

Academic Goals and Aspirations of the Indigenous Students

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Abstract. This study investigated the educational experiences of Indigenous Filipino students at a Philippine state university. The study aimed to provide narratives of their lived experiences in their academic goals and aspirations. The researcher employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and utilized Indigenous Standpoint Theory to ensure that the perspectives and voices of Indigenous students were heard. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed using key themes and subthemes. The study highlights the significance of education in fostering social mobility and enhancing personal and community empowerment. It also highlights the role of social capital in supporting indigenous youths' efforts to pursue higher education. The participants suggested several changes to university services to support Indigenous students, including creating an Indigenous Student Organization and a cultural awareness program, establishing Indigenous scholarships, and incorporating cultural topics into university orientations.

Keywords: Indigenous People; Education; Social mobility; Aspirations.

1.0 Introduction

Indigenous Peoples around the world have long faced systemic barriers in accessing quality education that honors their cultural heritage and empowers their communities. Despite legislative efforts and international declarations recognizing Indigenous rights to education, the reality for many Indigenous students remains marked by inequity and marginalization. This disparity is particularly evident in countries like the Philippines, where Indigenous communities encounter numerous challenges in their pursuit of higher education. The World Bank (2021) highlights the socioeconomic disparities experienced by Indigenous Peoples, who often bear the brunt of poverty and exclusion. In the Philippines, home to a significant Indigenous population, the quest for educational equity is a pressing issue. Despite constitutional guarantees and legislative measures aimed at safeguarding Indigenous rights to education, obstacles persist, ranging from inadequate resources and culturally insensitive curricula to discrimination within educational institutions.

Education is widely recognized as a powerful tool for social mobility, yet for many Indigenous students, accessing quality education remains a distant dream. The journey toward higher education is fraught with challenges, including financial constraints, linguistic barriers, and cultural alienation. Moreover, the absence of Indigenous perspectives within educational frameworks further exacerbates the marginalization experienced by Indigenous learners. Eduardo and Gabriel (2002) highlight the global disparity in Indigenous education, noting that existing educational systems often fail to meet the unique cultural and social needs of Indigenous students. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, N.d.) underscores the critical education gap faced

by Indigenous communities, citing factors such as lack of resources, discrimination, and cultural alienation within educational systems. Despite efforts by the Working Group on Indigenous Populations and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to address these issues, significant challenges persist (United Nations, 2018). Shalley et al. (2019) reveal lower access and completion rates for Indigenous students in higher education in Australia, particularly those from rural areas. Milne et al. (2016) further underscore the ineffectiveness of current educational strategies in promoting Indigenous academic success. Soria et al. (2020) highlight the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indigenous students, exacerbating existing disparities in access and resources. Similar challenges are observed in Canada, where Currie et al. (2012) and Bailey (2016) document experiences of racial discrimination and systemic barriers faced by Indigenous university students.

In response to these challenges, various initiatives have been implemented to promote Indigenous education. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has introduced culturally responsive education programs, including the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Curriculum Framework (DepEd, 2021). Despite these efforts, disparities persist, as highlighted by Eduardo and Gabriel (2021) in their study on Dumagat perceptions of education rights. Indigenous students employ a range of coping strategies to navigate the educational challenges they face. Nelson and White (2018) emphasize the importance of supportive relationships and culturally competent spaces in fostering Indigenous student success. Reyes et al. (2019) and Rogayan (2019) illustrate how Aeta and Igorot students in the Philippines draw strength from their cultural heritage to overcome obstacles in higher education.

While progress has been made in recognizing the importance of Indigenous education, significant gaps remain between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities. Behrendt et al. (2012) and Thomas et al. (2014) highlight systemic barriers that hinder Indigenous participation in higher education, underscoring the need for greater alignment between policy frameworks and implementation strategies. Indigenous education remains a complex and multifaceted issue worldwide. While various initiatives and policies aim to address the challenges faced by Indigenous students, persistent disparities underscore the need for comprehensive, culturally responsive approaches that empower Indigenous communities and promote equitable access to education.

Based on the researcher's observations, Indigenous students at Central Mindanao University are experiencing challenges similar to those highlighted in the literature. However, a gap remains, as no studies have been conducted to investigate their lived realities. Thus, this research explored the academic goals and aspirations of Indigenous students in the Philippines. By centering Indigenous voices and perspectives, it aims to shed light on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Indigenous students in their pursuit of higher education. Furthermore, this study endeavors to bridge the gap between policy rhetoric and lived realities by critically examining the implementation of educational policies and frameworks intended to support Indigenous students. Addressing the systemic inequities they face requires a holistic approach that centers on Indigenous voices and values. By empowering Indigenous students to pursue their academic goals and aspirations, education can become a transformative force that promotes social mobility and fosters inclusive societies.

2.0 Methodology

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate the lived experiences of Indigenous students in a university setting, guided by the Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST) by Martin Nakata. The study was conducted at a Philippine state university in Bukidnon, Philippines. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, with inclusion criteria that emphasized Indigenous identity, being eighteen years of age or older, and being currently enrolled at the university. The interview guide was pretested before the actual data collection to ensure it effectively captured the intended information. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, with strict adherence to ethical standards. Manual data coding and thematic analysis were employed to identify key themes, ensuring rigor and coherence in the interpretation of the data. Throughout the study, ethical considerations governed participant privacy and data confidentiality, with clear communication of participant rights and research objectives.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The qualitative findings provided valuable insights that directly contributed to achieving the research objectives. Through a sociological lens, these findings were organized into major themes with detailed elaborations discussed

in this section. To ensure clarity and context, each theme is accompanied by relevant excerpts and descriptions from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, thus honoring the lived experiences and perspectives of the Indigenous student participants.

3.1 Academic Aspirations and Communal Purpose

A dominant theme that emerged across participants' narratives was their deep commitment to education as a means not only for self-betterment but also for the upliftment of their families, communities, and cultural groups. Participant 2 shared:

"I want to assist other members of my tribe to secure lands that abide with the law... I also want to develop and sustain our ancestral domain."

This sentiment was echoed by Participant 5, who expressed:

"I want to be an inspiration to my community... we all share the same goal."

Another participant emphasized that their peers, though taking different academic paths, were united in their collective vision:

"Although we are pursuing different courses, ... we all want to help our respective families and communities."

As Participant 6 described,

"When I'm already successful, I could help financially/materially the younger generation in our community."

These perspectives align with global findings that Indigenous students often associate their academic success with broader communal upliftment and responsibility (Milne et al., 2016; Adonis & Couch, 2017). Educational pursuits are viewed not merely as personal achievements but also as acts of cultural preservation, ecological stewardship, and resistance against marginalization (Behrendt et al., 2012). The aspiration to become role models within their communities underlines the transformative power of education in reshaping Indigenous futures.

3.2 Navigating Financial and Academic Obstacles

Participants frequently cited economic challenges as a primary barrier to educational success. Participant 3 emphasized:

"There should really be a scholarship for the IP students, since most of us come from poor families."

Another participant echoed this need, noting that financial support is essential for continued access to higher education. These findings are consistent with Bandias et al. (2013), who identified financial hardship as a key barrier to Indigenous student retention.

In addition to economic concerns, academic difficulties stemming from language barriers and culturally misaligned curricula also surfaced. Participant 6 shared:

"We don't speak English at home... academic writing is hard without support."

As another participant expressed, many Indigenous students find university-level academic expectations overwhelming due to the disconnect between their cultural-linguistic backgrounds and institutional norms.

These insights align with the literature that documents how systemic inequalities, particularly in curriculum and instruction, can alienate Indigenous students (Smith et al., 2016; Eduardo & Gabriel, 2002). These challenges, although widespread, often remain invisible to university administrators and instructors who lack training in cultural sensitivity.

3.3 Resilience, Coping Strategies, and Cultural Strengths

Despite encountering substantial challenges, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, drawing strength

from their cultural heritage, community solidarity, and spirituality. As Participant 4 described:

"I pray to our Magbabaya before exams; that calms my mind."

Another participant expressed how cultural gatherings and storytelling provided emotional support:

"When we feel low, we gather, sing, and share stories. That gives me strength."

Participant 7 noted the importance of being proud of their culture and correcting misconceptions:

"It makes me happy to share my culture so that I could also correct the wrong ideas about the Lumads."

These coping mechanisms align with those of Reyes et al. (2019), who found that Aeta students utilized cultural practices and spiritual traditions to sustain themselves amid adversity.

This resilience is further supported by Adonis and Couch (2017), who observed similar patterns among Igorot students, for whom cultural beliefs served as vital coping mechanisms in higher education settings. These findings challenge deficit-based perspectives and instead highlight the cultural strengths that Indigenous students bring to the academic realm.

3.4 Role of Institutional Support and Inclusive Teaching

A recurrent recommendation from participants was the establishment of an Indigenous Student Office or organization that could serve as a support hub. Participant 8 shared:

"It would be best if there will be an office or organization that will handle us, especially for other Indigenous students to feel that they are not alone in CMU."

Another participant added:

"There are other IPs who are still shy and when there will be an office that will handle us, we will be united and we can seek help whenever we have problems."

Participants also called for orientation programs that promote cultural awareness. As Participant 10 emphasized:

"Once everyone is culture-sensitive, subtle forms of discrimination will not exist."

These insights align with the global literature, which emphasizes the need for culturally competent programs and safe spaces in universities (Nelson & White, 2018; Thomas et al., 2014).

Such recommendations reinforce the idea that support systems must go beyond academic advising to include emotional, cultural, and social dimensions—essential aspects of student success for marginalized populations.

3.5 Instructors as Crucial Allies

The role of educators was identified as central to either reinforcing or dismantling cultural barriers within academic spaces. Participant 6 shared a positive experience:

"My instructor asked me to share about my language... it helped me speak up."

Such moments of recognition can be empowering and affirming, allowing Indigenous students to feel seen and valued.

Conversely, other participants recounted alienating experiences. Participant 9 described:

"Some teachers just speak English fast... I feel lost."

These encounters highlight the power imbalance in the classroom and the risk of exclusion that arises when instructors lack cultural responsiveness.

As Morgan (2003) argues, faculty members serve as gatekeepers to institutional inclusion or exclusion. Culturally responsive pedagogy, empathy, and the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems are not optional but necessary for equitable education (Milne et al., 2016; DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2015). Instructors who intentionally make space for Indigenous voices contribute significantly to reshaping academic culture.

3.6 Broader Implications: Policy, Practice, and Structural Equity

The findings of this study also address a broader issue: the disconnect between inclusive policy frameworks and their actual implementation. While the Philippines' Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Framework (DepEd, 2021) advocates for culturally relevant education, participants continue to experience marginalization and a lack of genuine inclusion. This reflects broader global trends, where well-intentioned policies are often undermined by structural inertia and inadequate resource allocation (Trudgett & Sullivan, 2017; Bandias et al., 2013).

As Participant 1 noted during a focus group:

"The system says it supports us, but sometimes, it feels like we are invisible."

This feeling of invisibility was especially heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, where online learning widened the equity gap. Soria et al. (2020) highlight that Indigenous students globally faced compounded disadvantages during the pandemic, such as poor internet access, economic instability, and limited institutional support.

These findings underline the urgent need for structural reform in higher education. Symbolic inclusion must give way to systemic transformation through inclusive curricula, equitable funding, faculty training, and meaningful student participation.

The results of this study highlight a dual narrative: the persistent structural disadvantage faced by Indigenous students and their unwavering resilience and commitment to education as a means of empowerment. Participants' academic aspirations extended far beyond personal success, encompassing a vision of collective well-being, cultural recognition, and social change.

From coping through ancestral practices to advocating for institutional reform, their stories reflect both struggle and strength. As such, higher education institutions must move beyond performative inclusivity and commit to structural equity by embedding Indigenous perspectives in pedagogy, enhancing faculty awareness, and establishing dedicated support systems.

These findings contribute to a growing body of literature that emphasizes the critical role of culturally responsive education in advancing not only academic success but also social justice for Indigenous Peoples.

4.0 Conclusion

This study concludes that higher education serves as a transformative pathway for Indigenous students in the Philippines, enabling them to experience personal growth, cultural preservation, and community advancement. Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST), the research highlighted the complex interplay of aspirations, motivations, and challenges that shape the academic journeys of Indigenous students. Despite systemic barriers, including financial limitations, academic underpreparedness, and cultural alienation, these students exhibit remarkable resilience and a deep commitment to using education as a tool to uplift their communities. Their chosen academic disciplines and stated goals reflect a clear focus on Indigenous rights, sustainable development, and social justice.

Beyond personal success, the participants expressed collective aims: to become role models, safeguard Indigenous knowledge systems, and push for more inclusive educational practices. Their voices underscore the urgency for institutional reforms that not only accommodate Indigenous students but also affirm their cultural identities and heritage. In response to these insights, this study recommends establishing an Indigenous Student Resource

Center or Office to provide academic guidance, mental health support, and cultural programming. Financial support should be enhanced through scholarships, travel allowances, and subsistence grants specifically tailored for Indigenous students, especially those from geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas.

Furthermore, it is essential to integrate Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and languages into the curriculum and co-curricular activities. Initiatives such as inviting elders and cultural bearers as guest speakers during university orientations and intercultural events can promote cultural pride and awareness. Sensitivity training for faculty, staff, and students should also be conducted regularly to foster culturally responsive and inclusive classrooms. To reinforce the link between academic learning and community engagement, universities should develop community-based learning and outreach programs that allow Indigenous students to apply their education in service of their home communities.

Finally, higher education institutions must strengthen partnerships with Indigenous communities through formal agreements, such as Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), ensuring that education and research initiatives adhere to ethical, participatory, and culturally grounded approaches. Implementing these practical recommendations can help close the gap between policy and practice, contributing meaningfully to the realization of Indigenous students' aspirations while upholding the constitutional mandate to provide inclusive, quality, and culture-based education for all.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The sole author initiated and completed this study.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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