



ENHANCING INDIGENOUS LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE THROUGH A SCHOOL - COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP: EVIDENCE FROM THE ADOPT A BAJAU LEARNER PROGRAM IN THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous learners continue to experience educational inequalities resulting from poverty, cultural marginalization, language barriers, and limited access to inclusive and culturally responsive education. This study evaluated the effectiveness of the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program implemented at Tandag Central Elementary School, Tandag City, Surigao del Sur, during School Year 2024–2025. Specifically, it assessed the effectiveness of school-based interventions and program support, determined changes in the academic performance of Bajau learners before and after program implementation, examined the relationships between program components and academic achievement, and explored the lived experiences of learners and program implementers. A mixed-methods convergent research design was employed involving 52 participants composed of 15 Bajau learners, 5 teachers/program implementers, 2 school administrators, 5 adopters, 5 barangay officials, and 20 other stakeholders. Quantitative data were analyzed using weighted mean, Pearson product–moment correlation, and paired comparison, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. Findings revealed that the school-based intervention was perceived as very effective (grand weighted mean = 4.44), whereas program support was rated as very high. The mean general average of Bajau learners significantly increased from 78.62 (Satisfactory) before program implementation to 85.47 (Very Satisfactory) after implementation, representing a mean improvement of 6.85 points. Moreover, strong positive and statistically significant relationships were found between school-based interventions and academic performance ($r = 0.81\text{--}0.90$, $p < .05$), indicating that culturally responsive instructional strategies, resource provision, community partnerships, and active stakeholder involvement substantially enhanced learners' academic achievement. Qualitative findings further

demonstrated that culturally sustaining pedagogies, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs), family engagement, and collaborative support mechanisms strengthened learners' motivation, confidence, attendance, and sustained educational engagement. The study concludes that the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program provides an effective model of culturally responsive and school–community partnership-based education that promotes academic success and educational inclusion among indigenous learners. The findings underscore the importance of strengthening collaborative and culturally sustaining educational initiatives to reduce learning disparities and improve educational outcomes among marginalized indigenous communities in the Philippines.

Keywords: *Indigenous education, Bajau learners, school–community partnership, culturally responsive education, academic performance, inclusive education, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs), Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of sustainable development, social inclusion, and economic advancement. However, indigenous learners continue to experience persistent educational inequalities resulting from poverty, geographic isolation, language differences, discrimination, and limited access to culturally responsive educational opportunities. These barriers contribute to lower academic achievement, irregular school attendance, and higher dropout rates among indigenous populations worldwide. According to UNESCO (2023), community-based and culturally responsive educational interventions are essential in addressing educational disparities because they strengthen learner participation, promote cultural identity, and improve educational outcomes among marginalized indigenous communities. Likewise, Indigenous Navigator (2021) emphasized that quality education for indigenous peoples should recognize their cultural heritage, languages, and traditional knowledge while ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education has strengthened its commitment to inclusive education through the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program, which promotes culturally appropriate, rights-based, and contextualized learning for indigenous communities. Despite this policy direction, implementing culturally responsive education remains challenging because many schools continue to face shortages in instructional resources, culturally appropriate learning materials, teacher preparation, and sustained community participation. Morales (2025) reported that although the IPEd Program has significantly improved educational access for indigenous learners, schools continue to encounter implementation challenges that limit its overall effectiveness. Similarly, Navas and Siyang (2023) argued that strengthening indigenous education requires collaborative partnerships among schools, families, local governments, and indigenous communities to ensure that educational programs respond to learners' cultural contexts and educational needs.

Among the indigenous cultural communities in the Philippines, the Bajau people remain one of the most educationally disadvantaged groups. Traditionally recognized as sea-dwelling communities, many Bajau families who have settled in coastal urban areas continue to experience poverty, unstable livelihoods, limited parental educational attainment, language barriers, and social exclusion. These socioeconomic conditions frequently result in poor academic performance, inconsistent school attendance, and limited educational opportunities for Bajau learners. As observed at Tandag Central Elementary School, these educational challenges necessitated the implementation of localized interventions that provide both academic and socio-emotional support for indigenous learners.

To address these educational concerns, Tandag Central Elementary School implemented the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program, a school–community partnership initiative that integrates culturally responsive instruction, financial assistance, educational resource provision, mentorship, and active stakeholder participation to improve the educational experiences of Bajau learners. The program recognizes the importance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) while promoting collaboration among teachers, parents, community leaders, and external partners. Recent evidence suggests that culturally sustaining educational practices supported by strong community partnerships significantly enhance learner engagement, academic achievement, and educational inclusion among indigenous students. For instance, Gaite (2025) found that culturally responsive educational support and community involvement substantially improve indigenous learners' academic persistence, motivation, and sense of belonging, thereby contributing to better educational outcomes.

Although previous studies have examined indigenous education policies and culturally responsive teaching practices, limited empirical research has evaluated the effectiveness of comprehensive school–community partnership programs specifically designed for Bajau learners in the Philippine basic education context. Existing literature has largely focused on policy implementation and the educational experiences of indigenous communities without simultaneously examining measurable academic outcomes, stakeholder support, and learners' lived experiences. This research therefore sought to address this gap by evaluating the effectiveness of the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program in enhancing the academic performance and sustained educational engagement of Bajau learners at Tandag Central Elementary School. Specifically, the study assessed the effectiveness of school-based interventions and program support, examined changes in learners' academic performance before and after program implementation, determined the relationships between program components and academic achievement, and explored the lived experiences of learners and program implementers. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on culturally responsive indigenous education and provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening inclusive educational policies and school–community partnership initiatives for marginalized indigenous learners in the Philippines.

Research Questions

This study examined the effectiveness of the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program implemented at Tandag Central Elementary School during School Year 2024–2025. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How effective are the school-based interventions of the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program in terms of project objectives, instructional strategies, learning materials, cultural sensitivity support mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation, and attendance?
2. What is the level of program support provided through resource provision, financial assistance, community linkages, and active adopter involvement?
3. Is there a significant difference in the academic performance of Bajau learners before and after the implementation of the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program?
4. Is there a significant relationship between the effectiveness of school-based interventions and the academic performance of Bajau learners?
5. Is there a significant relationship between the level of program support and the academic performance of Bajau learners?
6. What are the lived experiences of Bajau learners and program implementers regarding the implementation of the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent research design to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program implemented at Tandag Central Elementary School during School Year 2024–2025. The quantitative component assessed the effectiveness of school-based interventions, the level of program support, and the academic performance of Bajau learners before and after program implementation, while the qualitative component explored the lived experiences of learners and program implementers to enrich the interpretation of the quantitative findings. The study involved 52 participants, comprising 15 Bajau learners, 5 teachers/program implementers, 2 school administrators, 5 adopters, 5 barangay officials, and 20 other stakeholders who were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in the program. Data were collected using a researcher-developed and expert-validated questionnaire, school records on learners' academic performance and attendance, and semi-structured interview guides for the qualitative phase. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance and permission were obtained from the concerned authorities, and informed consent and learner assent were secured from all participants. Quantitative data were analyzed using weighted mean to determine the effectiveness of school-based interventions and program support, paired-samples comparison to examine differences in learners' academic performance before and after program implementation, and Pearson product-moment correlation to determine the relationships between program components and academic performance. Qualitative interview data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes describing participants' experiences with the implementation of the Adopt a Bajau Learner

Program. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of how culturally responsive school–community partnership interventions contributed to the academic performance and sustained educational engagement of Bajau learners.

RESULTS

Table 1. Effectiveness of the School-Based Interventions of the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program

School-Based Intervention	Mean	Interpretation
Project Objectives	4.39	Very Effective
Instructional Strategies	4.52	Very Effective
Learning Materials	4.38	Very Effective
Cultural Sensitivity Support Mechanism	4.60	Very Effective
Monitoring and Evaluation	4.39	Very Effective
Attendance	4.35	Very Effective
Grand Mean	4.44	Very Effective

Table 2. Level of Program Support

Program Support	Mean	Interpretation
Resource Provision	4.38	Very High Support
Financial Aid	4.49	Very High Support
Community Linkages	4.44	Very High Support
Active Adopter Involvement	4.47	Very High Support
Grand Mean	4.45	Very High Support

Table 3. Comparison of the Academic Performance of Bajau Learners Before and After Program Implementation

Academic Performance	Before Program (SY 2023–2024)	After Program (SY 2024–2025)	Mean Difference	Decision
Mean General Average (MGA)	78.62 (Satisfactory)	85.47 (Very Satisfactory)	6.85	Significant Improvement

Table 4. Relationship Between School-Based Interventions and Academic Performance

School-Based Intervention	r-value	p-value	Interpretation
Project Objectives	0.81	0.018	Significant Positive Relationship
Instructional Strategies	0.88	0.009	Significant Positive Relationship
Learning Materials	0.84	0.015	Significant Positive Relationship
Cultural Sensitivity Support Mechanism	0.90	0.006	Significant Positive Relationship
Monitoring and Evaluation	0.83	0.017	Significant Positive Relationship
Attendance	0.85	0.013	Significant Positive Relationship

Table 5. Relationship Between Program Support and Academic Performance

Program Support	r-value	p-value	Interpretation
Resource Provision	0.82	< .05	Significant Positive Relationship
Financial Aid	0.89	< .05	Significant Positive Relationship
Community Linkages	0.91	< .05	Significant Positive Relationship
Active Adopter Involvement	0.96	< .05	Significant Positive Relationship

Table 6. Summary of Themes on the Lived Experiences of Bajau Learners and Program Implementers

Theme	Description
Culturally Responsive Instruction	Teachers adapted instructional strategies by incorporating learners' culture, language, visual materials, and contextualized teaching approaches.
Increased Learner Engagement	Interactive and culturally grounded learning activities enhanced learners' motivation, participation, confidence, and classroom engagement.
Instructional Challenges	Language barriers, irregular attendance, and limited instructional resources remained persistent challenges during program implementation.
Multi-layered Support Systems	Collaboration among teachers, adopters, parents, community leaders, and school administrators strengthened learner support and promoted sustained educational participation.
Psychosocial Development	Learners developed greater self-confidence, emotional resilience, cultural identity, and sense of belonging through a culturally safe learning environment.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program effectively enhanced the academic performance and educational engagement of Bajau learners through culturally responsive school-based interventions and collaborative stakeholder support. The high effectiveness rating of the program indicates that instructional approaches grounded in learners' cultural identity create inclusive learning environments where indigenous students feel valued and motivated to participate. This finding is consistent with Esparrago-Kalidas (2025), who emphasized that culturally sustaining pedagogies strengthen indigenous learners' engagement by integrating local knowledge, language, and culture into classroom instruction while addressing barriers that often hinder academic participation. Such culturally responsive practices allow indigenous learners to connect classroom learning with their lived experiences, thereby improving educational outcomes.

The significant improvement in the academic performance of Bajau learners after participating in the program further highlights the importance of comprehensive educational interventions that combine instructional support with socioeconomic assistance. The provision of learning materials, financial assistance, mentoring, and continuous monitoring created favorable conditions that enabled learners to overcome educational disadvantages associated with poverty and social exclusion. Similarly, Regaspi (2025) emphasized that strengthening educational support for Aeta Indigenous learners requires active collaboration among families, schools, and communities. The study found that parental involvement, financial support, and effective school–community

partnerships contribute to improved educational engagement and learner outcomes despite the socioeconomic challenges faced by Indigenous communities. These findings reinforce the importance of implementing comprehensive and culturally responsive interventions that address both academic and social barriers to achieve equitable educational opportunities for Indigenous learners.

The strong positive relationships between school-based interventions and academic performance also underscore the critical role of culturally responsive instructional practices in improving indigenous learners' educational achievement. Among the intervention components, cultural sensitivity exhibited the strongest association with academic performance, indicating that instructional strategies that respect indigenous identity and promote culturally safe learning environments significantly enhance learner engagement. This finding supports the work of Bonifacio et al. (2021), who demonstrated that integrating indigenous language and culture into educational programs strengthens learners' confidence, participation, and academic performance by reinforcing their cultural identity while facilitating meaningful learning experiences.

Likewise, the strong correlations between program support and academic performance emphasize the importance of sustained collaboration among schools, families, adopters, and community stakeholders in promoting educational success. Active stakeholder involvement not only addressed learners' material needs but also fostered a supportive environment that encouraged regular attendance and continuous academic engagement. According to Magdadaro and Sacramento (2022), meaningful community engagement enables indigenous education programs to become more responsive to local needs, strengthens policy implementation, and promotes shared responsibility among educational stakeholders. Their study further emphasized that school–community partnerships serve as important mechanisms for sustaining culturally appropriate educational initiatives in indigenous communities.

The qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results by demonstrating that culturally responsive instruction, contextualized learning activities, and collaborative support systems contributed to the learners' increased confidence, motivation, and sense of belonging. Teachers' efforts to integrate indigenous culture, simplify instructional approaches, and involve families created a culturally safe learning environment where Bajau learners became more engaged in classroom activities despite language barriers and socioeconomic challenges. These findings align with Cubillas et al. (2025), who reported that family support, positive school relationships, and culturally responsive educational environments significantly contribute to the academic well-being and resilience of indigenous learners. Collectively, these findings suggest that culturally grounded educational interventions supported by strong school–community partnerships provide an effective framework for improving both academic achievement and long-term educational engagement among marginalized indigenous learners.

Overall, this study extends the growing body of evidence on indigenous education by demonstrating that culturally responsive school–community partnership programs can effectively address both the academic and socio-emotional needs of indigenous learners. The findings highlight the value of integrating culturally sustaining pedagogies, active

stakeholder participation, and holistic learner support into inclusive education initiatives. Such approaches not only improve academic performance but also foster educational equity by creating learning environments that recognize and respect indigenous identities while promoting sustained participation in formal education.

Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program is an effective school–community partnership initiative for improving the educational outcomes of Bajau learners at Tandag Central Elementary School. The program's school-based interventions, particularly culturally responsive instructional practices, together with strong program support through resource provision, financial assistance, community linkages, and active adopter involvement, were perceived as highly effective in addressing the educational needs of indigenous learners. The significant improvement in learners' academic performance following program implementation confirms that comprehensive interventions that integrate academic, cultural, and socioeconomic support can effectively reduce barriers to learning among marginalized indigenous communities. Furthermore, the significant positive relationships between school-based interventions, program support, and academic performance underscore the importance of culturally inclusive teaching, collaborative stakeholder engagement, and sustained learner support in promoting academic success. The qualitative findings further reinforce these results by demonstrating that culturally responsive pedagogy, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs), family involvement, and community collaboration foster learners' confidence, motivation, attendance, and educational engagement. Overall, the study concludes that culturally responsive school–community partnership programs provide a sustainable and inclusive framework for enhancing the academic performance and long-term educational participation of indigenous learners, offering valuable evidence to strengthen Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) initiatives and similar educational programs in the Philippines and other contexts serving marginalized indigenous populations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, it is recommended that schools serving indigenous learners institutionalize culturally responsive and community-based educational programs similar to the Adopt a Bajau Learner Program to promote inclusive and equitable learning opportunities. School administrators should strengthen the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogies by providing continuous professional development for teachers on Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd), culturally responsive instruction, and the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) into classroom teaching. Partnerships with local government units, non-government organizations, community leaders, and private stakeholders should be expanded to ensure the sustainable provision of financial assistance, learning materials, mentoring programs, and other learner support services. Parents and community members should be actively involved in planning, implementing, and monitoring educational interventions to foster shared responsibility for learners' academic success. Furthermore, policymakers and education leaders are encouraged to develop policies that reinforce school–

community collaboration and allocate adequate resources for indigenous education initiatives. Finally, future researchers may conduct longitudinal and multi-site studies involving larger samples of indigenous communities to evaluate the long-term effectiveness, scalability, and sustainability of culturally responsive educational interventions across diverse educational settings.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Schools Division Office and the school administration of Tandag Central Elementary School. Informed consent was secured from all adult participants, while written parental or guardian consent and learner assent were obtained for the participation of Bajau learners who were minors. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by assigning codes to participants and ensuring that all personal information and responses were treated with the utmost confidentiality. Data collected were used solely for academic and research purposes and were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. The study adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice, and cultural sensitivity by recognizing and respecting the cultural identity, traditions, and values of the Bajau indigenous community throughout the research process. No form of deception, coercion, discrimination, or harm was involved during the conduct of the study. The researchers likewise ensured compliance with the ethical standards prescribed by the institution and the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013) and the Philippine National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research (2022) applicable to research involving human participants.

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