



FROM NOTHING TO SOMETHING: UNVEILING THE EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE (IP) PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract:

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples (IP) professionals who are now public-school teachers in Tboli 1 District, Tboli, South Cotabato, and examined the challenges they encountered in becoming professionals. Ten IP teachers participated in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using semi-structured guides. The transcribed and translated data were thematically coded. The teachers' experiences reflected themes of cultural discrimination, personal growth, perseverance amid hardship, tribal identity, cultural uniqueness, heritage preservation, and educational advancement. Coping-related themes included overcoming financial hardship, accessing scholarships, persisting in education, mobilizing family and community support, preserving cultural identity, advocating equal rights, sustaining cultural heritage, and viewing education as a form of empowerment that can reshape cultural norms. Insightful themes emphasized perseverance and respect, appreciation of cultural diversity, identity shaped by nature and history, preservation of ecological knowledge, faith and determination, and education as a force that empowers culture. Overall, the findings highlight the transformative role of education in empowering Indigenous teachers while preserving cultural identity and underscore the need for inclusive programs, targeted scholarship opportunities, and culturally responsive teacher development to support Indigenous pathways to professional growth.

Keywords: educational management, indigenous empowerment, professional growth, lived experiences, cultural resilience, phenomenology, Philippines

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1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as one of the most powerful levers for social, economic, and political transformation, equipping individuals with knowledge and skills to improve not only their own lives but also those of others in their communities. It can dismantle systemic barriers, promote tolerance, and foster more just and equitable societies, making education a revolutionary instrument for realizing human and collective potential (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021; da Silva *et al.*, 2024; Liboiron, 2021).

Despite this transformative promise, Indigenous Peoples have long experienced colonization, marginalization, and discrimination, particularly in relation to schooling and professional opportunities. Yet, over generations, many Indigenous communities have drawn on resilience and perseverance to sustain rich cultural traditions, languages, and rituals while negotiating mainstream institutions. Recent scholarship documents how Indigenous Peoples transform hardship into strength and contribute meaningfully to society, illustrating their resilience in building fulfilling lives for themselves and their communities (Baskin, 2022; Drummond, 2020; Lim, 2025).

However, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the lived experiences of Indigenous professionals—especially those working in education—as they navigate their careers and workplaces. Existing studies tend to foreground Indigenous learners or communities rather than Indigenous professionals' own trajectories, identity negotiations, and strategies for succeeding within institutions shaped by non-Indigenous norms (Bastien *et al.*, 2023; Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021; Locke *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, we know little about how Indigenous identity informs professional practice, what challenges these professionals encounter, and which forms of support enable their success and inclusion. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the career journeys, everyday challenges, coping strategies, and identity work of Indigenous professionals in education. In doing so, it seeks to generate nuanced insights that can inform more inclusive workplace practices, targeted educational policies, and legislation that genuinely support Indigenous professionals' well-being and advancement. Furthermore, understanding their experiences can help to preserve and value indigenous knowledge and culture. The important contributions that indigenous professionals make to their fields must be acknowledged. Their cultural background, traditional knowledge, and viewpoints can all be advantageous to society as a whole. By studying their experiences, we can advocate for greater representation, respect, and inclusion, resulting in a more just and inclusive society (Bishop & Durksen, 2020; Felix, 2023; Makate, 2020).

In the Philippines, Indigenous Peoples were the original inhabitants of the archipelago, sustaining complex cultures, highly revered customs, and sacred rituals long before the emergence of the modern state. Over time, however, many Indigenous communities were pushed to the margins and became minority groups with declining social, economic, and political power (Bishop & Vass, 2021; Fiolet *et al.*, 2022; McCartney *et al.*, 2023). Against this backdrop, a vibrant Indigenous Peoples sector has emerged,

supported by a diverse range of academic, civil society, church, and grassroots organizations that provide policy advocacy, community development, technical assistance, and educational initiatives. Collectively, these groups have developed increasing sophistication and specialization, playing a crucial role in defending Indigenous rights and advancing social justice.

At the same time, hundreds of Indigenous Peoples Organizations (IPOs) across the Philippines now work in partnership with civil society, development agencies, and government actors. Through these efforts, Indigenous communities continue to nurture distinctive social structures, customs, and dialects, maintain deep relationships with their ancestral homelands, and enrich the cultural diversity of the world. It is therefore imperative to respect and protect Indigenous rights, cultures, and traditions, especially as they are embodied in communities that have inhabited their lands for thousands of years (Blanchet Garneau *et al.*, 2021; Francis-Cracknell *et al.*, 2023; Mudemba *et al.*, 2021). Our connection to the land, woven into everyday rituals and ways of life, is a central marker of Indigenous identity.

Within this broader context, my own story reflects the tensions between educational promise and lived exclusion. As an Indigenous person and one of the original inhabitants of this land, I have witnessed how the education system often fails learners like me. Many Indigenous students, including myself, have experienced hunger, illness, exhaustion, bullying, and persistent discrimination in school because of our ethnicity and culture, which continue to obstruct equal access to meaningful education. I remember being despised and looked down upon simply for being Indigenous, perceived as ignorant or lacking knowledge and guidance. Yet I also know that I deserve dignity and respect, not mockery. Today, I feel grateful that government agencies and non-governmental organizations have begun to extend more opportunities and benefits to Indigenous communities, particularly in education. These experiences, and my pride in belonging to the Indigenous Blaan people, compel me to investigate how Indigenous professionals navigate educational spaces that have historically excluded us.

As the saying goes, "*It takes a village to raise a child,*" and my own educational journey embodies this truth. I was overjoyed when opportunities emerged to cover my allowances, tuition, uniform, and other school-related expenses, making college seem attainable. Yet, beneath these blessings lay a difficult reality: my parents' limited financial capacity created the most challenging period of my college years, and persistent insecurity continually tested my determination as a student.

Even so, I tried to view each opportunity through a positive and disciplined lens. This commitment helped me maintain strong grades and, eventually, graduate in 2012 as a dean's lister from Ramon Magsaysay Memorial College in General Santos City—a moment of great pride as a Blaan student and descendant of resilient ancestors. Building on this, I was selected as a scholar of the Assisi Foundation Incorporated, which supports underrepresented, marginalized, and minority college students.

Later, my parents encouraged me to apply for assistance from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). Successfully passing the interview and

becoming a grantee reinforced the lesson that “*no one succeeds alone*”: students like me rely on a web of support from families, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations. With these collective efforts, my academic journey became less burdensome and more hopeful. These experiences strengthen my conviction that “*education knows no background, race, age, or social status*” and inspire this study’s focus on how Indigenous learners and professionals navigate higher education systems that have not always recognised their worth.

Consequently, this study foregrounds the diverse skills, abilities, and knowledge that Indigenous people contribute to their respective industries, underscoring how their adaptability, tenacity, and distinct cultural perspectives enrich professional environments. By illuminating these strengths, the study advances diversity, inclusivity, and cultural competence across sectors through a focused portrayal of Indigenous professionals. More broadly, its contribution to the literature lies in elevating Indigenous professionals’ perspectives and experiences, thereby fostering empathy, understanding, and critical awareness within the wider community. Ultimately, the study helps bridge the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds by encouraging dialogue, collaboration, and mutual respect.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Experience of Indigenous People Professionals When it comes to Their Education

Indigenous Peoples constitute approximately 2.09% of the United States population, with 574 federally recognized tribes under the Bureau of Indian Affairs. However, only 14% of the 2.75 million Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. attain a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 30% of non-Indigenous populations, revealing a persistent educational gap rooted in structural inequalities and constrained access to higher education. In essence, Indigenous peoples are defined not only by their ancestral connection to pre-colonial societies but also by distinct governance systems, cultural traditions, spiritual practices, and languages that shape their collective identity and worldview (Bourque Bearskin *et al.*, 2025; Gangoso, 2023; Nicholas, 2022).

In this regard, education is widely acknowledged as a universal human right that enables individuals to exercise other civil, political, and socioeconomic rights. Accordingly, it must be accessible to all persons regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, or economic status. Beyond access, education also fosters democracy, peace, justice, and national development, serving as a powerful instrument for social transformation and equity. Despite this promise, Indigenous learners worldwide continue to experience educational exclusion due to discrimination, language barriers, and culturally irrelevant curricula, underscoring a global need for inclusive and culturally responsive schooling systems (Burgess *et al.*, 2022; Gebara *et al.*, 2023; Oloo & Kiramba, 2022).

Building on this concern, Indigenous knowledge represents a rich system of collective wisdom developed through generations of interaction with the environment.

It encompasses cultural values, adaptive practices, spiritual beliefs, and ecological insights that guide community life and identity. Yet, mainstream education systems have historically marginalized Indigenous knowledge by privileging Western scientific paradigms, often rendering Indigenous epistemologies invisible or inferior. As a result, Indigenous learners frequently experience cultural alienation in formal schooling. Consequently, scholars now advocate integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into curricula to strengthen identity formation and academic engagement among Indigenous youth (Camacho & Matus, 2021; Handsley-Davis *et al.*, 2023; Parreñas, 2020).

Within this broader body of knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) plays a crucial role in environmental conservation and sustainable development. Derived from close relationships with nature, TEK enables Indigenous communities to predict weather changes, identify planting cycles, and manage natural resources responsibly. In contrast to industrial practices that often degrade ecosystems, TEK emphasizes balance, reciprocity, and environmental stewardship. Thus, integrating TEK into modern education not only promotes cultural preservation but also contributes directly to addressing contemporary ecological challenges (Jewell *et al.*, 2022; Petzold *et al.*, 2020; Staller & Chen, 2022).

Despite its value, Indigenous knowledge was historically dismissed by colonial institutions as folklore or superstition. Over time, however, postcolonial shifts in research and policymaking have increasingly recognized Indigenous Peoples as legitimate knowledge producers rather than passive beneficiaries. Today, Indigenous communities actively participate in global dialogues on sustainability, education, and human rights. Even so, many Indigenous professionals continue to confront discrimination, identity conflicts, and institutional exclusion—issues that remain underexplored in the scholarly literature (Joy-Correll *et al.*, 2022; Raballe *et al.*, 2021; Stenfors *et al.*, 2020).

Turning now to the Philippine context, Indigenous Peoples (IPs) receive legal protection through Republic Act 8371, or the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, which guarantees cultural integrity, self-determination, and access to education. Complementing this, Department of Education Order No. 62, s.2011 established the National Indigenous Peoples Education Policy Framework, promoting culture-based and mother-tongue instruction in basic education. Likewise, CHED Memorandum Orders encourage higher education institutions to institutionalize Indigenous-sensitive academic programs and community engagement initiatives. Despite these policy gains, systemic challenges such as poverty, linguistic barriers, and discrimination still hinder IPs from completing schooling and entering professional careers. Accordingly, there is a notable research gap in understanding the lived experiences, struggles, and success journeys of Indigenous professionals in the Philippines, which provides a critical rationale for the present study (Latulippe & Klenk, 2020; Riley *et al.*, 2025; Thunig & Jones, 2021).

In addition, Indigenous knowledge has become increasingly central to environmental policy debates. Perspectives on Arctic sea ice in a warming climate and Indigenous peoples' roles as biodiversity stewards exemplify how place-based

knowledge has emerged as indispensable to environmental understanding and protection. Indigenous knowledge now figures prominently in scientific research, illuminating ecosystem dynamics and human–nature interactions while challenging dominant epistemological, ontological, and political assumptions in science. Importantly, Indigenous knowledge systems have been shaped not only by imperial projects and modern discourses but also by Indigenous institutions, disciplines, and environmental conditions (Layton, 2023; Reyteran, 2021; Topa *et al.*, 2025).

Consequently, scholars emphasize that Indigenous knowledge is about more than epistemology: it entails ethical commitments and forms of action, as well as alternative ontologies to those asserted by “Western” territorial authority and by science, including relational ethics between humans and other species. Indigeneity is neither wholly imposed nor entirely autonomous; rather, it emerges from interactions between how people understand themselves and the contexts in which they live. Although partly shaped by globalization, Indigeneity remains geographically specific. Key aspects of the concept—such as tendencies toward essentialism and clear-cut distinctions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities—are rooted in settler societies like North America, whereas Indigeneity carries different meanings in Southeast Asia or Africa. Thus, the historiography of Indigenous knowledge as an expression of indigeneity must account for how it circulates across diverse geographical, political, and cultural contexts (Li *et al.*, 2021; Reyes-Garcia *et al.*, 2024; Turner *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, Indigenous peoples have developed and refined their knowledge systems over millennia, drawing on evidence gathered through direct contact with the environment, long-term experiences, extensive observations, and practical skills. These systems reveal diverse Indigenous worldviews and offer distinct understandings of nature and science that differ from dominant Western frameworks. Yet Indigenous knowledge has not been widely integrated into formal governmental adaptation efforts and has frequently been overlooked in policy and research. Despite this marginalization, Indigenous communities have long recognized the centrality of their knowledge systems in managing change and sustaining community resilience (Gothe, 2024; Vallejo, 2022; Williams *et al.*, 2020).

2.2 Coping Mechanisms among Indigenous People Professionals and Their Challenges on Their Education

Indigenous professionals draw on various coping mechanisms to navigate their educational journeys, shaped by their cultural identity and lived realities. Notably, strengthening cultural connections serves as a powerful foundation for resilience. Upholding traditional values, using indigenous languages, and participating in cultural practices foster a sense of belonging and identity that empowers learners to overcome academic and personal challenges. In many cases, cultural continuity reinforces emotional stability and motivation in the face of institutional (Bishop & Durksen, 2020; Felix, 2023; Makate, 2020).

In addition, community support plays a vital role in sustaining indigenous people throughout their education. Guidance from elders, participation in local cultural gatherings, and involvement in community-based encouragement systems help students manage educational pressures. Likewise, indigenous student networks and peer support groups foster emotional security and academic confidence, enabling them to thrive in unfamiliar learning environments. These communal relationships affirm cultural identity while nurturing perseverance (Bishop & Vass, 2021; Fiolet *et al.*, 2022; Mc Cartney *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, access to indigenous mentors and role models enhances academic persistence and career planning among indigenous professionals. Seeing successful individuals who share similar cultural backgrounds inspires learners to set higher goals and persist despite systemic inequalities. Mentors provide culturally sensitive guidance, academic advice, and moral encouragement. Consequently, the presence of role models strengthens self-efficacy and nurtures aspirations aligned with both academic success and cultural preservation (Blanchet Garneau *et al.*, 2021; Francis-Cracknell *et al.*, 2023; Mudemba *et al.*, 2021).

Moreover, many Indigenous learners engage in advocacy and self-empowerment to cope with educational barriers. They participate in initiatives that raise awareness of indigenous rights, challenge discriminatory policies, and push for culturally responsive curricula. Through this, they become active agents of change rather than passive recipients of education. This empowerment fosters confidence, leadership, and a commitment to improving educational systems for future generations (Bourque Bearskin *et al.*, 2025; Gangoso, 2023; Nicholas, 2022).

However, despite these coping strategies, indigenous professionals continue to face significant barriers. Limited access to quality education in geographically isolated communities remains a persistent concern. Additionally, mainstream academic institutions often lack cultural representation, resulting in learning environments that disregard indigenous knowledge systems. Language barriers further hinder participation when mother-tongue instruction is unavailable. Financial struggles and discrimination contribute to educational inequalities, creating emotional and academic strain among indigenous learners (Burgess *et al.*, 2022; Gebara *et al.*, 2023; Oloo & Kiramba, 2022).

Nevertheless, ongoing efforts seek to address these inequities. In the Philippines, legal frameworks such as the 1987 Constitution and the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) recognize the educational rights of Indigenous Cultural Communities. These policies aim to preserve indigenous knowledge while promoting equal access to learning. Through culturally inclusive programs and community-based education, the government collaborates with Indigenous organizations to protect linguistic heritage and educational sovereignty. These initiatives affirm the right of Indigenous Peoples to develop culturally grounded and empowering learning environments (Camacho & Matus, 2021; Handsley-Davis *et al.*, 2023; Parreñas, 2020).

Relatively, to this end, the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997 was passed. It also recognizes the state's obligations to ensure the continuity of IPs/ICCs' unique cultural expressions by ensuring their full participation in activities and endeavors related to health, education, and other areas of service, thereby making them responsive to the needs of their unique communities. There is a limited mechanism in place to raise awareness among intellectual property owners about the IPRA framework of 1997. Intellectual property owners are entitled to a comprehensive educational experience (Jewell *et al.*, 2022; Petzold *et al.*, 2020; Staller & Chen, 2022).

Consequently, to address the issue, Education International (EI), which includes the Working Group on Indigenous Populations and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (WGIPPFII), adopted resolutions that recognize the uniqueness of IP culture and language in terms of Indigenous Education. It emphasizes the value of enhancing and preserving Indigenous cultural heritage and identity. As EI commits to promoting intellectual property rights to self-determination, cultural identity preservation, and the right to learn in one's native language, it also recognizes the critical role of educators, education support personnel, and other education sector organizations in ensuring that this commitment is met. Despite the issuances and resolutions protecting the right to education for intellectual property, literature on IP rights to education reveals cases of violations (Joy- (Correll *et al.*, 2022; Raballe *et al.*, 2021; Stenfors *et al.*, 2020).

On the other hand, in the Philippines, instructors are frequently encouraged and advised to be creative in their teaching methods in order to effectively connect with IPs/ICCs and meet the demands of Section 30 of the IPRA of 1997, which states that ICCs/IPs must have equal access to various cultural opportunities through educational system mechanisms. This includes scholarship funding, the right to speak their native language, and culturally appropriate approaches (Latulippe & Klenk, 2020; Riley *et al.*, 2025; Thunig & Jones, 2021).

2.3 Insights/lesson Learned by the Participants of Being an Indigenous People

Indigenous peoples generally experience lower educational outcomes than non-Indigenous populations. Yet some remote schools are challenging this status quo by offering educational opportunities that allow Indigenous learners to thrive. Critically, Indigenous peoples' resilience is inextricably linked to their self-determined identity, which is inherent in Indigenous cultures and traditions. More than any other group, Indigenous peoples advocate for the right to self-determination (Conkey, 2024; Schunko *et al.*, 2024; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020).

The inherent right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination has a lengthy, complex, and compelling history. Indigenous communities view history as one of their strengths, and in most cases, colonialism or state expansion reduced them to numerical minorities. During the colonial period, colonizing powers recognized certain Indigenous rights, and in contemporary political and legal arguments, these historical acts of recognition are cited as foundational sources of rights. Nonetheless, Indigenous peoples have also derived rights from precolonial legal systems, and it is reasonable to

understand these pre-existing rights as the foundation for modern political and legal relationships with the state. For decades, Indigenous representatives have debated "self-determination," "autonomy," "self-government," and "sovereignty" in both domestic and international forums, consistently emphasizing that the right to lands, territories, and natural resources is critical to collective survival and thus inextricably linked with self-determination (Sharma *et al.*, 2021; Vimpari *et al.*, 2023; Yu & Karin, 2022).

In accordance with international law, Indigenous peoples possess the right to self-determination. By virtue of this right, they freely determine their relationship with the states in which they live, in a spirit of coexistence with other citizens, and pursue their economic, social, cultural, and spiritual development under conditions of freedom and dignity. This principle recognizes their inherent authority to govern their own affairs and preserve distinct identities, ensuring that their voices and perspectives are respected in decision-making processes affecting their lands, resources, and ways of life (Sokolova *et al.*, 2025; Walsh *et al.*, 2023; Zidny, 2020).

Beyond its intrinsic value, education is regarded as both a fundamental human right and an essential tool for achieving other human rights and liberties. It serves as a means for economically and socially marginalized people to rise out of poverty and fully participate in their communities. Indeed, education is now widely regarded as one of the most effective long-term financial and social investments a country can make. Adequate education empowers Indigenous children and adults to exercise and enjoy their economic, social, and cultural rights while improving their ability to exercise civil rights and influence political policy processes, thereby strengthening human rights protection overall. As a result, education is critical for the enjoyment, preservation, and transmission of Indigenous cultures and languages (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021; da Silva *et al.*, 2024; Liboiron, 2021).

Turning to the experiences of Indigenous professionals themselves, research reveals two central insights into their journeys within educational and professional contexts. First, Indigenous professionals frequently face unique and complex barriers to success that stem from historical and systemic factors such as colonialism, discrimination, and marginalization. Their paths to professional achievement often involve overcoming significant obstacles and dismantling entrenched societal barriers. Second, when navigating multiple identities, Indigenous professionals frequently struggle to balance their professional roles with their Indigenous identities and community responsibilities, highlighting the ongoing tension between mainstream professional expectations and Indigenous cultural values and commitments (Baskin, 2022; Drummond, 2020; Lim, 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative research approach, particularly phenomenology, whose purpose was to describe the lived experiences of Indigenous people who became

professionals. The research was qualitative in approach, phenomenological in tradition, hermeneutical in discipline, and interpretative in nature. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that focuses on studying and understanding the structures of human experience and consciousness. It has influenced various fields, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, and even aspects of literary theory and art criticism. Phenomenology provides a framework for understanding subjective experiences and offers insights into the nature of consciousness and how individuals relate to the world around them (Staller & Chen, 2022).

In this regard, the study employed a qualitative approach to answer the research questions, as it aimed to assist the researcher in interpreting the lived experiences of Indigenous professional individuals. The research questions focused on how people interpret their experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. Furthermore, qualitative studies can provide detailed insights into human behavior, emotions, and personality characteristics that quantitative methods cannot match. The qualitative approach is a research method used in the social sciences and other fields to collect and analyze non-numerical data. Through this lens, it focuses on understanding the depth and nuances of human experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena. Qualitative research methods involve exploring subjective experiences, perspectives, and meanings through techniques such as interviews, observations, and document analysis (van Manen & van Manen, 2021).

Correspondingly, qualitative research aims to achieve a better understanding through firsthand experiences, truthful reporting, and quotations from actual conversations. It seeks to understand how respondents derive meaning from their surroundings and how these meanings influence their behavior. In addition, a qualitative approach represents a general way of thinking about conducting subjective research. It describes, either explicitly or implicitly, the purpose of the study, the role of the researcher, the stages of the research process, and the methods of data analysis (Bishop & Durksen, 2020).

Moreover, qualitative research offers a holistic perspective that acknowledges the complexity and diversity of human experiences. It allows researchers to delve into the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, shedding light on the underlying reasons, beliefs, and values that drive their actions. By doing so, it captures the depth and nuances of human behavior, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena and providing valuable insights that quantitative research alone may not achieve (Felix, 2023).

Consequently, as the study of phenomena's nature, qualitative research is particularly suitable for addressing the reasons why certain phenomena are observed or not, evaluating intricate multi-component interventions, and enhancing research designs. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are among the most popular techniques for gathering data (Makate, 2020).

Henceforth, the qualitative research approach may be equally significant as the quantitative research technique, particularly in educational research, as long as both aim

to improve the quality of education. Both approaches use different methods to achieve similar goals. However, their differences in methodologies or processes extend beyond data-gathering techniques, study designs, or analytic procedures; they also differ in their underlying beliefs about the world, reality, science, and knowledge. Ultimately, these assumptions are reflected, implicitly or explicitly, in a researcher's explanation of philosophical assumptions and research paradigms (Fiolet *et al.*, 2022).

3.2 Role of the Researcher

In this qualitative inquiry, I served as the primary research instrument, fostering a culturally safe and reciprocal space for Indigenous professionals to articulate their educational journeys and professional trajectories. Recognizing the systemic barriers historically faced by Blaan and Tboli learners, I sought to elicit nuanced accounts of their lived experiences, adaptive coping strategies, and insights gained throughout their academic pursuits. Guided by an emic orientation, I approached the field with an open stance, prioritizing participant-driven conceptualizations over externally imposed frameworks. This ensured that the participants' own voices and terminologies structured the meanings constructed within this research (Stenfors *et al.*, 2020; McCartney *et al.*, 2023; Nicholas, 2022).

Consistent with the paradigm of the researcher-as-instrument, I navigated multiple, interconnected roles to ensure data depth and triangulation. Operating simultaneously as inquirer, interviewer, and observer, I facilitated semi-structured interviews and conducted naturalistic observations to generate rich, descriptive data (Blanchet Garneau *et al.*, 2021; Francis-Cracknell *et al.*, 2023). In my capacity as an advocate, I committed to a decolonizing and ethical representation of these narratives, aiming to inform policy and practice shifts that impact Indigenous professionals (Mudemba *et al.*, 2021). Finally, as transcriber and analyst, I engaged in an iterative, reflexive process—transcribing accounts verbatim and performing recursive readings of field notes to identify emerging patterns and tensions. This approach facilitated the co-construction of knowledge while maintaining a rigorous awareness of how my own positionality shaped the interpretive process (Bourque Bearskin *et al.*, 2025; Gangoso, 2023).

3.4 Research Participants

3.4.1 Research Participants and Sampling Strategy

This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted within the Tboli 1 District, engaging 10 Indigenous professionals from the Blaan and Tboli ethnolinguistic groups. All participants held permanent appointments within the Department of Education (DepEd), ensuring a deep-seated understanding of the institutional and cultural intersections at play.

I employed a purposive homogenous sampling technique to select individuals who shared specific, relevant characteristics. Unlike maximum variation sampling, this approach allowed for a concentrated exploration of the shared lived experiences and

cultural nuances unique to Indigenous educators in this specific context. Of the 10 participants, five engaged in in-depth interviews (IDI), while the remaining five participated in focus group discussions (FGD). This dual approach facilitated both the elicitation of personal, idiosyncratic narratives and the identification of collective, shared meanings.

While qualitative sample sizes vary, a cohort of 10 is consistent with phenomenological standards, which prioritize "depth over breadth" to uncover the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My focus remained on reaching thematic saturation and penetrating the core of their professional journeys rather than seeking statistical generalizability.

3.5 The Role of the Researcher

In this inquiry, I served as the primary research instrument, fostering a culturally safe and reciprocal environment for participants to articulate their trajectories. Recognizing the systemic barriers historically faced by Blaán and Tboli learners, I sought to elicit accounts of their resilience and adaptive strategies.

Guided by an emic orientation, I approached the field with an open stance—a "blank page"—allowing participants to define key concepts in their own words. This ensured that participant-driven conceptualizations, rather than externally imposed frameworks, structured the meanings constructed (Stenfors *et al.*, 2020; Nicholas, 2022). Throughout the study, I navigated interconnected roles: as inquirer and observer, I facilitated dialogue and conducted naturalistic observations; as advocate, I committed to an ethical, decolonizing representation of their stories to inform future policy; and as analyst, I engaged in an iterative, reflexive process to identify patterns and tensions while remaining mindful of my own positionality (McCartney *et al.*, 2023; Bourque Bearskin *et al.*, 2025).

3.6 Instrumentation and Trustworthiness

To facilitate interactional dialogue, I utilized a semi-structured interview guide characterized by open-ended questions. To ensure the validity and rigor of the data collection process, the instrument underwent expert validation prior to implementation. This ensured that the prompts were culturally sensitive, theoretically grounded, and capable of eliciting the rich, nuanced descriptions necessary for a high-quality phenomenological analysis.

3.7 Data Collection

This qualitative phenomenological inquiry was situated within the Tboli 1 District and involved 10 Indigenous professionals from the Blaán and Tboli ethnolinguistic groups. All participants held permanent appointments within the Department of Education (DepEd), providing them with a unique vantage point on the intersection of Indigenous identity and professional institutionalization. I employed a purposive homogenous sampling technique to select individuals who shared a common set of professional and

cultural characteristics, an approach that facilitated a concentrated exploration of shared lived experiences rather than broad generalizability. Of the 10 identified participants, five engaged in individual in-depth interviews (IDI) while five participated in focus group discussions (FGD). This sample size is consistent with phenomenological standards, which prioritize the attainment of thematic saturation and the uncovering of the "essence" of a phenomenon through a deep, rather than wide, participant pool (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Throughout this process, I served as the primary research instrument, fostering a culturally safe and reciprocal environment that allowed participants to articulate their educational and professional trajectories with agency. Grounded in an emic orientation, I approached the field with an open stance, or a "blank page," ensuring that participant-driven conceptualizations structured the analysis rather than externally imposed categories (Stenfors *et al.*, 2020; Nicholas, 2022). I navigated a series of interconnected roles—including inquirer, observer, advocate, and analyst—to generate the rich, nuanced descriptions necessary for high-quality qualitative work. This multifaceted engagement involved examining relevant records, facilitating dialogue, and engaging in an iterative, reflexive practice to acknowledge how my own positionality shaped the co-construction of knowledge (McCartney *et al.*, 2023; Bourque Bearskin *et al.*, 2025).

Data collection was initiated only after securing formal institutional approval from the District Supervisor and coordinating with school heads. Ethical safeguards were strictly maintained; each participant received a comprehensive informed consent package, and I utilized pseudonyms to ensure the confidentiality of all shared narratives. Prior to formal data collection, I conducted a mock interview with an Indigenous professional to calibrate the semi-structured interview guide and ensure its cultural and linguistic appropriateness. This focus on rapport and relational ethics was prioritized over rigid adherence to the interview guide, as building trust was considered essential to eliciting authentic lived realities.

The actual data generation involved two-part, face-to-face interviews that captured both demographic backgrounds and the complexities of the participants' professional journeys. To supplement these individual accounts, the focus groups provided a platform for identifying collective patterns and shared tensions within the community. All sessions were recorded in private, secured venues and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the integrity of the participants' voices. Throughout the duration of the field work, I maintained a reflexive journal to document naturalistic observations and emerging themes, ensuring that the final analysis remained deeply grounded in the contextual realities of the Blaán and Tboli professionals (Blanchet Garneau *et al.*, 2021; Gangoso, 2023).

3.8 Analysis of Data

In this study, the analysis of data followed Colaizzi's method of phenomenological inquiry to explore and interpret the lived experiences of the participants. After conducting semi-structured interviews, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim

and carefully reviewed against field notes to ensure accuracy. Each transcript was read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives and emotional expressions. During this familiarization phase, recurring ideas began to emerge, such as perseverance in education, the role of family support, and cultural pride. This immersion in the data allowed the researcher to develop sensitivity to nuanced experiences conveyed by each participant.

Following this, significant statements relevant to the phenomenon under study were systematically extracted. These statements were those that directly reflected the participants' lived realities and unique experiences. For instance, a participant who shared, "I walked two hours every day to reach my school," provided a meaningful description of educational struggles. Such statements were listed separately and served as the foundation of the thematic analysis. Each significant statement was then interpreted to derive formulated meanings. These meanings represented the underlying intent or essence behind the participants' words. In the earlier example, the statement reflected determination and resilience in pursuit of education despite physical hardship. Once all formulated meanings were identified, they were grouped into clusters of related concepts. These clusters formed emerging themes such as Family as a Source of Motivation, Perseverance Amid Hardship, Cultural Identity as Strength, and Barriers in the Educational Journey. These theme clusters provided structure to the large volume of qualitative data and revealed common experiences shared by many participants. A sample coding matrix was constructed to organize significant statements, formulated meanings, and clustered themes to maintain transparency in the analytic process and ensure consistency in interpretation.

These clustered themes were then synthesized into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. This narrative integrated all the emergent ideas to describe how participants navigated their educational journeys despite systemic and personal challenges. The analysis revealed that indigenous individuals relied on deep cultural roots, family encouragement, and community support systems to persevere in their educational aspirations. From this descriptive synthesis, the researcher articulated the fundamental structure of the phenomenon by capturing its core meaning: indigenous professionals pursue educational success through resilience grounded in cultural values and collective support despite experiencing social and institutional inequities.

To validate the findings, the researcher returned the thematic summary to selected participants for member checking. Participants confirmed the authenticity of the interpretations and affirmed that the results reflected their lived realities. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews, which justified the number of participants in alignment with qualitative research standards. The analysis process-maintained rigor through an audit trail, reflective journaling, and triangulation of interview data with field notes. Overall, Colaizzi's method provided a systematic and credible approach to deriving meaningful insights from the participants' experiences.

3.9 Ethical Consideration

This study adhered to a rigorous ethical framework grounded in participant autonomy and cultural safety. Formal approval was granted by the RMMC Ethics Review Committee, ensuring compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173) and the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (RA 8371), following NCIP-recommended protocols to ensure cultural safety for the Blaan and Tboli communities. Formal informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were briefed on the study's voluntary nature and their right to withdraw without consequence. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, and data remained accessible only to the researcher. Beyond procedural compliance, I prioritized relational accountability, ensuring that the research process respected Indigenous self-determination and that findings accurately reflected the participants' authentic lived realities. The inquiry was conducted with no competing interests, posed minimal risk, and upheld academic integrity through transparent and ethical data representation.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Lived Experiences of Indigenous People Professionals

Clustered Themes	Emergent Themes
Experiences	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discriminated by non -IP - Discriminated on the way we talk as a Blaan - Feeling discriminated due to their expression "ay Blaan" - Faced discrimination from other non-IP on the way we talk - Can't understand our teacher because she is speaking Ilonggo - Bullied because we are Blaan 	Cultural Discrimination
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discriminated but took it positively by practicing tongue-twister to improve our speech - Encountered some discriminations from our co-IP especially Blaan - Took all bullies as an inspiration to be better. - Language barrier 	Positive Growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Really strive to finish our studies; we lived in the mountain. - Need to work hard to finish our studies and reach our goal. - Lived in the mountain and walked many kilometers - Had experienced a lot of sacrifices and difficulties. - Troubles and problems are my companions. - As a Tboli we have a target to those who discriminated us. - Studied without paying the tuition fees as a scholar 	Hardship Perseverance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Our teacher told us to represent our culture and tribe - Participate in the IIP activity in the municipality share the knowledge we acquired - Just believe in ourself as a Blaan that we can finish our studies. - Feeling blessed of some opportunities 	Tribal Identity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We have many traditions and beliefs which are not in non-IP - Different experience of non-indigenous people and beliefs 	Cultural Uniqueness

- Different culture, different beliefs and norms, the way we talk and walk or even the way we dress is just because of your culture and environment has big impact in your life cultural traditions that make us proud due to uniqueness	
- To preserve the identity as a Blaán and our culture for the next generation - Preserve the traditions, knowledge, and practices in our community	Heritage Preservation
- Education is the only key to break ignorance; it helps widen our understanding of everything - Our education experience helps us grow as a human being. - We need to go to school and study. - Most IPs changed because of globalization and modernization.	Educational Growth

Table 1 presents the lived experiences of Indigenous People (IP) professionals, highlighting their experiences, cultural identity, and educational growth. The table is organized into several clustered themes: Experiences, Positive Growth, Tribal Identity, Cultural Uniqueness, Heritage Preservation, and Educational Growth, each supported by corresponding emergent themes.

Under the Experiences cluster, the IP professionals described frequent encounters with cultural discrimination. Many participants reported being discriminated against by non-IP individuals, particularly because of their accent, language, and ethnic identity as Blaán. They shared experiences of bullying, misunderstanding in classrooms due to language differences, and feeling marginalized because of cultural expressions. Despite these negative encounters, some participants reframed discrimination positively by using it as motivation to improve their communication skills and strengthen their resilience. These experiences reveal the persistent challenges of language barriers and social prejudice faced by IP professionals.

In the Positive Growth cluster, participants emphasized hardship perseverance as a defining aspect of their journey. Growing up in mountainous areas, walking long distances to school, and enduring financial and personal struggles shaped their determination to complete their education. Many expressed a strong commitment to working hard to achieve their goals, viewing their sacrifices as stepping stones toward success. Scholarship opportunities and personal motivation played crucial roles in sustaining their educational pursuits, demonstrating how adversity fostered resilience and ambition.

The Tribal Identity and Cultural Uniqueness clusters highlight a strong sense of pride in their heritage. Participants acknowledged the uniqueness of their traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices, distinguishing them from non-indigenous communities. They emphasized the importance of representing their tribe, participating in cultural activities, and maintaining confidence in their identity as Blaán or Tboli individuals. These themes reflect a deep appreciation of cultural diversity and the role of identity in shaping their personal and professional lives.

Under Heritage Preservation, participants expressed a commitment to safeguarding their cultural traditions for future generations. They stressed the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge, practices, and values within their

communities. This sense of responsibility underscores their role not only as professionals but also as cultural stewards dedicated to sustaining their heritage.

Finally, the Educational Growth cluster underscores the transformative power of education. Participants viewed education as a key pathway to overcoming ignorance, broadening perspectives, and fostering personal development. While acknowledging the effects of globalization and modernization on indigenous communities, they affirmed the necessity of schooling in empowering IP individuals and promoting social progress.

Overall, the table illustrates a narrative of resilience, cultural pride, and educational empowerment among Indigenous People professionals. Despite facing discrimination and hardship, they demonstrate perseverance, maintain a strong cultural identity, and recognize education as a vital tool for personal and community advancement.

Table 2: Coping with the challenges of being an indigenous people professional

Clustered Themes	Emergent Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Studying while working in order to finish our studies - Lack of financial support so I was a working student - Some treated Blaas as poor but we take it positively so we study hard. 	Overcoming Financial Hardship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong determination to finish our studies - Trusting yourself and fight to reach to finish our studies - Very optimistic. We fought for our dream. - They didn't know our way of life. - Being an IP, we must have wider understanding. - Ask help from parents or members of the family. 	Pursuing Educational Dreams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NCIP scholar, as one of the indigenous people. - Barangay and NCIP scholar. - Recipient of a scholarship program assisting Ips. - Working student and a municipal scholar. - NCIP office in Marbel to avail the program. - All expenses were covered by the grant, mine is just to study. 	Scholarship Assistance Access
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strive hard and hit the goal of success. - Studied hard and maintain good grades. - Studied hard as much as we can. - Study hard and give our best for it. - Maintained good grades in the university - Made sure that the scholarship and chance given to us would not be wasted so we must finish our studies. 	Persverance Through Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NCIP, our parents, and our grandma contributed a lot. - Our family, working student and municipal scholar. - Farming and family contributed to our success - Family and scholarship and being working student - Strive hard by selling ice candy for our allowance. 	Family Contribution Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unity is one of the strengths in our community. - We always help and share each other - Unity against social injustices - Strengthen bonding by celebrating IP day - We preserve culture and traditions 	Community Collective Support

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preserve and promote our practices - Preserve our identity and adopt the new trends and challenges - Balancing and preserving our indigenous identity with the necessity to adapt evolving circumstances - Educate the young generations - Impart and share them to have more ideas who we are and where we came from and what our tribe is. 	Cultural Identity Preservation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bridge the gap by being fair in everything. - Equal opportunities in the government - Help indigenous and non-indigenous understand each right - Respect to each other - Found ways on the right perceptions of IP and non-IP 	Advocating Equal Rights
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus more on education - Preserve our dances and making outfit of our tribes - "Bong gumne" "Big House" tourism project in Lake Sebu - Community savings and livestock raising 	Sustaining Cultural Heritage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Education empowers the IP - Education plays a significant role in empowering indigenous individuals and communities to overcome historical and contemporary challenges they face - Education is important that helps people change - Education is the key to eradicate poverty - Education is the weapon that can break ignorance and through education, indigenous people were able to understand more many things and understanding of many situations. 	Education as Empowerment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decrease early marriages and educated indigenous people is increasing - IP children are almost going to school. - Early and fix marriages, "Sunggod" "Dowry" are now rare - Ips is involved in decision making. 	Changing Cultural Norms

Table 2 presents how Indigenous People (IP) professionals cope with the challenges they encounter while pursuing education and professional growth. The table is organized into several clustered themes: Overcoming Financial Hardship, Pursuing Educational Dreams, Scholarship Assistance Access, Perseverance Through Education, Family Contribution Support, Community Collective Support, Cultural Identity Preservation, Advocating Equal Rights, Sustaining Cultural Heritage, Education as Empowerment, and Changing Cultural Norms. These themes collectively illustrate the practical strategies, social supports, and cultural values that enabled participants to navigate their struggles.

Under Overcoming Financial Hardship, participants described studying while working due to limited financial resources. Many shared experiences of being working students and facing stereotypes that associated their ethnic group with poverty. Instead of being discouraged, they transformed these perceptions into motivation to study harder. This determination was reinforced by self-belief, optimism, and the willingness to seek help from family members. These accounts show that resilience and a strong sense of purpose were central coping mechanisms in addressing economic challenges.

The cluster Pursuing Educational Dreams and Scholarship Assistance Access highlights the critical role of scholarships in sustaining their education. Many participants benefited from programs offered by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), barangay scholarships, and municipal grants. These financial supports reduced educational burdens and allowed them to focus on their studies. Participants expressed a deep sense of responsibility to maintain good academic performance and not waste the opportunities provided. Their perseverance is evident in their commitment to achieving high grades and striving for success despite hardships.

In Family Contribution Support and Community Collective Support, participants emphasized the importance of collective effort. Families contributed through emotional encouragement, financial assistance, and livelihood activities such as farming or small-scale selling. At the community level, unity and cooperation were identified as strengths that helped members confront social injustices and celebrate cultural identity. Community bonding through shared traditions and events reinforced a sense of belonging and mutual support.

The clusters Cultural Identity Preservation and Sustaining Cultural Heritage reveal participants' dedication to maintaining their indigenous identity while adapting to modern challenges. They described actively preserving traditions, educating younger generations about their heritage, and promoting cultural practices through tourism projects and community initiatives. Balancing modernization with cultural preservation emerged as a key strategy in sustaining their identity.

Under Advocating Equal Rights, participants highlighted efforts to bridge gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous groups by promoting fairness, respect, and mutual understanding. They emphasized the importance of equal opportunities in governance and social systems, as well as correcting misconceptions about indigenous communities. Advocacy served as a coping strategy by empowering them to challenge discrimination constructively.

Finally, the Education as Empowerment and Changing Cultural Norms clusters underscore the transformative impact of education. Participants viewed education as a powerful tool for breaking cycles of poverty, ignorance, and outdated practices such as early marriages. Increased school participation and involvement in decision-making processes were seen as signs of positive change within their communities. Education not only enhanced individual opportunities but also contributed to broader social progress. Overall, Table 2 reflects a narrative of resilience, collective support, and empowerment among Indigenous People professionals. Through financial resourcefulness, scholarship access, family and community backing, cultural pride, and a strong belief in education, participants demonstrated effective coping strategies that enabled them to overcome adversity and contribute to the advancement of their communities.

Table 3: Insights/lesson learned of being an indigenous people professional

Clustered Themes	Emergent Themes
Insights	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be strong, and show them that they cannot pull you down. - Always have positive mindset and have a strong determination to attain your goals - Believe in yourself. - Always try for a better - Take all bullies positively - The importance of respecting our elders' beliefs and tradition. And pass it to the next generation 	<p>Perseverance and Respect</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It shaped our perspective on diversity and the importance of preserving - Profoundly shaped my perspective on cultural diversity and the significance of heritage preservation - Shaped the way of learning most especially in our community in preserving our heritage - Able to understand your own culture and it will be a big help for you to understand other cultures too that the young generation will still have to be proud on 	<p>Appreciating Cultural Diversity</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nature and land enhance our well-being and freely provides the essentials for our survival. - We are blessed through the land and nature - Our ancestors have connections to our nature - IP identity is manifested spiritually and culturally if you're living in the mountain as close to nature - Lot of beliefs and we always connect it to the land and to the nature like in planting, we always based it on the position of the moon 	<p>Nature Shapes Identity</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They exchange their land even in 1 ganta of rice to the settlers and move to the mountain because they are afraid to be in the city with the new settlers - There are good and bad stories about the history of our ancestors. - Bullying, abuses of rights and unequal treatment - Attempt to marry twice during my 5th grade and after the graduation in college but I rejected 	<p>Learning from History</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They know the right time, when to put fertilizer, how to plant corn and when to do it, when is the right time - Predicting the weather, understanding climate risk, coping with climate impacts, informing and improving responses to climate change and variability. - Preserve the Mother Earth - Educate our community on how to address the global challenges especially those involve in "kaingin" - Know our mission here on earth 	<p>Ecological Knowledge Preservation</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Never stop dreaming. Don't be afraid of failure - Always in mind that if others can do it, they can do it also - Always put God first in everything you do and He will do the rest for you - Keep going, strive hard, always seek the kingdom of God for guidance and wisdom - You can have better job if you finish a degree. 	<p>Faith and Determination</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All of us must be educated and become professionals - All their children should become professionals. - An IP must be determined. - Embrace their cultural identity - Unity, understanding and love with non-Ips 	<p>Education Empowers Culture</p>
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Table 3 presents the insights and lessons learned by Indigenous People (IP) professionals from their lived experiences. The table is organized into several clustered themes: Perseverance and Respect, Appreciating Cultural Diversity, Nature Shapes Identity, Learning from History, Ecological Knowledge Preservation, Faith and Determination, and Education Empowers Culture. These themes reflect the personal values, cultural reflections, and guiding principles that participants developed through their journeys.

Under Perseverance and Respect, participants emphasized the importance of resilience, self-belief, and maintaining a positive mindset in the face of discrimination and challenges. They encouraged taking negative experiences, such as bullying, as motivation for growth. Respect for elders and the responsibility to pass cultural traditions to future generations were also highlighted as essential lessons. These insights reveal how perseverance is closely tied to cultural respect and intergenerational continuity.

The cluster Appreciating Cultural Diversity illustrates how participants' experiences shaped their understanding of both their own culture and others. They expressed that deep knowledge of one's heritage strengthens pride and fosters appreciation for diversity. By understanding their indigenous identity, participants felt better equipped to respect and engage with other cultures, ensuring that younger generations remain proud of their roots.

In Nature Shapes Identity, participants described a profound connection to land and nature. They viewed the environment as central to their spiritual and cultural identity, emphasizing that their traditions, beliefs, and daily practices are closely linked to natural cycles. Living near nature reinforced their sense of belonging and well-being, highlighting how the natural world shapes indigenous identity.

The Learning from History cluster reflects awareness of their ancestors' struggles, including displacement, discrimination, and social injustices. Participants acknowledged both positive and painful historical experiences as sources of wisdom. These reflections informed their determination to resist harmful traditions and advocate for personal agency and rights, particularly in matters such as early or forced marriage.

Under Ecological Knowledge Preservation, participants underscored the value of indigenous ecological knowledge in agriculture and environmental stewardship. They recognized their ancestors' expertise in weather prediction, sustainable farming, and caring for the Earth. Preserving and sharing this knowledge was seen as a responsibility, especially in addressing modern environmental challenges and promoting sustainable practices within their communities.

The Faith and Determination cluster highlights the role of spirituality and ambition in guiding participants' lives. They stressed the importance of perseverance,

courage in pursuing dreams, and faith in God as a source of strength and direction. Education was closely linked to hope for better opportunities and improved livelihoods. Finally, Education Empowers Culture emphasizes the belief that education is essential for both personal success and cultural preservation. Participants expressed the aspiration for all indigenous children to become educated professionals while remaining proud of their identity. They advocated unity, mutual understanding, and harmonious relationships with non-indigenous communities, viewing education as a bridge that strengthens both cultural pride and social inclusion.

Overall, Table 3 reveals that the lessons learned by IP professionals center on resilience, cultural pride, environmental stewardship, spirituality, and the transformative power of education. These insights demonstrate how their experiences shaped a strong commitment to personal growth, community development, and the preservation of indigenous heritage.

4.1 Implications for Practice

The empirical insights garnered from this inquiry offer significant implications for the development of inclusive, culturally responsive, and equitable educational frameworks. First, the persistent reality of systemic marginalization underscores the urgent need for proactive institutional frameworks that go beyond standard anti-bullying policies. Schools must cultivate inclusive pedagogical spaces through continuous monitoring and value-based curricula that explicitly foster mutual respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. Such environments are essential for dismantling deep-seated prejudices and reinforcing a sense of belonging for Indigenous students.

Second, the participants' demonstrated resilience in navigating geographic and economic adversity highlights the necessity of equitable financial scaffolding. This suggests that institutional support must be multidimensional, encompassing not only expanded scholarship access but also robust mentorship programs and community partnerships. Furthermore, there is a critical need for the design of culturally affirmative instructional materials that integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP). By prioritizing epistemological diversity within the curriculum, educational institutions can foster cultural sustainability, ensuring that academic success does not come at the cost of ancestral identity. Finally, coordinated efforts among policymakers, educators, and Indigenous communities are required to expand educational opportunities that empower Indigenous learners to achieve socio-economic mobility while remaining firmly anchored in their cultural heritage.

4.2 Recommendations

This exploratory study provides an in-depth account of the lived experiences of a specific cohort of Blaan and Tboli professionals in South Cotabato, but its limited sample and geographic focus indicate the need for further research. Future work should adopt comparative, longitudinal designs that include Indigenous professionals from other regions and private institutions, while incorporating intersectional analyses of gender,

age, and tribal affiliation to clarify how these factors shape professional trajectories and identity formation. Evaluative studies are also needed to assess the long-term impact of targeted interventions—such as mentorship schemes and community-led scholarship programs—on the retention and success of Indigenous learners, including the “next generation” navigating increasingly globalized educational and labor markets. The findings have important implications for practice in promoting inclusive, culturally responsive, and equitable education for Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners, underscoring the need for stronger anti-bullying initiatives, value-based curricula, scholarships, flexible learning options, and institutional support for working students. Integrating Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and ecological practices into the curriculum can preserve cultural heritage while positioning education as a tool for empowerment that advances social mobility, gender equity, and positive cultural change, highlighting the importance of coordinated efforts among schools, policymakers, and communities to expand educational access and enable IP learners to succeed academically while preserving their heritage.

4.3 Concluding Remarks

The completion of this study on the experiences of Indigenous People professional teachers marks a meaningful contribution to understanding the journey of empowerment and success among marginalized communities. Through this research, I gained not only academic insights into the factors that foster resilience perseverance, guidance, and family support—but also a deeper appreciation for the transformative power of education in breaking cycles of poverty and inspiring communities. Conducting interviews and focus group discussions presented challenges in capturing the nuanced realities of Indigenous learners, yet these moments enriched my perspective, strengthened my empathy, and reinforced the importance of inclusive and culturally responsive approaches in education. Beyond the technical findings, this journey has affirmed for me that education is more than a personal achievement; it is a bridge between tradition and modern aspirations, a tool for empowerment, and a legacy shared across generations. I am grateful for the opportunity to witness these stories of determination and hope, and I am inspired to continue advocating for policies, mentorship, and community engagement that sustain the growth and resilience of Indigenous professionals, demonstrating that education is not only a right but a path toward collective progress.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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