



# Unschoolled but not uneducated: A case study of two parents' motivations and perceptions for unschooling their children

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**Abstract:** The issue surrounding unschooling revolves around the tension between established educational norms and the desire of some parents to provide their children with a more flexible and individualized learning experience that diverges from traditional school structures and curricula. This study primarily aimed to explore parents' motivations and perceptions about unschooling as an alternative educational approach for their children, contributing to a better understanding of this alternative teaching methodology. The study utilized a multiple case study design involving semi-structured interviews with cases of unschooling. This study was conducted in Bayawan City, Philippines. The study participants were two parents who choose unschooling as the preferred path for their children. The researchers applied the six phases for reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke. The researchers generated four themes: parents' perceived benefits of unschooling, personalized learning and parental involvement together create pathways to self-actualization, concerns and critiques of traditional education, and cultivating envisioned living through alternative education. The study reveals that parents embrace unschooling to nurture their children's innate curiosity

and motivation, prioritizing a joyful, pressure-free, and individualized learning journey that fosters autonomy and lifelong learning, all aimed at enriching the child's overall quality of life.

**Keywords:** unschooling, alternative education, parental motivations, individualized learning, philosophy of education, case study.

## Introduction

History has introduced numerous approaches to reconsidering the fundamental assumptions of education (Baker et al., 2021); one of which is unschooling. Unschooling is defined as a process where children learn at their own pace, free from formal school rules and without following a set curriculum (Vesneski et al., 2022). Emphasizing self-directed learning, unschooling enables children to explore their interests without the constraints of a predetermined curriculum, as chosen by parents seeking individualized and flexible education. As unschooling gains popularity, it prompts a re-evaluation of established educational norms, sparking discussions on the future of education and the role of autonomy in shaping well-rounded individuals.

Unschooling benefits include not being worn down by prior schooling, self-direction, freedom of choice, and maximizing educational opportunities (Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021). Unschooling goes beyond traditional education by emphasizing the restoration of the joy of learning, fostering a natural curiosity in children. By liberating students from the rigid structure of a conventional curriculum, unschooling encourages them to explore and delve into their passions. This approach recognizes that genuine understanding and knowledge acquisition often occur when individuals are driven by intrinsic motivation. As an exploratory, qualitative study on an under-researched phenomenon, O'Hare and Coyne (2019) raises questions for future research about how values, beliefs, and identities manifest in unschooling families and offers unique insights into how unschooling bloggers shape their social identities. In essence, unschooling seeks to ignite a lifelong love for learning, fostering creativity and critical thinking skills that extend far beyond the boundaries of a classroom. Children demonstrate increased behavioral engagement when they actively seek learning opportunities and assume responsibility for their own learning (Fredricks et al., 2004).

According to Republic Act No. 9155, "It is hereby declared the policy of the State to protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality basic

education and to make such education accessible to all by providing all Filipino children free and compulsory education in the elementary level and free education in the high school level” (Republic Act 9155, 2001). Despite the legal framework recognizing education as a fundamental right for children, some parents choose the nontraditional path of unschooling. It is essential, however, not to pass judgment on these parents.

Consequently, discussions on integrating unschooling within the broader educational framework should be approached carefully, considering its implications for institutional harmony. The engagement of education stakeholders in tackling teaching and research challenges emphasizes the importance of safeguarding academic freedom (Popov et al., 2021). In order to shed light on the current issues presented by this educational trend and provide ideas for tackling the changing nature of education in the twenty-first century, this article examines the motives and perspectives of parents who choose to unschool their children.

The scarce and unusual practice of unschooling has become a fascinating but little-studied phenomenon in educational research, leading to an investigation into the attitudes and reasons behind the few parents who choose this unusual method. While alternative education is becoming increasingly popular, there is an apparent lack of information in the literature on why parents voluntarily choose to unschool their children and how they see it affecting their development. In the Philippines, education is perceived highly. According to the 1987 Philippine Constitution, Article 2, Section 17: “The State shall give priority to education, science and technology, arts, culture and sports to foster patriotism and nationalism, accelerate social progress, and promote total human liberation and development” (Government of the Philippines, 1987). In the years 2022 to 2023, four out of five citizens within the age bracket of 5–24 are enrolled in school. Those who have not enrolled have done so for practical reasons like they have finished schooling to a degree so they are working or are looking for work or cannot go to school due to financial or medical difficulties or similar difficulties (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). With schooling as the *de facto* norm, why then would these two cases go directly opposite of it? Why go against the grain so steadily? By exploring the various facets of unschooling, this study aims to close this research gap by elucidating the nuanced reasons behind parents’ adoption of this technique and their accompanying beliefs about its effectiveness. This study intends to contribute to the larger conversation on educational choices by providing insightful viewpoints for educators, researchers, and policymakers navigating the changing landscape of modern education.

The child's interaction with self-chosen content is essential for their self-actualization, diverging from traditional approaches that prescribe universal learning content (Chase & Morrison, 2018). By concentrating on the intricacies of parents' motivations for selecting unschooling and their perceptions of its effects on their kids' development, the study seeks to fill a unique knowledge vacuum in this field. By unravelling the intricate web of reasons that led parents to choose this nontraditional path for their children, the findings will hold significant potential to advance our theoretical understanding of alternative education methods, especially unschooling. On a practical level, this study may enlighten parents, legislators, and educators on the variables influencing the choice to unschool and the perceived effects on a child's education.

Theoretically, when children are allowed to choose to study the fields they deem interesting and important to them, they will be more engaged and involved with the activities (Rousseau, 2009). They would love the process of learning skills, by allowing them to freely try activities they would grow up without fearing failure and be resilient against adversities and challenges. By allowing them to have a variety of experiences, both good and bad, the child would grow up to be capable and self-reliant ready to further interact with society without losing one's way.

Further, within the self-determination theory (STD), there are three core motivating needs: Autonomy, Competency, and Relatedness. Autonomy here is not necessarily about being independent or self-reliant but more on the ability to choose and dictate one's direction (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is the need to be able to self-regulate and act in accordance to one's volition. Even if only a few of a person's actions would ever be truly autonomous without any outside influence or environmental factor, it is important that a person should be able to choose actions consistent to his/her self-interests. According to STD, people will naturally choose activities and fields that feel sustaining to them, hence fulfilling their psychological needs. Hence the need for autonomy. Only through volitional, voluntary activity can people be empowered and enabled to fulfil their psychological needs. This in turn allows the same people to "enact their values and solve their problems." When people do not have to worry about being deprived of their needs, they have the tendency to voluntarily seek out new experiences and challenges, and through these voluntary activities do they gain further interest and competence.

This study primarily aimed to explore parents' motivations and perceptions about unschooling as an alternative educational approach for

their children. Specifically, this study sought to explore why parents choose unschooling as an alternative teaching methodology for their children and examine how parents' immediate perceptions of unschooling influence their decision-making process.

## Literature Review

### Unschooling as an Innovative Educational Alternative

Parents are seeking alternatives to the typical schooling techniques, and one innovative and unconventional approach to education is unschooling. Without a set curriculum or grades, this alternative approach strongly emphasizes letting kids follow their hobbies and passions at their own pace. One prominent factor driving parents to embrace unschooling is dissatisfaction with the traditional educational system, which is a major factor in their decision to adopt unschooling. Critics contend that standardized testing takes precedence in traditional schools over tailored instruction, inhibiting creativity and impeding a child's innate curiosity. Unschooling families valued their children's autonomy, allowing them to express individuality and learn from social experiences (De Wit et al., 2017).

### Unschooling Motivations and Goals

Self-regulated online learning allows students to control their own study habits in a virtual setting, whereas personalized learning entails adjusting educational experiences to each learner's preferences and requirements. As hypothesized, students' perceptions affect their attitude towards personalized self-regulated online learning (Ingkavara et al., 2022). Some parents are drawn to unschooling because it emphasizes customizing education to each child's requirements. They want a more flexible and individualized learning environment, which may be achieved in self-regulated online learning.

Cultivating a passion for lifelong learning is a major driving force behind unschooling. Parents who choose unschooling often prioritize helping their children develop an internal sense of self-directed learning to avoid the external demands of grades and tests. This approach encourages students in adult education and vocational programs to actively engage in academic pursuits and cultivate a lifelong learning attitude. Self-directed learning can

boost engagement and lifelong learning among university students (Chukwuedo et al., 2021). As hypothesized, autonomous motivation boosts student engagement, learning, and wellness, supported by teachers' and parents' psychological need fulfilment (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In addition, parents valued their children's freedom to explore, engage in self-directed learning, and solve problems, emphasizing practical life skills learned in a non-threatening, inspiring environment (Rudge, 2021). Also, given the rising costs of education and the demands placed on families in today's world, unschooling is viewed as a cost-effective alternative to conventional education.

Unschooling is a distinctive tactic that fits in with a larger movement supporting all-encompassing and alternative methods of education. This broader movement challenges the one-size-fits-all approach to education by recognizing the diversity of children's needs and learning styles. Intimate, domestic environments prioritize personalized learning based on individual children's needs, often occurring spontaneously (Myers, 2022). A rising number of people are realizing that education should emphasize holistic development, which includes social, emotional, and practical abilities, in addition to intellectual performance. Unschooling, in this setting, emerges as a pioneering strategy that matches the shifting landscape of educational philosophies striving to adapt to the multifarious requirements of learners in the 21st century. Parents who embrace unschooling allow their children to guide their education, emphasizing freedom and learning through real-world experiences rather than relying on prepackaged materials (Valiente et al., 2022).

## Parental Influences in Unschooling Choices

Conversely, it is impossible to overestimate the impact of education pioneers on parents' attitudes toward unschooling. One of the main drivers of unschooling is parental faith in their kids' capacity to direct their learning. Unschooling parents see themselves as facilitators, offering resources and support while letting kids take the lead in their educational journey. Children are seen as active explorers and agents in play, shaping and acquiring knowledge, skills, and understandings of themselves and their environments (Gurholt & Sanderud, 2016). The decision to unschool is also influenced by environmental considerations. For example, marginalized groups like people of colour wonder if it would be more beneficial to pursue education outside of institutions that they believe are recreating the injustices they already experience (King & Casimere, 2022). Parents would

choose to avoid a coercive stance in the various fields of education and child raising (Petrovic & Rolstad, 2017 as cited in Vesneski et al., 2022). The parents themselves want to break away from the rigid and coercive structure of traditional educational institutions. Parents who choose unschooling would relinquish parental control and would rather experience the joy of family life, connecting with their children, emphasizing their rights and trusting them (O'Hare & Coyne, 2020 as cited in Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021).

## Unschooling as a Lifestyle Choice

The decision to unschool is also influenced by the idea of time as a resource, with parents appreciating the freedom to travel or spend more time with their families. Families prioritizing experiential learning and considering life as an excellent educational adventure may find this temporal freedom particularly appealing. Thus, parents' perceptions of their roles and effectiveness vary, but connections with other parents are vital for defining these roles and improving effectiveness (Curry & Holter, 2015). Therefore, individuals who experienced childhood stressors may experience worsening mental health compared to peers who did not, as they grow older (Kamis, 2020).

In view of the studies aforementioned, there is a noticeable gap in the existing research regarding the motivations of parents who choose unschooling for their children and their perceptions of the outcomes.

## Methods

### *Design*

The study utilized a qualitative multiple case study design involving semi-structured interviews with cases of unschooling. Case studies “explore in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The case(s) are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time” (Creswell, 2014). The case study method offers an in-depth view of a subject within real-life settings, from the perspectives of those involved (Stake & Visse, 2023). This methodological decision enabled a thorough examination of the topic, highlighting the individuality of every

instance and offering a thorough grasp of the parents' motivations and perceptions for unschooling.

### *Setting*

The study was carried out in Bayawan City, a second-class component city in the Visayas region of Negros Oriental, Philippines. Both national policies and regional cultural values that place a high value on formal education influence the Philippines' educational system. Homeschooling, including its more extreme variant, unschooling, is legal in the Philippines but subject to strict regulations. Homeschooling is permitted by the Department of Education (DepEd) under DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2019, which mandates that students who are homeschooled must follow the K–12 Basic Education Curriculum and enrol in a DepEd-accredited provider. These students must go through a validation process for grade-level accreditation using the Philippine Educational Placement Test (PEPT) or the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Test, and they are regularly assessed to make sure they are making academic progress and following the curriculum.

However, these legal requirements are contested by unschooling, a philosophy that rejects external assessments and formal curricula. In reality, unschooling is frequently carried out informally and outside of DepEd's jurisdiction, which raises concerns regarding legitimacy, legality, and long-term educational validation. With unschooling, children can follow their interests without a set schedule or standardized curriculum, in contrast to structured homeschooling models that replicate school-based instruction at home. Because of both cultural norms that strongly favour formal education and a lack of public discussion about alternative educational models, the prevalence of unschooling in the Philippines is low and largely undocumented, despite not being officially tracked. Because of this, homeschooling—including unschooling—has more legal protections, wider support systems, and greater public acceptance in Western nations like the US and the UK than it does in the Philippines. For example, depending on state laws, unschooling is legal in many U.S. states as long as fundamental educational outcomes are proven using flexible methods like portfolio reviews or standardized testing. In contrast, the Philippines' nationalized curriculum and evaluation procedures uphold stricter standards.

Because Bayawan City is the study's location, it provides a valuable perspective on how Filipino families deal with cultural, legal, and



educational expectations when they decide to take an unusual route like unschooling. The city's blend of rural and urban features also sheds light on how regional socioeconomic circumstances influence parental incentives, access to resources, and views of the legitimacy of education.

### *Positionality of the Researchers*

As researchers, we are aware that the entire research procedures like developing research questions, gathering, analysing and disseminating data can be affected by our academic, cultural, and personal backgrounds. As educators and members of the formal academic system which has been publicly supporting curriculum-based structure of education, we are cognizant of our positionality. Our initial views on what can be considered as a valid and successful education may be influenced by our exposure to standardized pedagogical frameworks and our training in teacher education.

However, our interest for alternative educational processes is brought on by our concern and curiosity for non-conventional learning approaches, namely unschooling. Although we intend to approach this with an open mind and intellectual curiosity, we are aware of the possibility that there may be bias in the study, particularly in the interpretation of non-standard educational options that deviates significantly from institutionalized models. To account for this, we undertook a reflexive approach in our research, frequently questioning our expectations and analytically interacting with the respondents' experiences as they define it.

In a country where standardized education is mandated by the government and is viewed as conventional, our experiences as Filipino scholars also colour how we comprehend the prerogatives of parents and educational autonomy. We admit that there may be a difference in perception from other researchers coming from western values where unschooling has more presence because of how it is situated within their sociopolitical environment. But by presenting the experiences of the respondents with sensitivity, respect and a desire to boost visibility for those not covered by common education discourse, we attempted to genuinely represent their nuanced experience.

### *Participants*

The study participants consisted of two parents who choose unschooling as the preferred path for their children's alternative education. The following inclusion criteria had to be met to qualify for an interview: (a) participants

should be biological parents or legal guardians of unschooled children, (b) parents or guardians with children aged 5 to 12 years old (elementary school age level), (c) must have chosen the unschooling method for their children, (d) parents must be 18 years old and above; and (e) be willing and available during the study period.

**Participant 1**, is a 39-year-old woman. She has three children, none of whom are currently attending school. Additionally, she is an undergraduate majoring in Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education, major in English.

**Participant 2**, a 41-year-old married woman. She is a housewife and mother. She has two children who are not currently enrolled in school. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education, major in Counseling Education, and a Master of Education, major in Guidance and Counseling (completed academic requirements)

**Case 1**, involves a single mother and her three unschooled children: a 12-year-old boy, a 10-year-old boy, and a 9-year-old girl. Her husband passed away in 2020. Despite this loss, the commitment to unschooling has remained strong, as both parents were mutual and firm in their decision to embrace this educational approach before his death. The mother was put in school from age 6 until she stopped schooling at 30. The technologies, gadgets, and devices available in their house include a desktop computer, phones, a laptop, and Wi-Fi internet.

**Case 2**, is a dedicated full-time mom and entrepreneur. She plays an active role in her children's upbringing and education, leveraging her diverse skills as a trainer/facilitator for women and youth empowerment, adolescent reproductive health, and personality development. Her husband, aged 45, works for the government. Together, they nurture their two children, an 11-year-old daughter, and a 7-year-old son. The technologies, gadgets, and devices available in their house include desktop computers, tablets, phones, laptops, and Wi-Fi internet.

This study is comprised of two participants who have similar socio-economic circumstances and academic backgrounds. This minuscule scope mirrors the reality of unschooling as a sporadic and niche educational practice in Bayawan City, and the Philippines in general. The 1987 Philippine Constitution and the national policies in place have placed a great importance in formal schooling, making unconventional practices like unschooling an unpopular choice in the eyes of the public. Therefore, locating participants who would volunteer to participate in this study was difficult, as parents who practice unschooling are hesitant to divulge their

employment of such method out of anxiety brought about by public opinion and possible adverse reaction from the state.

Although attempts were made to add more possible participants by interfacing with the local community and even by informal recommendations, only the two parents that participated in the study are the only ones willing to speak for the case of unschooling within the city at the time the study was conducted. Due to the circumstances, the study shifted focus from trying to achieve data saturation typical for in qualitative studies, but instead more into in-depth inquiries about these isolated cases rather than a generalization. While these two cases may not be entirely representative of the possibilities unschooling is capable of, they still offered valuable insight into a niche in education that is sparsely discussed in the Philippines. Therefore, we emphasize that these cases are specifically for these limited and context-specific experiences rather than representative of a whole.

### *Data Gathering Procedure*

Data collection occurred over a span of one week in April 2024, with the initial interviews conducted on April 6, 2024. The primary data collection method was a series of face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews with each participant. These interviews were conducted in the participants' chosen place for their convenience and familiarity to ensure participant comfort and natural expression. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in Filipino, with English translation provided in transcription. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder. Field notes were taken simultaneously to document contextual details such as non-verbal cues (e.g., tone, gestures, emotional expressions), environment, and immediate researcher observations.

To address the need for data triangulation and methodological depth, two follow-up conversations were conducted remotely through voice calls. These follow-ups provided clarification, cross-validation of initial responses, and opportunities to probe emerging themes. The researchers also asked participants to share learning artifacts such as their children's writing samples, digital creations (e.g., social media content), or photographs of educational routines. These artifacts were used as supplementary data to enrich the narrative context and deepen the interpretation of unschooling practices.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focused on parental motivations, perceptions of learning outcomes, and comparisons with traditional schooling (see table 1). All audio files were securely stored and transcribed verbatim in their original language before being translated to English. Non-verbal cues noted in the field logs were included in the coding process where relevant. This multi-modal approach aimed to provide a richer, more reliable dataset aligned with the depth and contextual sensitivity expected in qualitative case study research.

**Table 1:** Questions asked to the participants in relation to their motivations and perceptions for unschooling their children.

| <b>Foci</b> | <b>Questions</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Motivations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. What are the main reasons or motivations behind your decision to choose unschooling for your child's education?</li> <li>b. How do you believe unschooling caters to your child's individual needs or learning style compared to traditional schooling?</li> <li>c. What long-term goals or outcomes do you envision for your child through the unschooling approach? How does this align with your expectations for their future?</li> </ul>                                     |
| Perceptions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. How has unschooling influenced your child's educational and personal development? Can you share any specific observations or experiences?</li> <li>b. What challenges, if any, have you encountered with unschooling? Conversely, what benefits or positive outcomes do you perceive for your child?</li> <li>c. How do you compare your child's unschooling experience with what you might expect in a traditional school setting? What differences stand out to you?</li> </ul> |

## *Analysis*

Recorded interviews were digitally transcribed. The participants' perceptions and motivations were examined using thematic analysis. The researchers applied the six phases for analysis as Braun and Clarke (2021) described. The six phases for analysis are the following: (a) familiarizing with the dataset, (b) coding, (c) generating initial themes, (d) developing and reviewing themes, (e) refining, defining, and naming themes, and (f) writing up.

To ensure the trustworthiness and interpretive validity of the findings, the researchers employed several established strategies throughout the research process. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the participants, including follow-up interviews and validation of responses to confirm the accuracy of emerging interpretations.

Triangulation was achieved by collecting multiple sources of data, including field notes, follow-up conversations, and learning artifacts such as writing samples and educational materials produced by the children. The researchers also practiced reflexivity, maintaining a research journal to document personal reflections, biases, and methodological decisions that could influence data interpretation. To support transferability, thick descriptions of the research setting, participant backgrounds, and unschooling contexts were provided, allowing readers to assess relevance to other contexts. Finally, confirmability was reinforced through careful documentation of the research trail, including transcriptions, coding procedures, and audit trails, making the analytic process transparent and verifiable.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The two participants were asked for their informed consent, guaranteeing they were fully aware of the goals, methods, and voluntary nature of their involvement in the research. Their autonomy was protected by emphasizing throughout the consent process the freedom to leave at any time without repercussions. Throughout the study, privacy and anonymity were carefully preserved. To protect participant confidentiality, all transcripts and other documentation were edited to remove any personally identifiable information. Lastly, the Negros Oriental University Research Ethics Committee granted ethics approval before the start of fieldwork to ensure that no ethical standards would be violated when conducting research with participants (Ethics Clearance Reference Number: REA-2024-EXE-S-0082).

## **Results**

Interviews with parents highlight that unschooling is perceived not merely as an absence of formal education but as a deliberate and holistic approach to fostering a child's natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation. Parents emphasize the importance of creating a stress-free and non-competitive learning environment where children's interests drive their educational journey. The findings illustrate how unschooling prioritizes quality of life, personal contentment, and the development of practical life skills, with parents playing a pivotal role in modelling behaviours and setting educational standards. The thematic analysis of in-depth interview transcripts generated four major themes, each with corresponding

subthemes, to highlight the motivations and perceptions of the parents for their children, as shown in table 2.

**Table 2:** Themes and subthemes generated by the researchers.

| Themes                                                                                        | Subthemes                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Parents' perceived benefits of unschooling                                                    | Distinction between being unschooled and uneducated                         |
|                                                                                               | Focus on quality of life and contentment as goals                           |
|                                                                                               | Absence of pressure and competition                                         |
|                                                                                               | Promotion of child's interest                                               |
| Personalized learning and parental involvement together create pathways to self-actualization | Personal awakening and individualized growth through educational discovery  |
|                                                                                               | Home-related challenges and their impact on children's performance          |
| Concerns and critiques of traditional education                                               | Traditional school system's influence on children's behaviour and attitudes |
|                                                                                               | Bullying and emotional distress challenges within traditional schools       |
|                                                                                               | Re-evaluation of traditional education's efficacy and equity                |
| Cultivating envisioned living through alternative education                                   | Prioritizing autonomy and kindness through alternative paths of education   |
|                                                                                               | Embracing envisioned living through lifelong learning                       |

## Theme 1: Parents' perceived benefits of unschooling

The first theme highlights how the parents perceive unschooling as a beneficial educational approach that promotes self-directed, purposeful learning driven by children's interests and abilities, countering misconceptions of neglect or lack of education. Unschooling is perceived to create a stress-free and non-competitive learning environment where children's interests drive their education. Parental involvement is crucial, as they model behaviours and set standards that guide the child's personalized learning journey. Additionally, this theme is amplified through the following subthemes: distinction between being unschooled and uneducated, focus on quality of life and contentment as goals, absence of pressure and competition, and promotion of child's interest.

**Distinction between being unschooled and uneducated.** Unschooling distinguishes itself from the notion of being uneducated by fostering an environment where children actively learn outside traditional school settings, driven by their interests and abilities. This approach counters the misconception that unschooled children are neglected or lack access to education, emphasizing instead the purposeful and self-directed nature of their learning. By encouraging curiosity and personal engagement,

unschooling ensures children receive a rich and meaningful education tailored to their unique needs and passions.

A parent emphasized that unschooling fosters education through alternative methods outside traditional schooling. According to the parent: *"Our children are unschooled, but they are not uneducated"* (Participant/Case 2). The same parent recounted: *"My daughter excels at doing chores and writing. She is also into archery and is very good at creating content using CapCut, with some of her videos reaching 7,000, 35,000, and even 53,000 views. My son is seven years old and is already very good at spelling, even with long words. He analyses them, and he can spell them out. We never taught him how to read, but he can read books, like Harry Potter, independently and learns naturally"* (Participant/Case 2). Another parent also added that: *"I am a product of my current achievements. Even though I was schooled before, I am more on my achievements that I can call the product of unschooling"* (Participant/Case 1).

**Focus on quality of life and contentment as goals.** Unschooling prioritizes the holistic development of children by valuing their overall well-being and happiness alongside developmental learning. This educational approach encourages children to freely explore their passions and interests, fostering intrinsic motivation and a deeper sense of fulfilment. By moving beyond traditional success metrics, unschooling aims to provide a more enriching and meaningful life experience, helping children develop a strong sense of purpose and personal satisfaction.

True happiness and success come from contentment and perspective, not material possessions. According to the parent: *"The quality of life we lead serves as a model for our children. The goal should not solely revolve around earning millions or building extravagant houses, although it is acceptable if they desire these with purpose. True happiness is not determined by material possessions or lavish travels. Rather, it stems from contentment and perspective. Ultimately, defining success and happiness lies within one's own perception, and we aim to instil contentment as a crucial life skill in our children"* (Participant/Case 2).

**Absence of pressure and competition.** Unschooling environments are uniquely defined by the absence of pressure and competition, providing children the freedom to learn at their own pace and according to their individual needs. This stress-free atmosphere creates a relaxed and supportive setting where children can explore and experiment without the fear of judgment or failure. Consequently, it fosters a positive relationship

with learning and promotes self-discovery, enabling children to develop confidence and a genuine love for knowledge.

In this alternative learning approach, the focus is on striving to surpass your own achievements rather than competing with others. According to the parent: *“In unschooling, it’s not like the pressure in regular school, where you feel you have to perform because you are competing with others. Here, you perform because you want to surpass your own achievements”* (Participant/Case 2).

**Promotion of child’s interest.** Parents highlight the alignment of unschooling with children’s interests, contrasting it with traditional schooling, where mandatory subjects are imposed regardless of interest. They emphasized that unschooling allows for natural alignment with a child’s passions, fostering a more intrinsic and personalized approach to learning. Additionally, parents noted the evolving landscape where success is increasingly influenced by leveraging digital platforms like social media and the internet, highlighting alternative paths to achievement outside traditional educational frameworks.

A parent mentioned: *“In unschooling, the context is that you follow the child’s interests. When you follow the child’s interests, everything falls into place naturally. Unlike in school, where you still need to learn about certain subjects even if you don’t like them”* (Participant/Case 2). The same parent observed: *“Many successful individuals or those who have significantly improved their lives didn’t achieve it solely through schooling, but rather by utilizing social media and the internet to their advantage”* (Participant/Case 2).

Although parents in this study described unschooling as greatly favourable and an empowering educational practice, further scrutiny reveals that the connections between parents’ ideals and the sociocultural landscape they live in are strained beneath the surface. The participants put a premium on freedom, and learning at the children’s own pace and interests as the foremost advantage of unschooling. This is in line with Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which states that being able to act in accordance to one’s volition and being able to exercise one’s proficiencies is fundamental for an individual’s development. However, such standpoint might be indicative of an idealistic thinking fashioned by the parents’ middle-class status and various opportunities available to them, which raises the question of whether a less fortunate family would achieve a similar conclusion. While the parents do not measure success with the traditional metrics for academic achievement, they still revel in their children’s



expeditious literacy and personal progress, which still reinforces neoliberal sentiments of productivity and personal accomplishments. This implies that even unschooling as how it was done in these cases are still not entirely free from societal pressures of being able to produce “successful” results, even if it was orchestrated differently.

Furthermore, there is constant underscoring of desirable results from the parents that may obscure potential dangers and disadvantages innate to unschooling. For instance, there is no organized evaluation or peer socialization, often considered as advantages, curtails chances for the children to measure their capabilities alongside others, receive criticism, or adjust emotions, factors important for child growth (Steinberg, 2020). The data exhibits no discourse about educational challenges, parental uncertainty or changing viewpoints, suggesting a deficiency in the contemplations of the shortcomings of unschooling. This alludes to a possibility of bias in the perception of their experience and a romanticization of the approach. In qualitative studies it is necessary to consider factors participants' have missed, incongruities in their statements, or changing viewpoints just as much as they respect participant assertions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). By emphasizing on positive narratives, the analysis risks only furthering the pre-existing notions while ignoring the actual intricacies and uncertainties indicative of alternative educational practices. Following studies should employ a longitudinal research design that investigates the parents' perspectives and whether there are any shifts and changes as the children undergo unschooling for prolonged periods, and if its results align with the ideals that unschooling advocates.

## **Theme 2: Personalized learning and parental involvement together create pathways to self-actualization**

The second theme presents personal awakening and individualized growth through educational discovery catalysed by the transformative journey of unschooling, where tailored learning experiences foster holistic development and uncover individuals' full potential. Parents' motivations for unschooling are often sparked by realizations of missed opportunities in traditional schooling and insights into the limited practical applicability of conventional education. Home-related challenges further influence these motivations, highlighting the interconnectedness between home environments and educational outcomes. Additionally, this theme is elaborated through the following subthemes: personal awakening and

individualized growth through educational discovery, and home-related challenges and their impact on children's performance.

**Personal awakening and individualized growth through educational discovery.** Educational discovery ignites a personal awakening, driving individuals toward unique and personalized growth. Through tailored and practical learning experiences, parents embark on a path to self-discovery, uncovering their full potential and fostering holistic development. This transformative journey unlocks abilities and enhances understanding of themselves and the world, leading to profound personal and intellectual enrichment.

A parent discovered the views on unschooling, as she explained: *"I read about unschooling and found out that there are families abroad who practice it. When I saw why they do it, it made sense to me. Since it's the topic for my client, I'm writing a blog about it. That's why, I realized they also have their own reasons and motivations"* (Participant/Case 1).

The same parent had a realization of missed opportunities in traditional schooling has fuelled a strong desire for unschooling. According to the parent: *"Both my husband and I have been thinking, even if he's the one saying it, that if only during our schooling days, we adapted this approach earlier, we would have learned many useful things. These thoughts sparked a stronger burning desire inside us for unschooling"* (Participant/Case 1). Additionally, this parent narrated: *"I can confidently say that maybe from what I've learned or experienced in school before, less than 50% has been useful in real life. That's what opened my mind to unschooling"* (Participant/Case 1).

**Home-related challenges and their impact on children's performance.** Challenges within the home setting can significantly influence children's academic performance and behaviour at school. This underscores the vital link between home and educational environments, necessitating collaborative efforts from families, educators, and communities. By fostering supportive and nurturing environments, stakeholders can mitigate these challenges, facilitating children's academic success and holistic development.

Parents' motivation styles were influenced by home issues observed during counselling sessions. According to one parent, she explained: *"As a guidance counsellor before, I often brought home problems that usually started at children's home, such as lack of attention, that's really it, and the*

*child was always not good enough. That became a motivation style for parents” (Participant/Case 2).*

Although the parents narrated the process of unschooling as something that leads to personal discovery and development, further introspection reveals that this change may be mirroring pre-existing discontent with traditional schooling. These shared accounts emphasize the respondents yearning for pragmatic purposeful learning as well as the discontent caused by previous experiences with the academe. This assessment of past experiences mirrors what Biesta (2009) calls “learnification” of education, in which education is simplified to just measuring numerical results rather than how it personally affects the students and its transformative effects to society at large. Noteworthy is the fact that despite the participants acknowledging unschooling’s accentuation on independence, productivity, practicality and overarching growth, there is still an expectation that students still need to appear successful and meet perceived success thresholds aligned with more neoliberal ideation of self-improvement (Ong, 2006). This inconsistency needs further investigation as they directly question the notions that unschooling simply escapes the governing educational model. That instead of fully committing to the separation from institutional schooling, participants are content with just reframing the objectives to fit an alternative system, implying that their adherence to unschooling may be as much reactive as it is aspirational.

Moreover, home environment influencing the challenges that stem from educational choices reveals an underlying interaction between unschooling and parental autonomy. While the participants portrayed unschooling as an initiative against the perceived shortcomings of the system, their contemplations also suggest that the emotional labour and methods of guidance are shaped by their professional grounding and family circumstances. For instance, the second participant experienced being a guidance counsellor, have connected behavioural problems of children with familial neglect, hence the utilization of unschooling as a preventative, and even therapeutic measure. But we need to be critical to these kinds of incentives, especially if unschooling is ultimately for the children’s developmental growth or just as a coping strategy due to their past regrets or distrust of the educational institutions.

### Theme 3: Concerns and critiques of traditional education

The third theme captures the need for transformative reforms in traditional education systems to address concerns about children's behaviour and attitudes, stressing the importance of fostering individuality and critical thinking. It highlights the imperative for proactive measures to tackle bullying and emotional distress within traditional schools, promoting safer and more supportive learning environments. Additionally, this theme is elucidated through the following subthemes: traditional school system's influence on children's behaviour and attitudes, bullying and emotional distress challenges within traditional schools, and re-evaluation of traditional education's efficacy and equity.

**Traditional school system's influence on children's behaviour and attitudes.** There are concerns regarding how the traditional school system impacts children's behaviour and attitudes, often prioritizing conformity over individuality. Critics argue that this emphasis on compliance may hinder critical thinking skills necessary for navigating the complexities of the modern world. Consequently, there is a growing call for educational reforms that prioritize holistic development and cater to diverse student needs.

One parent highlighted the need for alternative education to benefit behavioural growth. According to the parent: *"The quality of students, maybe in your own nieces and nephews, younger siblings, they are in school, but I could say that many, though not all, of the kids nowadays are very disrespectful. You get scared in class of their attitude, their behaviour. The way they talk to their parents; the way they behave themselves in public. This is one of my realizations that there must be alternative way of education aside from the usual school system"* (Participant/Case 2).

**Bullying and emotional distress challenges within traditional schools.** Bullying and emotional distress present significant challenges in traditional educational settings, necessitating proactive measures to create safer environments. Parents observed that children often suffer from bullying at school, causing emotional distress. According to the parent: *"I don't know if you've noticed, but most kids, the way they speak, they're being bullied, they cry. My office mates' children, when they come home from school, they cry because of what happened. I don't want my children to experience that because they don't deserve that treatment at school"* (Participant/Case 2).

**Re-evaluation of traditional education's efficacy and equity.** There is an ongoing discourse on the efficacy and equity of traditional education, especially with alternative learning avenues available. Critics argue that traditional schooling may not effectively meet diverse student needs, prompting a re-evaluation of its role and accessibility. This debate includes discussions on reserving traditional education for those unable to access alternatives and advocating for systemic reforms to ensure equitable access for all students.

Unlike traditional, repetitive schooling, a parent perceived that subjects can be learned quickly. One parent mentioned that: *"I realized that in one semester of physics, for example, or history that you keep going back to in school, you can learn it in one day or even one hour. Then we keep going back to school; we never learn. We never learn like in history. So, that is the reality today; the world is so interconnected now that it's very different from five or even ten years ago. The world is different now, and education is actually in our hands"* (Participant/Case 2). The parent affirmed that a diploma should not be the sole measure of success. According to the parent, she stated: *"Just because we are used to the idea that a diploma is the basis of success, does not mean that is all we should adhere to"* (Participant/Case 2).

Although participants voiced strong critiques of the traditional school system—particularly in terms of behavioral issues, bullying, and the lack of individualized attention—these perspectives merit deeper interrogation beyond surface-level rejection. One parent's assertion that many schooled children today are disrespectful reflects broader anxieties about youth culture and generational change, yet it also reveals a potential overgeneralization rooted in limited exposure and personal disappointment. The critique aligns with Illich's (1971) notion of the "hidden curriculum," which suggests that formal schooling often socializes children into hierarchical obedience and conformity. However, what is missing in the participants' framing is a nuanced exploration of how factors such as family dynamics, community norms, and digital culture also shape children's attitudes and behaviors. The idealization of unschooling as a cure-all for these social problems may oversimplify complex developmental processes and shift responsibility for behavioral formation solely onto school systems (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). This reveals a tension between the participants' desire for child-centered education and the structural realities they seek to disengage from.

Moreover, the parents' narratives invoke the idea of "efficiency" in learning, with one asserting that subjects like history or physics can be

learned in a matter of hours rather than through a semester of formal instruction. This perspective, while empowering in its confidence in learner autonomy, potentially disregards the cumulative and scaffolded nature of deep disciplinary knowledge. According to Bruner (1996), meaningful understanding develops through spiraled, context-rich learning rather than rapid, superficial coverage. The parent's view, in this sense, may reflect frustration with rigid schooling rather than a fully informed critique of pedagogical design. Additionally, the dismissal of diplomas as markers of success challenges dominant educational narratives, but it also raises questions about long-term recognition, especially in contexts like the Philippines where formal credentials are deeply tied to employment and social mobility. These contradictions suggest that while unschooling may represent a liberating alternative for some, it also exists within a broader socio-educational ecosystem that continues to value institutional validation and structured learning outcomes.

## Theme 4: Cultivating envisioned living through alternative education

The fourth theme emphasizes that prioritizing autonomy and kindness in alternative education pathways fosters holistic development, emphasizing individual growth and compassionate learning environments. Embracing envisioned living through lifelong learning underscores the continuous pursuit of knowledge and personal fulfilment, encouraging individuals to explore their passions and contribute meaningfully to society. These principles guide educational philosophies and practices aimed at nurturing self-directed learners and fostering a culture of lifelong curiosity and empathy. Additionally, this theme enumerated the following subthemes: prioritizing autonomy and kindness through alternative paths of education and embracing envisioned living through lifelong learning.

**Prioritizing autonomy and kindness through alternative paths of education.** Learners are empowered to shape their educational journeys by prioritizing autonomy and kindness through alternative education paths, fostering self-reliance and empathy. This approach emphasizes personalized learning experiences that cater to individual strengths and interests, cultivating a supportive and inclusive educational environment. Through autonomy and kindness, alternative education pathways promote learning growth and the development of compassionate and resilient individuals.

The parent pitied forcing children to comply with parents' wishes, as it disregards their autonomy. According to the parent, she said: *"For me, it is pitiful on the part of the child if you force her/him to follow what you want when they have her/his own free will"* (Participant/Case 1). The parent prioritizes kindness in nurturing children and personal values. According to the parent: *"I am their guiding light because I will nurture them. I want to instil in them what I have in my mind, but always choose to be kind first before being right. Kindness should come before correctness, because even my late husband, that was his mantra too, kind then right. And for me too, I always choose to be kind because that's where everything starts"* (Participant/Case 1).

**Embracing envisioned living through lifelong learning.** Embracing envisioned living through lifelong learning encourages individuals to continuously explore their passions and expand their horizons. Lifelong learning becomes a journey of self-discovery and personal growth, fostering adaptability and creativity in navigating life's challenges. By embracing curiosity and a commitment to growth, individuals cultivate a sense of purpose and fulfilment, enriching their lives and contributing to a thriving, evolving society.

Religious values influence the parent's long-term goals for their children. According to the parent, she stated: *"Growing up in a religious family and now with my husband's side, it is the same for our family now. So, the end goal of this life is how you live it and how other people will remember you or feel about you based on your actions. I envision long-term goals for my children"* (Participant/Case 1).

The parents' emphasis on cultivating autonomy and kindness in their children's education reflects a deeply humanistic orientation toward learning. At first glance, this prioritization appears empowering, affirming children's agency and the ethical role of parents as facilitators of self-discovery. However, a closer reading suggests that these values may serve dual functions: as both aspirational ideals and compensatory strategies to mitigate the uncertainty and lack of formal structure in unschooling. While one parent emphasized being a "guiding light" and placing kindness above correctness, this narrative also implies a subtle balancing act between child autonomy and parental influence. This aligns with Biesta's (2010) critique of the "learnification" discourse, in which the focus on individualized, autonomous learning can obscure the educator's responsibility to challenge, interrupt, and guide. The parent's framing of moral education, informed by

religious values and familial legacy, suggests that unschooling is not purely child-directed but deeply shaped by adult worldviews.

Furthermore, the idealization of lifelong learning and envisioned living, though inspirational, may obscure the tensions between personal fulfillment and structural realities. One parent's vision of their children being remembered for how they made others feel reveals an affective and moral orientation to education that transcends academic performance. Yet, this philosophical grounding may unintentionally marginalize the practical demands of navigating formal institutions, employment systems, or standardized assessments that continue to dominate social mobility in the Philippines. The vision of unschooling as a path to holistic development may reflect what Rizvi and Lingard (2009) call "imagined futures"—hopeful projections shaped by parental values and globalized discourses of self-actualization. However, these imagined futures can clash with the lived constraints of neoliberal educational economies, where credentials, competition, and quantifiable achievement still carry substantial weight. By presenting unschooling through an overwhelmingly positive lens, the analysis risks overlooking how these ideals are continuously negotiated and potentially constrained by broader socio-political and economic systems.

## Discussion

Unschooling emphasizes interest-driven learning rather than academics, promoting autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Based on the results of the parents' perceptions when it comes to schooling, they tend to perceive the unschooling of their children as a lifestyle that should be enjoyed, and they consider how they live and how it reflects who they are. This is supported by Valiente et al. (2022) who argued that unschooling is a lifestyle choice that fits in with the natural parenting styles of parents who reject conventional norms and believe in trusting their children's innate abilities and freedom to learn through experiences in the real world. On the other hand, just like how they perceived unschooling, parents' motivation for their children to unschooling by choice shows that it is better to unschool their children as they believe that the behaviour of their children, the way they act is influenced most by the people outside or the public. Parents who choose unschooling aim to lessen the environmental impact of their family while encouraging a more sustainable way of living as they believe the actions of their children matter as they get influenced by their environment (Hopkinson, 2021).



As gathered from the study results, parents' perceptions and motivations when it comes to unschooling are both at the same level as they perceive and are motivated to choose unschooling for their children. Parents observed their children learning more eagerly and effectively with more relevant material than in school and noted their children's increased curiosity (Gray & Riley, 2013). They feel that their children are more capable and can still learn even at home with the help of the different social media platforms that can help them study and learn the skills they need.

Unlike this study, which aims to understand the experience of unschooling better, non-directive in-depth interviews with five Quebec adults who had experienced it were conducted according to a phenomenological approach, revealing their perceptions of their educational experiences and their families, as well as their views of the world (Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021). Certain aspects of the testimonies corroborate the results of previous studies concerning self-directed learning, use of information technology, development of interests, and participation in a support group; others reveal limits when it comes to learning perseverance, pursuit of complex learning goals, school integration, and evaluation. Finally, parents in unschooling do not rely on a set of materials or curriculum (Riley, 2018). Parents believe in the children's autonomy and capacity to direct their learning. Unschooling parents see themselves as facilitators, offering resources and support while letting kids take the lead in their educational journey. They frequently strongly believe in their kids' innate curiosity and ability to learn without formal teaching (Gurholt & Sanderud, 2016). Remoting learning or unschooling has a potential impact, especially on primary students. They do not have too much stress in exams, excessive homework, peer pressure, and academics that can affect their mental well-being (Ye et al., 2023).

The findings of this study, which centres on Rousseau's concept of natural education and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), demonstrate that allowing children to follow interests that hold personal significance enhances learning engagement, self-motivation, and holistic development. The unschooling experiences showed how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are all fundamental needs according to Self-Determination Theory; they were developed through daily life, personal curiosity, and relational supervision. The study also draws attention to the tension that exists between these ideals and institutional realities, with access to these freedoms being mediated by financial privilege and cultural capital. Therefore, even if the participants' approaches defy established educational standards, they encourage more flexible, learner-centred

approaches in traditional classroom settings. It is beneficial to integrate the principles of unschooling, such as emotional safety, meaningful contents, and personalized pacing, into national frameworks rather than dismissing alternatives like it. This clearly affects educational policy and practice. Policymakers need to consider how to create inclusive educational systems that accommodate a range of learning styles in order to guarantee fairness, social accountability, and long-term opportunity for all children.

## Limitations

The study is limited to the two participants who are willing to talk about their practices about unschooling, a future study with more varied participants or even a community of parents who practice unschooling is suggested for future researchers. The nature of the research questions were open-ended questions provided to participants. Due to the nature of how the data was gathered, the study is more focused on the subjective experiences of its participants. These participants were primarily parents who chose unschooling, mostly mothers, who were instructed to give brief answers. Although some parents noted that they consulted their children when answering questions, how much of the children's perspectives influenced the responses is still being determined. Therefore, we cannot accurately gauge whether children's views on unschooling align with their parents. For a more comprehensive understanding, future research may systematically gather and analyze the viewpoints of unschooled children themselves regarding the advantages and disadvantages of unschooling. Additionally, short-term studies focusing on parents who choose unschooling could provide immediate insights into their motivations, challenges, and initial outcomes, complementing longitudinal research efforts.

## Conclusions

This study aimed to explore parents' motivations and perceptions for choosing unschooling as an alternative educational approach for their children and how their initial perceptions of unschooling influence their decision-making process, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of its potential benefits. The study found that unschooling in two cases in Bayawan City, Philippines prioritizes the child's individual interests and holistic development over traditional academic benchmarks. It highlighted diverse talents nurtured through unschooling and emphasized the crucial role of parental modelling and support in fostering a fulfilling lifestyle

beyond material success. These branching out of skillset and interest in various fields can be attributed to the lack of pressure stemming from competition and need to conform to score oriented standard exams. The children are more interested in acquiring skills or knowledge they deem useful or practical instead of passing an exam. Motivations for choosing unschooling included perceived improvements in learning outcomes, attitudes toward learning, and enhanced psychological and social well-being for children.

The empirical findings of the study offer a critical viewpoint on the lived realities of two cases of unschooling in the Philippines, emphasizing both the fundamental tensions and the transformational possibilities of this practice. While portraying unschooling as a democratized and child-centred alternative to formal education, the participants' narratives also exposed the subtle contradictions between aspirational ideals and structural barriers like socioeconomic privilege, institutional validation, and the enduring relevance of formal credentials. These cases highlight the challenging compromises families must make when deviating from standard educational models in a country where education is both culturally and constitutionally necessary. The study urges scholars, educators, and policymakers to think about how mainstream systems can adapt to accommodate alternative learning pathways particularly by promoting critical thinking, autonomy, and well-being, rather than an outright endorsement of unschooling. As interest in alternative education grows worldwide, this study highlights the importance of carrying out qualitative, culturally sensitive investigation that examines the advantages of unschooling as well as its disadvantages and risks. These results call for families and practitioners who are following nontraditional paths to carefully examine the broader sociopolitical concerns that impact educational choice and equity.

The present study reveals that unschooling addresses the diverse needs and aspirations of families seeking alternatives to traditional schooling. It underscores the significant role of parental involvement and community dynamics in shaping educational choices. The findings suggest that unschooling supports individualized learning and fosters family harmony and a sense of freedom. This is due to encouraging children to make their own decisions and allowing them a higher level of autonomy than that of school or formal learning environments, improving their sense of self reliance and critical thinking in the process. Moreover, the study emphasizes the need for continued exploration into the long-term outcomes and broader societal implications of unschooling practices. Theoretical implications include advancing the understanding of how unschooling

aligns with socio-cultural dynamics and individual beliefs within a specific local context. This calls for strategies to promote and enhance educational alternatives that prioritize individualized learning and comprehensive growth for children while addressing concerns about socialization and future opportunities for unschooled children. Lastly, future research may benefit from broader, multi-site investigations or longitudinal tracking to explore unschooling in more varied socio-economic and cultural settings, should additional participants become accessible.

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