-Bakker & Martens,

2026a), and in findings that relatedness can play a role in coping with boredom in democratic school settings (Lees, 2017).

From this perspective, the limited visibility of relatedness may reflect its background or enabling function rather than its absence. This interpretation is supported by Kraftl (2013) who argues that alternative learning environments can foster deep personal growth, provided adequate relational support is present. As Ryan (1991) suggests, individuation can be understood not as something that occurs apart from others, but rather in relation to them.

At the same time, critical perspectives raise questions about the broader implications of autonomy-rich models. Wilson (2016), for example, argues that a strong emphasis on individual self-actualization may risk privileging personal development over engagement with wider social and political concerns.

The accounts in this study, however, complicate this critique. While participants frequently described strong orientations toward self-direction and personal responsibility, many also reported active involvement in community initiatives, volunteering, creative collaboration, and civic engagement. These findings suggest that the forms of self-knowledge cultivated in such environments may not be purely individualistic but can coexist with—and potentially support—relational and social commitments. Rather than standing in opposition, autonomy and relatedness may thus be more dynamically intertwined than such critiques assume.

Integrating the Findings: Development Across the Life Course

Taken together, the findings suggest a possible developmental sequence through which early experiences of autonomy may contribute to enduring orientations toward self-directed learning, reflective agency, and adaptive engagement across the life course. Experiences of boredom in the absence of externally imposed structure often prompted internal questioning about interests, goals, and priorities. These reflections appeared to support the development of self-evaluative habits that helped participants align their actions with personal values. Over time, such reflective practices were frequently described alongside more flexible approaches to decision-making and learning, including confidence in exploring new directions and adapting to change. Interpreted through SDT, this sequence may reflect a gradual transition from heteronomous to autonomous regulation, as individuals come to experience themselves as the origin of their actions and regulate behavior in accordance with internalized values rather than external pressures (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Participants' diverse professional trajectories and personal pursuits illustrate how the psychological patterns identified in the findings may be enacted in adulthood. Participants described pathways involving ongoing learning, creative engagement, and value-driven decision-making. These patterns of aligning decisions with personal values and sense of self highlight how early educational experiences may contribute to the formation of enduring orientations that guide learning and decision-making across

the life course. While such patterns cannot be attributed solely to their schooling experiences, they provide insight into how autonomy-rich educational environments may interact with broader life trajectories.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted considering several limitations related to its design and scope. First, the analysis is based on participants' retrospective accounts of their schooling experiences and their perceived influence on later life trajectories. These narratives reflect participants' interpretations rather than direct evidence of causal relationships, and are likely shaped by their current identities, perspectives, and life circumstances. Several participants also noted the difficulty of disentangling the specific impact of their schooling from other influences, underscoring the interpretive challenges inherent in retrospective research.

Second, the study draws on a relatively small sample (N = 14), consisting of graduates from Sudbury model schools. While the inclusion of participants from multiple schools across different countries introduces some variation in context, the findings reflect the perspectives of a particular group and cannot be assumed to represent all students in self-directed educational environments more broadly.

Third, the possibility of selection effects should be considered. Individuals who choose to attend or remain in highly self-directed educational settings may already be predisposed to value autonomy, reflection, or non-traditional learning pathways. In addition, those who opted to participate in this study may be more inclined to reflect positively on their experiences. These factors make it difficult to determine the extent to which the patterns described here are attributable to the educational environment itself rather than to characteristics of the individuals who selected into it.

Fourth, the retrospective nature of the study introduces potential limitations related to memory and narrative construction. In some cases, participants reflected on experiences that occurred more than a decade earlier. While such accounts offer valuable long-term perspectives, they may also be influenced by selective recall, post hoc reasoning, or reinterpretations shaped by subsequent experiences.

Fifth, although autonomy and intrinsic motivation emerged as central themes, the role of relatedness was less explicitly reflected in participants' accounts. Given its established importance within Self-Determination Theory, this limited visibility suggests that relatedness may operate more implicitly or in the background, and points to an important area for further research.

Finally, causal interpretations should be approached with caution. Although participants frequently linked their educational experiences to later attitudes, behaviors, and life choices, these developmental trajectories are likely shaped by multiple interacting factors, including personal dispositions, family context, and broader sociocultural influences, rather than schooling alone.

Implications for Lifelong Learning and Educational Practice

Despite these limitations, the findings offer insight into how autonomy-rich educational environments may shape learners' developmental trajectories and ongoing engagement with learning. Participants' accounts suggest that environments allowing students to structure their own time and make meaningful decisions may support the development of reflective habits, value-driven motivation, and adaptive approaches to learning.

While highly autonomy-rich educational models such as Sudbury schools may not be feasible or appropriate in all contexts, the findings raise broader questions about how elements of autonomy-rich practices might be incorporated into more conventional educational systems. Opportunities for student choice and self-directed exploration may contribute to the development of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and adaptability—qualities that are increasingly emphasized in contemporary discussions of educational reform.

The findings also invite reflection on some prevailing assumptions within mainstream schooling. Participants frequently described early experiences of autonomy, self-reflection, and value-driven decision-making, and several contrasted these experiences with peers who began questioning their educational or career paths only years after leaving school. While such comparisons should be interpreted cautiously, they resonate with research suggesting that highly standardized and externally regulated learning environments may sometimes undermine intrinsic motivation by prioritizing compliance over self-determination (Deci et al., 1991; Ryan et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017). From a humanistic perspective, Rogers (1961) similarly warned that excessive external control can distance individuals from their internal guidance systems.

More broadly, the study contributes to ongoing debates about the goals of education by suggesting that experiences emphasizing agency, reflection, and authentic engagement may shape how individuals approach learning, decision-making, and participation across the life course.

Future research could further investigate the mechanisms through which autonomy-rich educational environments influence psychological development and life trajectories. Comparative studies across cultural contexts, educational models, or socioeconomic settings may provide deeper insight into how autonomy, relatedness, and competence interact in shaping long-term educational outcomes. Such research would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how educational systems can support both individual development and broader social engagement.

Taken together, these findings invite renewed consideration of how educational systems might incorporate greater opportunities for autonomy and self-directed learning, while remaining attentive to the diverse needs of learners and contexts.

Declarations

Statements and Declarations

Competing Interest

The first author is employed at a school operating under a model similar to those examined and had prior familiarity with four participants (one relative and three former students). Steps were taken to prevent undue influence on study design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. The second author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Ethical approval

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines and approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (cETO), Open University of the Netherlands (Approval No. U202103682).

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation.

Data Availability

Due to the participant consent agreement, anonymized interview transcripts are not publicly available. Data may be requested from the corresponding author for research purposes, subject to ethical approval.

Author Contributions

The first author conceived and designed the study, collected and analyzed data, and drafted the manuscript. The second author supervised the project and contributed to writing and revising the manuscript. Both authors approved the final version.

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