

Education Through Their Eyes: Indigenous Students' Perspectives on Cultural Inclusivity and Academic Barriers

Genesis G. Camarista, Ph.D., Marlyn V. Rivera, Ph.D., Almar, J. Java, MEd
 Josielee Grace S. Vasquez, MPA, Hanna Lee D. Montecalvo, MAEd

josieleevasquez@wvsu.edu.ph

West Visayas State University-Himamaylan City Campus, Brgy. Caradio-an, Himamaylan City, 6108, Philippines

Abstract

Within the framework of Philippine higher education, this study explores how Indigenous students perceive academic hurdles and cultural inclusivity. The study, which was based on the frameworks of Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2010), and Social Justice Education (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), sought to investigate four main areas: (1) the academic difficulties that Indigenous students frequently encounter; (2) how they perceive cultural relevance in curricula and classroom practices; (3) how they perceive inclusion and representation in institutional policies and educational activities; and (4) whether there are notable differences in these perceptions based on ethnolinguistic affiliation. The study used a quantitative descriptive-comparative methodology to survey 90 Indigenous students who were enrolled in the 2025–2026 academic year at West Visayas State University's Himamaylan City Campus. The most common academic difficulty, according to the findings, was financial hardship, highlighting larger socioeconomic disparities. Notwithstanding these challenges, students thought their education was inclusive and culturally relevant in general, however group differences indicated different experiences. The four Indigenous groups' assessments of cultural relevance and inclusivity did not differ statistically significantly, according to Kruskal-Wallis analyses. In order to overcome structural inequities, these findings emphasize the necessity of focused, culturally sensitive, and equity-oriented initiatives that go beyond symbolic inclusion. The study supports continued initiatives to bring Philippine higher education into accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the tenets of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), namely Article 14.

Keywords: Indigenous students, cultural inclusivity, academic barriers, culturally responsive teaching, SDG 4, UNDRIP, higher education, Philippines

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

Education is a recognized fundamental human right and a powerful catalyst for social mobility and national development. At the global level, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda emphasizes the need to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). Central to this goal is the imperative to improve access to and quality of education for marginalized and underserved groups, including Indigenous Peoples, who continue to experience systemic barriers in mainstream educational systems.

Globally, Indigenous students face persistent academic disparities due to intersecting issues such as cultural marginalization, limited access to resources, language barriers, and socio-economic disadvantage. According to UNESCO (2020), Indigenous learners are more likely to underperform in formal education settings compared to their non-Indigenous peers, often due to curricula that do not reflect their cultural identities or lived experiences. In countries like Australia, Canada, and the United States, studies have consistently documented lower achievement rates, higher dropout rates, and limited access to culturally relevant pedagogy among Indigenous students (Dockery, 2016; Battiste, 2013).

In the Philippine context, these challenges remain similarly pronounced. Despite the presence of inclusive education initiatives such as the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) Program by the Department of Education (DepEd), Indigenous learners continue to encounter educational environments that are not fully aligned with their cultural realities. Structural issues—such as the underrepresentation of Indigenous content in the curriculum, limited teacher training in cultural responsiveness, and financial or geographic constraints—further hinder academic access and performance among Indigenous populations (DepEd, 2015; MacDonald, 2020).

The IPED Framework was established to honor Indigenous Peoples' rights to an education that is respectful of their identity, language, and cultural heritage. However, implementation of this policy has shown varied effectiveness across regions. Some schools, particularly in remote or under-resourced areas, continue to provide education that lacks cultural relevance and inclusivity, thereby contributing to feelings of academic unpreparedness, isolation, and underachievement among Indigenous learners (Salazar, 2021).

Furthermore, in higher education settings, Indigenous students remain largely underrepresented and underserved. As noted by Belisario and Bugtong (2019), Indigenous students in colleges and universities report limited access to academic support services, culturally responsive faculty, and inclusive school policies. These barriers potentially affect not only academic outcomes but also students' perceptions of belonging and inclusion.

While national policies such as the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997 provide a legal foundation for equitable education, empirical data capturing Indigenous students' perceptions of inclusivity and the academic challenges they face—especially at the tertiary level—remain limited. Most existing studies are qualitative or policy-based, with few large-scale, quantitative investigations that could offer generalizable insights into the experiences of Indigenous learners within mainstream educational systems.

This study aims to fill that gap by quantitatively examining the perceptions of Indigenous students regarding cultural inclusivity in educational settings and identifying the academic barriers they commonly face. Using survey instruments and statistical analyses, the study will generate empirical evidence on how Indigenous students perceive their representation in curricula, classroom practices, and institutional policies, as well as the extent of academic challenges such as financial hardship, lack of support services, and academic preparedness.

By systematically collecting and analyzing this data, the study contributes to the monitoring of SDG 4 indicators, supports the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Article 14), and responds to local educational goals focused on equity, access, and inclusion. Furthermore, the findings can inform educational planners, curriculum developers, and institutional leaders in designing more culturally responsive programs and policies that directly address the needs of Indigenous students.

In doing so, the study aligns with the broader educational thrusts of inclusive development, cultural sustainability, and social justice—themes that are central to both global education frameworks and the Philippines' commitment to building a more equitable and culturally affirming education system.

Guided by these objectives, the present study is anchored on a central inquiry: *How do Indigenous students perceive cultural inclusivity and academic barriers in their educational experience?* This overarching question reflects the need to understand education from the students' own perspectives—an area that has been largely overlooked in previous research and policy evaluations. To operationalize this aim, the study explores four specific dimensions: (1) the academic challenges Indigenous students commonly face in their current educational settings, including financial hardship, limited academic support, and feelings of underpreparedness; (2) their level of

perception regarding the relevance of their culture in the curriculum and classroom practices, which touches on the extent to which educational content reflects their identity and heritage; (3) the degree to which they feel represented and included in school activities, institutional policies, and teaching approaches; and (4) whether significant differences exist in these perceptions based on the students' specific Indigenous group affiliation. These questions are designed to generate robust, actionable data that can inform culturally responsive educational reforms—directly addressing the policy-practice gap while contributing to the advancement of SDG 4, the implementation of the Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the Philippines' broader goals for inclusive and equitable education.

2. Theoretical framework

The present study is grounded in several interrelated theories that offer a multidimensional understanding of the academic barriers and cultural inclusivity perceived by Indigenous students in formal education settings. These include Critical Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Social Justice Education—each of which provides an interpretive lens through which the educational experiences of Indigenous learners can be analyzed and contextualized.

At the core of this study is Critical Pedagogy, as articulated by Paulo Freire (1970), who emphasized the need for education to be a liberating force that challenges systems of oppression and inequality. Freire's concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness) underscores the importance of enabling learners—particularly those from marginalized groups—to recognize and question the societal structures that perpetuate their marginalization. In the context of Indigenous education, critical pedagogy calls attention to how traditional schooling can reproduce colonial narratives and exclude Indigenous voices, thereby reinforcing educational inequities.

Complementing this is the theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), primarily developed by Geneva Gay (2010). CRT advocates for the integration of students' cultural backgrounds, languages, and experiences into the curriculum and teaching methods. According to Gay, culturally responsive educators recognize the importance of cultural knowledge in shaping students' learning styles, motivations, and academic outcomes. Within the Indigenous context, this means valuing Indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and worldviews in classroom instruction, curriculum content, and school policies.

Additionally, this study draws from the principles of Social Justice Education, which seeks to dismantle institutional barriers and promote equity in educational access, participation, and outcomes (Adams et al., 2016). Social justice frameworks emphasize that inclusion is not merely about access, but also about meaningful representation, participation, and empowerment within the educational process. Indigenous students often encounter academic challenges due to systemic factors such as underrepresentation in school leadership, curricular marginalization, and implicit biases—all of which social justice education seeks to address.

These theoretical frameworks collectively inform the study's examination of Indigenous students' perspectives. They support the notion that academic barriers are not only individual or technical, but often structural and cultural in nature. By centering the students' voices and perceptions, the study aligns with the theoretical position that education should be transformative, inclusive, and culturally sustaining.

Furthermore, these theories provide a foundation for interpreting how Indigenous learners navigate and respond to academic environments that may not reflect or affirm their identities. The use of these frameworks ensures that the analysis does not merely describe perceived challenges, but also interrogates the broader educational systems that shape them. In doing so, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on equity, representation, and decolonization in education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-comparative research design to investigate the perceptions of Indigenous students on cultural inclusivity and the academic barriers they face within formal educational settings. The design allowed for the systematic measurement and statistical analysis of student responses to assess trends, differences, and relationships across variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, this study focused on quantifying students' perceived cultural relevance within the curriculum and classroom practices, as well as the extent of inclusivity in school policies, teaching approaches, and co-curricular activities.

3.2. Participants and inclusion criteria

The participants of the study were Indigenous students enrolled from first year to fourth year West Visayas State University – Himamaylan City Campus (WVSU-HCC) during the first semester of the academic year 2025–2026. A total enumeration sampling technique was employed, involving all 90 Indigenous students enrolled at the time of the study.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Must be officially enrolled at WVSU-HCC.
2. Must self-identify as a member of an Indigenous cultural group.
3. Must be actively attending classes during the first semester of A.Y. 2025–2026.
4. Must provide voluntary informed consent to participate in the study.

This approach ensured that the entire accessible Indigenous student population was captured for comprehensive and representative analysis.

3.3. Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-designed structured survey questionnaire composed of three major sections:

1. Personal Profile: This section gathered demographic data such as age, sex, year level, Indigenous group affiliation, and place of residence.
2. Cultural Relevance Scale: A 5-point Likert-type scale was developed to measure students' perceptions of the relevance and representation of their culture in the curriculum, instructional content, and classroom activities. Items ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
3. Inclusivity Scale: Another 5-point Likert-type scale assessed students' perceptions of inclusivity in school practices, policies, extracurricular involvement, and teacher-student interactions.

3.4. Validity and Reliability of the instrument

The survey instrument was reviewed for face and content validity by a panel of experts in Indigenous education, educational research, and psychometrics. Revisions were made based on their recommendations to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items.

A pilot test was conducted on a separate group of Indigenous students from a comparable academic setting to determine the reliability of the scales. The Cultural Relevance Scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .959, and the Inclusivity Scale had a reliability coefficient of .929, both indicating excellent internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2003).

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, formal permissions were secured from the university administration and relevant academic units. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose, procedures, and ethical safeguards of the study. The survey was administered in-person by the researchers in a classroom setting to ensure high response rates and facilitate clarification if needed. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

3.6. Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were encoded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. The following statistical methods were employed:

- Mean and standard deviation (SD) were computed to describe the average level and variability of Indigenous students' perceptions on cultural relevance and inclusivity.
- The Kruskal-Wallis H test, a non-parametric alternative to one-way ANOVA, was used to determine whether there were significant differences in perceived cultural relevance and inclusivity based on the type of Indigenous group. This test was appropriate given the ordinal nature of the Likert-scale data and the potential non-normal distribution of responses (Field, 2018).

The level of statistical significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research (PHREB, 2017). The following measures were implemented to ensure ethical conduct:

- Informed Consent: Participants were informed of the research purpose, their right to refuse or withdraw, and how their data would be used.
- Anonymity and Confidentiality: No personally identifying information was collected. All responses were kept strictly confidential and used solely for academic purposes.
- Data Protection: Completed questionnaires were securely stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researchers. Digital files were password-protected.
- Ethical Approval: The research proposal received clearance from the WVSU-HCC Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

4. Results and Discussion

Understanding the academic challenges that Indigenous students face is essential in creating equitable and inclusive educational environments. These challenges often stem from a complex interplay of socio-economic, institutional, and cultural barriers that disproportionately affect Indigenous learners in mainstream academic settings. In this study, the first research question sought to identify and quantify the most common academic difficulties experienced by Indigenous students enrolled at West Visayas State University – Himamaylan City Campus.

Using descriptive statistics, responses were analyzed to determine which challenges were most prominent. The results offer insight into areas where Indigenous students feel most burdened—ranging from financial hardship and academic workload to limited access to support services and feelings of isolation. These findings are presented below.

Academic Challenges Indigenous Students Commonly Face in Educational Settings

Indigenous students in higher education often encounter a unique set of academic challenges shaped by intersecting socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. These challenges are not merely individual difficulties but are rooted in broader systemic issues that include financial instability, limited access to academic support, and cultural disconnection from the mainstream educational environment. In the context of West Visayas State University – Himamaylan City Campus, it becomes essential to explore these barriers from the students' own perspectives to design responsive interventions and support systems. This section presents the findings on the most common academic difficulties reported by Indigenous students, highlighting the areas where they feel most burdened and underserved in their educational journey. The results offer insight into the specific aspects of academic life that may hinder their success and retention, thereby informing more equitable educational practices.

Table 1. *Academic Challenges Indigenous Students Commonly Face in Educational Settings*

Academic Challenges	Mean	SD	Interpretation	Rank
I have faced financial difficulties that negatively impact my academic performance.	3.22	1.07	Moderate	1
I find it difficult to keep up with the academic workload.	3.11	1.01	Moderate	2
I struggle to access academic support services when I need them.	2.93	1.09	Moderate	3
I lack sufficient time to balance academic responsibilities with personal or family obligations.	2.83	1.20	Moderate	4
I have experienced a lack of culturally relevant content in my courses.	2.72	1.07	Moderate	5
I feel underprepared for university-level coursework.	2.67	1.19	Moderate	6
I find it difficult to approach or communicate with my instructors.	2.51	1.13	Moderate	7
I feel isolated or underrepresented in my academic program.	2.49	1.18	Mild	8
I do not receive adequate guidance on course selection and academic planning.	2.44	1.12	Mild	9
I have experienced bias or stereotyping from faculty or staff.	2.30	1.17	Mild	10

Note: 4.51-5.00 Very severe; 3.51-4.50 Severe; 2.51-3.50 Moderate; 1.51-1.50 Mild; 1.00-1.50 Note evident

The data presented in Table 1 reveal that Indigenous students commonly face a range of moderate academic challenges, with the most pressing issue being financial difficulty, followed by problems related to academic workload and limited access to support services. All items, except for the last three, were rated as moderate challenges, with only three interpreted as mild.

The highest-rated challenge—"I have faced financial difficulties that negatively impact my academic performance" ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.07$)—underscores the economic vulnerability that many Indigenous students face. This aligns with Pateña et al. (2021), who noted that financial instability is a key contributor to academic stress and dropout risk among underrepresented student populations in the Philippines. Similarly, Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago (2017) found that financial strain was a strong predictor of reduced academic engagement in marginalized communities.

From a theoretical perspective, Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement highlights that students who experience external stressors, such as economic hardship, are less likely to engage meaningfully in academic activities due to limited physical and psychological energy. Financial difficulty thus not only affects students materially but also reduces their ability to participate fully in learning processes.

The second and third highest-rated items—"I find it difficult to keep up with the academic workload" ($M = 3.11$) and "I struggle to access academic support services when I need them" ($M = 2.93$)—point to institutional

shortcomings in addressing the needs of Indigenous learners. These findings echo the results of Talidong and Paringit (2021), who emphasized that many Indigenous students report difficulty navigating the academic system, including lack of awareness about tutoring or counseling services.

Zimmerman's (1989) Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) theory provides a lens through which to interpret these difficulties. Without adequate academic support, Indigenous students may find it difficult to develop self-regulatory behaviors such as planning, time management, and help-seeking—skills essential for academic productivity, especially in university contexts.

The item "I have experienced a lack of culturally relevant content in my courses" ($M = 2.72$) ranked fifth but still falls within the moderate range. This result suggests that Indigenous students feel a noticeable disconnect between their cultural identity and the curriculum, a theme that has been extensively documented in studies on inclusive education. According to Kahu and Nelson (2018), the absence of culturally responsive teaching materials can lead to lower emotional and cognitive engagement among minority learners.

This is further supported by Vygotsky's (1978) Constructivist Learning Theory, which posits that learners best acquire knowledge when new content is linked to their existing cultural and social context. A curriculum that neglects Indigenous worldviews thus limits meaningful learning experiences and may contribute to feelings of alienation.

The items related to instructor communication ($M = 2.51$), representation in the academic program ($M = 2.49$), and inadequate guidance ($M = 2.44$) were all rated as mild to moderate, suggesting that while these challenges exist, they may be less prominent than financial or structural issues. However, the presence of bias or stereotyping from faculty or staff ($M = 2.30$) remains a serious concern, despite its mild rating. Bias—even when subtle—can negatively impact academic self-efficacy, classroom participation, and long-term academic persistence (George & Mallery, 2003).

These findings are aligned with Piaget's (1952) constructivist emphasis on the social dimension of learning. When students feel misrepresented or judged based on stereotypes, it disrupts the safe learning environment necessary for effective cognitive development.

Level of Perception of Indigenous Students Towards the Relevance of their Culture in the Curriculum and Classroom Practices

Understanding how Indigenous students perceive the integration of their cultural identity within the curriculum and classroom practices is critical to evaluating the inclusivity and responsiveness of educational institutions. In culturally diverse contexts such as the Philippines, where multiple ethnolinguistic groups coexist, the relevance of Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and perspectives in formal education contributes to students' sense of belonging, academic engagement, and identity affirmation. This section presents the results of the study on how Indigenous students at West Visayas State University – Himamaylan City Campus perceive the degree to which their culture is recognized and reflected in their academic experience. Specifically, it compares perceptions across four Indigenous groups—Bukignon, Magahat Bukignon, Babayles Bukignon, and Karolano—to assess both general trends and group-specific experiences related to cultural representation in educational content and pedagogical practices.

Table 2. *Level of Perception of Indigenous Students Towards the Relevance of their Culture in the Curriculum and Classroom Practices*

IP Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Interpretation
Bukignon	18	4.22	.62	Culturally relevant
Magahat Bukignon	41	4.06	.70	Culturally relevant
Babayles Bukignon	15	3.81	.56	Culturally relevant
Karolano	16	4.33	.69	Culturally relevant
Total	90	4.09	.67	Culturally relevant

Note: 4.51-5.00 Highly culturally relevant; 3.51-4.50 Culturally relevant; 2.51-3.50 Moderately relevant; 1.51-1.50 Minimally relevant; 1.00-1.50 Not culturally relevant

The results presented in Table 2 reveal that Indigenous students across all identified ethnolinguistic groups perceive the current curriculum and classroom practices as "Culturally Relevant", with a total mean score of 4.09 (SD = 0.67). This falls within the range of 3.51 to 4.50, based on the interpretation scale used. Among the groups, Karolano students reported the highest mean perception (M = 4.33, SD = 0.69), followed by the Bukignon (M = 4.22, SD = 0.62) and Magahat Bukignon (M = 4.06, SD = 0.70) groups. The Babayles Bukignon, while still within the culturally relevant range, reported the lowest mean perception (M = 3.81, SD = 0.56), suggesting slightly less integration or recognition of their specific cultural identity in educational content and practices.

These findings suggest that Indigenous students do see a degree of cultural acknowledgment in the educational setting. However, the variance among groups indicates that the implementation of culturally inclusive curricula is not uniformly experienced, aligning with previous observations by Salazar (2021), who noted inconsistencies in how Indigenous cultures are integrated across educational settings in the Philippines.

This perception aligns closely with Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which asserts that learning is inherently social and deeply influenced by culture. According to Vygotsky, students construct knowledge more effectively when learning experiences are rooted in familiar cultural and social contexts. In the case of Indigenous students, curriculum content that reflects their cultural knowledge, languages, traditions, and worldviews can support more meaningful engagement and cognitive development.

Additionally, Geneva Gay's (2010) theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) provides a valuable lens for interpreting the findings. CRT emphasizes the importance of using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective. The "Culturally Relevant" ratings across all groups suggest some degree of success in this direction, yet the varying means point to an uneven application of CRT principles, which may reflect gaps in teacher training, localized curriculum adaptation, or institutional support.

Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory supports the interpretation that students' learning is affected by multiple contextual layers. The micro- and mesosystemic interactions between the student, teacher, curriculum, and community significantly influence their educational experience. The slightly lower mean from Babayles Bukignon students may indicate that their particular cultural narratives or linguistic traditions are not as visible or recognized in the curriculum compared to other groups.

The results also resonate with findings from Battiste (2013), who argued that Indigenous students thrive academically when their cultural identity is affirmed in the learning process. Battiste emphasized that culturally relevant pedagogy not only fosters academic success but also contributes to students' sense of identity and self-worth.

Similarly, in a Philippine context, MacDonald (2020) observed that while the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed) Program has helped integrate cultural elements into basic education, its impact has been uneven, depending on the school's resources, teacher preparedness, and community involvement. This aligns with the present study's finding that although the general perception is positive, variations among Indigenous groups suggest room for deeper, more tailored inclusion.

Furthermore, the work of Demmert and Towner (2003) highlights that inclusion of Indigenous languages, values, and worldviews within the curriculum enhances Indigenous students' engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. This provides further theoretical and empirical support for the importance of culturally relevant content in improving educational outcomes for marginalized learners.

Extent of Indigenous Students' Perceptions of Their Representation and Inclusion in School Activities, Policies, and Teaching Approaches

Table 3. Extent of Indigenous Students' Perceptions of their Representation and Inclusion in School Activities, Policies, and Teaching Approaches

IP Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Interpretation
Bukignon	18	4.50	.46	Generally inclusive
Magahat Bukignon	41	4.20	.58	Generally inclusive
Babayles Bukignon	15	4.20	.66	Generally inclusive
Karolano	16	4.45	.60	Generally inclusive
Total	90	4.30	.58	Generally inclusive

Note: 4.51-5.00 Extensively inclusive; 3.51-4.50 Generally inclusive; 2.51-3.50 Moderately inclusive; 1.51-1.50 Minimally inclusive; 1.00-1.50 Not inclusive at all

As shown in Table 3, Indigenous students across the four identified ethnolinguistic groups perceive a “generally inclusive” educational environment in terms of their representation in school activities, institutional policies, and teaching practices. The overall mean score was 4.30 ($SD = 0.58$), indicating a positive assessment of inclusivity across the student population. Among the groups, Bukignon students rated the highest ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.46$), nearing the “extensively inclusive” range, followed closely by Karolano students ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.60$). Magahat Bukignon and Babayles Bukignon students reported similar scores ($M = 4.20$), suggesting consistent perceptions of general inclusion across these subgroups.

These findings indicate that Indigenous students feel moderately well-represented in the academic and institutional environment of their school, particularly in co-curricular and classroom contexts. The scores are encouraging, especially considering the historical marginalization of Indigenous peoples within formal education systems (Battiste, 2013; UNESCO, 2020). However, the fact that the ratings fall just short of the “extensively inclusive” range implies that there remains room for more systemic and deeply rooted cultural integration.

The findings can be interpreted through the lens of Geneva Gay’s (2010) Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), which posits that students thrive when their cultural identities are integrated into instructional content, methods, and classroom environments. CRT advocates for educational experiences that recognize and build on students’ cultural knowledge, experiences, and frames of reference. The “generally inclusive” rating suggests that some CRT principles may already be in practice, but a stronger, more intentional application is needed to achieve full inclusion.

Further supporting this analysis is Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the importance of the interaction between individuals and their environments—particularly the microsystem of the school. When Indigenous students perceive themselves as represented and included, it reflects positive interactions between their personal identities and institutional systems, such as school policies and classroom teaching strategies. A more inclusive mesosystem—interactions between home, school, and community—also plays a role in strengthening their engagement and belonging.

Also relevant is Fraser’s (2009) Theory of Social Justice, which distinguishes between redistribution, recognition, and representation as three core dimensions of justice. Representation, the dimension most related to the current data, refers to the inclusion of marginalized voices in decision-making and institutional life. The findings suggest progress in representation, yet the goal of full parity and empowerment of Indigenous students remains in progress.

Numerous studies echo these findings. For instance, Castagno and Brayboy (2008) argue that many efforts at Indigenous inclusion in schools are often superficial, involving tokenized cultural events or curriculum add-ons. They assert that genuine inclusion requires systemic transformation, not just symbolic gestures.

In the Philippine context, Belisario and Bugtong (2019) noted that Indigenous students often feel excluded from leadership roles, school governance, and cultural programming, even when Indigenous content is present in the curriculum. This aligns with the current study's result that, while Indigenous students perceive general inclusion, there is potential to elevate these efforts to a more meaningful, student-centered engagement.

Similarly, MacDonald (2020) emphasized that despite the existence of the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed) Program, institutional practices in Philippine schools often fall short in involving Indigenous students in policy-making or co-curricular planning. Schools tend to lack mechanisms for Indigenous student feedback or structured involvement in curriculum development, which contributes to a lingering sense of exclusion despite positive steps.

Furthermore, UNESCO (2020) and United Nations (2007) through Article 14 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), emphasize the importance of Indigenous representation and self-determination in education. Education systems must not only allow Indigenous learners access but should actively involve them in shaping the education that serves their communities and respects their cultures.

Differences in Indigenous Students' Perceived Cultural Relevance and Inclusivity in School Settings Based on Type of Indigenous Group

To determine whether perceptions of cultural relevance and inclusivity significantly differ among Indigenous students from four different ethnolinguistic groups (Bukignon, Magahat Bukignon, Babayles Bukignon, and Karolano), a Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted. This non-parametric test was appropriate given the ordinal nature of the Likert-scale data and the small, unequal group sizes.

Table 4. Differences in the Indigenous Students' Perceived Cultural Relevance and Inclusivity in School Settings Based on Type of Indigenous Group

IP Group	N	Mean Rank	χ^2	df	p-value	Mean Rank	χ^2	df	p-value
Bukignon	18	50.67	6.152	3	.104	53.92	5.511	3	.138
Magahat Bukignon	41	43.72				40.13			
Babayles Bukignon	15	33.93				41.77			
Karolano	16	55.09				53.28			

Results showed no statistically significant difference in perceptions of cultural relevance across the four Indigenous groups: $\chi^2(3) = 6.152$, $p = .104$. Although the mean ranks varied—with Karolano (55.09) and Bukignon (50.67) students ranking highest and Babayles Bukignon the lowest (33.93)—the difference was not significant at the .05 level. This suggests that despite some variance in experiences, Indigenous students generally perceive their cultures as being similarly represented in the curriculum and classroom practices.

Similarly, there was no statistically significant difference in the perceived inclusivity of school settings: $\chi^2(3) = 5.511$, $p = .138$. Mean ranks again showed variation, with Bukignon (53.92) and Karolano (53.28) reporting higher levels of inclusivity, compared to Magahat Bukignon (40.13) and Babayles Bukignon (41.77). However, the differences were not sufficient to be considered statistically significant.

These results align with the principles of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which emphasizes the role of the school microsystem in shaping learners' experiences. The relatively consistent perceptions across different groups may reflect institutional efforts to standardize inclusive practices, particularly through national programs such as the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed) Framework (DepEd, 2015). This framework mandates the integration of Indigenous perspectives into teaching, learning, and school culture.

Furthermore, the findings support Banks' (2006) Theory of Multicultural Education, which promotes equity and cultural pluralism in school practices. The absence of significant differences may suggest some level of success in implementing inclusive and culturally relevant education in the setting studied, possibly due to the shared institutional context (e.g., WVSU-HCC) and the total enumeration sampling from that institution.

However, the numerical differences in mean ranks—especially the lower scores from the Babayles Bukignon group—highlight the importance of not overlooking intra-Indigenous diversity. This observation is supported by Castagno and Brayboy (2008), who caution that educational policies often homogenize Indigenous experiences, failing to recognize the nuanced realities of different groups.

Previous studies have noted both commonalities and divergences in how Indigenous students experience education. For example, Belisario and Bugtong (2019) found that while many Indigenous learners in the Philippines appreciate curricular efforts that reflect their identities, the depth and authenticity of inclusion often differ by region, group, and even individual school leadership. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) reported that the effectiveness of culturally responsive practices is highly contingent upon localized implementation, community involvement, and teacher training.

These insights align with the present findings: although statistical tests indicate general parity, educational institutions must remain vigilant in identifying and addressing the subtle inequities and overlooked experiences that aggregate data may conceal.

5. Conclusion

This study provides empirically grounded insights into the academic challenges, perceptions of cultural relevance, and perceived inclusivity of Indigenous students enrolled at West Visayas State University – Himamaylan City Campus. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on Indigenous education, emphasizing the need for both structural support and culturally responsive pedagogy. Several key conclusions can be drawn from the results:

Academic Challenges. The most commonly reported academic difficulty was financial hardship, followed by challenges related to academic workload and limited access to academic support services. These findings likely reflect the broader socio-economic realities faced by many Indigenous communities, particularly those in rural and geographically isolated areas. The data suggest that economic disadvantage may undermine students' ability to engage fully in academic work, in part due to limited access to digital resources, transportation, and supplemental educational support.

Perceptions of Cultural Relevance. The students' overall perception of the curriculum and classroom practices as “culturally relevant” suggests a degree of institutional success in integrating Indigenous perspectives into formal education. This may reflect ongoing efforts under the Department of Education's Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Framework. However, the slightly lower scores from the Babayles Bukignon subgroup may point to inconsistencies in implementation across different cultural groups. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring educational content to reflect the distinct heritage and lived experiences of diverse Indigenous groups.

Perceptions of Inclusivity. The data indicate that Indigenous students generally perceive their school environment as inclusive, particularly with respect to activities, policies, and teaching practices. This perception is encouraging and suggests that students feel a degree of visibility and belonging within the institutional culture. However, the fact that overall scores did not reach the threshold for “extensively inclusive” suggests that inclusivity may still be partial or surface-level. While symbolic efforts—such as cultural celebrations or thematic activities—may be present, there remains a need to embed inclusivity more deeply into governance structures, curriculum design, and faculty development.

Differences Across Indigenous Groups. While the Kruskal-Wallis test revealed no statistically significant differences in students' perceptions of cultural relevance and inclusivity across the four Indigenous groups studied, observed variations in mean ranks may indicate subtle experiential differences. These differences, although not statistically conclusive, may warrant further exploration through qualitative methodologies to uncover deeper, context-specific nuances. The lack of significant variation may also reflect the homogeneity of the institutional setting, where all participants are exposed to similar policies, instructors, and curricular content. Nonetheless, the data support the value of disaggregating findings by ethnolinguistic group to ensure that more specific needs are not obscured by aggregate reporting.

6. Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered to enhance the academic success and cultural inclusion of Indigenous students at West Visayas State University – Himamaylan City Campus and similar institutions:

Establish Targeted and Culturally Responsive Financial Assistance Programs. Given that financial hardship was identified as the most significant academic challenge among Indigenous students, it is recommended that the university implement targeted financial assistance programs, such as culturally responsive scholarships, emergency funds, or need-based grants. While state universities benefit from the Free Higher Education Act (Republic Act No. 10931), many Indigenous students continue to face economic barriers related to non-tuition expenses, including internet connectivity, transportation, meals, and academic materials. These financial burdens can hinder their academic participation and persistence. To address this, the university may collaborate with local government units (LGUs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Indigenous Peoples' (IP) organizations to co-develop sustainable financial aid mechanisms tailored to the lived realities of Indigenous learners.

Enhance Academic Support Services. Academic workload and access to support services emerged as significant challenges. The institution may strengthen tutorial programs, peer mentoring, and academic advising services tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous students. These services may be culturally sensitive and available during flexible hours, considering students' family obligations and transportation barriers.

Moreover, orientation and bridging programs for first-year Indigenous students could support smoother transitions into higher education by addressing gaps in academic preparedness and institutional navigation.

Contextualize Curriculum to Reflect Diverse Indigenous Cultures. Although students generally perceived the curriculum as "culturally relevant," the variation among groups suggests the need for more localized and differentiated inclusion of Indigenous content. Curriculum developers and instructors may go beyond tokenistic representations by incorporating ethnolinguistic-specific histories, traditions, and knowledge systems into lesson plans and learning activities. Collaborations with local elders, community leaders, and cultural bearers can enrich content authenticity and strengthen student engagement.

Strengthen Teacher Training in Cultural Responsiveness. To sustain culturally relevant pedagogy, the university may implement capacity-building programs for faculty on multicultural education and Indigenous epistemologies. Such training can include workshops, immersion programs, or participatory learning experiences. Teachers equipped with this knowledge are better able to foster inclusive classrooms where Indigenous identities are affirmed and respected.

Institutionalize Inclusive Policies and Leadership Participation. Although the learning environment was rated as "generally inclusive," efforts may be made to ensure that inclusivity is not merely symbolic but structurally embedded. This can be achieved by institutionalizing policies that ensure Indigenous student representation in decision-making bodies, curriculum review panels, and school activities.

Develop Monitoring and Feedback Mechanisms for Inclusivity. To ensure consistency in the implementation of inclusive practices across Indigenous groups, the university may establish regular assessments and feedback systems. These may include culturally responsive evaluation tools and participatory assessments that involve students and community stakeholders. Such mechanisms can help identify emerging issues and adjust interventions accordingly.

Promote Co-curricular Cultural Engagement. To enhance visibility and belonging, the university can support student-led cultural organizations, inter-ethnic dialogue forums, and Indigenous celebrations that reflect the diverse traditions of the IP groups enrolled. These platforms not only validate students' identities but also educate the wider campus community on Indigenous knowledge and values.

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