



Unveiling The Struggles, Dreams, Aspirations and Academic Success Among Overaged IP Learners in the Public Schools: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners in Kablon Elementary School during the school year 2025–2026. Ten Grades 3 to 6 learners were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed using semi-structured questions, with pseudonyms inspired by B'laan cultural terms to ensure confidentiality and respect for their heritage. Data were analyzed thematically to identify key patterns in their experiences. Findings revealed that overaged IP learners faced academic difficulties in reading, writing, and keeping pace with younger classmates, as well as social discomfort, poverty-related challenges, and difficulties balancing school and family responsibilities. Despite these challenges, learners demonstrated resilience through persistence in schooling, strong motivation to complete their education, and aspirations for improved livelihoods and support for their families and communities. Overall, the study highlights their determination and resilience, emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive and inclusive educational support to strengthen learning outcomes among overaged Indigenous learners.

Keywords

Educational management, indigenous learners, academic success, educational resilience, aspirations, Philippines

1. Introduction

In the Philippines, Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners face persistent barriers to formal education. This study aims to understand how overaged IP learners navigate these challenges while pursuing education as a means of personal and cultural growth. Globally, indigenous students encounter systemic obstacles such as linguistic challenges, cultural misrepresentation, and socio-economic exclusion. Nationally, Philippine IP learners face similar marginalization despite inclusive education policies. B'laan students face countless challenges in their lives. In the area where I taught, many of them struggle in their educational journey. Locally, in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato, T'boli overaged learners struggle to balance school, family responsibilities, and subsistence work, often resulting in interrupted schooling and psychosocial stress. These cases underscore the importance of exploring how overaged IP learners persist in schooling and find meaning in their educational experiences



(Galang & Ganai, 2020; McKinley & Smith, 2019; Quines, Ramirez, 2022; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2021).

The significance of this study lies in its potential to amplify the voices of overaged IP learners of Kablon Elementary School and contribute to culturally sensitive educational reforms. By focusing on their narratives, the study addresses the gap in current literature concerning how age, ethnicity, and socio-cultural context intersect in shaping academic trajectories. The study utilized a qualitative research design using a multiple case study approach with five elementary non-indigenous teachers chosen through purposive sampling. It highlights that academic success cannot be uniformly defined but rather understood within the framework of each learner's socio-cultural reality (Quines, 2025).

This study is aligned with both international and national legal frameworks that promote inclusive and equitable education. Globally, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 advocate for the right to quality education for all, particularly marginalized groups. In the Philippine legal context, the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (RA 8371) recognizes the right of IPs to culturally appropriate education, while the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (RA 10533) mandates contextualized and culture-responsive pedagogy. Moreover, the Department of Education's Indigenous Peoples Education Policy Framework specifically addresses the need to improve access and relevance of education for IP communities, emphasizing the importance of capturing their perspectives in education policy and practices. (DepEd Order No. 62, s. 2011).

The primary objective of this study is to explore and document the lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations of overaged IP learners in Kablon Elementary School through a phenomenological lens. In doing so, the research contributes to a more inclusive discourse on academic success that transcends ageist and ethnocentric biases. Teachers' job satisfaction remains a significant challenge, particularly in countries with developing educational systems. Common sources of dissatisfaction include unfair promotion practices, favoritism among educational officials, and inefficiencies within the education system. It seeks to provide empirical grounding for the development of culturally responsive teaching strategies and community engagement practices that honor the identities and life circumstances of these learners. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to educational equity by providing stakeholders with grounded insights on how to support overaged IP learners not just in achieving academic success, but in affirming their right to dream, belong, and thrive within the formal school system (Quines, 2023).

1.1 Research Questions

The researcher sought to answer the following questions:

How do the overaged IP learners describe their lived experiences, including their struggles, dreams, aspirations, and academic success, as overaged IP learners?

1.1 How do the overaged IP learners view their struggles, dreams, aspirations, and academic success as overaged IP learners while striving to complete their basic education?

1.2 How do the overaged IP learners feel about their future, and what dreams or aspirations encourage them to continue their schooling despite difficulties?

1.3 What insights do the overaged IP learners gain about achieving academic success for themselves and for their community as overaged IP learners?

1.2 Theoretical Lens

This study adopted an integrated theoretical lens grounded in Resilience Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP), and Social Constructivism. Each lens was selected as an explanatory framework directly linked to the experiences and educational journeys of overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners.

Grounded in Ann Masten's Resilience Theory (2001), the study found that learners demonstrated perseverance, adaptability, and hope despite challenges such as poverty, delayed school entry, and family responsibilities. Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970) further explained how learners



navigated educational barriers and cultural marginalization while viewing education as a means of empowerment and social mobility. The findings were also interpreted through Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP), which highlighted how learners' aspirations and definitions of success were shaped by cultural identity, community values, and collective well-being. Likewise, Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivism (1978) explained how learning and resilience were strengthened through interactions with teachers, peers, family members, and community networks. Together, these theoretical lenses provide a holistic understanding of how overaged IP learners persist, learn, and maintain their cultural identity despite educational challenges.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study supports the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by highlighting the educational experiences of overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners and emphasizing the need for inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive learning environments that promote their participation, retention, and academic success. It also contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by addressing the challenges faced by marginalized Indigenous learners and advocating for equal educational opportunities, social inclusion, and respect for cultural diversity.

At the local level, the study benefits the Schools Division Office, school administrators, teachers, Indigenous communities, parents, and policymakers by providing evidence that can inform the development of culturally sensitive programs, policies, and support mechanisms for overaged IP learners. Furthermore, it serves as a valuable reference for future researchers interested in Indigenous education, educational inclusion, and strategies that promote equitable learning opportunities for marginalized populations.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners in Kablon Elementary School. The phenomenological design was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth understanding of how participants perceived and made sense of their educational experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019). Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed to identify significant statements and emerging themes related to educational barriers, cultural identity, community support, and persistence in schooling. This approach ensured that the voices and experiences of overaged IP learners remained central to the study.

2.2 Research Participants

For this study, ten overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners enrolled in Kablon Elementary School during the School Year 2025–2026 were selected through purposive sampling to provide meaningful insights into their educational experiences. Participants were aged 13–15 years old, belonged to recognized Indigenous communities, and had experienced delayed schooling due to factors such as poverty, family responsibilities, displacement, and limited access to education. Learners who were not overaged, were not Indigenous Peoples, were not enrolled in Kablon Elementary School, or were unwilling to participate were excluded from the study. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage, with confidentiality and ethical standards strictly maintained throughout the research process.



2.3 Data Collection

For this study, data were collected using a qualitative phenomenological approach. After securing permission and informed consent, ten overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed using semi-structured, open-ended questions. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified through member checking to ensure accuracy and credibility. Field notes were also taken to capture relevant observations and enrich the data.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in this study ensured that all procedures were conducted in line with the RMMC Ethics and Review Committee guidelines, with emphasis on voluntary participation, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and protection of participants' rights. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, risks, and benefits of the study and were allowed to withdraw at any time without penalty. Parental consent was obtained for minors, and pseudonyms were used to protect identities in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. The study also ensured minimal risk by allowing participants to skip questions or stop interviews if they felt uncomfortable. Recruitment was done fairly and transparently without coercion or undue incentives. Furthermore, the researcher-maintained honesty, objectivity, and academic integrity by avoiding plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, deception, and conflicts of interest, ensuring that all findings were accurately and ethically reported.

3. Results and Discussion

This chapter contains the study's findings from the interview of the participants on their struggles, dreams, aspirations, and academic success as overaged IP learners in public schools.

Table 1. Views of Overaged IP Learners on their struggles, dreams, aspirations, and academic success while striving to complete their basic education

Clustered Themes	Emergent Themes
Struggles with reading, writing and comprehension Difficulty in keeping pace with younger classmates, especially in English lessons Felt out of place in group work and activities Decided sometimes to sit at the back of the classroom to avoid attention Repeated academic struggles	Academic Pressure
Felt embarrassed due to being older than classmates Being laughed at by reciting slowly Got embarrassed when answering incorrectly in class Avoided asking questions or participating due to fear of ridicule, judgment, or being seen as incapable Felt out of place during group activities and interactions with younger peers	Social Discomfort
Pressured to work right away Decided to take on family responsibilities instead of continuing schooling Doubts from peers or community members about studying at an older age	Societal Doubts
Feelings of sadness, fear, crying, stress, and thoughts of quitting school	Stress and Hardship

Long walks to school, lack of supplies, transportation issues, and poverty intensified learning struggles	
Struggled to juggle school with family duties, farm work, or caregiving Considered dropping out due to hardship and repeated difficulty in balancing studies with work	Life Balance

Table 2. Feelings of Overaged IP Learners on their struggles, dreams, aspirations, and academic success while striving to complete their basic education

Clustered Themes	Emergent Themes
Expressed the goal of completing education despite being overaged and facing difficulties Aspirations included earning respect and being seen as capable despite age and background	Feelings of Hope and Pride
Dreams of being employed to secure stable jobs Envisioned a future with stable work, their own homes, and freedom from poverty and hardship	Excitement and Hope for Stability
Aspirations to help parents, siblings, and improve family living conditions Hoped to serve their tribe or community, inspire younger IP learners, and contribute to communal well-being	Caring and Motivated
Dreams fueled to keep from quitting despite shame, fatigue, and discrimination Desire to prove that age is not a barrier To inspire other overaged or younger IP learners to persist in school	Mixed Emotions of Stress and Pride
Success as means to improve, become persistent, and learn not merely for grades or awards Education as means to change life and create new opportunities.	Joy in Achieving Success

Table 3. Insight of Overaged IP Learners on their struggles, dreams, aspirations, and academic success while striving to complete their basic education

Clustered Themes	Emergent Themes
Understanding lessons that were hard even if progress was slow Emphasized gradual improvement in reading, answering questions and higher confidence	Learning Despite Difficulty
Attendance to school despite shame, fatigue, poverty, or discrimination was seen as a major achievement Valued effort by trying again and not giving up more than high grades or academic awards.	Continuing Steady Effort in Building Persistence
Boosted sense of success and confidence through encouragement and acknowledgments from the teachers Being able to recite, answer questions, or complete tasks independently and confidently	Using Support to Build Confidence
Succeed academically despite being overaged Felt successful when they could use what they learned in class in daily life	Employing Knowledge Beyond Limitations
To move closer to dreams, to graduate, to work and to help the family Changes in views of success focusing now to become successful	Building Dreams Through Perseverance



through perseverance	
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Discussion

This chapter presents the major findings of the study on the lived experiences of overaged IP learners, focusing on their struggles, dreams and aspirations, and academic success, and connects their accounts with relevant literature and theories.

Challenges

The findings show that overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners face interconnected academic, social, and economic challenges that hinder their education. These include difficulties in literacy and classroom participation, financial constraints, long travel distances, family and work responsibilities, and emotional struggles that increase their risk of dropping out.

Coping Mechanism

The results show that overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners experience a mix of positive emotions and strong motivations in their pursuit of education. Many expressed feelings of hope and pride, with a strong desire to complete their studies despite being overaged and facing various difficulties, as well as a need to be respected and recognized as capable learners. Participants also shared excitement and hope for stability, envisioning a future with stable jobs, improved living conditions, and freedom from poverty. In addition, they demonstrated a caring and motivated outlook, with aspirations to help their families, contribute to their communities, and serve as role models for other IP learners. Despite experiencing stress, shame, and discrimination, they remained driven by a desire to prove that age is not a barrier to success. Overall, their sense of academic success is deeply connected to personal growth, perseverance, and the opportunity to transform their lives and future.

Insights

The results show that overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners view their academic success and educational journey as a gradual and meaningful process shaped by persistence, support, and personal growth. Many emphasized learning despite difficulty, noting that even slow progress in reading, comprehension, and classroom participation reflects improvement and growing confidence. Participants also highlighted continuing steady effort in building persistence, where simply attending school despite shame, poverty, fatigue, or discrimination is already considered a significant achievement. In addition, they valued using support to build confidence, especially encouragement from teachers that helped them recite, answer questions, and complete tasks independently. Learners also expressed employing knowledge beyond limitations, seeing success not only in grades but in applying what they learn in daily life. Overall, their insights show that academic success is defined through perseverance, personal development, and the determination to achieve their dreams despite challenges.

Implications for Practice

Academic Pressure. Feelings of embarrassment, fear of ridicule, and discomfort during group activities hinder participation. Educators can create an inclusive classroom by using small-group discussions, assigning rotating leadership roles, and allowing alternative responses such as written reflections or digital submissions. For example, a “question box” can let learners submit answers anonymously to encourage participation without fear of judgment.

Social Discomfort. Overaged learners often experience low self-esteem due to peer comparison. Schools can provide counseling, mentorship programs, and collaborative activities that recognize individual strengths. Teachers might implement peer-pairing exercises where learners support each other in tasks, fostering confidence and resilience.



Societal Doubts. Family obligations and community expectations can conflict with schooling. Flexible schedules, blended or after-school programs, and coordination with families help learners balance responsibilities. For instance, assigning project deadlines that consider farming or household duties allows learners to complete tasks without undue stress.

Stress and Hardship. Long commutes, lack of supplies, and poverty increase learning challenges. Schools can provide resources such as school supplies, transport support, or links to social services. Teachers might maintain a “resource corner” with materials learners can borrow, reducing barriers to participation.

Life Balance. Learners juggle schoolwork and household duties. Educators can teach time-management strategies, integrate experiential learning, and design practical assignments. For example, math problems could use household or farm scenarios, connecting learning to real-life tasks. Feelings of Hope and Pride. Learners aspire to complete education despite challenges. Teachers can celebrate achievements with a “success board” for small accomplishments, set attainable goals, and provide targeted praise to strengthen motivation. Excitement and Hope for Stability. Learners dream of stable work and independence. Schools can integrate career guidance, life skills, and practical learning experiences, such as job-simulation activities or community projects linking education to future opportunities. Caring and Motivation. Learners aim to help family and community. Educators can implement service-learning projects, mentorship roles, or community-based assignments that allow meaningful contribution while reinforcing motivation. Mixed Emotions of Stress and Pride. Learners face stress but feel pride in overcoming obstacles. Teachers can provide safe spaces for sharing, mindfulness exercises, and resilience-building activities. Joy in Achieving Success. Education is valued as transformative. Teachers can highlight real-world relevance of lessons through hands-on projects or problem-solving tasks, encouraging learners to persist beyond grades.

Learning Despite Difficulty. Gradual improvement is emphasized. Scaffolded instruction, step-by-step guidance, and patient feedback support steady learning. Continuing Steady Effort. Consistent attendance and effort matter more than high grades. Teachers can recognize persistence through point systems, growth charts, or weekly progress check-ins. Using Support to Build Confidence. Encouragement and acknowledgment strengthen self-efficacy. Mentorship programs and guided skill-practice sessions reinforce competence. Employing Knowledge Beyond Limitations. Learner’s value applying lessons in real-life contexts. Project-based learning, such as building simple tools or community mapping, connects classroom knowledge to everyday tasks.

Building Dreams Through Perseverance. Learners link academic success to personal and family aspirations. Goal-setting activities, reflective exercises, and career planning sessions help learners visualize the impact of perseverance on long-term goals.

Implications for Future Research

Longitudinal Studies on Learner Development and Educational Outcomes: Future research should examine the long-term educational trajectories of overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners to better understand how age disparities influence academic achievement, self-esteem, resilience, and social integration over time. Tracking learners from elementary through higher levels may provide valuable insights into sustained learning progress and transition outcomes.

Intersectionality of Age, Gender, and Cultural Identity: Further studies should explore how age, gender, and Indigenous identity intersect to shape learners’ experiences in school. Such research may help explain patterns of persistence, participation, or dropout, and provide a more nuanced understanding of the diverse realities of overaged IP learners.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogies and IKSP Integration: Future inquiries should evaluate the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching strategies and the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) in improving learner engagement, motivation, retention, and academic performance. These studies may also identify best practices for strengthening culturally grounded education in Indigenous communities.



Policy Implementation and Educational Equity in IPED: Additional research should investigate gaps in the implementation of the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) framework, particularly in remote and underserved areas. This may help identify barriers at the grassroots level and guide the development of more inclusive and context-sensitive educational policies and interventions.

Technology Use and Alternative Learning Systems: Future studies may also examine the role of technology and alternative learning systems in improving access, flexibility, and equity in education for overaged IP learners. Research in this area may provide evidence-based strategies for supporting learners who face geographic, economic, or social barriers to formal schooling.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this phenomenological inquiry affirm the resilience, hope, and determination of overaged Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners in public schools despite facing systemic, socio-economic, and cultural barriers. Their experiences show that learning goes beyond age, being driven by intrinsic motivation, community support, and a strong sense of purpose, even amid stigma, poverty, and social exclusion. Their dreams and aspirations reflect education as not only personal achievement but also a pathway for communal upliftment, cultural preservation, and breaking the cycle of poverty, where success is understood through self-worth, cultural pride, and meaningful contribution to their communities. Overall, the study emphasizes the need for inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices that recognize and support the lived realities of overaged IP learners, ensuring equitable access and fostering a more just and empowering learning environment for all.

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