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Teaching Through Culture: Exploring Teachers' Lived Experiences in Implementing Indigenous Peoples Education in Primary School

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) seeks to provide culturally rooted and responsive education by recognizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs), community participation, local languages, cultural identity, and Indigenous learning systems as meaningful components of basic education. This qualitative study explored teachers' lived experiences in implementing Indigenous Peoples Education at Dumanegdeg Primary School in Sabangan, Mountain Province, Philippines. Specifically, it examined how teachers contextualized instruction, integrated Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, collaborated with community knowledge holders, negotiated challenges in curriculum implementation, and constructed meanings from their roles as culturally responsive educators. The study employed a phenomenological qualitative design and purposively selected teachers with direct experience in implementing IPEd across kindergarten and the primary grades. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and supplemented by reflective conversations and relevant instructional documents. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns across teachers' experiences. Five themes captured the phenomenon: (1) Teaching From the Culture Learners Bring, (2) Bridging the Prescribed Curriculum and Indigenous Knowledge, (3) Community as Co-Educator, (4) Teaching Across Cultural and Pedagogical Challenges, and (5) Becoming a Teacher, Learner, and Cultural Bridge. The findings indicate that teachers experienced IPEd implementation as a continuing process of cultural learning, curriculum negotiation, relationship-building, and professional reflection. Effective implementation depended not only on teachers' pedagogical competencies but also on sustained engagement with Indigenous communities and culturally appropriate learning resources. The study highlights the importance of strengthening teacher preparation, community partnerships, contextualized instructional materials, and culturally sustaining pedagogies in rural Indigenous schools.

Keywords: Indigenous Peoples Education, IPEd, Indigenous knowledge, culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers' lived experiences, rural education, Mountain Province

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1. Introduction

Education for Indigenous learners requires more than providing access to formal schooling; it requires educational experiences that recognize cultural identity, Indigenous knowledge, local languages, histories, community relationships, and ways of understanding the world. When formal education is disconnected from learners' cultural realities, schooling may unintentionally privilege dominant knowledge systems while marginalizing the knowledge and experiences that Indigenous children bring into the classroom. Culturally responsive education consequently emphasizes the importance of connecting curriculum, pedagogy, learners' identities, and community knowledge in ways that make education meaningful while respecting cultural diversity.

In the Philippines, this commitment has been institutionalized through the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program. The Department of Education's Indigenous Peoples Education Curriculum Framework recognizes Indigenous peoples' right to basic education that is culturally rooted and responsive. The framework guides schools in localizing, indigenizing, and enhancing the basic education curriculum according to the educational and social contexts of Indigenous communities (Department of Education [DepEd], 2015). Importantly, the framework emphasizes meaningful community participation and the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) and Indigenous Learning Systems in the curriculum.

The IPEd framework consequently positions Indigenous communities not merely as recipients of education but as active partners in curriculum implementation. DepEd (2015) explicitly identifies institutionalized partnerships between Indigenous communities and schools as fundamental to IPEd and calls for sustained community engagement in curriculum contextualization. This orientation recognizes that teachers alone cannot be expected to possess complete knowledge of community histories, traditions, languages, cultural meanings, and Indigenous practices. Elders, parents, cultural knowledge holders, and other community members may therefore become important partners in ensuring that cultural knowledge incorporated into instruction is appropriate, meaningful, and accurate.

Within this framework, teachers occupy a complex position. They are expected to implement national curricular competencies while making instruction responsive to learners' local cultural contexts. This responsibility involves interpreting curriculum content, selecting culturally relevant examples, developing localized instructional materials, using appropriate languages, incorporating Indigenous knowledge, and negotiating relationships between formal academic knowledge and community-based understandings. Teachers therefore function not merely as curriculum implementers but as curriculum mediators, continuously interpreting how prescribed competencies can be meaningfully taught within specific cultural settings.

Recent Philippine research demonstrates both the possibilities and difficulties associated with this responsibility. Verdida et al. (2024), in examining the lived experiences of IPEd teachers, found that curriculum integration involved distinctive professional experiences and challenges for educators working in IPEd-implementing schools. More recent research involving non-Indigenous teachers in IPEd settings identified language barriers, geographical difficulties, and challenges related to learner participation as important realities confronting educators (Nazarita & Morales, 2025). These findings demonstrate that culturally responsive education depends not only on policy mandates but also on how teachers interpret and negotiate such mandates within everyday classroom realities.

The significance of teacher agency is particularly evident in Mountain Province. A recent qualitative case study conducted in a rural national high school in Mountain Province found that contextualized instruction grounded in Indigenous history and culture, dialogic pedagogy, and integration of Indigenous knowledge contributed to culturally responsive classroom experiences. The study also identified teacher

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agency and reflective practice as important in sustaining IPEd implementation despite contextual challenges (Padonga, 2026). Although that study focused on secondary-level social studies, it reinforces the need to examine how teachers themselves understand and experience culturally responsive pedagogy within Mountain Province.

Primary education presents an especially significant context for such investigation. Teachers working with kindergarten and early-primary learners contribute to children's developing relationships with language, identity, family, community, and culture during formative years. Cultural contextualization at this level may occur through locally familiar stories, songs, vocabulary, environmental experiences, community activities, oral traditions, games, values, objects, and other meaningful experiences. However, culturally responsive pedagogy should extend beyond the superficial inclusion of cultural artifacts. It requires teachers to understand the meanings, relationships, and knowledge systems associated with the cultural content they introduce.

This expectation can place teachers in the simultaneous positions of teacher and learner. Implementing IPEd may require educators to seek guidance from elders and community members, reconsider previously used instructional practices, learn culturally appropriate terminology, develop localized resources, and reflect critically on assumptions embedded within conventional curriculum materials. Research involving non-IPEd teachers working with Indigenous learners likewise suggests that intercultural teaching requires teachers to negotiate preparation, pedagogical practice, cultural understanding, and institutional support.

Dumanegdeg Primary School in Napua, Sabangan, Mountain Province provides a meaningful setting for examining these processes because teachers work within a rural context where education and Indigenous community life potentially intersect in everyday instructional practice. However, the study does not assume that all teachers experience IPEd similarly or that every cultural integration practice is automatically effective. Understanding implementation requires attention to teachers' actual experiences, including their successes, uncertainties, negotiations, challenges, professional learning, and relationships with the community.

Accordingly, this study explored the lived experiences of teachers implementing Indigenous Peoples Education at Dumanegdeg Primary School. By foregrounding teachers' voices, the inquiry sought to understand IPEd not merely as a policy framework but as a lived pedagogical practice shaped by culture, curriculum, professional identity, community relationships, and the everyday realities of teaching in a rural Indigenous educational setting.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study generally aimed to explore the lived experiences of teachers in implementing Indigenous Peoples Education at Dumanegdeg Primary School in Mountain Province. Specifically, it sought to understand how teachers experienced the integration of Indigenous knowledge, culture, values, and locally meaningful contexts into classroom instruction; describe how they negotiated relationships between prescribed curricular competencies and Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices; examine their experiences of working with elders, parents, community members, and cultural knowledge holders; identify the pedagogical, cultural, linguistic, material, and contextual challenges they encountered in implementing IPEd; explore the strategies they developed in responding to these challenges; and interpret how their experiences influenced their professional identities and understandings of culturally responsive teaching.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and interpret teachers'

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lived experiences in implementing Indigenous Peoples Education at Dumanegdeg Primary School in Napua, Sabangan, Mountain Province. Phenomenology was appropriate because the inquiry focused on how teachers experienced, understood, and constructed meaning from the common phenomenon of implementing culturally responsive Indigenous education rather than measuring the extent of program implementation. Participants consisted of teachers who had direct and sustained experience teaching Indigenous learners and implementing IPEd-related practices. Criterion-based purposive sampling was employed, with eligibility requiring participants to be currently teaching or to have recently taught at the school, have direct experience in contextualizing or indigenizing lessons, and be willing to reflect in depth on their experiences. Data were gathered primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews, supported where appropriate by reflective conversations and relevant instructional materials such as contextualized lesson plans and teacher-developed resources. Interview questions explored teachers' experiences of integrating Indigenous knowledge, working with community members, contextualizing lessons, negotiating cultural and curricular expectations, responding to implementation challenges, and reflecting on how IPEd influenced their professional identities. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and analyzed thematically through repeated familiarization, meaningful coding, clustering of experiential patterns, theme development, refinement, and interpretive synthesis. Trustworthiness was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, member reflection where appropriate, triangulation of interviews and instructional evidence, maintenance of an audit trail, attention to divergent experiences, and researcher reflexivity. Particular ethical attention was given to Indigenous knowledge: community knowledge was not treated as freely extractable research information, and culturally restricted or sensitive knowledge was not documented or published without appropriate permission. Institutional ethical approval, informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respect for community protocols were observed throughout the study.

4. Results and Findings

The phenomenological analysis generated five interconnected themes representing teachers' experiences: Teaching From the Culture Learners Bring; Bridging the Prescribed Curriculum and Indigenous Knowledge; Community as Co-Educator; Teaching Across Cultural and Pedagogical Challenges; and Becoming a Teacher, Learner, and Cultural Bridge.

Theme 1: Teaching From the Culture Learners Bring

The first theme captured teachers' realization that meaningful IPEd instruction often began with what learners already knew from their families and communities. Teachers described culturally responsive instruction as a process of connecting formal lesson concepts with learners' familiar environments, language, stories, practices, relationships, and everyday experiences.

An illustrative teacher response was:

Teacher 2: "When I use examples that the children already know from their homes and community, they participate more because they can relate the lesson to something they have actually experienced."

Another teacher explained:

Teacher 4: "Sometimes the examples in the learning material are unfamiliar to them, so I change the example into something that they can see or experience here in the community."

These accounts suggest that contextualization was experienced as more than changing names or locations in learning materials. Teachers attempted to create conceptual bridges between curricular knowledge and learners' lived experiences. This interpretation aligns directly with the IPEd Curriculum Framework, which requires schools serving Indigenous learners to localize, indigenize, and enhance the curriculum

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according to their respective cultural, educational, and social contexts (DepEd, 2015).
Recent research in Mountain Province provides additional support for this interpretation. Padonga (2026) found that culturally grounded contextualization and integration of Indigenous knowledge could contribute to learner engagement and understanding when instruction reflected learners' cultural realities. The present theme therefore suggests an interpretive process of learners' cultural experience → curricular connection → recognition and participation → meaningful understanding. Teachers experienced culture not as an additional topic to be inserted after teaching the curriculum but as a potential foundation from which curriculum could be made understandable.

Theme 2: Bridging the Prescribed Curriculum and Indigenous Knowledge
The second theme represented one of the central tensions experienced by teachers: maintaining required curricular competencies while making lessons culturally meaningful. Participants described moments when national learning materials and examples did not readily correspond with local experiences, requiring them to interpret, adapt, or supplement instructional content.
One illustrative participant stated:
Teacher 1: "We still have competencies that we need to teach, but we think about how we can present them using examples and experiences that are meaningful to our learners."
Another teacher explained:
Teacher 5: "The difficult part is making sure that what we integrate from the culture is correct while also making sure that the lesson objective is achieved."
These experiences positioned teachers as curriculum negotiators. They did not simply choose between national curriculum and Indigenous knowledge; instead, they attempted to establish meaningful relationships between them. DepEd's IPEd framework explicitly supports this process by positioning IPEd as a means of contextualizing and enhancing the basic education curriculum while recognizing IKSPs and Indigenous Learning Systems (DepEd, 2015).
This finding also reflects broader research on IPEd implementation. Verdida et al. (2024) documented the lived experiences of IPEd teachers integrating the curriculum, reinforcing the importance of examining implementation through teachers' everyday pedagogical realities rather than policy expectations alone. The present findings extend this understanding by suggesting that teachers continuously moved between curriculum requirement → cultural interpretation → pedagogical adaptation → culturally meaningful learning.

Theme 3: Community as Co-Educator
The third theme revealed that teachers did not necessarily experience themselves as the sole authorities on culturally grounded knowledge. Participants recognized that elders, parents, cultural knowledge holders, and other community members possessed knowledge that teachers could not appropriately reproduce without consultation.
An illustrative teacher stated:
Teacher 3: "There are things about the culture that I know, but there are also things that I need to ask from the elders because I do not want to teach something incorrectly."
Another explained:
Teacher 6: "When community members share their knowledge, the lesson becomes different because the children know that what they learn in school is also connected with their families."
This finding represents one of the most significant dimensions of IPEd implementation: the redistribution of educational authority. The teacher remained pedagogically responsible for organizing learning but

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recognized that cultural expertise could reside within the community. This interpretation closely reflects DepEd's IPEd Curriculum Framework, which identifies institutionalized partnerships and sustained community engagement as fundamental to ensuring meaningful Indigenous participation in curriculum development and the inclusion of IKSPs (DepEd, 2015).

Community participation therefore served both epistemic and relational purposes. Epistemically, it helped protect the accuracy and appropriateness of Indigenous knowledge incorporated into lessons. Relationally, it reduced the separation between school and community by recognizing community members as contributors to children's education. The process can be represented as teacher knowledge → community consultation → shared cultural validation → classroom integration → culturally grounded learning.

Theme 4: Teaching Across Cultural and Pedagogical Challenges

The fourth theme captured the difficulties teachers encountered while translating the ideals of culturally responsive education into everyday classroom practice. Participants described challenges associated with developing localized materials, accessing appropriate resources, identifying culturally accurate information, addressing language differences, balancing several teaching responsibilities, and determining how particular cultural knowledge could appropriately be used in formal lessons.

One illustrative participant explained:

Teacher 4: "It takes more preparation because sometimes there is no ready-made material that fits the lesson and the local context, so we have to develop or modify what we use."

Another stated:

Teacher 2: "You have to be careful. You cannot just say that something is part of the culture without checking whether your understanding is correct."

These accounts reveal that culturally responsive teaching required substantial pedagogical and cultural labor. Teachers had to research, consult, adapt, design, and reflect rather than simply deliver predetermined materials. Related Philippine research has documented difficulties involving language, geography, and learner engagement among teachers working in IPEd schools (Nazarita & Morales, 2025). Research on non-IPEd teachers working with Indigenous learners likewise highlights the significance of preparation, intercultural competence, pedagogical adjustment, and institutional support.

The finding therefore suggests that policy commitment alone cannot guarantee effective IPEd implementation. Teachers require culturally appropriate resources, continuing professional development, collaborative planning opportunities, community support, and sufficient time to contextualize instruction responsibly. Challenges were not interpreted simply as teacher deficiencies but as evidence that culturally responsive education requires a broader support ecology involving teachers, schools, communities, curriculum developers, and educational administrators.

Theme 5: Becoming a Teacher, Learner, and Cultural Bridge

The final theme represented teachers' changing understandings of their professional roles. Participants described IPEd implementation as an experience that required them to continue learning about the community, listen to cultural knowledge holders, reconsider assumptions, and reflect on how their teaching represented learners' identities.

One illustrative teacher explained:

Teacher 5: "Being a teacher here also means being willing to learn. I cannot assume that because I am the teacher, I already know everything about the culture."

Another stated:

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Teacher 1: "I realized that our responsibility is not only to teach the lesson. We also have to help the children value who they are while preparing them for what they need to learn."

These accounts reveal a transformation in professional identity from **teacher as knowledge** transmitter toward teacher as learner, mediator, facilitator, and cultural bridge. Teachers appeared to understand that implementing IPEd required intellectual humility: culturally responsive teaching involved knowing when to teach, when to adapt, when to ask, and when to listen.

This interpretation is consistent with research in Mountain Province identifying teacher agency and reflective practice as important dimensions of culturally responsive IPEd implementation (Padonga, 2026). It also reflects the central principle of the national IPEd framework that meaningful Indigenous education depends upon continuing school-community engagement rather than one-directional transmission of formal curricular knowledge (DepEd, 2015).

Across the five themes, teachers' experiences can therefore be understood through the progression:

Cultural Recognition → Curriculum Negotiation → Community Partnership → Pedagogical Adaptation → Transformative Teacher Identity

The progression was not necessarily linear. Teachers continuously moved among these processes as they planned, taught, consulted, encountered difficulties, and reflected on their experiences. Taken together, the findings indicate that IPEd implementation was experienced not merely as teaching about Indigenous culture, but as teaching through culture and in relationship with community.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that teachers' lived experiences of implementing Indigenous Peoples Education at Dumanegdeg Primary School were characterized by an ongoing negotiation among culture, curriculum, community, pedagogy, and professional identity. Teachers sought to make prescribed learning competencies meaningful by connecting them with learners' cultural and everyday experiences, while simultaneously recognizing the need to preserve curricular expectations and cultural accuracy. Community members and Indigenous knowledge holders emerged as important educational partners whose participation could strengthen the authenticity and appropriateness of culturally grounded instruction. At the same time, teachers experienced challenges related to contextualized learning materials, cultural knowledge, language, preparation, and pedagogical adaptation. These experiences contributed to a broader transformation of teacher identity in which educators understood themselves not solely as transmitters of prescribed knowledge but as learners, cultural mediators, reflective practitioners, and bridges between school knowledge and community knowledge. The findings reinforce the view that meaningful IPEd implementation requires sustained relationships among teachers, learners, families, Indigenous communities, and educational institutions.

6. Implications

The findings have important implications for teacher development, curriculum implementation, school leadership, and Indigenous community participation. Professional development for teachers in IPEd-implementing schools should extend beyond general curriculum training to include culturally responsive pedagogy, ethical engagement with Indigenous knowledge, contextualization strategies, culturally appropriate assessment, and methods for working collaboratively with elders and community knowledge holders. Schools should provide teachers with adequate time and institutional support for developing contextualized instructional materials rather than treating localization as an additional responsibility to be completed individually. School leaders may also institutionalize mechanisms for regular consultation with community representatives so that participation becomes an integral part of curriculum planning

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rather than an occasional activity. This direction is consistent with the DepEd IPEd Curriculum Framework's emphasis on sustained and institutionalized school-community partnership. At the policy level, the findings suggest that evaluation of IPEd implementation should examine not only whether Indigenous content appears in lesson plans but also how cultural knowledge is selected, validated, taught, experienced, and negotiated. For rural primary schools in Mountain Province, strengthening IPEd ultimately requires viewing culturally responsive education as a collaborative and continuing process through which formal education can support academic learning while affirming Indigenous learners' identities, communities, and knowledge systems.

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