

Voices From the Margins: Understanding Lived Experiences of Indigenous Learners in Predominantly Non-Indigenous Educational Settings Using Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of Indigenous learners in predominantly non-Indigenous educational settings, focusing on the challenges and strategies they encounter in their academic journey. Using Appreciative Inquiry as a methodological framework, the research identifies key themes that highlight both the strengths and challenges of Indigenous learners. Findings reveal that Indigenous students demonstrate resilience and adaptive strategies, leveraging supportive teacher interactions, peer engagement, and cultural pride to overcome educational barriers. Positive academic experiences are enhanced when students feel seen and valued, with teachers who integrate cultural expressions and affirm students' identities. However, challenges such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and a lack of curriculum representation persist. Indigenous students express a strong desire for more inclusive education, advocating for the integration of their culture, history, and language into school curricula. The study provides recommendations for creating more supportive environments, including culturally responsive teaching, mentorship programs, and language accessibility initiatives. Sustainable changes are also proposed, including policy reforms and community engagement strategies that ensure long-term cultural inclusion and academic success for Indigenous learners. These findings underscore the need for systemic changes in education to nurture both the academic and cultural identities of Indigenous students.

Keywords: Indigenous Learner; Predominantly Non-Indigenous Settings; lived experiences; Appreciative Inquiry

I. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Peoples are essential members of society that contribute to the rich culture and history of their communities. If they are given proper recognition and equitable access to holistic education, they have the potential to play a significant role in national development. This can be achieved by preserving their heritage, giving them the opportunity to share their unique knowledge systems, and having them actively

participate in various socio-economic advancements.

Across the globe, Indigenous communities encounter numerous critical challenges, including the displacement from their ancestral lands due to industrial expansion and deforestation, which jeopardizes both their traditional way of life and their right to self-determination (Anaya, 2011). Additionally, the forces of globalization and assimilation policies have accelerated the decline of Indigenous languages and cultural practices, leading to significant cultural erosion. Furthermore,

systemic discrimination and social exclusion continue to contribute to persistent issues such as poverty, unemployment, and limited political representation (United Nations, 2009)

Indigenous communities continue to face legal and political obstacles, including the lack of formal recognition of their sovereignty and autonomy. Additionally, economic exploitation in sectors such as mining and tourism further restricts their ability to achieve sustainable development and self-determination. These ongoing challenges emphasize the pressing need for global initiatives aimed at safeguarding Indigenous rights and enhancing their overall well-being.

Ensuring access to high-quality education is crucial for empowering Indigenous Peoples and preserving their cultural heritage. The absence of culturally responsive education has been identified as a significant factor contributing to their continued social disadvantage. Galindo (2018) emphasized that for generations, Indigenous communities have faced persistent marginalization due to their distinct ways of life, traditions, and beliefs. They have also been subjected to discrimination, often rooted in longstanding stereotypes that portray them as uneducated or uncivilized.

Indigenous Peoples have the right to high-quality education—one that reflects their beliefs, values, principles, and shared cultural identity (Forbes, 2003; Hare, 2010). Hare (2010) further emphasizes that education for Indigenous learners should focus on the development of the whole person, addressing both cognitive and emotional aspects to create a holistic learning experience.

The Philippine government, through the Department of Education (DepEd), actively embraces change and addresses the educational needs of Indigenous Peoples. In alignment with the country's commitment to achieving the Education for All (EFA) targets and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as advancing the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA), DepEd adopted the National Indigenous Peoples (IP) Education Policy Framework (DepEd, 2011). This framework acknowledges education as a fundamental tool for realizing other human rights and essential freedoms. To reinforce this policy, DepEd developed an Indigenous Peoples (IP) Education Program guided by a rights-based approach, emphasizing the core principles of

participation, inclusion, and empowerment (DO 62, s. 2011).

Despite the existence of state policies aimed at ensuring access to education, many Indigenous Peoples have yet to fully realize this fundamental right, highlighting a persistent education gap. This discrepancy suggests a misalignment between the policies on education in the Philippines and their actual implementation—an issue that this research seeks to explore and address.

Including Indigenous perspectives in research and knowledge-sharing is important for making academic spaces more inclusive and fairer. By exploring the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples, researchers can ensure that their voices, narratives, and traditional knowledge systems are acknowledged and valued within academic discourse. This approach not only deepens our understanding of human diversity and resilience but also supports efforts toward social justice, cultural preservation, and sustainable development. Recognizing and valuing Indigenous perspectives is a crucial step toward building a more inclusive and equitable society. Students are shaped by more than just their race, ethnicity, or background; their unique and layered experiences directly influence both their academic and personal success. By understanding these diverse experiences, policymakers can better identify the challenges Indigenous students face and the ways they overcome them. This awareness is essential for developing educational policies that are responsive to their needs and promote a more supportive learning environment (Mason, 2021)

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to understand the lived experiences of Indigenous Learners in predominantly non-indigenous educational settings; therefore, it will answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Indigenous learners in non-Indigenous educational settings, particularly in relation to their academic, social, and cultural integration?
2. In what ways do these experiences influence the academic engagement, motivation, and performance of Indigenous learners?

3. What strategies and support systems do Indigenous learners use to navigate and thrive in non-Indigenous educational settings?

II. METHODOLOGY

This study will use an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as the method of study. Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S. (1987) states that AI is a strengths-based, positive approach to research and organizational change that focuses on identifying and amplifying the best in people, processes, and organizations. Unlike traditional problem-solving models, which focus on identifying and fixing problems, AI focuses on uncovering the positive aspects of an organization or community and building on those strengths (Bushe, 2011).

AI is typically conducted in a cycle of five phases, often referred to as the "5-D" cycle: Definition, Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. Each phase plays a unique role in guiding the research process and ensuring that the voices of participants are central to the study (Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S., 1987).

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study explores the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners in predominantly non-Indigenous educational settings within the Municipality of Lake Sebu.

The study is geographically limited to schools located within the Lake Sebu East District, considering its demographic characteristics. To ensure alignment with the study's focus, only schools with a large population of non-IP learners while still catering to a significant number of IP learners will be included. Schools that adhere to the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) framework may still be considered, provided that the non-IP student population remains higher than the IP student population.

Research Instrument

This study utilizes a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data-gathering instrument, designed to explore the lived experiences of Indigenous learners in predominantly non-Indigenous educational settings. To align with the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework, the interview questions are structured around the 4D model—Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny—which focuses on uncovering strengths, envisioning

possibilities, and fostering positive educational experiences.

The semi-structured nature of the interview allows for flexibility, enabling participants to narrate their experiences while ensuring key themes are addressed. The questions are designed to elicit positive and meaningful reflections on their academic, linguistic, social, and cultural experiences in school.

To ensure validity and reliability, the interview guide underwent expert validation by a panel of researchers and educators familiar with Indigenous education and Appreciative Inquiry.

All interviews will be audio-recorded (with participant consent) and transcribed for thematic analysis. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and voluntary participation, will be strictly observed. Participants will also receive a token of appreciation for their time and insights. The primary instrument for data collection in this study is a self-developed interview questionnaire, designed to explore and understand the lived experiences of Indigenous learners in predominantly non-Indigenous educational settings. This questionnaire consists of three sections, each corresponding to the study's specific research questions (SOP) to ensure that all aspects of the inquiry are thoroughly addressed.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher will seek permission from the Schools Division of South Cotabato by submitting a formal letter addressed to the Schools Division Superintendent. Upon approval, the researcher will then send letters to the eight selected elementary schools in Lake Sebu. These letters will include essential details about the study. After distributing the letters, the researcher will await responses from the schools regarding their willingness to participate. It is explicitly stated in the letter that participation is voluntary, and schools have the full right to decline without any obligation.

Once the selected schools grant approval, the researcher will request permission to access the list of enrolled Indigenous learners to compare their population with that of non-Indigenous learners. This information will be handled with the utmost

confidentiality. After securing the necessary permits and consent from relevant stakeholders, the researcher will proceed with conducting interviews with Indigenous learners. Before the interview process begins, the researcher will obtain informed consent from each participant, ensuring they voluntarily agree to take part in the study (Ang Karugasik, 2016). Once consent is given, the researcher will provide a briefing on the study's objectives and the interview process.

Data Analysis

In research areas with limited prior studies, such as the challenges faced by Indigenous learners in educational settings, a descriptive qualitative approach is particularly valuable. Colaizzi's method is often preferred due to its structured thematic analysis, making it more accessible and familiar to researchers. To ensure a thorough understanding of the data, the researcher will meticulously review the interview transcripts multiple times.

Following Hatch's (2002) recommendations, the researcher may create a note sheet for each participant to facilitate qualitative analysis. As data analysis progresses, these summary sheets will serve as a quick reference to the source data. Hatch (2002) suggests that after initial readings, researchers should review the data with a specific typology in mind.

The researcher will categorize the data into themes or categories based on the literature by extracting relevant text samples and assigning them to specific themes or constructs. After thoroughly reviewing the data with each typology in mind, the researcher will proceed with the coding process. This will involve multiple rounds of analysis, during which emerging patterns and insights will be identified.

To provide context and relevance to the learners' educational experiences, the researcher will analyze the data by identifying key themes, recurring concepts, and common belief patterns that emerge throughout the interviews. As these themes develop, meaningful interpretations will begin to surface. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), this data analysis stage allows the researcher to establish connections between interviews, giving depth and context to the identified themes and categories.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher will take necessary steps to ensure that the study upholds ethical standards while maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Respondents' names and personal information will not be disclosed at any point. Before the interview, they will receive a consent form explaining the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without needing to provide a reason. The researcher will also reassure participants that their safety and privacy will be respected. All gathered information will be strictly for academic purposes and handled with the utmost care and confidentiality.

By Section 8 of the Data Privacy Act of 2012, which emphasizes the importance of safeguarding personal information, deliberate measures must be taken to ensure confidentiality. Protecting research participants should be the researcher's top priority. When applying the principles of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, the researcher must always prioritize the well-being of the participants, as they are integral to the success of the study.

Researcher Positionality

As an Indigenous researcher and a member of the T'boli community, the researcher's perspective is deeply shaped by her cultural heritage and lived experiences. Growing up within the community, she has been guided by its values, traditions, and knowledge systems while also witnessing the challenges Indigenous peoples face in navigating societal structures that often overlook or marginalize their voices.

This dual perspective positions the researcher as an insider within the context of this study. Sharing cultural commonalities with the participants allows her to approach the research with a deep, nuanced understanding of their experiences and perspectives. However, she acknowledges that her insights do not encompass the full spectrum of Indigenous experiences. Her background, education, and personal journey shape the lens through which she views and interprets the research.

As a researcher, she also operates within the academic system—a space that has historically marginalized and misrepresented Indigenous Peoples. This dual positionality requires her to navigate the intersection of two distinct worlds: one shaped by non-Indigenous academic traditions and

another deeply rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing. She recognizes that her presence in this space carries both privilege and responsibility—to challenge systemic inequities, honor her community's knowledge, and ensure that the research is conducted with integrity and respect. Her positionality influences not only the questions she asks but also the methodologies she employs—prioritizing relational accountability, cultural relevance, and the empowerment of Indigenous voices. By acknowledging her place within this research, she hopes to contribute to a body of work that amplifies Indigenous perspectives and fosters meaningful change.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous learners in predominantly non-Indigenous educational settings. Using thematic analysis, the data collected through interviews were coded and categorized into themes that address the study's main research questions. In alignment with the Appreciative Inquiry framework, the findings highlight both the challenges faced by Indigenous learners and the strategies, support systems, and aspirations that contribute to their resilience and success in school.

Presentation of Findings

These findings were derived from the interviews conducted with Indigenous learners regarding their experiences in predominantly non-Indigenous educational settings. The data gathered were analyzed thematically, guided by the three main research questions, each of which consists of five sub-questions. Through careful analysis, some themes were found to overlap across different sub-questions. To avoid redundancy and provide a more cohesive discussion, these overlapping themes were merged while ensuring that all key insights were preserved.

The findings are structured under each main research question to facilitate clarity and organization. Each section presents the essential themes identified, followed by a table that categorizes the clustered themes, corresponding

codes, and significant statements from participants. These tables provide a structured summary of the findings, while the accompanying narrative explains the relevance of each theme in understanding the lived experiences of Indigenous learners.

Emerging Themes on Lived Experiences of Indigenous Learners in non-Indigenous Settings

This section presents the findings that answers to the research question 1:

What are the lived experiences of Indigenous learners in non-Indigenous educational settings, particularly about their academic, social, and cultural integration?

Emergent Theme 1: Communication Challenges and Support

The responses illustrate that Indigenous learners initially experience communication barriers due to differences in language use between home and school settings. This creates feelings of fear, embarrassment, and isolation in classroom interactions. However, the accounts also highlight moments of support, where teachers and peers helped bridge the language gap through kindness, patience, and peer inclusion. These support systems play a critical role in boosting the learners' confidence and easing their adjustment to the school environment.

These findings are consistent with recent literature emphasizing language as a crucial component in educational inclusion. According to Garcia and Kleifgen (2019), language differences can marginalize learners when the dominant language in the classroom does not reflect students' linguistic backgrounds. Similarly, Ball and McIvor (2021) highlight that Indigenous learners often face systemic barriers in education due to linguistic mismatches and a lack of culturally responsive communication practices. Moreover, support from teachers and peers aligns with Villegas et al. (2020) who argue that culturally responsive teaching—where language and identity are recognized—can significantly enhance engagement and learning outcomes for Indigenous students.

Emergent Theme 2: Cultural Affirmation and Expression

This theme captures the ways in which Indigenous learners are able to express, affirm, and take pride in their cultural heritage within the school setting. Despite moments of misunderstanding or teasing from peers, many participants responded with confidence and a willingness to educate others about their traditions. Whether through performances, music, or traditional attire, these learners transformed cultural expression into teachable moments, fostering mutual respect and awareness among their peers.

These findings resonate with Keddie (2019), who highlights the importance of creating educational spaces where students feel safe and empowered to express their cultural identities. Cultural affirmation in schools not only enhances students' self-esteem but also promotes intercultural understanding. Similarly, Sarra et al. (2020) emphasize that giving voice to Indigenous traditions in mainstream schools helps disrupt deficit narratives and fosters a culture of inclusion and respect. The learners' ability to educate peers and receive admiration reflects a shift toward more reciprocal cultural exchanges in the classroom.

Emergent Theme 3: Inclusive Educational Environments

This theme reflects how supportive and inclusive learning spaces contribute to Indigenous learners' sense of belonging and confidence in school. Participants shared experiences of being encouraged by teachers who embraced mistakes as part of learning and validated their voices. Inclusion was also fostered through visible representation of their cultures in classroom materials and activities, as well as through peer engagement during shared cultural exchanges like traditional games and art. These inclusive practices transformed the classroom into a space where Indigenous learners felt seen, heard, and respected.

The findings align with Hyde & Power (2022) who argue that inclusive learning environments are pivotal in nurturing student engagement, especially for culturally diverse learners. When students see their identities reflected in classroom content and

interactions, they are more likely to participate actively and develop stronger self-esteem. Similarly, Guenther et al. (2020) emphasize that when Indigenous culture is integrated meaningfully into school spaces, it enhances not only academic outcomes but also learners' emotional security and cultural identity. This theme also supports Morrison et al. (2019) who advocate for classrooms that validate all cultural narratives to break cycles of marginalization.

Emerging Theme 4: Experiences of Exclusion, Misunderstanding, and Cultural Devaluation

This theme reveals the emotional and psychological impact of exclusion, stereotyping, and lack of cultural sensitivity experienced by Indigenous learners in non-Indigenous educational settings. Learners recounted moments of being mocked for their language, traditional clothing, and cultural practices. These instances not only led to feelings of isolation and embarrassment but also undermined their confidence and willingness to share their identity. Such experiences illustrate the persistent microaggressions and cultural invalidation that many Indigenous students face within school environments.

These findings echo Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2019) who found that experiences of racial microaggressions and cultural devaluation significantly affect Indigenous learners' self-concept and participation in class. Similarly, Sarra et al. (2020) emphasized that when Indigenous cultures are dismissed or viewed through a deficit lens, it leads to disengagement and emotional distress among students. Moreover, MacGill and Blanch (2021) advocate for culturally safe classrooms where all students feel respected and valued, noting that exclusionary practices often stem from unconscious biases and systemic gaps in cultural competency training.

Emerging Theme 5: Integration of indigenous Knowledge with Formal Education

This theme highlights the effort of Indigenous learners to bridge the gap between their traditional knowledge and formal education. While the shift from community-based learning to the structured

environment of formal schooling presents challenges, learners express a desire for more connections between their cultural practices and academic content. They show a preference for incorporating their way of life into the school curriculum, such as through stories, field trips, and cultural learning experiences. These responses suggest that integrating Indigenous knowledge into formal education can support a more meaningful and relevant learning experience for Indigenous students.

These findings align with the work of Bishop (2019), who emphasized the importance of recognizing and integrating Indigenous knowledge into mainstream educational curricula to promote educational equity. Harrison and Greenfield (2021) also highlighted that culturally responsive teaching that incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing enhances the learning experiences of Indigenous students, making learning more engaging and relevant to their lives. This approach not only improves academic performance but also fosters a deeper sense of cultural identity and pride.

Emerging Theme 6: Shaping Personal Identity through Indigenous Values

This theme underscores the significant role Indigenous cultural values play in shaping the personal identity of Indigenous learners. The participants express pride in their cultural heritage and often share stories and traditions with their peers. These values, such as respect for elders, gratitude, patience, helpfulness, and generosity, are integral to the students' sense of self and guide their interactions with others in the school environment. Despite occasional scepticism from classmates about the authenticity of their cultural expressions, these learners show resilience and pride in their cultural identity, which positively influences their behaviour and relationships with teachers and peers.

The strength of Indigenous learners' personal identity is closely linked to the preservation and expression of their cultural values. These values are not only foundational to their personal development but also serve as a source of resilience in challenging educational environments. According to McKinley (2019), when Indigenous students are

able to draw upon their cultural values in educational settings, they experience a strengthened sense of belonging and self-confidence, which contributes to better academic outcomes.

Promoting the affirmation of Indigenous values in educational settings can support the development of a positive self-concept among Indigenous students.

Emerging Themes on Impact of School Experiences on Academic Engagement and Performance

This section presents the findings that answers to the research question 2:

In what ways do these experiences influence the academic engagement, motivation, and performance of Indigenous learners?

Emerging Theme 1: Supportive Interpersonal Interactions Enhancing Engagement

Supportive interpersonal interactions, particularly between teachers, peers, and Indigenous learners, play a vital role in fostering academic engagement and motivation. Through personalized attention, positive reinforcement, and culturally responsive interactions, Indigenous learners are provided with the support they need to overcome challenges and become more engaged in their learning environment. These interactions contribute significantly to enhancing learners' confidence and academic perseverance, as seen in the participants' experiences.

The learners in this study consistently mentioned the importance of teacher support in their academic engagement. Several participants shared that when teachers took the time to incorporate the learners' cultural knowledge and language into lessons, it helped them connect better with the content and feel valued in the classroom. For example, one student emphasized that understanding lessons improved when teachers used their indigenous language and cultural practices as teaching tools. This aligns with recent findings in educational literature, which highlight the positive effects of culturally responsive teaching on student engagement (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2020).

Another significant aspect of support mentioned by participants was the encouragement and patience shown by teachers when learners made mistakes. This emotional support helped to mitigate the fear of failure and created a learning environment where mistakes were viewed as opportunities for growth rather than setbacks. For instance, learners described how their teachers' acceptance of errors motivated them to continue trying without the pressure of perfection. This reflects the principles of a growth mindset and underscores the importance of emotional and social support for academic success (Dweck, 2017).

Emerging Theme 2: Material and Instructional Supports for Academic Performance

Material and instructional supports significantly impact Indigenous learners' academic performance. Availability of educational resources, access to basic necessities, and support systems such as scholarships, feeding programs, and peer tutoring all play critical roles in helping learners overcome barriers to learning. Participants frequently mentioned the importance of having access to essential learning materials such as pencils, papers, and other supplies. This finding is consistent with existing research that stresses the role of adequate learning materials in fostering student engagement and success. Without proper resources, students are at a disadvantage, which can negatively affect their academic performance and motivation (Kraft, 2019; Hattie, 2020).

Moreover, several learners shared how personal circumstances, such as hunger or a lack of electricity at home, made studying particularly difficult. This is a common challenge among students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, where issues such as food insecurity can detract from their academic performance (Berryman et al., 2020).

Teachers' proactive responses to these challenges, such as organizing feeding programs or adjusting school schedules to accommodate work at home, were highly appreciated by participants. This mirrors findings in educational research that emphasize the importance of teacher involvement in addressing students' external challenges, thus

helping them balance academic and personal needs (Deci & Ryan, 2019; Harris & Jones, 2020).

Emerging Theme 3: Experiential and Culturally Engaging Pedagogies Enhances Learning

This theme highlights how learning becomes more meaningful for Indigenous learners when it includes experiential strategies and culturally relevant content. When teachers use hands-on activities and integrate local traditions, learners feel more connected to the lesson and more confident in participating.

Participants expressed how they learn better when teaching strategies are interactive and connected to their Indigenous culture. These insights affirm that when the learning process mirrors learners' lived experiences and cultural identity, it becomes easier to understand, relate to, and retain academic content.

This theme is supported by studies in culturally responsive education. Bishop and Berryman (2006) assert that learners' academic success is closely tied to how well their cultural knowledge and identities are valued in school. Similarly, Gay (2010) emphasizes that culturally relevant teaching enhances student motivation, engagement, and achievement, especially among marginalized groups. These studies validate the participant voices in this research, which point toward the effectiveness of culture-centered and participatory pedagogies in Indigenous education.

Emerging Theme 4: External Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Affecting Engagement

This theme explores the external factors that hinder Indigenous learners' academic engagement, such as poverty-related struggles, language-based discrimination, and limited access to basic resources like electricity and food. Despite these challenges, participants shared ways these were addressed—often through supportive interventions by teachers and the school community. These strategies, rooted in care and responsiveness, helped learners remain engaged and regain confidence in their studies.

This theme resonates with the concept of educational equity—the idea that learners must be

given the resources they need to succeed, based on their unique circumstances. Research by Ladson-Billings (2006) and Bishop (2011) suggests that effective educational environments do not ignore learners' struggles, but rather respond to them with contextualized and culturally sensitive strategies. Moreover, in AI research, small-scale success stories such as solar lamp distribution or peer-led reading support are seen as the "seeds" of transformation that can be expanded system-wide.

Emerging Theme 5: Recommendations for Enhanced Support

This theme presents the voices of Indigenous learners who, while appreciative of the existing support they receive, express thoughtful and heartfelt recommendations to further strengthen their educational experiences. Their suggestions center on the inclusion of more culturally relevant content, increased patience and understanding from teachers, accessible learning materials in their native language, and financial support to ensure continuous learning.

Many participants articulated the importance of having lessons and activities that reflect their cultural identity. This desire to see their heritage reflected in the classroom emphasizes the need for deeper cultural integration in the curriculum, not just for engagement, but for fostering mutual understanding among all students.

Several learners also noted difficulties in accessing materials written in their own language. Language remains a critical barrier, particularly when parents are unable to assist due to their own limited formal education.

The need for patience and remedial support was also a recurring theme. Learners mentioned how they fall behind due to domestic responsibilities, like chores and farming duties, and called for additional time and understanding from teachers. Furthermore, the lack of financial stability continues to hinder educational access.

Bishop and Berryman (2006), in their book *Culture Speaks: Cultural Relationships and Classroom Learning*, highlight the importance of building strong, respectful relationships between teachers

and Indigenous students. They found that when teachers value and include indigenous culture in their teaching, students feel more accepted and more motivated to learn. They recommend that classrooms should be places where students can share their ideas and feel their culture is respected.

Emerging Themes on Strategies and Support Systems for Navigating Mainstream Education

This section presents the findings that answers to the research question 3:

What strategies and support systems do Indigenous learners use to navigate and thrive in non-Indigenous educational settings?

Emerging Theme 1: Supportive Interpersonal Interactions Enhancing Engagement

The voices of the Indigenous learners reveal how essential interpersonal relationships are in enhancing academic engagement. Supportive interactions with teachers—those who use culturally relevant examples, explain concepts using the learners' native language, and offer emotional encouragement—serve as strong motivational forces.

Additionally, the importance of peer support emerged clearly. Classmates who provided help during difficult lessons or encouraged participation in group activities helped shape a more inclusive and encouraging learning environment. These relationships empowered learners, transforming shyness into confidence, and frustration into determination.

The findings support what recent research suggests about the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and positive classroom relationships. According to Gay (2018), when teachers integrate students' cultural backgrounds into instruction, learners feel valued and are more likely to engage. Furthermore, Hattie's (2017) research on visible learning identifies teacher-student relationships as a high-impact factor influencing student achievement.

Peer-assisted learning, as emphasized by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, is another strong

reinforcement present in the data. Collaborative support among classmates allows students to bridge gaps in learning through shared experiences and social interaction, which is vital in multicultural educational settings.

Emerging Theme 2: Family, Community and Cultural Support Systems

The responses from participants highlight the critical role that family, community, and cultural support systems play in fostering resilience and perseverance among Indigenous learners. Participants expressed that their families instilled values such as patience, hard work, and pride in their culture, which significantly shaped their attitudes toward learning. Cultural teachings, often passed down by grandparents, served as a source of strength, especially during academic struggles. These familial and cultural supports create a sense of belonging and empowerment, encouraging students to face challenges with determination and resilience. The emotional and practical assistance provided by family members, whether through advice, encouragement, or prayer, reinforces the participants' belief in their capabilities, enhancing their motivation to overcome obstacles in their educational journey.

Recent research emphasizes the importance of family and community involvement in education, particularly for Indigenous students. Studies show that cultural continuity and family support are linked to higher academic success and better mental health outcomes for Indigenous learners (Bishop, 2011). According to a study by Skerrett (2016), the resilience fostered by strong family and community connections contributes to improved educational outcomes, aligning with the experiences shared by the participants.

Emerging Theme 3: Resilience and Achievement Amid Adversity

The participants' responses illustrate a strong sense of resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity. Despite facing numerous challenges, including lack of resources, long distances to school, and language barriers, the Indigenous learners demonstrated a remarkable capacity to overcome obstacles. Their personal stories of

determination—such as studying under a streetlight, walking long distances to attend school, and seeking help from family members—underscore their commitment to education. Achievements, whether academic (e.g., excelling in exams or contests) or personal (e.g., overcoming ridicule or cultural barriers), reflect the learners' inner strength and drive.

According to a study by Munn (2020), Indigenous learners who exhibit resilience in the face of barriers tend to achieve higher academic success, as they develop coping strategies that contribute to long-term perseverance. Research also suggests that resilience plays a significant role in mitigating the impact of socio-economic challenges, such as lack of resources and support (Te Kani & Wendt-Samu, 2017). The findings from the participants resonate with these studies, showcasing how resilience can lead to academic achievement despite challenging circumstances.

Emerging Theme 4: Advice for Perseverance and Self Advocacy

The participants' responses provide a clear and powerful message about the importance of perseverance and self-advocacy in the face of academic and personal challenges. Many participants spoke about the value of asking questions, seeking help, and not being afraid to make mistakes. They also highlighted the importance of patience and persistence, emphasizing that even when learning is difficult, staying committed to the process will ultimately lead to success. A recurring theme is the belief that education is a path to improving one's life and community, with participants encouraging each other to push through challenges for a brighter future. Several responses also pointed to the strength of their cultural identity, urging their peers to be proud of who they are and to embrace their unique skills.

The collective advice from participants underscores a sense of empowerment—reminding each other that learning is not just about academic achievement, but about personal growth, resilience, and the courage to share one's culture and experiences. Their emphasis on perseverance is rooted in the idea that challenges can be overcome

with the right mindset, support systems, and belief in one's ability to succeed.

The advice shared by the participants aligns with research on self-advocacy and perseverance. According to a study by Zepeda & May (2018), students who actively seek help and advocate for themselves tend to perform better academically, particularly in challenging environments. This is particularly relevant for Indigenous learners, who may face unique barriers to success. Moreover, studies on resilience and academic motivation (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggest that having a sense of purpose and persistence in the face of adversity significantly boosts academic outcomes. The learners' focus on perseverance and education as a means to improve their futures reflects these findings.

Emerging Theme 5: Envisioning Systemic Reforms for Cultural Inclusion

The responses of the participants emphasize the need for systemic changes that prioritize the inclusion of Indigenous culture within the educational environment. A consistent desire for cultural representation in school curricula, such as history lessons and cultural appreciation programs, emerged from the participants. Many voiced the importance of sharing their cultural heritage through arts, music, and food, highlighting the impact of exposure to these elements on their sense of identity and belonging.

Furthermore, they envisioned mentorship programs and outreach activities that bridge the gap between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers, helping foster empathy and mutual understanding.

The findings from this theme suggest a need for educational policies that foster cultural inclusivity and respect for Indigenous communities. A 2020 systematic review by Lowe et al. examined school-based Indigenous cultural programs in Australia and found that these initiatives positively impact indigenous student's sense of identity and connection to their community. The study emphasizes that for such programs to be effective, systemic reforms are necessary, including adequate resourcing, leadership support, and genuine collaboration with Indigenous communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations derived from the study's findings through the lens of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Unlike traditional problem-centered approaches, AI focuses on identifying strengths, envisioning possibilities, and designing sustainable solutions. By adopting this strengths-based perspective, this study aims to not only recognize the challenges faced by Indigenous learners but also highlight their successes and explore ways to build on them for a more inclusive and empowering educational experience.

The conclusions and recommendations are structured using AI's **4-D Cycle**. By structuring this chapter in alignment with Appreciative Inquiry, the study aims to contribute to a more hopeful and solutions-oriented discourse on Indigenous education. This approach ensures that the voices of Indigenous learners are not only heard but also valued as essential contributors to shaping a more responsive and culturally affirming educational system.

Conclusion

Discovery: What is Working Well?

The findings from this study reveal that Indigenous learners in predominantly non-Indigenous educational settings are demonstrating resilience and perseverance, despite facing several challenges. Supportive interpersonal interactions, such as positive teacher engagement, peer support, and family involvement, play a crucial role in enhancing students' academic motivation and performance. The learners' strong sense of cultural identity, supported by their families and communities, helps them navigate academic and social difficulties. Culturally engaging pedagogies, coupled with material and institutional supports, further contribute to creating a more inclusive learning environment. Indigenous learners have also developed personal strategies for adjustment, such as seeking academic support, applying resilience in difficult circumstances, and remaining focused on their goals. Their engagement is further

amplified when opportunities for cultural expression and representation are integrated into their learning experiences.

Dream: What Could Be?

Despite these positive aspects, several challenges remain, particularly around language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and limited representation of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum. Indigenous learners express a desire for systemic reforms that would integrate their culture, traditions, and language more meaningfully into the educational environment. They envision a curriculum that includes Indigenous histories, knowledge, and languages, alongside policies that promote cultural sensitivity among teachers and peers. Mentorship programs, culturally relevant teaching materials, and greater institutional support for both learners and teachers would significantly enhance the educational experience for Indigenous students. Strengthening family and community involvement in education, as well as providing learners with tools to advocate for themselves, could further empower them in their academic journey. By addressing these gaps, Indigenous learners can experience a more inclusive, supportive, and equitable educational environment that honors both their academic potential and cultural heritage.

Design: How Can We Improve?

In line with the aspirations of Indigenous learners, the following recommendations are aimed at fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for them:

1. **Curriculum Integration.** Schools should prioritize the integration of Indigenous history, culture, and knowledge systems into the curriculum. This approach not only fosters cultural appreciation but also enhances mutual understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.
2. **Culturally Responsive Teaching.** Teachers should undergo regular training on culturally responsive pedagogy. This training will ensure that Indigenous students are not only represented but also supported in the classroom,

enabling them to feel a sense of belonging and recognition.

3. **Language Accessibility.** To address language barriers, schools should develop learning materials in Indigenous languages. Offering bilingual support in classrooms will help Indigenous students connect with the content more effectively and improve overall academic performance.

4. **Mentorship and Peer Support Programs.** Establishing mentorship programs that pair older Indigenous students with younger ones will ease the transition into formal education. These peer support networks can promote a sense of community, academic success, and cultural pride.

5. **Community Engagement.** Strengthening partnerships between schools and Indigenous communities can enrich students' learning experiences. Cultural exchanges and community engagement will help bridge gaps, promote understanding, and create more inclusive school environments.

Destiny: Sustainable Future

To ensure long-term progress and support for Indigenous learners, it is crucial to implement sustainable policies and systemic changes:

1. **Government and Policy Support.** Education policymakers must prioritize the institutionalization of culturally inclusive curricula. Adequate funding should be allocated to Indigenous education initiatives to ensure their sustainability and long-term success.
2. **School-Wide Cultural Initiatives.** Schools should organize regular cultural events, Indigenous heritage celebrations, and student-led initiatives to promote cultural pride and representation. These activities will foster a deeper appreciation for Indigenous cultures within the school community.
3. **Indigenous Representation in Decision-Making.** Involving Indigenous leaders, educators, and students in the decision-making process will ensure that their perspectives and needs are central to educational reforms. Their inclusion is vital for shaping policies that are both relevant and impactful.
4. **Continuous Professional Development.** To continuously improve support for Indigenous

learners, schools should invest in regular workshops and training programs for educators. This ongoing professional development will ensure that teachers remain well-equipped to address the unique needs of Indigenous students.

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