

The lived experiences, challenges encountered, and coping mechanisms of Indigenous Peoples (IP) school heads in SAMARICA

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Abstract

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of school heads managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools in Occidental Mindoro, with a focus on the challenges and adaptive leadership practices in geographically isolated and culturally diverse contexts. Using semi-structured interviews with 20 school heads, the study employed thematic analysis to capture recurring patterns in their narratives. Significant findings revealed that school heads face persistent challenges, including geographic isolation, inadequate infrastructure, language barriers, and limited parental involvement. These conditions manifest in long walks through dangerous terrain, weather-dependent access to schools, makeshift classrooms, lack of electricity, and difficulties in transitioning learners from their mother tongue to Filipino and English. Despite these barriers, school heads demonstrated resilience through culturally responsive leadership, including immersion in Indigenous traditions, trust-building with elders and parents, contextualization of learning resources, mentoring and peer collaboration, and sustaining emotional and spiritual resilience through faith and self-care. The study concludes that effective leadership in IP schools requires not only administrative competence but also cultural sensitivity, pedagogical support, and community linkages. To address the systemic inequities faced by IP schools, the research recommends implementing a capacity-building program for school heads. This program may include modules on cultural immersion, inclusive planning, resource mobilization, instructional leadership, and wellness support, thereby empowering leaders to sustain quality education in marginalized communities. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for DepEd to provide systemic support, culturally grounded training, and policy reforms to strengthen educational outcomes for Indigenous learners and ensure inclusive, equitable education.

Keywords: Indigenous Peoples education, school leadership, challenges in IP school, cultural immersion, community engagement

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1. Introduction

Countries worldwide and international organizations have supported the Education for All (EFA) policy as a shared commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of these is the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which, as a global initiative, focuses on guaranteeing the right to education, especially for minority groups facing obstacles to accessing national education services (UNESCO, 2019). Records also demonstrate the importance of Indigenous Peoples' Education (IPEd) in fostering inclusive development and protecting cultural heritage. To advance educational justice and cultural diversity, educational frameworks worldwide have increasingly recognized the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into formal curricula (Verdida & Malon, 2024).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has implemented the IPEd Program to ensure that indigenous communities receive education that respects their cultural contexts. This program primarily aims to make education inclusive and respectful of the diversity among learners from various contexts. In addition, managing schools has become more challenging for school heads. (Eyana et al., 2024) identified several challenges faced by school heads, including limited resources, curriculum demands, teacher retention, community and parental involvement, and infrastructure maintenance. To address these challenges, the researcher aims to develop strategic plans with clear steps and measures. Galorio and Bauyot (2024) explored resilient leadership among school heads and found it crucial for navigating the ever-changing challenges in education.

Occidental Mindoro is home to diverse indigenous groups, including the Mangyan tribes, for whom culturally relevant education is essential for community empowerment (Ulayao et al., 2025; Aldave et al., 2025). The division has public and elementary schools with a large number of learners who need support not only in academics but also in life. This urges school heads to organize and launch various initiatives to help learners equip themselves. Although several studies have focused on the challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners, limited research explores the lived experiences of school heads managing IP schools, particularly in geographically isolated areas like Occidental Mindoro. Existing studies often center on curriculum, student access, and inclusive education but rarely highlight the leadership dynamics and personal realities of administrators. This lack of focus on school leadership creates a critical gap in understanding how administrators navigate the cultural, logistical, and emotional complexities of Indigenous education.

In view of the above, a significant gap remains in our understanding of the specific experiences and challenges faced by school heads who implement these programs at the ground level. While previous studies have examined teachers' experiences within the IPEd framework (Verdida & Malon, 2024), there is limited research on the perspectives of school heads, who play a crucial role in shaping educational practices. This gap is particularly evident in Occidental Mindoro. By addressing this gap, the study seeks to provide valuable insights into how school heads perceive their roles and the challenges they encounter in fostering an inclusive educational environment.

Statement of the Problem - The study generally explored the lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of school heads managing IP schools within the Schools Division Office of Occidental Mindoro during the school year 2025-2026. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of the school heads in managing Indigenous Peoples' schools? (2) What are the challenges encountered by school heads in managing Indigenous Peoples' schools? (3) What are the coping mechanisms employed by school heads in overcoming the challenges they encountered in managing Indigenous Peoples' schools? (4) What capacity-building program can be proposed to enable the school heads to manage IP schools

effectively?

Significance of the study - Since the study focused on the lived experiences of school heads, it provides valuable insights into their unique challenges and leadership practices in these contexts. By examining their lived experiences, the research highlights both strengths and areas for improvement, providing a foundation for targeted training programs to enhance culturally responsive leadership. This capacity-building approach empowers school heads to lead more effectively, ensuring that education in IP schools aligns with community values while addressing systemic barriers, including limited resources, faculty preparation, and regulatory demands. Teachers and learners in IP schools also stand to benefit from improved leadership. With school heads better equipped to support professional development, teachers can access more guidance, resources, and training opportunities tailored to the needs of Indigenous learners. This contributes to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environment, fostering student engagement and academic performance. For Indigenous learners and their communities, the study's findings can inform the design of school programs that respect cultural traditions, strengthen trust in the education system, and preserve heritage while promoting equitable access to quality education. Beyond the school level, the study has broader implications for stakeholders, including DepEd Occidental Mindoro, parents, alums, local government units, and cultural agencies such as IPED, NCCA, and the Mangyan Education Center. These institutions can use the findings to refine policies, allocate resources more equitably, and design professional development programs responsive to intercultural leadership and community involvement. The study also provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, teacher education institutions, and future researchers, offering a replicable framework to sustain Indigenous identity and promote educational empowerment. In doing so, it bridges gaps between cultural preservation and educational reform, ensuring that IP schools remain relevant, inclusive, and transformative.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study - This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of twenty elementary school heads managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools in Occidental Mindoro, focusing on the leadership challenges they encounter, the coping strategies they employ, and the insights they gain in fostering inclusive, culturally responsive education. Through in-depth interviews with those serving Mangyan and other indigenous communities, the research illuminated the complexities of leading schools in underserved, culturally distinct contexts, highlighting issues such as resource limitations, regulatory demands, and the need for resilience. While the scope was limited to elementary IP schools in one province and the qualitative design reflects subjective perspectives, the findings nonetheless provide meaningful contributions by identifying capacity-building needs, emphasizing cultural sensitivity and community engagement, and offering a foundation for developing targeted leadership programs that strengthen Indigenous education.

2. Methodology

Research Design - This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of elementary school heads managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools, with an emphasis on how they navigate leadership challenges and foster culturally responsive education. By listening directly to participants, the research captured context-specific realities of school leadership in indigenous communities, using systematic steps, including identifying significant statements, clustering themes, and validating findings, to ensure depth and fidelity (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). This approach highlighted the values, motivations, and adaptive strategies of school heads, offering meaningful insights into their leadership practices and capacity-building needs. Phenomenology, as applied here, is particularly valuable in educational research because it uncovers subjective meanings and cultural contexts, making the findings relevant for strengthening leadership programs in IP schools (Abalos et al., 2020).

Participants of the Study - The participants in the study were 20 public school heads from the IP Schools of the Division Office of Occidental Mindoro, specifically, nine from San Jose North District, four from Magsaysay District, four from Rizal District, and three from Calintaan District, whose experiences qualified them to participate. The participants were purposively selected based on the following criteria: currently serving as school

heads or principals of an officially recognized Indigenous Peoples (IP) school in Occidental Mindoro. They must have served in their position for at least two school years to ensure they have sufficient experience and insight into managing the school and engaging with the IP community. Preference was given to school heads with prior experience in IP education settings or teaching interactions with the IP community in the context of education. These criteria help carefully select participants who served as key informants for the study. They met the study's criteria, making them the most appropriate individuals for the lived experience being explored.

Research Instrument - In phenomenological research, in-depth interviews remained the primary method for collecting data, allowing the researcher to explore participants' lived experiences in detail (Neubauer et al., 2019). This method provides a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under exploration. For this study, data were gathered through in-depth interviews conducted in English. An interview guide with open-ended questions, transcribed in English, was personally developed by the researcher to elicit detailed responses from participants. This approach aligns with current qualitative research practices that emphasize the importance of multiple data collection methods to capture the complexity of the participants' experiences. Specifically, the interview guide was divided into three questions: *Question 1: Lived Experiences*; *Question 2: Challenges in Managing IP Schools*; and *Question 3: Coping Mechanisms*. All in all, three questions were asked of all participants to understand their lived experiences fully. Follow-up questions were asked to delve deeper into the participants' shared narratives.

The validity of the interview guide in this study was established through several steps to ensure that the instrument effectively explored the intended constructs and accurately captured the lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples' Schools. Three validation experts confirmed the interview guide's validity. The interview guide was developed based on a thorough review of the literature on leadership in Indigenous Peoples' Schools, capacity building, and phenomenological inquiry. Expert input from an educator, a school administrator, and researchers familiar with indigenous education was incorporated to ensure the questions cover all relevant aspects of the school heads' experiences. This ensured the interview questions were appropriate, comprehensive, and relevant to the research objectives. Meanwhile, to check the face validity of the interview guide, subject matter experts reviewed it to ensure that the questions appear to measure the experiences of elementary school heads effectively. The experts provided feedback on the clarity, language, and appropriateness of the questions to the study context, ensuring that they aligned with the research goals. In terms of construct validity, the interview guide was designed to probe the school heads' experiences in managing Indigenous Peoples' Schools and to explore their leadership challenges, strategies, and perceptions of capacity building.

Data Gathering Procedure - The data-gathering process began with formal approval from the division's higher authorities and the Divine Word College of San Jose. Guided by Creswell's (1998) phenomenological inquiry procedures, as cited in Oliveira Lopes et al. (2025), the researcher first developed a deep understanding of the phenomenon and then crafted semi-structured interview questions to elicit insights from participants who had directly experienced it. These interviews were personally conducted to explore the meanings behind the participants' lived experiences. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a code. After data collection, Colaizzi's (1978) method was used to analyze the interviews (Wirihana et al., 2018; Cariaga et al., 2025). Recruitment was conducted respectfully, recognizing that voluntary participation was essential to obtaining rich, authentic data. Interviews were held in school to maintain confidentiality and provide a comfortable environment. Sessions were scheduled during the participants' and the researcher's free time to minimize disruption and allow for thoughtful sharing. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized by removing or obscuring identifying details. Recordings, transcripts, and consent forms were stored securely, with consent forms kept separately to prevent any link to the interview content. Participants were also advised not to mention specific names of individuals or places during the interviews. Before each session, the researcher explained the study's purpose, interview format, and the potential benefits and risks of participation. Participants were assured that their involvement was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that strict confidentiality protocols were in place. They were informed that, while no financial compensation would be provided, their contributions could help raise awareness and deepen

understanding of the leadership experiences of elementary school heads in IP schools.

Once the data analysis and interpretation were completed, member checking was employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by returning the data, interpretations, or themes to the participants for confirmation. Through this process, the researcher allowed participants to review transcripts, summaries, or emerging conclusions to ensure their perspectives were accurately captured and represented. It helped minimize researcher bias, clarify misunderstandings, and strengthen the study's authenticity by aligning the results with participants' lived experiences. To summarize, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with 20 school heads serving IP communities over three weeks, given their busy schedules and time constraints. These interviews provided rich, firsthand accounts of their leadership experiences. The responses were analyzed using thematic coding, allowing the researcher to identify common patterns and extract key themes related to the challenges faced and coping mechanisms used in managing IP schools. This method ensured that the findings were grounded in authentic, context-driven narratives.

Data Analysis - Since the study employed a qualitative phenomenological design, participants were asked to take part in face-to-face interviews. An approved interview guide was used in conducting the interview. Participants were encouraged to talk freely and tell stories in their own words about their challenges and coping strategies in managing IP schools. At the end of each interview, a second contact with the participants was made to discuss the study findings and ensure they reflected their own experiences. The researcher determined the level of data saturation during a process carried out in parallel with data collection. The researcher also double-checked the transcripts to ensure nothing was missed during transcription.

Specifically, this study adopted Colaizzi's (1978) process for phenomenological data analysis, as cited in Wirihana et al. (2018) and Cariaga et al. (2025), because it provided a structured, systematic approach to elucidating the meanings of participants' experiences. First, the researcher read and reread each transcript several times to identify common experiences. In this stage, the thoughts, feelings, and ideas were observed and analyzed. The researcher identified commonalities in the participants' responses. This was in reference to their answers to the research questions. Second, significant statements and phrases were sifted from each transcript. As the researcher became immersed in the data, the extraction and identification of significant statements started. In this process, the researcher eliminated insignificant responses that he deemed irrelevant to the phenomenon. Third, meanings were formulated from the significant statements. Each underlying meaning was coded in one category as it reflected an exhaustive description. Fourth, after reaching an agreement on all formulated meanings, the categorization process was carried out, revealing a unique structure of theme clusters. Each cluster of themes was coded to include all formulated meanings within that cluster. Then, groups of theme clusters that reflected a particular vision issue were combined to form a distinctive theme construct. All themes were internally convergent and externally divergent, meaning that each formulated meaning fell into only one theme. Fifth, all emerging themes were defined in exhaustive detail. After merging all study themes, the study structure of the phenomenon was extracted. Thereafter, the researcher reviewed the findings for richness and completeness to provide a sufficient description and confirm it. Finally, the researcher confirmed the validation of this exhaustive description. Sixth, a reduction of findings was done in which redundant, misused, or overestimated descriptions were eliminated from the structure since such attempts were made to emphasize the fundamental structure. Some changes were made to clarify the relationships between clusters of themes and the themes extracted from them. Seventh, the researcher validated study findings using the "member checking" technique. He returned the study results to the participants for confirmation. Finally, after all participants expressed satisfaction and agreement with the study results, the study was finalized for analysis and interpretation. This phenomenological method ensured that the analysis was both systematic and faithful to the participants' lived experiences. By following its sequential steps, the researcher generated a rigorous, validated thematic structure that captured the essence of school heads' challenges and coping mechanisms.

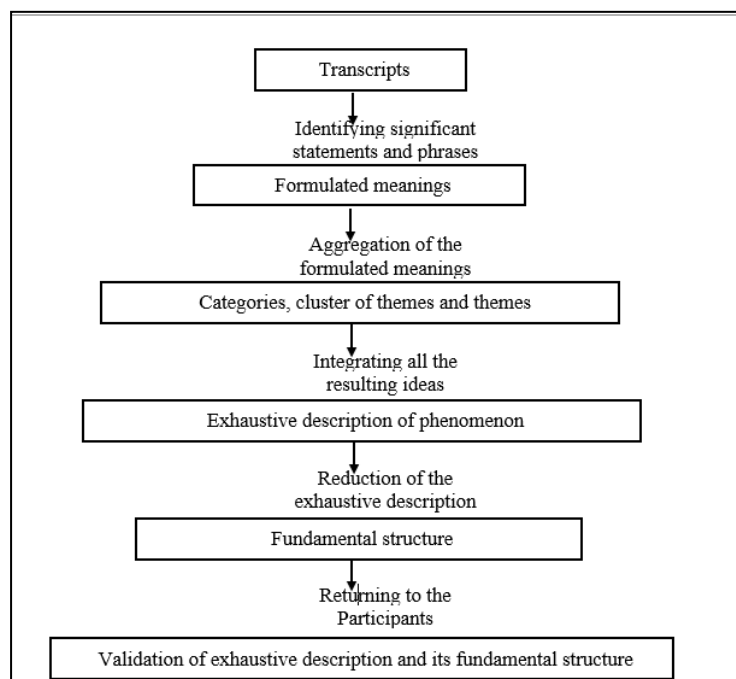


Figure 1. Data Analysis according to Colaizzi (1978)

Ethical Considerations - Since school heads managing IP schools were the participants of this study, the researcher sought permission from the Schools Division Superintendent. Their consent was obtained prior to the interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were observed and practiced in this research. The researcher made sure that the participants signed the informed consent form. They were also informed of the study's objectives and assured that their involvement would remain anonymous, as each participant was assigned a code. The study was voluntary, meaning no participant was forced to participate. It would be their personal choice to participate or not after understanding the study's purposes. Informed consent was also obtained from them, and they were informed of the study's purpose and that they could stop at any time if they felt uncomfortable sharing their lived experiences. They were also informed that the study complies with the Data Privacy Act, and they may decide which stories can be shared and which parts cannot be shared.

3. Results and Discussions

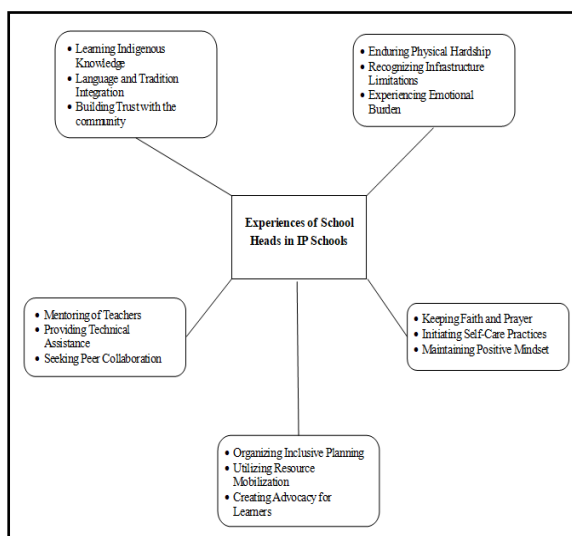


Figure 2. Initial Thematic Map for Experiences of School Heads in IP School

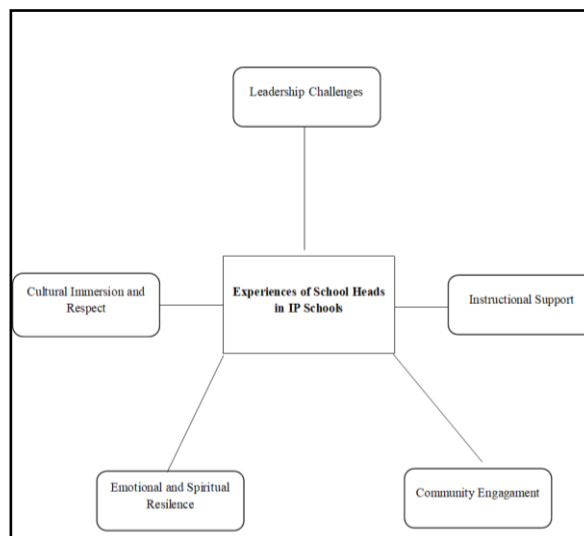


Figure 3. Final Thematic Map for Experiences of School Heads in IP School

Figures 2 and 3 show the initial and thematic maps for the experiences of school heads in the IP School. The lived experiences of school heads in Indigenous Peoples' (IP) schools were marked by a combination of challenges, victories, and stories of resilience. School heads often served as community links, cultural advocates, and emotional anchors for both students and staff. Through semi-structured interviews, school heads shared their experiences managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools. The scrutiny of the narratives disclosed that their lived experiences included cultural immersion and respect for indigenous knowledge, geographic isolation, resource constraints, curriculum adaptation, community engagement, and leadership identity, among others. Anent this, the shared insights provided a deeper understanding of how school heads performed their roles, balanced cultural sensitivity with educational mandates, and responded to the unique demands of IP education. By analyzing these themes, their narratives illuminated the complexities, challenges, and rewarding experiences that shaped their leadership journey. Their narratives further disclosed that their experiences influenced their decisions in managing IP schools. Their roles demanded adaptive leadership, deep empathy, and a commitment to preserving Indigenous identity while promoting inclusive, high-quality education.

Interviews with 20 public school heads from IP Schools revealed that they shared rich, complex lived experiences shaped by cultural, emotional, and leadership realities. They immersed themselves in Indigenous knowledge, integrated local languages and traditions, and built trust with communities through respectful engagement (Mercado, 2023; Miolo, 2025; and Flores et al., 2025). Leadership challenges included enduring physical hardship, addressing infrastructure gaps, and managing emotional burdens in isolated settings (Lugatiman & Bauyot, 2024; Corpuz & Salandanan, 2021). Despite these, they provided instructional support by mentoring teachers, offering technical assistance, and seeking peer collaboration (Nantin & Morales, 2025; Padilla & Gonzales, 2023; Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025). Emotional and spiritual resilience was key as they relied on faith, prayer, self-care routines, and a positive mindset to stay grounded. Community engagement was central, with inclusive planning involving parents, elders, and tribal leaders. They mobilized resources through partnerships, proposals, and local initiatives to sustain school programs. Advocacy for learners was evident in their push for culturally relevant materials and representation in district planning (Paway, 2025; Palma, 2025; and Peligro and Dopeño, 2025).

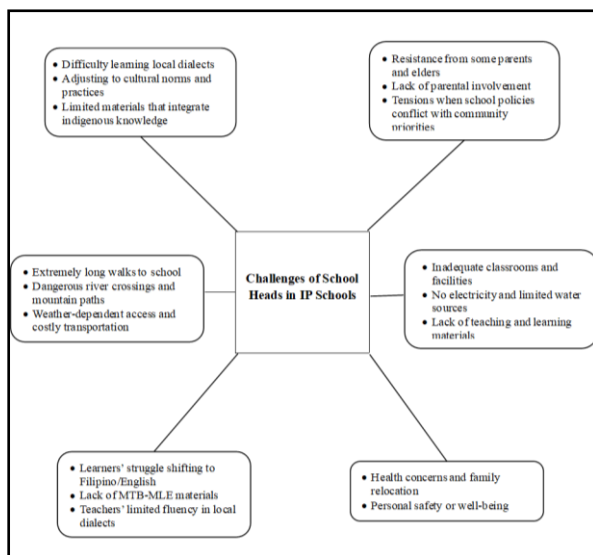


Figure 4. Initial Thematic Map for Challenges of School Heads in IP School

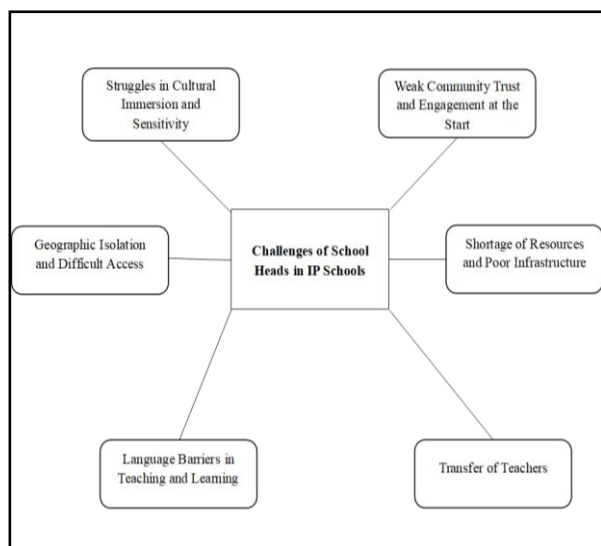


Figure 5. Final Thematic Map for Challenges of School Heads in IP School

Figures 4 and 5 show the initial and thematic maps for the experiences of school heads in the IP School. Serving as a school head in an Indigenous Peoples (IP) school presents a unique set of challenges that go beyond traditional educational leadership. These schools are often situated in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA). These are the areas where access to resources, infrastructure, and support systems is limited. The

role demands not only administrative competence but also cultural sensitivity, resilience, and a deep commitment to equity. In going through these complexities, school heads must address issues such as teacher turnover, language barriers, community engagement, and the personal safety and well-being of both staff and learners. School heads in IP schools face distinct and layered challenges rooted in cultural, geographic, and systemic realities. They struggle to learn local dialects and adjust to unfamiliar cultural norms, often without materials that reflect Indigenous knowledge. At the outset, some parents and elders resist school initiatives, and tensions arise when policies conflict with community priorities (Nantin & Morales, 2025; Sonza & Protacio, 2025; Abellanosa & Maglantay, 2025). Parental involvement is often low, making collaboration difficult (Pagios, 2025; Cuartero-Enteria & Tagyam, 2020). Geographic isolation adds to the burden, with school heads enduring long walks, dangerous terrain, and weather-dependent travel (Kearney et al., 2022; Aquino et al., 2024; Paway, 2023; Nazarita & Morales, 2025; and Buenafior et al., 2023). Infrastructure is poor, with many schools lacking classrooms, electricity, water, and basic learning materials (Esperanza, 2025; and Basiwal-Ao-wat and Tovera-Ayang-ang, 2024). Language barriers affect both teaching and learning, as students struggle with Filipino and English, and teachers lack fluency in local dialects. The absence of MTB-MLE resources further complicates instruction. Frequent teacher transfers due to health, safety, or family concerns disrupt school stability.

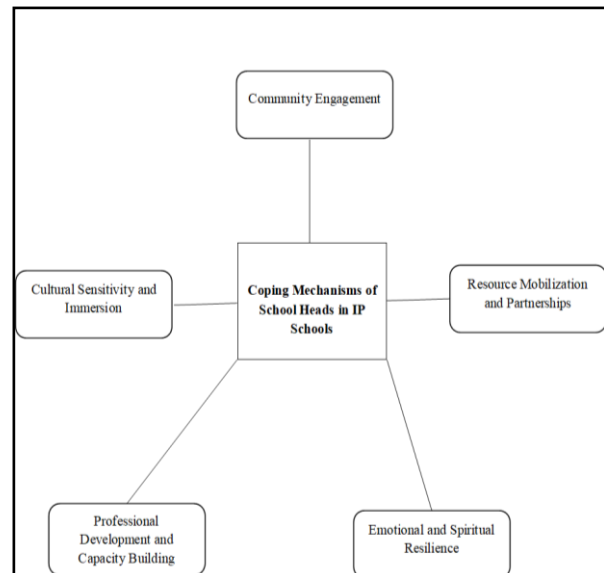
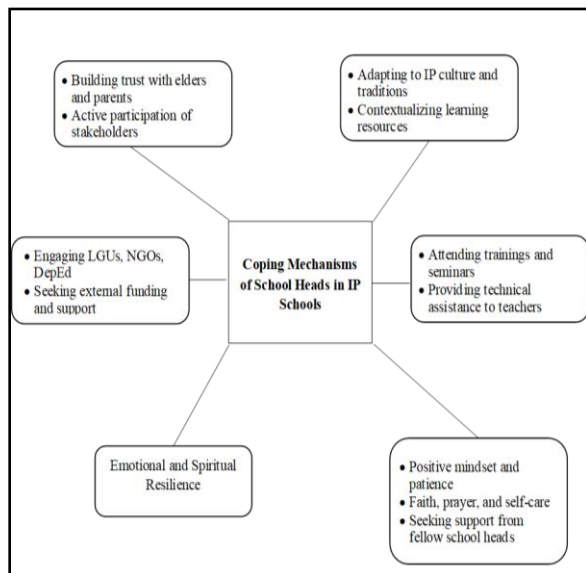


Figure 6. Initial Thematic Map for Coping Mechanisms of School Heads in IP School Figure 7. Final Thematic Map for Coping Mechanisms of School Heads in IP School

Figures 6 and 7 show the initial and thematic maps for coping mechanisms of school heads in the IP School. Managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools presents unique challenges that require culturally responsive leadership and adaptive strategies. School heads often navigate complex realities, including limited resources, the need to build trust within diverse communities, and day-to-day challenges. In response, they develop coping mechanisms that reflect both personal resilience and collective wisdom rooted in Indigenous contexts. These strategies embody intentional efforts to sustain inclusive, respectful, and effective educational environments. In view of the narratives of the school heads, the themes and categories of their coping mechanisms as IP school heads are identified using phenomenological data analysis. The presented figures encapsulate the school heads' coping mechanisms that emerged from codes and themes through the significant statements. These were developed and identified from the implicit and explicit meanings embedded in their descriptions.

School heads in IP schools use a variety of coping mechanisms to manage the challenges they face. They build trust with elders and parents to strengthen community relationships (Nesterova, 2023). Stakeholders are actively involved in school planning and decision-making. By adapting to IP culture and traditions, school heads foster respect and relevance in their leadership (Miole, 2023; Basiwal-Ao-wat and Ayang-ang, 2024). They

contextualize learning resources to reflect Indigenous values (Valle, 2025). To address resource gaps, they engage LGUs, NGOs, and DepEd and seek external funding through proposals and partnerships (Valle, 2025; Miolo, 2023). Professional development is a priority, with school heads attending trainings and providing technical assistance to teachers (Basiwal-Ao-wat and Ayang-ang, 2024). Emotional and spiritual resilience is sustained through faith, prayer, self-care, and a positive mindset. Support from fellow school heads helps them share burdens and stay motivated (Dela Cruz, 2023). These coping strategies reflect their commitment to culturally responsive, collaborative, and resilient leadership.

Table 1

A Proposed Capacity-Building Program for School Heads Managing IP Schools

Main Objectives	Activities	Time Frame	Point Person	Resources (Human, Financial, Material)	Expected Output
Strengthen cultural immersion and the integration of Indigenous knowledge.	Workshops on IP culture, dialects, and traditions; Co-learning sessions with elders	May 2026	School heads, IP elders, cultural experts	Honoraria for elders, training kits, venue, and facilitators	Improved cultural sensitivity and trust-building
Enhance inclusive planning and community engagement.	Stakeholder mapping, simulation of inclusive SIP planning, and community consultations	June 2026	School heads, parents, tribal leaders, LGU reps	Planning tools, consultation funds, and documentation materials	Inclusive and community-aligned SIPs
Improve resource mobilization and partnership building.	Proposal writing clinics, networking forums with LGUs, NGOs, and DepEd	July 2026	School heads, district supervisors, NGO partners	Resource persons, proposal templates, travel funds	Increased access to external support and funding
Build capacity for instructional leadership and teacher support.	Mentoring workshops, technical assistance modules, and peer collaboration sessions	August 2026	School heads, master teachers, and education program specialists	Training modules, mentoring guides, peer support tools	Strengthened teacher performance and instructional quality
Promote emotional and spiritual resilience.	Mindfulness and self-care sessions, faith-based reflections, peer support circles	September 2026	School heads, guidance counselors, and faith leaders	Wellness kits, retreat venue, facilitators	Sustained motivation, well-being, and leadership resilience

Based on the findings of this study, elementary school heads managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools face complex challenges that require culturally responsive, emotionally resilient, and strategically collaborative leadership. To address these needs, a capacity-building program may be designed to strengthen their immersion in Indigenous culture, enhance inclusive planning and community engagement, improve resource mobilization, and support instructional leadership. This program can also equip school heads with tools to mentor teachers in culturally responsive pedagogy and to navigate multilingual classrooms. Additionally, it can foster emotional resilience through wellness support and peer collaboration, enabling leaders to sustain their roles in high-stress, low-resource environments.

The proposed program integrates key components, including cultural sensitivity training, stakeholder collaboration, proposal writing, teacher mentoring, and wellness support. It aims to empower school heads to lead with empathy, competence, and cultural integrity, while navigating the unique demands of IP education. This initiative aligns with DepEd's commitment to inclusive, context-based leadership development in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas. It also promotes community-based leadership practices that honor Indigenous values and strengthen school-community relationships. By equipping school heads with

culturally responsive tools and strategies, the program fosters sustainable, equity-driven improvements in IP school governance. It was carefully crafted based on the shared narratives of elementary school heads during semi-structured interviews. Their lived experiences revealed recurring themes such as cultural immersion, community engagement, resource mobilization, instructional leadership, and emotional resilience, which were synthesized into the program's core components. These insights provided authentic, context-specific guidance for designing a responsive and empowering intervention that reflects the actual coping mechanisms and leadership needs of school heads managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools.

The proposed capacity-building program is designed to address the unique challenges faced by school heads managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools, particularly those in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. These leaders are at the forefront of ensuring culturally responsive education. However, they often encounter barriers such as limited resources, language differences, and the need to balance administrative duties with community engagement. By strengthening their competencies in cultural immersion, inclusive planning, resource mobilization, instructional leadership, and resilience, the program aims to empower school heads to sustain quality education while honoring Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Traditions. The primary recipients of this program are school heads of IP schools, who play a critical role in shaping educational practices and fostering trust between schools and communities. Secondary recipients include teachers, IP elders, local government representatives, and NGO partners, whose collaboration is essential for holistic and sustainable educational development. The need for this program stems from the recurring issues of teacher transfers, language barriers, geographic isolation, and limited access to professional development opportunities, all of which weaken instructional continuity and community trust (Malon et al., 2026). Through targeted workshops, mentoring sessions, and wellness initiatives, the program seeks to build a cadre of resilient, culturally sensitive, and strategically equipped school leaders (Cagatcagat & Pabiona, 2025). Ultimately, this initiative will not only enhance leadership effectiveness but also contribute to the broader goal of inclusive, equitable, and community-aligned education for Indigenous learners.

Elementary school heads managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools require a capacity-building program that addresses their unique cultural, geographic, and systemic challenges. The proposed Culturally Responsive Leadership and Resilience Program (CRLRP) is designed to strengthen their ability to immerse in Indigenous cultures, build trust with communities, and lead inclusive school planning. It also aims to enhance their skills in resource mobilization through partnerships with LGUs, NGOs, and DepEd, while supporting instructional leadership and teacher mentoring in multilingual and resource-limited contexts. Recognizing the emotional and spiritual demands of working in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas, the program includes modules on self-care, faith-based coping, and peer support.

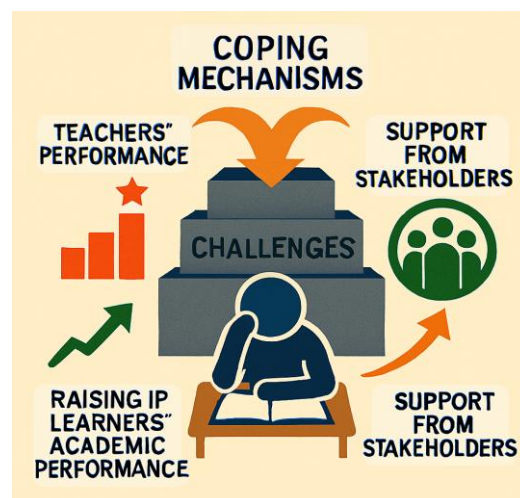


Figure 8. Simulacrum of the Study

The symbolic simulacrum visually represents the complex leadership dynamics faced by school heads in Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools (Hogan & Thompson, 2025). At the center sits a contemplative figure, symbolizing the school head, surrounded by stacked blocks labeled “Challenges,” reflecting the layered burdens of limited resources, cultural barriers, and administrative pressures. Rising from these challenges is a swirling arrow labeled “Coping Mechanisms,” which branches into three directions. Each leads to a key outcome. One arrow points to a bar graph marked “Teachers’ Performance,” representing improved instructional delivery and professional resilience; another leads to an upward arrow labeled “Raising IP Learners’ Academic Performance,” symbolizing enhanced student achievement; and the third connects to a circle of figures labeled “Support from Stakeholders,” signifying community trust and collaborative governance. The entire diagram abstracts leadership into a visual theory of change, showing how resilience and adaptive strategies can transform adversity into systemic educational progress (Yang & Suntrayuth, 2025).

4. Conclusions

In view of the above findings, the lived experiences of school heads in IP schools reveal a deep commitment to culturally responsive leadership grounded in empathy, resilience, and collaboration. Their immersion in Indigenous knowledge and traditions fosters trust and relevance in school-community relationships. Despite facing physical, emotional, and infrastructural challenges, they sustain their leadership through faith, self-care, and a positive mindset. Instructional support and community engagement emerge as vital strategies for improving learning outcomes and promoting shared ownership. Overall, these school heads exemplify adaptive, values-driven leadership that bridges formal education with Indigenous identity and collective empowerment. School heads in IP schools face complex challenges that stem from cultural, geographic, and systemic factors. Their efforts to immerse themselves in Indigenous culture are hindered by language barriers and a lack of culturally relevant materials. Geographic isolation and poor infrastructure make daily operations physically demanding and resource-constrained. Weak initial community trust and frequent teacher transfers further disrupt school stability and progress. These findings highlight the urgent need for culturally responsive support, improved infrastructure, and sustained community partnerships to empower school leadership in Indigenous contexts. School heads in IP schools demonstrate adaptive and resilient leadership through diverse coping mechanisms. They strengthen community engagement by building trust and involving stakeholders in school activities. Cultural immersion and contextualization of learning resources help them align education with Indigenous values. Partnerships, professional development, and emotional-spiritual practices sustain their motivation and effectiveness. These coping strategies enable school heads to overcome systemic challenges and lead with empathy, relevance, and purpose. There is an urgent need to build the capacity of elementary school heads in IP schools through a holistic and culturally responsive leadership program. Their coping mechanisms, rooted in community engagement, cultural immersion, resource mobilization, professional development, and emotional resilience, reflect both the complexity of their roles and the depth of their commitment. A well-designed capacity-building initiative can therefore honor Indigenous contexts while equipping school heads with strategic, instructional, and wellness competencies.

Recommendations - In light of the findings, the following recommendations are proposed: Educational leaders in IP schools can be provided with capacity-building activities and emotional and spiritual wellness programs that recognize their unique challenges and coping strategies. DepEd and local stakeholders may strengthen inclusive planning and resource mobilization efforts to empower school heads and sustain culturally-responsive leadership. DepEd is still encouraged to prioritize the creation of culturally grounded instructional materials and localized language resources, specifically for IP schools, to ensure equity and inclusion despite the shelving of MTB-MLE. DepEd and local education units can strengthen inter-agency partnerships to support school heads in resource mobilization, cultural immersion, and community engagement. Regular capacity-building programs and peer support networks can be provided to sustain emotional resilience and culturally-responsive leadership in IP schools. DepEd may implement a culturally-responsive leadership program that equips elementary school heads in IP schools with skills in community engagement, resource mobilization,

and instructional support. Integrating wellness modules and Indigenous knowledge systems will further strengthen their resilience and effectiveness in managing culturally diverse and geographically isolated learning environments. Further studies may be conducted by other researchers about the challenges and coping mechanisms using a mixed-method research design.

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