

## Immersion Experiences of Teacher Education Students in Conducting Indigenous Studies

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### ABSTRACT

Indigenous studies is a popular research interest among social studies teacher education students, emphasizing the importance of properly educating them to conduct these studies and prepare them for immersion experiences. This study explores the experiences of teacher education students during their immersion in Indigenous studies in Bataan and proposes instructional support to enhance sustainable practices for future researchers. Utilizing phenomenological research, student teachers who have conducted Indigenous studies were purposefully interviewed. The results demonstrate that despite encountering challenges, these immersion experiences gave students valuable first-hand knowledge, personal growth, and a deeper understanding of Indigenous cultures. These findings underscore the need for instructional support, as suggested in the study, to better equip teacher education students to support and promote Indigenous studies.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Indigenous people (IP), also known as First Peoples, are the earliest known inhabitants of a nation or area of land (Murphy, 2023). In Bataan, Philippines, the predominant IP group is the Aeta (Ayta), wherein the Magbukon comprises most tribes. Bataan, located in the western part of Central Luzon, has a total land area of 137,296 hectares, with 46,200 hectares, or 34 percent, considered IP ancestral land (Peoples Development Institute, 2021). The Aeta Magbukon remains one of the least known and documented Indigenous tribes, retaining primarily subsistence hunter-gathering strategies to supply their basic needs (McHenry et al., 2013).

The Ayta Magbukon has occupied the Bataan Peninsula since immemorial, coexisting with the lowland population surrounding them. However, development in the province has offered new opportunities while also irreversibly changing some aspects of the Ayta Magbukon indigenous culture, including its language (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, 2020) and the protection of their rights as promulgated by Republic Act No. 8371 (The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997).

Emphasizing Indigenous studies in higher education is essential to empower local populations and promote Indigenous peoples' welfare. As an interdisciplinary field, Indigenous studies aims to foster a comprehensive and respectful understanding of Indigenous cultures (Murphy, 2023). With the growing participation of Indigenous peoples in higher education, there is a need to redefine the boundaries between Indigenous studies as a discipline and Indigenous support services (Kennedy, 2023). Research findings suggest that collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, which clearly articulate Indigenous research principles, effectively create sustained and meaningful change in Indigenous communities (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021).

To conduct meaningful Indigenous studies, student researchers should employ robust methods to gain an in-depth understanding of Indigenous experiences, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for exploring lived experiences (Buenaflor et al., 2023) and ethnographic studies for examining cultural contexts and sensitive issues like racism (Supan & Mendoza, 2023). Additionally, student researchers should situate their studies within broader educational policies and trends (Grande, 2018) and use multi-method approaches to identify and analyze social factors influencing Indigenous education (Balangon, 2023). This can involve various methodological and analytical techniques to gather and interpret data from diverse sources.

Meanwhile, immersion experiences for students have been shown to have significant impacts on their multicultural awareness and personal development. A study by Couture (2021) concluded that participants reported an overall increase in multicultural awareness through their community immersion experiences. Additionally, Goldoni (2013) found that students' approaches to study abroad, their level of engagement with members of the new culture, as well as their socio-cultural identity and cultural values, influence their preparation for the experience, the quality of the sojourn, their perceptions of the sojourn, and how they are perceived in the host society. Furthermore, research by Mills et al.

(2015) suggests that, after returning from an immersion trip, students report a greater ability to cope with stress and a stronger sense of vocational identity compared to students who do not participate in immersion trips. These immersion experiences also provide the basis for using the language and constructing meaning through interaction in the culture (Yamada, 2001).

Immersion as experiential learning provides an alternative to traditional classroom teaching methods in higher education (Nakelet et al., 2017; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Experiential learning theory promotes active student engagement, encouraging them to create knowledge and critically reflect on their experiences, which helps transfer skills to future endeavours (Lachapelle & Whiteside, 2017). Community immersion projects, where students engage with communities outside their institutions, have been successfully used in various fields. These projects, along with service-learning activities, enhance students' awareness of diversity issues (Sherman & Boukydis, 2020).

Indeed, immersion experiences in Indigenous studies can significantly enhance students' multicultural awareness and personal development. Research shows that community immersion projects increase multicultural understanding (Couture, 2021) and that students' engagement with new cultures influences their preparation and perceptions (Goldoni, 2013). Post-immersion, students report improved stress coping and stronger vocational identity (Mills et al., 2015) while also gaining linguistic and cultural competence (Yamada, 2001). As an experiential learning method, immersion offers an alternative to traditional teaching, promoting active engagement and critical reflection (Lachapelle & Whiteside, 2017; Nakelet et al., 2017; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This approach, including service-learning activities, has been successful in various fields and can enhance awareness (Sherman & Boukydis, 2020), especially of Indigenous diversity issues.

Indeed, to conduct meaningful Indigenous studies, student researchers should use robust qualitative methods to understand Indigenous experiences deeply. This includes exploring lived experiences through interpretative analysis and examining cultural contexts and sensitive issues like racism through ethnographic studies. Additionally, students should situate their research within broader educational policies and trends and use multiple methods to analyze social factors influencing Indigenous education. Collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, guided by Indigenous research principles, can create lasting and meaningful change. Immersive experiences are also valuable for learning, as they enhance multicultural awareness and personal development. These experiences promote active engagement, critical reflection, and skill transfer and can increase awareness of Indigenous diversity issues through community engagement and service-learning activities.

Given the importance of understanding Indigenous cultures and supporting Indigenous peoples' participation in higher education, this study aims to explore the immersion experiences of teacher education students in conducting Indigenous studies in Bataan. By examining the experiences of student teachers who have conducted Indigenous studies, this study seeks to provide insights and reflexive opportunities for those who seek to improve their research practice. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on Indigenous studies and to support the development of culturally responsive education for Indigenous students.

With that, the primary intention of the study is to explore the immersion experiences of teacher education students (as non-Indigenous researchers) in conducting Indigenous studies in Bataan, as well as the proposal of instructional support that may be provided to them. Venturing to this research endeavour, the study hopes to contribute to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) No. 4 (Quality Education) and SDG No. 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

## **IMPLEMENTATION AND METHODS**

This study is a phenomenological investigation focused on exploring the immersion experiences of teacher education students specializing in social studies from the Bataan Peninsula State University-Balanga Campus' College of Education. The primary aim is to understand the students' experiences and insights gained while conducting Indigenous studies in Bataan. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study seeks to capture the essence of the student's experiences and derive meaningful interpretations from their perspectives.

The participants for this study were purposively selected from the teacher education program, specifically those majoring in social studies and who have already conducted Indigenous studies in their research courses. Before conducting the interviews, consent forms were provided to all participants to ensure they were fully informed about the study's objectives and their rights as participants. This step was crucial to maintain ethical standards and ensure that the participants were comfortable sharing their experiences.

Data collection was carried out using an interview guide designed to elicit detailed and meaningful responses from the participants. The interviews were conducted until saturation was reached, meaning that no new information or themes emerged from additional interviews. In this study, nine responses out of the thirteen interview transcripts were retained, as they provided a comprehensive and rich dataset for analysis.

The gathered data were analyzed using descriptive phenomenological analysis. This method involves a systematic and thorough examination of the participants' narratives to identify common themes, patterns, and meanings. By employing this analytical approach, the study aims to provide a detailed and insightful account of the students' immersion experiences, highlighting the significance and impact of their engagement with Indigenous studies in Bataan.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Immersion Experiences of Teacher Education Students in Conducting Indigenous Studies

The results obtained from the interviews conducted among the teacher education students are capsulated into four themes: immersion experience, immersion impact, challenges and rewards, and preparation for future support.

#### *Theme 1: Immersion Experience*

Participants shared their personal experiences of the immersion program, highlighting its enlightening and informative nature. They appreciated the first-hand knowledge they gained about Indigenous culture and traditions.

*P1: "The experience was very enlightening for me... We've learned a lot."*

*P3: "Bilang teacher education student, conducting Indigenous studies sa Bataan, napakalaking bagay ang immersion experience sa akin... Natutunan ko ang kahalagahan ng kanilang mga tradisyon, wika, at ang pamamaraan ng pagtuturo ng mga nakakatanda ng kanilang language sa mga bata." [As a teacher education student, conducting Indigenous studies in Bataan, the immersion experience was a huge thing for me. I learned the importance of their traditions, language, and the way elders teach their language to children.]*

*P4: "When we conducted a study about Indigenous people... it was a very happy experience because here I got to interact with the Aeta people within their community."*

Participants found the immersion program enlightening and informative, valuing the first-hand knowledge gained about Indigenous culture and traditions. One student highlighted the significance of learning about traditions, language, and teaching methods, while another appreciated the joyful interaction with the Aeta community. These experiences underscored the immersion program's impact on deepening understanding and appreciation of Indigenous cultures.

#### *Theme 2: Immersion Impact*

The immersion experience significantly impacted participants' understanding, communication, and perspective of Indigenous culture and education. They felt more equipped to support future Indigenous students and communities.

*P1: "Especially our study focused on the concept of their pakikipagkapwa [oneness with others], where in the future if I will have a student that's from our Indigenous communities, I'll have prior knowledge and understanding as to how I should communicate and facilitate the learning of the student."*

*P2: "Malaki ang naging impact sa akin ng pagka-conduct ng Indigenous study in Bataan dahil mas napalawak nito ang aking perspective sa kalagayan ng ating mga katutubo. Mas nakikilala ko ang kanilang kultura, mas napamahal at nagkaroon ako ng sense of protectiveness na mas protektahan at pangalagaan ang kanilang wika at kultura." [Conducting the Indigenous study in Bataan had a great impact on me because it broadened my perspective on the condition of our natives. I got to*

know their culture better, I fell in love more and I had a sense of protectiveness to better protect and preserve their language and culture.]

P5: "*Yung experiences namin drive us to deeply understand the culture of Indigenous people, naka-impact ito positively in a way that mas naging motivation namin ito to ensure that our research will give justice to them knowing yung mga challenges na kinakaharap nila.*" [Our experiences drive us to understand the culture of Indigenous people deeply, it impacted positively in a way that it became more of a motivation for us to ensure that our research will give justice to them knowing the challenges they face.]

The immersion experience profoundly influenced participants' understanding, communication, and perspective regarding Indigenous culture and education. They reported feeling better equipped to support future Indigenous students, with a deepened sense of protectiveness and motivation to preserve Indigenous languages and cultures. The experience also enhanced their ability to communicate effectively and facilitate learning for Indigenous students, driven by a desire to address the challenges these communities face.

### ***Theme 3: Challenges and Rewards***

Participants discussed the challenges and rewards associated with the immersion experience. Some of the challenges they faced included financial struggles, remote locations, and transportation issues. However, the rewards included a sense of fulfillment, accomplishment, and cultural preservation.

Participant 1 (P1): "*As for the challenges, it is the financial aspect but other than that everything is very rewarding.*"

P2: "*The challenges is first the location, dahil ang ating mga katutubo ay nasa may bundok o malapit sa kabundukan nahirapan kami in terms of sasakyan, papunta at pauwi. The rewards are hindi siya physical eh, more on fulfillment of accomplishment na may natulong ka may nai-ambag ka in terms of preserving and maintaining their language and culture.*" [The challenge is the location because our IPs are in or near the mountains, and we had difficulty in terms of transportation and going to and returning home. The rewards are not physical; they are more about the fulfillment of accomplishment that you have helped someone and contributed to preserving and maintaining their language and culture.]

P5: "*Yung challenges is yung money, location, and yung questioning kasi hindi lahat pwede itanong sa kanila pero I think yung pagka-conduct ng research is a reward specifically mas nakikala namin yung mga IP na nakikita lang natin sa, most importantly sa studies namin ang reward sa pagconduct nito.*" [The challenges are the money, location, and the questioning because not everything can be asked of them, but I think being able to conduct research is a reward specifically, we get to know the IPs that we only see in, most importantly in our studies the reward for conducting it.]

Participants encountered various challenges during the immersion experience, including financial struggles, remote locations, and transportation issues. Despite these obstacles, they found the experience rewarding, citing a sense of fulfillment, accomplishment, and the opportunity to contribute to cultural preservation. The rewards were primarily intangible, such as the satisfaction of helping and learning more about Indigenous communities, which outweighed the challenges faced.

#### ***Theme 4: Preparation for Future Support***

Participants believed that the immersion experience prepared them to better support and educate Indigenous students and researchers in the future by providing them with a deeper understanding, empathy, and appreciation for Indigenous cultures.

*P4: "My immersion experience deepened my understanding of indigenous cultures and their unique challenges, allowing me to offer more empathy and appropriate support."*

*P9: "Participating in an immersion experience focused on Indigenous studies can better prepare individuals to support and educate Indigenous students and researchers in the future. By immersing oneself in Indigenous cultures, histories, and worldviews, one can gain valuable insights and perspectives crucial for effective mentorship and support."*

Participants felt the immersion experience equipped them to better support and educate Indigenous students and researchers in the future. The experience deepened their understanding, empathy, and appreciation for Indigenous cultures and their unique challenges, providing valuable insights and perspectives essential for effective mentorship and support.

In general, the thematic analysis revealed that the participants found the immersion experience enlightening and informative, as they gained first-hand knowledge about Indigenous culture and traditions. This experience significantly impacted their understanding, communication, and perspective of Indigenous culture and education, better equipping them to support future Indigenous students and communities.

However, the immersion experience also presented challenges like financial struggles, remote locations, and transportation issues. Despite these challenges, participants highlighted the rewards of the experience, including a sense of fulfillment, accomplishment, and cultural preservation.

Lastly, participants believed that the immersion experience prepared them to better support and educate Indigenous students and researchers in the future. By gaining a deeper understanding, empathy, and appreciation for Indigenous cultures, they felt more equipped to provide effective mentorship and support.

The results of the present study align with the findings of Pidgeon and Riley (2020) in that the immersion experience provided teacher education students with valuable first-hand knowledge, personal growth, and a deeper understanding of Indigenous cultures. Both studies highlight the importance of building and sustaining meaningful research relationships with Indigenous communities to create positive change.

### **Proposed Instructional Support to the Teacher Education Students in Conducting Indigenous Studies**

Based on the findings from the thematic analysis, instructional support for teacher education students (non-Indigenous researchers) in conducting Indigenous studies may include cultural competency training, mentorship from Indigenous scholars, and community engagement opportunities. Cultural competency training can help students better understand and appreciate Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives. Mentorship from Indigenous scholars can guide in conducting research in a culturally responsive and respectful manner. Community engagement opportunities can facilitate partnerships with Indigenous communities and ensure that research is relevant, meaningful, and beneficial to the communities involved. Additionally, instructional support can emphasize the importance of Indigenous research principles, such as self-determination, reciprocity, and respect, to promote ethical and responsible research practices.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The immersion experience in Indigenous studies in Bataan provided teacher education students with valuable first-hand knowledge, personal growth, and a deeper understanding of Indigenous cultures despite facing challenges. It ultimately prepared them to better support and educate Indigenous students and researchers in the future.

It is recommended that teacher education programs continue to incorporate immersion experiences in Indigenous studies, as they provide valuable opportunities for students to gain first-hand knowledge, develop cultural competencies, and better support student researchers and Indigenous communities. Moreover, efforts may be made to address and mitigate challenges faced during these experiences, such as financial constraints and transportation issues, to ensure accessibility and effectiveness in such predicaments.

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