



Self-Development Versus Social Comparison: A Conceptual Model of Personal Growth in Scouting Education

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Abstract

Scouting has historically emphasized personal growth, character formation, leadership development, and service through continuous self-improvement; however, contemporary scouting increasingly operates within educational environments characterized by competition, rankings, and comparison-based evaluation. This shift creates a theoretical tension between developmental and comparative conceptions of success that remains insufficiently addressed in existing scholarship. To address this gap, this conceptual paper develops a novel framework of Self-Referenced Development (SRD), defined as a developmental orientation through which individuals evaluate progress relative to their own prior levels of competence, leadership, character, and contribution rather than through interpersonal comparison. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Positive Youth Development, the study employs an integrative conceptual analysis to construct a mechanism-based model explaining how autonomy-supportive practices, mastery-oriented activities, and reflective learning experiences foster SRD, while social comparison orientation constrains its development and brotherhood climate mitigates such effects. The proposed framework advances theory by introducing SRD as a distinct multidimensional construct, integrating fragmented theoretical traditions, and reconceptualizing educational success as developmental movement rather than comparative achievement. The model provides a foundation for future empirical research on youth development, leadership education, and nonformal learning environments.

Keywords

self-referenced development; scouting education; social comparison; positive youth development; self-determination theory; personal growth

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1. Introduction

Scouting has long been recognized as one of the world's most influential forms of nonformal education for promoting character formation, leadership development, citizenship, and personal growth among young people. Since its establishment, the scouting movement has emphasized experiential learning, outdoor education, teamwork, community service, and progressive self-improvement as central mechanisms of development. Unlike educational approaches that primarily prioritize standardized achievement or competitive performance, scouting seeks to cultivate responsible, autonomous, and socially engaged individuals who continuously strive to become better versions of themselves through meaningful experiences and reflective practice. This developmental orientation aligns closely with contemporary perspectives on youth development that emphasize flourishing, contribution, and lifelong growth rather than merely the attainment of externally validated performance outcomes (Lerner *et al.*, 2021; Shek *et al.*, 2019).

The educational philosophy underlying scouting is highly consistent with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which proposes that optimal human functioning and psychological growth emerge when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Within scouting environments, participants are encouraged to make decisions, assume responsibility, solve practical problems, and collaborate with peers in pursuit of shared goals. Such experiences provide opportunities for self-directed learning while fostering intrinsic motivation and personal agency. Extensive evidence indicates that educational environments supporting these psychological needs contribute to higher engagement, persistence, well-being, and developmental outcomes (Guay, 2022; Howard *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, success in scouting has traditionally been understood not as outperforming others but as achieving continuous improvement in personal competence, character, leadership, and service orientation.

This developmental emphasis is further reinforced by Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspectives, which conceptualize youth as active contributors to their own growth and to the well-being of their communities. PYD scholarship highlights the importance of developing competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution through supportive developmental contexts (Lerner *et al.*, 2021). Rather than focusing on correcting deficiencies, PYD encourages educational systems to cultivate strengths and developmental assets that enable young people to thrive. Scouting reflects this strengths-based philosophy by providing structured opportunities for young people to learn, lead, serve, and reflect. Accordingly, developmental progress within scouting is traditionally interpreted through personal growth trajectories rather than through comparative rankings or competitive superiority.

Despite these developmental foundations, contemporary educational environments are increasingly characterized by competition, performance metrics, public recognition systems, and ranking-oriented evaluation. Across educational settings, young people are frequently encouraged to assess their abilities and achievements relative to those of others. Social Comparison Theory suggests that individuals naturally evaluate themselves through comparisons with peers, particularly when objective standards of performance are ambiguous or socially salient (Festinger, 1954). While social comparison can sometimes stimulate motivation and aspiration, excessive reliance on comparative evaluation may also generate anxiety, diminished self-worth, and heightened dependence on external validation (Marsh, 1987; Marsh & Parker, 1984). Recent studies continue to demonstrate that comparative processes remain powerful influences on adolescent self-concept and achievement-related beliefs, particularly during periods of identity formation and social development (Jansen *et al.*, 2022).

The growing influence of comparison-oriented evaluation has become increasingly visible within youth organizations, including scouting. In many contexts, scouting units devote

considerable attention to competitions, championships, rankings, and public recognition. Such activities are often justified as mechanisms for motivating participants, developing skills, and encouraging excellence. Indeed, competitions can generate valuable learning opportunities when they are framed as developmental experiences rather than ultimate goals. However, concerns emerge when success becomes defined primarily through trophies, awards, or superior performance over other groups. Under such conditions, participants may gradually begin to evaluate their worth according to comparative achievements rather than developmental progress. The educational meaning of participation may therefore shift from learning and growth toward external recognition and competitive distinction.

This phenomenon reflects a broader tension between two fundamentally different developmental orientations. The first orientation emphasizes self-development, in which individuals assess progress relative to their own previous capabilities and strive for continuous improvement. The second orientation emphasizes social comparison, in which success is evaluated according to one's relative standing among peers. Achievement Goal Theory provides a useful framework for understanding this distinction by differentiating mastery-oriented goals from performance-oriented goals (Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Mastery goals focus on learning, competence development, and self-improvement, whereas performance goals emphasize demonstrating superiority over others. Research consistently indicates that mastery-oriented environments foster more adaptive outcomes, including stronger intrinsic motivation, greater persistence, and more sustainable engagement than environments dominated by comparative evaluation (Scherrer *et al.*, 2020; Senko *et al.*, 2011).

Within scouting education, this tension raises important conceptual questions regarding the nature of personal growth. If scouting fundamentally seeks to develop character, leadership, citizenship, and service, should educational success be measured through interpersonal comparison or through developmental progress? How does increasing exposure to comparison-oriented evaluation influence the educational mission of scouting? More importantly, how can scouting organizations preserve developmental integrity while operating within broader educational cultures that increasingly reward competitive achievement?

Although substantial research has examined self-determination, achievement motivation, self-regulated learning, self-concept, and social comparison in educational contexts (Marsh *et al.*, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020), relatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding how these perspectives intersect within scouting education. Existing scouting research primarily focuses on leadership development, outdoor learning, engagement, and positive developmental outcomes (MAEM & PhD, 2024). Consequently, little theoretical work has examined the possibility that self-development and social comparison may function as competing evaluative frameworks within scouting environments. More importantly, existing literature has not sufficiently explained how developmental educational philosophies can be preserved when increasingly comparison-oriented practices become embedded within youth development settings.

This gap is theoretically significant because scouting represents a distinctive educational environment in which cooperation, brotherhood, mutual support, and collective responsibility coexist alongside competitive activities. Unlike many formal educational settings, scouting explicitly promotes shared growth and community contribution as central educational objectives. Understanding how social comparison interacts with these developmental principles is therefore essential for preserving the educational integrity of scouting programs. Failure to address this issue may contribute to an unintended shift from character-centered development toward performance-centered participation, thereby weakening the movement's foundational educational mission.

To address this gap, the present conceptual paper proposes a new framework for understanding personal growth in scouting education through the concept of Self-Referenced Development (SRD). SRD refers to a developmental orientation in which individuals evaluate progress primarily against their own previous levels of competence, leadership, character, and contribution rather than against the performance of others. Building upon Self-Determination Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, and Positive Youth Development perspectives, the paper argues that self-referenced evaluation provides a more appropriate developmental foundation for scouting education than comparison-based assessment.

The article makes three primary contributions. First, it identifies and conceptualizes the growing tension between self-development and social comparison within contemporary scouting education. Second, it introduces Self-Referenced Development as a novel conceptual construct that captures the developmental logic underlying scouting philosophy. Third, it proposes an integrative framework explaining how autonomy-supportive practices, mastery-oriented activities, and reflective learning experiences foster personal growth, while social comparison orientations may weaken these developmental pathways. Through these contributions, the paper seeks to advance theoretical understanding of scouting education and provide a foundation for future empirical research on youth development in nonformal educational contexts.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Gap

2.1 Self-Development as the Educational Logic of Scouting

The foundational philosophy of scouting is rooted in the idea that education should facilitate continuous personal growth rather than merely evaluate performance. Since its inception, scouting has emphasized experiential learning, responsibility, leadership, service, and character formation as developmental processes through which young people progressively improve their capabilities and contributions to society. Unlike performance-centered educational approaches that prioritize comparative achievement, scouting conceptualizes success as an ongoing process of becoming rather than a static outcome of outperforming others.

This developmental orientation is strongly aligned with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that optimal functioning and sustainable growth emerge when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). SDT views development not as a consequence of external rewards but as the outcome of active engagement in meaningful and self-endorsed activities. Educational environments that support these psychological needs consistently foster stronger motivation, persistence, well-being, and learning outcomes (Bureau *et al.*, 2022; Howard *et al.*, 2021). More importantly, autonomy-supportive contexts encourage individuals to internalize developmental goals and evaluate progress according to personally meaningful standards rather than external judgments (Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Scouting embodies many characteristics associated with need-supportive educational environments. Through patrol systems, outdoor challenges, project-based activities, and shared decision-making, participants are encouraged to exercise initiative, solve problems collaboratively, and assume responsibility for their own learning. Such experiences strengthen personal agency while simultaneously fostering social connectedness. Consequently, development within scouting is commonly interpreted as improvement relative to one's previous capabilities rather than superiority over others.

A complementary perspective emerges from Positive Youth Development (PYD), which conceptualizes young people as developmental assets capable of contributing to their

communities when provided with supportive environments (Lerner *et al.*, 2021). PYD scholarship emphasizes competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution as key indicators of healthy development. More recent work further highlights youth agency, arguing that developmental outcomes emerge when young people actively participate in shaping their own growth trajectories rather than merely complying with externally imposed expectations. This perspective closely mirrors scouting's educational philosophy, which positions participants as active contributors to their own development through learning, service, and leadership experiences.

Importantly, both SDT and PYD implicitly assume a developmental rather than comparative understanding of success. Growth is assessed according to progress, learning, and increasing capacity rather than relative standing. Educational quality is therefore reflected in the extent to which individuals become more capable, responsible, and socially engaged over time. However, this developmental logic increasingly encounters tension when educational environments prioritize ranking, competition, and visible indicators of achievement.

2.2 Social Comparison and the Construction of Success

Although development is often conceptualized as a personal process, self-evaluations rarely occur in isolation. Social Comparison Theory proposes that individuals naturally evaluate their abilities, achievements, and characteristics by comparing themselves with others, particularly when objective standards are unavailable or ambiguous (Festinger, 1954). Comparative processes therefore serve important informational functions, helping individuals understand their social position and interpret their performance.

However, social comparison is inherently paradoxical. While upward comparison may stimulate aspiration and motivation, it may also generate dissatisfaction, self-doubt, and dependence on external validation. Likewise, downward comparison may increase perceived competence but may discourage further development. The developmental consequences of comparison therefore depend on the degree to which comparative standards become dominant criteria for defining success.

Research in educational psychology consistently demonstrates that comparative environments shape motivation, self-concept, and achievement-related behavior. One of the most influential examples is the Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect, which demonstrates that students' self-perceptions are influenced not only by their abilities but also by the achievement levels of surrounding peers (Marsh, 1987; Marsh & Parker, 1984). Consequently, individuals with similar competencies may develop substantially different self-concepts depending on the social contexts in which they are embedded. Such findings suggest that evaluations of competence frequently reflect social positioning rather than actual developmental progress.

The influence of social comparison becomes particularly salient during adolescence, a developmental period characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation and identity formation. Contemporary studies continue to show that peer comparison significantly influences academic self-concept, motivation, and psychological adjustment even after controlling for objective performance indicators (Jansen *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, environments emphasizing public recognition, rankings, and normative evaluation often redirect attention away from learning and toward external validation (Scherrer *et al.*, 2020).

These dynamics are increasingly relevant within scouting contexts. Although scouting traditionally promotes cooperation and collective growth, many contemporary programs incorporate competitions, awards, rankings, and performance-based recognition systems. Such mechanisms may generate enthusiasm and challenge; however, they may also encourage participants to evaluate success according to comparative standards. As a result,

developmental outcomes such as character growth, service orientation, and reflective learning risk becoming less salient than visible indicators of achievement.

The issue, therefore, is not competition itself but the possibility that comparison becomes the primary lens through which development is interpreted. When educational success is equated with outperforming others, growth may be overshadowed by concerns regarding status and superiority. This creates a fundamental tension with the developmental philosophy historically associated with scouting education.

2.3 Achievement Goals and Competing Standards of Competence

Achievement Goal Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals define competence and interpret success within educational settings. According to the theory, achievement behavior is guided by goal orientations that shape the standards through which competence is evaluated (Ames, 1992; Nicholls, 1984).

A central distinction concerns mastery-oriented and performance-oriented goals. Mastery goals define success through learning, improvement, and competence development, whereas performance goals define success through demonstrating superiority relative to others (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). These different standards produce distinct motivational patterns and developmental consequences.

Research consistently demonstrates that mastery-oriented environments foster stronger intrinsic motivation, persistence, cognitive engagement, and resilience than performance-oriented environments (Senko *et al.*, 2011). Individuals pursuing mastery goals are more likely to interpret challenges as opportunities for growth and setbacks as part of the learning process. In contrast, performance-oriented environments often increase concerns regarding evaluation, social comparison, and failure avoidance (Scherrer *et al.*, 2020).

More importantly, recent developments within Achievement Goal Theory suggest that competence can be evaluated using different reference standards. Elliot *et al.* (2011) distinguish task-based, self-based, and other-based standards of competence. Task-based standards focus on successful task completion, self-based standards focus on improvement relative to prior performance, and other-based standards rely on comparison with peers. This distinction is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that meaningful evaluation does not require interpersonal comparison. Individuals can assess competence through temporal self-comparison by asking whether they have improved relative to their own previous condition.

For scouting education, this distinction has significant implications. The historical philosophy of scouting aligns closely with self-based and mastery-oriented standards because participants are encouraged to pursue continuous improvement rather than comparative superiority. Nevertheless, many contemporary recognition systems implicitly promote other-based standards that emphasize ranking and competition. Consequently, scouting environments may simultaneously communicate two competing definitions of success: developmental growth and comparative achievement.

2.4 Conceptual Gap

The preceding review reveals an important theoretical fragmentation. Self-Determination Theory explains how autonomy-supportive environments facilitate growth and motivation. Positive Youth Development highlights strengths-based development and youth agency. Achievement Goal Theory explains how mastery-oriented standards foster adaptive learning and development. Social Comparison Theory explains how comparative evaluation influences self-perceptions and behavior. Despite their shared concern with human development, these traditions have largely evolved independently.

As a result, existing scholarship provides substantial insight into motivation, achievement, self-concept, and youth development but offers limited explanation regarding how developmental and comparative evaluative systems interact within educational environments. More specifically, current literature has not adequately explained how educational contexts grounded in self-improvement preserve their developmental integrity when increasingly exposed to comparison-oriented practices.

This gap is particularly salient within scouting because developmental and comparative logics coexist within the same educational system. On one hand, scouting promotes cooperation, leadership, service, character development, and personal responsibility. On the other hand, participants frequently encounter competitions, rankings, and public recognition structures that encourage comparative evaluation. Existing theories explain either developmental processes or comparative processes, yet they provide limited insight into how these competing evaluative frameworks influence the meaning of personal growth.

Accordingly, a fundamental theoretical question remains unresolved: how should personal growth be conceptualized when developmental objectives coexist with increasingly comparison-oriented mechanisms of evaluation? Addressing this question requires a framework that explicitly captures the developmental logic underlying scouting philosophy while distinguishing growth from comparative achievement. To address this challenge, the next section introduces Self-Referenced Development (SRD) as a novel conceptual construct that positions temporal self-improvement, rather than interpersonal comparison, as the primary basis for evaluating personal growth in scouting education.

3. Reconceptualizing Personal Growth in Scouting

3.1 Reframing the Meaning of Personal Growth

The preceding discussion suggests that contemporary scouting education operates at the intersection of two competing evaluative logics. The first logic views development as a process of continuous self-improvement, emphasizing growth in competence, character, leadership, and contribution over time. The second logic evaluates success through comparative achievement, focusing on relative performance, rankings, and visible indicators of superiority. Although both logics may coexist within educational environments, they rest upon fundamentally different assumptions regarding the nature of personal growth.

The developmental tradition underlying scouting has historically been grounded in the belief that individuals should strive to become better than they were previously rather than better than other people. Progress is therefore interpreted as a developmental trajectory rather than a competitive position. Such a perspective is consistent with broader developmental theories that conceptualize growth as a dynamic process of adaptation, learning, and increasing complexity in human functioning. Development occurs when individuals expand their capacities, deepen their understanding, strengthen their character, and increase their ability to contribute meaningfully to others.

In contrast, comparison-oriented evaluation systems frequently define success through normative standards that position individuals relative to their peers. While these standards may provide useful performance information, they are less capable of capturing developmental change. Two individuals may experience substantial personal growth despite occupying identical positions within a competitive hierarchy. Likewise, an individual may achieve superior rankings without demonstrating meaningful developmental progress. Consequently, comparative achievement and personal development should not be treated as conceptually equivalent outcomes.

This distinction becomes particularly important within scouting because many of its most valued outcomes—including character development, leadership maturity, service

commitment, resilience, and reflective capacity—are inherently developmental rather than competitive. These outcomes are better understood through changes occurring within individuals across time than through differences observed between individuals at a single point in time. The challenge therefore lies in developing a conceptual framework capable of capturing growth as a developmental process rather than as a comparative outcome.

To address this challenge, the present paper introduces Self-Referenced Development (SRD) as a developmental construct specifically designed to explain how personal growth can be evaluated through temporal self-comparison rather than interpersonal comparison.

3.2 Defining Self-Referenced Development

Self-Referenced Development (SRD) is defined as:

A developmental orientation through which individuals evaluate progress in competence, leadership, character, service, and personal effectiveness primarily in relation to their own previous levels of functioning rather than through comparison with the performance of others.

At its core, SRD shifts the evaluative reference point used to define success. Rather than asking whether one has performed better than peers, SRD encourages individuals to assess whether meaningful improvement has occurred relative to their own prior condition. The central question becomes not “How do I compare with others?” but rather “How have I grown compared with who I was before?”

Conceptually, SRD integrates insights from several theoretical traditions. Self-Determination Theory suggests that sustainable development emerges when individuals pursue growth through autonomous and internally endorsed goals rather than through externally imposed standards (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Achievement Goal Theory demonstrates that self-based standards of competence produce more adaptive motivational outcomes than other-based standards because they emphasize improvement rather than superiority (Elliot *et al.*, 2011). Research on self-regulated learning similarly indicates that effective development depends upon continuous self-monitoring, reflection, and adjustment relative to personal goals and standards (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002).

However, SRD differs from these theories in an important respect. Rather than focusing on motivation, goal orientation, or self-regulatory processes individually, SRD focuses on the evaluative framework through which developmental progress is interpreted. It therefore functions as a higher-order developmental lens that shapes how experiences, achievements, setbacks, and growth trajectories are understood.

From this perspective, developmental success is not determined by social position but by developmental movement. Individuals may occupy different levels of competence while simultaneously exhibiting strong SRD if they continue progressing relative to their own previous capabilities. Conversely, individuals may achieve superior performance outcomes while exhibiting weak SRD if their primary concern remains comparative superiority rather than developmental growth.

Accordingly, SRD represents a distinct conceptual approach to understanding development in educational settings where personal growth constitutes a central objective.

To clarify the conceptual positioning of Self-Referenced Development (SRD), Figure 1 contrasts the developmental logic underlying SRD with the comparative logic commonly associated with social comparison processes. The figure illustrates how different evaluative standards lead to fundamentally different interpretations of educational success and personal growth.

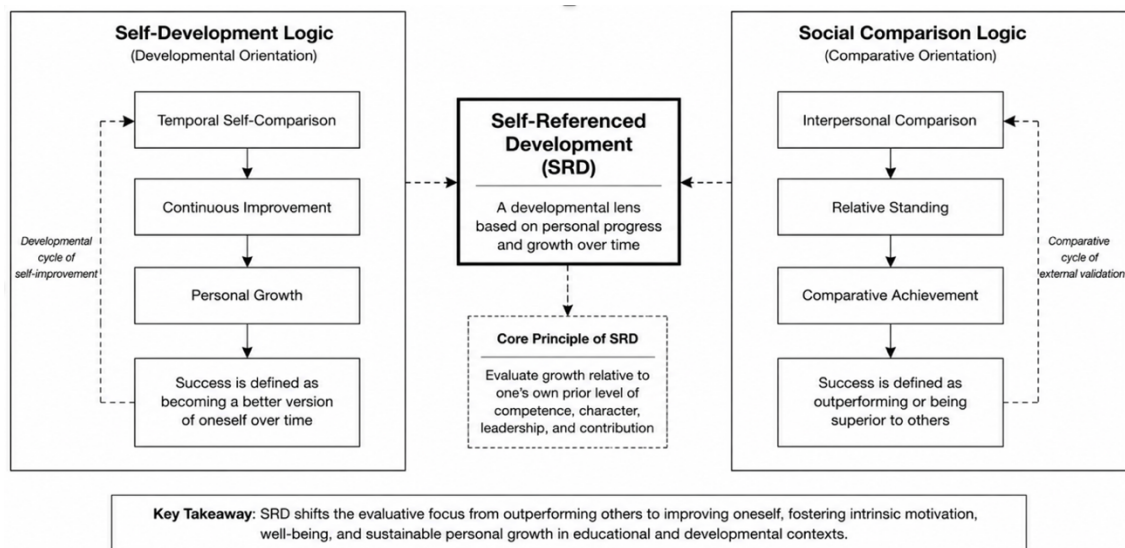


Figure 1. Theoretical Positioning of Self-Referenced Development within Competing Evaluative Logics

Source: Developed by the authors based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020), Achievement Goal Theory (Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001), Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), and the conceptual synthesis proposed in this study.

Figure 1 illustrates two contrasting evaluative pathways. The self-development pathway emphasizes temporal self-comparison and continuous improvement, leading to personal growth as the primary indicator of success. In contrast, the social comparison pathway emphasizes interpersonal comparison and relative standing, resulting in comparative achievement. SRD occupies a distinct position by framing development through progressive self-improvement rather than competitive superiority, thereby preserving the developmental mission of scouting education.

3.3 Core Dimensions of Self-Referenced Development

To establish SRD as a multidimensional developmental construct, five interrelated dimensions are proposed. These dimensions collectively capture the domains through which developmental progress is most consistently expressed within scouting education.

Personal Mastery

Personal mastery refers to the progressive improvement of knowledge, skills, and competencies relative to previous levels of performance. Unlike comparative achievement, which evaluates competence according to normative standards, personal mastery focuses on developmental advancement across time. Mastery-oriented individuals define success through learning, improvement, and increasing capability rather than through outperforming others (Ames, 1992; Senko *et al.*, 2011).

Within scouting contexts, personal mastery may be reflected in increasing competence in outdoor skills, communication, problem-solving, project management, or technical proficiency. The defining characteristic is not the absolute level of competence achieved but the evidence of meaningful developmental progress.

3.3.1 Leadership Growth

Leadership growth refers to the progressive enhancement of an individual's capacity to guide, coordinate, influence, and support others. Contemporary leadership development scholarship increasingly conceptualizes leadership as a developmental process that evolves through experience, responsibility, reflection, and social interaction rather than as a fixed personal trait.

Within scouting, leadership opportunities are intentionally embedded in patrol systems, project activities, and collective decision-making processes. Development occurs when individuals become increasingly capable of managing responsibilities, facilitating teamwork, resolving conflicts, and exercising influence in constructive ways. Leadership growth is therefore assessed through developmental advancement rather than relative leadership superiority.

3.3.2 Service Orientation

Service orientation refers to the increasing willingness and capacity to contribute positively to others, communities, and society. Unlike achievement domains that emphasize individual accomplishment, service reflects a prosocial developmental trajectory characterized by empathy, responsibility, civic engagement, and contribution.

Positive Youth Development scholarship consistently identifies contribution as one of the most important indicators of healthy development because it reflects the integration of personal growth with social responsibility (Lerner *et al.*, 2021). Within scouting, service orientation is expressed through community engagement, helping behaviors, social responsibility, and commitment to collective well-being.

3.3.3 Character Consistency

Character consistency refers to the increasing alignment between personal values and observable behavior across situations and over time. Character development is not merely reflected in isolated demonstrations of honesty, responsibility, or integrity. Rather, it emerges through the stable enactment of values across diverse contexts.

From an SRD perspective, character development occurs when ethical commitments become progressively internalized and consistently expressed in everyday actions. Development is therefore reflected in the strengthening coherence between values, decisions, and behavior rather than in isolated moral performances.

3.3.4 Reflective Improvement

Reflective improvement refers to the capacity to critically evaluate experiences, derive lessons from successes and failures, and translate these insights into future developmental action. Reflection serves as a developmental mechanism through which experience becomes learning and learning becomes growth.

Research on self-regulated learning consistently identifies reflective evaluation as one of the most important drivers of long-term development because it enables individuals to recognize strengths, identify developmental needs, and adjust future behavior accordingly (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002). Within scouting, reflective improvement transforms participation from mere activity into developmental experience.

Collectively, these dimensions suggest that personal growth is inherently multidimensional. Development cannot be adequately captured through a single indicator of achievement because meaningful growth occurs simultaneously across competence, leadership, service, character, and reflective capacities.

To further clarify the internal structure of Self-Referenced Development (SRD), Figure 2 presents the multidimensional architecture of the construct. The figure illustrates how five interrelated developmental domains collectively form a holistic framework for evaluating personal growth beyond comparative achievement.

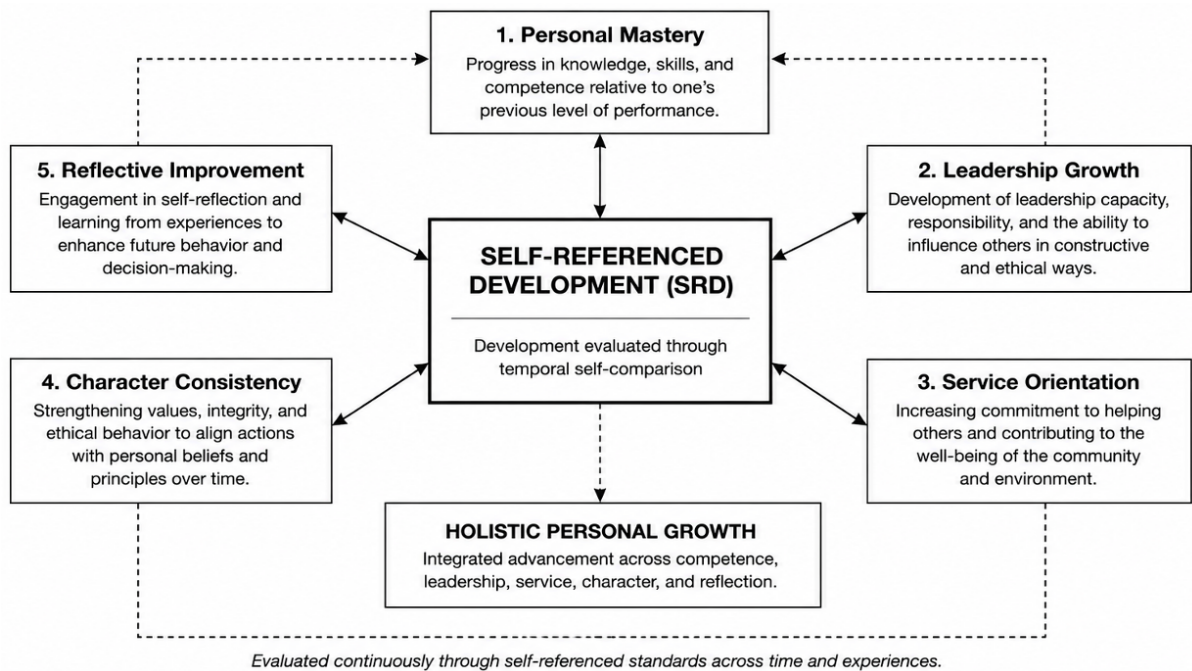


Figure 2. Multidimensional Structure of Self-Referenced Development (SRD)

Source: Developed by the authors based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020), Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al., 2021), Achievement Goal Theory (Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001), and the conceptual synthesis proposed in this study.

Figure 2 conceptualizes SRD as a multidimensional developmental construct comprising five interconnected domains: personal mastery, leadership growth, service orientation, character consistency, and reflective improvement. Together, these dimensions indicate that development extends beyond competence acquisition alone. The framework therefore positions personal growth as a holistic process encompassing cognitive, behavioral, social, ethical, and reflective advancement evaluated through temporal self-comparison rather than interpersonal comparison.

3.4 Distinguishing SRD from Related Constructs

A critical requirement for establishing a new conceptual construct is demonstrating its distinctiveness from existing theoretical concepts. Although SRD shares certain similarities with established constructs, it represents a conceptually different phenomenon.

First, SRD differs from self-efficacy. Self-efficacy concerns individuals' beliefs regarding their capability to perform specific tasks successfully (Bandura, 1977). SRD, in contrast, concerns how individuals evaluate developmental progress across time. Individuals may possess high self-efficacy while evaluating success primarily through social comparison, indicating that the two constructs address different psychological processes.

Second, SRD differs from self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning focuses on planning, monitoring, and regulating behavior to achieve desired outcomes (Zimmerman, 2002). SRD does not describe regulatory processes themselves but rather the evaluative standard used to interpret developmental progress. In other words, self-regulated learning explains how individuals pursue goals, whereas SRD explains how they evaluate growth.

Third, SRD differs from mastery goal orientation. Mastery goals primarily concern learning and competence development within achievement contexts (Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). SRD extends beyond achievement settings by incorporating broader developmental domains including leadership, service, character, and reflection. Consequently, SRD represents a more comprehensive developmental construct.

Most importantly, SRD explicitly rejects the assumption that development must be evaluated through interpersonal comparison. Existing theories acknowledge the existence of self-based standards of competence (Elliot *et al.*, 2011), yet none explicitly conceptualize self-referenced evaluation as a multidimensional developmental framework for youth education. This distinction constitutes the primary theoretical contribution of SRD.

To further establish the conceptual uniqueness of Self-Referenced Development (SRD), Table 1 compares SRD with several theoretically related constructs frequently discussed in educational psychology and youth development literature. The comparison highlights differences in focus, evaluative standards, and theoretical scope.

Table 1. Distinguishing Self-Referenced Development from Related Constructs

Construct	Primary Focus	Reference Standard	Distinction from SRD
Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 1977)	Beliefs about one's capability to perform specific tasks successfully	Perceived task competence	Focuses on capability beliefs, whereas SRD focuses on evaluating developmental progress across time
Self-Regulated Learning (Zimmerman, 2002; Panadero, 2017)	Planning, monitoring, and regulating learning processes	Goal attainment and learning outcomes	Emphasizes regulatory processes, whereas SRD emphasizes the evaluative lens through which growth is interpreted
Mastery Goal Orientation (Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001)	Learning, competence acquisition, and skill improvement	Competence development	Primarily achievement-focused, whereas SRD encompasses broader developmental domains including leadership, service, character, and reflection
Growth Mindset	Beliefs regarding the malleability of abilities	Development potential	Focuses on implicit beliefs about ability, whereas SRD concerns how developmental progress is evaluated
Self-Referenced Development (SRD)	Multidimensional personal growth across competence, leadership, service, character, and reflection	Temporal self-comparison relative to one's previous condition	Proposed developmental framework emphasizing growth as developmental movement rather than comparative achievement

Source: Developed by the authors

Table 1 demonstrates that although SRD shares certain conceptual elements with established constructs, it represents a distinct developmental framework. Unlike theories focusing on capability beliefs, goal orientations, or self-regulatory processes, SRD centers on the evaluative reference point used to interpret growth. Its unique contribution lies in conceptualizing personal development as multidimensional progress assessed through temporal self-comparison rather than interpersonal comparison.

3.5 Toward a Development-Centered Paradigm of Scouting Education

The introduction of SRD carries important implications for how educational success is conceptualized within scouting. If personal growth is fundamentally developmental rather than comparative, then educational evaluation should prioritize evidence of transformation rather than evidence of superiority.

This perspective does not imply that competitions, awards, or performance assessments should be eliminated. Rather, it suggests that such mechanisms should be interpreted as developmental instruments rather than ultimate indicators of success. Competitions may provide challenge, feedback, and opportunities for growth, but they should not become the primary basis for evaluating educational outcomes.

Viewed through an SRD lens, the ultimate purpose of scouting is not to produce winners but to cultivate progressively more capable, responsible, reflective, and socially engaged individuals. Educational success is therefore measured by developmental trajectories rather than comparative positions. This shift represents a movement from a performance-centered paradigm toward a development-centered paradigm that is more closely aligned with the historical philosophy and educational mission of scouting.

Building upon this conceptualization, the following section develops a comprehensive framework explaining the antecedents, outcomes, and boundary conditions of Self-Referenced Development within scouting education.

4. Proposed Conceptual Framework and Proposition Development

4.1 A Mechanism-Based Model of Self-Referenced Development

The central argument of this paper is that personal growth in scouting education does not emerge automatically from participation itself. Rather, developmental outcomes arise through specific educational processes that shape how participants interpret, evaluate, and regulate their experiences. Building upon the theoretical foundations developed in the previous sections, this paper proposes Self-Referenced Development (SRD) as the primary developmental mechanism through which scouting experiences are translated into meaningful personal growth.

The proposed framework integrates insights from Self-Determination Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Positive Youth Development. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that developmental growth becomes most likely when educational environments encourage individuals to evaluate success according to personal progress rather than comparative performance. In such environments, participants become increasingly oriented toward learning, reflection, self-improvement, and contribution rather than toward social ranking and external validation.

The framework proposes that three educational conditions are particularly important for fostering Self-Referenced Development: autonomy-supportive scouting practices, mastery-oriented developmental experiences, and reflective learning processes. These conditions shape how individuals interpret competence, evaluate progress, and construct developmental meaning from their experiences. Rather than functioning independently, they collectively create a developmental climate that encourages temporal self-comparison and continuous self-improvement.

At the center of the framework, SRD functions as a cognitive-developmental lens through which participants interpret growth. Through this lens, educational experiences become meaningful not because they establish superiority over others but because they demonstrate progress relative to prior levels of functioning. Consequently, SRD serves as the mechanism linking educational experiences to broader developmental outcomes.

The framework further recognizes that scouting increasingly operates within social environments characterized by competition, ranking, and performance visibility. Accordingly, social comparison orientation is conceptualized as a developmental constraint that may redirect attention away from self-improvement and toward comparative achievement. However, because scouting simultaneously emphasizes cooperation, solidarity, and mutual support, the negative effects of social comparison may be mitigated by a strong brotherhood climate that reinforces collective rather than competitive identities.

Figure 3 presents the complete mechanism-based framework proposed in this study. The model integrates developmental antecedents, the central role of Self-Referenced Development (SRD), personal growth outcomes, and contextual influences that either facilitate or constrain developmental processes within scouting education.

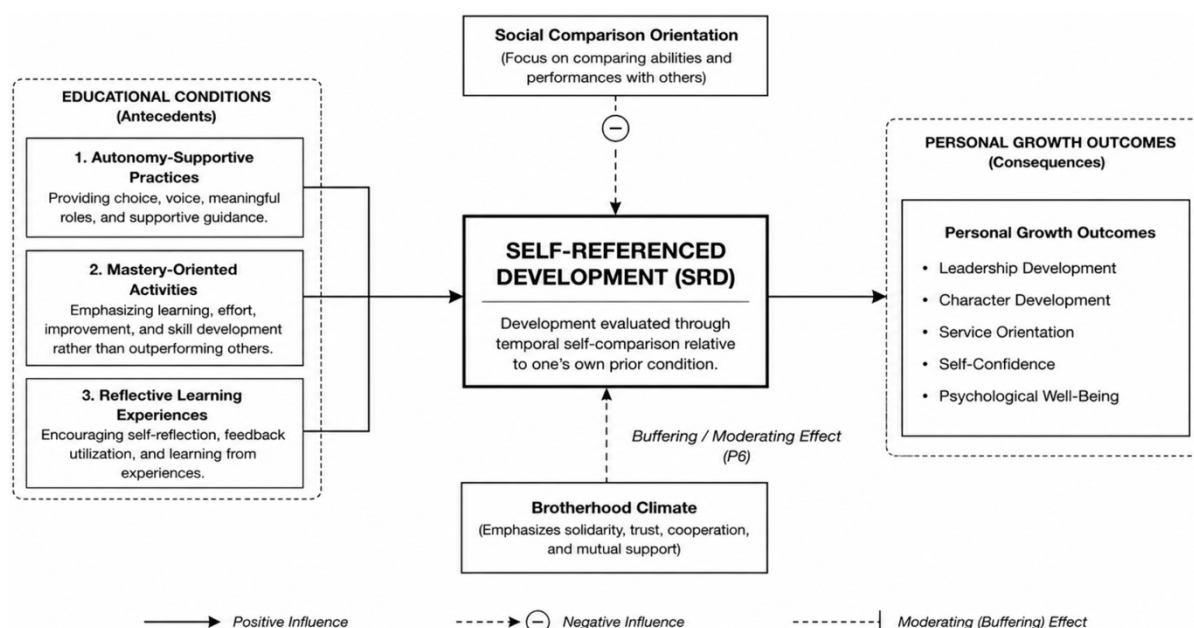


Figure 3. Mechanism-Based Framework of Self-Referenced Development in Scouting Education
Source: Developed by the authors based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020), Achievement Goal Theory (Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001), Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al., 2021), and the conceptual synthesis.

Figure 3 positions Self-Referenced Development as the central developmental mechanism linking educational experiences to personal growth outcomes. Autonomy-supportive practices, mastery-oriented activities, and reflective learning experiences strengthen SRD, whereas social comparison orientation weakens its emergence. The model further proposes that brotherhood climate functions as a protective contextual condition that buffers the negative influence of comparative evaluation, thereby preserving developmental growth within scouting environments.

4.2 Educational Conditions Facilitating Self-Referenced Development

1) Autonomy-Supportive Scouting Practices

Self-Determination Theory consistently demonstrates that autonomy-supportive environments promote internalization, intrinsic motivation, and sustained engagement (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Individuals are more likely to invest effort in developmental activities when they experience ownership over their actions and perceive their participation as self-endorsed rather than externally imposed.

Within scouting education, autonomy support emerges through opportunities for decision-making, responsibility sharing, leadership participation, problem solving, and self-directed learning. Such experiences encourage participants to view development as a personally meaningful process rather than as a requirement imposed by authorities.

More importantly, autonomy support changes the evaluative standards individuals use to assess success. Because developmental goals become internally endorsed, participants are more likely to focus on personal improvement and less likely to depend on external validation. Consequently, autonomy-supportive environments strengthen the tendency to evaluate growth through self-referenced standards.

Proposition 1 (P1)

Autonomy-supportive scouting practices positively influence Self-Referenced Development.

2) Mastery-Oriented Activities

Achievement Goal Theory suggests that educational environments communicate implicit definitions of success. Mastery-oriented environments define success through learning,

improvement, and competence development, whereas performance-oriented environments define success through comparative superiority (Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

Many traditional scouting activities naturally embody mastery-oriented principles. Participants are expected to progressively develop skills, overcome challenges, and improve performance through repeated practice and experience. Advancement systems generally emphasize developmental progression rather than direct competition among participants.

These experiences encourage individuals to interpret competence as something that can be developed rather than merely demonstrated. As a result, participants become increasingly likely to assess progress relative to previous performance levels rather than relative to peers.

Mastery-oriented activities therefore provide the motivational structure through which SRD can emerge and stabilize.

Proposition 2 (P2)

Mastery-oriented scouting activities positively influence Self-Referenced Development.

3) Reflective Learning Experiences

Developmental experiences do not automatically produce developmental learning. Experiences become educationally meaningful when individuals reflect upon them, derive lessons, and incorporate these lessons into future behavior.

Research on self-regulated learning identifies reflection as a critical mechanism through which learners transform experience into developmental knowledge (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002). Reflection enables individuals to identify strengths, recognize developmental needs, monitor progress, and establish future goals.

Within scouting, reflection frequently occurs through mentoring conversations, patrol discussions, developmental evaluations, achievement records, and personal journals. These practices encourage participants to compare present functioning with past functioning, thereby reinforcing temporal self-comparison.

Accordingly, reflective learning processes strengthen SRD because they continuously direct attention toward developmental trajectories rather than static performance outcomes.

Proposition 3 (P3)

Reflective learning experiences positively influence Self-Referenced Development.

4.3 Social Comparison Orientation as a Competing Developmental Logic

Although scouting philosophy emphasizes personal growth, participants remain embedded within broader social systems that frequently reward comparison-based achievement. Consequently, many individuals enter scouting environments already accustomed to evaluating success through rankings, recognition, and relative performance.

Social Comparison Theory suggests that such evaluative tendencies become particularly influential when performance information is publicly visible and socially meaningful (Festinger, 1954). Under these conditions, participants may increasingly interpret educational activities through the question, “How do I compare with others?” rather than “How am I developing?”

This shift has important developmental consequences. Comparative evaluation redirects attention away from learning processes and toward social positioning. Developmental achievements that are personally meaningful but not publicly visible may therefore become undervalued. Furthermore, individuals who perceive themselves as performing below peers may experience reduced motivation despite demonstrating substantial developmental progress.

From the perspective of the present framework, social comparison orientation represents a competing developmental logic that directly challenges the emergence of SRD. Whereas SRD promotes temporal self-comparison, social comparison orientation promotes interpersonal comparison. The stronger the latter becomes, the more difficult it becomes for participants to evaluate success through developmental progress.

Proposition 4 (P4)

Social comparison orientation negatively influences Self-Referenced Development.

4.4 Self-Referenced Development as the Mechanism Linking Experience and Growth

The central proposition of this paper is that Self-Referenced Development functions as the mechanism through which educational experiences are translated into developmental outcomes.

When individuals evaluate success through self-referenced standards, developmental progress remains attainable regardless of the performance of others. This evaluative orientation encourages persistence because setbacks are interpreted as temporary developmental challenges rather than evidence of inferiority. It also promotes intrinsic engagement because improvement itself becomes rewarding.

Through repeated cycles of challenge, reflection, adaptation, and growth, participants gradually develop stronger leadership capabilities, greater confidence, deeper character commitments, enhanced service orientation, and greater psychological well-being. These outcomes emerge not merely because individuals participate in scouting but because they interpret participation through a developmental lens.

SRD therefore represents the psychological process that converts educational experiences into enduring developmental gains.

Proposition 5 (P5)

Self-Referenced Development positively influences personal growth outcomes in scouting education.

4.5 Brotherhood Climate as a Boundary Condition

A distinctive characteristic of scouting education is its strong emphasis on brotherhood, cooperation, mutual support, and collective identity. These relational qualities differentiate scouting from many educational environments dominated by individual competition.

Drawing upon Positive Youth Development and Self-Determination Theory, supportive social relationships provide developmental resources that strengthen belonging, trust, and shared commitment (Lerner *et al.*, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Such relational environments influence not only how individuals behave but also how they interpret achievement and success.

Within a strong brotherhood climate, peers are more likely to be perceived as collaborators rather than competitors. Development therefore becomes a collective rather than individualistic endeavor. Under these conditions, social comparison remains less salient because participants derive value from mutual growth and shared accomplishment.

Conversely, when brotherhood climate is weak, competitive pressures may become more influential, increasing the likelihood that participants evaluate success through comparative standards.

Accordingly, brotherhood climate serves as a boundary condition that shapes the extent to which social comparison influences developmental processes.

Proposition 6 (P6)

Brotherhood climate moderates the relationship between social comparison orientation and Self-Referenced Development such that the negative relationship becomes weaker under conditions of high brotherhood climate.

4.6 Theoretical Significance of the Framework

The proposed framework advances scouting and youth development scholarship in three important ways.

First, it positions Self-Referenced Development as the central mechanism underlying developmental growth in scouting education. Rather than treating development as a direct consequence of participation, the framework explains how educational experiences become translated into developmental outcomes.

Second, the framework integrates four influential theoretical traditions—Self-Determination Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Positive Youth Development—into a coherent explanatory model. This integration addresses the theoretical fragmentation identified in previous literature.

Third, the framework reconceptualizes educational success as developmental movement rather than comparative achievement. By emphasizing temporal self-improvement as the primary basis of evaluation, the model offers a theoretically grounded alternative to performance-centered interpretations of educational success.

Taken together, these contributions establish SRD as a promising conceptual foundation for future empirical research and provide a mechanism-based explanation of how scouting education can preserve its developmental mission within increasingly comparison-oriented environments.

To synthesize the proposed conceptual model, Table 2 summarizes the theoretical foundations, directional relationships, and propositions underlying the Self-Referenced Development framework.

Table 2. Summary of Theoretical Foundations and Proposed Relationships

Proposition & Theoretical Foundation	Proposed Relationship	Expected Direction
P1 Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020)	Autonomy-Supportive Scouting Practices → Self-Referenced Development (SRD)	Positive (+)
P2 Achievement Goal Theory (Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001)	Mastery-Oriented Activities → Self-Referenced Development (SRD)	Positive (+)
P3 Self-Regulated Learning Theory (Zimmerman, 2002; Panadero, 2017)	Reflective Learning Experiences → Self-Referenced Development (SRD)	Positive (+)
P4 Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; Jansen <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	Social Comparison Orientation → Self-Referenced Development (SRD)	Negative (–)
P5 Integrated SRD Framework	Self-Referenced Development (SRD) → Personal Growth Outcomes	Positive (+)
P6 Positive Youth Development and Self-Determination Theory	Brotherhood Climate moderates the negative effect of Social Comparison Orientation on SRD	Buffering Effect

Source: Developed by the authors based on Self-Determination Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Positive Youth Development, and the conceptual synthesis proposed in this study.

Table 2 highlights the integrative nature of the proposed framework by linking multiple theoretical traditions within a unified developmental model. The framework positions SRD as the central mechanism translating educational experiences into personal growth outcomes, while recognizing social comparison orientation as a competing evaluative logic and brotherhood climate as a contextual condition that protects developmental processes from excessive comparative pressures.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Rethinking Development in Scouting Education

The primary objective of this paper has been to reconsider how personal growth should be conceptualized within scouting education. Although scouting has historically positioned itself as a developmental movement dedicated to character formation, leadership development, citizenship, and service, contemporary scouting increasingly operates within educational environments that emphasize competition, ranking, and visible performance outcomes. This evolution creates a fundamental tension between developmental and comparative understandings of success.

The present framework suggests that this tension is not merely a practical issue but a theoretical one. Existing educational systems frequently assume that achievement and development represent closely related outcomes. However, the conceptual analysis presented here indicates that the two are not necessarily synonymous. Comparative achievement reflects an individual's position relative to others, whereas development reflects change occurring within the individual across time. The distinction is particularly important because educational environments often reward achievement while simultaneously claiming to promote development. Yet success in one domain does not automatically imply success in the other.

From this perspective, the central contribution of Self-Referenced Development (SRD) is its reconceptualization of personal growth as a process of temporal self-improvement rather than interpersonal comparison. Rather than evaluating success according to normative performance standards, SRD directs attention toward developmental trajectories characterized by increasing competence, leadership capacity, character consistency, service orientation, and reflective capability. This shift fundamentally changes how educational success is interpreted. The critical question becomes not whether individuals outperform their peers but whether they become more capable, responsible, and socially engaged than they were previously.

Importantly, this argument does not imply that achievement outcomes lack educational value. Rather, it suggests that achievement and development should be treated as conceptually distinct phenomena. Achievement may provide evidence of performance, whereas development provides evidence of transformation. Scouting, as a developmental educational movement, has historically prioritized transformation. The SRD framework therefore offers a theoretical mechanism for preserving this developmental focus in environments increasingly influenced by comparative evaluation.

5.2 Extending Existing Theories of Human Development

A major implication of the present framework is its contribution to broader discussions within educational psychology and youth development research. Existing theories provide valuable insights regarding motivation, achievement, self-regulation, and developmental growth, yet they often focus on specific components of the developmental process. The introduction of SRD contributes by integrating these perspectives through a common evaluative mechanism.

From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, the framework extends existing understanding of how autonomy-supportive environments facilitate growth. Prior research has established that autonomy support enhances motivation, engagement, and well-being (Howard *et al.*, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020). The present framework suggests that one reason these outcomes occur is because autonomy-supportive contexts encourage individuals to evaluate success according to self-endorsed developmental standards rather than externally imposed comparative criteria. In this sense, SRD may represent a cognitive-developmental pathway through which need-supportive environments influence long-term growth.

The framework also extends Achievement Goal Theory. Traditional goal orientation research distinguishes mastery goals from performance goals and demonstrates the adaptive advantages of mastery-oriented learning environments (Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). The present study builds upon this distinction by proposing that self-referenced evaluation functions as a broader developmental principle extending beyond competence acquisition alone. Whereas mastery goals primarily concern learning and achievement, SRD encompasses leadership, character, contribution, and reflective development. Consequently, SRD broadens the application of mastery-oriented thinking beyond achievement contexts toward holistic human development.

Similarly, the framework contributes to Social Comparison Theory by identifying circumstances under which comparative evaluation may become developmentally problematic. Existing scholarship has extensively documented how social comparison influences self-concept, motivation, and emotional functioning. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to explaining how comparison-oriented evaluation may redirect educational systems away from developmental objectives. The SRD framework highlights this possibility and suggests that developmental contexts may require evaluative systems that reduce dependence on normative comparison.

Finally, the framework contributes to Positive Youth Development scholarship by providing a conceptual mechanism linking developmental experiences with developmental outcomes. PYD emphasizes competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution as indicators of healthy development (Lerner *et al.*, 2021). SRD complements this perspective by explaining how individuals cognitively interpret developmental progress across these domains. In doing so, it offers a potentially useful explanatory construct for understanding how positive developmental outcomes emerge within supportive educational environments.

5.3 From Performance-Centered to Development-Centered Education

Beyond scouting, the proposed framework raises broader questions regarding contemporary educational practice. Educational systems increasingly operate within cultures characterized by accountability metrics, rankings, awards, standardized performance indicators, and public recognition systems. While these mechanisms may facilitate evaluation and comparison, they may also encourage the perception that educational success is primarily defined by measurable achievement.

The SRD perspective challenges this assumption. If the ultimate purpose of education is human development rather than merely performance optimization, then educational evaluation should account for developmental trajectories in addition to comparative outcomes. Indicators such as resilience, leadership maturity, ethical responsibility, civic engagement, reflective capacity, and service orientation are often less visible than academic or competitive achievements, yet they represent essential dimensions of long-term human development.

This argument resonates with growing calls for more holistic educational approaches that emphasize flourishing, well-being, purpose, agency, and lifelong learning. Development-centered education recognizes that meaningful growth frequently occurs in ways that cannot

be fully captured through rankings or competitive performance indicators. Accordingly, the contribution of educational institutions should be evaluated not only according to what individuals achieve but also according to who they become.

Within this broader context, scouting provides a particularly valuable setting for examining alternative approaches to educational evaluation. Because scouting explicitly seeks to cultivate character, leadership, citizenship, and service, it offers an opportunity to explore developmental frameworks that prioritize transformation rather than competition. The concept of SRD therefore has potential relevance not only for scouting but also for other forms of youth education, leadership development, experiential learning, and community-based education.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

The present study makes three primary theoretical contributions.

First, it introduces Self-Referenced Development as a novel conceptual construct that captures a previously underexplored dimension of educational development. Existing literature acknowledges self-based standards of competence and the importance of self-improvement, yet relatively little attention has been devoted to conceptualizing self-referenced evaluation as a multidimensional developmental framework. SRD addresses this gap by providing a theoretically grounded construct encompassing mastery, leadership, service, character, and reflective growth.

Second, the study contributes to theory integration. Research on motivation, achievement, social comparison, and youth development has often progressed within relatively independent theoretical traditions. The present framework demonstrates how these perspectives can be integrated through a common developmental mechanism. By positioning SRD as the central evaluative process linking educational experiences with developmental outcomes, the framework provides a more comprehensive explanation of personal growth within scouting education.

Third, the study advances a development-centered conceptualization of educational success. Rather than defining success through comparative achievement alone, the framework emphasizes developmental progress across time. This reconceptualization contributes to broader scholarly discussions concerning the purpose of education and the criteria used to evaluate developmental outcomes.

5.5 Practical Implications

The proposed framework also generates important implications for educational practice.

For scout leaders, the framework highlights the importance of emphasizing developmental progress rather than comparative outcomes. Leaders may strengthen SRD by encouraging goal setting, reflective practice, personal growth monitoring, and developmental feedback. Such approaches help participants recognize progress that may otherwise remain invisible within competition-oriented systems.

For scouting organizations, the framework suggests the need to reconsider how success is recognized and evaluated. While competitions may remain valuable educational tools, recognition systems should also acknowledge developmental achievements related to leadership growth, community contribution, character development, and personal improvement. Such recognition may help maintain alignment between organizational practices and educational philosophy.

For schools and youth-serving organizations, the framework offers an alternative perspective on extracurricular education. Programs designed to promote leadership, citizenship, service, and character development may benefit from assessment approaches that emphasize

developmental trajectories rather than solely performance outcomes. Development-centered evaluation may provide a more accurate representation of educational impact in contexts where holistic growth constitutes a primary objective.

For parents, the framework underscores the importance of reinforcing developmental rather than comparative definitions of success. Encouraging young people to focus on personal growth, learning, effort, and contribution may strengthen resilience and intrinsic motivation while reducing dependence on external validation.

5.6 Future Research Directions

As a conceptual contribution, the present framework establishes several directions for future inquiry.

The first priority involves the development and validation of a multidimensional SRD measurement scale. Empirical validation is necessary to establish the construct's dimensional structure, reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity relative to related constructs such as self-efficacy, mastery orientation, growth mindset, and self-regulated learning.

Second, future studies should empirically test the mechanism-based framework proposed in this article. Quantitative research could examine the relationships among autonomy-supportive practices, mastery-oriented experiences, reflective learning, social comparison orientation, brotherhood climate, and SRD. Such investigations would provide evidence regarding the explanatory power of the proposed model.

Third, longitudinal studies are particularly important because developmental processes unfold across time. Longitudinal designs would enable researchers to examine whether SRD predicts sustained growth in leadership, character, service orientation, well-being, and civic engagement throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Fourth, future research should investigate SRD across different cultural contexts. Because educational systems vary substantially in their emphasis on competition, achievement, and collective development, cross-cultural studies may reveal important contextual differences in how self-referenced development emerges and operates.

Finally, researchers should examine the applicability of SRD beyond scouting education. The framework may prove relevant for leadership programs, youth organizations, experiential education initiatives, community-based learning environments, and other developmental settings where personal growth represents a central educational objective.

Taken together, these directions provide a foundation for a broader research agenda focused on understanding how educational systems can promote developmental growth while resisting excessive dependence on comparison-based definitions of success.

6. Conclusion

This study was motivated by a growing tension within contemporary scouting education between two competing evaluative logics: the traditional developmental philosophy emphasizing personal growth and the increasingly pervasive influence of comparison-oriented achievement systems. Although scouting has historically prioritized character formation, leadership development, service, and continuous self-improvement, existing literature has provided limited theoretical explanation regarding how developmental educational environments can preserve their educational integrity when exposed to evaluation systems grounded in competition, ranking, and comparative performance. To address this gap, the present conceptual paper introduced Self-Referenced Development

(SRD) as a novel framework for understanding personal growth through temporal self-improvement rather than interpersonal comparison.

The central contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of developmental success. Whereas much of the existing literature evaluates educational outcomes through competence demonstration, achievement attainment, or comparative performance, the SRD framework proposes that meaningful development should be understood as progressive change relative to one's own prior levels of functioning. By integrating insights from Self-Determination Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Positive Youth Development, the study advances a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals interpret growth within developmental educational settings. In doing so, the framework extends current knowledge by positioning self-referenced evaluation as the central mechanism linking educational experiences to broader developmental outcomes, including leadership growth, character consistency, service orientation, reflective improvement, and personal mastery.

The proposed framework also contributes to theory development by addressing fragmentation across previously separate streams of scholarship. Existing theories explain important aspects of motivation, achievement, self-regulation, and youth development, yet they provide only partial explanations regarding how developmental and comparative evaluative systems coexist within educational environments. SRD offers an integrative perspective that connects these traditions through a shared developmental logic, thereby extending mastery-oriented and developmental perspectives beyond competence acquisition toward a more holistic conception of human growth. More broadly, the framework advances a development-centered paradigm that challenges the assumption that educational success should be defined primarily through comparative achievement.

Beyond its theoretical significance, the framework generates important implications for educational practice and policy. For scouting organizations, youth development programs, schools, and leadership education initiatives, the findings highlight the need to design evaluation systems that recognize developmental trajectories rather than solely comparative outcomes. Educational practices emphasizing autonomy support, mastery-oriented learning, reflective processes, and supportive peer relationships may strengthen developmental growth while reducing excessive dependence on external validation. The framework also suggests that educational institutions should complement performance indicators with measures that capture transformation in leadership, character, civic engagement, and personal responsibility, thereby aligning evaluation systems more closely with long-term developmental objectives.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. As a conceptual study, the proposed framework remains theoretically derived and has not yet been subjected to empirical validation. The dimensional structure of SRD, the causal relationships proposed within the framework, and the moderating role of brotherhood climate require systematic empirical examination. In addition, the framework was developed primarily within the context of scouting education, and its applicability across different educational, organizational, and cultural settings remains an open question. These limitations, however, should be viewed not as weaknesses but as opportunities for further theoretical refinement and empirical advancement.

Future research should focus on developing and validating a multidimensional SRD scale, testing the proposed mechanism-based model through longitudinal and cross-sectional designs, and examining the construct across diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Scholars may also investigate potential mediating and moderating mechanisms, explore developmental outcomes beyond those proposed in this study, and evaluate whether SRD contributes uniquely beyond related constructs such as mastery orientation, growth mindset, self-efficacy, and self-regulated learning. Such efforts would not only strengthen the

nomological validity of SRD but also contribute to a broader understanding of how educational systems can cultivate sustainable human development.

In conclusion, this study argues that the future of scouting education and potentially developmental education more broadly depends not on how effectively individuals learn to surpass others, but on how effectively they learn to surpass their former selves. By introducing Self-Referenced Development as a theoretically grounded alternative to comparison-based evaluation, this paper offers a new lens for understanding personal growth, redefines the meaning of educational success, and provides a foundation for a more human-centered, development-oriented approach to youth education in an increasingly performance-driven world.

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