Bridging Cultures: Teaching Indigenous People (IP) Learners from the Lenses of Teachers in a Public Elementary School

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Abstract

Teachers play a significant role in realizing United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal Number 4: Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education. This quest includes building an inclusive learning environment which serves as the very heart of indigenous people's education. This qualitative study which utilized data triangulation through interviews, class observation, and journaling discusses the challenges and coping strategies of teachers in teaching indigenous people learners in the four recognized indigenous people schools of Aglipay West District of Schools Division Office of Quirino, Region II, Philippines. Findings indicate that contextualization of instructions, utilization of cultural resources, and leveraging dialects boost learning outcomes. However, to achieve these, teachers were required to demonstrate initiatives due to unavailability and limited access to culturally appropriate resources and other underlying challenges toward facilitating IP learners' success. The key towards a culturally responsive and inclusive educational landscape lies in the shared actions of teachers, communities, and policymakers.

Keywords: *inclusive education*, *IP education*, *IP learners*, *teachers' experiences*

1. Introduction

Realizing United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All encounters problems that extend beyond classroom challenges. Obida and Cagoco, (2025) stated that teaching is frequently beset by language challenges since most learners from indigenous backgrounds speak their own dialect, which may vary greatly from the language of instruction.

Mercado (2021) underscored that numerous teachers have reported minimal training in culturally responsive pedagogy, impacting their capacity to work productively with IP learners. Further, he emphasized that the absence of culturally relevant teaching materials hampers the delivery of an effective curriculum.

According to Vindigni, 2024, despite progress in achieving SDG 4, major barriers remain, particularly for marginalized demographics. These include encounters that hinder equitable access to quality education.

Despite the presence of the Indigenous Peoples Education, the program of the Department of Education that recognizes the right of IP communities to a quality education that respects their identity and advocates for indigenous knowledge, skills, and culture., numerous teachers are sent to IP communities unequipped, which is one of the factors that contribute to challenges in providing inclusive, relevant, and effective teaching.

To better face these challenges in teaching IP learners, teachers need to employ various coping mechanisms. Knowing teachers' lived experiences and coping strategies is important to reaching SDG 4, as it informs culturally responsive teaching.

Hence, this study aimed to explore the problems faced by public elementary school teachers in educating IP learners and determine the coping strategies they use as a response to these challenges.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted among 26 public elementary school teachers of the four recognized IP schools in the Aglipay West District, Schools Division of Quirino, Philippines which include Alicia Integrated School, Diodol Elementary School Annex, Diodol Elementary School Main, and San Benigno Elementary School.

A total enumeration sampling technique was employed, encompassing all Kindergarten to Grade 6 teachers. Respondents varied in teaching ethnolinguistic backgrounds, and years of experience, providing a comprehensive understanding of the diverse challenges faced in IP education. According to Concept of Sampling Methodologies and Their Applications, this technique is handy in research when the population is within reach, permitting reliable and accurate data gathering without sampling flaws.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and journal entries. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility, allowing researchers to probe deeper into respondents' responses while maintaining a consistent framework across interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in either Ilocano, Filipino, or English, depending on their preference. With consent, interviews were video recorded for accuracy. Additionally, teacher's classroom session was observed to gain insights into practical teaching strategies, and a journal detailing daily experiences and challenges in teaching IP learners were included.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The process involved transcribing interviews verbatim, coding significant statements, and developing themes that encapsulate the essence of respondents' experiences. To enhance the study's credibility, methodological triangulation was employed by cross-verifying data from interviews, observations, and journal entries.

3. Results

Challenges Experienced by Teachers in Teaching IP Learners

Theme 1. Bridging Cultural and Linguistic Divides

One of the greatest challenges facing teachers in educating Indigenous Peoples learners is how to handle cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom. Williams and Patel (2020) observe that teachers are faced with both cultural and language barriers, especially with students whose first language is indigenous or regional.

Respondents pointed out that even among a single indigenous group—the Ifugao—there are subgroups like the Tuwali and Ayangan. R12 noted the challenge of coping with the different behaviors among these subgroups. R15 and R16 underscored the importance of cultural accommodations and acknowledgment of these diversities in effective teaching.

Language was always cited as the main barrier. Leaño et al. (2019) found that native language teaching improves understanding. Observations 15; R11; R8; R9; R10; indicated that employing learners' dialect improves understanding, confidence, and engagement. For example, lower-grade learners needed translation into Tuwali for improved understanding.

The Australian Association for Research in Education also acknowledged language as a shared communication barrier between teachers and IP learners.Teachers often pointed out the importance of adjusting to language requirements. In Observations 9 and 14, learners reacted in various languages (English, Filipino, Ilocano, Ifugao), underlining the multilingual context.

Teachers narrated anecdotal tales of language difficulties. R1 and R5 validated the communication difficulty when the teacher does not use the learners' language. R2 reported a funny incident of being misunderstood because she was not familiar with the Ifugao dialect, emphasizing the need for learner and peer support in translation. R18 and R25 described how they asked for help from colleagues or learners to communicate and understand, resulting in mutual learning.

Non-verbal methods were also important. Rater's Note 4 and Observation 2 indicate that the teachers utilized gestures and sign language to assist in understanding. A journal entry highlighted how emotions and facial expressions facilitated communications gaps when the spoken words were not comprehended.

Finally, educating IP learners demands an acceptance of their linguistic and cultural diversity. It is not only a pedagogical shift but also an assurance of equity, inclusion, and quality education for everyone.

Theme 2. Addressing Multi-Layered Challenges

Teachers encounter various challenges in the delivery of quality education to IP learners. One major challenge is insufficient indigenous and appropriate instructional materials, which hinder learners from engaging and understanding. This is pointed out by respondents R14, R17, and R23 who highlight the inadequacy of indigenized materials that would make lessons culturally significant. To address these gaps, some teachers, like R2 and R23, innovate by creating their own teaching aids—such as drawings and culturally relevant stories—to better capture learners' attention.

Another critical barrier is the limited teaching time to accommodate all learners, particularly weak readers and writers. Respondents R1, R8, and R17 indicate that lesson time is normally insufficient, and extensive travel distances for students lead to constant tardiness, which further shortens teaching hours. This logistics problem impacts the entire delivery, as indicated by R17 and R8. To address this, teachers constantly advise the learners to get up early in order not to miss early classes.

Socio-economic elements also pose an obstacle to education. Families' poverty among IP learners hinders the acquisition of basic school materials like paper and pencils, which hinders learners from full participation. Financial limitations and the absence of basic needs like quality housing and nutrition are highlighted by respondents R5, R18, and R20 as specific determinants of learners' performance in schools. To at least bridge the gap, teachers provide materials and resources out of their own pockets.

In addition, there is a gap between the school instructional practices and home life of the learners. Respondents R9, R10, and R15 note that variability in family discipline and absence of family support hinders teachers from reinforcing desired behavior and study habits. Even if quality teaching is offered by the teachers, lack of reinforcement at home restricts learner advancement. To answer this, teachers constantly converse with the parents giving them updates regarding their children's development and solicit support.

Despite such challenges, educators are dedicated to providing quality education through modifications of materials and approaches to suit learners' cultural environments, as illustrated by the R2 and R23 respondents. There is a need for increased institutional support towards such improvement, such as the availability of culturally suitable teaching materials and cooperation with families and communities, as implied throughout the data.

Coping Strategies Used by Teachers in Teaching IP Learners

Theme 3. Tailoring Teaching to Local Needs

This theme underscores the importance of cultural applicability in learning materials and instructional approaches. Teachers connect teaching methods in the culture of IP learners, connecting gaps between curricular content and learners' background. According to Abad (2020), the utilization of localized narratives and materials enhanced learners' engagement and comprehension, particularly if they represented the reality of the community.

Respondents showed flexibility by contextualizing and localizing materials—adjusting examples (such as apples and grapes) with common fruits in the locality (such as atis and bananas). These adjustments made lessons more applicable, reduced complicated ideas, and aided understanding. R1 and R5 both underscored replacing unfamiliar elements with familiar ones known to learners to aid understanding. R23, R8, and R13 reiterated that indigenized content appeals to learners, enhances cultural pride, and enhances learning outcomes.

In addition, contextualizing entire lessons was practiced. R16, R17, and R14 emphasized having to modify lesson plans, instruction, and even instruction language to accommodate IP learners'

backgrounds. Observations further verified such strategies, as observed in using characters such as "Benjo," an IP child, and common words such as tumayyap (to fly in Ifugao) during lessons.

Simplification and alignment with learners' prior knowledge were other major strategies. R5 and R14 emphasized once again that making the lesson simpler to align with learners' level of familiarity leads to enhanced understanding. At the same time, R11 and R18 emphasized how cultural representation in narratives, names, and images makes learners more connected to the content and keeps their interest alive.

Practical and experiential learning also came into focus. R25 emphasized employing activities based on everyday life, such as narratives and pictorial representations, while observation 18 indicated that examples culturally relevant in group activities improved engagement and understanding.

This topic demonstrates how teachers own responsive teaching through localizing material, using cultural symbols, and modifying teaching methods. These actions not only make learning effective but also affirm the learner's identity and build an enhanced sense of belonging to the lessons, leading to an exclusively inclusive learning environment.

Theme 4. Fostering Empathetic Teaching

Compassionate teaching became a vital approach among teachers teaching IP learners. There was a strong focus on emotional intelligence, cultural empathy, and reflective pedagogy to achieve respectful learning environments. Aligning with the positive relationship between cultural sensitivity and better learner achievements as identified by Baron (2023), the findings demonstrate the way teachers' compassionate practices result in significant learning experiences.

Most of the teachers engaged in emotional awareness by paying attention to learners' cultural and emotional signals. For example, R2 highlighted the need to pay attention to learners' emotions to prevent internal resistance and explained modifying classroom material according to learners' feedback. R8 underscored the need to carefully choose words and depictions to avoid harm or trouble, while R1 underscored the need to exercise caution through speech and materials to prevent unintentionally marginalization. Likewise, R5 underscored the importance of being tactful in spoken interactions not to cause emotional harm to learners.

Teachers emphasized the importance of enhancing their knowledge about indigenous cultures in order not to cause unintentional offense. R7 emphasized learning regarding the learners' cultural background in order not to get things wrong. R20 practiced respect for cultures by acknowledging and respecting learners' heritage as a way of comprehending diversity in the classroom.

In presenting content, teachers such as R2 were able to balance the curriculum without sacrificing cultural sensitivity by localizing illustrations and actively engaging learners' feelings in teaching. This adaptive, learner-focused method allowed teachers to maintain academic standards without compromising learners' cultural identities.

Observational findings confirmed these methods. In Rater's Note 6, a teacher supported learning via open discussion and board work, giving learners room to reflect and exchange. Observations

5, 9, 14, 17, 19, and 11 also uncovered teachers rendering material into learners' dialects, eliciting multilingual answers in English, Filipino, Ilocano, and Ifugao, and cultivating spontaneous conversations in local languages. For instance, learners employed their native dialects—like using "tullo" and "oppat" for numbers three and four, or expressions like "eleven ke ahoy"—showing that language inclusion promoted both understanding and relationship-building.

Teachers such as R1 and R5 underscored how incidental use of words could make learners feel deprived or ridiculed. Their comments highlighted the importance of intentional linguistic care and culturally sensitive instructional decisions.

Self-reflection was also a critical tactic. R11 mentioned consistently checking their own words and deeds to avoid bias and soliciting feedback from learners, peers, and community members. This forward thinking was also applied to ongoing to enhance cultural awareness. R14 also explained reflecting daily to gauge the lesson appropriateness as well as the emotional resonance for learners.

Building relationships through open communication facilitated inclusiveness. R2 explained that having comfortable conversations helped to establish trust and reaffirm equality, even across differing cultures. By engaging in such relational practices, teachers disassembled potential barriers and opened classroom culture.

These stories describe how empathy, self-knowledge, and respect for culture are used by teachers to build secure and inclusive learning environments for IP students. Reflective teaching, empathetic communication, and relational connection were found to enhance learner engagement, promote a sense of belonging, and validate cultural identities — uncovering the profound importance of developing empathetic pedagogy in indigenous education environments.

4. Discussion

Challenges Experienced by Teachers in Teaching IP Learners

Theme 1: Bridging Cultural and Linguistic Divides

Teachers encounter significant challenges in teaching IP learners because of cultural and linguistic differences in the classroom. Teachers highlighted the intricacy of dealing with numerous indigenous groups each with different cultural practices and ways of communication. Misunderstanding is prevalent when learners belong to different tribes, and this has necessitated instruction strategies that consider such differences.

The use of native tongues in school was a determining element for proper learning. According to teachers, IP learners learn better, are more confident, and participate more actively when taught using their native tongues. Lessons translated into native languages were necessary, especially at the lower grades, as language was more apparent there. The utilization of local languages further facilitated improved learners understanding and retention.

Teachers also realized their own weaknesses in communicating in local languages given that they were not very proficient. To address these gaps, teachers tended to use learner or peer translation and refer to local colleagues for advice. Non-verbal communication methods, including the use of sign language, were employed to assist in breaking down understanding.

Despite all these, attempts by teachers to adopt and integrate indigenous cultures and languages in teaching are evidence of a pledge towards inclusive and equitable education. The practice places priority on the use of cultural sensitivity in learning not only as a scholarly demand but as a pledge towards promoting inclusivity and appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems.

Theme 4. Addressing Multi-Layered Challenges

Teachers are confronted with a range of challenges that impede the efficient transmission of general learning experience for IP learners. These challenges are not only logistical but also deeply embedded in economic and systemic issues.

One of the major challenges is the lack of indigenous teaching materials. IP learners are advantaged by materials that are culturally grounded, which facilitate their connection with the lessons. There is a visible absence of contextualized materials, especially in rural areas, which hampers the delivery of effective inclusive education. To overcome this, teachers often rely on their creativity and resourcefulness. Many teachers create their own materials, such as culturally relevant stories or visual aids like drawings, to help engage learners and facilitate learning. This innovative approach demonstrates their commitment to providing quality education despite the lack of resources.

Time constraints also present themselves as an impediment to efficient teaching. Teachers realize that available time for classes is not adequate to provide individual attention to every learner, and more so, those who need it most. This problem is further aggravated by logistical issues, such as extensive distances travel, resulting in tardiness and missed activities. To address these, teachers are consistent with providing advises to the learners.

Socio-economic limitations also add to the problem. Most of the learners belong to poor families and do not have access to simple school materials. Teachers also engage in additional work, like supplying printed material from their own pockets, to assist their learners and provide them with the means to learn.

Family problems further complicate learning. Inconsistency in the discipline at home and lack of support from home is one of the problems need to be addressed by the teachers. This break between home and school usually culminates into behavioral problems as learners find it hard to apply the behaviors at home that they learn at school. To address this, teachers relay this with the parents through open communication and meeting.

Coping Strategies Used by Teachers in Teaching IP Learners

Theme 3. Tailoring Teaching to Local Needs

Teachers utilize localized and contextualized instructional materials to enhance lesson relevance and effectiveness. The strategy helps learners relate to the lessons, ensuring increased engagement and enhanced understanding.

Teachers acknowledge that locally accessible products, terms, and examples should be utilized in class. This makes the lesson more understandable and relatable to learners. Parallel to this, teachers

localize curriculum texts to match the cultural components that they are familiar with, therefore increasing their involvement and interest in the lessons.

Teachers frequently adapt their pedagogy to suit the cultural background of the learners. This involves simplifying the material and adapting teaching techniques to make the lesson more satisfactory. Teachers utilize known objects, experiences, or tales from the learners' community to facilitate the explanation of concepts. This highlights the need for cultural representation in learning, as it not only enhances understanding but also reinforces the identity and pride of the learners.

The use of culturally sensitive teaching methods extends beyond materials to the way lessons are delivered. Teachers employ hands-on activities, visual aids, and storytelling, which are strategies that resonate well with IP learners. These approaches help learners engage with the lesson more effectively and retain information better.

Theme 4. Fostering Empathetic Teaching

Cultural sensitivity, emotional awareness, and reflective teaching in creating an inclusive learning environment for IP learners are essential in realizing an inclusive education. The teachers' attempts to respect and integrate their learners' cultural backgrounds into their teaching practices were reflected in their focus on localizing materials, lesson simplification, and sensitivity to language and emotions. The respondents' comments emphasize the need to respect differences and adapt instruction to make a space in which IP learners are heard, understood, and engaged.

The focus on language sensitivity, as in the deliberate employment of dialects and local language, also testifies to the fact that cultural inclusivity goes beyond content—it is also about communication that evokes a sense of belonging and respect.

Teachers emphasized the importance of thinking through learners' emotional reactions and cultural sensitivities to ensure their pedagogic approaches are inclusive and culturally responsive. Teachers reflect on their own biases and undertake regular self-evaluation reflects their active perspective towards reducing cultural prejudice and encouraging inclusivity within the classroom.

These practices of teachers are based on empathy, self-knowledge, and an appreciation of the worth of cultural diversity. This integrated approach to teaching not only facilitates improved educational outcomes for IP learners but also leads to a more respectful and inclusive learning environment.

5. Conclusion

Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 — Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All requires joint, evidence-based, and persistent action from the entire community. From the perspective of Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd), such objectives mean that an educational system is required that takes into consideration and addresses the cultural, language, and socio-economic contexts of IP learners

Teachers working among IP communities encounter challenges, such as language difference, misunderstanding between cultures, lack of instructional materials, shortage of instructional time, and socio-economic disadvantage among learners and their families.

Despite these obstacles, most teachers have a remarkable degree of adaptability and empathy. They learn culturally responsive pedagogies, localize curriculum to represent indigenous knowledge systems, and employ learners' mother tongues or dialects to facilitate understanding and deepen engagement. These are not just teaching strategies—they are acts of respect and inclusion that affirm the identities and lived worlds of IP learners.

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