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Reviving Cultural Relevance: Exploring the Struggles of Non-IP Teachers in Integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices in IP Schools in Esperanza in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the digital age, non-Indigenous (non-IP) teachers face significant challenges in integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) within IP schools in DepEd Esperanza Districts, Division of Sultan Kudarat for the school year 2025–2026. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the barriers and enablers of culturally responsive teaching, aiming to provide insights that could guide curriculum design, teacher training, and policy development. Findings revealed that teachers encountered multiple obstacles, including limited cultural familiarity, language barriers, technological constraints, insufficient professional preparation, and the need for stronger collaboration with indigenous communities. Despite these challenges, teachers actively implemented contextualized and culturally responsive strategies, integrating indigenous stories, community practices, and traditional knowledge into lessons. Digital tools, such as multimedia resources and storytelling platforms, supported engagement and documentation of indigenous knowledge, although access to technology remained uneven, particularly in remote areas. Teachers perceived their roles as culturally responsible educators, acting as stewards and allies who safeguard indigenous identity while facilitating culturally meaningful learning. They also served as bridges between indigenous traditions and digital education, ensuring that technology enhanced rather than undermined cultural continuity. Additionally, teachers navigated tensions between standardized curricula and IKSP by contextualizing lessons, balancing curriculum requirements with cultural relevance, and employing hybrid approaches that combined digital and hands-on, community-based learning. Collaboration with elders and community members was critical to validating content and ensuring authenticity. The study concluded that effective culturally responsive teaching in IP contexts requires more than technological integration; it demands cultural competence, continuous learning, community collaboration, and sustained professional support.

Keywords: Professional Development, Hybrid Learning, Community Engagement, Curriculum Adaptation.



INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

In today's increasingly digitized educational landscape, the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) presents a critical challenge—particularly for non-Indigenous (non-IP) teachers tasked with delivering culturally relevant instruction in Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools. While digital tools and platforms promise innovation and wider access to information, they often reflect dominant cultural narratives and globalized content that marginalize indigenous perspectives. This results in a cultural disconnect between the curriculum and the lived realities of IP learners. For non-IP teachers with limited exposure to indigenous worldviews, values, and traditions, the task of authentically embedding IKSPs into digital instruction becomes even more complex.

Globally, education is rapidly shifting towards standardized digital platforms and e-learning tools that often emphasize uniform content delivery and assessment methods. However, this standardization can unintentionally marginalize Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs), which are deeply rooted in local contexts, oral traditions, and community experiences. Scholars such as McKinley and Smith (2019) argue that non-Indigenous educators frequently lack the cultural grounding and pedagogical frameworks necessary to integrate these indigenous worldviews into digital learning environments. Without culturally sensitive approaches, digital education risks alienating Indigenous learners and eroding valuable cultural heritage.

In the Philippines, the government has taken significant steps to address the educational needs of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) through policies such as the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program, which seeks to integrate indigenous perspectives, languages, and practices into the basic education curriculum. Despite these efforts, considerable implementation gaps persist, particularly among non-IP teachers who often struggle to contextualize curriculum content or apply culturally sensitive pedagogies in classrooms serving IP learners. Dizon (2020) highlights that while formal policy frameworks promote inclusion, the realities on the ground reveal challenges such as limited teacher training on indigenous cultures, lack of appropriate teaching materials, and insufficient community engagement bridging cultural divides within a rapidly digitizing educational landscape.

The situation is particularly complex in South Central Mindanao, a region characterized by rich ethno-linguistic diversity and a significant presence of Indigenous communities. Despite the cultural wealth, few studies have examined the lived experiences of educators tasked with delivering culturally responsive instruction in Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools in the context of digital education's prominence. Alvarez and Lantingan (2021) note that the shift to digital modalities in this region poses unique challenges, such as limited digital infrastructure and varying of digital literacy among teachers and learners. Additionally, the integration of IKSPs into digital curricula is often underdeveloped or inconsistently applied, creating educational environments where indigenous knowledge is sidelined rather than celebrated. This lack of



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localized research leaves a critical knowledge gap regarding how educators manage the intersection of indigenous culture and digital pedagogy in this culturally complex context.

Within Sultan Kudarat, and more specifically in the municipality of Esperanza, the scarcity of research on non-IP teachers' experiences in incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices into digitally enhanced instruction becomes even more apparent. The cultural and educational dynamics of Esperanza, a community with a significant indigenous population, are not documented in relation to the challenges educators face in balancing traditional indigenous knowledge with modern educational technologies.

This study was aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4: Quality Education, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. It also addressed Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities by focusing on marginalized Indigenous learners and their educational access and experience.

By exploring how non-IP teachers in Esperanza integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices within digital education, this research illuminated barriers and enablers to culturally responsive teaching.

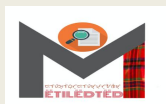
The goal was to provide actionable insights to guide the development of teacher training, curriculum design, and policy frameworks that support cultural revival in education in the digital age.

Research Questions

This research aimed to illuminate barriers and enablers to culturally responsive teaching. It provided actionable insights to guide the development of teacher training, curriculum design, and policy frameworks that support indigenous cultural revival in education, while adapting to the digital age's demands in DepEd Esperanza District III, Sultan Kudarat Division, for the school year 2025-2026.

Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of non-IP teachers in integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) in IP schools amid the rise of digital education?
2. What descriptions do non-IP teachers provide on the challenges they encounter while promoting cultural relevance through indigenous content in digitally-mediated instruction?
3. What meanings do non-IP teachers assign to their roles and responsibilities in preserving indigenous identity and knowledge within IP classrooms in the digital age?



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4. How do non-IP teachers navigate tensions between standardized digital curriculum and the need for culturally responsive indigenous pedagogy in Esperanza's IP schools?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research, specifically the phenomenological approach was employed to illuminate barriers and enablers to culturally responsive teaching, and to provide actionable insights that can guide the development of teacher training, curriculum design, and policy frameworks that support indigenous cultural revival in education, while adapting to the digital age's demands in DepEd Esperanza Districts, division of Sultan Kudarat for school year 2025-2026.

Phenomenological research is a method that aims to examine individuals' lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how they interpret them. 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 nature of the 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

Table 1 displays the qualifications of the participants based on the criteria set by the researcher prior to the selection of qualified informants of the study. This study involved fifteen (15) non-IP teachers assigned to Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools in Esperanza District III, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026, who qualify the inclusion criteria set by the researcher.



Table 1: Participants' Inclusion Criteria

Qualifications
<i>Participants: 15 Non-IP teachers</i>
1. Non-Indigenous Teachers – Only teachers who do not belong to any recognized Indigenous cultural community will be included to ensure the focus remains on the struggles of non-IP educators in integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP). 2. Assigned in IP Schools – Participants must currently be deployed or teaching in recognized Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools within Esperanza District III, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026. 3. Minimum Teaching Experience – Teachers must have at least one year of continuous teaching experience in an IP school to ensure adequate exposure to the challenges of integrating IKSP in the classroom. 4. Willingness to Participate – Only teachers who voluntarily agree to participate in the study and provide informed consent will be selected to ensure ethical compliance and openness in sharing lived experiences.

Sampling Technique

During the conduct of this study, a Purposive Sampling Technique was intentionally utilized to select fifteen (15) identified non- IP school teachers who are assigned in Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools in Esperanza District III, 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 effectively identify and contact eligible participants via online survey platforms. Researchers resort to purposive sampling to obtain access to a specific subgroup of individuals, whereby all survey respondents are meticulously selected based on their alignment with a specified demographic criterion.

Research Instruments

In this study, a semi-structured interview was employed as an exploratory instrument during both in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to illuminate barriers and enablers to culturally responsive teaching that provide actionable insights to guide the development of teacher training, curriculum design, and policy frameworks that support



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indigenous cultural revival in education, while adapting to the digital age's demands in DepEd Esperanza Districts, division of Sultan Kudarat for school year 2025-2026.

The validity and appropriateness of this tool were 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

To ensure reliability, the researcher adhered to a predefined set of procedures. The primary objective of the study was to examine the managerial hurdles of non-IP school heads assigned to IP schools in DepEd Esperanza District III, Division of Sultan Kudarat, for 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 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 the 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 the study. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), strictly adhering to the established EWMCI Research Ethics Committee.

The data collected from interviews and FGDs were systematically organized, subjected to comprehensive analysis, and interpreted using thematic analysis. This approach provided a deeper understanding of the issues under investigation.

Data Analysis

In this study, on the barriers and enablers of non-IP teachers to culturally responsive teaching in DepEd Esperanza Districts, Division of Sultan Kudarat, for the school year 2025–2026, a 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:



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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.

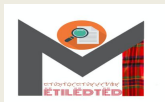
Relevant data excerpts, such as quotes extracted from interviews and FGDs, were selected and associated with the respective themes. These excerpts served as supporting evidence for the identified themes.

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 thematic analysis enabled the researcher to systematically explore the barriers and enablers of non-IP teachers in culturally responsive teaching in DepEd Esperanza Districts, Division of Sultan Kudarat, for the school year 2025–2026.

Scope and Limitations

This study examined non-IP teachers' integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) in IP schools in Esperanza, Sultan Kudarat Division, during the 2025–2026 school year, focusing on how these challenges unfolded in the digital age. Specifically, it involved selected non-IP teachers currently assigned to IP schools who are directly delivering lessons that require IKSP in the curriculum. Conducted within the identified IP schools of Esperanza District, the study used a qualitative research design, particularly phenomenology, to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings constructed by teachers as they navigate cultural integration amid technological advancements.



The scope of the inquiry covered the intersection of cultural relevance, pedagogical practices, and digital tools, while delimiting itself from examining administrative, student, or policy perspectives, as it aimed to deeply understand why and how non-IP teachers faced struggles and what implications these had for culturally responsive education in an increasingly digital educational environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In today's increasingly digitized educational landscape, the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) presents a critical challenge—particularly for non-Indigenous (non-IP) teachers tasked with delivering culturally relevant instruction in Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools. In this study, qualitative research, specifically the phenomenological approach was employed to illuminate barriers and enablers to culturally responsive teaching, and to provide actionable insights that can guide the development of teacher training, curriculum design, and policy frameworks that support indigenous cultural revival in education, while adapting to the digital age's demands in DepEd Esperanza Districts, division of Sultan Kudarat for school year 2025-2026.

The findings revealed that non-Indigenous Peoples (non-IP) teachers in IP schools encounter significant challenges as well as emerging opportunities in integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) within digitally mediated instruction. Initially, teachers experience cultural and linguistic barriers that hinder effective communication and full understanding of indigenous traditions. This aligns with recent studies emphasizing that culturally diverse classrooms often present difficulties in meaning-making when teachers lack prior immersion in indigenous cultural contexts (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2021). In addition, limited familiarity with indigenous epistemologies may result in instructional discomfort and uncertainty in accurately representing cultural knowledge systems (Smith et al., 2020).

Despite these barriers, teachers demonstrate adaptability by employing culturally responsive teaching strategies, including the integration of indigenous stories, community practices, and traditional ecological knowledge into classroom instruction. Such practices are consistent with findings that culturally responsive pedagogy enhances learner engagement and identity affirmation, particularly in Indigenous learning environments (Gay, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Furthermore, the use of digital tools such as multimedia resources, mobile devices, and digital storytelling platforms supports active learning and contributes to the documentation and preservation of indigenous knowledge. Recent literature highlights that digital storytelling and mobile-assisted learning strengthen cultural transmission when aligned with community knowledge systems (Harris & Dwyer, 2022; Oyarzun et al., 2021). However, these innovations remain constrained by infrastructural limitations, especially in remote areas where internet connectivity, electricity, and digital resources are insufficient. Similar findings were reported in global education technology studies, which note that the digital divide continues to disproportionately affect rural and indigenous communities (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

Moreover, the findings show that non-IP teachers face interconnected challenges in promoting culturally relevant education through Indigenous content in digital learning



environments. These challenges include limited cultural familiarity, concerns regarding accurate representation of indigenous knowledge, insufficient training in IKSP, language barriers, and the need for stronger collaboration with indigenous communities. These results are supported by recent research indicating that teacher preparedness and intercultural competence are critical factors in the successful implementation of indigenous education programs (McKinley & Tyler, 2020; Philips & Cummins, 2022). Likewise, inadequate professional development opportunities remain a persistent barrier to culturally responsive instruction in Indigenous contexts (Castagno & Brayboy, 2021).

Despite these constraints, teachers actively address these challenges by engaging in cultural sensitivity training, consulting elders, and collaborating with community members to ensure authenticity in lesson delivery. This practice reflects the principles of community-based education, which emphasize shared authority between educators and indigenous knowledge holders (Battiste, 2020; Smith, 2021). Such collaboration ensures that cultural knowledge is not distorted or decontextualized in digital learning environments.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that non-IP teachers perceive their roles in IP classrooms as culturally responsible educators who act as stewards of indigenous identity and knowledge. They see themselves as facilitators who bridge traditional indigenous knowledge systems with modern digital education, ensuring that technological integration supports rather than undermines cultural continuity. This perspective is supported by literature highlighting teachers as cultural mediators who play a vital role in sustaining indigenous identity within formal education systems (Kovach, 2020; Nakata, 2021). Teachers also emphasize continuous learning from indigenous communities and advocating for culturally grounded education policies that support inclusivity and respect for indigenous heritage.

Finally, the findings reveal that non-IP teachers in Esperanza's IP schools navigate tensions between standardized curricula and culturally responsive indigenous pedagogy through contextualization of lessons, integration of IKSP, and the use of hybrid teaching approaches combining digital tools with community-based learning. They actively collaborate with elders and community stakeholders to validate cultural content and ensure authenticity. These strategies align with contemporary scholarship that emphasizes hybrid and place-based pedagogies as effective approaches in Indigenous education (Corntassel, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). Teachers also advocate for enhanced professional development, culturally relevant digital resources, and supportive institutional policies to strengthen indigenous digital education systems and promote equitable learning outcomes.

Overall, the findings suggest that while significant structural, cultural, and technological barriers persist, non-IP teachers demonstrate strong commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy and indigenous knowledge integration in digital learning environments. Their adaptive strategies reflect an evolving educational practice that prioritizes cultural preservation, inclusivity, and contextualized digital learning.



Conclusion

The following inferences were made in light of this study's findings:

The integration of IKSP in IP schools demonstrates that culturally responsive education requires teachers to move beyond conventional teaching practices and embrace continuous learning, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity.

Also, the study concludes that culturally responsive digital instruction in indigenous contexts requires more than technological integration; it demands cultural competence, community collaboration, and sustained professional support for teachers.

Further, teaching in IP classrooms extends beyond academic instruction and requires a deep commitment to cultural respect, humility, and advocacy. As teachers navigate the intersection of indigenous traditions and digital education, their role evolves into that of cultural partners who help sustain identity, empower learners, and strengthen the connection between education and community heritage.

Finally, it has been concluded that effective teaching in indigenous contexts requires not only pedagogical flexibility and ethical decision-making but also deep cultural engagement, collaboration, and continuous learning.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, the following were recommended:

1. DepEd may develop accessible, culturally relevant digital learning resources that integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) and provide regular, hands-on professional development programs for non-IP teachers, focusing on both cultural understanding and digital pedagogy.
2. School Administrators may facilitate structured partnerships between teachers and local indigenous communities, including elders and cultural practitioners, to co-create lesson content, validate materials, and support language translation needs.
3. Policy Makers may establish clear policies and funding to improve digital infrastructure in remote IP schools, ensuring reliable internet, devices, and offline digital alternatives, while officially recognizing the role of IKSP in curriculum standards.
4. Future Researchers may explore innovative strategies for hybrid and blended learning that balance technology and indigenous cultural practices, and investigate sustainable models for teacher training, community engagement, and culturally responsive assessment in IP education contexts.



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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. The research examined the barriers and enablers of non-IP teachers to culturally responsive teaching in DepEd Esperanza Districts, Division of Sultan Kudarat, for the school year 2025–2026. It was imperative to emphasize the paramount importance of ethical considerations. Before commencing the 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.



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

Inclusion and Diversity: The study's structure prioritized inclusivity and diversity, encompassing a wide spectrum of the barriers and enablers of non-IP teachers to culturally responsive teaching in DepEd Esperanza Districts, Division of Sultan Kudarat for the school year 2025–2026.

Acknowledgment

The researcher would like to express his wholehearted gratitude to everyone who has been part of this journey. Their support, guidance and words of encouragement truly matters and has helped shape this work and made the journey more meaningful. As Aristotle once said, “Educating the mind requires not only knowledge but a community that nurtures the heart—especially for Indigenous learners whose culture must be preserved.” This reflects the shared effort of both teachers and non-teachers in supporting and uplifting every learner.

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Declaration AI Tools Utilization

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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