

Lived Experiences of Non-Indigenous People (IP) Learning Support Aide (LSA) Teachers Assigned in IPEd School

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of non-IP LSA teachers in IPEd-implementing school in Bonacao, San Fernando, Bukidnon, Philippines. Specifically, the study examined non-IP LSA teachers' motivations, challenges, adaptive strategies, and professional growth within culturally diverse and resource-constrained educational settings. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, fifteen (15) non-IP LSA teachers participated, selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interview and analyzed using the six-phase framework for thematic analysis as proposed by Clarke and Braun (2006). Findings revealed four major themes: altruistic and growth-oriented service for IP education access, highlighting dual motivations of compassion and professional development; multi-dimensional struggles, encompassing logistical, cultural, socio-economic, and environmental barriers in remote learning contexts; strategies for resilience through pedagogical adaptation and community integration; and professional maturity through advocacy and the preservation of identity. These imply that non-IP LSAs develop a deepened sense of purpose shaped by both challenges and meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities, leading to personal and professional growth. Their experiences emphasize that effective teaching in IPEd contexts requires cultural responsiveness, adaptability, and strong community engagement. The findings suggest the need for strengthened institutional support, including adequate resources, targeted training, and sustained professional development programs to further enhance LSAs' effectiveness in Indigenous education contexts.

Keywords: Learning Support Aides; professional maturity; cultural sensitivity; community engagement; resilience

INTRODUCTION

The Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) program in the Philippines was established to serve over 2.5 million Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners in remote schools through DepEd Order No. 62, s. 2011. This program is DepEd's initiative to support the right of indigenous learners to an education that truly reflects and respects their unique cultural identity (Department of Education, 2021). Volunteer non-IP LSA teachers serve as the core support system for this initiative, who assist in lesson delivery, learner monitoring, and community outreach in IPEd-implementing schools, especially in areas with limited regular teaching staff (Department of Education, 2020). Non-IP teachers are resilient, mission-driven individuals whose personal passions help them bridge cultural gaps in various IP settings (Nazarita & Morales, 2025).

International studies revealed a systemic gap in preparing non-Indigenous teachers for IP-like environments, including cultural insensitivity, language barrier, and inadequate immersion training. Steele et al. (2025) document pre-service teachers' superficial engagement with Aboriginal pedagogies, resulting in persistent equity barriers. Similarly, a study by Persaud et al. (2025) highlight the need for sustained community partnerships to mitigate misalignment in Indigenous schooling.

In the Philippine context, several studies support these gaps, highlighting language barrier, geographical barrier, culturally responsive lesson delivery, resource scarcity that challenge non-IP teachers in IPed schools in cultivating meaningful connection and developing pedagogical approach that is culturally responsive to students' educational needs (Cubi & Rollo, 2025; Lariago & Paglinawan, 2025; Tual & Capacio, 2025). Although existing studies have documented the increasing implementation of the IPed program across contexts, the phenomenological lived experiences of non-IP teachers remain underexplored specifically in the context of IPed schools. This leaves policymakers with limited contextualized insights necessary for improving LSA training and support mechanisms.

The implementation of IPed program across the province's municipalities, particularly in the province of Bukidnon, is evident to produce indigenous students with culturally rooted education. This phenomenological study narrows the focus to the lived experiences of non-IP LSA teachers in IPed school in Bonacao, San Fernando, Bukidnon. By examining their experiences, it bridges broader literature gaps with locale-specific insights to enhance IPed support frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences, difficulties and coping strategies of volunteered non-IP LSA teachers who have been assigned in IPed school. Phenomenological research design, as articulated by McLeod (2024), seeks to understand the meaning of lived experience from the perspective of the individual, making it particularly suitable for revealing the subjective realities of non-IP LSAs teaching the IPED curriculum. This transcendental phenomenological approach emphasized bracketing researcher preconceptions to capture authentic participant narratives about their struggles and adaptive responses.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Bonacao, San Fernando, Bukidnon, specifically in IPed-implementing school serving the Tigwahanon Indigenous Cultural Community (ICC). The site was intentionally chosen because of its active implementation of the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) program and its direct engagement with the IP community. As an IPed-implementing area, the locale provides a meaningful context for examining how non-IP Learning Support Aide (LSA) teachers navigate challenges such as language barriers, geographical constraints, and limited educational resources while maintaining cultural sensitivity through contextualized instruction.

Participants of the Study

The study purposively selected fifteen (15) non-IP Learning Support Aide (LSA) teachers actively assigned to the IPed-implementing school in Bonacao, San Fernando, Bukidnon for S.Y. 2025-2026. Participant selection continued until data saturation was achieved, wherein no new significant meanings, patterns, or experiential insights emerged from subsequent interviews, ensuring sufficient depth and richness of phenomenological data. Participants (pseudonyms K1-K15) possessed 6-15 months of service, motivated by teaching passion, cultural curiosity, and career advancement opportunity. The following are the criteria for selecting the participants: (a) non-IP LSA, (b) formal LSA designation per DepEd guidelines, (c) been teaching in IPed classes with minimum 6-month immersion ensuring experiential depth.

Research Instrument

The researcher used semi-structured interviews as the primary instrument of the study, employing a researcher-developed interview guide with four open-ended phenomenological questions that captures the depth experiences of the participants. The instrument underwent a validation process where it was reviewed and validated by three experts to ensure the questions were appropriate, culturally sensitive, and capable of eliciting the deep narrative data required for a phenomenological study.

Data Gathering Procedure

The primary data for the study was collected through a face-to-face interview method supplemented by a voice recorder to ensure accuracy in data transcription. The collection process followed a structured protocol: The researcher first secured a formal letter of permission, signed by the research adviser and the Dean of the College of Education of Central Mindanao University. This letter was presented to the School Head of Bonacao Elementary School to request official authorization to conduct the study on-site. Upon approval, the researcher coordinated with the school administration to identify potential participants and schedule interview sessions that would not disrupt regular school classes. Prior to the conduct of the interviews, informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. The researcher then conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews in a face-to-face setting to gather rich and detailed data relevant to the research objectives. During the interviews, responses were carefully documented through note-taking and audio recording, with the participants' permission, to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data. After the data collection process, all gathered information was transcribed and organized systematically for analysis.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and categorize the narrative responses of non-IP LSA teachers into meaningful patterns. Data were analyzed using the six-phase framework for thematic analysis as proposed by Clarke and Braun (2006). It involves transcribing and reviewing the raw responses, followed by the researcher's familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts to ensure a deep understanding of the participants' insights. During the second phase, initial codes were generated to identify significant segments of text. Next is coding and theme generation. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the raw data and addressed the study's objectives. Finally, the researcher defined and named the themes to provide a structured and coherent narrative of the findings. To enhance the accuracy and consistency of the findings, the researcher employed member checking, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of transcribed responses and interpreted meanings. In addition, peer debriefing with research adviser was conducted to minimize interpretive bias during analysis.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher adhered to strict ethical procedures throughout the study. Prior to data collection, a formal request was approved by the Dean of the College of Education at Central Mindanao University and the School Head of Bonacao Elementary School. The researcher provided each participant with a clear information about the study's objectives and the nature of their involvement. It was explicitly stated that participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time without any risk, penalty, or loss of benefits.

The researcher utilized coding system to replace the actual names of the participants of the study, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, all audio recordings were captured only with the participants' explicit consent and were stored in a secure, password-protected digital environment. These files were accessed exclusively by the researcher for analysis and will be permanently deleted upon the successful completion of the research to prevent any unauthorized access to the sensitive information provided.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of non-IP Learning Support Aide (LSA) teachers assigned in IPed school. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study identified four themes that captures the essence of LSA teachers lived experiences.

Theme 1: Altruistic and Growth-Oriented Service for IP Education Access

The emergent theme altruistic and growth-oriented service for IP education access reflects the dual motivations of non-IP LSAs, encompassing altruistic support for IP learners' equity and the pursuit of professional

development through volunteer service. This analysis implies that most LSA teachers are driven by a passion for teaching, characterized by altruistic commitment that enables them to help the indigenous community access education while simultaneously developing their skills in the field for future career opportunities.

This altruistic commitment is exemplified in participants' expressions of a genuine desire to support IP learners. For instance, K1 shared, "*I wanted to help children whose opportunity to go to school is far from them... through the IPed program.*". Similarly, K2 emphasized inclusivity and learner empowerment, stating, "*I want them to see that they also have potential—that they can really see they belong.*" while K3 directly noted their intention "*to help the IP community access education*".

In addition, K10 and K11 underscored the importance of meaningful experiences and professional development, as reflected in their statements, "*To gain more experience in the field of education*" while K3 stated, "*Because teaching is my passion*" reflecting intrinsic motivation that supports professional identity formation. Similarly, K5 emphasized career advancement, noting that "*This can support my career growth and open future opportunities.*"

These findings suggest that altruism and professional development are not mutually exclusive but rather coexist as complementary aspects that define the motivations of non-IP LSAs. Their passion for teaching serves as a unifying foundation that enables them to simultaneously contribute to community development and pursue personal career growth.

This finding supports the work of Hornyák (2025), who argues that teacher motivation is shaped by both intrinsic and altruistic motivations, encompassing both a desire to contribute positively to students' lives and a drive for personal professional advancement. A phenomenological study on IPed teachers in Mindoro found that teachers are motivated by their goal to "make a difference" and influence learners' lives (Robiños et al., 2020). Similarly, Sonza and Protacio (2025) revealed that teachers' lived experiences in IPed contexts displayed a strong commitment and sense of purpose despite challenges. Hence, it is understood that LSA teachers in IPed schools exhibit a strong moral purpose and social commitment, suggesting that voluntariness does not diminish their dedication to support indigenous learners' access to quality education. It is therefore recommended that educational institutions strengthen support systems for LSAs by providing targeted training, mentorship, and recognition programs that reinforce their moral commitment while enhancing their instructional competence in IPed settings.

Theme 2: Multi-Dimensional Struggles in IPed Contexts

The second theme that emerged from the participants' responses highlights the varied and interconnected challenges experienced by LSAs as they engage in teaching within IPed schools. These include language differences, cultural learning processes, resource limitations, geographical constraint, and socio-economic conditions within the learning environment. Rather than being viewed as deficits, these experiences reflect the unique and contextual conditions of IPed education that require continuous adaptation, cultural responsiveness, and flexibility in instructional practice. This is evidenced by the following statements.

Participants consistently described how limited instructional resources and geographic isolation influence their day-to-day teaching. As K1 noted, "*The first challenge is the lack of resources, like paper, pens, technology, and other materials,*" while K2 added that in remote mountain assignments, "*all your expenses are your own.*" These realities shape how LSAs plan and deliver instruction, often requiring them to adapt strategies and make use of what is available within the context of their assigned schools. Such conditions highlight the practical demands of teaching in remote environments, where flexibility and resourcefulness become part of everyday practice.

In addition, participants also emphasized cultural and socio-economic dimensions that directly affect teaching and learning. K3 shared that unfamiliarity with the community's culture can lead to "*culture shock,*" while K5 and K8 identified language and communication as ongoing challenges in effectively engaging learners. In addition, LSAs recognized that students' basic needs significantly influence learning outcomes. As K14 explained, "*learning cannot happen effectively when basic needs are not met,*" a point reinforced by K8's

observation “*Because of hunger, they also have low retention.*” In response, some participants described initiating small, practical efforts such as feeding program to better support their students. Hence, these accounts show that the challenges encountered by LSAs are interconnected realities that call for flexibility, cultural responsiveness, and context-sensitive teaching approaches in IPEd environments. These challenges not only posed difficulties for LSA but also strengthened their capacity to effectively support IP students.

The findings align with Sanchez and Dagondon (2025) and Verdida et al. (2024), who identified similar issues in IPEd implementation, including resource scarcity and contextual barriers. Several studies reported that teachers in remote Indigenous communities face comparable difficulties, Kirkland (2025) emphasizes that lack of cultural competence can hinder effective teaching. Furthermore, the issue of hunger affecting learning supports Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which posits that basic needs must be met before effective learning can occur (Burlison & Thoron, 2014 as cited by Akyüz & Durmuş, 2025). These findings highlight the need for systemic interventions, including increased funding, improved infrastructure, and culturally responsive training for teachers assigned in IPEd schools. Strengthening support systems is essential for both LSA teachers and the IP community in achieving quality education for all.

Theme 3: Resilient Pedagogical Adaptation and Community Integration

This theme illustrates how non-IP Learning Support Aides (LSAs) demonstrate resilience through active adaptation, cultural immersion, and community integration in Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) settings. Their responses show that coping with challenges goes beyond classroom instruction and involves becoming part of the community context they serve. As K1 explained, overcoming difficulties requires “*thinking beyond yourself*” and learning to integrate into the community to address long-standing issues, adding that being a teacher in this setting requires being “*flexible*” enough to learn skills beyond teaching, including “*farming, caregiving*” and even mediating local concerns. Similarly, K2 emphasized that when teaching is driven by genuine passion, “*there are many alternatives just to support*” learners, including practical initiatives such as organizing community activities to mitigate some existing problems. These accounts reflect how LSAs extend their roles beyond instruction, engaging in community-based activities to support learner participation and well-being.

Participants also highlighted pedagogical and cultural strategies that enable them to navigate language barriers, limited resources, and varying learner needs. K3 shared that attending DepEd seminars helped them learn about customary laws which they use to better understand and respect cultural norms, while K5 addressed communication challenges by seeking “*friends for translations and learning their basic language*” and striving to make learners feel that they “*belong*” through fair and culturally responsive classroom practices. In addressing instructional limitations, K8 described the need to go “*back to the basics*” to accommodate low literacy levels and being resourceful by using tools that could supplement teaching. Thus, these strategies show that resilience in IPEd contexts is deeply rooted in adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and a holistic understanding of learners’ needs, where teaching is intertwined with community engagement and care.

The findings implies that non-IP LSA teachers demonstrated adaptive resilience, combining personal agency with external support systems to cope with the challenges they faced in IPEd schools. Fabrigas and Paglinawan (2025) highlight resilience as a key factor in sustaining teachers in remote schools which is also evident among non-IP LSA teachers in IPEd schools. On the same note, active cultural engagement involves immersing oneself to the culture of their students to better captivate and deliver effective learning experiences among IP learners. It also highlights community involvement in school activities and its support for non-IP LSAs in navigating cultural challenges. Vygotsky supports the role of social interaction in learning, aligning with community collaboration (McLeod, 2024). Consequently, cultural integration emerges as a central strategy, reinforcing that effective teaching in IPEd contexts requires immersion rather than imposition. Orcales-Table (2024) documented similar immersion strategies among non-IP teachers in Aeta community. The study also emphasizes how seminars and trainings provided by DepEd and leaders of the community shaped LSAs views and perceptions regarding cultural sensitivity and identity uniqueness of IP community. The results suggest the need to expand access to seminars and strengthen partnerships between communities and LSAs to support more sustainable and resilient IPEd framework.

Theme 4: Professional Maturity through Advocacy and the Preservation of Identity

The final theme captures the transformative journey of Learning Support Aide (LSA) teachers from volunteers to dedicated advocates of Indigenous culture and identity. This shift reflects a deepened sense of purpose, moving beyond career-oriented goals toward a sustained commitment to cultural preservation and social equity. Their narratives reveal how engagement in IPEd settings reshaped their perspectives, enabling them to become more culturally aware and responsive educators. The following responses highlight this internal transformation and professional development.

Professional maturity emerges as a shift from initial career intentions to a more purposeful role as advocates for Indigenous education and culture. K14 states that “teaching is not just about academics—it also involves compassion and service,” while K14 suggests that being a “cheerful giver” is essential because “*When you give sincerely, especially to students in need, the joy and gratitude you receive in return are priceless. Seeing their smiles and appreciation makes all the effort worth it.*”. This evolution involves a profound change in how the teacher views their role, K5 states that “*being in an IP community really changed my mindset—it is so fulfilling to help them.*”. Similarly, K2 states that joining the program should not just be about “career opportunities” but about “leaving a positive impact on the community” that opens the teacher’s own perspective. K1 states that a teacher needs to “*establish a presence in the community so you won’t be forgotten,*” ensuring they are remembered as someone who truly helped improve lives through education.

Participants demonstrated their commitment to cultural preservation through culturally integrated teaching. K3 emphasized that in IPEd, “*culture must not die,*” highlighting the responsibility to preserve cultural identity so it will not be forgotten. This aligns with K12’s view that teaching should involve delivering the curriculum while integrating the “*tradition, values, principles, and beliefs*” of the community, allowing learners to gain knowledge while respecting and preserving their identity. Similarly, K10 stressed that recognizing cultural identity is essential in creating a “*meaningful and inclusive learning environment,*” as it strengthens the connection between lessons and learners’ lived experiences. Finally, K13 reflected that one of the most fulfilling aspects of being an LSA is knowing that their service has “*made an impact*” on the community.

Furthermore, research on Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) highlights that teachers who engage in culturally responsive practices develop stronger professional commitment and a deeper appreciation of Indigenous heritage, which contributes to more inclusive and meaningful learning environments (Verdida et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Non-Indigenous Peoples (non-IP) Learning Support Aide (LSA) teachers are driven by dual motivations in serving and teaching within IPEd-implementing schools, particularly passionate altruism and growth-oriented engagement with Indigenous learners. Despite challenges related to resources, language, culture, geographical isolation and socio-economic conditions, LSAs demonstrate high levels of resilience and adaptability, enabling them to function effectively in culturally diverse and geographically isolated communities. Their teaching practice is deeply grounded in cultural respect and community integration, highlighting that education in Indigenous contexts is not solely academic but also relational and cultural in nature. Through their immersion in Indigenous communities, non-IP LSA teachers have experienced a meaningful shift in perspective, allowing them to better appreciate the uniqueness and value of Indigenous Peoples (IP) identity. This transformation has shaped them into educators who are increasingly responsive to community needs and serve as agents of change within their contexts. Thus, the lived experiences of non-IP LSAs reflect that teaching in IPEd schools is not only a professional task but also a transformative and culturally immersive experience. This underscores the need to strengthen support systems for LSAs in IPEd schools by providing adequate teaching materials, logistical assistance, and continuous professional development programs focused on culturally responsive pedagogy and community-based education. In addition, while the study provides meaningful insights into non-IP LSA teachers’ experiences, its applicability is primarily limited to the specific context in which it was conducted, highlighting the need for further studies in other IPEd settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were drawn:

Policymakers play a crucial role in strengthening IPed implementation by increasing support system and resource allocation for IPed schools, as well as providing stronger support and incentives for Learning Support Aide (LSA) teachers. Schools may also consider integrating culturally responsive teaching frameworks and ensuring that LSAs are properly provided with seminars and trainings in Indigenous cultural practices and communication strategies. Future studies may also consider expanding the participant pool across multiple IPed-implementing schools in different Indigenous communities to enhance the contextual applicability of findings. Incorporating additional sources of data, such as classroom observations, document analysis, or learner performance records, may further strengthen the credibility and comprehensiveness of future investigations. Moreover, this study focused exclusively on non-Indigenous LSA teachers; therefore, the perspectives of Indigenous educators were beyond its scope. Future research may include Indigenous teachers, learners, and community stakeholders to provide a more holistic understanding of IPed implementation.

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