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Learning Against the Odds: The Lived Experiences of Indigenous Peoples Learners

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Index Terms:

Indigenous Peoples, lived experiences, phenomenology, educational access, resilience, inclusive education, culturally responsive education

Abstract. The Philippines is home to diverse Indigenous Peoples (IPs), whose unique and distinct cultures, traditions, languages, and ways of life shape their educational experiences. Despite policy efforts to promote inclusive education, many indigenous learners continue to experience difficulties, face challenges, and significant barriers in accessing quality education, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of Indigenous Peoples learners in their pursuit of education. Data were collected from ten (10) IP learners through in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes that characterized the participants' experiences. The findings revealed three major themes: (1) lived experiences and challenges in pursuing education, characterized by long, arduous and hazardous journeys to school, geographical isolation, and economic hardship; (2) positive perceptions of education as a pathway to a better future and a means of overcoming poverty; and (3) coping mechanisms anchored on resilience, optimism, family support, hard work and perseverance. Despite experiencing poverty, food insecurity, and limited educational resources, the participants demonstrated a strong commitment to completing their education. The study highlights the need for context-responsive educational interventions and support systems that address the unique realities of Indigenous Peoples learners while recognizing their resilience and aspirations. The findings may inform educators, school leaders, and policymakers in developing culturally responsive and inclusive educational programs that enhance educational access, equity, and learner success among indigenous communities and may strengthen collaboration among schools, families, communities and other stakeholders.

Introduction

Education is an essential need of every individual. According to Webster, "education is the sum of the qualities acquired through individual maturation and social training." Education as defined by Dictionary of Education is, 1.) the aggregate of all processes by which a person develops ability, attitudes and other forms of behaviour of practical values, in the society in which he lives; 2.) the social process by which people are subjected to the influence of a selected and controlled environment, especially that of the school, so that they obtain competence and optimum individual development.

For some, especially for those who are financially constraint, it is just an illusion that can never be reached. Other people believe that it is just a dream and too far from reality. Getting a good education equips one to survive in this very competitive world where the weak are either pushed to the sidelines or gobbled by the powerful. Though very hard to achieve, one has to strive hard to finish school.

The Philippines is a multicultural country that has many diverse indigenous groups which possess unique culture, learning systems and varied languages. The educational and cultural needs of these IP communities have not been given much importance before. Through the enactment of Republic Act 8371, the IP rights act (IPRA) of 1997 supports the provision of 1987 Philippine Constitution that the state shall encourage non-formal, informal and indigenous learning systems as well

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as self- learning, independent and out-of-school study programs particularly those that respond the needs of the community. IPRA recognizes and promotes the rights of IPs. It also assures the maximum participation in education and other needs and goals of ICCs and IPs. These initiatives have recognized and provided better opportunities to Indigenous Communities.

According to Dr. John Dewey, "Education is a continuous process of experiencing and of revising or reorganizing experiences." This statement connotes that education is a continuous process of growth and development. It opens the best path to good life and can change life for the better. The difficulties and challenges in acquiring education are much harder for the indigenous people in the far-flung communities. The distance of home to school, mountainous area to pass, river to cross, different cultures, family status, limited resources are some factors that hinder indigenous children to go to school. It is in this context to find out the struggles, challenges, experiences and the coping strategies of learners to pursue their studies.

The researcher chose this study for the following reasons: first, to keep the teachers who are assigned in an IP school aware of the community they are into and help them understand more their learners. Second, to give inspiration to IP learners and let them see that education can be achieved when one has commitment and perseverance and that being an IP is not a reason not to reach one's dreams and aspirations in life.

Research Questions

This research aimed to find out the struggles, challenges, experiences, and the coping strategies of learners to pursue their studies. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences and challenges encountered by IP learners in pursuit of education in terms of the following aspects:
    a. Topographical
    b. Financial
    c. Social
    d. Cultural
2. What is the IP learners' perception of education?
3. How do IP learners cope with the difficulties they encounter in their studies?

Methodology

The study used a qualitative research and phenomenological research design that sought to answer this study. Qualitative research is a type of social science research that collects and works with non- numerical data and that seeks to interpret meaning from these data that help us under-stand social life through the study of targeted populations or places, Crossman, (2019). Within sociology, this type is typically focused on the micro-level of social interaction that composes everyday life. Qualitative researchers use their own eyes, ears, and intelligence to collect in-depth perceptions and descriptions of targeted populations, places, and events. A qualitative approach in this study presented rich descriptions and experiences of IP learners in their endeavor for attaining education to accurately describe the phenomenon.

Phenomenology is the study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology involves the "bracketing" or putting aside the usual perception so that we can uncover the pure constituents of conscious experience. This conscious experience, in turn, is seen as the basis of personal meaning, as one reflects of his experiences in the context of his goals and purposes. It also involves the notion of "multiple realities" i.e. different people may consciously experience the world in diverse ways. In order to understand the meaning of person's actions, one must adept, through empathy, as seeing things from their point of view. This approach refers to the study of how people describe things and experience them through senses." (Creswell, 2009).

According to Christensen, Johnson and Turner (2010) the primary objective of a phenomenological study is to explicate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a person, or a group of people around a specific phenomenon. The phenomenologist attempts to understand human behaviour through the eyes of participants in the study. Phenomenology does not begin with a theory, but, instead, begins with a phenomenon under consideration. There are strong links between phenomenology and constructivism (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996) which is concerned with how the world appears to a particular person based on their personal views and experience.

This study used phenomenological approach that focuses on the wholeness of experience and a search for essences of experiences. It can help us understand better one's actions, their struggles in striving for their goals and their way of coping

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up to overcome difficulties. The study was conducted in one of the public schools in the province of Aklan, where ten (10) high school IP learners were enrolled.

The researcher used an interview guide in conducting in-depth interview and open-ended surveys to gather relevant and substantial information for the study. The interview guide questions were organized based on the statement of the problem. It is composed of three (3) parts. The first part is about the experiences and challenges encountered by the participants in terms of financial, social, cultural and topographical aspects. The second part is their perception of education, and the last part is the way the participants cope with the different experiences and challenges they encountered. The participants were guided to open up and allowed to tell their stories freely. There were timely interruptions to have a complete understanding of their stories. A video and audio recorder were utilized to make sure that data were completely collected for analysis and interpretations. A focus group was also done to examine an event or trend that occurred within the community.

The data were gathered through an in-depth-interview presented through narratives of lived experiences of the ten participants using recorded videos and interviews. Then the researcher summarized and organized the narratives into a story form following the statement of the problem as guide. The narratives are presented with subtitles and chapters to present it to readers as short stories. After a thorough process, the researcher made a presentation of the primary experiences. The primary experiences included the researcher's own description of the background of the study, the summary of participants' experiences, their perception of education and the coping strategies to overcome the challenges and my first reflection of the study.

After the researcher had reflected on the experiences shared by each ten participants, it was presented through themes common to all ten lived experiences of the participants. These themes were analyzed and discussed in relation to the existing theories and related literature to have validation of the phenomenon. The themes were presented according to how was the statement of the problem were arranged; describes the lived experiences of the IP learners, the challenges they encountered, their perception of education and the coping mechanism of the learners dealing with their difficulties. All the data gathered are purposely used for this paper and the identity of the respondents were protected to conceal their identity. After making the thematic analysis and external validation, a series of reflections were conducted until eidetic insights were obtained from theses reflections.

Then after, the researcher made a transcendental reflection based on the eidetic reduction wherein the researcher related the same to the researcher's actual encounter to the phenomenon. In these reflections, the researcher brought down the essence or the intrinsic characteristic of the phenomenon into her own consciousness. The researcher related her own experiences and insights to that of the participants of the study.

To further validate the data, a focus group was conducted. The Focus Group Discussion was done after having the one-on-one interview with the respondents for validation of results, data and information collected to them. The final stage was the summary of findings, the conclusion and recommendations.

In the conduct of the study, the participants were explained of the objectives and its significance for transparency. It was clarified to the participants that no ccompensation monetarialor in-kind will be given to them. The researcher also ensured that data are greatly confidential. Lastly, as this study entails field work, the researcher secured permission from community leader.

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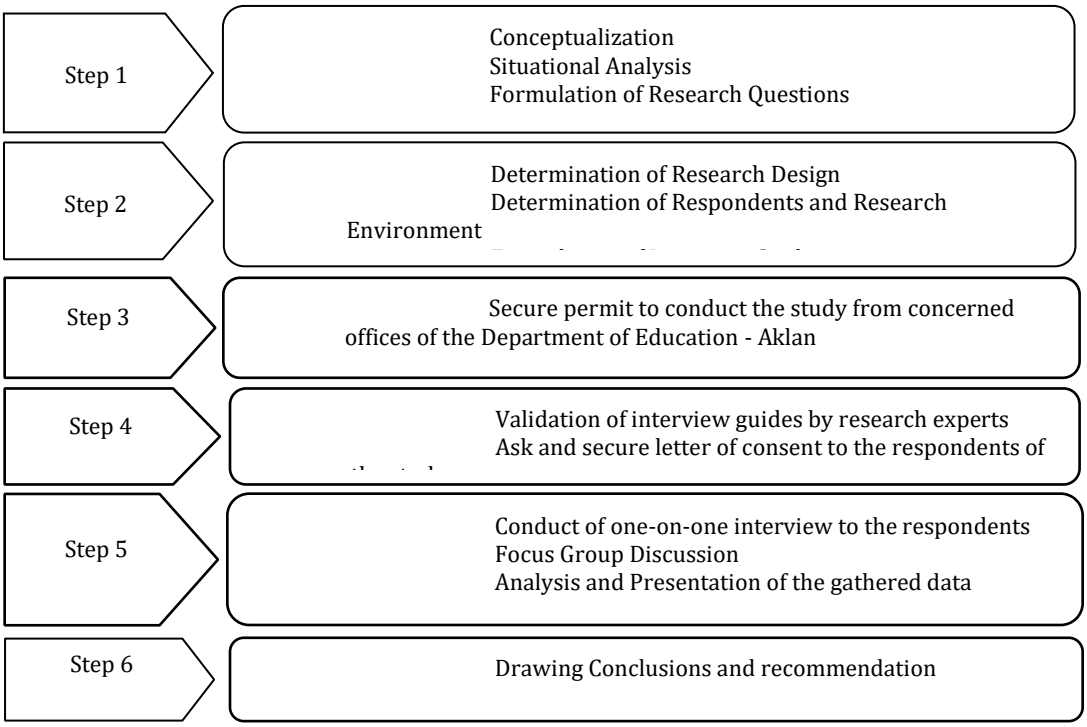


Figure 1. Procedure during the course of the study, from conceptualization to recommendations (recreated as an editable table).

Results and Discussion

The Lived Experiences and Challenges Encountered in Pursuit of Education

The findings revealed that Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners experienced multiple and interconnected challenges in their pursuit of education. These challenges were primarily associated with geographical isolation, poverty, food insecurity, and limited access to educational resources. Despite these adversities, the participants demonstrated remarkable perseverance in attending school and pursuing their educational aspirations.

One of the most prominent experiences shared by the participants was the physical difficulty of traveling to school. Most learners traversed mountainous paths, crossed rivers, and walked long distances daily under varying weather conditions. During the rainy season, these routes became even more hazardous because of slippery trails and swollen rivers, often resulting in absenteeism or exposing learners to significant safety risks.

As Student A narrated:
"We walk for an hour before we reach the school. We pass by a mountainous road, uphill and downhill, so it is very slippery during rainy days. If it is raining, we leave our school bag in our classroom and we go home under the rain. We just feel afraid sometimes if rain goes with lightning and thunder."
Similarly, Student C shared:

"I wake up at around 4:00 a.m. and prepare my baon. I have to leave home by 6:00 a.m. so that I won't be late. I also cross a river, but if it is flooded, I have no alternative route, so I really have to be absent from class."

These accounts illustrate how geographical barriers significantly influence school attendance and educational participation among learners residing in remote indigenous communities. This finding supports previous studies which emphasized that long travel distances, unsafe routes, and inadequate transportation remain major barriers to educational access among indigenous learners in geographically isolated areas (UNESCO, 2021; Philippine Institute for Development Studies [PIDS], 2020).

Beyond geographical challenges, poverty emerged as another recurring experience among the participants. Most learners came from large families whose primary sources of livelihood were farming, abaca weaving, carpentry, bamboo gathering,

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and copra production. These occupations generated irregular and insufficient income, making it difficult for families to meet even their basic needs.

Student B explained:
"We cross a river and two streams, and if the river is flooded, we traverse the high, risky, rocky terrain as an alternate route. My parents work on the farm. I am the third among nine siblings. During lunchtime, I go home because I don't have viand if I pack lunch. My parents need to equally divide our food among us."

Likewise, Student J stated:
"Abaca and copra are our source of living. Sometimes, we lack food. I bring packed lunch, but there are times that I don't have anything for recess. We are also short of school needs sometimes."

Student A also shared:
"My parents do abaca weaving for our source of living. We also sell bamboo. Sometimes my parents borrow money for our food and pay it after they have sold the bamboo."

These narratives highlight how economic deprivation extends beyond household income and directly affects learners' nutrition, school attendance, and access to educational materials. Existing literature consistently reports that poverty and food insecurity reduce learners' academic engagement, concentration, and educational outcomes, particularly among marginalized and indigenous populations (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2018).

Despite these economic and environmental challenges, participants did not perceive their indigenous identity as an obstacle to learning. They reported that communication with teachers and classmates was generally manageable because their local language closely resembled the dominant language spoken in nearby communities. Although traditional cultural practices remained evident within their communities, these were viewed as valuable aspects of their identity rather than barriers to educational participation.

This finding aligns with culturally responsive education literature, which argues that indigenous culture itself does not hinder academic success; rather, educational inequalities stem from structural barriers such as poverty, geographic isolation, and limited educational support (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP], 2007; UNESCO, 2021).

IP Learners Perception of Education

The findings revealed that despite their difficult living conditions, participants attached immense value to education. Education was consistently viewed as the most important pathway toward achieving a better future, overcoming poverty, and improving the living conditions of their families.

Student E expressed:
"I will study hard to help my parents in sending my younger brothers and sisters to school. My parents work hard for us, so I have to show them that I am studying well. Education is the only thing that cannot be taken by others."

Similarly, Student H stated:
"Just like any other student who has gone through many sacrifices, I also value education because this is one way of overcoming poverty. I don't want my future children to experience the difficult life we have now, so I will try my best to finish my studies and find a better job."

Student I further shared:
"I value my education because my parents always remind me that this is the only treasure they can give me. If you are educated, you will not be easily fooled by others."

These statements indicate that participants viewed education not merely as academic achievement but as a long-term investment capable of transforming their personal, social, and economic circumstances. Their aspirations reflected strong hope, responsibility toward their families, and a desire to break the cycle of poverty.

The findings support the Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), which posits that education enhances individuals' knowledge, skills, and future economic opportunities. Likewise, the participants' narratives resonate with studies indicating that indigenous learners perceive education as a means of social mobility while simultaneously preserving their dignity and improving their communities (UNESCO, 2021).

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IP Learners Coping Mechanism with the Difficulties Encountered

The findings revealed that participants developed various coping mechanisms to endure the numerous challenges they encountered while pursuing their education. Their coping strategies revolved around maintaining positive thinking, sustaining educational aspirations, drawing strength from family support, participating in school activities, and contributing to their households through work.

Student B shared:
"I keep myself motivated by what education can give me. I look for work whenever I am free to support my school needs and help my younger brothers and sisters. I learn to accept what we have at present so that I will not lose hope. I also enjoy spending time with my friends."

Similarly, Student F stated:
"To cope with the difficulties, I focus more on my studies and always think positively that all our sacrifices will bring success in the future. Even though it is hard, I have to endure to finish my studies. I also join school activities to inspire myself."

Student H likewise explained:
"During weekends and holidays, I work on the farm to help my parents. By doing this, I feel that I contribute to the needs of the family. I also spend some of my free time with my friends."

These narratives demonstrate that resilience among indigenous learners is strengthened by optimism, perseverance, family responsibility, and social support. Rather than surrendering to adversity, participants actively sought ways to remain engaged in their education despite numerous hardships.

This finding is consistent with resilience theory, which suggests that protective factors such as family support, positive future orientation, self-determination, and meaningful social relationships enable individuals to adapt successfully despite adverse circumstances (Masten, 2014). Similarly, Ungar (2011) emphasized that resilience develops through interactions between individuals and supportive social environments that nurture hope, motivation, and persistence.

Overall, the participants' lived experiences portray indigenous learners as resilient individuals who continue to pursue education despite structural barriers. Their narratives demonstrate that while poverty, geographical isolation, and limited resources remain significant challenges, strong family values, optimism, determination, and belief in the transformative power of education sustain their commitment to completing their schooling.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study found that the Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners enrolled in one of the public schools in the province of Aklan demonstrated remarkable resilience, determination, and perseverance despite facing significant geographical and socioeconomic challenges. These learners regularly travel long distances through rivers, stiff terrain, and forested areas to attend school, yet remain committed to pursuing their education. Their economic conditions serve as a source of motivation rather than a barrier, strengthening their resolve to achieve a better future. Furthermore, language differences and the preservation of indigenous culture did not hinder their communication with teachers, interaction with peers, or participation in academic activities. The findings also revealed that the learners highly value education, viewing it as a pathway to overcome poverty and improve their quality of life. Despite difficult living conditions, they exhibited positive attitudes, adaptability, and effective coping strategies that enabled them to remain focused on their studies. Based on these findings, the study recommends sustained support for IP learners through culturally responsive educational practices and collaborative community initiatives. Learners are encouraged to continue pursuing their education and serve as role models within their communities. Teachers should deepen their understanding of the IP communities where they are assigned by becoming familiar with local cultures, traditions, livelihoods, and geographical conditions, while developing culturally relevant and indigenous learning materials that enhance learner engagement. Moreover, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) is encouraged to strengthen programs that improve the welfare and educational opportunities of Indigenous Peoples by fostering partnerships, supporting community extension initiatives, and engaging indigenous elders and leaders in preserving cultural knowledge while promoting academic success.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.

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