Teaching at the Crossroads: Insights into the Experiences of Rural Teachers with Indigenous People Learners

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of teachers in the delivery of basic education to Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners in Jose Abad Santos District II, Davao Occidental using a phenomenological approach. Ten public school teachers were purposively selected to participate in in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD). The study aimed to investigate their experiences, coping mechanisms, and educational management insights. Findings revealed four major themes: Cultural Responsiveness in Teaching, Teaching Amid Resource Scarcity, Community Engagement and Trust Building, and Learners' Barriers and Strengths. Teachers integrated Indigenous culture and language in lessons, adjusted to multigrade settings, and established strong links with tribal leaders and parents. Their coping strategies included Personal Resilience and Mindset, Instructional Adaptation and Flexibility, and the Utilization of Improvised and Local Materials. Educational management insights emphasized Inclusive Educational Planning, Resourcefulness and Innovation, and Learner-Centered Teaching Management. These findings showed that effective education for IP learners depends on cultural integration, creativity, and community collaboration. The study has significant implications for improving inclusive practices, strengthening teacher support, and enhancing culturally relevant instruction. Future directions include enhancing teacher training, fostering school-community partnerships, and promoting participatory research involving IP stakeholders.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers in rural areas who handled Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners faced various challenges that affected the educational experience. These difficulties stemmed from the unique conditions of remote and underserved communities. They encountered issues such as long travel distances, rough terrain, and irregular learner attendance, which led to increased work-related stress. High dropout rates among IP learners were common, often caused by economic struggles, household responsibilities, and the need for children to help with family tasks.

Teachers in hinterland schools faced major challenges in educating Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners, including limited resources, poor access to technology, and lack of proper training. Teaching IP learners required different approaches due to cultural and language differences. In rural areas like the Torres Strait Islands, Nepal, and the Philippines, teachers dealt with discrimination, poor working conditions, and teacher migration. Many schools failed to adapt lessons to IP culture or support community empowerment. Despite the struggles, these experiences offered valuable lessons and highlighted the importance of sharing teacher stories to promote better understanding and encourage others to teach in IP communities.

This qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of teachers delivering basic education to Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners in Jose Abad Santos District II, Davao Occidental. Using a phenomenological approach, it focused on capturing teachers' personal insights, emotions, and reflections as they navigated cultural diversity, limited resources, and instructional challenges. The study also highlighted their coping strategies and the educational lessons gained from working with IP communities, ultimately aiming to inform improvements in both classroom practices and educational policies.

This research aimed to address the issues and concerns of the teachers teaching IP learners in Jose Abad Santos District II, Davao Occidental by exploring in-depth their lived experiences basis for program and policy recommendations. Further, this study explored the following questions:

- What are the experiences of teachers in the delivery of basic education to the IP learners in Jose Abad Santos District II, Davao Occidental?

- How do teachers cope up with the challenges in the delivery of basic education among IP learners?
- What are the educational management insights acquired by the teachers regarding their teaching experiences with IP learners in Jose Abad Santos District II, Davao Occidental?

The literature highlighted that cultural understanding and responsiveness were essential for effective teaching in Indigenous communities. Teachers who embraced Indigenous values and languages built stronger relationships and enhanced student engagement. Many adapted their methods to fit local contexts and multigrade setups. Coping strategies included personal resilience, spiritual grounding, creativity, and peer support, helping teachers manage challenges and stay motivated. Additionally, teachers often took on leadership roles, collaborating with tribal leaders and tailoring educational plans to community needs.

This study was guided by three key theories. The Funds of Knowledge Theory emphasized the importance of integrating Indigenous learners' cultural knowledge into classroom instruction, helping make lessons more meaningful and engaging. Situated Learning Theory highlighted that learning is most effective in real-life contexts, aligning with how teachers used local practices like farming or storytelling to teach. Lastly, Cultural Ecological Theory explained how cultural background and societal factors influenced Indigenous learners' education, helping to understand the challenges teachers faced and how they adapted their practices to meet both cultural and systemic demands.

II. METHOD

This study used a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to explore teachers' lived experiences in educating Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners. The qualitative method allowed for an in-depth understanding of teachers' emotional, cultural, and professional realities through interviews and observations. Phenomenology focused on capturing how teachers personally experienced and interpreted their work in Indigenous communities, offering insights into their practices, challenges, and adaptations.

This study was guided by key philosophical assumptions common in qualitative research. It recognized that researchers bring their own beliefs and values, which shape the study's direction. Ontologically, it accepted that multiple realities exist—teachers, IP learners, and their communities each have unique perspectives on education. Epistemologically, it valued knowledge gained from participants' lived experiences, emphasizing collaboration and cultural sensitivity. Axiologically, it acknowledged that both the researcher's and participants' values and worldviews influenced the interpretation and analysis of findings, making the research a shared and subjective process.

The study followed a qualitative interpretivist approach, focusing on how teachers personally make meaning of their experiences rather than seeking universal truths. Reality was seen as shaped by each teacher's unique perspectives, values, and cultural context. The researcher acknowledged their own influence and used strategies like bracketing and reflexive journaling to minimize bias. Emphasizing individual narratives as valid, the study aimed for a deep, human-centered understanding of how teachers work in culturally diverse and resource-limited Indigenous communities in Jose Abad Santos District II.

You selected 10 public elementary school teachers from Jose Abad Santos District II, Davao Occidental, who teach Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners. Five participated in in-depth interviews (IDIs) and five in a focus group discussion (FGD) to capture both individual and group perspectives. Using purposive sampling, you identified teachers with relevant experience by consulting school heads for referrals. Inclusion criteria required teachers to currently teach IP learners in the district, have at least two years of experience, be willing to participate, and be familiar with the challenges of teaching in remote, multicultural environments.

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire was reviewed and refined based on expert feedback to ensure appropriate language, suitable question complexity, alignment with the research design, and relevance to the study's objectives, while avoiding leading questions.

The researcher obtained formal endorsement, ethical clearance, and permission to conduct the study in public elementary schools in Jose Abad Santos District II. Ten purposively selected teachers of Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners participated in individual interviews or a focus group discussion. Interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, key themes about teachers' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies were identified. Findings were compared with literature and used to recommend cultural responsiveness, instructional flexibility, and community involvement to improve education for IP learners.

To strengthen credibility, the researcher used data triangulation by combining in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes to capture a comprehensive view of teachers' experiences with Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners. Five teachers gave detailed personal narratives in one-on-one interviews, while another five participated in focus groups to explore shared insights. Both were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, involved coding, theme development, and review to authentically represent teachers' lived experiences in delivering basic education to IP learners.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The lived experiences of teachers delivering basic education to IP learners in Jose Abad Santos District II are categorized into four themes: Cultural Responsiveness in Teaching, Teaching Amid Resource Scarcity, Community Engagement and Trust Building, and Learners' Barriers and Strengths.
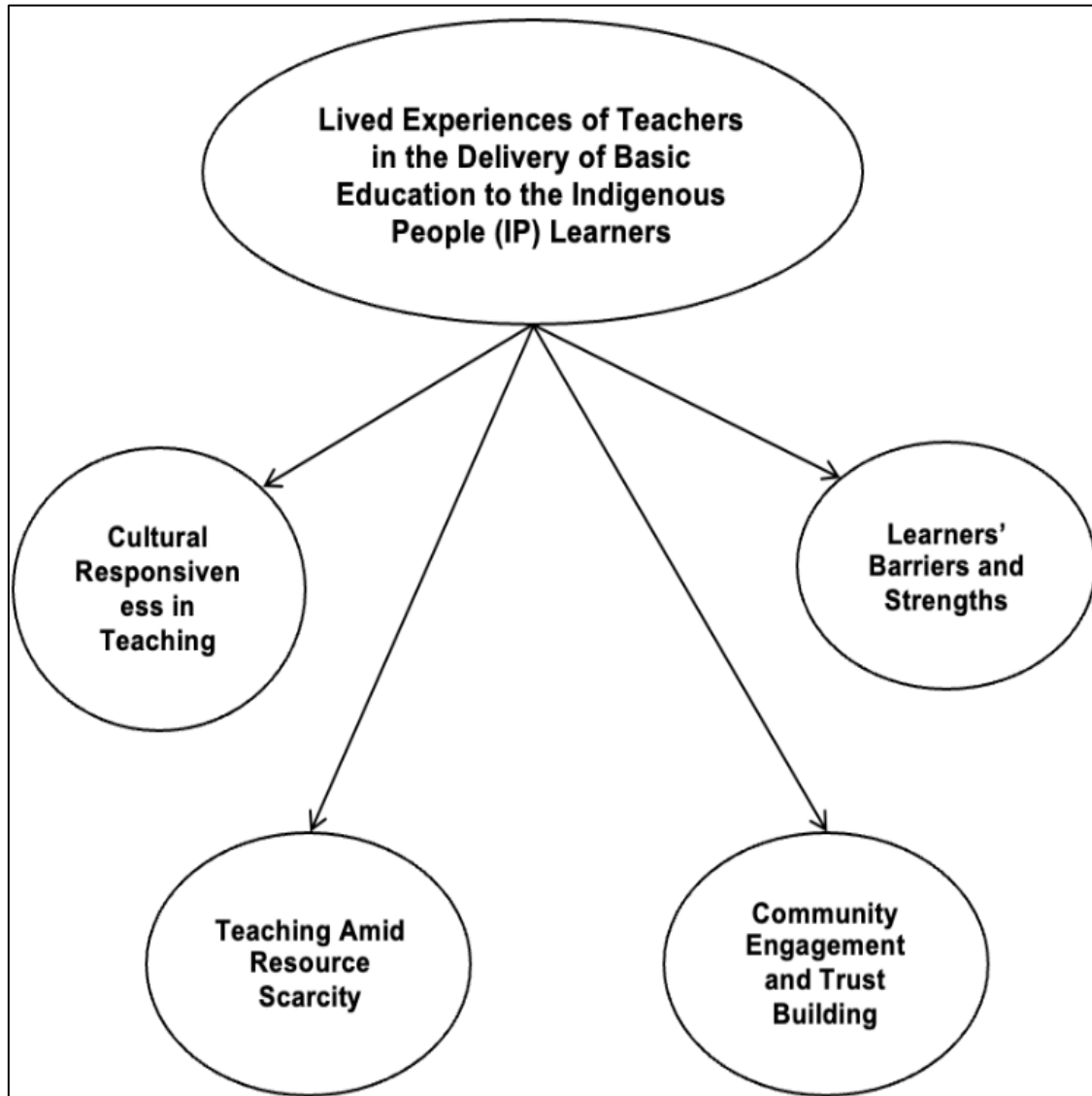

Fig 1 Lived Experiences of Teachers in the Delivery of Basic Education to the Indigenous People (IP) Learners

The coping mechanisms of elementary school teachers facing challenges in delivering basic education to IP learners include Personal Resilience and Mindset, Instructional Adaptation and Flexibility, and the Utilization of Improvised and Local Materials.
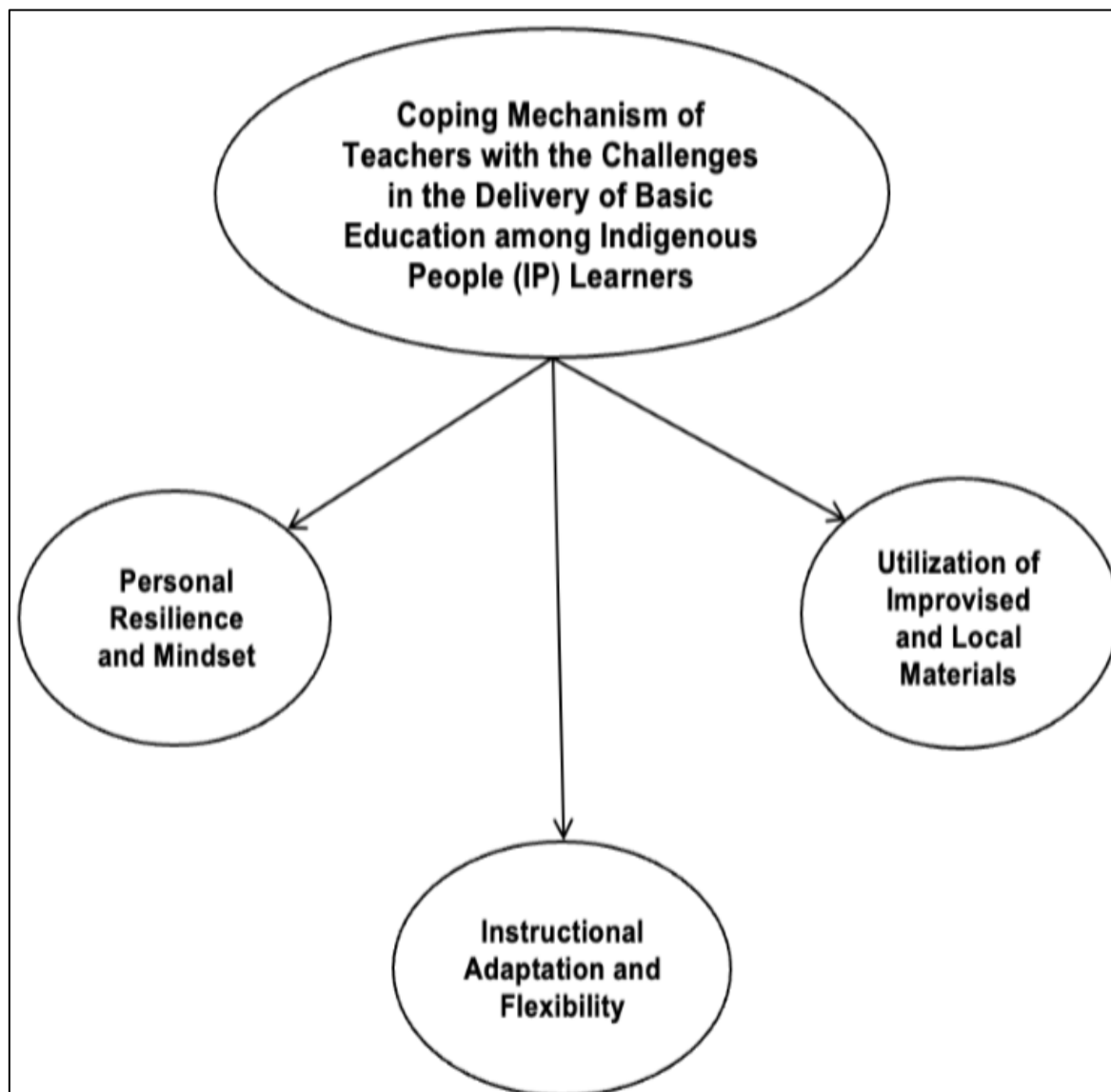
Fig 2 Coping Mechanism of Teachers with the Challenges in the Deliver of Basic Education Among Indigenous People (IP) Learners

Teachers' educational management insights from teaching IP learners in Jose Abad Santos District II include Inclusive Educational Planning, Resourcefulness and Innovation, and Learner-Centered Teaching Management.
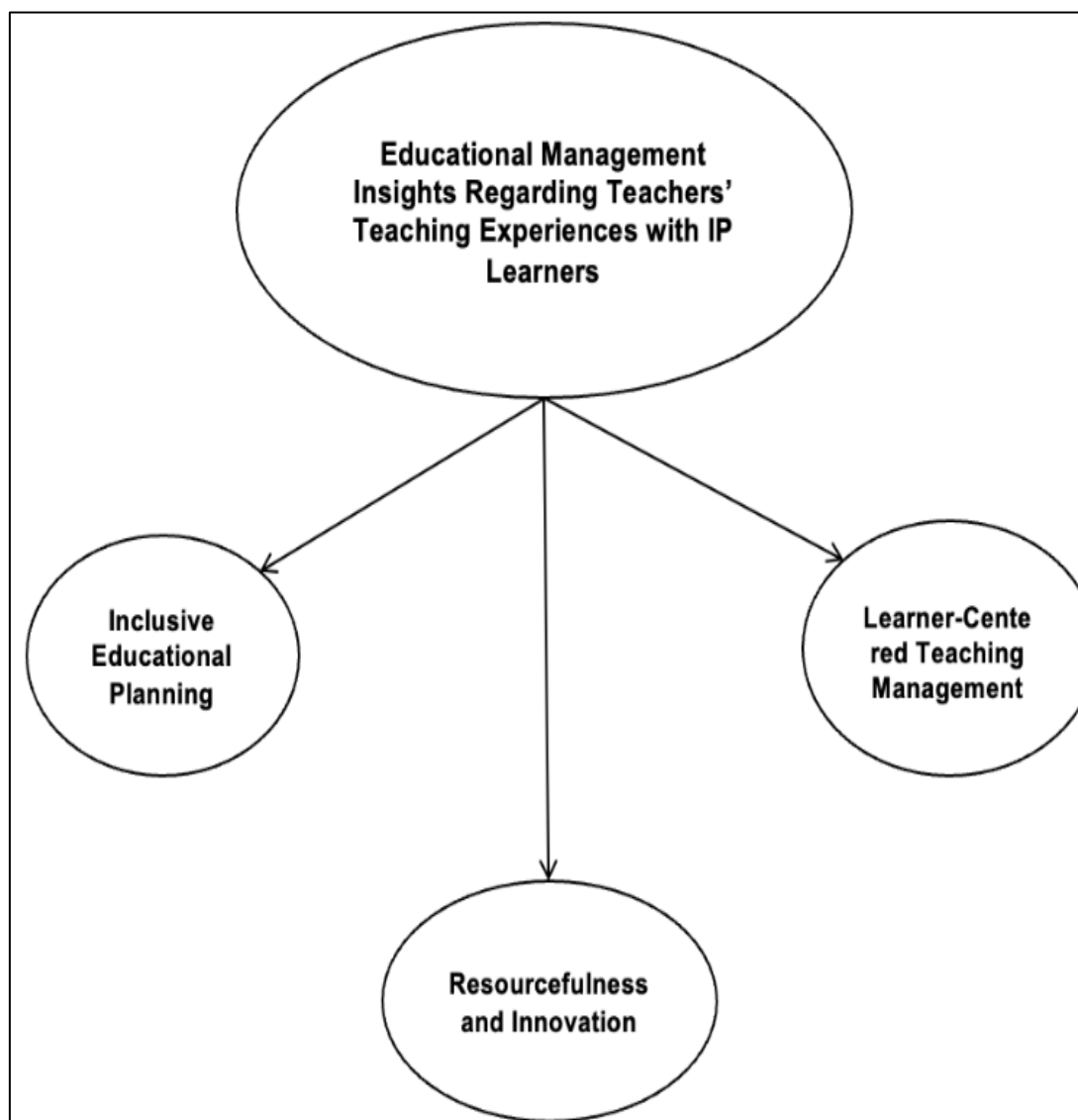
Fig 3 Educational Management Insight Regarding Teachers Teaching Experiences with (IP) Learners

Teachers in Jose Abad Santos District II integrate Indigenous culture, language, and knowledge into their teaching to foster respect and understanding among IP learners. Despite challenges like limited materials, poor infrastructure, and multigrade classrooms, they adapt creatively and build strong community ties through collaboration with parents and tribal leaders. They also address learners' academic gaps while nurturing their motivation and positive attitudes.

To cope, teachers rely on personal resilience and spiritual grounding, adapting instruction with multilingual and simplified approaches, and using improvised local materials. Their educational management emphasizes inclusive planning that incorporates IP culture, resourcefulness in creating low-cost tools and alternative learning spaces, and learner-centered strategies focused on individual strengths.

Educational practices should prioritize cultural inclusion by integrating Indigenous traditions, languages, and knowledge into the curriculum. Schools need flexible instructional models and low-cost teaching solutions to address resource shortages, infrastructure challenges, and multigrade classrooms. Building partnerships with tribal leaders and parents can improve trust, attendance, and home-based learning. Instruction should develop foundational literacy skills while celebrating learners' strengths to boost confidence and academic growth.

Teacher training should include resilience-building to help educators manage challenges. Instructional planning must focus on culturally relevant, multilingual, and simplified approaches, especially in Indigenous communities. Schools should support innovative use of local and improvised materials to foster creativity and sustainability. Educational leaders must provide resources aligned with these adaptive methods.

Teachers should use culturally relevant strategies, share best practices, and seek training in Indigenous pedagogy. Students need engaging, culturally meaningful lessons and support to address academic gaps. School heads must provide resources, promote collaboration with tribal leaders, and

focus on adaptive teaching development. The Department of Education should strengthen Indigenous education with clear guidelines, resources, and community involvement. Future research should explore the impact of culturally integrated education, compare IP and non-IP schools, and examine teacher resilience, using participatory methods for practical solutions.

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