Indigenous Filipino Students' Challenges, Coping Strategies, and Recommendations in Higher Education

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Abstract. Indigenous Peoples worldwide face persistent challenges in accessing equitable and culturally responsive education, and the Philippines is no exception. This study delves into the educational experiences of Indigenous Filipino students in higher education, examining their challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations for improvement. Drawing on qualitative case study methods and Indigenous Standpoint Theory, the research reveals the complex interplay of factors shaping Indigenous students' educational trajectories. The findings highlight the resilience of Indigenous students in adapting to the university environment and finding acceptance for their cultural identity. Despite positive experiences, challenges persist, including academic adjustment difficulties, financial constraints, and issues of discrimination and cultural identity. Indigenous students employ coping strategies such as maintaining a positive attitude and seeking support from peers. Participants offer recommendations for supporting Indigenous students, including establishing dedicated support organizations, expanding financial assistance, and promoting cultural awareness. By prioritizing Indigenous voices and perspectives, higher education institutions can create more inclusive and supportive environments, contributing to the broader goal of advancing Indigenous education and promoting social justice and equality.

Keywords: Challenges; Coping strategies; Indigenous students.

1.0 Introduction

Indigenous Peoples around the world continue to face systemic challenges in accessing equitable and culturally responsive education (United Nations, 2018). Despite growing recognition of their rights and contributions, Indigenous communities remain marginalized within formal education systems, which often privilege dominant cultural perspectives and exclude Indigenous ways of knowing. In the Philippines, where Indigenous Peoples constitute a significant and diverse portion of the population, this issue is exceptionally pressing. Historical marginalization, socioeconomic inequalities, and cultural exclusion continue to shape the educational trajectories of Indigenous Filipino students (UNDP, 2011; Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021).

Globally, studies from countries such as Australia and Canada consistently highlight barriers that Indigenous students face in educational systems. These include limited access to culturally relevant curricula, systemic discrimination, poor retention and completion rates, and inadequate institutional support (Bandias et al., 2013; Bailey, 2016). Within these systems, Indigenous learners often experience cultural erasure, alienation, and a lack

of recognition for their heritage and identity. In the Philippine context, although progressive frameworks such as the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997 and the Indigenous Peoples Education Curriculum Framework have been established (DepEd, 2021), implementation remains uneven, particularly in provinces like Bukidnon.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST) offer powerful frameworks for understanding and addressing these persistent educational disparities. UNDRIP emphasizes the right of Indigenous Peoples to education that respects their cultural methods, languages, and knowledge systems. Meanwhile, IST challenges dominant epistemologies by privileging Indigenous perspectives and centering their lived experiences in the analysis of power and inequality (Mansell, 2011).

Despite systemic barriers, Indigenous students demonstrate significant resilience in their educational journeys. Research highlights various coping strategies employed by Indigenous learners, including seeking familial and community support, drawing on their cultural identity for strength, and actively engaging in advocacy for inclusive education (Kelley & Henschke, 2019). However, these efforts are often constrained by entrenched institutional structures that fail to provide sufficient support or recognition.

While international scholarship on Indigenous education continues to grow, localized studies focusing on the lived experiences of Indigenous Filipino students, particularly in higher education settings, remain limited. There is a need for research that not only documents their challenges but also amplifies their voices and sheds light on the ways they navigate educational systems. This study addresses that gap by adopting a qualitative approach grounded in Indigenous methodologies and the principles of IST. It aims to explore the challenges faced by Indigenous Filipino students in higher education, examine the coping strategies they employ, and gather their recommendations for improving educational access and inclusion. By foregrounding Indigenous perspectives, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on equity and social justice in education. It aspires to inform culturally responsive policies and practices that affirm Indigenous identities and promote more inclusive and empowering learning environments in the Philippines and beyond.

2.0 Methodology
2.1 Research Design
This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the lived experiences of Indigenous Filipino students in a university setting. Guided by the Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST), as articulated by Nakata (2007), the research centered on Indigenous voices and epistemologies to better understand the educational challenges they face, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This emic approach allowed the researcher, who is both a teacher and a resident of Bukidnon, to explore experiences from within the cultural context of the participants. The case study design was chosen for its capacity to provide rich, detailed insights into the lived realities of a specific population within a defined institutional and geographic setting.

2.2 Research Participants
Ten participants (five males and five females) were recruited using snowball sampling, starting with a purposive sample of students who self-identified as Indigenous and were currently enrolled at Central Mindanao University (CMU) in Bukidnon. Initial participants were identified through academic contacts and student organizations, and earlier interviewees referred subsequent participants. Inclusion criteria required that participants be: (1) members of an Indigenous cultural community; (2) at least 18 years old; and (3) currently enrolled at CMU. The university is situated in Musuan, Maramag, Bukidnon, a province home to seven recognized Indigenous groups: Talaandig, Higa-onon, Bukidnon, Umayamnon, Matigsalug, Manobo, and Tigwahanon (Province of Bukidnon, 2012). Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new insights or themes emerged from additional participants.

2.3 Research Instrument
The primary research instruments were in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), facilitated through a semi-structured interview guide. This guide included open-ended questions that explored participants' experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies in navigating higher education. The questions focused on themes such as cultural identity, academic challenges, support systems, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their studies. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and private setting, using a mobile phone for audio recording, along with a notebook and pen for notes. To ensure depth and breadth of data, FGDs were stratified by sex (male

and female). Ethical standards were rigorously observed, including the use of written informed consent, confidentiality agreements, and adherence to health and safety protocols related to COVID-19. All data were manually transcribed, coded, and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. A matrix chart was developed to organize emerging codes, concepts, and patterns, enabling the identification of core themes and subthemes (Laycock et al., 2011). Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, ensuring participants' rights were respected, and data confidentiality was strictly maintained.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure
Data collection was conducted over three months during the academic year, ensuring flexibility and sensitivity to participants' availability and academic schedules. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained, and participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. The process began with identifying participants through purposive sampling, followed by snowball referrals. Initial contact was made via email or mobile communication, after which schedules were arranged for face-to-face or virtual meetings, depending on the participant's preference and COVID-19 safety considerations.

Data were collected through a combination of in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Each in-depth interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, while FGDs, organized by sex, lasted about 60–90 minutes. All interviews and discussions were conducted in a quiet, private setting conducive to open sharing. The interviews were guided by a flexible interview protocol designed to probe into areas such as academic and financial challenges, cultural identity, experiences of inclusion or exclusion, coping mechanisms, and participants' recommendations for improving Indigenous student support. With participant consent, all sessions were audio-recorded. The researcher also kept reflexive field notes to capture non-verbal cues, contextual details, and personal reflections during and after each interaction. All interviews and FGDs were conducted primarily in English, Filipino, or Bisaya, depending on participants' comfort and language preference.

2.5 Data Analysis
The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach guided the analysis: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed in conjunction with field notes to ensure accuracy and contextual understanding. The researcher then conducted open coding to label significant statements and ideas. These codes were organized into categories and grouped into emerging themes and subthemes using a matrix chart, which allowed for a clear comparison across participants and data sources. Throughout the process, the researcher engaged in reflexivity by maintaining a journal to monitor personal biases, especially given their positionality as both a teacher and a resident. This reflective practice ensured that participants' voices remained central in the interpretation and presentation of data.

3.0 Results and Discussion
The following themes emerged from the narratives of Indigenous students at Central Mindanao University (CMU), highlighting their lived experiences as they navigated the transition from flexible learning to full face-to-face classes. Their responses revealed significant challenges related to academic adjustments, financial hardship, limited internet access, and emotional and social stress. In response, the participants developed various coping strategies grounded in resilience, adaptability, and support systems. These findings reflect the broader issues described in existing literature on Indigenous Peoples' education and access to higher learning.

3.1 Navigating Academic Transition and Institutional Challenges
The abrupt shift from online to in-person learning presented significant challenges for Indigenous students. During the flexible learning setup, students had more time to complete school requirements. However, with the return to traditional classroom settings, many expressed doubts about their ability to cope with the academic pace and volume of tasks.

"Back when classes were online, we had more time. Now, everything feels fast-paced. During recitations, we can no longer search for answers. We feel pressured."

These sentiments echo the findings of Soria et al. (2020), who reported that BIPOC students, including Indigenous

learners, faced greater academic challenges during and after the pandemic, such as a lack of adequate instructional support and a mismatch between home and school environments. The unfamiliarity with particular subjects, especially for first-year students, is consistent with Milne et al. (2016), who observed that many Indigenous students are academically disadvantaged when educational strategies do not reflect their worldviews or learning needs. Moreover, Morgan (2003) noted that the Western-centric curriculum often forces Indigenous learners to adapt to a system that overlooks their cultural context, thereby increasing their sense of alienation.

3.2 Economic Constraints and Survival Strategies
All participants reported severe financial limitations that affected their studies, including a lack of daily allowances, transportation, food, and supplies.

"My parents were not supportive of me going to college... I am a security guard at night. Sometimes, my married siblings ask me for money because I have work."

Despite free tuition under government policy, incidental expenses continue to be a significant burden. This finding aligns with Eduardo and Gabriel (2021), who highlighted that Dumagat students face similar hardships due to transportation costs, lack of subsistence allowance, and discriminatory treatment. Likewise, Bandias et al. (2013) emphasized that Indigenous students' high attrition rates are rooted in persistent economic insecurity, exacerbated by insufficient institutional support. The stories from CMU further affirm Thomas et al. (2014), who argued that pathways into higher education may be available in theory but are often blocked by systemic and practical challenges.

3.3 Barriers to Technology and Internet Connectivity
Participants reported poor internet signals and limited access to devices, which impaired their ability to participate in online learning and research.

"The signal is okay in some places on campus, but there are areas with very slow connections."

This reflects national and international data showing that digital access remains a critical equity issue. Soria et al. (2020) found that Indigenous students in the U.S. were disproportionately affected by digital divides during the pandemic. In the Philippines, DepEd (2021) acknowledged the severe impact of poor connectivity on Indigenous learners in geographically isolated communities. Furthermore, Adonis and Couch (2017) noted that Igorot students faced systemic barriers rooted in location and access to educational tools. These technology gaps are not merely logistical concerns but are emblematic of the layered educational disadvantage IP students face.

3.4 Social Pressures and Cultural Sensitivity
Fear of discrimination due to Indigenous identity shaped students' behaviors, including choices in clothing and language.

"I decided not to wear our traditional attire anymore… Someone gave me a weird look."

This phenomenon is consistent with Bailey (2016) and Currie et al. (2012), who documented how Indigenous students often experience racial microaggressions in predominantly non-Indigenous educational spaces. Morgan (2003) also pointed out that universities often require Indigenous students to conform to a Western academic identity that disregards their cultural identities, creating internal conflict. These challenges echo what Rogayan (2019) described among Aeta students, who experienced verbal bullying and cultural stereotyping in state universities.

3.5 Coping Mechanisms and Hopes for Institutional Change
Participants exhibited resourceful coping strategies, such as part-time work, time management, and drawing strength from community values and personal goals.

"There should be a scholarship just for IP students… Even just a small amount helps."

These findings support Nelson and White (2018), who stressed the importance of relational support and culturally safe learning environments for Indigenous student success. Likewise, Reyes et al. (2019) documented how Aeta

students developed adaptive learning strategies, such as consulting dictionaries and mimicking English media, to overcome academic pressures. Adonis and Couch (2017) found that Igorot students relied on traditional values and familial teachings to persist in the face of adversity.

These coping narratives also affirm the transformative potential of education described by Behrendt et al. (2012), who argued that higher education, when inclusive and equitable, significantly uplifts Indigenous individuals and communities. However, without culturally grounded support systems, these pathways remain difficult to navigate. The lived experiences of Indigenous students at CMU mirror the broader struggles and resilience of Indigenous learners documented globally and locally. Despite legal frameworks and policy initiatives (e.g., IPRA 1997, DepEd Order No. 32 s.2015), Indigenous students continue to face structural inequalities. Their coping mechanisms, grounded in adaptability, cultural pride, and community, offer rich insight into the transformative potential of culturally responsive education. The findings reaffirm the need for equity-driven reforms in scholarship, infrastructure, and curriculum design to support Indigenous Peoples in higher education.

4.0 Conclusion

This study advances the field of Indigenous education by providing an in-depth, grounded understanding of the lived experiences of Indigenous Filipino students in higher education, with a focus on a public university in Bukidnon, Philippines. Anchored in Indigenous Standpoint Theory and a qualitative case study approach, the research contributes to the current state of knowledge by highlighting the unique cultural, financial, and academic realities that Indigenous students encounter, particularly during the transition from online to face-to-face learning in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study brings to light the persistent structural and institutional barriers faced by Indigenous students, including financial hardship, limited access to scholarships, academic adjustment difficulties, and experiences of subtle discrimination and cultural marginalization. These challenges are not isolated incidents but part of a larger pattern of systemic inequity in Philippine higher education. At the same time, the findings highlight the strength, adaptability, and agency of Indigenous students, who employ a range of coping strategies, demonstrate emotional resilience, rely on peer support, and exhibit resourcefulness to persist in their academic journey.

By documenting both the hardships and triumphs of Indigenous students, this study expands existing scholarship and highlights the critical importance of culturally responsive support systems. It justifies the need for targeted institutional reforms such as the creation of an Indigenous Student Organization, enhanced financial assistance, inclusive pedagogy, and more visible cultural representation within the university setting. These insights not only inform policy and practice at Central Mindanao University but also offer transferable lessons for other institutions seeking to advance equity for Indigenous learners.

Future research could explore the long-term educational outcomes of Indigenous students in higher education, the role of faculty attitudes in shaping student success, and the effectiveness of implemented support systems from the perspectives of both students and administrators. Comparative studies across regions and ethnolinguistic groups may also deepen understanding of localized needs and facilitate the development of more context-specific interventions. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that meaningful advancement in Indigenous education requires more than individual perseverance; it demands systemic transformation grounded in respect, inclusivity, and sustained institutional commitment. By centering Indigenous voices and collaborating with their communities, higher education institutions can serve as powerful agents in the broader pursuit of educational justice and Indigenous empowerment.

5.0 Contribution of Authors

The sole author initiated and completed this study.

6.0 Funding

7.0 Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

8.0 Acknowledgment

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