

## **From Classroom to Comebacks: A Narrative Inquiry into the Academic Journeys and Milestones of Returning Indigenous Graduates in Bagumbayan**

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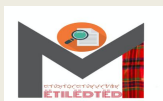
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## **ABSTRACT**

Indigenous learners often encounter complex and interrelated barriers that affect their participation and completion of formal education, including cultural mismatches with mainstream curricula, geographic isolation, and socio-economic constraints. This study explored the academic journeys

and milestones of returning Indigenous graduates in Bagumbayan, Division of Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026. It aimed to document their lived experiences, identify enabling factors and barriers, and understand the pathways that led them to successfully return to and complete their education. A qualitative research design, specifically narrative inquiry, was employed to capture the participants' personal stories and educational trajectories. Returning Indigenous graduates were purposively selected based on their experiences of discontinuing and resuming their studies. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and personal narratives, allowing participants to recount significant life events, challenges, and turning points in their academic journeys. Narrative and thematic analysis were used to interpret the stories and identify recurring patterns and meaningful insights. Findings revealed that participants experienced interruptions in their education due to financial difficulties, family responsibilities, cultural expectations, and limited access to educational resources. Despite these challenges, their return to education was influenced by strong personal determination, family encouragement, community support, and access to flexible learning opportunities. Participants highlighted key milestones such as re-enrollment, academic persistence, and eventual graduation as transformative moments in their lives. The study also emphasized the importance of culturally responsive support systems, including inclusive school environments, supportive teachers, and programs that respect Indigenous identities and traditions. These factors played a crucial role in sustaining learners' motivation and success. The study concludes that understanding the narratives of returning Indigenous graduates provides valuable insights for developing inclusive, culturally sensitive educational policies and support mechanisms that promote access,



retention, and completion among marginalized learners.

**Keywords:** educational persistence, cultural identity, learner resilience, access to education.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

Indigenous learners face complex, multi-layered barriers to sustained participation and completion in formal education—barriers shaped by colonial legacies, cultural mismatch with mainstream curricula, geographic marginalization, and episodic withdrawal from schooling due to economic or social pressures. Exploring the academic journeys of Indigenous graduates who later return to formal learning can surface strengths, coping strategies, and community-rooted motivations that standard outcome studies miss; narrative inquiry is especially suited to foreground rich, contextualized life histories that illuminate how cultural identity, policy environments, and local opportunity structures interact to produce “comebacks”.

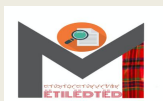
International policy and research emphasize the right to lifelong learning and culturally responsive education for Indigenous peoples, and global frameworks (including UNESCO) argue for inclusive systems that recognize non-linear learning pathways and community forms of knowledge transmission (UNESCO, 2023). However, much international literature remains focused on access metrics or institution-level reforms, with fewer narrative studies that center on Indigenous people and the micro-level processes of re-engagement. This narrative gap constrains understanding of how policies translate into lived pathways of return and success (UNESCO, 2023).

National policy in the Philippines has advanced mainstreaming Indigenous knowledge and integrating Indigenous Peoples’ education (IPEd) in formal curricula, with legal instruments and memoranda aiming for greater inclusion of IP perspectives in basic and higher education (NCIP, 2020; Mainstreaming Indigenous Knowledge..., 2022–2023). Still, empirical studies from 2018–2024 underline persistent cultural misalignment, limited implementation of locally-relevant curricula, and under-documentation of non-traditional learners’ comeback experiences—few studies examine post-completion returns or narrative accounts of re-entry.

The SOCCSKSARGEN regional context — Regional development plans and local reports document economic and geographic challenges—e.g., limited infrastructure, agricultural livelihoods, and ancestral domain concerns—that shape educational trajectories in SOCCSKSARGEN (SOCCSKSARGEN RDP 2017–2022). Yet region-level research rarely disaggregates the episodic return phenomenon among Indigenous learners (e.g., how regional socio-economic factors and local programs influence educational re-entry and persistence), resulting in insufficient qualitative evidence to guide localized interventions (SOCCSKSARGEN RDP 2017–2022; NCIP, 2020).

In Sultan Kudarat, emerging local studies and institutional projects—such as culture-based instruction developments at Sultan Kudarat State University—suggest promising movement toward culture-responsive pedagogy (Arciosa, 2024).

However, Bagumbayan’s specific experience with returning Indigenous graduates remains under-researched. There is a paucity of narrative, life-history research documenting how Bagumbayan-based graduates negotiate ancestral domain pressures, livelihood demands, and insights



essential for local schools, NCIP partners, and municipal education planners aiming to design supportive re-entry pathways (Arciosa, 2024; NCIP, 2020).

This study aligned principally with SDG 4 – Quality Education, by promoting inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning opportunities, and SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities, by documenting and proposing pathways to reduce educational inequalities affecting Indigenous peoples. By centering lived experiences and culturally grounded milestones, the research contributes evidence useful for policymaking aimed at promoting equitable access, retention, and academic completion among historically marginalized populations (UNESCO, 2023).

The study aims to explore and document the lived academic journeys, milestones, and enabling/barrier conditions of returning Indigenous graduates in Bagumbayan through narrative inquiry, with the objective of generating locally grounded recommendations for education stakeholders (including schools, local government, NCIP, and community leaders) to strengthen culturally responsive re-entry pathways and lifelong learning supports.

## Research Questions

This study aimed to explore and document the lived academic journeys, milestones, and enabling/barrier conditions of returning Indigenous graduates in Bagumbayan, Sultan Kudarat division through narrative inquiry. Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

1. What personal and educational experiences shaped the academic journeys of returning Indigenous graduates from Bagumbayan?

2. How do returning Indigenous graduates describe the challenges and opportunities

they encountered in completing their education?

3. In what ways do returning Indigenous graduates narrate the role of community, culture, and family support in their academic milestones?

4. What meanings and life lessons do returning Indigenous graduates attribute to their educational achievements and return to their community?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically narrative inquiry, to explore and document the lived academic journeys, milestones, and enabling/barrier conditions of returning Indigenous graduates in Bagumbayan, Sultan Kudarat division for the school year 2025-2026.

Narrative inquiry is appropriate because it enables researchers to capture participants' lived experiences of participants and the meanings they attach to their personal and professional practices (Clandinin, 2020). Through storytelling and reflection, teachers' experiences in creating and sharing vlogs can be examined within the broader context of their professional identity and responsibilities (Kim, 2020). Qualitative narrative approaches provide a deeper understanding of how teachers navigate tensions between personal expression and institutional expectations (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2021). Moreover, it enables the researcher to uncover patterns of behavior and values that influence teachers' performance and conduct (Webster & Mertova, 2020). Using narrative inquiry ensures that the study is grounded in authentic experiences while producing insights relevant to shaping



professional conduct interventions  
(Riessman, 2022).

## Research Instruments

### 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.

The participants of this study were 10 carefully selected IP students from Bagumbayan who already graduated from college. These students came from identified Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools in Bagumbayan District, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026. The following inclusion criteria will set for the selection of these participants:

### Sampling Technique

During the conduct of this study, purposive sampling was used to carefully select ten (10) IP students from Bagumbayan who had already graduated in college. 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.

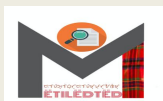
In this study, a semi-structured interview will function as an exploratory instrument during both in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to explore and document the lived academic journeys, milestones, and enabling/barrier conditions of returning Indigenous college graduates in Bagumbayan, Sultan Kudarat division 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 the research's reliability, the researcher adhered to a predefined set of procedures. The primary objective of this study was to explore and document the lived academic journeys, milestones, and enabling/barrier conditions of returning Indigenous college graduates in Bagumbayan, Sultan Kudarat division for school year 2025-2026.

In the initial phase, the researcher sought formal authorization from both the Superintendent of DepEd-Sultan Kudarat and the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies (CGS). This authorization was necessary 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 conducted face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), in strict adherence to EWMCI research ethics committee.

The data collected from interviews and FGDs were systematically organized, subjected to comprehensive analysis, and interpreted using the thematic analysis approach. This approach was expected to provide a deeper understanding of the issues under investigation. See Figure 3 below:

Step 1: Seek Approval to conduct the study from CGS and DepEd Authorities

Step 2: Selection of the Respondents

Step 3: Ethical Compliance/Protocols to EREC

Step 4: Interview and Focus Group Discussion

Step 5: Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation Presentation

## Data Analysis

In this study, centered on uncovering the lived academic journeys, milestones, and enabling/barrier conditions of returning Indigenous college graduates in Bagumbayan, Sultan Kudarat division for school year 2025-2026, a content or thematic analysis approach 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 groupings or 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 diligently 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 ensures 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 will be generated by identifying meaningful segments or patterns within the data. These codes captured essential concepts, ideas, or themes related to teachers with regard to their professional development and its outcomes in their teaching effectiveness.

Following coding, the identified codes were grouped into preliminary themes based on shared meaning or relevance. This step aims to establish 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 represents the content it encapsulates, facilitating easy identification and interpretation.



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

Finally, the thematic analysis will extend 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 researchers to explore lived academic journeys, milestones, and enabling/barrier conditions of returning Indigenous college graduates in Bagumbayan, Sultan Kudarat division for school year 2025-2026.

### **Scope and Limitations**

The study aims to explore and document the lived experiences, challenges, and achievements of Indigenous graduates who have returned to pursue further education or professional development. The participants of this study were Indigenous learners from Bagumbayan who had already graduated from college and had resumed their academic journeys after interruption. Conducted during the school year 2025–2026, the research involved in-depth interviews and reflective storytelling, allowing participants to share their personal journeys, key milestones, and the strategies they employed to overcome barriers. Utilizing a qualitative narrative inquiry design, the study sought to understand the “how” and “why” behind their academic persistence and successes, emphasizing the meaning and significance of their experiences.

The scope was limited to the perspectives of returning Indigenous graduates within Bagumbayan who had completed college, and it does not include those who had not yet graduated or are currently enrolled in primary or secondary education, ensuring that the findings are specific, in-depth, and contextually grounded.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The findings revealed that the academic journeys of returning Indigenous graduates were shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic challenges, support systems, cultural identity, and personal resilience. Participants narrated experiences of financial hardship, interrupted schooling, and limited access to educational resources. Despite these barriers, they demonstrated remarkable determination to continue and complete their studies. These findings align with the work of Tara J. Yosso (2005), who emphasized that marginalized learners possess various forms of capital, including aspirational and familial capital, which enable them to persevere despite structural inequalities. Similarly, studies on Indigenous education have highlighted that resilience and community support are crucial factors in sustaining educational participation among Indigenous learners (Guenther et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

The persistence of socio-economic hardships emerged as a significant theme among participants. Many graduates reported struggling with transportation costs, educational expenses, and family financial responsibilities, which often contributed to temporary withdrawal from school. These findings are consistent with international and local literature indicating that poverty remains one of the primary barriers to educational access and completion among Indigenous populations (UNESCO, 2023). In the Philippine context, Indigenous



learners frequently encounter economic disadvantages and geographical isolation that hinder their educational opportunities (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples [NCIP], 2020). Nevertheless, participants demonstrated a strong commitment to returning to school, suggesting that financial difficulties did not diminish their aspirations but instead strengthened their resolve to attain educational success.

Another important finding was the influence of support systems on the participants' educational persistence. Family members, teachers, mentors, tribal leaders, and peers played vital roles in encouraging learners to continue their studies despite challenges. Emotional support, guidance, and encouragement from significant individuals helped participants regain confidence and maintain motivation. This finding supports Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes that individuals develop and succeed through interactions with supportive social environments. Previous studies have similarly found that family engagement and community support significantly contribute to Indigenous learners' academic achievement and retention (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Guenther et al., 2019). The present study demonstrates that educational success is not solely an individual endeavor but is deeply rooted in collective support and social relationships.

The findings also underscored the importance of cultural identity in shaping educational persistence and achievement. Participants expressed pride in their Indigenous heritage and viewed education not as a means of abandoning their culture but as a tool for preserving and promoting it. Their narratives reflected a strong desire to serve as role models for younger generations and contribute positively to their communities. These results support

culturally responsive education perspectives, which argue that recognizing and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems enhances educational engagement and success (Gay, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). Furthermore, the findings align with the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) framework in the Philippines, which promotes culturally appropriate and community-responsive learning experiences (NCIP, 2020). The participants' experiences demonstrate that cultural identity can function as a source of strength and motivation rather than a barrier to academic achievement.

In addition, personal resilience emerged as a critical factor in overcoming educational obstacles. Participants described developing perseverance, self-discipline, adaptability, and determination throughout their educational journeys. These qualities enabled them to navigate academic pressures, family obligations, and financial constraints while remaining focused on their goals. The findings support resilience theory, which posits that individuals can achieve positive outcomes despite adversity through adaptive coping mechanisms and supportive relationships (Masten, 2018). Similar studies involving Indigenous learners have identified resilience as a key determinant of educational persistence and success, particularly among students from marginalized communities (Kral et al., 2018).

The study further revealed that returning Indigenous graduates faced significant challenges, including financial instability, academic adjustment difficulties, and limited educational resources. Participants who returned to school after interruptions often experienced anxiety related to academic performance and reintegration into the educational environment. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that non-traditional and returning students frequently



encounter challenges in balancing academic demands with personal and economic responsibilities (Cross, 2020). However, the participants also identified numerous opportunities that facilitated their educational success, including scholarships, government educational assistance, institutional support programs, and personal aspirations for a better future. Such findings suggest that supportive educational policies and intervention programs can effectively reduce barriers and enhance educational completion rates among Indigenous learners.

Moreover, the findings emphasized the significance of holistic support systems in fostering academic success. Family members provided emotional stability and encouragement, while community leaders and educational institutions offered resources and opportunities that facilitated persistence. Participants consistently highlighted that their achievements were collective accomplishments shared with their families and communities. This finding reflects Indigenous worldviews that emphasize interconnectedness, communal responsibility, and collective well-being (Brayboy, 2005). The results suggest that educational interventions designed for Indigenous learners should extend beyond individual academic support and incorporate family and community engagement strategies to maximize effectiveness.

Finally, participants viewed their educational achievements as symbols of pride, perseverance, and personal transformation. Completing their education represented not only the attainment of personal goals but also the fulfillment of responsibilities to their families, tribes, and communities. Many participants described education as a pathway toward empowerment, leadership, and community development. These findings resonate with transformative learning perspectives, which posit that education can facilitate personal growth, critical awareness, and social

contribution (Mezirow, 2018). Furthermore, faith, hope, and optimism emerged as important sources of strength that sustained participants throughout their educational journeys. Such findings highlight the multidimensional nature of educational success among Indigenous graduates, encompassing personal, cultural, spiritual, and communal dimensions.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the educational journeys of returning Indigenous graduates are characterized by resilience amid adversity, strengthened by supportive relationships, cultural identity, and access to educational opportunities. The study contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive, community-centered, and inclusive educational approaches that recognize the unique experiences and strengths of Indigenous learners. These findings have important implications for policymakers, educational institutions, and community leaders seeking to develop programs and interventions that promote educational equity, persistence, and success among Indigenous populations.

## Conclusions

The journeys of the IP graduates revealed that adversity, when coupled with support and cultural grounding, becomes a powerful driver of transformation rather than a barrier to success.

The coexistence of hardship and opportunity showed that access to even minimal support systems could significantly alter educational trajectories for marginalized learners.

Success is not an individual achievement alone, but a collective outcome shaped by interconnected support systems and a strong sense of belonging.



Education transcends personal success, becoming a meaningful pathway for identity formation, social responsibility, and the empowerment of future generations.

## Recommendations

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

1. DepEd may develop a “Return-to-School Support Kit” for Indigenous learners (including learning modules, offline materials, and starter financial assistance) to immediately support those re-entering education from disadvantaged backgrounds.

2. School Administrators may establish a school-based mentoring system where returning Indigenous graduates are paired with teachers or alumni who can guide them academically, emotionally, and culturally throughout their journey.

3. Policy Makers may expand and institutionalize sustainable scholarship programs with living allowances, ensuring not only tuition coverage but also daily needs to reduce dropout risks due to poverty.

4. IPED Coordinators may design and implement culture-based bridging programs that integrate Indigenous identity, language, and local knowledge into academic support to strengthen both learning and cultural pride.

5. IP Community may create a community learning support group (e.g., “Bayanihan Study Circles”) where elders, parents, and graduates regularly encourage and assist students in their studies and life decisions.

6. Future Researchers may conduct longitudinal studies on returning Indigenous graduates to track how educational support systems impact their long-term career paths, community involvement, and cultural identity preservation.

## Acknowledgment

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To **GOD ALMIGHTY**, the source of all wisdom, strength, and perseverance. Without His divine grace and guidance, this journey would not have been possible. To Him be all the glory and honor.

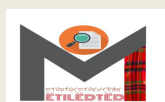
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### **Declaration AI Tools Utilization**

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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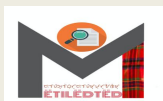
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