

Turning Difficulty to Bliss: Perceptions of Indigenous Students on Persistence in Pursuing College Education

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Abstract

Low schooling persistence among Indigenous students is disconcerting. I explored the persistence of Indigenous students in studying college program. Qualitative research design, purposive sampling, interviews and, thematic analysis were the methods I used. The perceptions of the 12 Indigenous students revealed that Indigenous college learners face academic, social, and financial barriers, yet remain resilient and persistent through coping strategies, cultural identity, and family support. Based on these findings, higher education leaders may implement academic, financial, and culturally responsive support programs to improve Indigenous learners' comprehension, reduce economic burdens, strengthen belonging, and promote persistence in college. Future studies may use qualitative methods to deepen understanding of Indigenous cultures and lived experiences, or quantitative methods such as multiple linear regression to examine how academic and social perceptions predict student persistence.

Keywords: Turning difficulty to bliss, perceptions of indigenous students, persistence in pursuing college education

1. Introduction

Indigenous learners in college institutions often experience feelings of insecurity institutions often experience feelings of insecurity characterized by social isolation and reluctance to fully participate or mingle with others. Bongco (2023) defined insecurity as a feeling of inadequacy not being good enough and uncertainty. Being alienated from their ethnicity, Indigenous students initially feel insecure, which is reflected in shy personalities and uncertainty about their capabilities.

Indigenous students attending a Canadian university faced overt and subtle microaggressions from both staff and fellow students, which undermined their sense of belonging and confidence. Many Indigenous youths experience a sense of "personal amputation" by attending formal mainstream schools and, since they are often excluded from the rewards of schooling, many question the relevance of such education (King & Brigham, 2023). Indigenous students in Peru experienced significant social isolation (Ayala et al., 2025), characterized by disconnection, loneliness, and exclusion, affecting emotional wellbeing and academic success (Caldas & Silva, 2024; Durat et al., 2023). These psychosocial challenges are particularly evident among indigenous students from rural areas who migrate to urban universities with dominant languages and cultures different from their own.

In the Philippines, the concept of 'social distance' illustrated the instances of racism in social settings. It pertains to the notion that Aeta students feel they are being rejected or excluded by their classmates purely

This study was conducted in Davao del Norte, where a significant presence of Indigenous learners exists within colleges. Despite existing studies on Indigenous education in the Philippines, research specifically addressing the insecurities and lived experiences of Indigenous learners in higher education institutions remains limited. Moreover, indigenous educational programs face numerous challenges due to socio-political dynamics and intermittent closures, as exemplified by the plight of the Salugpongong schools serving Lumad learners in Mindanao (Cabusao, 2020).

These gaps highlight the need for additional studies that examine the unique experiences and insecurities of Indigenous students in college institutions. This study aims to fill this gap and serve as a basis for creating enhancement programs tailored to Indigenous students' academic success and well-being in higher education settings in Davao del Norte.

1.1. Significance of the Study

This study is anchored in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), as it promotes inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive education for Indigenous learners in higher education. By exploring the lived experiences of Indigenous students, this study may provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities they encounter in academic and social environments. The findings of this study may serve as a valuable reference for Indigenous learners, reflecting their voices, experiences, and struggles and helping them strengthen their identity, confidence, and sense of belonging within the academic community. For teachers and academic staff, this study may offer insights into the realities faced by Indigenous students, guiding them in adopting inclusive, culturally sensitive, and responsive teaching strategies that support student engagement and success. For school administrators, the results of this study may serve as a basis for designing and improving institutional programs, policies, and support systems that promote inclusivity, respect for diversity, and equal access to educational opportunities. For parents and communities, this study highlights the importance of support systems in the academic journey of Indigenous learners, encouraging stronger collaboration between families and educational institutions.

1.2. Research Questions

In this study, I aimed to explore the persistence of Indigenous students in college programs. Below are the central research questions that guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions of Indigenous learners regarding their academic experiences in college institutions?
2. What are the perceptions of Indigenous learners regarding their social experiences in college institutions?
3. What are the perceptions of Indigenous learners on their persistence in studying college programs?

In this study, which explores the lived experiences of Indigenous learners in college institutions, it is assumed that their experiences are shaped by both individual and shared realities, in which their academic participation, social relationships, and cultural identity intersect to influence their sense of belonging and persistence in higher education. It is also assumed that these Indigenous learners navigate complex educational environments influenced by cultural background, institutional practices, and peer interactions, which collectively shape their self-perception and engagement as students. Their experiences reflect the dynamic process of adjustment, resilience, and meaning-making as they respond to challenges and opportunities within the academic setting. Furthermore, this study assumed that participants could provide honest, reflective, and meaningful accounts of their lived experiences through interviews, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of their realities. The data gathered are assumed to be rich and credible, serving as a basis for interpreting the experiences of Indigenous learners and for informing the development of responsive and inclusive educational programs.

1.4. Conceptual Framework

This study is rooted in student persistence theory, illustrating how academic participation and social relationships collectively converge to drive student persistence. Academic participation encompasses institutional experiences, including teacher support, curriculum relevance, counseling, and classroom engagement, serving as preconditions for academic success (Tinto, 1975). Social relationships capture peer interactions, faculty connections, a sense of belonging, and cultural adjustment that foster institutional connectedness beyond academics (Tinto, 1987). These demonstrate how these two factors, when aligned, facilitate student integration and persistence, particularly for Indigenous learners navigating higher education challenges.

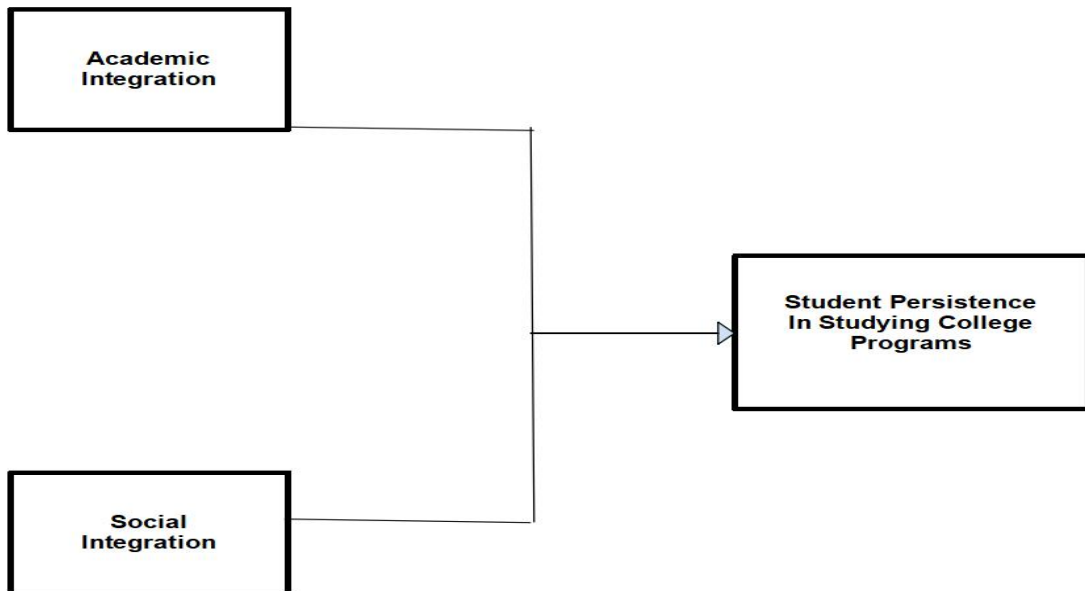


Figure 2. Paradigm of the Study through Student Persistence
 Theory by Vincent Tinto (1975)

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

In my study, a qualitative-descriptive research design was employed to provide a clear and direct description of the phenomenon based on the participants' lived experiences, closely reflecting their words and meanings (Villamin et al., 2024; Lim, 2024). This design is commonly used when the purpose of a study is to explore and describe real-life experiences or perceptions, particularly on topics that are not yet explored (Oranga & Matere, 2023). This design is advantageous due to its simplicity, flexibility, and ability to generate practical and easily understandable findings that are firmly grounded in participants' viewpoints (Villamin et al., 2024).

2.2 Locale of the Study

I conducted my study in Davao del Norte. I chose this setting because this province is known for its diverse population and rich cultural heritage. It is also a home to numerous colleges and universities that serve a considerable number of Indigenous learners from various ethnic communities and tribes such as Dibabawon, Blaán, Mansaka and others.

2.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

My study involved twelve (12) Indigenous learners who are 18 years old and above, both female and male, and are in their 3rd or 4th year of study in a college institution, in which students at these year levels had already established sufficient experience of their academic and social environment. To ensure relevance and depth, I employed purposive sampling (Patton, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This technique is typically applied when the goal is to gain in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon rather than to generalize findings to a larger population (Etikan et al. , 2016). Its main advantages include allowing the researcher to gather detailed and information-rich data, ensuring that participants are directly relevant to the research focus, and enhancing the depth and quality of qualitative insights (Patton, 2002).

2.4 Data Gathering Procedures

I conducted in-depth interviews, a qualitative data collection method that involves open-ended and flexible questioning to explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and meanings in detail (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach is commonly applied when a study aims to gain a deep understanding of complex phenomena, particularly those related to personal experiences and social contexts (Boyce & Neale, 2006). One of its key advantages is that it allows participants to freely express their thoughts, while giving the researcher flexibility to probe, clarify responses, and explore emerging themes, resulting in rich and detailed data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each Individual In-Depth Interview (IDI) lasted approximately 45–50 minutes, while the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) lasted about 1 to 1 hour and 30 minutes. Data gathering was conducted face-to-face based on the participants' preference, which also helped me build rapport and better observe their responses. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent to ensure accurate transcription and a more reliable analysis of the data.

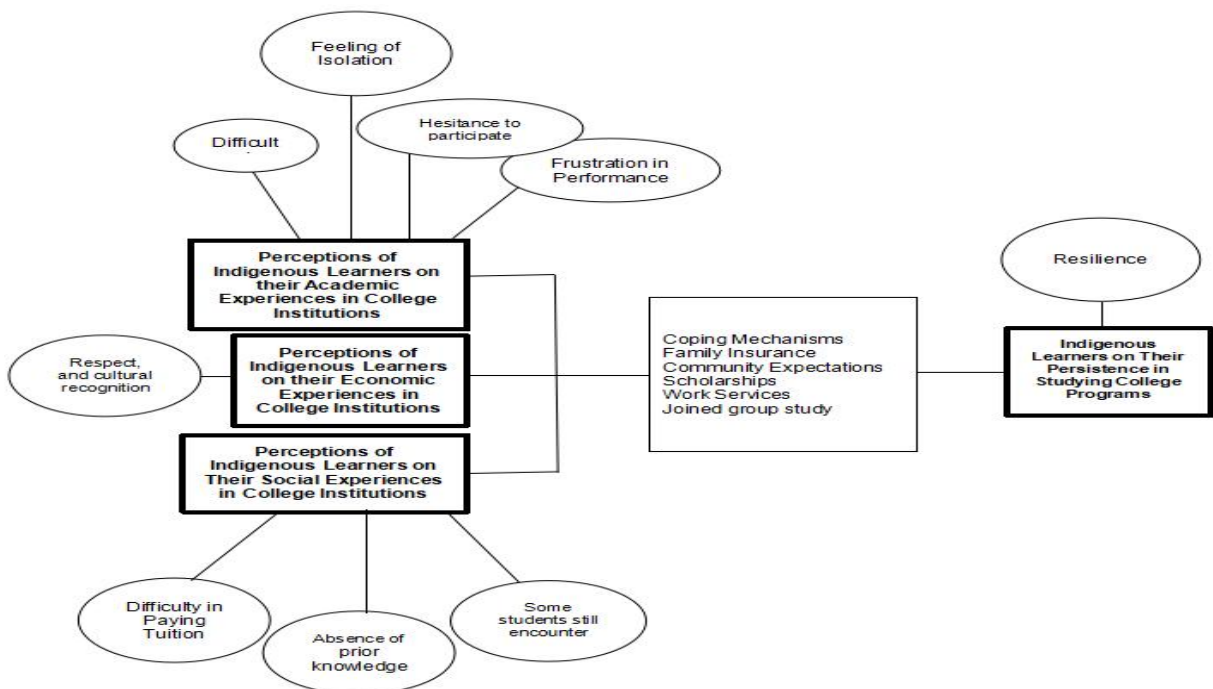
I employed thematic analysis, a qualitative method used to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This approach is commonly applied when a study seeks to understand participants' experiences, perspectives, and meanings across collected data. One of its key advantages is its flexibility, as it can be used across various qualitative studies, while also allowing for in-depth analysis and the organization of large amounts of data into meaningful and coherent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved familiarizing myself with the transcripts, generating initial codes, and grouped them into broader themes. I reviewed and refined the themes for coherence and defined each one to capture its meaning. I presented the findings systematically, supported by participants' statements.

2.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

In my study, I followed the four criteria in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I established credibility through member checking, while transferability was supported by providing thick and detailed descriptions of the research context. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of all research processes, and confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling to reduce bias and strengthen objectivity. Lastly, I secured the necessary ethical approvals from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) Region XI and sought approval from Society of Moral Integrity and Legal Ethics Committee of Holy Cross of Davao College (HCDC).

3. Results

In this chapter, I presented the perceptions of Indigenous students in higher education institutions, which I gathered from their responses. I specifically included in this chapter the modified paradigm based on the themes and sub-themes added to the original themes included in the fundamental concept of the theory that I used. I organize the presentation in the manner that the different themes in the different paradigms were highlighted.



Perceptions of Indigenous Learners on their Academic Experiences in College Institutions

This section presents the perceptions of Indigenous learners regarding their academic experiences in college institutions. It highlights how teaching practices, institutional support, and learning barriers influence their understanding, participation, and overall academic performance. The responses revealed that while some learners receive support from instructors, many still encounter challenges related to teaching methods, language barriers, and limited academic resources. Themes emerged from their narratives.

A participant shared,

“Naa may instructor nga ginabasa lang ang ppt, dili gina deep explain. Like...basa lang tas explain gamay, mao ra ma'am. Maong wala nako na feel nga fully academic support. Ang uban ma'am kay busy man pud gud mao ng uban dili nami kaayo madalikyatan, kumbaga hatag lang hatag og information, malimtan na usahay og check sa studyante kung nakasabot pa ba.” IDI-02

“There is an instructor who just reads the PowerPoint; it is not deeply explained. Like... they just read it and give a little explanation, that's it, ma'am. That's why I didn't feel full academic support. Some teachers are also busy, so others are not really monitored closely anymore. It's like they just keep giving information, and sometimes they even forget to check whether the students are still understanding.” IDI-02

As the participant expressed this experience, I could sense a quiet frustration in their voice. It seemed that the lack of deeper explanation left them feeling unsupported and disconnected from the lesson. The tone reflected a desire for more guidance, suggesting that surface-level teaching limited their ability to fully understand the subject matter.

Another participant stated,

“Sa major kay wala koy prior knowledge kaayo labi na sa math ang teacher namo nag explain pero dili nako magets dayon ma'am ang mga concepts, gamay rajud makasabot, unya kay ulawon man ko, maulaw pud ko mangutana ngutana sa ako teacher, labi na classmates, maong mag move forward mi sa among lesson ang isa dili pa kaayo nako gets “ IDI-03

“In our major subjects, I didn't really have much prior knowledge, especially in Math. Our teacher explains, but I don't immediately understand the concepts, ma'am. I only understand a little. And since I am shy, I also feel embarrassed to ask questions to my teacher, especially in front of my classmates. So, we just move on to the next lesson even if I still don't fully understand the previous one.” IDI-03

Another participant added,

“College na baya ma'am dili na kayo mi hungitan sa teachers labi na sa among major ma'am. Mao ng...makaingon ko dili kaayo fully addressed amoang academic needs, labi na sa mga indigenous students labi na kay minimal ra kaayo ang storya about sa amoa.” IDI-03

"In college, teachers do not give much guidance anymore, especially in our major subjects. That is why I can say that our academic needs are not fully addressed, especially for Indigenous students." IDI-03

While sharing this, the participant appeared hesitant and somewhat withdrawn. I noticed a sense of insecurity, particularly when they mentioned being too shy to ask questions. It reflected how limited instructional support, combined with personal hesitation, created a barrier to fully grasping academic content. 981

A participant shared,

"Usahay, lahi akong accent jud ma'am sa bisaya naanad ko ma'am ba nga pinagahi o pinadoot na pagstorya hehehe, so lain ang pagsabot nila sa akong mga tubag or explanation ma'am. Usahay pud ma'am, maka-feel ko nga dili jud ko masabtan." IDI-04

"Sometimes my accent in Bisaya is different because I am used to speaking in a stronger tone. Because of that, they misunderstood my answers or explanations." IDI-04

Another participant expressed,

"Dili man gyud ko kaayo outspoken. Most of the time kay maulaw ko kay conscious ko sa akong language labi na ako accent basin dili ko nila masabtan labi na sa participation ma'am kay mag tan aw man tanan saimo mao dili nalang kaayo ko ga participate sa klase." FGD-06

"I am not really outspoken. Most of the time I feel shy because I am conscious about my language and my accent. I am afraid they might not understand me, especially during participation, since everyone is looking at you. So, I just choose not to participate." FGD-06

As they spoke, I could observe their discomfort and self-consciousness. There was a noticeable hesitation in their responses, as if they were reliving moments of embarrassment or doubt. Their experiences showed how language differences and fear of judgment significantly reduced their confidence to actively engage in class.

A participant shared,

"Dili gyud siya fully na-address ma'am... limited ra gyud among resources kay akong mama walay stable nga income, mao nga usahay dili ma-provide tanan nako nga academic needs sa parents and school." FGD-06

"It is not fully addressed... our resources are really limited because my mother does not have a stable income. That is why sometimes my academic needs are not provided by both my parents and the school." FGD-06

During the interview, the participant's tone reflected concern and vulnerability. I could sense the pressure they carried, knowing that financial instability directly affected their ability to meet academic demands. It highlighted how external limitations, beyond their control, became a major barrier in their academic journey.

The participants emphasized several important concerns, particularly the lack of in-depth instruction, limited academic support, language barriers, low confidence in classroom participation, and financial constraints that hinder their ability to meet academic demands. During the interview conducted inside the faculty room during class hours, I vividly observed how the participants' discomfort and hesitation were not only heard in their words but deeply embodied through their physical gestures, facial expressions, and surrounding atmosphere. As the faint whirring of electric fans mixed with muffled classroom discussions, distant footsteps in the hallway, and occasional voices of teachers passing by, the participants' voices gradually

Several of them sat with slightly hunched shoulders, their backs no longer upright, while their hands nervously fidgeted with ballpens, ID laces, notebook edges, or the hems of their uniforms, subtle but constant movements that seemed to release internal tension. Some repeatedly clasped and unclasped their fingers, tapped their feet lightly on the floor, or pressed their palms together on their laps as if trying to steady themselves. I noticed how their breathing would sometimes deepen before answering difficult questions, followed by long pauses, swallowed words, or soft sighs. When discussing teachers who merely read PowerPoint presentations without deeper explanation, participants often lowered their heads, avoided direct eye contact, or tilted their bodies slightly inward, as though making themselves smaller in a space where they feared being overheard. Their eyes were especially revealing; rather than showing ease, they blinked rapidly, shifted toward the faculty room door whenever footsteps approached, scanned the windows, or briefly glanced at me for reassurance before continuing. Some gave nervous, restrained smiles paired with awkward laughter, but these were quickly replaced by tightened lips, knitted brows, or downcast eyes, suggesting emotional discomfort rather than amusement.

When talking about struggles in Math or major subjects, a few participants scratched their arms, rubbed their palms, or bit their lower lip before admitting confusion, shame, or fear of asking questions, their voices cracking slightly as if reliving moments of academic insecurity. The emotional weight became even more palpable when they discussed language barriers, accent insecurities, and financial hardship; one participant's voice slowed significantly, her gaze fixed on the floor while twisting her fingers together, while another inhaled sharply and paused for several seconds before speaking about limited resources at home. The air in the room felt unusually heavy, almost thick with unspoken burdens, and despite the ordinary scent of paper, classroom furniture, and warm indoor air, there seemed to linger a quiet tension shaped by fear, shame, and vulnerability. Through their lowered gazes, cautious glances, restrained postures, shaky voices, and protective gestures, I was able to sense not only their academic struggles but also their silent longing to be understood, supported, and safe enough to speak their truth.

These responses suggest that their academic challenges are not only rooted in instructional limitations but are also influenced by personal and social barriers, such as lack of confidence and fear of judgment, which further restrict their engagement in the learning process. As a researcher, I felt a sense of concern and empathy toward their situation, recognizing their efforts to persist despite multiple challenges and limited support. Given these academic experiences, it is important to further explore how these challenges extend beyond the classroom, leading to the next section which examines the social experiences of Indigenous learners in college institutions, particularly how inclusion, peer interactions, and institutional practices shape their sense of belonging.

Perceptions of Indigenous Learners on their Social Experiences in College Institutions

This section presents the perceptions of Indigenous learners regarding their social experiences in college institutions. It highlights how peer interactions, institutional practices, and cultural recognition shape their sense of belonging, inclusion, and identity within the academic community. The responses revealed that while many learners experience acceptance and support, some still encounter moments of discrimination and social discomfort. The following themes emerged from their narratives.

A participant shared,

"Sa tinuod lang, wala jud ko naka-experience nga gi-discriminate ko tungod kay Indigenous ko. Ginatrato ra ko nila nga parehas ra namong estudyante. Maka-feel ko nga accepted ko sa among klase, ug safe pud ang environment para nako" IDI-02

"Honestly, I have not experienced being discriminated against because I am Indigenous. They treat me just like any other student. I feel accepted in our class, and the environment is safe for me." (IDI 983 02)

Another participant expressed,

"Dili ko mahadlok nga mahibal-an nila nga IP ko kay klaro nga gi-respeto ug gi-value ang among pagka-Indigenous. Maski sa classroom o sa gawas, supportive ang mga teachers ug staff, ug bisan sa mga outreach programs, gi-apil pud ang mga bata ug uban pang IP communities. Mao nga comfortable ko ug feel jud nako nga socially accepted ko sa school." IDI-01

"I am not afraid for them to know that I am an IP because it is clear that our Indigenous identity is respected and valued. Whether in the classroom or outside, the teachers and staff are supportive, and even in outreach programs, children and other IP communities are included. That's why I feel comfortable and truly feel that I am socially accepted in the school." IDI-01

As the participants shared these experiences, I observed a sense of comfort and ease in their tone. Their responses reflected feelings of security and acceptance, suggesting that a respectful environment plays a significant role in helping them feel included and confident in their social interactions.

A participant shared,

"Naka-feel gyud ko nga seen ug valued ko katong ang school kay naga-organize og mga activities nga inclusive sa tanan, labi na sa mga IP students. Kanang dili mi ginapabayaang, like gina-encourage mi moapil ug gina-acknowledge pud among background. Bisan simple ra nga pag-respect sa amoang culture ug dili pag-judge, dako na gyud siya og impact sa ako" IDI-06

"I really felt seen and valued when the school organized activities that are inclusive of everyone, especially Indigenous students. They encourage us to participate and acknowledge our background. Even simple respect for our culture has a big impact on me." IDI-06

Another participant added,

"Tungod ani nga subject ma'am philippine indigenous communities siguro mas na-kuan nako nga nga na-value ko kay "dili lang diay ni sila basta nga indigenous people lang" kundili mga Indigenous People ni sila nga nag represent sa kultura sa tinood na mga pinoy, murag finally ma'am ba nga naa nagyuy pagtagad sa amoa. Kumbaga naana ba nga dili lang diay puro lang theory-theory amoa study-han, dili lang puro history sa Pilipinas kundi kami pud og kinsa mi" IDI-03

"Because of the subject Philippine Indigenous Communities, I realized that we are not just Indigenous people, but we represent the true culture of Filipinos. It felt like we were finally given attention, not just theory, but also who we are." IDI-03

While narrating their experiences, the participants showed a sense of pride and affirmation. I could see that recognition from the institution strengthened their identity and self-worth. Their voices carried a sense of validation, as if their culture was finally being acknowledged and appreciated.

A participant shared,

"For the events ma'am... we have a one-day celebration for IP Month, which honors Indigenous students here at Kapalong College of Agriculture, Sciences and Technology. Although it only happens

once a year jud, it is one way of promoting naman gud inclusivity for Indigenous people po. It also serves as a space for us to communicate and connect with other IP students. Aside from that, we also have an IP organization here at KCAST that aims to connect and bring all IP students together as one." FGD-01 984

"For the events, ma'am... we have a one-day celebration for IP Month, which honors Indigenous students here at Kapalong College of Agriculture, Sciences and Technology. Although it only happens once a year, it still serves as a way of promoting inclusivity for Indigenous people. It also provides a space for us to communicate and connect with other IP students. Aside from that, we also have an IP organization here at KCAST that aims to unite and bring all IP students together as one." FGD 01

Another participant expressed,

"It is when we were giving our suggestions during the community extension with the IP community. I suggested what we could do so we would better understand what we needed to do. I felt pleased and happy because they listened to our advice and adopted it. With that, I felt seen and valued." FGD-02

"When we gave suggestions during a community extension, they listened to us and adopted our ideas. I felt happy because I felt seen and valued." FGD-02

As these experiences were shared, I observed a sense of enthusiasm and fulfillment from the participants. Their expressions suggested that being included and heard strengthened their motivation to continue their studies. It became clear that inclusion was not only social but also contributed to their persistence in college.

A participant shared,

"I have experienced discrimination po ma'am, kanang murag unfair gud na assumption... This experience po ma'am were painful and made me question staying in college po but at the end nagpadayon ko kay kabalo ko na akong presence diri sa SMC sa institution og asa ko ginahulma karon ma'am kay duna jud naay dakong kahulugan labi na ginatudlo sa ato ang esentro ang Ginoo" IDI-04

"I have experienced discrimination, ma'am, it felt like an unfair assumption. The experience was painful and made me question whether I should continue in college. But in the end, I chose to keep going because I know my presence here at Saint Mary's College, in this institution where I am being shaped, has a deeper purpose, especially since we are taught to keep God at the center." IDI-04

During this moment, I could sense the emotional weight carried by the participant. Their tone became more serious, and there was a pause before continuing their statement. The experience of discrimination clearly left a deep impact, yet it also revealed their resilience. Despite the pain, they chose to persist, holding on to a sense of purpose and meaning in their educational journey.

The participants highlighted the importance of inclusion, respect, and cultural recognition in shaping their social experiences, as well as the presence of supportive peers and institutional practices, although some also reported instances of discrimination. During the interview, as they spoke their posture visibly changed, they sat straighter in their chairs, lifted their heads higher, and their shoulders appeared more open and relaxed, as though they were physically embodying confidence and belonging. Their eyes, which may have once cautiously scanned the room, now widened with energy and certainty; there was a distinct sparkle in them, often accompanied by raised eyebrows and sustained eye contact that conveyed sincerity and pride.

Some participants' eyes seemed to "light up," reflecting joy and validation, especially when 985 discussing school programs like Indigenous Peoples (IP) month, inclusive classroom environments, or subjects that acknowledged their identity. Their smiles became broader and more genuine, with lips parting naturally and teeth showing, often followed by soft laughter or enthusiastic tones that filled the room with warmth. Several would gesture more openly with their hands, placing a hand on their chest when speaking about feeling valued, nodding repeatedly as they emphasized positive experiences, or moving their hands outward as if illustrating inclusion and connection. The sound of their voices also transformed; instead of soft murmurs, their tone became clearer, firmer, and more animated, sometimes rising in pitch out of excitement when describing moments where their culture was respected or when their suggestions were heard and implemented.

I observed how some leaned slightly forward while speaking, eager to elaborate, while others exchanged proud glances with fellow participants, as if silently affirming shared experiences of dignity and belonging. Their laughter no longer sounded nervous or restrained but full and expressive, blending with the ambient sounds of the room in a way that made their joy feel palpable.

When discussing subjects like Philippine Indigenous Communities, their words seemed to flow more passionately, and one could almost feel the emotional release in their expressions, as though they were finally being recognized not merely as students, but as vital representatives of culture and identity. The room itself felt lighter during these moments; even the ordinary sounds of electric fans and distant classroom noise seemed less intrusive as participants' positive energy dominated the space.

However, when one participant recounted discrimination, the emotional tone shifted again, her smile faded, her gaze briefly lowered, and her fingers tightened together, signaling pain despite her resilience. Yet even then, as she spoke of perseverance and purpose, there was a quiet strength in her lifted chin, steady voice, and composed posture. Through these visible changes, widened eyes, radiant smiles, confident gestures, fuller voices, and expressive body language, I was able to witness how acceptance fostered pride, how inclusion nurtured confidence, and how recognition of Indigenous identity could transform participants from cautious narrators into empowered individuals who visibly carried both dignity and hope.

These responses suggest that a supportive and inclusive environment strengthens their sense of belonging, identity, and motivation, while experiences of discrimination, although less frequent, still impact their emotional well-being but also reveal their resilience. As a researcher, I felt a sense of appreciation and concern, recognizing the importance of inclusive spaces in fostering not only social connection but also student persistence, while also acknowledging the challenges that still need to be addressed. Given these social experiences, it is important to further explore how these factors influence their determination to continue their studies, leading to the next section on the persistence of Indigenous learners in pursuing their college education.

Perceptions of Indigenous Learners on their Persistence in Studying College Programs

This section presents the perceptions of Indigenous learners regarding their persistence in studying college programs. It highlights how their lived experiences, cultural background, and personal struggles shape their resilience, identity, and motivation. Despite facing financial, cultural, and personal challenges, participants demonstrate strong coping mechanisms and draw motivation from their families and communities.

A participant shared,

"Lisod jud malayo sa lugar na gika dak an nimo ma'am pero early on, nakat-onan na nako unsaon pag-endure sa kalisod, kay kabalo ko nga ang education mao rajud ang akong way para maka forward sa life. naglisod ko sa pagbalance sa akong studies ug financial responsibilities ma'am. Kanang... there were nights ma'am nga dili ko katulog kay sige ko hunahuna og asa ko mukuha og

allowance o unsaon pag-budget sa akong kwarta para lang makasurvive sa adlaw-adlaw Usaay mosulod jud ang self-doubt jud ma'am dili maiwasan. Kanunay jud ko gapangita og way ma'am para lang makapadayon" IDI-04

"It is really difficult to be far from the place where you grew up, ma'am, but early on, I learned how to endure hardships because I know that education is my only way to move forward in life. I struggle to balance my studies and financial responsibilities. There were nights when I could not sleep because I kept thinking about where to get my allowance and how to budget my money just to survive every day. Sometimes, self-doubt enters, and it cannot be avoided. I keep looking for ways just to continue." IDI-04

As the participant shared this, I could observe the weight of responsibility reflected in their tone. There was a sense of emotional exhaustion as they described sleepless nights and constant worry about financial survival. Despite this, there was also a quiet determination in their voice, showing that hardship did not weaken them but instead strengthened their resolve to continue their education.

A participant expressed,

"Isa pud ka importante nga kultura o values nga akong nadala kay ang pagka-matatag. Gitudlo jud sa amoa, nga kuan bisan unsa pa ang problema o kalisod, dili mo surrender dayon. Uhhh... padayon lang gyud bisan lisod." IDI-02

"One important value that I carried from our culture is resilience. We were taught that no matter how hard the problem is, we should not easily give up. We should continue even if it is difficult." IDI-02

Another participant added,

"Gamay ra akong nahibal-an nga dibabawon, amoang language, pag abot diri bisaya man gihapon medyo naa gyuy kalahian, so naghinay-hinay og kawala akong natun an sa among original language ma'am." IDI-01

"I only know a little of our native language now. When I came here, people speak Bisaya, and there are differences, so little by little, I am losing what I learned from our original language." IDI-01

While sharing these experiences, the participants showed mixed emotions. I could sense pride when they talked about the values instilled in them, particularly perseverance. However, there was also a subtle sadness when discussing the gradual loss of their language, suggesting an internal struggle between preserving their identity and adapting to a new environment.

A participant stated

"Gina train nako akong kaugalingon nga kailangan nako mag adjust. Then hinay-hinayon nako og apply sakong kaugalingon sa ilang na andan. Para ma fit in bitaw ko kailangan nako ma meet ilang standard. Pero dili kay nako pugson akong kaugalingon, kung asa ra ang akong makaya." IDI-01

"I train myself that I need to adjust. Slowly, I try to apply myself to what others are used to so I can fit in. I need to meet their standards, but I do not force myself beyond what I can do." IDI-01

Another participant shared,

Para nako, dili jud maiwasan challenge labi na sa language barrier ug sa financial issues, akong buhaton kay maningkamot ko nga masabtan nako ang situation ug mag-adjust, maningkamot aron makahuman." FGD-04

"For me, challenges like language barriers and financial issues cannot be avoided. What I do is try to understand the situation and adjust. I strive so that I can finish my studies." FGD- 04

During the interview, I noticed that the participants spoke in a calm and reflective manner. Their responses showed acceptance of their situation rather than resistance. It was evident that adaptation had become a survival strategy for them, and they approached it with patience and self-awareness.

A participant shared,

"Ang nakamotivate sakoa ma'am no is akoo jud pamilya, pamilya nako kay tungod lagi pod sa kalisod nya wala napod koy papa nya mama nalang ang nikuan samoa so kailangan jud nako makahuman kailangan makatrabaho puhon para sakoang pamilya" FGD-06

"What motivates me is my family. Because of our struggles, and since I no longer have a father, my mother is the only one supporting us. That is why I really need to finish my studies and find a job for my family." FGD-06

Another participant said,

"Ang nakatabang gyud nako ma'am kay ang akong pamilya ug community. Sila naghatag og suporta ug guidance, labi na sa mga butang nga lisod nako." FGD-04

"My family and community really helped me. They give me support and guidance, especially in things that are difficult for me." FGD-04

As these stories were shared, I could clearly see the emotional connection of the participants to their families. Their voices softened, and there was a sense of responsibility and gratitude. It became evident that their motivation was not only personal but deeply rooted in their desire to uplift their families and give back to their community.

The participants emphasized the importance of resilience, cultural values, adaptive coping strategies, and strong family and community support in sustaining their persistence in college despite various challenges. During this interview, their tone was notably composed, neither overly fragile nor defeated, but grounded, steady, and reflective. The room was filled with the familiar hum of electric fans, occasional muffled voices from nearby classrooms, and the faint scraping of chairs, yet their storytelling often became the strongest presence in the space. Many participants leaned back comfortably or sat in open, relaxed positions; some with one leg crossed over the other in a "number 4" posture, arms resting freely, or hands animatedly moving as they spoke, suggesting not avoidance, but genuine openness and trust. What stood out most was their unwavering eye contact: when they spoke about where they came from, their family sacrifices, or the values their Indigenous upbringing instilled in them, they often looked directly at me without hesitation, their eyes steady, expressive, and almost glowing with pride. There was a visible shift whenever they recalled their roots, their smiles widened, their cheeks lifted, and some would even laugh softly before or after describing painful memories, as though adversity had become a chapter they could now revisit with strength rather than sorrow.

Even when recounting sleepless nights, financial uncertainty, or self-doubt, many smiled in disbelief, shook their heads lightly, or chuckled while saying these experiences, almost as if amazed by how far they had come. Their laughter felt warm and human, less about minimizing pain and more about honoring their

endurance. Some participants used expansive hand gestures, placing palms on their chest when mentioning family, pointing outward when talking about dreams, or moving their hands rhythmically as if illustrating the journey they endured. Others wiped sweat from their foreheads or adjusted their posture mid-story, not from discomfort alone, but from the emotional intensity and enthusiasm of reliving deeply personal experiences. A few participants laughed so naturally while narrating past struggles that the atmosphere momentarily resembled friends exchanging life stories rather than a formal interview. Their resilience was not only heard in statements about perseverance; it was visible in their relaxed shoulders, upright posture, animated storytelling, and the way they transformed painful memories into meaningful reflections.

When discussing language loss or adjusting to new cultural norms, there was occasional softness in their expressions, brief pauses, or reflective glances upward, yet these moments were often followed by acceptance and practical wisdom rather than despair. The scent of warm indoor air, paper, and faint perspiration mixed with the palpable energy of determination as some became physically expressive, their gestures growing more passionate the more they spoke about survival, family, and purpose.

Through their open body language, steady eye contact, broad smiles, laughter amidst hardship, and deeply expressive hand movements, I witnessed not only their struggles but also an extraordinary sense of self-awareness: they were not merely recounting difficulties, but proudly narrating the making of their resilience. In those moments, they did not appear as victims of circumstance, but as individuals deeply shaped by hardship, sustained by family and culture, and empowered by the belief that education was their path forward. These responses suggest that their persistence is deeply influenced by both internal factors, such as resilience and adaptability, and external factors, such as family encouragement and cultural grounding, which help them continue despite hardships. As a researcher, I felt a strong sense of admiration and empathy, recognizing their ability to endure difficulties while remaining committed to their educational goals. Overall, these findings highlight that persistence among Indigenous learners is not solely an individual effort but is strongly connected to their cultural identity and support systems, which sustain their motivation to complete their college education.

Summary of Findings

The findings of the study revealed the lived experiences of Indigenous learners as they navigate college education, highlighting the interplay of their personal characteristics, academic challenges, and social experiences within higher education institutions.

1.Perceptions of Indigenous Learners on their Academic Experiences in College Institutions

Indigenous learners experience difficulty in understanding and engagement due to limited instructional support and ineffective teaching practices, which leads to feelings of isolation and frustration in the learning environment. Furthermore, language and confidence barriers, along with financial and institutional constraints, hinder their active participation and negatively affect their overall academic performance.

2.Perceptions of Indigenous Learners on their Social Experiences in College Institutions

Indigenous learners often experience inclusion, respect, and cultural recognition from both peers and institutional practices, which strengthen their sense of belonging, identity, and academic persistence. However, despite these positive experiences, some still encounter discrimination in social spaces. Nevertheless, they demonstrate resilience and continue their studies with a strong sense of purpose.

3.Perceptions of Indigenous Learners on their Persistence in Studying College Programs

Indigenous learners demonstrate strong resilience shaped by financial and personal hardships, while their cultural identity serves as both a source of strength and a challenge in adapting to new environments. They employ adaptive coping strategies and draw deep motivation from their families and communities, which sustain their persistence in pursuing higher education.

4. Discussions

Discussed in this chapter are the findings of the study, along with their implications for practice and recommendations for future directions.

Perceptions of Indigenous Learners Regarding their Academic Experiences In College Institutions

In my study, I found that Indigenous learners often perceive their academic experiences as shaped by both institutional support and their personal capacity to adapt. While some reported positive interactions with faculty, many described challenges such as surface-level teaching, fast-paced instruction, and limited guidance, which made it difficult for them to fully engage and understand their lessons in an academic environment that often does not fully address their cultural and learning needs. My finding aligns with Bongco (2024), who found that systemic academic gaps, including the lack of culturally sensitive teaching among Indigenous college students in the Philippines, reduce student engagement and contribute to feelings of exclusion. Similarly, I agree with Cameron et al. (2024), who found that Indigenous students view culturally affirming teaching practices and active inclusion as key factors for academic success, showing that their academic engagement is strongly influenced by how visible and supported they feel in the classroom.

However, I opposed the study of Pascual (2024), who argued that the primary barrier to Indigenous students' academic success is not mainly teaching practices, but rather the lack of culturally relevant curriculum and learning resources. This suggests that even with supportive instruction, academic performance may still be limited without integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into the curriculum.

Perceptions of Indigenous Learners Regarding their Social Experiences In College Institutions

In my study, I found that Indigenous learners perceived their social experiences in college institutions as generally inclusive and supportive, where respect from peers and institutional recognition strengthened their sense of belonging, identity, and academic persistence. However, while most reported positive social interactions characterized by acceptance and cultural recognition, some still encountered instances of discrimination in social spaces, yet they demonstrated resilience and continued their academic journey with a strong sense of purpose. My finding aligns with Reyes et al. (2026), whose very recent study specifically documents how Indigenous students in Philippine Higher Education Institutions rely on peer solidarity and community-based support to affirm their identity and mitigate the impacts of subtle marginalization. Similarly, I agree with Bongco (2024), who emphasized that institutional recognition and supportive peer relationships enhance Indigenous students' identity development and academic engagement.

However, I opposed the study of Permangil (2024), arguing that for many Indigenous students, true social belonging is developed through their own informal, self-created networks. This network functions independently of institutional programming, rather than through school-sponsored events.

Perceptions of Indigenous Learners Regarding their Personal Characteristics as they Navigate their College Education

In my study, I found that Indigenous learners demonstrate strong resilience and motivation, which they actively use as key strengths in navigating higher education, drawing on their cultural identity, family support, and sense of responsibility to uplift their communities. My finding aligns with Kalaiwa'a et al. (2024), who demonstrated that the integration of Indigenous knowledge and cultural activities in educational settings significantly builds students' self-assurance and allows them to feel deeply connected to their cultural heritage while pursuing their studies. Similarly, I agree with Durmush (2024), whose research confirmed that

However, I opposed the study of White et al. (2025), arguing that focusing too much on “resilience” in higher education can make students’ success mainly depend on personal strength, rather than addressing larger system issues such as racism, unfair curricula, and lack of funding. They also warn that this view can romanticize students’ struggles and allow institutions to avoid making real structural changes.

Implications for Practice

Based on my findings, I propose that higher education institutional leaders and faculty members design and implement structured remedial and academic support programs, such as bridge programs, tutorials, peer-assisted learning, and language support, to address gaps in comprehension, participation, and prior knowledge among Indigenous learners. These interventions, along with scaffolded instruction and regular comprehension checks, are expected to improve understanding, increase engagement, build confidence, and strengthen Indigenous learners’ ability to cope with academic demands and persist in their college programs.

In terms economic experiences in college institutions, higher education institutional leaders, faculty, LGUs, and Indigenous community leaders may collaborate to establish community-based financial support systems for Indigenous college students through scholarships, donation drives, livelihood support, and structured partnerships with stakeholders. These interventions aim to ease financial burdens, improve access to resources, and ensure continuous enrollment and educational persistence among Indigenous learners facing economic difficulties.

In relation to social experiences in college institutions, higher education institutional leaders, Student Affairs Offices, faculty, and LGUs may implement inclusive and culturally responsive programs such as cultural orientations, anti-discrimination policies, intercultural awareness initiatives, and mandatory Indigenous Peoples Month celebrations. These interventions aim to reduce discrimination and social isolation while strengthening inclusivity, sense of belonging, and social integration among Indigenous college learners.

Future Directions

Based on the findings, I propose that future studies employ a qualitative design focusing on a deeper exploration of Indigenous cultures, values, and lived experiences to strengthen advocacy for culturally inclusive and responsive educational practices. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural identity influences academic and social integration. Additionally, future researchers may utilize a quantitative approach, particularly multiple linear regression analysis, to examine the predictive influence of key variables such as perceptions of Indigenous learners on their academic and social experiences as independent variables, and their persistence in studying college programs as the dependent variable. This approach may help identify significant determinants of student persistence and provide empirical support for targeted institutional interventions.

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