

Original Article

Success Stories of Best Pedagogical Practices of Elementary Teachers in Teaching Reading to Indigenous Learners

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Abstract

Indigenous learners often face persistent barriers to early literacy, including linguistic mismatch, limited culturally aligned materials, and low access to sustained support outside school. This study examined the success stories of elementary teachers who teach reading to indigenous learners in Sta. Maria East District, Division of Davao Occidental, Philippines. A qualitative phenomenological approach guided the inquiry. Ten public elementary teachers with at least three years of experience in reading instruction for indigenous learners participated through in depth interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis identified best pedagogical practices, the meaning teachers attach to these practices, and teacher generated insights to improve reading instruction. Findings highlight culturally responsive instruction that affirms learners' language and identity, the use of contextualized and visual learning materials, and strong family and community involvement. Teachers described meaning making through cultural affirmation, professional growth through adaptation, and fulfillment that follows learner progress. Teachers also recommended cross curricular reading integration, targeted training in cultural pedagogy, and stronger school community partnerships. The findings support literacy interventions that respect indigenous knowledge systems while strengthening foundational reading skills through locally grounded practice.

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1. Introduction

Early literacy shapes learners' access to the full curriculum because reading supports the acquisition of knowledge, the development of vocabulary, and participation in classroom discourse. When foundational reading skills remain weak in the primary grades, learners face cumulative disadvantage that affects later learning outcomes and school completion. In indigenous communities, literacy development is often shaped by linguistic and cultural context. Many children enter school with a rich oral tradition and a home language that differs from the official language of instruction, and this mismatch can limit comprehension, reduce participation, and weaken confidence in early reading tasks.

International evidence suggests that instruction that connects literacy to learners' cultural knowledge and lived experience can strengthen engagement and support learning, especially when teachers select texts, examples, and classroom routines that align with community values (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Wearmouth, 2017). Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the alignment of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment with the cultural strengths of learners and views culture as a resource for learning rather than a barrier (Gay, 2010; Keehne, 2018). In literacy instruction, this approach often appears through the use of culturally relevant stories, local knowledge, and classroom talk that affirms identity and supports comprehension.

For many indigenous learners, the mother tongue supports meaning because it reduces cognitive load during early decoding and comprehension, and it allows teachers to build reading tasks around familiar vocabulary, routines, and narratives. Evidence from multilingual contexts shows that mother tongue instruction can improve early literacy under supportive conditions, but implementation requires teacher capacity, materials, and alignment between home language and school practice (Piper et al., 2016).

In the Philippines, mother tongue based multilingual education aims to support learning in the early grades, yet outcomes depend on language diversity, teacher preparation, and material quality (Igarashi et al., 2024). These realities are visible in rural districts where teachers work with indigenous learners who speak local languages, face limited printed resources, and rely on families and elders who hold community narratives and oral traditions. Teachers often respond by crafting local materials, translating texts, and negotiating instruction with parents and elders. Such work is not only technical. It also requires moral commitment and relational practice, because teachers must build trust with families and demonstrate respect for cultural identity.

Research on indigenous education in different settings shows that literacy improves when reading tasks reflect the cultural context, when instruction values local language, and when schools connect with community knowledge keepers (Bennet et al., 2012; Keehne, 2018). However, the details of how teachers enact these practices and how they interpret their success are often underreported in the literature, particularly in Philippine indigenous contexts. This study addresses that gap by

documenting the success stories of elementary teachers who have developed effective pedagogical practices for teaching reading to indigenous learners. The inquiry focuses on three aims: to describe best pedagogical practices used in reading instruction, to understand how teachers make meaning of these practices, and to capture teacher generated insights that can improve reading instruction for indigenous learners in similar settings. By centering teachers' lived experience, the study offers practice based evidence to inform school level literacy support, teacher development, and community partnerships in indigenous education.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative, exploratory phenomenological design to describe the experiences of elementary teachers who teach reading to indigenous learners and to capture the meaning they assign to effective practice. The study site was Sta. Maria East District in the Division of Davao Occidental, Philippines. Purposive sampling guided participant selection to ensure information rich cases. Ten public elementary teachers were included from a pool of eligible teachers in the district. Participants met the inclusion criteria of at least three years of experience in teaching reading to indigenous learners and active involvement in literacy instruction at the elementary level.

Data collection relied on in depth, one-on-one interviews that used a semi-structured interview guide aligned with the research questions and informed by established qualitative interviewing guidance that emphasizes open ended prompts, probes for concrete examples, and attention to participant meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020). The interview guide invited teachers to describe successful reading practices, explain why these practices work in their context, reflect on how they learned to adapt instruction, and share suggestions that can improve reading instruction for indigenous learners. With participant consent, interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed to support systematic analysis.

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis, which supports a flexible yet rigorous process of coding, theme development, and interpretive writing (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). The researchers reviewed transcripts several times to build familiarity, generated initial codes that captured patterned meaning across accounts, and clustered codes into candidate themes that answered the research questions. Themes were reviewed against the dataset to confirm coherence, refined to clarify boundaries, and written as analytic narratives supported by verbatim excerpts. To strengthen trustworthiness, the study used practices aligned with qualitative rigor, including careful documentation of analytic decisions, repeated engagement with transcripts, and the use of multiple excerpts per theme to show evidence across participants (Tracy, 2020).

Ethical practice followed core principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice described in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Participants

provided informed consent, and confidentiality was protected through the use of participant codes, secure storage of digital files, and careful handling of potentially identifying details. Data protection procedures aligned with the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012, which sets standards for lawful, transparent, and secure processing of personal information (National Privacy Commission, 2012).

3. Results

3.1 Best Pedagogical Practices

Theme 1: Culturally-Responsive Teaching Strategies

Teachers used culturally relevant texts and the mother tongue to support comprehension and engagement. They selected local stories and oral traditions so learners could connect print with familiar cultural meaning. They mentioned:

"We incorporate local stories and folklore to make reading more relatable to them." (P1)

"Using their mother tongue helps them understand the material better." (P3)

"We use their language and culture so they can understand the lesson more easily." (P6)

Theme 2: Contextualized and Visual Learning Materials

Teachers created localized and visual materials that link words to familiar objects, routines, and community settings. They reported that materials in the native language and culturally familiar images worked better than generic texts. They stated:

"We use pictures of things they see in their environment so they can connect words to objects." (P4)

"Materials in their native language are more effective than generic textbooks." (P8)

"It is more effective when there are images that are familiar to the children." (P10)

Theme 3: Community and Parental Involvement

Teachers extended reading support through parents, elders, and community members who reinforced literacy routines at home. They also drew on elders' oral traditions as authentic sources for reading texts. They verbalized:

"We train parents to read with their children using simple materials in their own language." (P2)

"The elders help us by sharing oral traditions that we turn into reading texts." (P7)

"The help of parents and elders has a very big effect on their reading." (P5)

3.2 Meaning-Making of Pedagogical Practices

Theme 1: Affirmation of Cultural Identity

Teachers described reading instruction as meaningful when it protects learners' language and identity while building skills. They viewed mother tongue use and cultural content as a form of respect that improved learner response. They mentioned:

"It feels meaningful to teach reading while keeping their traditions alive." (P1)

"Teaching in their own language shows respect and the kids respond better." (P3)

"We are happy that we helped sustain their culture and language." (P6)

Theme 2: Growth through Adaptation

Teachers reported professional growth after they adjusted methods to local needs and the indigenous context. They emphasized flexibility in strategy choice and continuous refinement based on learner response. They verbalized:

"I had to rethink my old strategies and create new ways that actually work here." (P4)

"Every learner is different, especially in indigenous communities, so we adjust." (P7)

"Our teaching style changed because of their needs." (P9)

Theme 3: Fulfillment through Learner Progress

Teachers expressed fulfillment when learners gained confidence and independence in reading. They linked success to visible progress in decoding and comprehension as well as improved participation. They stated:

"When they start reading on their own, it's the most rewarding feeling." (P2)

"I feel fulfilled knowing that our approach is really helping them." (P5)

"Their success in reading is our happiness." (P8)

3.3 Insights to Improve the Teaching of Reading to Indigenous Learners

Theme 1: Integrate Reading across Subject Areas

Teachers suggested that reading practice should occur across subjects to increase exposure and transfer of skills. They described short reading tasks in content lessons as a practical way to strengthen routine practice. They mentioned:

"Reading activities should be part of every subject, not just Filipino or MTB." (P1)

"We include short reading passages in Science to help them read while learning content." (P4)

"It is better when there is reading in every lesson so they become more used to it." (P6)

Theme 2: Enhance Teacher Training in Cultural Pedagogy

Teachers called for training focused on indigenous education, local languages, and culturally responsive approaches to reading. They emphasized workshops that provide concrete methods and materials suited to the indigenous context. They verbalized:

"Teachers should be trained in using mother tongue-based approaches." (P2)

"We need workshops on how to teach reading that fits the indigenous context." (P6)

"It would be better if there were training about their culture and teaching methods." (P8)

Theme 3: Strengthen School-Community Partnerships

Teachers stressed sustained coordination with parents, elders, and local leaders to support literacy goals. They viewed partnership work as necessary for program continuity and authenticity of learning resources. They stated:

"Reading programs are more successful when the community is involved." (P3)

"Elders can help us teach stories and language in a more authentic way." (P5)

"It is a great help when the community is involved in children's reading." (P9)

4. Discussion

The findings show that teachers frame effective reading instruction for indigenous learners as a culturally grounded practice that aligns language, text, and relationships with the community context. Culturally-responsive teaching strategies emerged as a core element of success, especially the use of local stories, folklore, and the mother tongue as an instructional bridge. This result supports culturally relevant pedagogy, which positions culture as a resource for academic success and highlights the importance of cultural competence and identity affirmation within instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It also aligns with culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes curriculum and classroom interaction that reflect learners' cultural experiences and funds of knowledge (Gay, 2010).

In literacy contexts, culturally-aligned texts can support comprehension because learners interpret meaning through familiar narrative structures and cultural references, which can lower barriers in early reading tasks (Wearmouth, 2017). Research in indigenous focused schooling contexts reports similar patterns where literacy improves when instruction values local language and local knowledge, and when reading tasks reflect community realities (Bennet et al., 2012; Keehne, 2018). At the same time, the broader policy environment reminds educators that mother tongue based instruction requires careful implementation, especially in linguistically diverse settings. Evidence from the Philippines suggests that large scale policy shifts in early grade language of instruction can yield mixed outcomes when testing occurs in Filipino or English, and this highlights the need for strong teacher preparation and material quality that supports transfer across languages (Igarashi et al., 2024). The teachers in this study addressed this challenge by aligning early reading tasks with the mother tongue while using culturally relevant content to build motivation and comprehension, which may create stronger foundations for later language transitions.

The theme set on meaning-making of pedagogical practices highlights how teachers interpret their work beyond technical instruction. Teachers described affirmation of cultural identity as a key form of meaning. This supports the view that literacy instruction can serve both academic and cultural purposes, because language and text serve as carriers of identity and community values. When teachers treat local language as legitimate in school, they communicate respect, and this can strengthen classroom trust and learner engagement.

The themes of growth through adaptation and fulfillment through learner progress also align with scholarship on teacher professional well-being and efficacy. Teachers tend to report higher satisfaction and stronger professional commitment when they observe learner progress and when instructional effort yields visible gains (Eryilmaz et al., 2025). In indigenous contexts, this dynamic may be stronger because progress often reflects both academic development and increased confidence in identity safe learning spaces.

The theme set on insights provides clear directions for school improvement. The call to integrate reading across subject areas reflects strong literacy research that frames reading as a cross curricular practice rather than an isolated skill. When teachers embed short texts and reading tasks across subjects, learners gain more practice time and apply comprehension strategies in different content areas, which can strengthen transfer and vocabulary growth (Forsman et al., 2023). Teachers also requested enhanced training in cultural pedagogy, a finding that aligns with teacher education literature that argues for structured learning on culturally responsive practice, not only general awareness (Tanase, 2020). Targeted professional development can support teachers as they select culturally aligned texts, plan mother tongue scaffolds, and create assessments that value understanding rather than surface language features.

Finally, teachers emphasized strong school community partnerships. This is consistent with evidence that partnerships with families, elders, and local organizations can extend learning time, build shared responsibility, and support the sustainability of school programs in resource constrained contexts (Sapanik & Brown Jr., 2021). For literacy in indigenous communities, partnerships are particularly important because elders hold oral traditions and local knowledge that can become authentic reading texts, and parents can support reading routines at home when they receive simple guidance and materials.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective reading instruction for indigenous learners depends on three connected elements: culturally responsive pedagogy, locally relevant materials, and sustained community engagement. These elements act together to support comprehension, motivation, and identity safe learning conditions. Future work can test how these practice elements influence measurable reading outcomes over time and can examine how schools can scale local material development and teacher training while respecting language diversity and community authority.

5. Conclusion

Elementary teachers in Sta. Maria East District described success in teaching reading to indigenous learners through culturally responsive instruction that values local language and identity, the deliberate use of contextualized and visual materials, and active involvement of parents and elders. Teachers also described meaning through cultural affirmation, professional growth that follows adaptation, and fulfillment that follows learner progress. To strengthen reading instruction for indigenous learners, teachers recommended cross curricular integration of reading, focused training in cultural pedagogy, and stronger school community partnerships. Schools that aim to improve foundational reading in indigenous contexts should support teachers with time, training, and resources for local material development and partnership work, while protecting cultural knowledge and language rights.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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