

Beyond the Passing Grade: Teachers' Lived Experiences of "Failure to Fail" Indigenous Learners Facing Academic Difficulties

Mark Jobert H. Cagape

Master of Arts in Education Major in Teaching Social Studies, Holy Cross of Davao College, INC.

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ABSTRACT

Teachers often encounter difficult grading decisions when academic standards intersect with poverty, child labor, language barriers, cultural differences, geographical isolation, and limited educational support. This study explored the lived experiences of teachers concerning "failure-to-fail" practices involving Indigenous learners facing academic difficulties. Guided by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, the study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design at Rajah Cabungsoan Integrated School in Barangay Rajah Cabungso-an, Lingig, Surigao del Sur. Twelve public-school teachers who taught Indigenous learners were purposively selected and participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and examined using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Four interrelated themes emerged: (1) professional and personal identity in "failure-to-fail" practices, (2) emotional struggles in supporting Indigenous learners, (3) community influence on "failure-to-fail" practices, and (4) negotiating cultural sensitivity in "failure-to-fail" practices. Findings revealed that teachers experienced guilt, moral hesitation, emotional strain, and concern for professional integrity when passing learners who had not demonstrated sufficient mastery. Their decisions were also shaped by promotion expectations, administrative and documentation burdens, parental and community pressure, and the practical difficulty of providing sustained remediation in geographically isolated communities. Teachers attempted to respond through simplified and contextualized instruction, formative and alternative assessments, and targeted interventions; however, these measures raised continuing concerns regarding rigor, fairness, comparability, and future learning gaps. The study concludes that "failure-to-fail" practices should not be viewed merely as leniency or grade inflation but as context-dependent professional decisions arising from the reciprocal influence of personal beliefs, instructional actions, and environmental conditions. Schools should pair compassion with structured academic intervention, culturally responsive assessment, collaborative decision-making, and shared accountability among teachers, administrators, families, Indigenous leaders, local government units, and education authorities.

Keywords: failure-to-fail practices, Indigenous learners, teacher decision-making, academic difficulties, rajah cabungso-an

INTRODUCTION

The Problem and Its Setting

From my perspective, the challenge of failure to fail, where teachers struggle to assign failing grades to students' academic difficulties, is a significant professional and ethical problem in education. I have observed that educators across various contexts may avoid failing students due to emotional discomfort, fear of conflict, or institutional pressures that influence their assessment decisions (Liu et al., 2024), especially among Indigenous Learners with diverse community. Reflecting on global educational research, faculty members describe the difficulty of balancing care for students with the responsibility to uphold standards (Adkins & Aucoin, 2022). In fact, literature on teacher assessment suggests that teachers' hesitation to fail students is linked to concerns about fairness, subjectivity, and lack of clear support systems, which can compromise the integrity of academic evaluations (Mark-van der Vossen et al., 2014). According to

Trumbull & Nelson Barber (2020), the conventional evaluation system is not aligned with indigenous ways of learning, leading teachers to adjust grading practices to avoid disadvantaging learners.

In the United Kingdom, I have discovered that educators sometimes hesitate to fail underperforming students in professional placements because the emotional and professional costs of failing a student are high and institutional support for doing so is limited (Finch, 2024). Systematic review research in Europe highlights that practice educators often give the benefit of the doubt and avoid failing students who show marginal competence, pointing to inconsistent expectations and leniency in gatekeeping roles (Gardner & Augustus, 2025). Just as recent medical education research in India shows that examiners at multiple medical schools' face determinants such as stress, reluctance to confront students, and administrative deterrents that contribute to the failure to fail problem when assessing underperforming medical students (Sethi, 2025).

In the Philippines, I have observed that teachers often struggle with failing students who do not meet academic standards, reflecting challenges similar to the failure to fail phenomenon documented internationally (Thorup et al., 2024). For an indigenous education context, teachers face additional challenges as they balance academic standards with the socio-cultural realities of learners; for instance, research conducted in indigenous schools in Talaingod, Davao del Norte revealed that teachers demonstrate strong commitment and empathy, which can influence their assessment decisions (Lugatiman & Baluyot, 2024). Recent studies indicate that teachers in IP (Indigenous People) community schools sometimes pass underperforming learners due to social, cultural, and institutional pressures, including the desire to support students from marginalized communities to avoid conflict with parents and administrators (Paderes & Ramos, 2024). Moreover, reports on mass promotion show that learners are frequently moved into higher year levels despite academic difficulties, suggesting that systemic expectations and school policies contribute to a culture where failure is avoided (Cariaso, 2026).

In reviewing the existing literatures, I found that there is a limited study in understanding the lived experiences of teachers who engage in “failure to fail” practices, particularly among indigenous learners. For instance, Santos (2020) explored the influence of cultural sensitivity on teachers' grading decisions and found that educators often adjust standards to accommodate learners' backgrounds, however, the study did not deeply investigate the emotional and ethical dilemmas teachers face when they choose not to fail students. In relation to this, Dela Cruz and Ramos (2021) analyzed assessment fairness in marginalized communities and highlighted systemic pressures influencing teachers' decisions, yet their work focused more on policy implications rather than personal experiences. Meanwhile, Bautista (2021) examined the educational challenges of indigenous learners, emphasizing socio-cultural barriers to academic success, but did not consider how teachers respond to these challenges in terms of grading practices. Based on these gaps, I see a need to further explore how teachers navigate the tension between maintaining professional standards and showing compassion, particularly in indigenous contexts, which justifies the focus of my study on teachers' lived experiences of failure to fail Indigenous Learners with academic difficulties.

Significance of the Study

This study means by looking closely at how teachers explore the complex challenge of failure to fail indigenous learners with academic difficulties and make meaningful decisions in supporting these indigenous learners while upholding academic standards. It connects to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by highlighting how equitable and culturally responsive assessment practices can promote inclusive learning and help every learner reach their full potential. This would also reflect the schools Vision-Mission-Goals that aims to form teachers who are not only competent but also value-driven, ethical, and socially responsible individuals. Through this study, teaching becomes more than instruction; it becomes a pathway for empowerment, cultural appreciation, and fostering academic integrity. In doing so, the study bridges educational practice and social equity, proving that understanding teachers' experiences with failure to fail can inform policies and practices that inspire fair, meaningful, and sustainable learning outcomes for all learners.

Research Question

In this study, I aim to explore the teachers' lived experiences of failure to fail indigenous learners facing academic difficulties. Specifically, this study seeks to address the question:

1. What is the lived experience of teachers in the "failure to fail" phenomenon with the Indigenous learners facing academic difficulties?

Theoretical Lens

I anchored my study in the Social Cognitive Theory of Albert Bandura (1985), as it provides a useful framework for understanding my participants' lived experiences regarding failure to fail Indigenous Learners facing academic difficulties. This theory suggests that human behavior is shaped by a dynamic and reciprocal interaction among personal factors, behavioral patterns, and environmental influences. In exploring my participants' experiences, I observed that their decisions not to fail IP learners facing academic difficulties were influenced by their personal beliefs about fairness, empathy, and professional responsibility, as well as their past experiences in handling student performance. At the same time, environmental factors such as school policies, community expectations, and the cultural realities of Indigenous Learners significantly shaped these decisions. In this perspective, teachers working in indigenous contexts often develop a strong sense of cultural sensitivity and moral obligation, which affects how they assess their students. By applying this theory, I was able to understand that their struggle to fail learners is not simply about academic standards, but also navigating the complex interplay of social, cultural, and institutional factors that define their teaching environment. This theory thus allowed me to examine deeply how teachers construct meaning from their experiences and how these experiences shape their assessment practices in culturally diverse settings.

Conceptual Paradigm



Assumptions

This study assumes that teachers have the capacity to explore the challenge of failure to fail by drawing on their professional knowledge (behavioral), personal values (personal), and cultural understanding (environmental), which significantly shape their teaching practices. It presumes that these experiences influence how teachers balance the ethical responsibility with the need to support students' learning and development. The research also assumes that participants are capable of articulating their experiences and reflections honestly, providing insights that accurately represent their challenges and decision-making processes. It also assumes that the school and community environments in which these teachers operate offer sufficient support and context for meaningful engagement with Indigenous learners. This study assumes that the teachers' personal, behavioral and environmental experiences regarding failure to fail indigenous can be analyzed through their narratives and insights.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design guided by a descriptive phenomenological approach, which is aimed at uncovering and interpreting individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was used to reveal the fundamental essence of teachers' lived experiences concerning failure to fail practices among indigenous learners. Descriptive phenomenology prioritizes the exploration and description of experiences as they are lived and interpreted by participants themselves, which was essential for

examining the challenges, reflections, and reasoning processes that teachers encounter when determining whether to pass students who not meet academic expectations (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). By adopting this design, the study strives to generate rich, holistic insights into teachers' perspectives that shape their experiences with this complex educational phenomenon.

Locale of the Study

I conducted my study at Rajah Cabungsoan Integrated School, located in Barangay Rajah Cabungso-an, Lingig, Surigao del Sur. I chose this locale because, aside from being convenient and accessible for me as a researcher, it allowed me to efficiently gather relevant data from participants. More importantly, I selected this setting because the majority of the students enrolled in the school are Indigenous learners, making it a suitable location for exploring the lived experiences of teachers regarding the phenomenon of "failure to fail" Indigenous learners with academic difficulties.

Sample and Sampling Technique

This study purposively selected teachers who are currently assigned to and teaching Indigenous Learners in public schools under the Department of Education. The participants included twelve (12) teachers in Rajah Cabungsoan Integrated School, composed of seven (6) elementary teachers and eight (6) secondary teachers. Among these, six (6) were newly hired teachers, while the remaining six (6) have more than three (3) years of teaching experience. All participants will take part in in-depth interviews. They were chosen for their ability to provide rich, meaningful, and reflective insights into failure to fail practices, as they have navigated various challenges in balancing academic standards, ethical responsibilities, and the diverse needs of Indigenous Learners. Teachers who are currently teaching IP learners or who are private school educators were excluded to ensure the relevance of the sample. Purposive sampling allowed the inclusion of participants with diverse teaching experiences and perspectives, which contributed to the depth and richness of the qualitative investigation. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative studies typically involve 5 to 25 participants depending on the research design and research questions; thus, the sample size of this study is appropriate for capturing the essence of the teachers' lived experiences.

Data Gathering Technique

In this study, an in-depth interview (IDI) method was semi-structured to collect data. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured and adaptable manner, employing open-ended questions to allow participants to express their experiences with failure to fail practices freely and comprehensively by following Braun and Clarke's format. With the participants' informed consent, I audio-recorded each session and simultaneously took notes to transcribe the discussions verbatim. This method enabled me to remain closely attuned to the participants' perspectives while acknowledging that the transcripts represented both contextual and interpretive accounts of their lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Transcripts and digital recordings were meticulously organized, securely stored, and treated with strict confidentiality to safeguard the identities and personal information of the participants throughout the study, by virtue of the Republic Act 10173 also known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

Data Analysis Technique

In this study, I analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis, which allowed me to identify patterns and themes that captured the essence of teachers' lived experiences with failure to fail practices. Significant statements were highlighted and coded, and similar codes were grouped together to form initial themes. These themes were then reviewed, refined, and organized into overarching categories that reflected shared experiences and variations among participants. Throughout the process, I engaged in reflexive thinking to ensure that my interpretations remained grounded in the teachers' perspectives while acknowledging my own assumptions. This approach provided a rich, nuanced, and faithful representation of the phenomenon, revealing the complexity of teachers' experiences and the contextual factors influencing their practices.

Trustworthiness

To establish the trustworthiness of this study, I thoroughly informed the participants about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, potential risks, and their rights throughout the study. I emphasized that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Prior to collecting data, I obtained their informed consent. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, each participant was assigned a code. I also maintained a comprehensive audit trail to document all research decisions, data collection, and data management practices, ensuring transparency, accountability, and credibility of the findings. Finally, I obtained ethical approval from the Society of Moral Accountability, Integrity, and Legal Ethics (SMILE), which confirms that this study adheres to accepted ethical standards for social research.

RESULTS

The modified paradigm of this study emerged from the lived experiences of teachers regarding their failure to fail Indigenous learners with academic difficulties. Through the participants' narratives, the study identified three major interrelated themes that shaped their experiences and decision-making processes, namely: personal conflict, behavioral conflict, and environmental pressure. These themes revealed how teachers continuously negotiate between professional standards, compassion, instructional responsibilities, and institutional expectations when dealing with struggling Indigenous learners. The findings further highlighted emerging cultural themes that emphasized the influence of Indigenous learners' lived realities, cultural identity, language, and socio-economic conditions on teachers' grading and instructional practices.

Thematic Analysis Table

OBJECTIVES	THEMES	SUB THEMES	CORE IDEAS
To explore the teachers' lived experiences of failure to fail indigenous learners facing academic difficulties	Professional and Personal Identity in "Failure to Fail" Practices	Conflict Between Compassion and Academic Standards	Teachers experience internal conflict between maintaining academic standards and responding compassionately to Indigenous learners' difficult circumstances.
		Guilt and Moral Hesitation in Passing Learners	Passing learners despite insufficient mastery creates guilt, discomfort, and concerns about professional integrity.
		Institutional and External Pressures in Decision-Making	Teachers' grading decisions are influenced by documentation requirements, school expectations, and promotion pressures.
		Emotional Impact of Poverty, Child Labor, and Learners' Difficult Life Circumstances	Teachers empathize with Indigenous learners whose poor performance is linked to poverty and family responsibilities.
		Fear of Community Judgment and Professional Conflict	Fear of parental complaints and community criticism influences grading decisions.
	Emotional Struggles in Supporting Indigenous Learners	Conflict in Simplifying Learning Tasks Without Compromising Classroom Progress	Teachers simplify lessons and tasks to support Indigenous learners but worry about affecting classroom pacing.
		Difficulty in Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching	Teachers struggle to contextualize lessons using Indigenous culture while meeting curriculum standards.

		Practices	
		Burden of Remediation and Targeted Intervention	Continuous remedial instruction requires additional time, effort, and emotional investment.
		Conflict in Shifting from Standardized to Formative Assessment	Teachers increasingly value learner effort and progress but question whether these reflect mastery.
		Tension in Using Flexible and Alternative Assessment Practices	Alternative assessments promote inclusivity but raise concerns about fairness and comparability.
		Ethical Conflict in Grading	Teachers consider effort and perseverance but worry about future learning gaps.
		Struggle in Understanding Learners' Context and Barriers	Teachers seek deeper understanding of learners' backgrounds before making academic judgments.
		Emotional Strain and Compassion Fatigue in Support Practices	Repeated interventions sometimes result in exhaustion and frustration.
	Community Influence in "Failure to Fail" Practices	Pressure to Conform to School Promotion Policies and Administrative Expectations	School systems encourage promotion and discourage learner retention.
		Conflict Between Academic Integrity and Institutional Accountability	Teachers fear learner failure may be viewed as a reflection of ineffective teaching.
		Burden of Additional Workload	Extensive paperwork discourages teachers from failing learners.
		Challenges of Geographical Distance	Remote locations make interventions and monitoring difficult.
		Fear of Community Conflict and Parental Pressure	Parents and communities influence promotion decisions.
		Subtle Expectations to Prioritize Retention Over Academic Readiness	Teachers perceive silent expectations to prioritize promotion over readiness.
		Need for Stronger Support Systems in Academic Decision-Making	Teachers seek collaborative and institutional support for difficult grading decisions.
	Negotiating Cultural Sensitivity in "Failure to Fail" Practices	Conflict Between Educational Expectations and Learners' Survival Realities	Teachers recognize that poverty and survival needs affect academic performance.
		Difficulty in	Teachers struggle to balance

		Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching	curriculum standards with Indigenous identity and language.
		Parental Ignorance and Limited Educational Support in Indigenous Communities	Limited parental literacy and educational support contribute to learner difficulties.
		Fear of Community Resistance	Fear of damaging relationships with Indigenous families influences grading decisions.
		Reluctance to Fail Learners Due to Geographical Hardship	Distance and limited accessibility discourage intensive remediation and retention.

Theme 1: Professional and Personal Identity in “Failure to Fail” Practices

The lived experiences of teachers revealed that the phenomenon of “failure to fail” Indigenous learners was deeply rooted in personal conflicts emerging between professional responsibility and emotional compassion. Teachers described an internal struggle where decisions regarding learner promotion were no longer based solely on competencies and performance, but also shaped by empathy, moral hesitation, fear of consequences, and concern for the lived realities of Indigenous learners. These experiences showed how teachers continuously negotiated between fairness, accountability, and humanity while confronting learners’ academic difficulties.

Sub Theme 1: Conflict Between Compassion and Academic Standards. Teachers commonly described an internal conflict between maintaining academic standards and responding compassionately to Indigenous learners’ difficult situations. Although they recognized that learners did not fully meet the required competencies, many participants admitted that emotional compassion often outweighed strict academic expectations. One participant shared:

“Ahmm... kuan man gud, naa gyud koy internal struggle ani ba. Kay isip nako as a teacher, kinahanglan gyud nako i-follow ang standards ug mahimong accountable sa sulod sa classroom. Dapat masiguro gyud nako nga ang akong lessons makatabang sa ilang future. Pero, ahh... dili man sad ta bato ba, tao man sad ta. Maluoy gyud ka labi na kung makita nimo ilang kahimtang. Mao nang bisan wala gyud nila na-meet ang criteria, usahay mapasar nalang gyud nako sila.” [“I really experience an internal struggle in this situation. As a teacher, I believe I should follow standards and remain accountable inside the classroom. I need to ensure that my lessons contribute to learners’ futures. However, we are only human, and I cannot help but feel pity, especially when I see their difficult circumstances. That is why, even if they did not fully meet the criteria, I still end up passing them.”] (IDI: P1, p. 19)

Similarly, another participant reflected on the emotional struggle of balancing standards and learner realities

“Ahh... murag conflicted gyud ko pirmi ani. Kay sa usa ka side, gusto gyud nako i-uphold ang standards, pero sa pikas side, makahuna-huna sad ko sa reality sa akong learners ba. Kanang lisod ilang kahimtang, naa pay problema sa balay. Didto nako na-realize nga ang teaching dili lang diay puro grading ug performance—apil sad diay ang pagsabot sa ilang kinabuhi.” [“I often feel conflicted about this. On one side, I want to uphold standards, but on the other side, I think about the realities of my learners, especially their difficult circumstances and struggles at home. I realized that teaching is not only about grading and performance, but also about understanding learners’ realities.”] (IDI: P7, p. 25)

These responses suggest that teachers constantly negotiated between enforcing academic accountability and responding humanely to learners who faced barriers beyond their control. For many participants, compassion became a powerful factor that reshaped how standards were interpreted and applied.

Sub Theme 2: Emotional Guilt and Moral Hesitation in Passing Learners. The findings also revealed feelings of guilt, discomfort, and moral hesitation whenever teachers recorded grades that did not fully reflect actual learner performance. Participants admitted experiencing emotional discomfort because passing learners despite unmet standards often conflicted with their professional conscience. One participant openly confessed:

“Ahh... honestly, uncomfortable gyud siya para nako. Murag dili gyud sakto sa akong konsensya ba, kay kabalo ko nga ang grade nga akong gi-record dili gyud fully nag-reflect sa tinuod niyang kahibalo ug readiness. Murag ma-compromise akong integrity as a teacher.” [“Ahh... honestly, it felt uncomfortable for me. It did not sit well with my conscience because I knew the grade I recorded did not fully reflect the learner’s true skills and readiness. It felt like my integrity as a teacher was being compromised.”] (IDI: P11, p. 28)

Another participant explained the emotional burden attached to grading decisions

“Ahmm... kanang mag-record kag grade nga kabalo kang dili gyud match sa actual performance sa bata, murag bug-at gyud siya sa feeling. Naa koy relief kay basin dili siya ma-discourage, pero at the same time naa sad gyud guilt nga basin sayop akong gihimo.” [“Ahmm... recording a grade that I know does not fully match the learner’s actual performance feels emotionally heavy. I feel relief because the learner may not be discouraged, but at the same time I also feel guilt, wondering if I made the wrong decision.”] (IDI: P3, p. 22)

These narratives reveal that teachers did not simply pass learners without emotional consequence. Rather, they experienced moral dilemmas where compassion provided temporary relief but simultaneously generated feelings of guilt and professional uncertainty

Sub Theme 3: Institutional and External Pressures in Decision-Making. Beyond personal emotions, teachers also disclosed that their grading decisions were strongly influenced by institutional expectations and external pressures. Many participants admitted that even when they personally believed a learner should fail due to unmet competencies, school policies, promotion expectations, and administrative burdens pushed them toward passing Indigenous learners. Teachers felt caught between their professional judgment and the expectations imposed by the system.

One participant openly described how institutional demands affected academic decisions

“Dili gyud lalim honestly. Kay kung naa gyud student nga dapat mabagsak, daghan kaayo ug requirements, supporting documents, remediation pa, home visitation, ug usahay ma-question pa ka sa administration. Kuan man gud, murag mas dali nalang usahay nga ipasar nalang sila kaysa moagi pa sa tanan nga proseso.” [Honestly, it is not easy. If a student truly deserves to fail, there are so many requirements, supporting documents, remediation plans, home visitations, and sometimes even questioning from administration. It sometimes feels easier to just pass the learner than go through the entire process.] (IDI: P5, p. 26)

Similarly, another participant explained how school expectations influenced decision-making

“Naa man gud pressure minsan sa school nga kinahanglan taas ang passing rate ba. Dili man siya direkta nga giingon, pero murag ma-feel nimo nga kinahanglan supportive ka ug dili basta-basta magpabilin ug learner sa same grade level.” [There is sometimes pressure in school to maintain high passing rates. It may not be directly stated, but you can feel the expectation to be supportive and avoid retaining learners in the same grade level.] (IDI: P8, p. 27)

These accounts indicate that teachers' failure-to-fail practices were not purely personal choices. Instead, they emerged from broader institutional pressures where teacher accountability, documentation burdens, and promotion expectations complicated objective academic decisions.

Sub Theme 4: Emotional Impact of Poverty, Child Labor, and Learners' Difficult Life Circumstances. Teachers also expressed deep emotional conflict when Indigenous learners struggled academically due to pov-

erty, child labor, and difficult family situations. Participants explained that pity and empathy frequently prevented them from failing learners because they understood that poor performance was often connected to survival rather than laziness. Teachers viewed these learners as victims of circumstance rather than simply underperforming students.

One participant emotionally described this dilemma

"Ahmm... maluoy gyud ko sa uban bata kay makita nimo nga dili man tungod tapulan sila ba. Naa gyud uban nga pagkahuman ug school mutrabaho pa, mutabang sa ginikanan, or magbantay sa manghod. Unya kung mubagsak pa gyud sila, murag sakit pud sa akua kay kabalo ko nga lisod ilang kinabuhi." [I really pity some learners because it is not necessarily laziness. Some of them work after school, help their parents, or take care of younger siblings. If they fail on top of that, it becomes emotionally painful for me because I know how difficult their lives are.] (IDI: P4, p. 23)

Likewise, another participant reflected

"Ahh... usahay makahuna-huna gyud ko nga unfair pud kung ibagsak nako sila dayon kay murag dili man equal ilang opportunities compared sa uban learners. Naa silay struggles outside school nga dili nato makita pirmi." [Ahh... sometimes I think it is unfair to fail them immediately because their opportunities are not equal to those of other learners. They have struggles outside school that we do not always see.] (IDI: P12, p. 30)

These narratives emphasize that poverty, family obligations, and child labor deeply shaped teachers' emotional responses. As a result, failure-to-fail practices often became acts of compassion influenced by learners' lived realities rather than solely by academic evidence.

Sub Theme 5: Fear of Community Judgment and Professional Conflict. Teachers additionally described fears of criticism, conflict, or strained relationships with parents and Indigenous communities whenever they considered failing a learner. Some participants admitted feeling pressured to avoid confrontation because failing Indigenous learners could be interpreted negatively by families or even become a source of tension within the community.

One participant candidly admitted

"Naa gyud uban parents nga mangayo ug favor para sa grades sa ilang anak. Dili pud ko ganahan ug conflict ba, labi na kung maguba among relationship sa community. Mao nang usahay, with conditions nalang pud nga maningkamot sila sunod grading." [There are parents who ask favors regarding their child's grades. I also want to avoid conflict, especially if it damages our relationship with the community. That is why I sometimes allow passing with conditions for improvement in the next grading period.] (IDI: P5, p. 27)

Another participant reflected on the silent expectations surrounding Indigenous learners

"Ahh... dili man siya ginastorya directly, pero murag naa gyud expectation nga dapat sabton nato sila ug dili gyud dayon ibagsak. Murag naa kay pressure nga mahimong considerate kay basin ma-discourage pud ang learner." [It is not directly stated, but there seems to be an expectation that we should understand them and avoid failing them immediately. There is pressure to be considerate because the learner might become discouraged.] (IDI: P6, p. 29)

These experiences reveal that teachers' grading decisions extended beyond classrooms and assessment criteria. Rather, they were embedded in social relationships, cultural expectations, and fears of conflict, further complicating the decision to fail Indigenous learners.

Theme 2: Emotional Struggles in Supporting Indigenous Learners

The lived experiences of teachers revealed that “failure to fail” practices among Indigenous learners were not only shaped by personal emotions but were also reflected in behavioral conflicts emerging through classroom instruction, assessment, and intervention practices. Teachers continuously modified lessons, adjusted assessments, and implemented interventions to support struggling Indigenous learners. However, these accommodations frequently created tension between responsiveness to learner needs, classroom fairness, instructional pacing, and professional standards. Participants revealed that behavioral conflict emerged as teachers attempted to support Indigenous learners without compromising curriculum expectations and the progress of other learners.

Sub Theme 1: Conflict in Simplifying Learning Tasks Without Compromising Classroom Progress. One of the major behavioral conflicts experienced by teachers involved simplifying lessons and adjusting learning tasks to accommodate Indigenous learners with academic difficulties. Participants described modifying instruction by breaking lessons into smaller components, simplifying classroom activities, and making instructions more manageable. However, teachers also expressed concern that excessive accommodation could affect classroom pacing and potentially delay learners who were progressing according to grade expectations.

One participant explained:

“Ahmm... kuan man gud, akong gina-simplify ang lessons ug activities para masabtan gyud nila. Nya kung mahimo, akong i-connect sa ilang lived experiences ug culture ba para mas dali nila ma-relate. Pero usahay, murag kinahanglan balik-balikon ang discussion kay dili dayon sila kasabot.” [I simplify lessons and activities so they can better understand. If possible, I connect lessons to their lived experiences and culture so they can relate more easily. However, there are times when discussions need to be repeated because they do not immediately understand.] (IDI: P1, p. 33)

Similarly, another participant shared

“Ahh... akong ginabuhay kay akong gina-break down ang tasks ngadto sa mas gagmay nga steps aron dili sila ma-overwhelm. Kanang manageable lang ba para dili sila mahadlok mo-try.” [What I do is break tasks into smaller steps so learners will not feel overwhelmed. I make them manageable so they will not feel afraid to try.] (IDI: P12, p. 43)

Another participant reflected on the challenge of adjusting instruction

“Akong gi-adjust ang tasks pinaagi sa pag-simplify ug paghatag ug mas klaro nga examples. Pero kuan man gud, usahay makahunahuna ka pud kung ma-left behind ba ang uban nga students nga okay na unta ang pacing.” [I adjust tasks by simplifying them and providing clearer examples. However, I sometimes wonder if other students who are already progressing well might be left behind.] (IDI: P7, p. 39)

These narratives suggest that teachers experienced instructional conflict because while modifications supported struggling Indigenous learners, they also worried that too much accommodation might affect classroom pacing and the learning progress of high-performing students. Teachers continuously negotiated between inclusivity and maintaining instructional balance.

Sub Theme 2: Difficulty in Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices. Teachers also experienced behavioral conflict in implementing culturally responsive teaching practices, particularly due to language barriers and limited culturally appropriate materials. Although participants recognized the importance of contextualizing lessons according to Indigenous learners' lived experiences, they admitted difficulty in

balancing curriculum expectations while simultaneously adapting instruction to learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

One participant explained

“Dile naman gud enough nga mag-general instruction lang. Gina-try nako nga mag-focus ug interventions ug i-connect ang lessons sa ilang lived experiences, local language, ug community practices. Pero usahay lisod pud siya kay dili tanan instructional materials responsive sa ilang culture.” [General instruction alone is not enough. I try to provide focused interventions and connect lessons to learners' lived experiences, local language, and community practices. However, it becomes difficult because not all instructional materials are culturally responsive.] (IDI: P3, p. 34)

Another participant emphasized contextualization

“Akong ginagamit kay familiar examples, local stories, ug culturally relevant materials para mas meaningful sa ila ang learning. Pero naa gyud times nga murag lisod i-balance sa curriculum expectations.” [I use familiar examples, local stories, and culturally relevant materials to make learning more meaningful for them. However, there are times when balancing this with curriculum expectations becomes difficult.] (IDI: P6, p. 36)

Another participant reflected

“Ang curriculum man gud maoy guide ug standards, pero akong learners' identity maoy naga-hatag ug meaning kung giunsa nila pagdawit sa lesson.” [The curriculum provides direction and standards, but my learners' identity gives meaning to how lessons are received.] (IDI: P7, p. 40)

These responses reveal how teachers struggled to balance curriculum requirements with Indigenous learners' linguistic and cultural realities. Behavioral conflict emerged as teachers attempted to remain culturally responsive while ensuring learners still met academic competencies.

Sub Theme 3: Burden of Remediation and Targeted Intervention. The findings further revealed that teachers experienced behavioral conflict due to the burden associated with remediation and targeted intervention. Participants described providing additional learning support through remedial classes, one-on-one instruction, supplementary activities, and re-teaching sessions for struggling Indigenous learners. However, these interventions often became physically, emotionally, and professionally demanding, particularly when learners continued to struggle despite repeated support. Teachers admitted that the responsibility of remediation sometimes contributed to their reluctance to fail learners because of the additional workload and emotional investment involved.

One participant shared

“Kuan man gud, akong ginabuhay kay mag-conduct gyud kog remedial classes, maghatag ug hand-outs ug study guides aron somehow maka-catch up sila. Pero honestly, kapoy pud siya kay usahay bisan unsaon nimo ug intervention, murag hinay gihapon ang progress.” [What I usually do is conduct remedial classes and provide hand-outs and study guides so they can somehow catch up. However, honestly, it becomes exhausting because despite interventions, progress sometimes remains slow.] (IDI: P2, p. 32)

Another participant explained

“Ahh... akong ginahatagan ug mas daghang one-on-one support ba, nya simpler ug contextualized materials para masabtan nila. Pero usahay murag demanding pud kaayo siya sa time ug effort.” [I provide more one-on-one support and use simpler, contextualized materials so they can understand better. However, this can become very demanding in terms of time and effort.] (IDI: P6, p. 36)

Similarly, another participant emphasized

“Permi gyud ko naga-conduct ug intervention program para sa struggling learners. Pero naa gyud moments nga makapoy sad kay murag balik-balik nalang ang process, nya usahay gamay ra kaayo ug improvement.” [“I often conduct intervention programs for struggling learners. However, there are moments when it becomes exhausting because the process feels repetitive and improvements are sometimes very minimal.”] (IDI: P1, p. 31)

These narratives suggest that teachers experienced behavioral conflict as remediation increasingly became an additional burden rather than solely an instructional strategy. Although participants remained committed to supporting Indigenous learners, repeated interventions sometimes intensified professional exhaustion and reduced confidence in the effectiveness of support mechanisms.

Sub Theme 4: Conflict in Shifting from Standardized to Formative Assessment. Behavioral conflict was also evident in teachers’ transition from traditional grading practices toward formative and process-based assessment. Participants explained that instead of relying solely on examination scores and written outputs, they increasingly considered learner participation, effort, progress, and classroom engagement. However, teachers questioned whether these forms of evaluation still accurately reflected learner competency and academic readiness.

One participant explained

“Instead nga final outputs lang akong tan-awon, ginatan-aw pud nako ang process ba—participation, effort, ug kanang gamay nga improvements. Kay usahay man gud, dili makita sa grades ang ilang paningkamot.” [Instead of focusing only on final outputs, I also look at the process—participation, effort, and small improvements. Sometimes, learners’ efforts are not reflected in grades alone.] (IDI: P3, p. 35)

Similarly, another participant emphasized:

“Akong ginaconsider pud ilang participation, improvement, ug unsa nila pag-apply ang learning sa ilang context. Dili lang kay puro score ang basihan.” [I also consider learners’ participation, improvement, and how they apply learning within their context. Scores alone are not my only basis.] (IDI: P6, p. 37)

Another participant added

“Mas gina-increase nako ang formative assessment ug feedback ba para ma-monitor gyud nako ilang progress while ga-learn pa sila.” [I increase the use of formative assessments and feedback so I can monitor learner progress while learning is still happening.] (IDI: P9, p. 41)

These responses reveal that teachers experienced ethical tension in moving from standardized assessment toward more formative approaches. Although participants valued learner growth and resilience, they simultaneously questioned whether process-based evaluation sufficiently reflected academic mastery.

Sub Theme 5: Tension in Using Flexible and Alternative Assessment Practices. Teachers also described behavioral conflict in utilizing alternative assessment practices to accommodate Indigenous learners who struggled with conventional written tasks. Participants explained that they often provided opportunities for learners to demonstrate understanding through oral responses, role-playing, drawings, demonstrations, and hands-on activities. However, despite recognizing the inclusivity of these strategies, some teachers questioned whether alternative assessments maintained consistency and fairness when compared with traditional evaluation methods.

One participant explained

“Kung dili gyud sila maka-perform sa written assessments, usahay akong ginapa-oral nalang sila, mag-drawing, role-playing, or hands-on activities ba aron makita gihapon nako kung nakasabot ba sila. Pero

usahay makahuna-huna pud ko kung same ba gyud ni siya ug level sa standard assessment.” [When learners cannot perform well in written assessments, I sometimes allow oral responses, drawings, role-playing, or hands-on activities so I can still see if they understand. However, there are times when I wonder if these are really equivalent to standard assessments.] (IDI: P3, p. 35)

Another participant shared

“Usahay akong ginapa-oral or practical nalang sila instead nga puro written tests kay mas makita man gud nako ilang understanding kung actual nila ginabuhat.” [Sometimes I allow oral or practical demonstrations instead of relying only on written tests because I can better see their understanding when they actually perform tasks.] (IDI: P11, p. 42)

Similarly, another participant stated

“Ahmm... ginahatagan nako sila ug lain-lain nga ways para ma-show ilang learning—oral responses, visual activities, ug hands-on tasks. Kay dili man gud tanan bata pareho ug way sa pagpakita sa ilang understanding.” [I provide different ways for learners to demonstrate learning—oral responses, visual activities, and hands-on tasks. Not all learners show understanding in the same way.] (IDI: P10, p. 41)

These narratives indicate that while teachers attempted to make assessment more inclusive and culturally responsive, they simultaneously struggled with maintaining fairness, comparability, and consistency in grading practices. Behavioral conflict emerged from balancing learner accommodation with academic rigor.

Sub Theme 6: Ethical Conflict in Grading. Participants also revealed ethical conflict when effort, participation, and perseverance became more heavily weighted than actual competency mastery in grading decisions. Teachers admitted that when Indigenous learners struggled academically, they frequently considered learner effort and classroom participation as alternative indicators of achievement. However, this practice created internal uncertainty because teachers worried that passing learners without mastery might prolong learning deficiencies in later grade levels.

One participant shared

“Akong decision usahay ma-influence gyud sa ilang effort ba, participation, ug kanang partial skills nga ilang napakita. Labi na kung makita nako nga naningkamot gyud sila bisan lisod para nila.” [My decision is sometimes influenced by learners’ effort, participation, and partial skills, especially when I see that they are genuinely trying despite difficulties.] (IDI: P6, p. 37)

Another participant explained

“Akong ginatan-aw pud ilang attitude toward learning—kung willing ba sila mo-participate ug kanang persistent gihapon bisag lisod kaayo para nila.” [I also consider their attitude toward learning—whether they are willing to participate and remain persistent even when learning becomes difficult.] (IDI: P9, p. 41)

These findings suggest that teachers experienced moral tension when effort and resilience became central considerations in grading decisions. While participants recognized perseverance as meaningful, they simultaneously questioned whether such practices adequately prepared Indigenous learners for future academic demands.

Sub Theme 7: Struggle in Understanding Learners’ Context and Barriers. Teachers also described behavioral conflict in distinguishing between lack of academic effort and barriers resulting from language, culture, and socio-economic realities. Participants emphasized the importance of understanding learner circumstances before making academic judgments, although doing so often required additional emotional investment and professional effort. Teachers explained that understanding Indigenous learners’ backgrounds became necessary in order to determine whether difficulties stemmed from disengagement or structural disadvantage.

One participant explained

“Usahay makigstorya gyud ko sa parents or community members aron masabtan nako ang background sa learner. Kay basin dili diay lack of effort ang problem pero naa gyud deeper nga reason behind sa iyang struggles.” [I sometimes talk with parents or community members to better understand the learner’s background. There are times when the issue is not lack of effort but deeper reasons behind the learner’s struggles.]

Another participant reflected

“Ahh... akong ginabuhat kay multiple approaches gyud—varied assessments, one-on-one conversations, ug checking for understanding pinaagi sa lain-lain nga paagi para mas makita nako asa gyud sila naglisod.” [Ahh... I use multiple approaches such as varied assessments, one-on-one conversations, and checking for understanding through different methods so I can identify where learners are truly struggling.] (IDI: P10, p. 40)

These responses indicate that teachers actively sought contextual understanding before making academic decisions. However, this process often intensified behavioral conflict as teachers carried additional emotional and instructional responsibilities in supporting Indigenous learners.

Sub Theme 8: Emotional Strain and Compassion Fatigue in Support Practices. Teachers revealed that repeated intervention and support practices often resulted in emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue. Participants admitted feeling frustration, discouragement, and emotional strain when interventions repeatedly failed to produce improvement. Although teachers remained committed to helping struggling Indigenous learners, repeated academic difficulties sometimes diminished motivation and intensified professional fatigue.

One participant openly confessed

“Honestly, kung dili na gyud mu-work ang assessments ug makita nako nga murag wala gyud effort ang learner, usahay mawad-an pud ko ug gana ba. Murag kapoy na pud sige ug effort kung wala kaayo makita nga improvement.” [Honestly, when assessments no longer work and I see little effort from learners, there are times when I also lose motivation. It becomes exhausting to continuously invest effort without seeing much improvement.] (IDI: P5, p. 35)

Meanwhile, another participant reflected

“Lisod gyud i-balance ang fairness ug support. Kay gusto man nako sila tabangan pero naa pud koy standards nga kinahanglan sundon.” [It is really difficult to balance fairness and support. I want to help learners, but I also have standards that I need to follow.] (IDI: P6, p. 37)

These experiences reveal that teachers’ continuous emotional investment in struggling Indigenous learners frequently intensified feelings of exhaustion and professional fatigue. Despite these challenges, participants continued adjusting their practices in hopes of improving learner outcomes and preventing academic failure.

Theme 3: Community Influence in “Failure to Fail” Practices

The lived experiences of teachers revealed that “failure to fail” Indigenous learners was not only shaped by personal and behavioral struggles but was also deeply influenced by environmental conflicts embedded within the educational system and the communities they served. Teachers described how school policies, administrative expectations, geographical realities, and community pressures influenced their grading decision-

s. These systemic conditions often created conflict between maintaining academic integrity and responding to institutional demands, parental expectations, and the realities of Indigenous communities. As a result, many

teachers found themselves negotiating professional accountability within environments that indirectly discouraged learner failure.

Sub Theme 1: Pressure to Conform to School Promotion Policies and Administrative Expectations. Teachers revealed that institutional expectations often encouraged learner promotion rather than retention, making it difficult to strictly implement failing grades among struggling Indigenous learners. Although participants acknowledged the importance of maintaining standards, many admitted that school systems subtly reinforced the expectation that learners should be promoted despite academic deficiencies. Teachers experienced conflict because institutional priorities often emphasized retention, promotion, and reducing failure rates rather than competency attainment.

One participant explained

“Kuan man gud, sa school policies ug administration ba, murag ginapush gyud nga i-promote ang learners ug likayan ang failure labi na sa early grades. Murag naa gyud expectation nga dapat supportive ta ug dili dayon ta magbagsak.” [School policies and administration seem to encourage promoting learners and minimizing failure, especially in the early grades. There appears to be an expectation that teachers should be supportive and avoid immediately failing learners.] (IDI: P6, p. 57)

Similarly, another participant reflected on how institutional systems quietly influenced grading behavior

“School policies, administration, ug even community expectations ba, murag hilom lang pero maka-influence gyud sila sa akong grading system. Dili man siya direct nga pressure pero ma-feel nimo.” [School policies, administration, and even community expectations quietly influence my grading system. The pressure may not be direct, but it can definitely be felt.] (IDI: P7, p. 59)

Another participant openly described administrative influence in passing learners

“Gi-emphasize gyud sa among administration nga ‘no learner left behind’ ba. Mao nang usahay ma-consider nalang gyud pud ang effort ug participation bisan kulang pa ang mastery.” [Our administration strongly emphasized the idea of ‘no learner left behind.’ Because of this, effort and participation are sometimes considered even when mastery remains insufficient.] (IDI: P3, p. 58)

These responses reveal that teachers frequently experienced institutional pressure to prioritize learner promotion over competency attainment. While these policies intended to support retention, participants struggled because such expectations often contradicted actual learner readiness.

Sub Theme 2: Conflict Between Academic Integrity and Institutional Accountability. Participants also revealed experiencing conflict between maintaining professional standards and responding to accountability systems embedded within schools. Teachers admitted feeling that learner failure could reflect negatively on their competence, classroom management, or instructional effectiveness. Consequently, many teachers experienced hesitation in failing Indigenous learners because they feared judgment from administrators or colleagues.

One participant explained

“Murag lisod pud siya kay kung mabagsak ang learner, usahay makita siya nga reflection sa imong teaching ug classroom management. Murag ikaw dayon ang ma-question nganong wala siya nakaabot sa standards.” [It becomes difficult because when a learner fails, it is often viewed as a reflection of your teaching and classroom management. Teachers may then be questioned about why learners did not meet standards.] (IDI: P7, p. 60)

Another participant emphasized institutional accountability

“Ahmm... pirmi mi gina-remind sa administration nga kinahanglan transparent, documented, ug fair ang grading practices. Mao nang murag kinahanglan gyud nimo ma-defend tanan decisions.” [Administration constantly reminds us that grading practices must remain transparent, documented, and fair. Because of this, teachers feel the need to defend every academic decision.] (IDI: P10, p. 61)

Similarly, one participant reflected on emotional pressure

“Naa gyud usahay nga feeling nga kung mubagsak ang bata, murag pangutan-on pud dayon ang teacher kung unsay kulang sa pagtudlo.” [There are moments when failing learners also raises questions about the teacher and what may have been lacking in instruction.] (IDI: P10, p. 60)

These narratives reveal that accountability systems intensified environmental conflict by indirectly transferring responsibility for learner outcomes to teachers. As a result, failing Indigenous learners became professionally risky and emotionally burdensome.

Sub Theme 3: Burden of Additional Workload. The findings further revealed that teachers often hesitated to fail Indigenous learners because doing so required substantial documentation, remediation efforts, and additional professional responsibilities. Participants explained that failing a learner involved extensive paperwork, home visitations, intervention reports, attendance monitoring, and compliance with school and division requirements. These responsibilities often became overwhelming, particularly in remote Indigenous settings where resources and access were limited. Teachers admitted that such workload unintentionally discouraged them from assigning failing grades, even when learners had not fully met academic expectations.

One participant openly admitted

“Kuan man gud, giingnan pud ko sauna sa uban teachers nga hasol kaayo mubagsak ug student. Daghan daw kaayo ug paperwork, intervention reports, supporting documents, ug usahay naa pay summer classes. Mao nang usahay makahuna-huna ka nga murag mas dali nalang gyud ipasar.” [Senior teachers once told me that failing a student is extremely burdensome. There are many paperwork requirements, intervention reports, supporting documents, and even summer classes. Because of this, there are times when it feels easier to simply pass the learner.] (IDI: P5, p. 56)

Similarly, another participant described the volume of documentation required

“Daghan gyud kaayo ug documentary requirements before ka makabagsak ug learner ba. Naa pay home visitation records, attendance monitoring checklist, scores, pictures, ug uban pa. Murag maka-overwhelm usahay.” [There are many documentary requirements before a learner can be failed. These include home visitation records, attendance monitoring checklists, scores, pictures, and many others. It can become overwhelming.] (IDI: P1, p. 57)

These responses suggest that institutional systems unintentionally normalized failure-to-fail practices because remediation and documentation requirements were often perceived as additional burdens rather than supportive mechanisms. Consequently, teachers sometimes chose learner promotion over navigating highly demanding procedures.

Sub Theme 4: Challenges of Geographical Distance. Teachers working in geographically isolated Indigenous communities disclosed that environmental realities created another major conflict in implementing interventions for struggling learners. Participants explained that traveling to remote communities for home visitations, remediation, or documentation frequently required physical sacrifice, additional time, and emotional effort. As a result, sustained interventions often became difficult to maintain, contributing to teachers' hesitation in failing Indigenous learners.

One participant reflected

“Lisod pud gyud kay naa man gud learners nga layo kaayo ug lugar. Kanang intervention ug monitoring ba, dili pirmi mahimo kay lisod ang byahe ug usahay affected pud sa family responsibilities sa bata.” [It is really difficult because some learners live in very distant places. Conducting interventions and monitoring cannot always happen because travel is difficult, and learners are also affected by family responsibilities.] (IDI: P8, p. 58)

Another participant emphasized the realities of learners’ situations

“Dili gyud nako ma-ignore ang realities sa akong students ba. Naa gyud uban nga financial ug family challenges maoy makaapekto sa ilang attendance ug performance sa school.” [I cannot ignore the realities of my students. Financial and family challenges often affect their attendance and performance in school.] (IDI: P7, p. 60)

These findings reveal that geographical isolation intensified environmental conflict because teachers found it difficult to sustain interventions across distant Indigenous communities. Limited accessibility, family obligations, and lack of resources often constrained teachers’ ability to fully implement remediation before making grading decisions.

Sub Theme 5: Fear of Community Conflict and Parental Pressure. Participants also disclosed experiencing pressure from Indigenous parents and communities regarding learner promotion. Teachers admitted fearing confrontation, criticism, or damaged relationships with families whenever learners were at risk of failing. In several cases, participants described situations where parents directly appealed for passing grades despite poor academic performance. This pressure often complicated teachers’ ability to strictly implement academic standards.

One participant candidly admitted

“Every quarter gyud naa gyud uban parents nga mangayo ug favor para sa grades sa ilang anak. Kuan man gud, dili pud ko ganahan ug conflict labi na sa parents ug community. Mao nang usahay ihatag nalang nako ilang gusto pero naa pud koy conditions nga kinahanglan maningkamot ang bata.” [Every quarter there are parents who ask favors regarding their child’s grades. I do not want conflict with parents and the community, so there are times when I give what they ask for, although with conditions that the learner must improve.] (IDI: P5, p. 58)

Another participant emphasized parental concerns

“Ahh... importante pud kaayo ang expectations sa pamilya ba kay naa gyud uban parents nga mahadlok nga basin ma-discourage ilang anak kung ma-retain sa same grade.” [Family expectations are also important because some parents fear that their child may become discouraged if retained in the same grade level.] (IDI: P12, p. 63)

These findings suggest that maintaining school-community relationships often became a competing priority alongside academic integrity. Teachers frequently negotiated between professional standards and preserving trust with Indigenous families and communities.

Sub Theme 6: Subtle Expectations to Prioritize Retention Over Academic Readiness. The findings also revealed the presence of subtle and unspoken expectations that encouraged teachers to prioritize learner retention and graduation over academic readiness. Participants described implicit messages within the school environment suggesting that Indigenous learners, particularly those facing academic difficulties, should be promoted whenever possible. Although these expectations were rarely stated directly, teachers perceived institutional signals that emphasized compassion, learner retention, and minimizing failure. This created environmental conflict because teachers questioned whether learners were genuinely prepared for the succeeding grade level.

One participant reflected on the implicit expectation surrounding struggling learners

“Murag naa gyud unspoken expectation ba nga kinahanglan considerate ta sa learners, labi na tong naa gyud difficulties. Kanang dili dayon ta magbagsak kay basin mawad-an sila ug gana sa school.” [There seems to be an unspoken expectation that teachers should be considerate of learners, especially those facing difficulties. Teachers are expected not to fail them immediately because they might lose motivation in school.] (IDI: P6, p. 62)

Similarly, another participant emphasized the silent pressure attached to learner promotion

“Naa gyud usahay relief ug approval kung mapasar ang learner, pero murag naa pud quiet pressure ba kung prepared ba gyud siya sa next grade level.” [There is often relief and approval when learners are promoted, but there is also quiet pressure regarding whether they are truly prepared for the next grade level.] (IDI: P11, p. 63)

Another participant described feelings of subtle scrutiny

“Usahay dili man siya direct nga criticism pero kanang silence ba, murag maka-feel gihapon ka nga gi-scrutinize imong decision kung nganong napasar nimo ang learner.” [Sometimes it is not direct criticism, but even silence can make you feel that your decision is being scrutinized regarding why the learner was promoted.] (IDI: P9, p. 62)

These narratives indicate that failure-to-fail practices were subtly normalized within school environments. Although teachers were not explicitly prohibited from failing Indigenous learners, participants perceived strong institutional and social expectations that favored retention and promotion over competency attainment.

Sub Theme 7: Need for Stronger Support Systems in Academic Decision-Making. Teachers further emphasized the importance of stronger institutional and community support systems to help them make fair and reasonable academic decisions. Participants highlighted the need for clearer grading policies, collaborative decision-making, stronger parental involvement, and culturally responsive interventions that could reduce the burden placed solely on teachers. Many participants expressed that the absence of adequate support intensified uncertainty and emotional conflict in grading Indigenous learners.

One participant emphasized the importance of shared support

“Foremost gyud para sa akua, kinahanglan nako ug support system gikan sa community labi na sa parents. Nya importante pud gyud ang support sa administration para dili murag teacher ra isa ang ga-carry sa tanan responsibility.” [Foremost, I need a support system from the community, especially from parents. Administrative support is also important so that teachers do not carry all responsibilities alone.] (IDI: P1, p. 64)

Similarly, another participant suggested collaborative academic decision-making

“Mas maayo gyud siguro kung naa structured discussions or collaborative decision-making ba aron dili murag ikaw ra isa ang ga-decide sa lisod nga cases sa learners.” [It would be better if there were structured discussions or collaborative decision-making so teachers would not feel alone in making difficult decisions regarding learners.] (IDI: P3, p. 64)

Another participant reflected on institutional clarity

“Kung mas klaro siguro ang policies ug interventions para sa struggling learners, mas confident pud mi sa among decisions ug dili kaayo conflicted.” [If policies and interventions for struggling learners were clearer, teachers would feel more confident in their decisions and less conflicted.] (IDI: P7, p. 64)

These findings indicate that teachers desired environments where responsibility for learner success was collectively shared among schools, families, administrators, and communities. Participants believed that stronger systems of support could reduce professional uncertainty and help ensure that academic decisions remained fair, culturally responsive, and evidence-based.

Theme 4: Negotiating Cultural Sensitivity in “Failure to Fail” Practices

The lived experiences of teachers revealed that “failure to fail” Indigenous learners was deeply shaped by cultural conflicts emerging from the realities of Indigenous communities, family expectations, socio-economic hardships, and the cultural responsibilities carried by learners. Teachers described tensions in balancing professional standards with cultural responsiveness while simultaneously navigating parental attitudes toward schooling, geographical barriers, language difficulties, and socio-cultural expectations surrounding Indigenous education. The findings further revealed that teachers’ decisions to pass struggling Indigenous learners were often shaped by emotional compassion, cultural sensitivity, and fear of conflict with Indigenous families and communities.

Sub Theme 1: Conflict Between Educational Expectations and Learners’ Survival Realities. Teachers described how Indigenous learners often struggled academically because schooling competed with survival needs and family obligations. Participants revealed that many Indigenous learners experienced poverty, child labor, and domestic responsibilities, making it difficult for them to fully participate in classroom learning. As a result, teachers admitted experiencing emotional conflict whenever learners performed poorly because academic difficulties were often tied to life struggles rather than lack of ability.

One participant explained

“Kuan man gud, usahay murag dili kabalo ang bata asa gyud siya mag-focus ba. Kanang mag-eskwela ba siya or mutabang sa pamilya kay lisod man ilang kahimtang. Mao nang usahay dili gyud sila ka-focus sa school.” [Sometimes learners do not know where to focus. They struggle between attending school and helping their family because of difficult circumstances. As a result, they are often unable to focus on schooling.] (IDI: P2, p. 66)

Similarly, another participant reflected on redefining learner success according to life circumstances

“Para nako usahay, success na gani nang musulod gihapon sila sa school bisan daghan kaayo silag struggles. Kanang maningkamot gihapon sila, mutry ug usab bisag lisod kaayo ilang kahimtang.” [For me, success can already mean simply attending school despite many struggles. Learners continue trying and making efforts despite difficult circumstances.] (IDI: P7, p. 70)

Another participant emphasized gradual growth rather than immediate achievement

“Usahay success pud para nako nga makita nimo nga ni-effort ang bata, ni-participate sa klase, ug slowly naga-develop iyang confidence ug skills bisan dugay ang progress.” [For me, success can also mean seeing a learner exert effort, participate in class, and slowly build confidence and skills even if progress takes time.] (IDI: P12, p. 74)

These narratives reveal that teachers became emotionally conflicted because Indigenous learners’ poor performance was often inseparable from poverty, labor, and survival responsibilities. Consequently, participants found it difficult to impose failing grades on learners already burdened by difficult life conditions.

Sub Theme 2: Difficulty in Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching. Participants also disclosed challenges in reconciling school curriculum with Indigenous learners’ cultural identity. Teachers admitted struggling to contextualize lessons while still meeting curriculum competencies, particularly when language differences created barriers in instruction and assessment. Although teachers valued culturally responsive

teaching, participants described difficulties implementing such practices within standardized educational expectations.

One participant emphasized the need for culturally aligned materials

“Para nako kinahanglan gyud ug instructional materials nga responsive sa ilang lived experiences ug culture ba, apil na gyud ang language. Kay usahay dili gyud sila maka-relate sa examples nga naa sa books.” [For me, instructional materials should be responsive to learners’ lived experiences and culture, including language. Sometimes learners cannot relate to examples found in textbooks.] (IDI: P1, p. 67)

Similarly, another participant explained

“Ang akong ginabutang sa lessons ang local stories, traditions, ug language aron mas meaningful sa ila ang learning. Pero kuan man gud, usahay lisod gihapon i-balance sa curriculum requirements.” [I integrate local stories, traditions, and language into lessons so learning becomes more meaningful. However, it is sometimes difficult to balance these adjustments with curriculum requirements.] (IDI: P11, p. 72)

Meanwhile, another participant reflected

“Ang curriculum man gud maoy guide ug standards, pero akong learners’ identity maoy naga-hatag ug meaning kung unsaon nila pagdawat sa lesson.” [The curriculum serves as a guide and standard, but my learners’ identity gives meaning to how lessons are received.] (IDI: P7, p. 69)

These findings reveal that teachers experienced cultural conflict because culturally responsive teaching required adjustments that were often difficult to implement within rigid educational structures. Teachers struggled to maintain curriculum fidelity while respecting Indigenous learners’ cultural identity and linguistic realities.

Sub Theme 3: Parental Ignorance and Limited Educational Support in Indigenous Communities. The findings further revealed teachers’ struggles with limited educational support from some Indigenous parents, often due to illiteracy, lack of formal schooling, or survival-related priorities. Participants admitted feeling emotional conflict because many parents genuinely wanted educational success for their children but lacked the capacity to provide academic guidance at home.

One participant explained

“Kuan man gud, lisod pud kay ang ginikanan usahay dili pud kabalo mubasa ug musulat. Mao nang dili gyud nila matabangan ilang anak sa balay kung assignments o reading practice na.” [It is difficult because some parents themselves cannot read or write. As a result, they are unable to assist their child at home with assignments or reading practice.] (IDI: P4, p. 68)

Another participant reflected on limited home support

“Murag limited gyud usahay ang support sa balay ba. Naa pay irregular attendance ug cultural responsibilities nga makaapekto sa chance sa learner nga fully maka-engage sa klase.” [Support at home is often limited. Irregular attendance and cultural responsibilities also affect learners’ opportunities to fully engage in class.] (IDI: P3, p. 69)

These narratives indicate that teachers experienced both frustration and compassion, recognizing that academic difficulties were often reinforced by family and environmental limitations rather than unwillingness to learn.

Sub Theme 4: Fear of Community Resistance. Teachers revealed experiencing fear and hesitation whenever Indigenous learners were at risk of failing because of possible backlash from parents and communities. Participants described situations where teachers felt pressured to avoid failing learners in order to prevent

misunderstandings, conflict, or damaged relationships with Indigenous families. Teachers admitted that parental appeals, community expectations, and fear of strained relationships often influenced their willingness to assign failing grades despite poor academic performance.

One participant candidly admitted

“Ahmm... every quarter gyud naa gyud parents nga mangayo ug favor para sa grades sa ilang anak. Kuan man gud, dili pud ko ganahan nga magka-grudge ang parents sa akua ba. Mao nang usahay ihatag nalang nako ilang gusto pero naa pud koy conditions nga kinahanglan maningkamot gyud ang bata.” [Every quarter there are parents who ask favors regarding their child’s grades. I do not want parents to develop resentment toward me. Because of this, there are times when I give what they ask for, although with conditions that the learner must exert effort.] (IDI: P5, p. 60)

Similarly, another participant disclosed subtle expectations from the community

“Murag naa gyud expectation gikan sa community ba nga dapat supportive ang teachers ug dili dayon magbagsak sa learners, labi na tong naglisod gyud.” [There seems to be an expectation from the community that teachers should remain supportive and avoid immediately failing learners, especially those who are struggling.] (IDI: P11, p. 73)

Another participant reflected on the emotional burden of avoiding conflict

“Usahay makahadlok pud kay basin ma-misunderstood ka sa parents or community kung ibagsak nimo ang learner. Murag lisod pud nga madaot inyong relationship sa community.” [Sometimes it becomes frightening because parents or the community may misunderstand your decision if a learner fails. It is difficult when relationships with the community become strained.] (IDI: P12, p. 73)

These narratives reveal that teachers frequently experienced cultural conflict because failing Indigenous learners could potentially lead to parental dissatisfaction, accusations of unfairness, or strained relationships within Indigenous communities. As a result, participants often negotiated between professional judgment and maintaining positive school-community relationships.

Sub Theme 5: Reluctance to Fail Learners Due to Geographical Hardship. Participants also admitted that the geographical isolation of Indigenous communities affected their willingness to fail learners. Teachers explained that failing a learner often required additional remediation, documentation, monitoring, and home interventions, all of which became physically and professionally difficult in geographically distant communities. Participants emphasized that inaccessible locations often limited their ability to consistently implement follow-up support for struggling learners.

One participant reflected

“Dili man gud tanan learners dali ma-monitor kay layo kaayo ilang lugar, nya lisod pud ang byahe usahay. Mao nang challenging kaayo ang intervention ug follow-up.” [Not all learners can easily be monitored because they live in distant places, and travel itself is often difficult. As a result, interventions and follow-up become very challenging.] (IDI: P8, p. 71)

Meanwhile, another participant emphasized the need for stronger institutional support

“Kinahanglan gyud siguro ug structured support ug interventions ba kay dili man pud kaya nga teacher lang pirmi ang magdala sa tanan burden labi na sa struggling learners.” [There should really be structured support and interventions because teachers alone cannot continuously carry all the burden, especially for struggling learners.] (IDI: P3, p. 77)

Another participant reflected on physical and emotional limitations

“Usahay makahuna-huna pud ka nga lisod gyud mag-remedial ug balik-balik kung layo kaayo ang learners ug lisod adtoon ilang lugar. Murag usahay limitado pud ang kaya sa teacher.” [There are moments when repeated remediation becomes difficult because learners live in very remote places that are hard to access. Teachers also have limitations in what they can realistically sustain.] (IDI: P7, p. 76)

These findings indicate that geographical isolation intensified teachers’ hesitation to fail Indigenous learners because remediation demands often exceeded available time, physical resources, and professional capacity. Consequently, teachers frequently experienced conflict between ensuring learner readiness and managing the realities of intervention within geographically isolated Indigenous communities

DISCUSSION

Elaboration of Findings

My findings on the lived experiences of teachers regarding the phenomenon of “failure to fail” Indigenous learners with academic difficulties revealed a deeply complex educational reality shaped by emotional, instructional, institutional, and cultural tensions. With the various techniques I have utilized throughout this study have demonstrated that teachers’ decisions to pass Indigenous learners despite academic difficulties were not simply acts of leniency but emerged from multiple intersecting realities that influenced professional judgment. These findings highlighted that - teachers experienced “failure to fail” as a dynamic struggle between compassion and accountability, responsiveness and fairness, and educational standards and socio-cultural realities. The experiences I have collectively manifested through the major themes of Personal and Professional Identity in “Failure to Fail” Practices, Emotional Struggles in Supporting Indigenous Learners, Community Influence in “Failure to Fail” Practices, and Negotiating Cultural Sensitivity in “Failure to Fail” Practices – I collectively revealed that learner promotion decisions are deeply contextual rather than solely competency-based which could affect failing learners with academic difficulties.

Professional and Personal Identity in “Failure to Fail” Practice

The findings revealed that teachers experienced personal and professional conflict when deciding whether to fail Indigenous learners with academic difficulties. Participants described feelings of compassion, guilt, hesitation, and responsibility as they balanced academic standards with the realities faced by Indigenous learners. These experiences suggest that grading decisions were influenced not only by professional obligations but also by teachers’ personal values and moral judgments.

The findings support Walker and Kelly (2022), who found that teachers frequently experience emotional and ethical tension when making decisions involving vulnerable learners. Their study emphasized that educators often struggle between enforcing academic expectations and responding to learners’ social and emotional needs. Similarly, Collett (2023) reported that teachers’ professional identities are shaped by moral commitments that influence classroom decisions, particularly when learners face significant disadvantages.

The findings also align with Hargreaves and Fullan (2021), who argued that teaching involves emotional labor in which educators continuously negotiate professional expectations and personal compassion. Likewise, Mockler (2022) found that teachers often make decisions based on both professional judgment and ethical responsibility, especially when working with marginalized populations. These studies support the participants’ experiences of internal conflict when deciding whether to fail Indigenous learners.

On the other hand, a study of Sahlberg (2023) emphasized that educational decisions are often influenced by teachers’ commitment to equity and learner welfare. Similarly, Day and Gu (2021) found that teachers’ personal beliefs and sense of responsibility strongly influence how they respond to learners experiencing academic and social difficulties. These findings support the participants’ tendency to consider learners’ circumstances when making promotion decisions.

However, some studies present a different perspective. Knight (2021) argued that academic assessment should remain focused on demonstrated competency and should not be significantly influenced by emotional considerations. Similarly, Wiliam (2022) maintained that fairness in assessment requires consistent application of academic standards across all learners. Newton (2023) further suggested that promotion without demonstrated mastery may reduce the credibility of assessment systems and create future learning difficulties. Likewise, Baird et al. (2021) emphasized that objective and evidence-based assessment practices remain essential for maintaining academic integrity and educational quality.

In summary, the findings indicate that teachers' failure-to-fail practices are closely connected to their personal and professional identities. The findings contribute to the limited literature on failure-to-fail practices among Indigenous learners and provide evidence that teachers' grading decisions are shaped by both professional accountability and culturally situated realities.

Emotional Struggles in Supporting Indigenous Learners

The study revealed that teachers experienced emotional struggles while supporting Indigenous learners with academic difficulties. Participants described challenges in simplifying lessons, implementing culturally responsive instruction, conducting remediation, modifying assessments, and balancing fairness with compassion. Teachers also reported feelings of frustration, exhaustion, and uncertainty as they continuously adjusted instructional practices to meet learners' needs while maintaining academic standards.

The findings also support Jennings and Greenberg (2021), who found that teachers frequently experience emotional demands when addressing the diverse learning needs of students. Their study emphasized that continuous efforts to support struggling learners often require significant emotional investment, which may affect teachers' well-being and decision-making. Similarly, Mercer and Gregersen (2022) reported that teachers often experience emotional tension when balancing instructional responsibilities with the individual needs of learners facing learning barriers.

The findings are also consistent with Gay (2021), who emphasized that culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to continuously adapt instructional practices to learners' cultural experiences and backgrounds. Likewise, Ladson-Billings (2021) argued that responsive instruction involves balancing curriculum expectations with learners' cultural realities, a challenge reflected in the participants' efforts to contextualize lessons for Indigenous learners.

A similar study of Zinsser et al. (2022) found that teachers frequently experience stress and emotional fatigue when implementing interventions for learners with persistent academic difficulties. Similar findings were reported by Collie (2023), who explained that repeated instructional adjustments, remediation activities, and learner support responsibilities can contribute to teacher exhaustion and reduced professional confidence. These studies support participants' accounts of frustration and compassion fatigue when interventions resulted in limited improvement.

In contrast, there are some studies offer contrasting perspectives. Kirschner and Hendrick (2022) argued that instructional accommodations should remain limited to avoid reducing academic rigor and learner accountability. Similarly, Sweller (2023) suggested that excessive instructional modification may unintentionally lower expectations and reduce opportunities for cognitive development. Mayer (2022) further emphasized that effective teaching should focus on evidence-based instructional strategies rather than continuous adaptation driven by learner circumstances. Likewise, Coe et al. (2021) maintained that learner achievement is more strongly influenced by instructional quality than by adjustments in assessment and intervention practices. The findings indicate that supporting Indigenous learners involves substantial emotional and professional demands on teachers.

Community Influence in "Failure to Fail" Practices

The findings revealed that teachers' failure-to-fail practices were strongly influenced by community and institutional factors. Participants described experiencing pressure from school policies, administrative

expectations, parental demands, documentation requirements, and the realities of geographically isolated Indigenous communities.

In fact, Epstein (2022), who emphasized that family and community relationships significantly influence educational decision-making and learner outcomes. Teachers often adjust instructional and academic practices to maintain positive relationships with families and community stakeholders. Similarly, Ainscow (2021) found that school practices are shaped by broader social and community contexts, particularly when educators work with marginalized and disadvantaged populations.

The findings are also consistent with Leithwood et al. (2021), who reported that administrative expectations and school leadership practices influence teachers' classroom decisions and professional judgments.

Furthermore, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2022) found that collaborative relationships among schools, families, and communities can significantly affect teacher decision-making and professional confidence. Similarly, Bryk et al. (2021) emphasized that trust among educators, families, and communities influences how schools respond to learner difficulties. These studies support participants' accounts of balancing professional judgment with the need to preserve positive school-community relationships.

Hanushek (2021) argued that educational decisions should primarily focus on measurable academic outcomes rather than social or community pressures. Similarly, Chetty et al. (2022) emphasized that maintaining rigorous academic standards is essential for long-term learner achievement regardless of contextual challenges. Koretz (2023) further suggested that accountability systems should strengthen academic expectations rather than encourage leniency in promotion decisions. Likewise, Finn (2021) maintained that learner promotion should be based on demonstrated readiness rather than external influences from parents, communities, or institutions.

While previous studies have examined school-community partnerships and institutional influences on teaching practices, the present study extends the work of Datnow (2022) by showing how these influences operate within Indigenous communities characterized by geographical isolation, strong community relationships, and limited access to educational resources.

Negotiating Cultural Sensitivity in “Failure to Fail” Practices

The findings revealed that teachers experienced cultural conflict when making academic decisions involving Indigenous learners. Participants described difficulties in balancing curriculum expectations with Indigenous learners' cultural identity, language, family responsibilities, and socio-economic realities. Teachers also reported challenges arising from limited parental educational support, community expectations, and geographical barriers.

The findings support Paris and Alim (2021), who emphasized that culturally sustaining educational practices require teachers to recognize and respond to learners' cultural identities, languages, and community experiences. Their work suggests that effective teaching involves adapting educational practices to learners' cultural realities rather than relying solely on standardized expectations. Similarly, Castagno (2022) found that educators working with Indigenous learners frequently experience tension between institutional requirements and culturally responsive practices, particularly when learners' cultural experiences differ from dominant educational structures.

The findings are also consistent with McCarty and Lee (2021), who argued that Indigenous education requires educational approaches that respect cultural identity while supporting academic development. These studies support participants' experiences of adapting instructional and assessment practices to better respond to Indigenous learners' realities.

Another study from Khalifa et al. (2021) emphasized that culturally responsive school practices require educators to understand the social and cultural contexts affecting learner participation and achievement. Similarly, Rogoff (2022) explained that learning is deeply connected to cultural participation and community

practices, highlighting the importance of considering learners' cultural environments when making educational decisions. These findings support participants' efforts to understand Indigenous learners beyond academic performance alone.

However, some studies offer contrasting perspectives. Hirsch (2021) argued that schools should maintain a common academic curriculum and shared standards regardless of cultural differences among learners. Similarly, Young (2022) emphasized that academic achievement is best supported through consistent curricular expectations rather than differentiated cultural adaptations. Christodoulou (2023) further argued that excessive contextualization may reduce opportunities for learners to access broader academic knowledge. Likewise, Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2021) maintained that instructional decisions should prioritize evidence-based learning principles rather than cultural accommodations that may weaken academic expectations.

The findings indicate that teachers continuously negotiated cultural sensitivity when making decisions about Indigenous learners experiencing academic difficulties. While previous studies have explored culturally responsive teaching and Indigenous education, the present study extends the work of Brayboy et al. (2023) by demonstrating how cultural sensitivity directly influences failure-to-fail practices among teachers working in Indigenous communities. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural responsiveness influences teacher judgment in contexts where academic standards and cultural realities frequently intersect.

IMPLICATIONS

My findings of this study imply the need for a more culturally responsive, equitable, and supportive educational system for Indigenous learners with academic difficulties.

Greater Professional Discretion for Teachers in Academic Decision-Making

This study implies that teachers should be granted greater professional freedom in deciding whether to fail or promote Indigenous learners with academic difficulties.

Compassion Must Be Paired with Sustainable Academic Support

My findings imply that compassion toward struggling learners should not end in merely passing them despite unmet competencies. Stakeholders such as school administrators, parents, Indigenous leaders, local government units, and the Department of Education should work together in creating stronger support systems to help academically struggling learners improve rather than simply move to the next grade level.

Strengthening Culturally Responsive and Contextualized Education

My study implies the need for more culturally responsive educational practices that acknowledge Indigenous learners' realities, language differences, cultural identity, and socio-economic struggles. Since academic difficulties were often linked to poverty, child labor, family obligations, and language barriers, schools may reconsider rigid and standardized instructional approaches. Teachers may be provided with localized learning materials, contextualized assessments, and professional development opportunities focused on Indigenous education and culturally sensitive teaching.

Shared Responsibility for Learner Success Among Stakeholders

My findings suggest that responsibility for learner success should not rest solely on teachers. Teachers' lived experiences revealed emotional exhaustion, ethical dilemmas, and compassion fatigue due to repeated intervention and the burden of making difficult academic decisions independently.

Revisiting Educational Policies on Learner Failure and Promotion

My study implies that educational institutions may revisit policies surrounding learner retention and promotion, particularly among Indigenous learners experiencing academic difficulties. Policies emphasizing “no learner left behind” should be balanced with genuine academic readiness and meaningful intervention to ensure that promotion does not unintentionally conceal learning gaps.

Reconceptualizing the “Failure-to-Fail” Phenomenon in Education

My study implies that failure-to-fail practices should not be immediately interpreted as teacher negligence or grade inflation. Rather, they should be understood as complex decisions shaped by compassion, cultural sensitivity, systemic limitations, professional responsibility, and concern for learner welfare.

My study highlights the need to view Indigenous education through an equity-centered lens that values learner context, resilience, and meaningful opportunities for growth while maintaining educational integrity.

Future Directions

My findings of this study manifested in the modified paradigm open various opportunities for future research interests and undertakings concerning the phenomenon of “failure to fail” Indigenous learners with academic difficulties. One study that may be done after this is a multiple regression design using personal conflict, behavioral conflict, environmental conflict, and cultural conflict as determinant or predictive variables to determine failure-to-fail practices among Indigenous learners as the criterion variable. Another possibility is to conduct a moderating study using school support systems, culturally responsive teaching practices, or parental involvement as moderating variables in the relationship between teachers’ conflicts and failure-to-fail practices.

Challenges

Based on my aforementioned results, key research challenges are posed. First, in teaching and assessment practices, my findings revealed that teachers may experience difficulty in balancing academic integrity with compassion, particularly when Indigenous learners struggle due to poverty, child labor, language barriers, and limited educational support at home. Teachers may also encounter challenges in implementing culturally responsive instruction and differentiated assessment without affecting classroom pacing and the progress of learners who are academically performing well. Second, in school and institutional support, administrators may strengthen intervention systems, contextualized learning materials, and culturally responsive assessment frameworks to reduce teachers’ burden in remediation, documentation, and grading decisions involving struggling Indigenous learners. Third, in community and cultural engagement, schools may foster stronger collaboration with Indigenous parents, elders, and local leaders to encourage educational support at home, address misconceptions about learner promotion, and create shared accountability in supporting learners’ academic growth despite socio-economic hardships. Lastly, my findings of this study may be packaged into a teacher support guide or culturally responsive intervention framework in order to support educators, school leaders, and researchers engaged in Indigenous education and learner assessment practices.

As my study challenged the conventional understanding that learner promotion should solely rely on standardized academic performance, I, in turn, open the possibility of subjecting the modified paradigm of failure-to-fail practices among Indigenous learners with academic difficulties to further scholarly critique and validation in order to refine, strengthen, and transform it into a more responsive and culturally grounded educational framework.

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ATTACHMENTS

INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

Research Objective	Revised Open-Ended Question	Probing Questions (To Dig Deeper)
To explore the teachers' lived experiences of failure to fail indigenous learners facing academic difficulties.	Can you share a specific experience where you encountered a situation related to the 'failure to fail' phenomenon with your Indigenous learners?	Walk me through the specific moment you realized this student could not meet the standards.
		What was the physical or emotional 'atmosphere' in your classroom during that period?
		Can you describe a situation where you felt compelled to pass a learner despite academic challenges?
	How would you describe the internal tension or the 'mental tug-of-war' you navigated when deciding to pass a student who haven't met the criteria/standard?	In that moment of decision, what considerations influenced your decision?
		What did it feel like to record a grade that didn't match the student's actual performance? Please elaborate.
		What emotions do you experience when you decide not to fail the struggling learner?
		How do you think your decision-making affects your own sense of professional identity?
	What specific shifts in your	How do you distinguish between a lack of academic

	teaching or assessment practices occur when you realize an Indigenous learner is at risk of failing?	effort and a cultural or linguistic barrier?
		What does your 'support' look like when the standard tools aren't working?
	How do school policies, administration, or community expectations influence your grading decisions?	Can you recall a specific situation where these factors affected your decision?
		How would you describe the 'unspoken' messages or feedbacks you receive when you failed to fail an indigenous learner who has academic difficulties?
		What support systems would help you feel more confident in making reasonable academic decisions?
	How does the cultural background and lived reality of your Indigenous learners facing academic difficulties reshape the way you define 'academic success'?	How do you reconcile or improve the school's curriculum with the learners' cultural identity?
		How do you settle your professional standards with cultural sensitivity in these situations?
		Looking back, how has this experience influenced you as a teacher?

Thematic Analysis Table

OBJECTIVES	THEMES	SUB THEMES	CORE IDEAS	RESPONSES
To explore the teachers' lived experiences of failure to fail indigenous learners facing academic difficulties	Professional and Personal Identity in "Failure to Fail" Practices	Conflict Between Compassion and Academic Standards	Teachers experience internal conflict between maintaining academic standards and responding compassionately to Indigenous learners' difficult circumstances.	"Bisan wala gyud nila na-meet ang criteria, usahay mapasar nalang gyud nako sila." (P1); "Teaching dili lang diay puro grading ug performance—apil sad diay ang pagsabot sa ilang kinabuhi." (P7)
		Guilt and Moral Hesitation in Passing Learners	Passing learners despite insufficient mastery creates guilt, discomfort, and concerns about professional integrity.	"Murag ma-compromise akong integrity as a teacher." (P11); "Naa sad gyud guilt nga basin sayop akong gihimo." (P3)
		Institutional and External Pressures in Decision-Making	Teachers' grading decisions are influenced by documentation requirements, school expectations, and promotion	"Murag mas dali nalang usahay nga ipasar nalang sila." (P5); "Naa man gud pressure minsan sa school nga kinahanglan taas ang passing rate." (P8)

			pressures.	
		Emotional Impact of Poverty, Child Labor, and Learners' Difficult Life Circumstances	Teachers empathize with Indigenous learners whose poor performance is linked to poverty and family responsibilities.	"Mutrabaho pa, mutabang sa ginikanan, or magbantay sa manghod." (P4); "Dili man equal ilang opportunities compared sa uban learners." (P12)
	Emotional Struggles in Supporting Indigenous Learners	Fear of Community Judgment and Professional Conflict	Fear of parental complaints and community criticism influences grading decisions.	"Dili pud ko ganahan ug conflict." (P5); "Naa gyud expectation nga dapat sabton nato sila." (P6)
		Conflict in Simplifying Learning Tasks Without Compromising Classroom Progress	Teachers simplify lessons and tasks to support Indigenous learners but worry about affecting classroom pacing.	"Akong gina-simplify ang lessons ug activities." (P1); "Makahunahuna ka pud kung ma-left behind ba ang uban students." (P7)
		Difficulty in Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices	Teachers struggle to contextualize lessons using Indigenous culture while meeting curriculum standards.	"Dili tanan instructional materials responsive sa ilang culture." (P3); "Lisod i-balance sa curriculum expectations." (P6)
		Burden of Remediation and Targeted Intervention	Continuous remedial instruction requires additional time, effort, and emotional investment.	"Kapoy pud siya kay usahay hinay gihapon ang progress." (P2); "Murag balik-balik nalang ang process." (P1)
		Conflict in Shifting from Standardized to Formative Assessment	Teachers increasingly value learner effort and progress but question whether these reflect mastery.	"Dili makita sa grades ang ilang paningkamot." (P3); "Dili lang kay puro score ang basihan." (P6)
		Tension in Using Flexible and Alternative Assessment Practices	Alternative assessments promote inclusivity but raise concerns about fairness and	"Mag-drawing, role-playing, or hands-on activities." (P3); "Same ba gyud ni siya ug level sa standard assessment." (P3)

			comparability.	
		Ethical Conflict in Grading	Teachers consider effort and perseverance but worry about future learning gaps.	“Ma-influence gyud sa ilang effort ug participation.” (P6); “Persistent gihapon bisag lisod.” (P9)
		Struggle in Understanding Learners’ Context and Barriers	Teachers seek deeper understanding of learners’ backgrounds before making academic judgments.	“Makigstorya gyud ko sa parents or community members.” (P12); “Multiple approaches gyud.” (P10)
	Community Influence in “Failure to Fail” Practices	Emotional Strain and Compassion Fatigue in Support Practices	Repeated interventions sometimes result in exhaustion and frustration.	“Mawad-an pud ko ug gana.” (P5); “Lisod gyud i-balance ang fairness ug support.” (P6)
		Pressure to Conform to School Promotion Policies and Administrative Expectations	School systems encourage promotion and discourage learner retention.	“Ginapush gyud nga i-promote ang learners.” (P6); “No learner left behind.” (P3)
		Conflict Between Academic Integrity and Institutional Accountability	Teachers fear learner failure may be viewed as a reflection of ineffective teaching.	“Reflection sa imong teaching.” (P7); “Kinahanglan gyud nimo ma-defend tanan decisions.” (P10)
		Burden of Additional Workload	Extensive paperwork discourages teachers from failing learners.	“Daghan kaayo ug paperwork.” (P5); “Maka-overwhelm usahay.” (P1)
		Challenges of Geographical Distance	Remote locations make interventions and monitoring difficult.	“Lisod ang byahe.” (P8); “Financial ug family challenges makaapekto sa attendance.” (P7)
		Fear of Community Conflict and Parental Pressure	Parents and communities influence promotion decisions.	“Mangayo ug favor para sa grades.” (P5); “Mahadlok nga basin ma-discourage ilang anak.” (P12)
		Subtle Expectations to Prioritize Retention Over	Teachers perceive silent expectations to prioritize	“Unspoken expectation nga kinahanglan considerate ta.” (P6); “Quiet pressure kung prepared ba gyud siya.” (P11)

		Academic Readiness	promotion over readiness.	
		Need for Stronger Support Systems in Academic Decision-Making	Teachers seek collaborative and institutional support for difficult grading decisions.	“Kinahanglan nako ug support system.” (P1); “Collaborative decision-making.” (P3)
	Negotiating Cultural Sensitivity in “Failure to Fail” Practices	Conflict Between Educational Expectations and Learners’ Survival Realities	Teachers recognize that poverty and survival needs affect academic performance.	“Mag-eskwela ba siya or mutabang sa pamilya.” (P2); “Success na gani nang musulod gihapon sila sa school.” (P7)
		Difficulty in Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching	Teachers struggle to balance curriculum standards with Indigenous identity and language.	“Materials nga responsive sa ilang culture.” (P1); “Lisod gihapon i-balance sa curriculum requirements.” (P11)
		Parental Ignorance and Limited Educational Support in Indigenous Communities	Limited parental literacy and educational support contribute to learner difficulties.	“Dili pud kabalo mubasa ug musulat.” (P4); “Limited gyud usahay ang support sa balay.” (P3)
		Fear of Community Resistance	Fear of damaging relationships with Indigenous families influences grading decisions.	“Dili ko ganahan nga magka-grudge ang parents.” (P5); “Expectation gikan sa community.” (P11)
		Reluctance to Fail Learners Due to Geographical Hardship	Distance and limited accessibility discourage intensive remediation and retention.	“Layo kaayo ilang lugar.” (P8); “Teacher lang pirmi ang magdala sa tanan burden.” (P3)