

KEEPING INDIGENOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMS STRONG: PROBLEMS AND SUCCESSFUL APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of teachers implementing the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) Program in selected public elementary schools in Central Lebak District, Sultan Kudarat. Anchored in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, the research explored teachers' professional development experiences, identified challenges in sustaining Indigenous education programs, and documented best practices for maintaining culturally relevant instruction. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires from purposively selected IPED teachers. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and meanings from participants' narratives. Findings reveal persistent challenges, including limited culturally appropriate instructional materials, insufficient IPED-specific training, language barriers, geographic isolation, and inadequate institutional support. Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrated resilience and commitment by implementing culturally grounded strategies such as mother tongue-based instruction, integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices, collaboration with elders and community members, and place-based learning approaches. The study highlights the crucial role of teachers as cultural bearers, advocates, and mediators in sustaining Indigenous education. The findings underscore the need for sustained professional development, stronger community engagement, and enhanced policy support to strengthen IPED implementation and promote culturally responsive and equitable education for Indigenous learners.

Keywords: *Indigenous Peoples Education, Culturally Responsive Education, Educational Equity for Indigenous Learners, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices, Teacher Professional Development, Central Lebak District, Sultan Kudarat*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Education is universally recognized not only as the transmission of knowledge but also as a powerful tool for empowering marginalized communities and preserving cultural identities (UNESCO, 2018). In the context of Indigenous Peoples (IP) education must play a dual role: it should provide learners with the competencies to navigate modern society while simultaneously safeguarding and transmitting their distinct languages, traditions, and worldviews. Globally, indigenous communities have long struggled with education systems that marginalize their culture, impose dominant worldviews, and threaten their heritage (Battiste, 2013; McKinley & Smith, 2019).

In response to these concerns, international frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasize the need for inclusive, equitable, and culturally relevant education for indigenous populations (United Nations, 2007; UNESCO, 2015). These global mandates recognize education as a human right and call for the protection of indigenous knowledge systems. In the Philippines, this call was echoed through the institutionalization of the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) Program by the Department of Education (DepEd Order No. 62, s. 2011), aiming to deliver a culture-based, responsive, and inclusive curriculum. While this is a positive national policy response, gaps remain in its actual implementation. At the national level, IP communities continue to experience systemic inequities, including underrepresentation in the curriculum, low investment in teacher training, and limited culturally appropriate learning materials (Macdonald & Ongpin, 2021). Regionally, in Mindanao where many IP communities reside, armed conflict, poverty, and limited infrastructure hinder access to quality education (Gaspar, 2017).

Locally, in Central Lebak, Sultan Kudarat a community home to rich IP cultures such where teachers in IPED schools encounter distinct challenges. These include geographic isolation, lack of instructional resources, limited institutional support, and difficulties in integrating local knowledge into the mainstream curriculum. Moreover, some IP communities remain skeptical of formal education due to historical trauma and perceived cultural erosion (Daclan & Demetillo, 2020). Despite these hurdles,

IPED teachers continue to serve as the frontline agents of transformation. They are not only educators but also cultural bearers, negotiators, and advocates for indigenous identity.

However, there is a scarcity of academic studies that document their lived experiences, insights, and best practices elements crucial in ensuring that IPED programs evolve in culturally respectful and pedagogically sound ways (Peñalba & Ubaldo, 2022). Their perspectives are vital to crafting responsive educational frameworks and empowering indigenous learners in a sustainable manner. This study, therefore, investigates the lived experiences of teachers implementing the IPED program in selected schools in Central Lebak, Sultan Kudarat. Specifically, it aims to understand the challenges they face in delivering culturally grounded education, the strategies and practices they use to sustain indigenous learning systems, and their recommendations for improving the program. By foregrounding the voices of IPED educators, this research seeks to contribute to the refinement of educational policies and practices that uphold indigenous rights, promote cultural integrity, and advance equity at all levels of the education system. Through this inquiry, the study aims to support the strengthening of the IPED system, promote educational justice, and affirm the invaluable cultural heritage of indigenous learners in the Philippines resonating with international advocacy and grounded in local.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of teachers implementing the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) Program. Phenomenology was appropriate as it allowed an in-depth understanding of teachers' personal, professional, and cultural experiences within Indigenous education contexts.

Research Participants

The participants were IPED teachers from public elementary schools in Central Lebak District, Lebak, Sultan Kudarat. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers directly involved in IPED implementation who could provide rich and relevant insights related to the research questions.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires. These tools allowed participants to freely express their experiences, challenges, and practices while remaining aligned with the study's objectives. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at venues convenient to participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. Transcripts were coded systematically to identify recurring patterns and meanings. Codes were grouped into categories and themes that reflected the core experiences of the participants. Member checking and peer review were employed to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and permissions were secured prior to data collection. Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and cultural sensitivity were strictly observed throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This phenomenological research employed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis model to explore the experiences, challenges and best practices of teachers implementing the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) Program in selected schools in Central Lebak District, Data were collected through face-to-face interview with the participants.

Lived experiences of teachers in Indigenous Education

The teachers' lived experiences in implementing the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) program are shaped by both structural challenges and context-responsive teaching practices.

Theme 1: Problems In Sustaining Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed)

One of the most prominent experiences identified is the problems in sustaining IPed, the language and cultural gap between teachers and Indigenous learners. Participants emphasized that their inability to speak the learners' mother tongue hinders effective communication, lesson delivery, and meaningful interaction.

This language gap creates a cultural disconnect that limits learners' comprehension and reduces teachers' capacity to deliver culturally responsive instruction. As a result, teaching becomes less effective, and learners struggle to fully engage in classroom activities.

Another significant experience highlighted is the lack of culturally relevant learning materials. Participants reported the scarcity of books, visual aids, and instructional resources that reflect Indigenous culture, language, and lived experiences. This shortage forces teachers to rely heavily on self-made or improvised materials, which requires additional time and effort. The absence of appropriate resources weakens the integration of Indigenous knowledge into daily lessons and affects the overall quality of IPED implementation.

The findings also indicate insufficient teacher's training, many teachers assigned to IPED schools lack adequate background, formal preparation, and continuous professional development related to Indigenous cultures, languages, and pedagogies. This lack of training results in limited confidence among teachers and increases the risk of inaccurate or superficial cultural integration. Consequently, teachers may struggle to deliver lessons that are both culturally respectful and educationally meaningful. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

"One major challenge that I face is the language barrier since I cannot speak their language." (IDI, P2)

"Another is language/ dialect. Some learners understand better in their mother tongue, but most materials are in Filipino or English." (IDI, P9)

"There are limited culturally relevant books and materials." (IDI, P3)

"From what I've seen, a big problem in keeping the IPED program is that we don't have enough materials or support."

"Sometimes there aren't enough books or tools that really show the Indigenous culture. (IDI, P4)

"Many teachers work without background to the IP cultures." (IDI, P4)

The sustainability of Indigenous Education programs is challenged by interconnected linguistic, instructional, institutional, and socioeconomic factors.

Addressing these concerns requires comprehensive interventions, including strengthened mother tongue-based instruction, increased provision of culturally relevant materials, continuous teacher training, and supportive programs that address learners' basic needs. These findings underscore the importance of a holistic and community-responsive approach to sustaining effective Indigenous Peoples Education programs.

The findings of this study are supported by the work of (Llego, 2022) which emphasized that Indigenous education programs worldwide face persistent challenges related to language barriers, lack of culturally relevant learning materials, insufficient teacher preparation, and socioeconomic constraints. UNESCO reported that when instruction is delivered in a language unfamiliar to Indigenous learners, comprehension and engagement significantly decline, thereby affecting academic performance and cultural relevance. Moreover, the study highlighted that the scarcity of culturally appropriate instructional materials limits the effective integration of Indigenous knowledge into formal education. The report further noted that teachers assigned to Indigenous communities often lack specialized training in Indigenous pedagogy, resulting in reduced confidence and effectiveness in culturally responsive teaching. Additionally, socioeconomic conditions such as poverty and food insecurity were identified as major contributors to learner absenteeism and low retention rates, ultimately threatening the sustainability of Indigenous education programs.

Theme 2: Successful Approaches

The successful approaches identified demonstrate teachers' adaptability and commitment to culturally responsive education. The use of self-made and localized materials enables educators to bridge resource gaps by aligning lessons with indigenous learners' contexts. Community immersion strengthens teachers' cultural understanding and relationships with learners, while storytelling as an instructional approach draws on indigenous oral traditions to enhance engagement, comprehension, and cultural relevance in the learning process.

One effective approach identified by the participants is the use of self-made and localized instructional materials. Due to the scarcity of culturally relevant resources, teachers often modify existing lessons or create their own materials to suit the cultural context of Indigenous learners. This practice reflects teacher creativity and adaptability, enabling educators to bridge curricular gaps and ensure that lessons remain relevant and meaningful. By contextualizing content based on learners' lived experiences,

teachers are able to enhance understanding and learner engagement despite material constraints.

Another significant strategy is community immersion, where teachers actively engage with and live among the Indigenous communities they serve. Participants emphasized that immersion allows educators to better understand learners' language, traditions, values, and daily realities. This close interaction fosters mutual trust and respect between teachers and the community, which in turn improves classroom instruction. Through immersion, teachers gain cultural sensitivity and firsthand knowledge that cannot be fully acquired through formal training alone, making instruction more culturally responsive and authentic.

The use of storytelling, particularly through the involvement of elders, also emerged as a powerful pedagogical approach. When elders share stories, traditions, and lived experiences, learners become more attentive and engaged. Storytelling serves as a culturally rooted teaching method that aligns with Indigenous ways of learning, emphasizing oral tradition, values transmission, and collective memory. This approach not only enhances comprehension but also strengthens learners' cultural identity and sense of belonging. These are the evident from the following statements of the participants below:

"I have to modify lessons or create my own materials." (IDI, P2)

"You go with them. You live with them." (IDI. P3)

"When elders share stories, students listen more attentively." (IDI, P5)

"We also integrate indigenous stories, songs, and practices into lessons. Using the local language during discussions helps learners participate more actively."(IDI,4)

"Honestly, when I was first assigned to teach in an IP school, I had very limited background about indigenous culture. Most of the trainings I attended were general teaching seminars. There were a few IPED trainings, but they were short and more on policy orientation rather than actual classroom strategies. I mostly learned through experience, asking elders, and observing the community." (IDI, P9)

“From my experience, storytelling really works. When elders come to class and share stories from their childhood or explain how things were done before, the students listen more attentively.” (IDI, P7)

Overall, the results suggested that effective Indigenous Education does not rely solely on formal resources, but rather on teacher initiative, cultural immersion, and the meaningful integration of Indigenous knowledge systems. These approaches demonstrate how educators creatively and collaboratively respond to challenges while maintaining the cultural integrity of IPED programs.

The findings of this study was supported by Gay (2018), who emphasized that culturally responsive teaching requires educators to adapt instructional materials and strategies to reflect learners’ cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Gay explained that when teachers develop localized and culturally relevant materials, learning becomes more meaningful and engaging, especially for marginalized groups such as Indigenous learners.

Theme 3: Sustaining relevance Indigenous Education Program

The findings highlight that sustaining the relevance of Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) programs depends on strong collaboration among teachers, elders, families, and the wider Indigenous community. Engagement with elders ensures cultural authenticity and continuity of indigenous knowledge, while cultural integration in teaching practices allows learning to remain meaningful and responsive to learners’ identities. These shared efforts reinforce that IPED sustainability is a collective responsibility rather than the sole task of educators.

One of the key strategies identified is collaboration or shared responsibility with elders and cultural leaders. Participants emphasized that teachers, parents, and elders work together to ensure that educational practices remain culturally appropriate and respectful. Elders serve as cultural authorities and knowledge bearers, guiding educators in accurately presenting traditions, beliefs, and practices. This collaboration fosters shared responsibility, strengthens community trust, and ensures that Indigenous knowledge is transmitted authentically. When elders and parents are actively involved, the program gains legitimacy within the community, increasing support and long-term sustainability.

Another important approach is cultural integration within classroom instruction. Participants noted that lessons are designed to reflect Indigenous traditions, values, and lived experiences. By embedding culture into daily lessons, education becomes more meaningful and relevant to Indigenous learners. This integration promotes cultural preservation, as learners are not only taught academic content but are also encouraged to value and take pride in their identity. Culturally grounded instruction helps learners see school as an extension of their community rather than a space disconnected from their cultural realities. These are the evident from the following statements of the participants below:

“Teachers, parents, and cultural leaders work together.” (IDI, P3)

“When parents and elders are involved, the students feel supported both at home and in school. I noticed that learners participate more when they see familiar faces in school activities.” (IDI, P4)

“Involving elders is very effective. They serve as living resources.” (IDI, P9)

“We also work hand in hand with parents and community leaders to make sure the program keeps going strong and stays meaningful for the learners.” (IDI, P6)

“Lessons reflect their traditions and values.” (IDI, P8)

“Well, for example, a certain tribe or specifically the Dulangan Manobo where I belong ever since 2009, respect their belief, respect their attitude, know them well, don't bring your lifestyle to them. It must be the reverse. We can integrate. Actually, we can integrate through values.” (IDI, P9)

“I bring their culture and values by using the learner's mother tongue, by sharing ideas and real examples. School activities like cultural presentations and projects that are based in the community really help the learners understand who they are. And it's all about showing respect and promoting their indigenous culture.” (IDI, P7)

Overall, the findings indicated that the relevance of Indigenous Education programs is sustained through strong partnerships and culturally embedded teaching practices. Collaboration with elders ensures authenticity and continuity of Indigenous knowledge, while cultural integration in the curriculum strengthens learner

engagement and identity formation. These approaches collectively reinforce the purpose of IPED as both an educational and cultural preservation initiative

This study was supported by Battiste (2013), who emphasized that Indigenous education becomes sustainable when elders and cultural leaders actively participate in teaching and decision-making processes. Battiste argued that elders play a vital role in safeguarding Indigenous knowledge systems and ensuring that education remains culturally grounded and community owned. Similarly, McCarty and Lee (2014) highlighted that culturally sustaining education requires schools to work in partnership with Indigenous communities to integrate cultural practices, values, and worldviews into the curriculum. Their study found that such collaboration strengthens cultural identity, learner engagement, and long-term program relevance.

In the Philippine context, DepEd Order No. 62, s. 2011, which institutionalized the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) Program, underscores the importance of community participation and cultural integration in curriculum development. The policy recognizes elders, parents, and cultural leaders as key partners in ensuring that education respects Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and values. These perspectives strongly align with the present findings, affirming that collaboration and cultural integration are essential in sustaining the relevance of Indigenous Education programs.

Table 1. Lived experiences of teachers in Indigenous Education

<i>Issues Probed</i>	<i>Codes / Categories</i>	<i>Significant Statements</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Meanings</i>
<i>RQ1 Lived Experiences</i>	Language Barrier	“One major challenge that I face is the language barrier since I cannot speak their language.”	Problems in sustaining IPED <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language and Cultural Gap 	Language differences hinder effective teaching and understanding.
	Lack of Culturally Relevant Materials	“There are limited culturally relevant books and materials.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource Scarcity 	Absence of appropriate materials weakens IPED implementation.
	Insufficient Training	“Many teachers work without background to the IP cultures.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate Teacher Preparation 	Teachers lack competence and confidence in teaching IP learners
	Self-made & Localized Materials	“I have to modify lessons or create my	Successful approaches <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Creativity 	Teachers compensate for resource gaps

		own materials.”		through innovation.
	Community Immersion	“You go with them. You live with them.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Immersion 	. Immersion helps teachers understand learners’ realities
	Storytelling	“When elders share stories, students listen more attentively.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous Pedagogy 	Oral traditions enhance engagement and learning.
	Collaboration with Elders	“Teachers, parents, and cultural leaders work together.”	<p>Sustaining relevance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared Responsibility 	Sustainability depends on collective efforts
	Cultural Integration	“Lessons reflect their traditions and values.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Preservation 	Education becomes meaningful when culture is embedded.

The study findings on Indigenous Peoples Education emphasized that the sustainability of IPED programs is often challenged by •Language and cultural gap, insufficient culturally appropriate learning materials, limited teacher training, and weak institutional support, particularly in remote and indigenous communities (UNESCO, 2019; DepEd, 2016). However, research also highlights that successful IPED implementation is achieved through culturally responsive and community-based approaches, including the use of mother-tongue instruction, contextualized teaching strategies, and the active involvement of elders and community leaders, which strengthen cultural authenticity and learner engagement (Gay, 2018; McCarty & Lee, 2014). Furthermore, the relevance of Indigenous education is sustained when schools collaborate continuously with communities, integrate indigenous

knowledge into the curriculum, and promote respect for indigenous identity and values, ensuring that education remains meaningful, inclusive, and culturally grounded (Banks, 2016; UNESCO, 2020).

Challenges

The teachers faced challenges due to curriculum misalignment and gaps in institutional support, making it difficult to implement culturally responsive IPED instruction. These challenges are compounded by resource limitations, including economic constraints and geographical disadvantages, as well as policy barriers such as rigid policies and the low prioritization of IPED, which weaken effective and sustained program implementation.

Theme 1: Teaching Challenges

The teaching challenges in IPED implementation was largely driven by curriculum misalignment and institutional support gaps. Teachers experience difficulty aligning the nationally prescribed curriculum with culturally responsive and contextualized instruction required in indigenous settings. Standardized competencies often do not fully reflect indigenous learners' cultural realities, resulting in limited integration of indigenous knowledge, language, and practices. Additionally, gaps in institutional support—such as insufficient training, unclear implementation guidelines, limited monitoring, and weak administrative assistance—leave teachers inadequately prepared to address these demands. Consequently, teachers rely heavily on personal initiative and improvised strategies, leading to uneven and inconsistent IPED delivery. These are the evident from the following statements of the participants below:

“Balancing the standard curriculum with cultural teaching is difficult.” (IDI, 5)

“I need more training to properly teach their culture.” (IDI,3)

“There is also a lack of consistent training for teachers assigned to IPED schools, especially new teachers.” (IDI, 2)

“As an IPED teachers. A major educational system barrier is the lack of faculty expertise and training in IPed principles, where many educators possess only superficial or inaccurate understandings, leading to ineffective teaching and facilitation.” (IDI, P1)

“Yes. Budget limitations and limited monitoring affect the sustainability of the program. Sometimes, IPED is treated as an additional task rather than a core program. This makes implementation inconsistent.” (IDI, P8)

These findings imply the need for greater curriculum flexibility that allows teachers to contextualize competencies according to indigenous cultural contexts without compromising learning standards. There is also a critical need to strengthen institutional support systems, including continuous IPED-focused teacher training, clear policy guidance, and sustained administrative backing. Addressing these gaps would enhance teachers' capacity to deliver culturally responsive instruction and promote consistent, effective IPED implementation.

Research consistently shows that curriculum rigidity and inadequate institutional support limit the effectiveness of indigenous education programs (UNESCO, 2019). Banks (2016) emphasizes that culturally responsive teaching requires flexible curricula and strong institutional commitment to support teachers working in diverse cultural contexts. In the Philippine setting, the Department of Education (DepEd, 2016) highlights that sustained training, clear guidelines, and administrative support are essential for successful IPED implementation and for enabling teachers to meaningfully integrate indigenous culture and knowledge into classroom instruction.

Theme 2: Resource limitations

The resource limitations significantly challenge the implementation of the IPED program, particularly through economic barriers and geographical disadvantage. Economic barriers include insufficient funding, lack of culturally appropriate learning materials, and limited access to basic school resources, which restrict teachers' ability to deliver meaningful and culturally responsive instruction. These challenges are intensified in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas where poor infrastructure, difficult terrain, and limited access to transportation hinder teacher deployment, learner attendance, and regular community engagement. As a result, IPED implementation becomes inconsistent and heavily dependent on teachers' personal efforts and external assistance.

These findings imply the need for increased and sustained financial support for IPED schools, particularly those in remote areas. Targeted resource allocation, provision of culturally appropriate instructional materials, and infrastructure development are essential to address economic and geographical barriers. Strengthening logistical support and prioritizing resource distribution for geographically isolated schools can enhance program accessibility, teacher effectiveness, and learner participation. These are the evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

“We don’t have enough materials or funds.” (IDI, P6)

“Infrastructure in remote areas is often poor.” (IDI, P5)

“We have limited access to textbooks and culturally appropriate resources hinders effective teaching.”(IDI, 4)

“Due to economic constraints prevent the school from providing necessary tools and equipment for hands-on learning.” (IDI, P2)

“We often rely on our personal resources to supplement what the school cannot provide.” (IDI, P1)

“There is insufficient funding to produce learning materials in local languages.” (IDI, P8)

“We have Limited access to training and workshops reduces teachers’ capacity to deliver effective I nstruction.” (IDI, P7)

“The Natural barriers, such as rivers or mountains, make it challenging for learners and teachers to attend school regularly.” (IDI, P9)

Findings on indigenous education emphasized that insufficient funding and limited resources are major barriers to effective program implementation, especially in remote and marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2019). Research further indicates that geographical isolation exacerbates educational inequities by limiting access to materials, training, and support services (McCarty & Lee, 2014). In the Philippine context, DepEd (2016) recognizes that addressing economic and geographical constraints is crucial for ensuring equitable

access to quality Indigenous Peoples Education and sustaining culturally responsive learning environments.

Theme 3: Policy barriers

The policy barriers, particularly policy rigidity and low program priority, significantly affect the implementation and sustainability of the IPED program. Rigid policies limit teachers' flexibility in adapting the curriculum to indigenous cultural contexts, resulting in challenges in contextualizing lessons and integrating indigenous knowledge. Additionally, the low prioritization of IPED at the institutional and policy levels leads to delayed implementation, insufficient monitoring, and limited allocation of resources. These constraints weaken program continuity and place additional burden on teachers to sustain IPED through personal initiative rather than structured policy support.

These findings imply the need for more flexible and responsive education policies that recognize the unique cultural and contextual needs of indigenous learners. Strengthening policy commitment and elevating IPED as a priority program can improve resource allocation, monitoring mechanisms, and institutional accountability. Policy reforms that allow contextual adaptation and sustained support are essential for ensuring the long-term effectiveness and relevance of IPED implementation. These are the evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

"Administrative requirements become too bureaucratic." (IDI, P2)

"IPED is treated as an additional task." (IDI, P5)

"When the school's plans or leaders change all the time, it messes up the program and makes it hard to keep going." (IDI, P3)

"We received minimal guidance or support because the program is not considered a priority." (IDI, P7)

"Policy rigidity and low institutional commitment create inconsistent and unsustainable program implementation." (IDI, P6)

"Rigid national curriculum policies make it difficult to integrate indigenous knowledge and practices." (IDI, P8)

“Teachers cannot adapt standardized competencies to reflect learners’ cultural contexts.” (IDI, P9)

Literature on indigenous education highlights that rigid education policies often hinder the effective integration of indigenous knowledge and culturally responsive practices (UNESCO, 2019). Studies further emphasize that programs with low policy priority tend to suffer from inconsistent implementation and limited sustainability (Banks, 2016). In the Philippine context, DepEd (2016) underscores the importance of policy flexibility and strong institutional commitment in strengthening IPED implementation and ensuring equitable education for indigenous communities.

Table 2. Challenges

<i>Issues Probed</i>	<i>Codes / Categories</i>	<i>Significant Statements</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Meanings</i>
<i>RQ2</i> <i>Challenges</i>	Curriculum Conflict	“Balancing the standard curriculum with cultural teaching is difficult.”	Teaching challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Curriculum Misalignment 	National standards limit flexibility.
	Lack of Guidance	“I need more training to properly teach their culture.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Institutional Support Gaps 	Teachers require sustained mentoring.
	Financial Constraints	“We don’t have enough materials or funds.”	Resource limitations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic Barriers 	Limited funding restricts program quality.
	Poor Infrastructure	“Infrastructure in remote areas is often poor.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Geographical Disadvantage 	Physical isolation affects access to education.
	Bureaucratic Processes	“Administrative requirements become too bureaucratic.”	Policy barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy Rigidity 	Excessive paperwork limits innovation.
	Inconsistent Support	“IPED is treated as an additional task.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low Program Priority 	Weak institutional commitment affects

				sustainability
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Research on Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) highlights that curriculum misalignment, limited institutional support, resource constraints, and policy barriers significantly hinder effective program implementation. Teachers often struggle to integrate culturally responsive instruction due to rigid national curricula and standardized competencies that do not reflect indigenous learners’ cultural realities, while gaps in training, unclear guidelines, and weak administrative support leave educators underprepared (Banks, 2016; DepEd, 2016). Resource limitations, including insufficient funding, lack of culturally appropriate materials, and poor infrastructure in geographically isolated communities, further restrict meaningful learning experiences (UNESCO, 2019; McCarty & Lee, 2014). Additionally, rigid policies and the low prioritization of IPED undermine program sustainability and place extra burden on teachers, who must rely on personal initiative to maintain culturally relevant practices (Banks, 2016; DepEd, 2016). Collectively, these studies underscore the need for flexible curricula, strengthened institutional support, targeted resource allocation, and responsive policy frameworks to ensure effective and sustainable IPED implementation.

Best practices

The best practices in teaching strategies emphasize linguistic relevance and practical learning, ensuring that lessons are understandable and applicable to learners’ daily lives. Community involvement through cultural authority and community ownership enhances learning by valuing local knowledge and fostering collective responsibility. Together, these practices create more meaningful, context-sensitive, and sustainable educational experiences.

Theme 1: Teaching Strategies

The teaching strategies emphasize linguistic relevance and practical learning as key approaches to enhance student engagement and comprehension. Linguistic relevance ensures that learners access content in a language or terms they understand, which facilitates clearer communication and deeper cognitive processing. Practical learning focuses on applying knowledge through hands-on, real-life activities, bridging the gap between theory and practice and making learning

meaningful and memorable for students. Together, these strategies create an inclusive and learner-centered environment that respects students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds while promoting active participation.

The emphasis on linguistic relevance and practical learning has important implications for education. Curriculum developers should design materials that are culturally and linguistically appropriate to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. Teachers should be trained to implement practical, activity-based lessons and adapt instruction to learners' linguistic needs. Educational policies and programs should support experiential learning approaches that connect classroom content to students' daily lives, fostering engagement, skill development, and long-term retention. These are the evident from the following statements of the participants below:

"Using the mother tongue helps learners understand better." (IDI, P1)

"Hands-on activities like crafts and farming." (IDI, P2)

"Learning through local experiences and examples makes lessons more meaningful." (IDI, P4)

"Field activities and community-based projects improve students' understanding of concepts." (IDI, P6)

"We integrate local knowledge and practices into classroom activities for relevance." (IDI, P5)

"I conducted demonstrations and experiential learning encourage active participation and skill development." (IDI, P9)

"I conducted Practical, hands-on activities help students apply what they learn in real-life situations and I used local dialects helps learners understand complex concepts more easily." (IDI, P3)

Research supports the effectiveness of these strategies. Cummins (2000) highlights that students learn best when instruction is delivered in a familiar language, reinforcing comprehension and cognitive growth. Kolb (1984) emphasizes that experiential learning through practical application enhances understanding and skill acquisition. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further supports these

approaches, suggesting that learning is most effective when situated within learners' social and cultural contexts and linked to meaningful real-life experiences.

Theme 2: Community involvement

The community involvement highlight the importance of cultural authority and community ownership in education. Cultural authority recognizes the knowledge, traditions, and values of the local community, ensuring that learning is respectful and relevant to learners' social and cultural contexts. Community ownership emphasizes active participation of community members in decision-making, planning, and implementation of educational programs, fostering a sense of responsibility, sustainability, and collective engagement. Together, these practices strengthen the relationship between schools and communities, making education more inclusive and contextually grounded.

The integration of cultural authority and community ownership has significant implications for educational practice and policy. Schools and educators should actively collaborate with local leaders, elders, and stakeholders to align curriculum and teaching methods with community values. Educational programs should encourage community participation in planning and evaluation processes to ensure relevance and sustainability. Such approaches can enhance learner engagement, promote social cohesion, and foster a shared sense of accountability for educational outcomes. These are the evident from the following statements of the participants below:

"They master the traditions." ." (IDI, P4)

"Parents become more supportive." ." (IDI, P3)

"When the community is involved, students feel their culture is valued." . (IDI, P2)

"Everyone in the village takes responsibility for the children's education." . (IDI, P5)

"We try to teach lessons in ways that reflect our local way of life." . (IDI, P1)

"Having guidance from cultural elders makes students feel proud of their heritage." ." (IDI, P6)

“Working closely with the community helps keep our programs relevant and strong. (IDI, P9)

Research supports the benefits of community involvement in education. Epstein (2011) emphasizes that active community engagement strengthens student learning and creates a supportive environment for educational success. Banks (2006) argues that incorporating local cultural knowledge into education enhances relevance and inclusivity, while Fullan (2007) highlights that community ownership leads to sustainable and effective school improvement. Together, these studies demonstrate that leveraging community authority and fostering ownership can significantly improve educational experiences and outcomes.

Table 3. Best practices

<i>Issues Probed</i>	<i>Codes / Categories</i>	<i>Significant Statements</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Meanings</i>
RQ3 <i>Best practices</i>	Mother Tongue Instruction	“Using the mother tongue helps learners understand better.”	Teaching strategies ● Linguistic Relevance	Language familiarity improves comprehension.
	Experiential Learning	“Hands-on activities like crafts and farming.”	● Practical Learning	Indigenous practices deepen understanding.
			Community involvement	

	Elders as Resource Persons	“They master the traditions.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Authority 	Elders ensure authenticity.
	Parental Support	“Parents become more supportive.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Ownership 	Shared participation sustains programs. S

Research consistently supports the value of these best practices. Cummins (2000) emphasizes that instruction delivered in a familiar language improves comprehension, cognitive growth, and learner confidence. Kolb (1984) highlights that experiential learning—through hands-on, real-life activities—enhances understanding, skill acquisition, and retention. Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory underscores that learning is most effective when it is situated within learners’ social and cultural contexts. Similarly, Epstein (2011) argues that active community engagement strengthens student learning and creates a supportive educational environment. Banks (2006) stresses that incorporating local cultural knowledge enhances relevance and inclusivity, while Fullan (2007) shows that community ownership fosters sustainable and effective school improvement. Together, these studies demonstrate that linguistically responsive, practical, and community-centered teaching strategies are essential for meaningful and culturally grounded education.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of teachers implementing the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) Program in selected public elementary schools in Central Lebak, Sultan Kudarat. Guided by a phenomenological approach and anchored on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, the findings reveal that sustaining Indigenous Education Programs remains both challenging and meaningful for teachers working in indigenous communities.

The study concludes that IPED teachers face persistent challenges such as language barriers, limited culturally relevant instructional materials, insufficient training specific to Indigenous education, and weak institutional support. These challenges hinder the effective implementation of culturally responsive teaching and

affect the sustainability of the program, particularly in geographically isolated and resource-limited settings.

Despite these difficulties, teachers demonstrate strong commitment, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity. The use of self-made and localized instructional materials, community immersion, storytelling, and collaboration with elders and parents emerged as effective practices that support learner engagement, cultural preservation, and meaningful learning. These practices highlight the critical role of teachers not only as educators but also as cultural bearers and advocates of indigenous identity.

Furthermore, the sustainability and relevance of the IPED program are strengthened when schools foster strong partnerships with indigenous communities. Active involvement of elders and cultural leaders ensures cultural authenticity, reinforces learner identity, and promotes shared responsibility in education.

Overall, the study affirms that Indigenous education is most effective when it is community-centered, culturally grounded, and institutionally supported.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

For the Department of Education (DepEd):

DepEd should strengthen the implementation of the IPED Program by providing sustained and specialized professional development for teachers assigned to indigenous schools. Trainings should go beyond policy orientation and focus on practical classroom strategies, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP), and mother tongue-based instruction. Adequate funding and timely provision of culturally appropriate learning materials should also be prioritized.

For School Administrators:

School heads and administrators should provide stronger institutional support to IPED teachers by allowing curriculum flexibility, encouraging culturally responsive practices, and promoting regular collaboration with elders and community leaders. Monitoring and mentoring systems specific to IPED implementation should be strengthened to ensure consistent program delivery.

For Teachers:

Teachers are encouraged to continue developing culturally responsive and innovative teaching strategies, such as localized materials, storytelling, and place-based learning. Engaging in continuous self-reflection, community immersion, and collaboration with indigenous elders will further enhance cultural competence and teaching effectiveness.

For Indigenous Communities and Parents:

Active participation of parents, elders, and cultural leaders should be sustained and strengthened. Their involvement in curriculum planning, classroom activities, and school programs is essential in preserving indigenous knowledge and ensuring the cultural relevance of education.

For Future Researchers:

Future studies may explore IPED implementation in other regions or use mixed-method approaches to further examine learner outcomes, policy effectiveness, and long-term impacts of Indigenous Education Programs. Research focusing on learner and parent perspectives may also enrich the understanding of IPED sustainability.

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