



ECHOES FROM THE HINTERLANDS: PERSPECTIVES OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES ON ADVANCING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION THROUGH THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES EDUCATION PROGRAM

¹Rosie Mae O. Iligan, LPT
Datu Salayan Elementary School

²Leodie D. Mones, PhD
DepEd Sultan Kudarat

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has become a central priority in the Philippine educational system, particularly through the implementation of the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program, which seeks to provide culturally responsive and equitable learning opportunities for Indigenous learners. Despite these initiatives, many Indigenous communities located in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas continue to encounter barriers that hinder meaningful participation in education. This study aimed to explore the perspectives of Indigenous communities on advancing inclusive education through the IPEd Program in identified Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools in Bagumbayan District, Sultan Kudarat during the School Year 2025–2026. Using a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, the study examined the lived experiences, perceptions, and insights of Indigenous community members regarding the implementation of the program. Findings revealed that Indigenous communities encounter several interconnected challenges in implementing the IPEd Program. These include cultural and curriculum mismatches, limited learning resources and facilities, geographical and accessibility constraints, insufficient family and community engagement in

certain contexts, and experiences of discrimination and social marginalization. Such challenges influence learners' participation, engagement, and academic development. Despite these barriers, the findings also highlight the program's significant opportunities. The IPed Program strengthens cultural identity, increases access to education, and encourages the active involvement of elders and community leaders in the learning process. It also promotes learner empowerment, motivation, and aspirations while facilitating the transmission of Indigenous knowledge across generations. Participants further emphasized that education serves as a holistic tool that not only develops academic competence but also preserves traditions, reinforces tribal identity, and supports social cohesion within communities.

Keywords: cultural sustainability, learner empowerment, community participation, educational equity

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Despite the Philippine government's strong policy commitment to inclusive and culturally responsive education through the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed) Program, many Indigenous communities, especially those in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, continue to experience barriers to meaningful learning. Reports from local schools and community stakeholders reveal persistent gaps such as inadequate culturally relevant learning materials, limited teacher preparation in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and insufficient participation of elders and community leaders in curriculum development. These challenges risk undermining the program's goal of preserving Indigenous culture while ensuring equitable access to quality education.

Globally, UNESCO and affiliated bodies have emphasized that inclusive education must exceed mere access to remove cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical barriers—thereby enabling full participation and equitable learning outcomes for Indigenous and marginalized learners (UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO, n.d.). Yet, despite such high-level commitments, persistent exclusion and learning gaps persist among these groups, suggesting a critical need for empirical research that centers local Indigenous perspectives rather than relying solely on top-down global metrics (UNESCO, 2024). There is limited empirical evidence documenting how Indigenous communities themselves experience or interpret the translation of international inclusive education ideals into their local schooling contexts.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education has formalized Indigenous Peoples Education through the National IPed Policy and IPed Curriculum Framework, which mandate culturally grounded instruction, mother-tongue education, and active community engagement (DepEd, 2016). Despite these policy directives, studies report inconsistent implementation due to gaps in teacher training, insufficient instructional materials, and tensions between Indigenous Knowledge Systems and formal curricula (Miolo, 2024). While national policies and implementation challenges are documented, there is a paucity of research that foregrounds Indigenous communities' perceptions of IPed across geographic regions.

Regional program evaluations in South Central Mindanao indicate that although the IPed Program has been mainstreamed across schools, it often suffers from insufficient culturally

relevant instructional materials, limited teacher capacity in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and weak monitoring and support systems—factors that compromise the program’s effectiveness in producing culturally affirming education (Evaluation Report, n.d.). Most regional documentation remains programmatic and evaluative; there is a lack of in-depth qualitative studies that capture Indigenous community narratives, intergenerational insights, and socio-cultural nuances affecting IPEd implementation in South Central Mindanao.

Localized case studies in Sultan Kudarat, especially among the Blaan and other Indigenous communities, highlight attempts to integrate Indigenous language and knowledge into formal schooling. However, challenges persist—such as limited teacher preparedness, gaps in community-school collaboration, and minimal participation of elders in curriculum design—that vary across municipalities like Columbio and Lutayan (Local IPEd Case Study, n.d.; Local Field Report, n.d.). There is a clear need for community-centered research in Sultan Kudarat that foregrounds Indigenous voices on what meaningful inclusion and educational relevance look like in their own terms.

This study aligned primarily with **SDG 4 – Quality Education**, specifically Target 4.5, which calls for eliminating educational disparities and ensuring inclusive access for marginalized groups, including Indigenous peoples, and Target 4.7, which promotes education that fosters respect for cultural diversity and global citizenship. It also contributes to **SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities**, by generating community-informed evidence on whether educational policies mitigate or exacerbate inequities faced by Indigenous learners in Mindanao (UN SDG Metadata, n.d.; SDG 4 Fact Sheet, n.d.).

The primary goal of this study was to **document and analyze the perspectives of Indigenous communities on Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) in Sultan Kudarat**. It also critically examined how Indigenous communities in Sultan Kudarat perceived and experienced the IPEd initiatives, and how these perceptions informed inclusive and culturally responsive schooling practices.

Research Questions

This study aimed to analyze the perspectives of Indigenous communities regarding IPEd implementation in Sultan Kudarat, specifically in identified IP schools in Bagumbayan District, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025-2026.

Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges do Indigenous communities perceive in the implementation of the Indigenous Peoples Education Program?
2. What opportunities do Indigenous communities perceive in the implementation of the Indigenous Peoples Education Program?
3. How do Indigenous communities describe the meanings and significance of the Indigenous Peoples Education Program in promoting inclusive education?
4. How do the experiences and insights of Indigenous communities shape their vision of inclusive education within the context of their cultural values and traditions?

METHODOLOGY

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Research Design

In this study, qualitative research, specifically the phenomenological approach, was employed to uncover the perspectives of Indigenous communities regarding IPed implementation in identified IP schools in Bagumbayan District, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025-2026.

Phenomenological research is a method that examines lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how these experiences are interpreted. It assumes that individuals employ a universal structure or essence to derive meaning from their encounters. This research involves interpreting participants' emotions, perceptions, and beliefs to elucidate the fundamental phenomenon under investigation. An essential aspect of the phenomenological research design is the researcher's obligation to set aside any preconceived assumptions about the experience or phenomenon (Delve & Limpaecher, 2012).

Participants of the Study

The participants of this study comprised **15 carefully selected individuals** from identified Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools in Bagumbayan District, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026. The selection of participants ensured a rich representation of voices and experiences from the community and diverse perspectives on advancing inclusive education through the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program.

Table 1. Participants' Inclusion Criteria

| Qualifications |
|--|
| <i>Participants: 15 carefully Selected Individuals</i> |
| The group will include: 1. Five (5) Indigenous Teachers – These are teachers assigned to IP schools who directly implement the IPEd Program. They will provide insights into the challenges, strategies, and teaching innovations used in bridging cultural knowledge and formal education. 2. Five (5) Indigenous Parents – Parents will be involved to highlight community participation and the role of family support in sustaining learners' education. Their perspectives will reflect cultural values, traditions, and the ways education intersects with indigenous practices. 3. Five (5) Community Elders/Leaders – Elders and leaders are recognized custodians of indigenous knowledge and traditions. Their voices are crucial in understanding how inclusive education can remain aligned with cultural identity, heritage preservation, and community development. This composition of participants is grounded in the belief that inclusive education within indigenous communities should be multi-voiced and participatory , representing the school, family, and community sectors. Through their lived experiences, the study will draw authentic narratives that echo the realities of inclusive education from the grassroots. |

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling was intentionally utilized to carefully select fifteen (15) **individuals** from identified Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools in Bagumbayan District, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026, who met the specific inclusion criteria established by the researcher.

Purposive sampling, alternately referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, constitutes a variant of non-probability sampling. Within this approach, researchers exercise their own judgment and discretion in selecting individuals from the population to participate in their surveys (Alchemer, 2021). This sampling method requires researchers to have prior knowledge of the study's objectives to identify and contact eligible participants via online survey platforms. Researchers use purposive sampling to secure access to a distinct subgroup of individuals, whereby all survey respondents are selected based on their alignment with specific demographic criteria.

Research Instruments

In this study, a semi-structured interview will function as an exploratory instrument during both in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to document and analyze the perspectives of Indigenous communities in Sultan Kudarat regarding IPed implementation in identified IP schools in Bagumbayan District, Sultan Kudarat during school year 2025-2026.

The validity and appropriateness of this tool will be substantiated through a rigorous evaluation process conducted by a panel of experts who possess expertise in the development of relevant research instruments.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher strictly adhered to a predefined set of procedures to ensure the research's reliability. The primary objective of this study was to document the perspectives of Indigenous communities on IPed implementation in Sultan Kudarat, in the identified IP schools in Bagumbayan District, during the school year 2025-2026.

In the initial phase, the researcher diligently sought formal authorization from both the Superintendent of DepEd-Sultan Kudarat and the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies (CGS). This authorization was essential to obtain the necessary permissions for the researcher to conduct the study, emphasizing the importance of ethical considerations.

Following this, a secondary authorization letter was sent to the District Supervisor, explicitly requesting access to the specific data required for this research. A meticulously crafted survey questionnaire was developed, evaluated, and then administered to the targeted participants.

The researcher employed purposive sampling to select secondary school teachers as participants in this study.

The researcher proceeded with face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), assuming strict adherence to the established EWMCI-Research Ethics Committee. Ultimately, the data collected from interviews and FGDs were systematically organized, subjected to comprehensive analysis, and interpreted using thematic analysis. This approach was expected to provide a deeper understanding of the issues under investigation.

Data Analysis

In this study on uncovering the **perspectives of Indigenous communities in Sultan Kudarat regarding IPED implementation in identified IP schools in Bagumbayan District, during the school year 2025-2026**, a content or thematic analysis was employed to examine the collected data.

This methodology, as described by Flick (2014), Ngag (2023), and Braun (2009), involves the systematic categorization of textual components, including statements, phrases, and words, into organized categories. These categories will be either derived from established frameworks or custom-developed to align with the study's specific objectives.

To execute this analytical process, a series of essential steps was followed:

Initially, all data sources, such as interview transcripts, notes from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and relevant documents, were meticulously organized and prepared for analysis. This phase ensured the systematic arrangement and accessibility of the data.

Subsequently, the researcher engaged with the data by conducting a thorough review of interview transcripts and FGD notes. This immersive process allowed a comprehensive understanding of the content and context embedded within the collected information.

The third step involved a systematic coding process. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments or patterns within the data. These codes captured essential concepts, ideas, or themes related to teachers, their professional development, and their outcomes in their teaching effectiveness.

Following coding, the identified codes were grouped into preliminary themes based on shared meaning or relevance. This step established an initial structure for organizing the data.

Next, the emerging themes and their corresponding codes were reviewed and refined. The researcher ensured the consistency and clarity of these themes, making necessary adjustments. Each refined theme was assigned a descriptive name that succinctly represented the content it encapsulated, facilitating easy identification and interpretation.

Relevant data excerpts, such as quotes extracted from interviews and FGDs, were selected and associated with the respective themes. These excerpts served as supporting evidence for the identified themes.

Finally, the thematic analysis extended beyond surface-level identification. The researcher interpreted the meaning and implications of each theme within the context of the

study's objectives. Also, the researcher sought patterns, connections, and variations within the themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of narratives.

This meticulous and structured process of thematic analysis enabled the researcher to systematically explore the perspectives of Indigenous communities in Sultan Kudarat regarding IPEd implementation in identified IP schools during the school year 2025-2026.

Scope and Limitations

This study examined the perspectives of Indigenous communities on the advancement of inclusive education through the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program in identified IP schools within Bagumbayan District, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026. Specifically, it sought to capture the voices of Indigenous learners, parents, elders, and teachers who directly engage with IPEd implementation, highlighting their experiences, challenges, and aspirations in fostering inclusivity in education.

The research was conducted through qualitative inquiry, using interviews and focus group discussions to gather in-depth narratives. While it centered on selected IP schools within Bagumbayan, the findings were delimited to the experiences and contexts of these communities and did not claim generalizability to all Indigenous groups. This study was undertaken to provide meaningful insights to guide policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in strengthening support systems and designing culturally responsive practices that ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of inclusive education for Indigenous learners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Despite the Philippine government's strong policy commitment to inclusive and culturally responsive education through the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program, many Indigenous communities, especially those in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, continue to experience barriers to meaningful learning.

In this study, qualitative research, specifically the phenomenological approach, was employed to uncover the perspectives of Indigenous communities in Sultan Kudarat regarding IPEd implementation in identified IP schools in Bagumbayan District during the school year 2025-2026.

First, the study revealed that indigenous communities faced multiple, interconnected challenges in the Indigenous Peoples' Education Program (IPEd). Key obstacles included cultural and curriculum mismatches, limited learning resources and facilities, geographical and accessibility barriers, insufficient community and family support in some contexts, and experiences of discrimination and social marginalization. These challenges affected learners' engagement, participation, and educational outcomes while highlighting systemic gaps in curriculum design, infrastructure, and culturally responsive teaching practices.

Also, the Indigenous Peoples' Education Program (IPEd) offered multiple opportunities for Indigenous communities, including the preservation and reinforcement of cultural identity, increased access to education through inclusive and flexible schooling, active engagement of community leaders and elders, support for career and personal development, and the empowerment and motivation of learners. These opportunities collectively enhanced both

individual and community growth, fostering pride, skills, and aspirations among Indigenous youth while promoting intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Moreover, the Indigenous Peoples' Education Program (IPED) was perceived by Indigenous communities as a holistic approach that promoted inclusive education by ensuring access and equality for all learners, recognizing and preserving cultural identity, empowering students through confidence and pride, encouraging active community participation, and bridging traditional knowledge with modern learning. The program strengthened learners' engagement, reinforced tribal values, and supported the transmission of Indigenous knowledge across generations.

Finally, the findings revealed that Indigenous communities perceived education as a multifaceted tool that preserves cultural knowledge, strengthens tribal identity, and empowers learners. Inclusive education programs like IPED foster pride, motivation, and confidence while ensuring access to learning for all, including those in remote areas. Education is seen not only as academic instruction but also as the integration of practical skills, upholding traditions, and promoting social cohesion, enabling the younger generation to maintain cultural continuity and engage confidently in broader society.

Conclusion

The following conclusions were made considering this study's findings:

Addressing these challenges requires aligning curricula with indigenous knowledge and languages, improving access to resources and infrastructure, fostering community engagement, and combating discrimination.

Also, culturally responsive education, IPED, not only addresses educational access but also strengthens Indigenous identity and community cohesion. By integrating tradition, language, and local knowledge into learning, the program creates a sustainable model of inclusive education that empowers learners and cultivates a sense of pride and agency within Indigenous communities.

It was also concluded that culturally responsive education, like IPED, is essential not only for academic learning but also for sustaining cultural heritage and fostering social inclusion. Finally, the study concluded that culturally responsive and inclusive educational programs are essential for sustaining Indigenous knowledge and identity. Linking formal education with cultural heritage, such programs foster empowerment, equity, and community engagement, demonstrating that meaningful education extends beyond literacy to encompass values, traditions, and practical life skills that support the holistic development of Indigenous learners.

Recommendations

Considering the findings of the study, the following were recommended:

1. **DepEd** may develop and implement culturally responsive curricula that are co-created with Indigenous elders and community leaders to bridge gaps between national standards and tribal knowledge. Provide mobile or satellite learning units for remote areas to ensure equitable access.

2. **School Administrators** may prioritize school infrastructure improvements, including learning materials in local languages, culturally relevant teaching aids, and safe transportation options. Foster an inclusive school climate where all learners feel respected and valued.
3. **Policy Makers / NCIP** may strengthen policies supporting Indigenous education by allocating dedicated resources, monitoring program implementation, and incentivizing teachers who specialize in culturally responsive pedagogy. Promote community-led oversight to ensure programs reflect Indigenous priorities.
4. **Indigenous Communities** may engage actively in program planning, mentorship, and cultural knowledge transmission. Encourage family involvement in children's education, and collaborate with schools to share traditions, languages, and practices.
5. **Future Researchers** may investigate innovative methods for integrating Indigenous knowledge with mainstream curricula, evaluate the long-term impacts of IPED on learner outcomes, and explore scalable solutions for remote and marginalized Indigenous communities.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

In preparation for this study, all the plans and recommendations were presented to East-West Mindanao Colleges Inc to ensure compliance with prescribed procedures and protocols. In the context of the research examining the perspectives of Indigenous communities in Sultan Kudarat regarding IPED implementation in identified IP schools in Bagumbayan District, during the school year 2025-2026, it was imperative to emphasize the paramount importance of ethical considerations. Before commencing this study, the following ethical principles were highlighted:

Informed Consent:

Before participation, consent was obtained from all school heads involved in the study. They must possess a comprehensive understanding of the study's objectives, methodologies, potential risks, and benefits. Furthermore, participation remained entirely voluntary, allowing the participants to withdraw from the study at any juncture without adverse consequences.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

To safeguard identities and responses, rigorous measures were followed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Rather than using actual names, pseudonyms or codes were used to uphold the participants' privacy. The collected data was securely stored with access restricted solely to the research team.

Avoiding Harm:

Delicate subjects, such as the challenges inherent in their roles, were discussed with potential emotional and psychological impact on participants. Strategies were in place to minimize distress, and a support system was readily available to assist participants.

Researcher-Participant Relationship:

The researcher maintained a professional and respectful rapport when engaging with the school heads. Any actions that might harm the participants were scrupulously avoided, ensuring their utmost dignity and respect throughout the research process.

Data Protection:

Adherence to data protection regulations and laws was observed to safeguard the participants' personal information. Stringent measures were employed to ensure the secure storage and transmission of data.

Voluntary Participation:

Participants were assured that their participation in the study was devoid of any coercion or external pressure.

Researcher Bias:

The researcher remained vigilant regarding potential biases that might influence data collection and analysis, upholding objectivity and transparency throughout the research endeavor.

Institutional Approval:

Before initiating the study, the researcher sought ethical clearance from the pertinent institutional review boards or ethics committees.

Honesty and Integrity:

The research findings were reported truthfully and accurately, free from manipulation or distortion to align with preconceived notions or biases.

Beneficence:

The potential benefits of the research in educational practices and policies were thoughtfully considered, ensuring that the study contributes to the education system.

Cultural Sensitivity:

The researcher demonstrated cultural sensitivity by respecting local customs, beliefs, and practices within the research setting and refraining from imposing external values on participants.

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Declaration AI Tools Declaration

I do hereby declare the use AI tools, such as Chat GPT and Grammarly for grammar checking and sentence organization purposes only.

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