

## Transforming Indigenous Mindsets: The Impact of Floating Nature Schools on *Suku Anak Dalam* Education

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### ABSTRACT

Indigenous communities such as the *Suku Anak Dalam* (SAD) in South Sumatra have historically viewed formal education as irrelevant or even threatening to their cultural identity. This study investigates how non-formal, culturally responsive education—delivered through a "floating nature school"—can transform such perceptions. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, using purposive sampling to select participants from the floating nature school in Muara Medak. Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, and supporting documentation. Triangulation was used to ensure the validity of findings. The study reveals a gradual shift in SAD students' mindsets from a fixed to a growth orientation. Initially, education was seen as unnecessary for forest-based life. However, the school's culturally adapted curriculum—integrating local knowledge, literacy, hygiene, and life skills—helped reframe education as valuable and empowering. Students began to demonstrate enthusiasm for learning, improved self-confidence, and aspirations for future careers. Independence in daily decision-making and personal responsibility also increased. Despite structural limitations and occasional irregular attendance, the floating nature school serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity. It successfully aligns educational content with SAD cultural values, fostering both skill development and cultural resilience. Contextualized, community-based education can significantly reshape Indigenous mindsets toward schooling, positioning education not as a threat, but as a tool for self-determination and improved quality of life.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The *Suku Anak Dalam* (SAD), an Indigenous community in Sumatra, Indonesia, has traditionally practiced a semi-nomadic, forest-dependent lifestyle. As part of the broader category of *Komunitas Adat Terpencil* (KAT)—Indonesia's designation for remote Indigenous communities—groups such as the SAD, Batin Sembilan, Sakai, and Talang Mamak rely on subsistence-based economies, including

hunting, gathering, and small-scale agriculture (Ibrahim et al., 2020; Mustika & Dastina, 2020). These communities maintain distinct sociocultural systems that differ significantly from mainstream Indonesian society. In areas like Muara Medak, South Sumatra, descendants of the Batin Sembilan continue to inhabit forested conservation zones. However, this traditional way of life is under intensifying pressure from economic development, large-scale land conversion, and transmigration policies that prioritize agricultural expansion and extractive industries (Anwar et al., 2022).

The encroachment of plantation economies and state-led development initiatives has not only transformed local ecosystems but also disrupted traditional knowledge systems and communal structures. These disruptions have compounded the socio-environmental vulnerabilities faced by SAD communities, leading to the gradual erosion of Indigenous cultural identity and resilience (Ellis & Allison, 2004; Escobar, 2006). The increasing exposure to dominant cultural norms and market logics poses critical questions about the future viability of Indigenous lifeways and how these communities might navigate changing social and ecological landscapes.

Within this broader context, education represents both a potential pathway for empowerment and a source of cultural tension. Historically, many SAD families have viewed formal schooling with skepticism, perceiving it as irrelevant to their forest-based livelihoods and incompatible with ancestral values (Sapina et al., 2022). The cost, rigidity, and institutional structures of formal education often fail to reflect the lived realities of SAD communities, reinforcing the perception that schooling undermines, rather than supports, Indigenous identities. Such resistance can be understood in light of what Dweck (2006) conceptualizes as a fixed mindset—a belief that intelligence and life outcomes are static and culturally preordained rather than malleable through learning and effort.

In response to these challenges, a community-based educational initiative—the Floating Nature School—was established in 2016 in Muara Medak. Launched by Pertamina Hulu Energi (PHE) Jambi-Merang in collaboration with the Sobat Eksplorasi Anak Dalam (SEAD) community organization, the program aims to provide non-formal, culturally responsive education tailored to SAD learners (Sari et al., 2021). Unlike conventional schools, the Floating Nature School integrates local ecological knowledge, seasonal rhythms, and trust-based pedagogies, allowing for a more flexible and relevant approach to learning. Although initial community responses were marked by hesitation—driven by concerns over cultural erosion and opportunity costs—the school gradually gained acceptance. Its curriculum was adapted to align with SAD values, enabling students to see education not as an imposition, but as a tool for life skills development, autonomy, and community well-being.

Preliminary observations suggest that the school is beginning to transform how education is perceived among SAD youth. By rooting educational content in the cultural and ecological context of the community, the program has started to shift attitudes from passive resistance to active engagement. Students are increasingly viewing education as a means of navigating both traditional knowledge systems and modern socio-economic structures, reflecting a shift toward what Dweck (2006) calls a growth mindset—the belief that abilities can be developed through dedication and learning.

While prior research has explored various aspects of educational access, non-formal learning models, and motivation in SAD contexts (Setiawati et al., 2022; Suharti, 2021; Tristo, 2018), limited attention has been given to how these experiences influence underlying attitudes and beliefs about education itself. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the evolving educational mindsets of SAD students engaged in the Floating Nature School program. Specifically, the study investigates the following research questions:

1. What were SAD students' initial attitudes and mindsets toward education?
2. How has the school's curriculum been adapted to align with SAD cultural practices?
3. In what ways have students' mindsets and behaviors evolved since participating in the program?

By examining these questions, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how culturally contextualized education can support both individual agency and collective cultural resilience within Indigenous communities. It also underscores the potential for alternative educational models to foster

transformation, not by replacing traditional identities, but by reinforcing them through adaptive and respectful pedagogies.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore changes in mindset and independence among *Suku Anak Dalam* (SAD) students following the introduction of the Floating Nature School in Muara Medak, South Sumatra. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate for capturing in-depth perceptions and sociocultural shifts in a marginalized Indigenous context.

The research was conducted over six months (January–June 2024) in the *Muara Medak Anak Dalam Tribe Forest*, Bayung Lencir District, Musi Banyuasin Regency. This site was purposively selected because of its longstanding cultural resistance to formal education and its role as a pilot location for the floating school initiative.

### 2.1 Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and direct experience with the school program. The sample included three educators and support personnel, along with seven SAD students across elementary, junior high, and senior high school levels. This composition enabled multilevel insight into mindset transformation from both institutional and learner perspectives.

### 2.2 Data Collection

Three complementary methods were used:

1. Observation: Focused on participation, attendance, classroom interaction, hygiene practices, and skill development.
2. Semi-structured interviews: Explored perceptions of education, aspirations, cultural tensions, and emerging autonomy.
3. Document analysis: Included field notes, photographs, and institutional reports to support triangulation.

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental/guardian permission secured for underage students. Ethical considerations adhered to standard protocols in Indigenous and educational research, emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity.

### 2.3 Indicators and Triangulation

Data collection was guided by two sets of indicators:

1. Mindset change: School attendance motivation, future aspirations, openness to new practices, and self-perception of learning.
2. Independence: Personal hygiene, environmental responsibility, self-directed decisions, and social confidence.

Triangulation was applied in two forms:

1. Technique triangulation: Using multiple data collection methods for a single phenomenon.
2. Source triangulation: Gathering data on similar issues from different participant types (e.g., students, teachers).

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Transcripts and observation notes were coded thematically. Emergent themes included: (1) shifting perceptions of education, (2) development of aspirations, (3) adaptation of cultural practices, and (4) evidence of growing independence. Analysis was interpreted through Dweck's (2006) fixed vs. growth mindset framework, providing a psychological lens to assess cognitive and behavioral transformation.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates the transformation of mindset and independence among students of the SAD community in *Muara Medak* following the implementation of the Floating Nature School. The discussion is structured around three guiding research questions: (1) What were the initial attitudes of SAD students toward education? (2) To what extent is the school's curriculum adapted to the students' cultural context and learning needs? and (3) How have students' mindsets and levels of independence evolved since participating in the program?

The SAD—one of Indonesia's Remote Indigenous Communities (KAT)—is an ethnic group in Sumatra traditionally living a nomadic, forest-based lifestyle, sustained through hunting, gathering, and deeply rooted cultural practices. In *Muara Medak*, South Sumatra, segments of the SAD population continue to inhabit protected forest zones while resisting full integration into mainstream Indonesian society. Despite their cultural resilience, SAD communities across Jambi and South Sumatra are increasingly affected by external pressures such as logging, palm oil expansion, and transmigration policies. These interventions have significantly disrupted their ecological systems, livelihoods, and cultural continuity. Within this context, formal education has often been viewed with suspicion, regarded not as a vehicle for empowerment but as a potential threat to ancestral knowledge and identity. Generational dependence on oral traditions and survival skills has further reinforced the perception that schooling is irrelevant to their way of life, shaping what Dweck (2006) would term a fixed mindset—a belief that abilities and life roles are inherited rather than developed through learning.

### 3.1 Mindset of SAD Students Toward the Importance of Education

Prior to the school's presence, many SAD families perceived education as irrelevant or even threatening to their traditional way of life. Consistent with long-held cultural beliefs, schooling was framed as something that could detach children from the forest and weaken their respect for ancestral traditions.

This perspective reflects what Dweck (2006) characterizes as a fixed mindset, where abilities are assumed to be inherited and unchangeable, and education is regarded as unnecessary for survival in the forest. However, the establishment of the floating natural school introduced gradual shifts in perception.

Teacher L (teacher at the floating school) explained:

*"The condition of the SAD community is currently transitioning towards a developing and open mindset towards education. Many from the SAD community support the floating nature school program, and many parents are enrolling their children in the floating nature school so they can learn to read, write, and count, in order for their children to have good lives and jobs in the future. And for the SAD children, many are enthusiastic about being able to go to school and achieve their aspirations. Although they often follow their parents into the forest to work, they always make an effort to go straight to school to study after returning from the forest."*

Students themselves began to express interest in education as a means of personal development and social mobility. **Fr** (student interviewed by the researcher) clearly articulated this change:

*“Before... we could only find fish... the important thing was that we could eat. But after... the floating nature school, we now know its benefits... It turns out that school can make us smart, no longer stupid and no longer fooled by others because now we are good at reading, writing, and counting.”*

These observations reflect a shift toward what Dweck (2006) defines as a growth mindset—the belief that abilities and intelligence can be cultivated through dedication, effort, and learning. Within this evolving perspective, students began to perceive education not as a threat to their cultural identity, but as a valuable means to enhance their personal well-being and contribute meaningfully to their community. Teachers noted increased student engagement, including a growing sense of pride in wearing school uniforms and more consistent attendance. Such behavioral changes suggest that education is being reinterpreted as a pathway to empowerment and development.

### 3.2 Curriculum Alignment With Students' Needs and Interests

The floating natural school implements *Paket A*, the Indonesian non-formal education program equivalent to primary schooling, but adapts its content to the SAD context. Teachers integrate local knowledge and daily practices into the curriculum, for example, using forest plants, river navigation, and seasonal activities as entry points for literacy and numeracy lessons. This approach reflects Freire's (1970) principle of contextual pedagogy, which emphasizes that education must begin from the lived reality of learners.

**Pt** (Project Officer at the floating school) explained:

*“The curriculum used at the floating nature school is adapted from the curriculum of the Jambi province PKBM (Community Learning Activity Center) because we cooperate with them. We adapt and adjust it to the needs and conditions at the floating nature school, so it is very flexible. Essentially, the condition of the children here is very different from those in PKBM or other public schools, in terms of ability, environment, and social conditions, but we share the same goal: to educate the nation's children. In our teaching and learning process, we use simple materials that are available here because our facilities are incomplete, and we sometimes take the students to learn directly in nature, so learning doesn't only happen in the classroom..”*

By embedding formal lessons into familiar activities, the school reduces resistance and enhances engagement. As **Ag** (student interviewed by the researcher) explained:

*“Yes ma'am, while we've been at school here, we've been taught many things. Usually, we only knew how to catch fish, then we'd sell them without knowing the real value because we couldn't read or count. But since we've been at school, ma'am, we've learned to count and read. We were also taught how to process our caught fish into salted fish, taught how to farm, and we were also each given one tree to look after, not to be cut down, we have to protect it, the teacher said so our forest isn't damaged”*

Such comments illustrate how curriculum contextualization strengthens both cognitive skills and cultural identity. Nevertheless, challenges remain. Limited resources, such as a shortage of books, stationery, and trained teachers, restrict the quality of instruction. Attendance is also irregular, as students often have to help their families with subsistence activities or plantation work. **Pt** (Project Officer) highlighted:

*"Sometimes children do not come for weeks because they must help their parents work in the fields."*

These conditions limit consistency in learning and place additional pressure on teachers to adjust their methods.

Beyond these immediate barriers, there is also a broader pedagogical tension: while localized teaching strategies promote engagement and cultural relevance, they must also prepare students for competencies required beyond the forest. As Dei (2011) and Battiste (2013) argue, culturally grounded education can risk isolation if not carefully balanced with skills that enable participation in wider society. For instance, while learning numeracy through counting fish fosters interest, students will eventually require more abstract mathematical reasoning to progress to higher levels of education.

In this sense, the floating natural school demonstrates an innovative model of balancing local relevance with universal competencies. Integrating indigenous knowledge into formal education not only affirms SAD students' cultural identity but also provides a bridge toward broader social participation. However, sustainability and scalability remain dependent on stronger resource provision, teacher training, and policy support from the state.

### **3.3 Mindset and Independence After Implementation of the Floating Natural School**

The presence of the floating school has fostered new forms of independence among SAD students. Children are increasingly capable of managing their time between school and family responsibilities. Basic literacy and numeracy have also expanded their autonomy in daily life for example, enabling them to read medicine labels, assist parents with administrative documents, or calculate wages when working outside the community. These functional skills represent concrete expressions of independence that were previously unavailable to SAD children.

In terms of mindset, the floating school has redefined education from being perceived as a "burden" into an "opportunity." While resistance remains among some parents, students are beginning to articulate long-term aspirations beyond forest life. **Sela** (student interviewed by the researcher) stated:

*"For us personally, we are very happy to be able to go to school like other children out there. We also want to go to school outside like other people, wear a complete uniform, have aspirations to study in the city, and also get an office job so that our parents' status will be elevated, ma'am."*

Such expressions illustrate a dual orientation: valuing formal education while retaining cultural identity.

These findings align closely with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), which emphasizes the role of social interaction and scaffolding in facilitating cognitive growth. In the context of the Floating Nature School, educators serve not only as facilitators of knowledge but also as cultural mediators who adapt learning to the students' sociocultural realities. Through this scaffolded approach, students are supported in gradually shifting from dependence to autonomy in learning. By embedding local values and seasonal rhythms into the curriculum, the school redefines education as a culturally relevant and dynamic process, rather than a rigid, external imposition. This pedagogical model fosters what Dweck (2006) terms a *growth mindset*, encouraging students to see intelligence and ability as developable rather than predetermined.

The contrast between pre- and post-intervention attitudes within the Suku Anak Dalam (SAD) community is particularly striking. Prior to the establishment of the school, formal education was largely perceived as incompatible with SAD cultural norms. Learning was primarily transmitted through oral traditions and experiential survival skills, and there was widespread concern among parents that formal schooling might erode cultural identity and alienate children from their community

(Sapina et al., 2022; Mustika & Dastina, 2020). Educational institutions, often perceived as rigid and disconnected from Indigenous lifeways, were therefore met with skepticism or outright resistance.

However, following the introduction of the Floating Nature School, a significant shift in perception occurred. Students began to view education as a useful tool for navigating emerging socio-economic and environmental challenges, including land encroachment, bureaucratic processes, and diminishing access to traditional livelihoods (Anwar et al., 2022). Literacy and numeracy skills, once viewed as irrelevant, started to be appreciated for their practical utility – such as reading signage, filling out forms, and engaging in basic commerce. Moreover, aspirations for professional roles such as teachers, health workers, and environmental stewards began to surface, signaling a redefinition of educational purpose that balances cultural preservation with future-oriented goals.

This transformation highlights the potential of culturally responsive education to foster what Escobar (2006) describes as *hybrid modernities* – ways of engaging with modern institutions without abandoning Indigenous identity. Rather than positioning tradition and modernity as mutually exclusive, the school enables SAD students to draw on both. The integration of culturally grounded pedagogy allows for a dual engagement: maintaining ancestral knowledge while acquiring new competencies that support community resilience.

In sum, the findings illustrate how education, when adapted to local cultural contexts, can play a transformative role in reshaping mindsets, strengthening community agency, and bridging traditional and contemporary knowledge systems. This supports the broader argument that inclusive, culturally sensitive approaches are essential for empowering marginalized Indigenous populations in an increasingly complex and globalized world (Ellis & Allison, 2004; Setiawati et al., 2022).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the *Suku Anak Dalam* (SAD) community's mindset toward education, once shaped by a deep-rooted reliance on survival skills and a fixed perception of intelligence, is gradually transforming through the culturally responsive approach of the Floating Nature School. The integration of formal learning with local knowledge – encompassing literacy, numeracy, hygiene, and environmental awareness – has enabled students to perceive education not as a threat, but as a meaningful pathway to self-improvement and broader life opportunities. This shift toward a growth mindset has also been accompanied by increased independence, self-confidence, and future-oriented aspirations among students. However, the study is limited by its narrow geographic scope and relatively small sample size, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within other SAD communities or Indigenous groups across Indonesia. Additionally, as the research is qualitative and cross-sectional, it cannot assess long-term changes in mindset or socio-economic outcomes. Future research should consider longitudinal studies across multiple regions and explore how such educational models can be institutionally supported and scaled while preserving cultural integrity. Investigating the role of parents, local leaders, and government agencies in sustaining mindset change would also offer valuable insights for policy and practice. Overall, this study affirms that with context-sensitive adaptation, education can serve as both a catalyst for personal development and a tool for cultural preservation in Indigenous communities.

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