

Preserving roots, shaping future: Exploring Blaan students' perception towards education

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions of Blaan senior high school students toward education, emphasizing its role as a tool for cultural preservation and personal empowerment. Using a qualitative narrative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten (10) Blaan senior high school students from two (2) barangays; Kimlawis and Balasiao in municipality of Kiblawan, Davao del Sur. The analysis revealed that Blaan students view education as essential to preserving their cultural heritage and the transformative power of education. Furthermore, findings showed that there were existing advantages of education contributing to cultural awareness to Blaan students. However, findings also showed the challenges faced by Blaan students in education. Lastly, the study highlighted the unique perspectives that shape the educational experiences of Blaan senior high school students. It revealed connection between their schooling and their sense of cultural identity. Indeed, education represents more than just learning new subjects; it is a powerful tool to improve social and economic standing while staying true to their heritage. Hence, education brings both opportunities and challenges, as students navigated the need to preserve their cultural roots while meeting modern academic demands.

Keywords: Perceptions, personal growth, transformative power, cultural representation.

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INTRODUCTION

The Blaan Tribe is one of the authentic indigenous tribes in the Philippines and is known to possess a great cultural heritage. The Blaan Tribal community consist of indeed a rich culture. Despite of laws and rights focusing in Indigenous groups, the Blaan Tribe still facing challenges in preserving their culture. In addition, the fear in which this rich cultural heritage may come to an end that the elders of the tribal communities will vanish, then who will have an interest to continue and preserve this rich cultural heritage.

The study conducted in Manoel Ribas a municipality in the state of Paraná in the Southern Region of Brazil by Silva et al. (2023), claimed that indigenous peoples expect the school to focus on their values while preserving the use of the mother tongue, so that students develop oral and written fluency giving the two languages equal importance and value in all areas of learning. Students can be integrated into society while remaining connected to their culture. In addition to this, the study of Baeza, Anderson, and White (2023), asserted that members of the Indigenous community realized they are not actively involved in school administration, despite the fact they believed their involvement was essential to integrate local knowledge in the classroom.

In the Philippines, Indigenous Peoples (IPs) make up a significant component of the population. The Section 3, Article II RA 8371 defined indigenous peoples as cultural communities or groups of homogenous societies who, since time immemorial, have lived organized communities on communally bounded and defined territories, sharing bonds of language, customs, and traditions, and who have become historically distinct from majority of Filipinos (Republic Act No. 8371).

In the study of the Dumagat IP groups in Gabaldon, Nueva Ecija, and Dingalan, Aurora, in the Philippines by Eduardo and Gabriel (2021), revealed that poverty is not the only thing that prevents IPs from exercising their right to an education; IPs themselves think that fighting the system they have grown accustomed to is pointless because it is a never-ending cycle of violence and abuse.

Subsequently, in the study of Victor and Yano (2016), noted that for nearly fifty years, indigenous communities in the Philippines have been fighting for educational reform that takes into account their cultural background, goals, and concerns. In response, a national educational policy was released by the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd). The Indigenous Peoples Education Office of the Department of Education reports that, in the first ten years of the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program, the agency is providing instruction to 2.529 million IP students in 42,176 public schools throughout the Philippines (Department of Education, 2021).

In Mindanao, Municipality of Kiblawan, Province of Davao del Sur, the study of Franca (2021), emphasizes the pivotal role of community unity in preserving Blaan culture amidst the challenges posed by modernization. In addition, the study of Francisco et al. (2021), noted that the absence of educational support structures due to parent's limited educational attainment and economic pressures leading to absenteeism and dropout rates underscore the complex interplay between education and socioeconomic status within the community.

Reflecting on the issue at hand, this serves as an advantage for the researcher to explore the educational obstacles that Blaan students' encounter, especially their view of education as an instrument for cultural strengthening. Therefore, the researcher is intent on delving into the genuine experiences of these students in their pursuit of education.

This research study delved into the perceptions of Blaan students regarding education, focusing on its role as a catalyst for cultural empowerment and preservation within the Blaan Tribal Community. By exploring the value placed on education by Blaan students, the study seeks to identify the extent to which education serves as a means to empower and propagate Blaan culture. Through qualitative analysis and engagement with Blaan students, the research endeavors to illuminate the nuanced intersections between formal education and the preservation of indigenous traditions. By shedding light on these dynamics, the study ultimately strives to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between education and cultural identity among the Blaan people.

Statement of the problem

This study explored the perspectives of Blaan students on how valuable the education is and on how education serves as a tool for cultural preservation and empowering tribal community. Specifically, this study shed light to these following concerns:

1. How do Blaan Senior High School students perceive education?
2. What are the advantages of education to the cultural identity of Blaan Senior High School students?
3. What are the challenges of education to the cultural identity of Blaan Senior High School students?
4. What are the insights of Blaan Senior High School students toward education?

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodological framework that guided the conduct of the study, integrating the research design, locale, participants, sampling technique, research instrument, data gathering procedures, data analysis, the role of the researcher, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations into a cohesive narrative. The study was conducted in selected barangays of the Municipality of Kiblawan, Davao del Sur, specifically Barangay Kimlawis and Barangay Balasiao. Kiblawan comprises approximately 18.03% of the total land area of Davao del Sur, with a land area of 390.07 square kilometers. According to the 2020 Census of Population and Housing, the municipality recorded a population of 49,381 individuals as of May 1, 2020. The two selected barangays were purposively chosen because they have the highest concentration of Blaan residents, particularly Blaan senior high school students, making them appropriate settings for exploring perceptions related to education and cultural preservation.

The study employed a qualitative research design anchored in the narrative approach, which focuses on understanding and describing the stories individuals share about their lived experiences. This design was deemed appropriate as it allowed an in-depth exploration of Blaan students' perceptions of education as a means of cultural empowerment and preservation. Through narrative inquiry and in-depth interviews, the study captured participants' personal accounts, meanings, and interpretations grounded in their cultural and educational contexts. The emphasis on narrative enabled the researcher to situate participants' experiences within their social and cultural realities, thereby providing rich and contextualized data.

The participants of the study were ten Blaan senior high school students who identified themselves as either pure-blooded or half-blooded Blaan. Five participants were selected from

each of the identified barangays. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to ensure that participants possessed characteristics relevant to the objectives of the study. Specifically, participants were required to be senior high school students, identify as pure-blooded or half-blooded Blaan, possess knowledge of their customs and traditions, and demonstrate willingness to share their experiences openly, including consent to audio recording. This sampling approach allowed the researcher to intentionally select information-rich cases that could provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. The semi-structured format facilitated comparability across interviews while still providing space for participants to express their perspectives freely. Prior to data collection, the interview instrument was subjected to validation by a panel of experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and consistency. Recommendations from the panel were incorporated into the final version of the instrument to strengthen its content validity and alignment with the research objectives.

The data gathering process followed a systematic and ethical procedure. After securing approval of the validated research instrument, the researcher conducted a preliminary screening to identify potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Informed consent letters were then distributed, clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, and the rights of the participants, including their right to decline or withdraw at any point. Upon obtaining informed consent, the researcher conducted face-to-face, one-on-one interviews in locations chosen by the participants to ensure comfort, privacy, and openness. All interviews were audio-recorded with the explicit permission of the participants, and verbatim transcripts were produced after each session. To express appreciation for their participation, the researcher provided a small token after the interviews, while reiterating assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity.

Data analysis was carried out using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, which is well-suited for uncovering the essence of lived experiences. The analysis involved a systematic process of familiarization with the transcripts, extraction of significant statements related to the phenomenon, formulation of meanings, and clustering of these meanings into thematic categories. These themes were then integrated into an exhaustive description that captured the core structure of the participants' experiences. Redundant or irrelevant statements were carefully eliminated to refine the findings, and member checking was conducted by returning the synthesized results to the participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their original experiences.

Throughout the research process, the researcher assumed multiple roles, primarily as an observer-as-participant. As the main instrument for data collection and analysis, the researcher facilitated interviews, established rapport with participants, and ensured that the purpose and procedures of the study were clearly communicated. Active listening, probing, and reflective questioning were employed to deepen the discussions and elicit authentic responses. In the analysis phase, the researcher adhered strictly to qualitative research protocols to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data. Safeguarding the confidentiality and integrity of all collected information was a central responsibility consistently upheld by the researcher.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were applied. Credibility was established through careful data collection, prolonged engagement with participants, and member checking to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Dependability was ensured by adhering to institutional research guidelines and providing a transparent and detailed account of the research process, enabling potential replication.

Transferability was addressed by providing rich descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Confirmability was strengthened through expert validation, the use of relevant literature, and systematic documentation of analytic decisions, ensuring that findings were derived from the data rather than researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were integral to all stages of the study. The researcher strictly observed the principles of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and respect for privacy. Participants were fully informed about the study and voluntarily consented to participate. Anonymity was preserved through the use of codes instead of real names, and all personal identifiers were excluded from transcripts and reports. The researcher respected participants' privacy by allowing them to choose when and how to share information and by conducting interviews in secure and comfortable environments. In compliance with the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), all data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. The researcher also ensured that participation posed no harm or risk to the participants and that the study would contribute positively not only to the Blaan students involved but also to broader educational and cultural research endeavors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the results of the study based on the qualitative data gathered from ten (10) Blaan senior high school students drawn from Barangays Kimlawis and Balasiao in the Municipality of Kiblawan, Davao del Sur. Using a qualitative narrative research design and purposive sampling, data were collected through validated semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed through Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological approach. The discussion is firmly grounded in the participants' narratives and is organized according to the four research questions of the study. The findings are interpreted in relation to the study's objectives and supported by relevant literature to deepen understanding of how education is perceived, experienced, and negotiated by Blaan students in relation to cultural identity, challenges, and future aspirations.

The participants consisted of ten Blaan senior high school students, five from each selected barangay, who identified themselves as either pure-blooded or half-blooded Blaan. All participants were enrolled in secondary schools within their respective communities and possessed basic knowledge of Blaan customs, traditions, and lived experiences as indigenous learners. Their shared context as indigenous youth residing in largely rural and mountainous areas shaped their educational experiences, perspectives, and challenges. This demographic and cultural positioning provided an essential backdrop for understanding how education is perceived not merely as academic instruction but as a transformative and culturally situated process. Their narratives consistently reflected the interplay between socioeconomic realities, indigenous identity, and aspirations for social mobility, which aligns with literature emphasizing the contextual nature of indigenous learners' educational experiences.

The first major finding of the study centers on the perceptions of education among Blaan senior high school students. Education was consistently described as highly valuable and transformative, particularly in terms of improving life circumstances, empowering individuals, and shaping future trajectories. Participants viewed education as a means of overcoming poverty, ignorance, and limited opportunities, emphasizing its role in improving employability, decision-

making, and personal agency. Statements such as education being a way to avoid deception, secure decent employment, and uplift one's family underscore how students equate schooling with socioeconomic mobility and self-worth. These perceptions reflect broader findings in the literature that frame education as a critical pathway to empowerment, particularly for marginalized learners who view academic attainment as a means of breaking cycles of disadvantage.

Education was also perceived as a powerful source of empowerment. Participants emphasized that being educated equips them with confidence, clarity of purpose, and the capacity to contribute meaningfully to their tribe. Empowerment was not confined to academic success but extended to personal growth, leadership, and service to the community. Students articulated that knowledge enables them to help fellow tribe members, advocate for their needs, and participate more actively in societal affairs. This aligns with studies highlighting how culturally grounded education strengthens indigenous students' sense of agency, particularly when supported by family encouragement, tribal pride, and institutional mechanisms such as scholarships and indigenous education policies. The recognition of education as both a personal and collective tool reflects the communal orientation of indigenous worldviews, where individual success is closely tied to communal advancement.

Closely linked to empowerment was the role of education in shaping students' futures. Participants consistently described education as preparation for life beyond school, including career opportunities, urban migration, and broader social engagement. Education was seen as opening perspectives, enhancing communication skills, and fostering adaptability in diverse social contexts. These narratives suggest that students do not view education as an abstract requirement but as a concrete investment in future stability and opportunity. The findings resonate with policy frameworks such as the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act, which recognizes education as a means of safeguarding indigenous participation in national development while preserving cultural identity. Thus, education emerged as both aspirational and pragmatic, serving as a bridge between present realities and envisioned futures.

Beyond economic and future-oriented outcomes, education was also strongly associated with personal growth and development. Participants described how schooling fosters resilience, adaptability, and self-awareness as they navigate academic pressures, discrimination, and cultural tensions. Education was perceived as expanding perspectives, enhancing critical thinking, and strengthening emotional resilience. These experiences reflect how indigenous students often develop coping mechanisms through education, particularly when confronted with systemic and social challenges. The development of resilience through education supports existing research that emphasizes the role of schooling in cultivating adaptive capacities among learners, especially those from marginalized communities.

Skill development emerged as another significant dimension of personal growth. Participants highlighted that education helps them acquire not only academic knowledge but also practical skills such as communication, problem-solving, and social competence. These skills were seen as essential for gaining respect within the community and functioning effectively in broader society. Students noted observable changes in behavior, attitudes, and understanding as a result of education, reinforcing the notion that schooling contributes to holistic development. This finding aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of teachers and curriculum implementation in nurturing both cognitive and socio-emotional competencies among learners.

The transformative power of education was further evident in how students negotiated the relationship between tradition and modernity. Participants recognized education as a means of preserving cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary realities. Education enabled them to

appreciate their traditions more deeply, understand the reasons behind cultural practices, and explore ways to sustain these practices in modern contexts. However, students also acknowledged the tension between development and cultural loss, noting that modernization sometimes leads to the gradual forgetting of traditions. This dual perspective reflects the complex role of education as both a preserver and transformer of culture, a theme widely discussed in indigenous education scholarship.

Education also played a critical role in strengthening cultural identity, particularly through cultural representation in schools. Participants emphasized the importance of seeing their language, traditions, and practices reflected in the educational environment. The inclusion of the Blaan language in instruction was viewed as enhancing comprehension, reducing communication barriers, and fostering a sense of recognition and belonging. Learning in one's mother tongue was associated with pride, validation, and stronger cultural attachment. This finding supports linguistic research highlighting the dynamic nature of indigenous languages and the importance of mother-tongue-based education in preserving linguistic and cultural identity.

Similarly, the inclusion of Blaan cultural practices in school activities such as performances, attire, and cultural programs reinforced students' connection to their heritage. These opportunities allowed students to express their identity publicly and meaningfully, transforming cultural practices into living elements of the school experience. Teacher sensitivity and cultural competence further amplified these benefits. Participants noted that teachers who understood their culture, used indigenous examples, and employed bilingual instruction created more inclusive and supportive learning environments. This underscores the critical role of culturally responsive pedagogy in promoting equity and engagement among indigenous learners.

Education also facilitated students' connection to ancestry and ancestral wisdom. Participants valued learning about traditional knowledge passed down through generations, including customs, values, and historical narratives. This knowledge fostered respect for ancestors and reinforced a sense of continuity between past and present. Integrating Blaan history into classroom instruction helped students see their culture as an integral part of the broader social narrative rather than a marginal footnote. These findings align with studies demonstrating that cultural integration in education enhances both academic engagement and identity affirmation among indigenous students.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also revealed significant challenges faced by Blaan senior high school students. Cultural indifference, prejudice, and misconceptions about indigenous identity negatively affected students' self-esteem and sense of belonging. Participants reported experiences of discrimination, stereotyping, and verbal bullying, which at times led to emotional distress and disengagement from school. These experiences mirror existing research documenting how prejudice and cultural ignorance can undermine indigenous students' academic confidence and participation.

Communication barriers and limited access to resources further compounded these challenges. Many students struggled with instruction delivered primarily in Filipino or English, particularly when culturally relevant materials in the Blaan language were scarce. Geographic isolation and limited educational resources, including textbooks, technology, and internet access, constrained learning opportunities and widened disparities between rural and urban learners. These structural barriers reflect systemic inequities that continue to affect indigenous education outcomes.

Another prominent challenge involved balancing modern academic demands with traditional knowledge. Students expressed difficulty managing time and attention between formal

schooling and cultural learning, noting that curricula often prioritize mainstream knowledge over indigenous epistemologies. Acculturation pressures further intensified this tension, as some students felt compelled to downplay their cultural identity to avoid discrimination. This internal conflict highlights the need for educational frameworks that integrate indigenous knowledge systems rather than positioning them in opposition to modern education.

The final set of findings focused on students' insights into the broader role of education. Education was widely viewed as a bridge between tradition and modernity, enabling students to honor their heritage while pursuing academic and professional aspirations. Participants emphasized the responsibility of educated Blaan youth to preserve and promote their culture, viewing themselves as carriers of tribal continuity. Cultural appreciation, both within and beyond the community, was seen as essential for sustaining identity and fostering mutual respect.

Education also contributed to personal and leadership development. Through school and community engagement, students developed leadership skills rooted in cultural values, including responsibility, service, and advocacy. Identity awareness emerged as a foundation for resilience and confidence, empowering students to navigate discrimination and societal challenges. Additionally, education equipped students with skills for social contribution, enabling them to support community development and inspire future generations.

Finally, education expanded students' awareness of their rights and access to opportunities. Participants highlighted how learning about indigenous rights empowered them to advocate for fairness, inclusion, and equity. Awareness of legal frameworks and institutional support mechanisms reinforced education's role as a tool for justice and empowerment. Education also broadened students' perspectives, exposing them to diverse ideas and global issues while strengthening appreciation for indigenous knowledge systems.

In synthesis, the findings demonstrate that education plays a multifaceted and deeply meaningful role in the lives of Blaan senior high school students. It functions simultaneously as a pathway to socioeconomic mobility, a mechanism for cultural preservation, a site of personal and leadership development, and a space where challenges rooted in inequality and cultural tension are negotiated. The results address the study's objectives by illustrating how education shapes perceptions, identity, and aspirations among Blaan youth, while also revealing the structural and cultural barriers they continue to face. These insights underscore the importance of culturally responsive, inclusive, and equitable educational practices and provide a strong foundation for the subsequent discussion of implications, conclusions, and recommendations.

CONCLUSION

The present study sought to understand the perceptions of Blaan senior high school students regarding education, with particular emphasis on its role as a catalyst for cultural empowerment and preservation within the Blaan tribal community. Drawing from the lived experiences of ten (10) Blaan senior high school students from Barangays Balasiao and Kimlawis in the Municipality of Kiblawan, the study illuminated how education is understood, valued, and navigated by indigenous learners situated within both cultural and academic contexts. Grounded in qualitative inquiry, the findings revealed that education is not merely perceived as formal schooling but as a transformative process that shapes personal growth, cultural identity, and future aspirations while responding to the social realities faced by Blaan youth.

The results demonstrated that Blaan students consistently view education as a powerful transformative tool that extends beyond individual academic achievement. Education was

perceived as a pathway toward socioeconomic mobility, improved life opportunities, and greater agency within society. Participants articulated that education equips them with knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to uplift not only themselves but also their families and communities. This perception underscores the role of education in empowering indigenous youth to articulate their voices, engage meaningfully with the wider society, and envision futures that transcend structural limitations such as poverty, geographic isolation, and marginalization. In this sense, education functions as both a personal and collective resource that strengthens indigenous participation in social and economic development.

Alongside its transformative value, the study highlighted the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by Blaán students as they navigate an educational environment often constrained by limited resources, language barriers, and insufficient culturally responsive support. Despite these challenges, participants exhibited strong determination, self-reliance, and the capacity to cope with academic pressures and experiences of discrimination. Their resilience was reinforced by personal motivation, peer and mentor support, and a clear sense of purpose rooted in both educational goals and cultural responsibility. These findings emphasize the need for institutional structures that recognize and respond to the unique realities of indigenous learners, particularly those in rural and geographically isolated communities, in order to sustain and enhance their educational engagement.

Importantly, the study revealed that Blaán students do not perceive education as a force that erodes their cultural identity. Instead, education is understood as a means of preserving, celebrating, and transmitting Blaán culture. Participants emphasized that schooling provides opportunities to recognize their heritage, deepen their understanding of ancestral wisdom, and share cultural practices within educational spaces. This integrative perspective reflects a view of education and culture as complementary rather than conflicting domains. Through language inclusion, cultural representation, and engagement with ancestral knowledge, education becomes a platform through which indigenous identity is affirmed and sustained while adapting to contemporary demands.

The findings further showed that education plays a central role in the personal growth and identity formation of Blaán students. As learners, they develop essential life skills such as critical thinking, communication, leadership, and adaptability, which prepare them for active participation in both community life and broader society. Many students expressed aspirations to serve as role models and advocates for their tribe, indicating that education nurtures not only professional ambitions but also a strong sense of social responsibility. This aspiration to give back to the community reflects how education fosters leadership grounded in cultural pride and collective well-being.

At the same time, the study acknowledged the academic and personal challenges encountered by Blaán students, including cultural indifference, misconceptions, and limited access to learning resources. In response, students adopted various coping strategies such as seeking social support, setting personal goals, and balancing academic responsibilities with cultural commitments. These strategies highlight their agency and creativity in managing educational demands while maintaining cultural integrity. Moreover, education emerged as a critical avenue for developing awareness of indigenous rights, enabling students to advocate for fairness, inclusion, and equity within educational and social institutions.

In synthesizing the findings, the study underscores the broader implications of education for indigenous learners. Education serves as a vital link between tradition and modernity, enabling Blaán students to honor their heritage while preparing for future opportunities. It empowers them

to broaden their perspectives, engage with diverse ideas, and contribute meaningfully to societal progress without abandoning their cultural roots. As such, education holds the potential to function as a transformative and culturally sustaining force when aligned with inclusive and responsive practices.

In light of these conclusions, the study points to the importance of collaborative efforts among key stakeholders to strengthen indigenous education. Educational institutions, particularly the Department of Education, are encouraged to integrate Blaán cultural content into curricula, provide culturally responsive teacher training, and allocate resources such as language support and financial assistance to reduce barriers faced by indigenous learners. Similarly, partnerships with the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples can enhance the integration of cultural practices into school programs and expand educational access through sustained support mechanisms. Local government units and non-governmental organizations may further contribute by establishing cultural centers and community-based programs that support both educational development and cultural preservation. The involvement of Blaán tribal leaders and elders as cultural mentors can reinforce students' identity and motivation, while increased parental engagement and student-focused academic support initiatives can strengthen learning outcomes and confidence.

Finally, the study recognizes the value of continued scholarly inquiry into indigenous education. Future research may expand the scope to include other indigenous communities and regions, examine the effectiveness of existing support programs, and generate evidence-based strategies that promote culturally inclusive and equitable education. Through such efforts, educational systems can be better equipped to honor indigenous knowledge, empower indigenous youth, and ensure that education serves as a meaningful instrument for both personal advancement and cultural continuity.

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