

The Lived Experiences of School Heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools of San Agustin and Lianga Districts

Juanito T. Eralino Jr.^{1*} and Adrian C. Nuñez^{1,2}

¹ Andres Soriano Colleges of Bislig, Mangagoy, Bislig City, Surigao del Sur

*juanito.eralino001@deped.gov.ph, ²anunez.0521@gmail.com

Date Submitted:

August 14, 2026

Date Accepted:

September 12, 2026

Date Published:

October 17, 2026

DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.23435268

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of school heads leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools in San Agustin and Lianga Districts, Division of Surigao del Sur, during School Year 2025–2026. Seven school heads were purposively selected and interviewed using a semi-structured guide, with data analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings showed that their experiences were shaped by cultural immersion and adaptive leadership, community trust and shared leadership, remote and resource-limited conditions, and fulfillment from learner and community transformation. To address challenges, school heads relied on resourcefulness, stakeholder partnerships, consultation with Indigenous leaders, flexible and participatory governance, and continuous professional learning. The participants also emphasized the

need for community-centered governance, culturally responsive and inclusive instructional leadership, sustained Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) training and mentoring, adequate resources, and stronger inter-agency support. The study concludes that effective leadership in IP Community Schools is adaptive, relational, culturally responsive, and grounded in sustained collaboration with Indigenous communities and stakeholders.

Keywords: *Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd), school heads, IP Community Schools, culturally responsive leadership, lived experiences, phenomenology*

INTRODUCTION

School leaders in Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities play a crucial role in creating educational environments that are responsive to the unique cultural backgrounds and needs of indigenous learners. In this regard, school leaders must be culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of indigenous students, which involves understanding and integrating indigenous cultural values and practices into the school environment (Martin et al., 2025).

Moreover, effective leadership in indigenous communities extends beyond school management and requires meaningful engagement with the wider community. Specifically, building strong partnerships with community leaders and elders helps create culturally sustaining schools and enhances the overall educational experiences of indigenous students (Angelle et al., 2026).

Despite the important role of school leaders in advancing indigenous education, they continue to face numerous challenges in balancing cultural preservation with the demands of modern educational systems. For instance, in Malaysia, Orang Asli schools encounter difficulties related to culturally specific leadership needs,

inadequate formal training, and various socio-economic barriers that affect educational delivery and school management (Salleh & Razak, 2024).

Furthermore, indigenous education systems around the world continue to experience systemic inequities, including limited educational access and insufficient integration of indigenous knowledge into formal schooling. These conditions contribute to high dropout rates and low literacy levels among indigenous learners (Gonzales, 2025).

Similarly, in Zimbabwe, poverty remains a persistent challenge in rural indigenous communities, further complicating educational development and highlighting the limitations of relying solely on scientific interventions to address community needs (Muguti, 2021).

Likewise, in Guatemala, indigenous communities continue to face significant educational disadvantages, with nearly 48% of the indigenous population reported as illiterate, placing additional challenges on school leaders in resource-limited schools (Delprato et al., 2022).

In the same manner, educational disparities remain evident in Paraguay, where indigenous populations average only three years of schooling compared to eight years among non-indigenous groups, limiting the pool of qualified educational leaders within indigenous communities (Delprato et al., 2022).

Similarly, in Mexico, indigenous adults average only three years of schooling, and up to 83% of students demonstrate unsatisfactory performance in core competencies, creating significant leadership challenges for school heads in remote indigenous communities (Delgado, 2025).

In the Philippine context, Indigenous Peoples (IPs) comprise about 10% to 20% of the population but remain among the most disadvantaged sectors. As a result, school heads in IP communities frequently face challenges related to inadequate funding, limited localized learning materials, and insufficient teacher development support (Perez-Brito et al., 2023).

Moreover, school leaders in indigenous communities across the country continue to encounter difficulties in delivering quality education. In Talaingod, Davao del Norte, school leaders face logistical and environmental challenges, including difficult terrain, limited infrastructure, and physically demanding travel conditions. These circumstances require resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness in managing schools located in remote indigenous communities (Lugatiman & Bauyt, 2023).

Similarly, cultural and educational disparities continue to affect indigenous education in Sultan Kudarat. Among the Blaan tribe, educational practices often struggle to align with formal schooling systems due to the shortage of qualified indigenous teachers and the limited integration of indigenous languages and knowledge into instructional materials (Dalengga & Naanep, 2025).

Despite existing studies on indigenous education and school leadership, limited research has explored the lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools within the local contexts of San Agustin and Lianga Districts. Therefore, this study explored and sought to understand the experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights of school heads in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools during the School Year 2025–2026. The findings provide context-based insights for strengthening indigenous education and educational leadership in IP communities.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools of San Agustin and Lianga Districts during the School Year 2025–2026. Specifically, the study examined the experiences of school heads in leading indigenous education, the challenges they encountered in managing IP Community Schools, the coping mechanisms they employed in addressing these challenges, and the insights and recommendations they derived from their leadership experiences. Furthermore, the findings of the study contributed to a deeper understanding of indigenous educational leadership and may serve as a basis for strengthening leadership support and educational programs in Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities.

Research Questions

This study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of school heads in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools of San Agustin and Lianga Districts?
2. How do school heads cope with the challenges they encounter in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools of San Agustin and Lianga Districts?

Theoretical Lens

This study will be anchored on Culturally Responsive Leadership Theory, as advanced by Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016). The theory posits that effective school leaders recognize, value, and integrate the cultural identities, experiences, and knowledge systems of diverse communities into school leadership practices.

Furthermore, leaders must develop a deep understanding and appreciation of the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students and staff. To achieve this, they must engage in continuous learning and reflection to effectively support, engage with, and respond to the needs of diverse communities (Özkan & Çakır, 2024). Moreover, Culturally Responsive Leadership Theory emphasizes the promotion of equity and social justice within educational settings. In particular, school leaders are expected to address disparities in educational outcomes and implement policies and practices that foster fairness, inclusion, and equal opportunities for all learners (Özkan & Çakır, 2024).

In the context of Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools, the theory will provide a lens for understanding how school heads lead culturally diverse educational environments, engage with indigenous communities, address leadership challenges, and promote educational practices that are responsive to the needs, values, and aspirations of Indigenous Peoples.

Importance of the Study

The findings of this study may provide valuable insights to the Department of Education officials, school heads, teachers, Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities, and future researchers regarding the lived experiences of school heads in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools.

Specifically, the study may help Department of Education officials better understand the realities, challenges, and support needs of school heads assigned to IP Community Schools. The findings may serve as a basis for developing policies, programs, and interventions that will strengthen indigenous education and school leadership.

Likewise, the study may benefit school heads by providing insights into effective leadership practices, coping strategies, and approaches for managing the unique demands of Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools. It may also serve as a source of guidance for current and aspiring school leaders assigned to indigenous communities.

Furthermore, teachers and Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities may benefit from the study through a better understanding of the leadership practices that promote culturally responsive, inclusive, and community-centered education. The findings may contribute to stronger collaboration among schools, families, community leaders, and other stakeholders in supporting indigenous learners.

Finally, the study may contribute to the existing body of knowledge on indigenous educational leadership and may serve as a reference for future researchers who wish to conduct related studies on Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd), culturally responsive leadership, and school management in indigenous communities.

Delimitation and Limitation of the Study

This phenomenological study explored and sought to understand the lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools within San Agustin and Lianga Districts, Division of Surigao del Sur, during the School Year 2025–2026. The participants were school heads who had direct experience in leading

and managing IP Community Schools within the identified districts. Specifically, the study focused on their leadership experiences, the challenges they encountered, the coping mechanisms they employed, and the insights and recommendations they derived from their experiences. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of their experiences in indigenous educational leadership.

The study was delimited to selected school heads of Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools in San Agustin and Lianga Districts who met the established inclusion criteria. It focused specifically on their experiences as educational leaders within IP communities and did not include the perspectives of teachers, learners, parents, Indigenous elders, community leaders, district supervisors, or other educational stakeholders. As a phenomenological inquiry, the study sought to understand the meanings and essence of the participants' lived experiences rather than measure variables, determine statistical relationships, or establish causal relationships.

The study was limited by the number of participating school heads and by the context-specific nature of their experiences within the selected IP Community Schools of San Agustin and Lianga Districts during the School Year 2025–2026. Consequently, the findings may not represent the experiences of all school heads in other districts, divisions, Indigenous communities, or educational settings. Therefore, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization but may provide meaningful and transferable insights into indigenous educational leadership in contexts with characteristics similar to those of the study.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined conceptually and operationally as used in this study:

Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools. Conceptually, Indigenous Peoples Community Schools are educational institutions that primarily serve indigenous learners and communities while recognizing and promoting indigenous culture, traditions, values, and knowledge systems. Operationally, this term refers to the public elementary schools within San Agustin and Lianga Districts that cater predominantly to Indigenous Peoples learners and implement programs aligned with the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) framework.

Indigenous Education. Conceptually, indigenous education refers to educational practices that recognize, preserve, and promote the culture, language, traditions, and knowledge systems of indigenous communities. Operationally, this term refers to the educational programs, policies, and practices implemented by school heads and teachers to support the learning needs of Indigenous Peoples learners in IP Community Schools.

Lived Experiences. Conceptually, lived experiences refer to the personal perceptions, interpretations, and meanings individuals attach to events and situations they encounter in their lives. Operationally, this term refers to the experiences of school heads in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools, including their successes, challenges, coping mechanisms, and reflections.

School Heads. Conceptually, school heads are educational leaders responsible for the administration, supervision, and overall management of schools. Operationally, this term refers to the principals, head teachers, teachers-in-charge, or designated school administrators who participated in the study and had direct experience leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools in San Agustin and Lianga Districts during the School Year 2025–2026.

Literature Review

This chapter presents the review of related literature and studies that will provide the theoretical and empirical foundations of the study. Specifically, it will include discussions on Indigenous Peoples (IP) education, school leadership in indigenous communities, the lived experiences of school heads, challenges encountered in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools, coping mechanisms employed by school heads, and insights gained from their leadership experiences. Furthermore, this chapter will examine relevant local and international literature and studies related to indigenous education and educational leadership. The reviewed literature and studies will help establish the research gap and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, thereby justifying the need to explore the lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools of San Agustin and Lianga Districts.

Indigenous School Heads

Indigenous school heads play a significant role in integrating Indigenous cultural values and knowledge into the school curriculum. In particular, they help design and implement society-responsive educational programs that reflect the cultural identity, traditions, and lived realities of Indigenous learners (Da'as, 2024).

Furthermore, indigenous school heads serve as cultural advocates within their schools by ensuring that the educational environment respects, preserves, and promotes Indigenous languages, traditions, and knowledge systems. As a result, they contribute to strengthening cultural identity, pride, and a sense of belonging among Indigenous students (Martin et al., 2025).

Indigenous school heads play a vital role in promoting culturally responsive leadership by integrating indigenous knowledge, traditions, and values into school practices. For instance, Sherpa school leaders in Nepal incorporate indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values into their leadership approaches, fostering inclusiveness, equity, accountability, and transparency within their schools. Their leadership practices reflect the cultural beliefs and traditions of the communities they serve (Sherpa et al., 2024).

Similarly, in New Mexico, leadership preparation programs for aspiring school leaders emphasize the importance of honoring traditional Indigenous values. These programs provide culturally relevant experiences and mentoring opportunities that help future school leaders effectively serve indigenous communities and promote culturally responsive education (Secatero et al., 2022).

The importance of indigenous school leadership is also evident in international contexts. For example, the experiences of Mi'kmaw women principals in Nova Scotia, Canada demonstrate how integrating indigenous cultural backgrounds into school administration contributes to more inclusive and supportive learning environments. Their leadership practices emphasize cultural responsiveness, community engagement, and the promotion of indigenous identity, resulting in stronger educational environments within indigenous-led schools (Nantin & Morales, 2025).

In the Philippine setting, the positive impact of indigenous educational leadership is reflected in schools implementing the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed) Program. Specifically, schools with effective IPed implementation have reported learner retention rates exceeding 100% due to the re-enrollment of returning learners, while dropout rates have declined to less than 0.2%. These outcomes highlight the important role of school heads in fostering inclusive, culturally responsive, and learner-centered educational environments that encourage the continued participation of Indigenous Peoples learners in formal education (Gulam & Hordista, 2024).

Challenges of Indigenous School Heads

Despite their important role in advancing indigenous education, indigenous school leaders continue to face numerous challenges in leading schools within systems that are often shaped by Eurocentric policies and educational frameworks. Consequently, they must navigate the complexities of implementing indigenous education programs while promoting culturally relevant leadership practices that reflect the needs and identities of Indigenous communities (Nantin & Morales, 2025).

Furthermore, the limited representation of Indigenous Peoples in leadership positions is exacerbated by systemic barriers such as inadequate funding, the lack of culturally relevant curricula, and insufficient support mechanisms for indigenous educators. As a result, these challenges hinder efforts to provide equitable and culturally responsive education for indigenous learners (Oliveira & Pino, 2025).

The challenges faced by indigenous school leaders are likewise evident in various international contexts. For instance, in Brazil, indigenous schools encounter difficulties in integrating cultural and technical training, highlighting the need for greater autonomy and increased state investment to enable indigenous communities to effectively manage their own educational institutions (Pozzer & Cecchetti, 2020).

Moreover, systemic and structural barriers continue to affect indigenous education worldwide. In Botswana, the lingering effects of colonialism create tensions between traditional knowledge systems and

Eurocentric educational perspectives. As a result, centralized educational policies often fail to address local realities and the unique needs of indigenous communities (Pheko & Mitchell, 2023).

Similarly, indigenous education systems in countries such as Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and Australia continue to face racial-colonial challenges, including institutional barriers, deficit-oriented perspectives, and curriculum issues that contribute to the marginalization and cultural assimilation of indigenous learners (Meston et al., 2024).

In the Philippine context, indigenous school leaders likewise face significant geographic and logistical challenges. For instance, a study conducted in Talaingod, Davao del Norte revealed that school leaders assigned to Indigenous Peoples (IP) Integrated Schools experienced difficulties related to physical accessibility, hazardous travel conditions, and the challenges of establishing an effective leadership presence in remote and geographically isolated communities. These realities underscore the resilience, adaptability, and commitment required of school heads serving indigenous learners in far-flung areas (Lugatiman & Bauyot, 2024).

Coping Mechanisms in Leading Indigenous Peoples (IP)

To cope with the demands of leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools, school leaders have developed various strategies that promote professional development and leadership resilience. In particular, they foster positive workplace relationships and encourage mutual support among educators in overcoming challenges encountered in remote indigenous communities (Lugatiman & Bauyot, 2023).

Ultimately, empowering indigenous communities through education and advocacy remains essential in promoting sustainable development and social equity. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the integration of indigenous knowledge systems with scientific approaches is viewed as an effective strategy for addressing poverty and improving community well-being (Muguti, 2021). Similarly, fostering diversity and supporting indigenous leaders within educational and government institutions contribute to the creation of more inclusive and equitable environments. Such efforts help strengthen indigenous representation, promote cultural responsiveness, and support the advancement of indigenous communities ("Fostering Diversity: Exploring the Experiences...", 2024).

Similarly, school leaders worldwide continue to experience high levels of work-related stress. In Kazakhstan, many school leaders reported intense occupational stress and relied on peer-support networks to maintain their well-being and avoid burnout, highlighting the importance of resilience and professional support in educational leadership (Durrani & Makhmetova, 2024).

Moreover, efforts to integrate indigenous culture into educational practices continue to demonstrate positive outcomes. In the Kalinga community, teachers are encouraged to incorporate cultural elements into technology-based instructional materials to improve student engagement and strengthen cultural relevance in instruction (Hortelano & Roleda, 2024).

Furthermore, collaborative community involvement remains essential in supporting indigenous education. In Talaingod, guidance coordinators emphasize the active participation of parents, tribal leaders, and community members in educational and career guidance programs. This collaborative approach helps empower indigenous learners and cultivate leadership and community involvement among students ("Career Guidance Program Implementation in...", 2025).

School leaders in Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities in Mindanao rely on strong peer collaboration and mutual support to cope with the demands of leading schools in remote areas. In Talaingod, Davao del Norte, fostering teamwork and a positive work environment helps school leaders manage hazardous travel conditions and sustain their leadership responsibilities (Lugatiman & Bauyot, 2023).

Organization of the Study

Discussed in Chapter 1 will be the introduction of the study, which will include the background of the study, purpose of the study, significance of the study, scope and delimitation, and definition of terms. This chapter will likewise present the theoretical lens, statement of the problem, and the review of related literature and studies that will provide theoretical and empirical foundations for understanding indigenous educational leadership, the

lived experiences of school heads, the challenges they encounter, and the coping mechanisms they employ in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools.

Presented in Chapter 2 will be the research methodology of the study. This chapter will describe the research design, research participants, research locale, data source, data collection procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness of the study, role of the researcher, and ethical considerations that will be observed throughout the conduct of the research.

Highlighted in Chapter 3 will be the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of the data gathered from the participants. This chapter will present the themes that will emerge from the lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools, including the challenges they encounter, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the insights they derive from their leadership experiences.

Presented in Chapter 4 will be the summary of findings, conclusions drawn from the results of the study, and recommendations for educational practice and future research related to indigenous educational leadership and the lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools.

METHODS

Research Design

I used a qualitative research design in this study because it allowed me to explore and understand the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences within a particular social and educational context. Qualitative research enables the collection of rich, detailed, and in-depth information concerning participants' experiences, perceptions, and perspectives. Through this approach, I gained a comprehensive understanding of the realities encountered by school heads in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools.

Furthermore, qualitative research aims to examine phenomena in a holistic and contextual manner by emphasizing natural settings and the perspectives of participants. Through this approach, researchers are able to develop a deeper understanding of the social world and the meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Fadli, 2021).

Specifically, I employed a phenomenological inquiry to explore the lived experiences of the participants. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to explore, describe, and understand the experiences of individuals who have directly encountered a particular phenomenon. Moreover, the phenomenological approach focuses on understanding phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them. It emphasizes the subjective nature of human experience by examining how individuals perceive, interpret, and construct meaning from particular situations in their lives (Lester, 1998).

This approach was appropriate for the study because it enabled me to examine the leadership experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights of school heads in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools of San Agustin District. Through phenomenological inquiry, I captured the meanings that participants attached to their experiences and developed a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of indigenous educational leadership.

Research Participants

The participants of this study were seven (7) school heads who had direct experience in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools in San Agustin District, Division of Surigao del Sur. They possessed firsthand knowledge of the cultural, instructional, administrative, and community-related realities of indigenous education. Their experiences provided rich and meaningful information that helped me understand the phenomenon under investigation.

I employed purposive sampling in selecting the participants. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich participants who possess firsthand knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon being studied. I considered this technique

appropriate because I intentionally selected participants based on their experience in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools and their ability to provide relevant and detailed accounts of their lived experiences.

Consistent with the requirements of phenomenological inquiry, I selected the participants based on their direct exposure to indigenous educational leadership. To qualify for inclusion, they had to be currently assigned to or have previously served as school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools within San Agustin District and be willing to share their experiences voluntarily. A total of seven (7) school heads participated in the study, and their responses were used in the analysis.

Data Source

The primary source of data for this study was the responses of the seven (7) selected school heads from Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools within San Agustin District during the School Year 2025–2026. I gathered the data using a semi-structured research instrument that allowed the participants to provide detailed accounts of their lived experiences in leading IP Community Schools.

To obtain rich and relevant information, I used a semi-structured interview guide derived from related studies and literature on indigenous educational leadership and Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd). The guide consisted of open-ended questions that explored the participants' lived experiences, the challenges they encountered, the coping strategies they employed, and the insights and recommendations they derived from leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools. The open-ended format allowed me to encourage the participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide context-specific explanations.

Prior to data collection, I submitted the adapted interview guide for validation by experts in educational research and qualitative inquiry to ensure the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the questions. I incorporated the recommendations and necessary revisions provided by the validators before using the instrument in the actual data-gathering process.

With the participants' informed consent, I audio-recorded the interviews to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information gathered. I subsequently transcribed the recorded responses verbatim and used the transcripts as the primary data for coding, analysis, and the development of essential themes and core ideas.

Data Collection

Prior to the conduct of the study, I secured approval from the appropriate authorities. I submitted a letter requesting permission to conduct the study to the Schools Division Superintendent of the Division of Surigao del Sur through the proper channels. Upon approval, I coordinated with the concerned district supervisor and school heads to facilitate the conduct of the study.

After obtaining the necessary permissions, I identified the participants based on the established inclusion criteria. I informed the selected school heads from Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools about the purpose, nature, and significance of the study. I also provided them with an informed consent form detailing their rights as participants, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Subsequently, I scheduled and conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the participants at mutually convenient times and venues. I used the adapted semi-structured interview guide to explore their lived experiences, the challenges they encountered, the coping mechanisms they employed, and the insights and recommendations they derived from leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools. I also used probing questions whenever necessary to obtain deeper and more comprehensive responses.

With the participants' permission, I audio-recorded the interviews to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data gathered. I also took field notes to document relevant observations and contextual information that supported the interpretation of the data. After each interview, I transcribed the recorded responses verbatim for subsequent analysis.

Following transcription, I conducted member checking by providing the participants with copies or summaries of their responses for verification and confirmation. This process helped ensure the accuracy and

credibility of the information gathered. Once validated, I organized and coded the interview transcripts and prepared them for thematic analysis. I treated all collected data with strict confidentiality and stored them securely throughout the conduct of the study.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data gathered from the participants using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that focuses on identifying, analyzing, organizing, and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data. I considered this method appropriate because it allowed me to examine comprehensively the lived experiences of school heads in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools and to identify common patterns and meaningful insights emerging from their narratives.

Following the completion of the interviews, I transcribed all audio-recorded responses verbatim to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. I carefully read and reviewed the transcripts several times to become familiar with the participants' accounts and to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences.

Subsequently, I conducted the coding process by identifying meaningful statements, phrases, and segments of data relevant to the research questions. I grouped similar codes into categories, from which broader essential themes and core ideas emerged. These themes represented the participants' lived experiences, the challenges and coping mechanisms associated with indigenous educational leadership, and the insights and recommendations they developed from their experiences.

Thereafter, I reviewed and refined the identified themes to ensure that they accurately reflected the participants' experiences. I used supporting excerpts from the interview transcripts to substantiate the themes and provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. I then interpreted the themes in relation to the theoretical lens, related literature, and the objectives of the study.

Finally, I presented the analyzed data narratively, highlighting the essence of the lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools of San Agustin District. The findings provided a deeper understanding of culturally responsive leadership, community engagement, resource and operational challenges, coping mechanisms, and the forms of support considered important in strengthening indigenous education.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor and integrity of the study, the researcher will observe the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria will guide the researcher in maintaining the accuracy, consistency, and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings.

Credibility. Credibility refers to the confidence placed in the truth and accuracy of the research findings. One of the commonly used procedures for establishing credibility is member checking, which allows participants to verify whether the information and interpretations generated by the researcher accurately represent their experiences (Mbatha et al., 2020). To establish credibility in this study, I conducted member checking after transcribing the participants' responses. I provided the participants with copies or summaries of their interview responses and allowed them to review, clarify, correct, or confirm the information they had shared. For example, when a participant described difficulties in balancing DepEd requirements with the customs and traditions of the Indigenous community, I ensured that the interpretation I assigned to the statement reflected the participant's intended meaning before incorporating it into the coding and thematic analysis. I also compared the participants' statements across the interview questions and supporting field notes to ensure that the emerging themes were consistent with their actual narratives.

Transferability. Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a qualitative study may be meaningful or applicable in other settings with characteristics similar to those of the research context. Providing rich and detailed descriptions of the participants, research setting, and circumstances surrounding the phenomenon enables readers to determine whether the findings may be relevant to their own contexts (Asmawi et al., 2025).

To facilitate transferability, I provided sufficient contextual information about the participants and the setting in which the study was conducted. I described the participants as school heads who had direct experience in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools and presented relevant information about their leadership experiences and the realities of working within Indigenous communities. For example, I described contextual conditions such as limited school resources, geographical challenges, language barriers, cultural differences, community participation, and the need to integrate Indigenous knowledge and practices into school programs. These descriptions allowed readers to compare the conditions of the study with those of other IP Community Schools or similar educational settings and determine the possible relevance of the findings

Dependability. Dependability pertains to the consistency, logical progression, and traceability of the research process. Maintaining an audit trail is an important procedure for establishing dependability because it provides documentation of the decisions, activities, and processes undertaken throughout the conduct of the study (Ahmed, 2023). To establish dependability, I maintained records of the major procedures and decisions made during the research process. These included the validated interview guide, letters of permission, informed consent documents, interview schedules, field notes, interview transcripts, coding sheets, thematic matrices, and revisions made during the development of the essential themes and core ideas. For example, I documented how significant statements from the participants were initially coded, how similar codes were clustered into core ideas, and how these core ideas were subsequently grouped under broader essential themes. This process provided a clear trail showing how I moved from the participants' original responses to the final thematic presentation of the findings.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are grounded in the participants' actual experiences rather than in the researcher's personal assumptions, preferences, or biases. Reflexive documentation and an audit trail help strengthen confirmability by making the analytical process transparent and allowing the researcher to demonstrate how interpretations were derived from the data (Ahmed, 2023). To establish confirmability, I maintained reflexive notes throughout the process of data collection and analysis and continuously examined my own assumptions regarding Indigenous educational leadership. I ensured that the essential themes and core ideas were supported by actual statements from the participants rather than by my personal expectations about the phenomenon. For example, when I identified themes related to culturally responsive leadership, community collaboration, resource limitations, and adaptive coping, I traced each theme back to specific coded statements and supporting excerpts from the interview transcripts. I also retained the coding records and thematic matrices so that the connection between the participants' narratives, the formulated meanings, the core ideas, and the final essential themes remained transparent and verifiable.

Role of the Researcher

In this phenomenological study, the researcher will serve as the primary research instrument responsible for the collection, interpretation, and analysis of the data gathered from the participants. The researcher will conduct the semi-structured interviews, facilitate the discussion using the validated interview guide, and encourage the participants to freely share their lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights gained in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools.

Moreover, the researcher will establish rapport with the participants to promote openness, trust, and honest communication throughout the interview process. The researcher will likewise ensure that ethical standards are strictly observed by securing informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, respecting participants' rights, and safeguarding all information gathered in accordance with the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

Furthermore, the researcher will transcribe, organize, code, and analyze the interview data through thematic analysis. Throughout the research process, the researcher will remain objective and reflexive by recognizing and managing personal assumptions and biases to ensure that the findings accurately reflect the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants regarding indigenous educational leadership.

Ethical Considerations

This study will observe established ethical principles in conducting research involving human participants to ensure the protection of their rights, dignity, safety, and well-being throughout the research process.

Social Value. The study will be conducted to contribute meaningful knowledge regarding the lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights that may help strengthen indigenous educational leadership and support programs for IP communities ("Research Ethics," 2022).

Informed Consent. Prior to participation, all participants will be fully informed of the purpose, procedures, benefits, and nature of the study. Their voluntary participation will be secured through a signed informed consent form, and they will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty (Rajasegaram & Gani, 2025).

Vulnerability of Research Participants. The researcher will ensure that participants are treated with respect and protected from any form of coercion, discrimination, or harm. Special consideration will be given to the cultural context and sensitivities of Indigenous Peoples communities (Rajasegaram & Gani, 2025).

Risks, Benefits, and Safety. The study will involve minimal risk to participants. Necessary measures will be taken to ensure that participation does not cause physical, emotional, psychological, or social harm, while maximizing the potential benefits of the research ("Research Ethics," 2022).

Privacy and Confidentiality of Information. The privacy of participants will be protected by maintaining the confidentiality of all information gathered. Codes or pseudonyms will be used in place of participants' names, and all data will be securely stored and used solely for research purposes (Cristhian, 2024).

Justice. The selection of participants will be based on the established inclusion criteria and not on personal preferences or biases. All participants will be treated fairly and equitably throughout the conduct of the study ("Research Ethics," 2022).

Transparency. The researcher will clearly communicate the objectives, procedures, and intended use of the study's findings to the participants. Honest and transparent communication will be maintained throughout the research process (Kaewkungwal & Adams, 2019).

Qualification of the Researcher. The researcher will ensure that the study is conducted in accordance with accepted research standards and ethical guidelines and will seek appropriate guidance from research advisers and experts when necessary (Tajir, 2018).

Adequacy of Facilities. Appropriate facilities, resources, and equipment will be utilized to ensure the safe, organized, and ethical conduct of the study, including the secure storage of research data (Tajir, 2018).

Community Involvement. Community involvement emphasizes the importance of engaging Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities in ways that respect their cultural values, traditions, practices, and systems of knowledge. Meaningful engagement with the community helps ensure that research conducted in Indigenous settings remains culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and beneficial to the people involved (Tajir, 2018). To observe this principle in the study, I respected established community protocols and recognized the role of Indigenous elders, leaders, and other community stakeholders in the educational setting. I ensured that the questions and interpretations used in the study did not disregard or misrepresent Indigenous beliefs and practices. For example, when participants discussed the importance of consulting tribal elders in understanding local customs, traditions, and culturally appropriate school practices, I treated these accounts as important contextual information in interpreting their leadership experiences. I also presented the participants' perspectives in a manner that acknowledged the value of community participation, cultural knowledge, and collaboration in strengthening Indigenous Peoples Education within the IP Community Schools of San Agustin District.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the results of the study based on the responses provided by the participants and organized according to the established research questions. The participants' accounts were examined, coded, clustered into core ideas, and synthesized into essential themes that represent their shared and distinctive experiences in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools.

Profile of the Participants

Table 1 presents the available demographic and professional information of the seven (7) school heads who participated in the study. To protect their identities, each participant was assigned a code from IDI1 to IDI7. Where a participant did not provide a particular demographic detail in the research instrument, the entry is indicated as “Not indicated.”

Table 1. *Profile of the Participants*

Participant No.	Assigned Code	Age	School Head Experience	District
01	IDI1	35	2 years	Liangá
02	IDI2	36	6 years	Liangá
03	IDI3	Not indicated	Not indicated	Not indicated
04	IDI4	21	Not indicated	Not indicated
05	IDI5	42	8 years	San Agustín
06	IDI6	42	8 years	San Agustín
07	IDI7	50	2 years	San Agustín

As shown in the table, the available participant information reflects school heads from both Liangá and San Agustín Districts, while some demographic entries were not supplied in the response forms. Among those who indicated their age, the reported ages ranged from 21 to 50 years, while reported experience as school head ranged from two to eight years. The variation in their backgrounds provided the study with perspectives shaped by different lengths of leadership exposure and different IP community contexts.

The participants described experiences involving cultural adjustment, community engagement, resource constraints, learner development, and the need to reconcile formal education requirements with Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and community expectations. These narratives served as the basis for the thematic presentation that follows.

Lived Experiences of School Heads in Leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools

Table 2 presents the essential themes and core ideas that emerged from the participants' accounts regarding their lived experiences in leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools of San Agustín and Liangá Districts. Four essential themes emerged from the data: cultural immersion and adaptive leadership; community trust and shared leadership; leadership amid remote and resource-limited conditions; and fulfillment through learner and community transformation.

Table 2. *Lived Experiences of School Heads in Leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools*

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Cultural Immersion and Adaptive Leadership	Entering IP school leadership with unfamiliarity, culture shock, or uncertainty Learning and respecting Indigenous customs, traditions, beliefs, language, and ways of life Consulting Datus, elders, parents, and community leaders for cultural guidance Balancing DepEd standards and policies with Indigenous knowledge and practices Adapting leadership through direct engagement, observation, and experience
Community Trust and Shared Leadership	Building trust with learners, parents, elders, and tribal leaders Maintaining open communication and regular consultation with the community Using participatory and shared decision-making in school matters Encouraging parent and community participation in school programs and activities Respecting rituals, IKSP, and community practices in school decisions
Leadership Amid Remote and Resource-Limited Conditions	Managing schools affected by distance and transportation difficulties Working with limited classrooms, facilities, learning materials, and financial resources Dealing with weak internet connectivity, electricity, and resource delivery constraints Exercising resourcefulness and careful planning to sustain school operations Coordinating teachers, parents, and IP leaders to respond to learner and school needs
Fulfillment Through Learner and Community Transformation	Finding fulfillment in improved attendance, participation, and learner confidence Celebrating learner achievements despite geographic and resource limitations Observing progress in literacy and other learning outcomes Strengthening cultural identity and pride through school programs Seeing stronger parent participation and more positive community perceptions of schooling

Cultural Immersion and Adaptive Leadership

This theme emerged from the participants' descriptions of entering IP school leadership as an experience that required deliberate cultural learning and adjustment. It drew on five core ideas: entering leadership with unfamiliarity, culture shock, or uncertainty; learning and respecting Indigenous customs, traditions, beliefs, language, and ways of life; consulting Datus, elders, parents, and community leaders for cultural guidance; balancing DepEd standards with Indigenous knowledge and practices; and adapting leadership through direct engagement, observation, and experience.

To begin with, several participants described their initial assignment as unfamiliar and challenging. Some openly referred to culture shock, while others explained that they had no formal induction into IP education and had to learn from the community itself. This initial uncertainty required humility and willingness to listen. Leadership could not rely solely on administrative routines because the participants had to understand the cultural meaning behind community practices and the ways these practices affected schooling.

Closely connected with this adjustment was the recognition that Indigenous leaders and elders were important sources of guidance. Participants consulted Datus, elders, parents, and community leaders when school activities involved culture, traditions, rituals, or community expectations. Their accounts further showed that effective leadership involved balancing national educational standards and DepEd policies with Indigenous knowledge systems and culturally responsive practices. Through repeated engagement, the participants gradually developed a more adaptive form of leadership grounded in cultural sensitivity and context.

Participants shared that:

Culture shock because I have no background about IP community. (IDI2)

Meeting with the community leaders, Datu, and elders for consultation regarding culture and tradition. (IDI3)

I assumed leadership in an IP school without any formal induction program. I had to learn and adapt the unique cultural, educational and community context of the school through direct engagement and experience. (IDI6)

Community Trust and Shared Leadership

This theme developed from the participants' repeated emphasis on relationships as the foundation of school leadership in IP communities. Five core ideas shaped the theme: building trust with learners, parents, elders, and tribal leaders; maintaining open communication and regular consultation; using participatory and shared decision-making; encouraging parent and community participation in school programs; and respecting rituals, IKSP, and community practices in school decisions.

At the center of this theme was the need to earn trust. Participants explained that leadership became more effective when learners, parents, community leaders, and elders saw the school head as someone willing to listen and work with them. Trust was strengthened through consultation, transparency, and sustained communication rather than through administrative authority alone. The participants' experiences suggest that community acceptance is both a leadership challenge and an important leadership resource.

The participants also described school governance as collaborative. Major school decisions, cultural activities, and the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) were often discussed with community leaders. Some respondents referred directly to shared governance or participatory decision-making. This approach allowed the school to maintain formal educational responsibilities while ensuring that Indigenous perspectives were not ignored in programs and activities.

Participants conveyed that:

Seeing with IP leaders, IP parents and learners and have open communication to align DepEd curriculum with culture and tradition. (IDI1)

Got the trust of the learners and the community leaders and the parents. (IDI5)

Collaboration and community partnerships help us gain trust and support of the community. Working closely with them enable us to address learner needs and strengthen school programs. (IDI6)

Leadership Amid Remote and Resource-Limited Conditions

This theme emerged from the material and geographic realities repeatedly described by the participants. It was formed by five core ideas: managing schools affected by distance and transportation difficulties; working with limited classrooms, facilities, learning materials, and financial resources; dealing with weak internet connectivity, electricity, and resource delivery constraints; exercising resourcefulness and careful planning; and coordinating teachers, parents, and IP leaders to respond to school and learner needs.

Several participants portrayed remote location as part of the everyday leadership burden. Distance affected travel, the delivery of resources, access to services, and communication with stakeholders. These geographic constraints were compounded by inadequate infrastructure and scarce resources. Participants cited insufficient classrooms and furniture, limited learning materials, unstable internet connectivity, electricity concerns, and inadequate financial support. One participant specifically noted the absence of MOOE for the IP school being managed.

In response to these conditions, school heads relied on resourcefulness and coordination. Participants described working closely with teachers, parents, local leaders, and community members to keep programs

functioning even when resources were limited. Their experiences suggest that school leadership in these contexts required practical problem-solving and the capacity to prioritize needs under constrained conditions.

Participants reported that:

No MOOE allotted to the IP school I am managing. It is therefore challenging as to the improvement of the school. **(IDI2)**

Lack of school building or classroom, furniture like arm chair and set of table and chair, and technology. Unstable internet connectivity and electricity. **(IDI3)**

Limited availability of resources including classrooms, learning materials and financial support. **(IDI6)**

Fulfillment Through Learner and Community Transformation

This theme reflected the positive meaning participants attached to their leadership despite the difficulties of IP school contexts. It drew on five core ideas: finding fulfillment in improved attendance, participation, and learner confidence; celebrating learner achievements despite geographic and resource limitations; observing progress in literacy and other learning outcomes; strengthening cultural identity and pride; and seeing stronger parent participation and more positive community perceptions of schooling.

Participants commonly described fulfillment in terms of visible learner change. They valued seeing previously hesitant learners become active and confident, witnessing children achieve despite living in far-flung areas, and observing gradual improvement in reading proficiency. These experiences gave school heads a sense that their leadership contributed directly to learner development and educational access.

Fulfillment also extended beyond individual learners. Participants valued the active participation of parents and communities, the integration of Indigenous traditions into school programs, and the gradual change of negative perceptions about Indigenous Peoples. Their narratives indicate that meaningful leadership outcomes were understood not only as academic performance but also as strengthened identity, belonging, confidence, and community-school relationships.

Participants expressed that:

I feel fulfilled whenever I see learners who were once hesitant to attend school become active and confident students. **(IDI2)**

Tribal leaders and elders were proud that their traditions and culture is integrated in the curriculum. **(IDI3)**

Seeing the positive transformation of the community, it is fulfilling to see children no longer walk long distances just to attend school and witness their learning proficiency gradually improve. **(IDI6)**

Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of School Heads in Leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools

Table 3 presents the essential themes and core ideas related to how school heads coped with the challenges they encountered in leading IP Community Schools. Four themes emerged: resource constraints managed through resourcefulness and partnerships; cultural and language barriers addressed through Indigenous consultation; negotiating policy and culture through flexible, participatory governance; and professional learning and collaborative capacity building.

Table 3. Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of School Heads in Leading Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
------------------	------------

Resource Constraints Managed Through Resourcefulness and Partnerships	Experiencing insufficient funding, MOOE, facilities, and learning materials
	Managing transportation, connectivity, electricity, and resource-delivery limitations
	Prioritizing needs and using available resources carefully
	Mobilizing community, barangay, and stakeholder support
	Using partnerships, fundraising, and external linkages to supplement limited resources
Cultural and Language Barriers Addressed Through Indigenous Consultation	Encountering unfamiliar customs, traditions, and Indigenous ways of life
	Experiencing language and dialect barriers among school heads and teachers
	Facing difficulty developing culturally contextualized learning resources
	Seeking technical assistance from Datus, elders, and community leaders
	Learning through research, observation, consultation, and localized examples
Negotiating Policy and Culture Through Flexible, Participatory Governance	Balancing DepEd mandates with Indigenous beliefs and community practices
	Encountering differing expectations regarding school programs and activities
	Using flexible schedules, policies, and teaching approaches when appropriate
	Consulting the community before culturally sensitive or major decisions
	Building trust through open communication and participatory decision-making
Professional Learning and Collaborative Capacity Building	Attending trainings, workshops, seminars, and LAC sessions
	Seeking guidance, mentoring, and technical assistance
	Using professional development to strengthen cultural sensitivity
	Building teacher capacity in IPed, contextualization, and multigrade instruction
	Developing confidence in culturally responsive and inclusive leadership

Resource Constraints Managed Through Resourcefulness and Partnerships

This theme emerged from the participants' descriptions of resource limitations as one of the most persistent challenges in IP school leadership. Five core ideas formed the theme: insufficient funding, MOOE, facilities, and learning materials; transportation, connectivity, electricity, and resource-delivery limitations; careful prioritization of available resources; mobilization of community and barangay support; and the use of partnerships, fundraising, and external linkages to supplement limited resources.

Participants reported that limited budgets affected the purchase of learning materials, infrastructure maintenance, school improvement, and the implementation of programs. Geographic isolation also made delivery and access more difficult. Rather than treating these conditions as purely administrative obstacles, school heads responded by prioritizing urgent needs, maximizing what was available, and seeking assistance from local communities and other stakeholders.

Community partnerships were particularly important where formal resources were insufficient. Some participants described volunteer support, resource mobilization, and partnerships that helped improve school

activities and projects. These coping mechanisms demonstrate that resource management in IP schools often depends on combining formal school resources with community-based support and external linkages.

Participants revealed that:

Insufficient budget for purchasing materials for learning and for infrastructure maintenance and repair. **(IDI5)**

Distance of school during delivery of resources, internet connection, resources. **(IDI7)**

My community partnership naka help sa pagpangayo ng resources, volunteer support... bisan limited ang budget. **(IDI4)**

Cultural and Language Barriers Addressed Through Indigenous Consultation

This theme reflected challenges arising when school leaders and teachers did not belong to the Indigenous group or were unfamiliar with its language, customs, and traditions. It drew on five core ideas: unfamiliarity with Indigenous culture; language and dialect barriers; difficulty producing contextualized learning resources; technical assistance from Datus, elders, and community leaders; and learning through research, observation, consultation, and localized examples.

Participants described how unfamiliarity could create uncertainty in program implementation and everyday communication. Some school heads acknowledged that they themselves were not members of the Indigenous group, while others noted that teachers could not speak or fully understand the local dialect. These gaps affected communication with elders and the development of culturally relevant lessons and learning resources.

The most common coping response was consultation. School heads sought assistance from Indigenous leaders and elders, asked questions about appropriate practices, researched community traditions, and used local examples to make instruction more responsive. In this sense, the community itself became a source of professional knowledge, helping leaders and teachers reduce cultural misunderstandings and improve the relevance of school activities.

Participants shared that:

Teachers are not familiar with the culture and traditions of the community, making it difficult to implement culturally relevant lessons. **(IDI2)**

All teachers in our school are not IP-blooded and can't speak Manobo or even understand the dialect. That's why they are struggling in making contextualized LR. **(IDI3)**

Ask assistance from IP leader (Datu) on what the culture all about related to Manobo. **(IDI5)**

Negotiating Policy and Culture Through Flexible, Participatory Governance

This theme emerged from the need to reconcile formal education mandates with community beliefs, traditions, and expectations. Five core ideas shaped the theme: balancing DepEd mandates with Indigenous practices; encountering differing expectations regarding programs and activities; using flexibility when appropriate; consulting communities before culturally sensitive or major decisions; and building trust through open communication and participatory decision-making.

Participants described situations in which policy implementation was not automatic. Some programs, including health-related initiatives, could be questioned or refused by community members because of beliefs and prior experiences. Other responses showed that ceremonies, rituals, school schedules, and curricular activities sometimes required adjustment or consultation. These experiences required school heads to interpret policy within the social and cultural context of the community.

Rather than abandoning institutional requirements, participants relied on dialogue and shared decision-making. They maintained communication with leaders and elders, explained school programs, and adjusted

schedules or implementation strategies when cultural respect required flexibility. Their coping approach therefore involved finding workable points of alignment between DepEd responsibilities and Indigenous community expectations.

Participants articulated that:

Communication barrier, beliefs and behaviors... deworming, vaccine mostly refused by IP community. **(IDI1)**

The school is sometimes flexible in the policies and schedules to give respect to their culture and traditions. **(IDI3)**

Balancing the implementation of DepEd policies while ensuring their practices and traditions are respected... consultation, open communication sa community leaders. **(IDI4)**

Professional Learning and Collaborative Capacity Building

This theme emerged from the participants' recognition that culturally responsive leadership requires continuous learning. Five core ideas gave meaning to the theme: participation in trainings, workshops, seminars, and LAC sessions; seeking guidance and technical assistance; using professional development to strengthen cultural sensitivity; building teacher capacity in IPed, contextualization, and multigrade instruction; and developing greater confidence in culturally responsive and inclusive leadership.

Participants repeatedly identified training and professional exposure as important coping resources. For school heads assigned without formal preparation, professional development provided a structured way to deepen understanding of Indigenous education. Participants also emphasized LAC sessions, mentoring, and collaboration as mechanisms for strengthening the practices of teachers who needed support in culturally relevant instruction or multigrade teaching.

The effects of professional learning were described in terms of greater patience, cultural sensitivity, open-mindedness, inclusive leadership, and stronger decision-making. These accounts indicate that coping in IP schools was not simply a matter of personal endurance; it also involved building professional competence through continuous learning and collective support.

Participants made known that:

Training workshop and exposure to Indigenous education helped me become more culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of the community. **(IDI2)**

Professional development and leadership training enhance skills and knowledge of culturally responsive education, inclusive leadership and decision making. **(IDI1)**

Professional development helped me become more patient, culturally sensitive, and open minded. **(IDI4)**

Insights and Recommendations Drawn from the Lived Experiences of School Heads

Table 4 presents the essential themes and core ideas derived from the participants' insights and recommendations. Their responses emphasized that effective indigenous educational leadership depends on community-centered governance, culturally responsive and inclusive instructional leadership, sustained professional development and specialized IPed support, and adequate resources reinforced by inter-agency and stakeholder partnerships.

Table 4. Insights and Recommendations Drawn from the Lived Experiences of School Heads

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
------------------	------------

Community-Centered and Shared Governance	Maintaining strong partnerships with Indigenous leaders, parents, and community members Using participatory decision-making and shared governance Building trust through constant communication and consultation Treating community members as partners in school improvement Strengthening support systems around learners and school programs
Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Instructional Leadership	Integrating IKSP, culture, traditions, beliefs, and customs into school programs Using contextualized, localized, and culturally relevant learning materials Promoting differentiated and inclusive teaching strategies Respecting Indigenous language, identity, and community practices Creating an inclusive and culturally responsive school environment
Sustained Professional Development and Specialized IPEd Support	Providing continuous IPEd training for school heads and teachers Orienting and mentoring newly assigned school leaders Strengthening teacher capacity in IPEd and multigrade instruction Providing guidance and technical assistance for culturally responsive leadership Considering deployment of personnel with IPEd knowledge and experience
Adequate Resources and Inter-Agency Support	Providing adequate funding, facilities, and learning resources Strengthening access to contextualized and culturally responsive materials Using Adopt-a-School and other stakeholder linkages Mobilizing DepEd, barangay, agency, and community support Institutionalizing sustained support for IP school programs and projects

Community-Centered and Shared Governance

This theme emerged from the participants' conviction that leadership in IP schools becomes more effective when the community participates meaningfully in school governance. Five core ideas shaped the theme: maintaining strong partnerships with Indigenous leaders, parents, and community members; using participatory decision-making and shared governance; building trust through constant communication and consultation; treating community members as partners in school improvement; and strengthening support systems around learners and school programs.

The participants consistently identified relationships with community leaders and elders as central to effective leadership. Their recommendations went beyond occasional consultation and pointed toward sustained partnership. Shared decision-making was viewed as particularly important when programs involved Indigenous culture, community resources, or learner welfare.

The responses further suggest that trust is strengthened when school leaders communicate regularly, listen to concerns, and recognize the community's role in solving school problems. In this model of leadership, the school is not separate from the community but works with it as a partner in sustaining learning, cultural identity, and school improvement.

Participants underscored that:

Strong partnerships with the community strengthen school programs and improve learner outcomes. **(IDI2)**

Shared governance. **(IDI3)**

Constant communication with the IP leaders and parents of learners related to indigenous culture, traditions, beliefs and customs. **(IDI5)**

Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Instructional Leadership

This theme emerged from participants' recommendations that Indigenous culture should be embedded in learning rather than treated as an occasional activity. It drew on five core ideas: integrating IKSP, culture, traditions, beliefs, and customs; using contextualized and culturally relevant materials; promoting differentiated and inclusive strategies; respecting Indigenous language and identity; and creating inclusive and culturally responsive school environments.

Participants recommended that school programs and classroom instruction reflect the realities of IP learners. They referred to contextualization, differentiated instruction, localized examples, and the continuous integration of Indigenous knowledge into school programs. These practices were viewed as ways to make education more meaningful while maintaining respect for community identity.

The participants also connected instructional leadership with inclusion. Respecting language, culture, and community practices was not seen as separate from educational quality. Instead, culturally responsive leadership was described as part of providing relevant learning opportunities and creating a school environment in which Indigenous learners feel recognized and supported.

Participants explained that:

I encourage differentiated instruction, inclusive education and contextualization suited to our learners. **(IDI1)**

Integrating indigenous learning to the Matatag Curriculum for making education more inclusive. **(IDI3)**

Respecting and integrating IP culture into learning, and building strong relationship with parents and community elders, creating inclusive and culturally responsive school environment. **(IDI7)**

Sustained Professional Development and Specialized IPed Support

This theme developed from participants' calls for continuous professional learning and stronger specialized support for school leaders and teachers working in IP communities. Five core ideas formed the theme: continuous IPed training; orientation and mentoring for newly assigned leaders; stronger teacher capacity in IPed and multigrade instruction; guidance and technical assistance for culturally responsive leadership; and the possible deployment of personnel with relevant IPed knowledge and experience.

Several participants stated that newly assigned school heads could benefit from structured orientation because direct assignment to an IP community without preparation required a steep learning process. Continuous professional development was also recommended for teachers, particularly in areas such as Indigenous culture, contextualized instruction, multigrade teaching, and culturally responsive educational practice.

Participants also valued mentoring and technical assistance. Their recommendations indicate that specialized support should not end after initial training but should continue as school heads encounter new community situations and policy demands. Some participants further recommended the deployment of IPed teachers or school leaders who already possess cultural and programmatic knowledge.

Participants recommended that:

Let the school heads undergo trainings on indigenous education to deepen their understanding especially the newly assigned. **(IDI3)**

Deployment of IPED teachers as well as school leaders. **(IDI5)**

Strengthen teacher capacity through trainings on IP education, MG teaching, strengthen collaboration with IP leaders and community. **(IDI6)**

Adequate Resources and Inter-Agency Support

This theme emerged from the participants' recognition that culturally responsive leadership must be supported by adequate institutional resources. Five core ideas shaped the theme: adequate funding, facilities, and learning resources; stronger access to culturally responsive materials; stakeholder linkages such as Adopt-a-School; mobilization of DepEd, barangay, agency, and community support; and sustained institutional support for IP school programs and projects.

Participants' recommendations reflected the practical limits of leadership when basic resources are insufficient. They called for adequate funding, learning materials, infrastructure support, and resources that reflect Indigenous culture. These needs were linked to both school improvement and the capacity of teachers to provide culturally relevant learning experiences.

External partnerships were also identified as a viable source of support. Participants pointed to other agencies, barangays, community stakeholders, and Adopt-a-School linkages as mechanisms for supplementing school resources. Their insights emphasize that the sustainability of IP education requires coordinated support beyond the individual efforts of school heads.

Participants stated that:

Provide adequate funding and resources to strengthen training for teachers. **(IDI1)**

Linkage to the other agencies or stakeholders through Adopt-a-School Program (ASP) in support to Indigenous Education. **(IDI3)**

Strong support from the Department of Education and stakeholders for programs and projects. **(IDI7)**

CONCLUSIONS

The lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Community Schools of San Agustin and Lianga Districts reveal that indigenous educational leadership is fundamentally an adaptive and relational form of leadership. School heads often entered IP communities with limited familiarity with Indigenous culture, language, traditions, or community expectations, and some experienced culture shock or uncertainty. Through direct engagement with Datus, elders, parents, learners, and community leaders, they gradually developed culturally responsive practices that enabled them to balance DepEd standards with Indigenous knowledge and traditions. Their experiences also demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is strongly connected with trust, consultation, shared decision-making, and respect for community practices.

The school heads encountered persistent challenges associated with limited funding, inadequate facilities and learning resources, transportation and connectivity constraints, language barriers, unfamiliarity with Indigenous customs, and the difficulty of integrating culturally relevant content into school programs. They addressed these challenges through resourcefulness, flexible leadership, community partnerships, consultation with Indigenous elders, collaboration with teachers and parents, and continuous professional learning. These coping mechanisms show that resilience in IP school leadership is strengthened when school heads do not work in isolation but draw on community knowledge, stakeholder support, and professional development.

The participants' insights further indicate that effective leadership in Indigenous education should be community-centered, culturally responsive, inclusive, and supported by adequate institutional resources. Strong partnerships with IP leaders, parents, barangay officials, and other stakeholders help create shared responsibility

for learner development and school improvement. At the same time, school heads and teachers require continuing IPed training, mentoring, culturally responsive learning resources, and stronger financial and logistical support. Thus, sustaining quality education in IP communities requires both capable school leadership and a support system that respects Indigenous identity while ensuring access to relevant and equitable educational opportunities.

Recommendations

1. The Department of Education and concerned Schools Division Office may institutionalize sustained Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed) orientation, mentoring, and professional development for school heads and teachers assigned to IP Community Schools. Training may focus on Indigenous culture and language, culturally responsive leadership, IKSP integration, contextualization, multigrade instruction, community engagement, and the implementation of DepEd policies within Indigenous contexts.
2. School heads may strengthen formal mechanisms for shared governance and community consultation by regularly engaging Datus, elders, parents, barangay officials, and other community representatives in culturally sensitive decisions, school planning, program implementation, and the integration of Indigenous knowledge and traditions into school activities.
3. DepEd and partner stakeholders may provide more equitable and adequate resources for IP Community Schools, including MOOE or other financial support, classrooms and facilities, learning materials, connectivity, transportation-related support, and culturally responsive instructional resources. Resource provision may be prioritized according to the specific needs of geographically isolated and resource-limited IP schools.
4. Schools and district offices may expand inter-agency and stakeholder partnerships through mechanisms such as the Adopt-a-School Program, local government collaboration, community resource mobilization, and partnerships with organizations that support Indigenous education. These partnerships may be used to strengthen school programs, learner support, teacher capacity, infrastructure, and the long-term sustainability of culturally responsive educational initiatives.

References

- Ahmed, S. K. (2023). The Pillars of Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/se58y>
- Al Tajir, G. K. (2018). Ethical treatment of participants in public health research. 2(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.21037/JPHE.2017.12.04>
- Angelle, P. S., Upson, C. C., & Knight, S. W. P. (2026). By Māori, for Māori: community partnerships for culturally sustaining schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jea-02-2025-0076>
- Asmawi, A., Ullah, M., & Fatema, S. K. (2025). The Tetra Pillars of Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research: Equipping Early Career Researchers with a Fundamental Understanding. *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*. <https://doi.org/10.55544/ijrah.5.6.13>
- Career Guidance Program Implementation in Indigenous People Elementary Schools: The Chronicles of Guidance Coordinators. (2025). <https://doi.org/10.17613/v901h-n0m58>
- Da'as, R. (2024). Indigenous school leadership practices for societal integration in segregated society. *Education Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2024.2323717>
- Delgado, M. (2025). Leadership learning of school leaders appointed to rural and remote Indigenous schools in Mexico. *School Leadership & Management*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2025.2559744>
- Delprato, M., Frola, A., & Antequera, G. (2022). Indigenous and non-Indigenous proficiency gaps for out-of-school and in-school populations: A machine learning approach. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 93, 102631. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2022.102631>
- Durrani, N., & Makhmetova, Z. (2024). School leaders' well-being during times of crisis: Insights from a quantitative study in Kazakhstan. *Education Sciences*, 14(9), 942. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14090942>
- Fadli, M. R. (2021). Memahami desain metode penelitian kualitatif. 21(1), 33–54. <https://doi.org/10.21831/HUM.V21I1.38075>
- Fostering diversity: exploring the experiences of selected indigenous people appointed in leadership positions in government institutions using the glass cliff theory. (2024). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12624907>

- Gonzales, C. R. (2025). Indigenization of Curriculum in Vinzons District and Its Effects to the Learning Engagement of Dumagat Learners. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, IX(V), 6159–6176. <https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2025.905000479>
- Gulam, E. R. F., & Hordista, A. S. (2024). *Implementation of Indigenous People Education in Sarangani Province. Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 27(4), 392–406. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14018756>
- Hortelano, J. C., & Roleda, L. S. (2024). Assessing the educational needs of Philippines indigenous Kalinga teachers and students in mathematics: Insights for researchers and policymakers. *Education Mind*. <https://doi.org/10.58583/em.3.2.2>
- Kaewkungwal, J., & Adams, P. (2019). Ethical consideration of the research proposal and the informed-consent process: An online survey of researchers and ethics committee members in Thailand. *Accountability in Research*, 26(3), 176–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2019.1608190>
- Kyngäs, H., Kääriäinen, M., & Elo, S. (2020). The Trustworthiness of Content Analysis (pp. 41–48). Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30199-6_5
- Lester, S. (1999). An introduction to phenomenological research. <http://devmts.org.uk/resmethy.pdf>
- Lugatiman, R. C., & Bauyot, M. M. (2024). The experiences of school leaders in Indigenous People integrated schools in Talaingod, Davao del Norte: A phenomenological study. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8(6), 307–318. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRIS.2024.806023>
- Martin, J., Merchant, B., & Reyhner, J. (2025). Privileging tribal values and knowledge in educational leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2025.2487579>
- Mat Salleh, M. F., & Abdul Razak, A. Z. (2024). Empowering education: developing a needs-based leadership model for orang asli schools in malaysia. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 9(56), 924–939. <https://doi.org/10.35631/ijepc.956057>
- Mbatha, M., Downing, C., & Nkosi, E. (2020). Case Managers Caring for Patients in a Managed Health Care Organization in South Africa, Part 2. *Professional Case Management*, 25(6), 361–366. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NCM.0000000000000472>
- Meston, T., Cutler, C., Riley, T., & Van Issum, H. (2024). The Sisyphean continuum: countering the racial-colonial challenges of Indigenous education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2024.2320361>
- Muguti, T. (2022). Indigenous Knowledge and Poverty Alleviation in Contemporary Zimbabwe (pp. 67–84). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5856-4_5
- Nantin, S. L., & Morales, L. (2025). Looking into the Indigenous People Education Program Implementation Through the Lens of School Heads. 38(6), 574–589. <https://doi.org/10.70838/pemj.380602>
- Naturalistic Inquiry Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Özkan, M., & Çakır, Ç. (2024). Culturally Responsive Leadership. *Advances in Educational Marketing, Administration, and Leadership Book Series*, 193–220. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3373-0402-1.ch005>
- Perez-Brito, C., Belghith, N. B., Piza, S. F., & Leiva, J. A. (2023). Household survey for Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines 2023. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.48529/f7gr-wa43>
- Pheko, B., & Mitchell, R. (2023). School Leadership Research in Botswana: Developing an Indigenous Approach. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8087194>
- Pozzer, A., & Cecchetti, E. (2020). Escolas indígenas: contextos, percepções e desafios interculturais. *AULA: Revista de Pedagogia*, 26(26), 53–71. <https://doi.org/10.14201/AULA2020265371>
- Rajasegaram, A., & Gani, P. (2025). Ethical considerations in obtaining informed consent for research participation: a review. *Quantum Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*. <https://doi.org/10.55197/qjssh.v6i2.1036>
- Secatero, S. L., Williams, S. “Cat,” & Romans, R. (2022). A Pathway to Leadership for Diverse Cadres of School Leaders: Honoring Indigenous Values in a Principal Preparation Program in New Mexico. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 21(1), 81–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2021.2022705>
- Sherpa, D., Baraily, K., & Rai, B. (2024). Impact of Indigenous Practices in School Leadership: A Phenomenological Study of Community Schools. *NCC Journal*, 9(1), 80–86. <https://doi.org/10.3126/nccj.v9i1.72252>
- Storani de Oliveira, F., & Del Pino, J. C. (2025). A educação escolar indígena no brasil: uma análise bibliométrica e avaliativa. *Linguagens Educação e Sociedade*, 29(60), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.26694/rles.v29i60.6210>
- Vasco-Toapanta, C. (2024). Revisión sistemática: observaciones de los comités de ética a protocolos de investigación médica. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13368512>