

Autoethnography as Story: The Realities and Dynamics of Transnational Children's Education on the Indonesia-Malaysia Border

Jagad Aditya Dewantara, Universitas Tanjungpura, Indonesia
Dasim Budimansyah, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
Kokom Komalasari, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
Gida Kadarisma, IKIP Siliwangi, Indonesia
Cecep Darmawan, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
Iqbal Arpanudin, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of transnational children's education on the Indonesia-Malaysia border, specifically in the Dayak Bidayuh community between Kampung Sontas (Indonesia) and Entubuh (Malaysia). The main issue is how citizenship status, limited mobility, and state policies affect children's access and educational experiences in cross-border kinship networks. The study aims to uncover the complex realities of these children's education from the perspective of actors directly involved in border life. Using an autoethnographic method implemented over five years (2019–2024), researchers immersed themselves in the lives of border communities, conducting participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documenting personal experiences as the main narrative. The results of the study show that transnational children face administrative limitations, gaps in educational facilities, and pressures of national and ethnic identity. Nevertheless, families and local communities play a central role in maintaining educational values through adaptive strategies and kinship solidarity. The implications of this study indicate the importance of inclusive and cross-border education policies and the need for state recognition of the complexity of identity and mobility of border communities. Autoethnography as an approach can bridge personal experiences with the structural dynamics that influence the lives of transnational children.

Keywords: autoethnography, transnational children, border education, Indonesia–Malaysia border, Dayak Bidayuh community, cross-border mobility, citizenship and identity

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Introduction

Various studies on education in border regions often place children as statistical figures: school participation rates, school dropout rates, or literacy achievements. However, behind these data there are complex life experiences, especially for children who grow up in transnational social spaces, where national borders are administrative but do not completely cut off social relations, kinship and cultural identity. This article departs from this anxiety, by focusing on the realities of transnational children's education on the Indonesia–Malaysia border, especially in the Bidayuh Dayak communities who inhabit Sontas Village (Indonesia) and Entubuh (Malaysia) (Dewantara et al., 2020).

The Sontas-Entubuh border region is not simply a geopolitical line separating two countries, but rather a shared living space that existed long before modern state borders were established. The Dayak Bidayuh communities in both regions share strong kinship ties, shared historical origins, and intertwined socio-cultural practices. In this context, children grow up with relatively fluid cross-border mobility, often hampered administratively. Education, as a state institution heavily dependent on citizenship status and formal bureaucratic systems, becomes an arena where the tension between transnational life and the logic of the state is most palpable. (Dewantara et al., 2025).

Transnational children across the Indonesia-Malaysia border face a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they live within transnational family networks that allow alternative access to schools, educational resources, and diverse learning experiences. On the other hand, they face limited legal documentation, differences in national curricula, disparities in educational facilities, and state policies that tend to view cross-border mobility as an anomaly or even a threat. These conditions impact not only their access to formal education but also their daily learning experiences, sense of security, and the formation of national and ethnic identities. (Dewantara et al., 2023).

Most previous research on border education still uses a structural or public policy approach, focusing on the state as the primary actor. This approach is important, but it often fails to capture the subjective experiences of the children and families living within it. Yet, for border communities like the Dayak Bidayuh, education is not solely understood as an institutional process within schools, but rather as part of a survival strategy, the transmission of values, and the negotiation of identity amidst pressures from the nation-state. Therefore, an approach that bridges personal experiences with broader structural dynamics is needed.

This article uses autoethnography as the primary methodological approach to understand this reality. Autoethnography allows researchers to position themselves not only as observers but also as part of the social world being studied. Through direct engagement and reflection on personal experiences over five years (2019–2024) of living, working, and interacting with the Sontas–Entubuh border community, this research seeks to present stories from within about the education of transnational children. This approach rejects claims of objectivity separate from experience, instead emphasizing the importance of narrative, emotion, memory, and social relations in the production of knowledge.

Autoethnography as story serves as the primary conceptual framework in this article. Stories are not understood simply as data illustrations, but as an analytical medium that reveals power relations, structural inequalities, and community adaptive strategies. Through everyday stories—about children attending school across borders, parents negotiating with authorities,

teachers facing limited facilities, and families relying on kinship solidarity this article shows how education is experienced, negotiated, and interpreted in a border context (Widoyoko, 2016).

The education of transnational children in the Dayak Bidayuh community is inextricably linked to issues of identity. These children grow up with a dual awareness of belonging to the same ethnic community, yet simultaneously interpellated by two countries with differing national narratives. Schools become crucial spaces where national identity is introduced, negotiated, and even questioned. In certain situations, children must learn to adapt to rigid national demands while maintaining local identities and cross-border kinship ties (Aditya Dewantara et al., 2025).

By positioning personal experiences as the entry point for analysis, this article aims to reveal the dynamics of transnational children's education in a more holistic and humane way. The primary focus is not only on what they lack documents, access, or facilities but also on what they build: the adaptive strategies of families, the role of local communities, and practices of solidarity that enable education to continue despite limitations. Through an autoethnographic approach, this research contributes to the discourse on border education, transnational studies, and qualitative methodology by demonstrating that personal stories can be a powerful analytical tool for understanding complex social structures.

Ultimately, this article emphasizes that understanding children's education in border regions is not sufficient only through policies and statistics. It requires methodological courage to listen to stories, feel tensions, and reflect on the researcher's position within them. Autoethnography offers this space, while also opening up the possibility for formulating education policies that are more inclusive, contextual, and sensitive to the lived realities of border communities.

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with an autoethnographic method, positioned not only as a data collection technique but also as an epistemological framework for understanding the educational realities of transnational children in the Indonesia-Malaysia border region. Autoethnography was chosen because it can bridge the researcher's personal experiences with the broader social, cultural, and political context, particularly in border situations fraught with negotiations of identity, mobility, and state power (Dewantara & Budimansyah, 2024).

Autoethnographic Approach

Autoethnography in this research is understood as “autoethnography as story,” an approach that places the researcher's lived narrative as both the primary data source and the analytical tool. The researcher does not position herself as a neutral external observer, but rather as an actor directly involved in the social life of the Dayak Bidayuh communities in Kampung Sontas (Indonesia) and Entubuh (Malaysia). This position allows the researcher to capture the dynamics of transnational children's education from within, including emotions, ethical dilemmas, and daily practices that are often overlooked by survey approaches or policy studies. (Miles et al., 2014).

Autoethnography was chosen because the research context the education of children across borders within kinship networks is difficult to fully understand without long-term engagement and in-depth social relations. This method allows for critical reflection on the researcher's

personal experiences as part of the social structure being studied, while also opening up space to examine the relationships between the micro (individual and family experiences) and the macro (state policies, citizenship regimes, and national education systems).

Location and Duration of Research

The research was conducted in the Sontas-Entubuh border region for five years (2019–2024). Sontas and Entubuh villages were chosen because both are Dayak Bidayuh communities with cross-border kinship ties, high social mobility, and child education practices that involve two different state systems. The long research period allowed the researchers to conduct repeated observations, build trust with the community, and capture changes and continuity in transnational child education practices.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through several complementary techniques:

Participant Observation

The researcher was directly involved in the daily life of the community, including participating in family activities, school activities, children's interactions, and community meetings. Participant observation was conducted reflectively, noting not only the events observed, but also the researcher's position, feelings, and responses to the situation.

In-Depth Interviews

Interviews were conducted informally and in-depth with transnational children, parents, teachers, traditional leaders, and local officials. The interviews were flexible and narrative, allowing informants to share their educational experiences without being constrained by a rigid question structure.

Reflective Notes and Personal Narratives

The researcher compiled ongoing reflective field notes, which included personal experiences, dialogues, significant events, and critical reflections on the researcher's position within power relations and research ethics. These notes served as the primary source for constructing the autoethnographic narrative.

Contextual Documentation

Supporting documents such as education policies, population administration documents, and local archives are used to enrich the analysis and link personal experiences to the broader structural framework.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted narratively and thematically. Rather than conducting formal coding separate from the narrative, researchers interpreted the data through the construction of narratives encompassing key themes, such as administrative limitations, cross-border mobility, disparities in educational facilities, and negotiations of national and ethnic identity. The

analysis process was iterative, in which personal reflections, interview data, and field observations were mutually tested and deepened (Blasco & Wardle, 2007).

Research Validity and Ethics

Research validity is maintained through reflexivity, long-term engagement, and triangulation of data sources. In the context of autoethnography, reflexivity is a key aspect of validity, as the researcher explicitly discloses their positionality, involvement, and potential biases. Ethical considerations include maintaining the anonymity of informants, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring that the narratives presented do not harm individuals or communities.

Through this method, the research seeks to provide an in-depth, contextualized, and lived-experienced understanding of the dynamics of transnational children's education in border regions.

Result and Discussion

Education in the Space Between: Administration, Mobility, and the Uncertainty of Transnational Children

The education of transnational children in the Sontas–Entubuh border region takes place in what can be called an in-between space—a social space at the intersection of transnational kinship and the rigid administrative system of the nation-state. This space is neither entirely within the logic of Indonesia, nor entirely subordinate to Malaysia. Over five years of fieldwork, this in-between space emerged as a key context shaping the access, experience, and meaning of education for Dayak Bidayuh children. One of the most striking findings of this research is that administrative uncertainty is a persistent structural condition in the educational lives of transnational children, not simply a momentary obstacle. Many children in Sontas Village have a history of long-standing cross-border mobility: born in Entubuh, raised in Sontas, returning to Malaysia for school, and then returning to Indonesia to follow their parents or relatives. This mobility is socially considered normal and legitimate within the Dayak Bidayuh kinship framework, but it does not always align with the logic of state population administration.

In formal education, uncertainty about citizenship and documentation is a major source of vulnerability. Children who lack Indonesian birth certificates, child identity cards, or valid cross-border documents are often admitted to school through informal mechanisms. Teachers and principals, particularly in border areas, often take a pragmatic stance, prioritizing children's rights to learn over rigid administrative compliance. However, this acceptance is always temporary and dependent on broader political-administrative circumstances. From the children's perspective, this creates an ambiguous school experience. School is not only a space for learning, but also a space of uncertainty. Children grow up with an implicit awareness that their presence at school could be questioned at any time. They understand that there are certain things that should not be asked or explained too much—for example, about birthplace, parental status, or reasons for changing schools. This awareness shapes a cautious attitude and a strategy of silence that develops from an early age.

Cross-border mobility is another dimension that deepens the educational experience in the in-between space. In autoethnographic accounts, researchers observe how children habitually move residences following family dynamics: living with their parents in Sontas, then spending

some time with their uncles or grandparents in Entubuh for school, and then returning again. These moves are not always accompanied by smooth transitions within the education system. Differences in curriculum, language of instruction, learning rhythms, and school culture mean that children must constantly adapt.

This socially fluid mobility clashes with state expectations of residential stability and identity. National education systems, in both Indonesia and Malaysia, are primarily designed for individuals who are settled, documented, and have clear citizenship status. Transnational children, with their fluid mobility and identities, fall outside this normative imagination. As a result, they are often positioned as “special cases” to be addressed ad hoc, rather than as part of a systemic education policy design.

The disparity in educational facilities between Sontas and Entubuh also influences families' educational choices. Schools in Entubuh have relatively better infrastructure, a more ideal teacher-student ratio, and more consistent state support. These conditions encourage families in Sontas to view education in Malaysia as an opportunity, despite the accompanying administrative risks. This decision is rarely based on ideological preferences for a particular country, but rather on practical considerations regarding their children's future. However, attending school in Malaysia does not necessarily solve problems. Children who attend Entubuh face complex identity challenges. At school, they are socialized into the Malaysian national narrative through the curriculum, state symbols, and disciplinary practices. At home and in the community, they continue to live within the Dayak Bidayuh culture, which transcends borders and is not fully tied to any one country. This tension creates a layered and sometimes contradictory identity experience.

In their autoethnographic experiences, researchers noted how children often navigated situational shifts in identity. In the school classroom, they conformed to prevailing national expectations; at home, they reverted to ethnic and kinship identities. Education, in this context, not only transmitted academic knowledge but also trained children to become flexible, adaptive subjects, able to navigate contexts of power.

For parents, the transnational education of children was a decision-making process fraught with moral and emotional dilemmas. Parents had to balance compliance with state regulations with the responsibility to ensure their children received a proper education. In many cases, they relied on cross-border kinship networks to overcome administrative limitations—for example, by entrusting their children to relatives with more complete documents or better access to certain schools. The state was present in family life not as a single, clear entity, but as a series of changing rules, apparatuses, and procedures. This uncertainty forced families and children to continually adapt their educational strategies. Education became an ongoing practice of negotiation, rather than the stable, linear process envisioned in national policies.

This subsection demonstrates that the education of transnational children on the border is not simply a matter of access to or quality of schooling, but a lived experience shaped by administrative uncertainty, cross-border mobility, and structural inequalities between countries. Children not only learn to read, write, and count, but also learn to understand national borders, bureaucratic loopholes, and survival strategies within a system that does not fully accommodate their existence. Through an autoethnographic approach, these experiences are not reduced to abstract data but are understood as living narratives that reflect the power relations between the state and border communities. Uncertainty, in this context, is not an anomaly, but a normal

condition that shapes the subjectivity and educational experiences of transnational Dayak Bidayuh children in Sontas–Entubuh.

Nurturing Education Amidst Disadvantages: The Role of the Family, Kinship Solidarity, and the Negotiation of Transnational Children's Identities

Amid administrative uncertainty, cross-border mobility, and limited state policy, the education of transnational children on the Sontas–Entubuh border is not entirely dependent on formal institutions. This research finding indicates that families and cross-border kinship networks play a central role as the main pillars of the educational sustainability of Dayak Bidayuh children. Education, in this context, is treated as a collective social practice that transcends school spaces and state logic.

Dayak Bidayuh families in Sontas and Entubuh view children's education not solely as the responsibility of the immediate parents, but as a shared responsibility within the extended kinship circle. When access to formal education is hampered by paperwork, distance, or limited facilities, solutions are often found through cross-border family solidarity. Children are entrusted to uncles, aunts, grandparents, or cousins who live closer to a particular school or have more stable administrative status. This practice is not seen as a form of “transfer of responsibility,” but rather as a collective strategy to ensure the child's future. In autoethnographic experiences, researchers witnessed how educational decisions are often made through family deliberations. Considerations arise not only regarding school quality but also regarding the child's safety, residential stability, and the family's ability to cope with administrative risks. Education is understood as a long-term process that requires flexibility, patience, and the ability to adapt to changing border situations.

This kinship solidarity also serves as an emotional protection mechanism for children. Children who must change schools or residences do not feel completely uprooted because they remain within the same extended family circle, culturally and emotionally. Dayak Bidayuh ethnic ties serve as a crucial foundation for maintaining a sense of continuity of identity for children amidst cross-border migration. Thus, despite changes in school and state systems, a sense of “home” remains through kinship ties.

In addition to families, local communities also play a crucial role in supporting the education of transnational children. Traditional leaders, teachers, and villagers often mediate between children's needs and state regulations. In many cases, schools in border areas demonstrate a high degree of flexibility in accepting children from unclear administrative backgrounds. This flexibility is not without risk, but is seen as a form of moral responsibility for the future of the community's younger generation. However, the role of families and communities is not only practical but also symbolic. The education of transnational children becomes an arena where values of kinship, ethics of sharing, and collective responsibility are reproduced. Parents and relatives actively instill in children that education is a path to community strengthening, not merely a means of individual social mobility. This narrative is crucial to understanding why, despite facing various limitations, families continue to strive to maintain the continuity of their children's education.

On the other hand, education also serves as a crucial space for transnational children to negotiate their national and ethnic identities. Dayak Bidayuh children grow up in a world that simultaneously cultivates cross-border ethnic identities and distinct national identities. Schools, as state institutions, play a significant role in this process. Through their curriculum,

flag ceremonies, national symbols, and language of instruction, schools transmit narratives of nationality that are often exclusive.

Children attending school in Malaysia, for example, are exposed to a national narrative that emphasizes loyalty to the Malaysian state, while their ethnic identities are not always given adequate space for expression. Conversely, children attending school in Indonesia also experience a process of national socialization that positions national borders as a clear marker of identity. In both contexts, Dayak Bidayuh identity, as a cross-border identity, is often marginalized. However, the findings of this study indicate that children do not simply passively accept this national narrative. Through cross-border life experiences, they develop contextual and situational identity negotiation skills. At school, they learn to project an expected national identity; at home and in the community, they return to an inclusive and cross-border ethnic identity. This ability is not the result of formal learning, but rather the result of everyday life experiences that constantly demand adaptation.

In autoethnographic accounts, researchers reflect on how children are often more flexible than adults in interpreting identity. For them, being “Indonesian,” “Malaysian,” and “Bidayuh” are not always understood as mutually exclusive identities, but rather as layers of identity that can be activated according to context. Education, in this case, serves as a social training space for managing these complex identities.

However, this flexibility also carries an emotional burden. Children sometimes experience confusion, especially when the national narrative in school contradicts their lived experiences at home and in the community. When the state is presented as the sole legitimate source of identity, children's cross-border experiences become invisible or even questioned. In these situations, the role of the family again becomes crucial as a safe space to discuss experiences, explain differences, and affirm ethnic identity.

This subsection emphasizes that the education of transnational children at the border cannot be separated from the social care work carried out by families and communities. When the state's presence is limited and often insensitive to the realities of the border, families and kinship networks take over the role of guardians of the continuity of children's education and identity. Education is maintained not only through school, but also through daily practices that instill the values of adaptation, solidarity, and resilience. Through an autoethnographic approach, these findings demonstrate that the educational success of transnational children is not solely determined by state policy, but by the ability of border communities to nurture education as a collective practice. Identity negotiation, in this context, is not a sign of crisis, but rather a form of social intelligence that enables children to survive and thrive in the space between two countries.

Education in Border Spaces as an Arena for Negotiation Between State, Kinship, and Identity

The findings of this study demonstrate that the education of transnational Dayak Bidayuh children on the Sontas-Entubuh border cannot be understood solely as an institutional process under state control, but rather as an arena of complex social negotiation. Schools and everyday educational practices become spaces where the logic of the nation-state, cross-border kinship ties, and the formation of children's identities interact, compete, and compromise. In this context, education functions not only as a means of transmitting knowledge, but also as a

mechanism for social regulation and the production of citizenship subjects (Arpanudin & Dewantara, 2025).

From the state's perspective, education is positioned as a crucial instrument for instilling national identity and ensuring citizen loyalty. The curriculum, national symbols, language of instruction, and disciplinary practices in schools reflect the state's efforts to normalize territorial boundaries and shape subjects consistent with a stable civic imagination. However, research findings suggest that this logic does not fully align with the realities of children's lives in border regions (Dewantara, 2024). Dayak Bidayuh children grow up in a social context that transcends national borders, where kinship relations, mobility, and ethnic identity are cross-territorial (Olendo et al., 2022).

In this situation, education becomes a space where the tension between these two logics is practically negotiated. Children and families do not outright reject the state, but neither do they completely submit to administrative demands and rigid national identities. Instead, they develop adaptive strategies that enable education to continue. These strategies include leveraging cross-border kinship networks, flexibility in school choice, and the children's ability to adapt to differing identity expectations across social spaces (Sulistyarini et al., 2021).

These negotiations also demonstrate the limitations of a territorial and exclusive approach to education policy. When education is designed only for clearly documented citizens, transnational children are left vulnerable and not fully accommodated (Jailani et al., 2021). These findings strengthen the argument that education in border regions requires a policy framework that recognizes mobility and multiple identities as social realities, not deviations. In other words, education needs to be understood as a contextual social practice, not simply the implementation of national regulations (Dewantara, 2025).

Furthermore, this subchapter highlights the role of kinship as an alternative social structure that balances state dominance in educational settings. The extended family and Dayak Bidayuh community serve as a social safety net, ensuring the continuity of children's education when the state's presence is limited or inconsistent. This role demonstrates that education in border areas is supported not only by formal institutions but also by informal social mechanisms rooted in the values of solidarity and collective responsibility (Fatmawati & Dewantara, 2022).

In the context of identity formation, education in borderlands produces children with reflective and contextual abilities in interpreting nationality and ethnicity. Children do not view national and ethnic identities as mutually exclusive categories, but rather as layers of identity that can be negotiated according to the situation. This ability challenges the assumption that national education always produces a single, homogeneous identity (Budimansyah & Dewantara, 2025). In contrast, education on the border demonstrates how identity is fluid and situational.

Thus, education in border regions can be understood as an arena where state, kinship, and identity interact in an unequal relationship. The autoethnographic approach used in this research allows for a deeper understanding of these dynamics, as it positions lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. This sub-chapter emphasizes that to fully understand the education of transnational children, a perspective that transcends the nation-state framework and allows for the experiences, stories, and social practices of border communities is necessary.

Conclusions

This research demonstrates that the education of transnational children on the Indonesia-Malaysia border, particularly within the Dayak Bidayuh communities of Sontas and Entubuh, is a social process that takes place in an in-between space characterized by administrative uncertainty, cross-border mobility, and ongoing identity negotiations. Education cannot be understood solely as a technocratic state service, but rather as a lived practice continuously negotiated by children, families, communities, and formal institutions within the border context. Using an autoethnographic approach, this research reveals that transnational children face various structural limitations, particularly related to citizenship status, access to documents, and disparities in educational facilities across countries. However, these limitations do not completely halt the educational process. Instead, families and cross-border kinship networks play a key role in maintaining the continuity of education through adaptive strategies, social solidarity, and flexibility in dealing with state systems that are not always responsive to the realities of the border.

The research findings also confirm that education is a crucial arena for the formation and negotiation of transnational children's identities. On the one hand, schools transmit national narratives that tend to demand a single loyalty. On the other hand, cross-border life experiences enable children to develop layered, contextual, and situational identities. This ability demonstrates that national and ethnic identities are not necessarily antagonistic but can instead be pragmatically negotiated in everyday life.

Methodologically, this research emphasizes the value of autoethnography as an approach capable of bridging personal experiences with broader structural dynamics. By employing storytelling as an analytical tool, autoethnography enables a more human and contextual understanding of education in border regions something often relegated to policy- and statistical-based analyses.

Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of more inclusive education policies that are sensitive to the mobility and complex identities of border communities. State recognition of the transnational realities of children and families in border areas is a key prerequisite for ensuring equitable and sustainable education rights. Without such recognition, the education of transnational children will continue to be precarious, relying on the resilience of families and communities rather than on systemic state protection.

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Contact email: Jagad02@fkip.untan.ac.id