

Experiences of Ata-Manobo Professionals in the Mainstream Workplace

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences and opportunities of Indigenous professionals in mainstream Philippine workplaces, focusing on the Ata-Manobo community in Davao del Norte. Utilizing the frameworks of cultural interface, resilience, and identity leadership, the research adopts a generic qualitative design and conducts thematic analysis of interviews with Indigenous professionals from the public service, education, and healthcare sectors. The analysis identifies three primary themes: receiving recognition, developing leadership skills, and gaining community trust. Transparent communication, active engagement, and community-driven development are shown to foster both individual and collective resilience, support professional advancement, and promote inclusion. These findings have significant implications for organizational policy and practice, emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive leadership, support for Indigenous agency, and targeted efforts to address structural barriers. The study demonstrates the necessity of sustained, collaborative strategies to advance the wellbeing and empowerment of Indigenous professionals in mainstream workplaces.

Keywords: resilience, identity leadership, cultural interface, Indigenous professionals, mainstream workplace

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indigenous population is estimated to comprise between 10% and 20% of the national total of 109,035,343, according to the 2020 population census. Most are in Luzon, especially the Cordillera Administrative Region, and in Mindanao, with smaller groups in the Visayas (IWGIA [International World Group for Indigenous Affairs], 2024). The Philippine Constitution recognizes this diversity as important for national unity and development. It requires the state to recognize, protect, promote, and fulfill the rights of indigenous peoples. Republic Act 8371, known as the “Indigenous Peoples Rights Act” (1997, IPRA), also confirms the right of IPs to manage their ancestral domains and guides national policy on indigenous peoples (UNDP, 2010). RA 8371 outlines rights to education, ancestral domains, cultural integrity, and self-governance, guiding government efforts to support Indigenous participation and protect cultural identity.

The Philippines was one of the first Asian countries to formally recognize Indigenous Peoples (IPs). The 1935 and 1973 Constitutions introduced a policy of “integration” into mainstream society. With the 1987 Constitution, the approach shifted to “recognition.” The 1987 Constitution also requires the State to promote social justice and protect the wellbeing and economic security of its people (Gabriel & Mangahas, 2017). Additionally, the Philippines has signed the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which sets global standards for protecting the rights and welfare of IPs (De Vera, 2007).

RA 8371 and related legal frameworks formally recognize and protect Indigenous rights in the Philippines. Nevertheless, significant gaps remain between policy and implementation, particularly regarding equitable institutional participation (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021; Ancheta & Casem, 2024). The Council of Indigenous Peoples' (2022) 2021 report indicates that 62.2% of Indigenous people in the Philippines participate in the labor force, representing approximately 270,000 workers. Despite this participation, Huang (2015) found that Indigenous people encounter substantial employment challenges. At the societal level, these challenges frequently stem from discrimination by management and peers, which may manifest as either prejudice or statistical discrimination. Similarly, Guimond and Desmeules (2018) and Proulx et al. (2020) demonstrated that Indigenous employees often experience difficulties within hierarchical, impersonal, and rigid bureaucratic structures in mainstream organizations. Furthermore, culturally incompatible organizational goals can create additional barriers (Walters et al., 2019; Staniland et al., 2020).

The Ata-Manobo are culturally distinct groups whose employment opportunities have been shaped by historical marginalization. They face barriers to employment, limited social protection, and workplace discrimination, as documented by international organizations. Although research on Indigenous livelihoods is expanding, there is still little knowledge about the specific work experiences of Indigenous professionals in mainstream Philippine workplaces (International Labour Organization, 2015). For example, research on how Ata-Manobo professionals navigate their cultural identities within mainstream society is limited. Studies show that workplace culture and organizational practices influence Indigenous employees' experiences, but empirical investigations are scarce. Analyzing these experiences is essential to identify the resilience strategies Indigenous professionals use as they balance cultural heritage with professional demands (Thiessen, 2023). This study examines the opportunities indigenous professionals experience in the mainstream workplace. Policy implications can be drawn from the study's findings to promote the wellbeing of indigenous professionals working in the mainstream workplace.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

This study seeks to enhance understanding of the opportunities indigenous professionals experience in mainstream workplaces. To achieve this, the analysis draws on cultural interface and resilience frameworks, as well as identity leadership, to strengthen the research context (Ang et al., 2024).

The cultural interface (Nakata, 2007) serves as a framework for analyzing the complex and dynamic space where Indigenous and mainstream knowledge systems intersect. Nakata (2007) asserts that this interface is continually shaped by historical, political, economic, and social forces, resulting in a context that is both multifaceted and layered. Within mainstream workplaces, the cultural interface offers a lens through which to examine how Indigenous professionals navigate and negotiate their cultural identities amid dominant organizational cultures. These professionals regularly manage differing values, expectations, and practices, while simultaneously advocating for Indigenous perspectives and exercising agency within mainstream settings (Odgers-Jewell et al., 2024). The cultural interface extends beyond the inclusion of Indigenous people in mainstream roles; it constitutes a generative space where Indigenous agency can drive change, challenge established norms, and elevate Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing. This interface enables Indigenous professionals to articulate their experiences, foster mutual understanding, and promote culturally responsive practices across the workplace (Kearney et al., 2025).

Resilience refers to the capacity to maintain or regain mental health in the face of adversity (Ungar et al., 2020), representing a dynamic process of positive adjustment. This construct encompasses interactions among personal traits, biological factors, and social environments (Tepes et al., 2020), highlighting

adaptability and the combined influence of internal and external supports. The definition of resilience continues to evolve, informed by diverse theoretical perspectives (Grygorenko & Naydonova, 2023).

In the context of Indigenous professionals in mainstream workplaces, resilience is a multidimensional process that extends beyond individual adaptation. For these professionals, resilience involves drawing upon cultural strengths, community connections, and collective values to navigate work environments shaped by mainstream norms and practices (Walls et al., 2024). This process often includes managing cultural dissonance, balancing traditional values with workplace expectations, and resisting pressures to assimilate (Thiessen, 2023). The capacity to sustain cultural identity and wellbeing while adapting to mainstream workplace contexts demonstrates a broader, culturally grounded form of resilience (Walls et al., 2024).

Organizations play a crucial role in either supporting or undermining these distinct sources of strength and adaptation. Kirmayer et al. (2011) explain that resilience is rooted in traditional values and is not solely an individual trait but also reflects a group or community's ability to adapt collectively to change and maintain a stable identity over time (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Lalonde, 2015). Andersson (2008) notes that resilience may also function as a form of social capital, providing resources for collective wellbeing. Haar et al. (2016) found that collectivism helps build resilience among Indigenous people, while Haar and Stanilad (2016) demonstrated that indigenous employees who scored low on mainstream resilience tests still reported high career satisfaction, attributed to their strong sense of collectivism at work, which is a key value in their culture.

Transactional and social-ecological perspectives emphasize resilience as a dynamic process within families, communities, and broader societies, where individuals generate new resources and adapt to ongoing challenges (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Folke & Carpenter, 2014). Positive adaptation approaches highlight how individuals and groups can thrive and grow despite adversity (Bonanno, 2015; Smith & Zautra, 2018). Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that resilience is shaped by psychological, social, and biological factors and is more than a personal trait. Rutter (2020) explains that resilience develops as individuals gain new strengths through their environments and social experiences, underscoring its evolving, context-dependent nature for Indigenous professionals in mainstream workplaces.

Identity leadership (IL) is grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner, 1991), both of which emphasize the significance of individual and collective identity. For Indigenous professionals in mainstream workplaces, IL assumes particular importance because these individuals must navigate the intersection of their Indigenous identity with dominant organizational cultures (Hunt, 2024). Framing IL in this context underscores the need for leaders to move beyond superficial inclusion and actively cultivate environments where Indigenous identities are respected, integrated, and empowered (Minthorn & Chavez, 2015).

Effective IL for Indigenous professionals requires the intentional inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, values, and worldviews within mainstream organizational structures (Minthorn & Chavez, 2015). This approach requires leaders who are attuned to the specific challenges faced by Indigenous employees, such as cultural dissonance, underrepresentation, and the balancing of community obligations with workplace expectations (Bearskin et al., 2024). When leaders construct and promote a shared group identity that meaningfully incorporates Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous professionals are more likely to feel acknowledged, respected, and able to contribute authentically (Minthorn & Chavez, 2015). Such practices also enrich the broader organization by introducing diverse leadership approaches and epistemologies (Bennett, 2025).

In practice, leaders in mainstream workplaces support Indigenous professionals by distributing power, fostering collaborative teams, and ensuring that Indigenous voices are both heard and valued (Bennett et al., 2025). Establishing empowering environments is essential, especially given potential barriers to participation or recognition (Thiessen, 2023). Leadership that values and integrates Indigenous perspectives builds trust, enhances engagement, and shapes an inclusive group identity (Li & Tang, 2022). Leadership effectiveness in this context relies on concrete actions that enable Indigenous professionals to maintain cultural integrity while advancing within mainstream organizations (Hamby et al., 2026). Leaders who reflect and shape organizational values to acknowledge Indigenous contributions shift the focus from individual achievement to collective success, thereby supporting group cohesion and authentic inclusion (Steffens et al., 2014). Indigenous professionals benefit from such leadership, which advances group interests, fosters shared identity, and ensures that all cultural groups are recognized and celebrated as integral to the organization's collective identity (Khumalo et al., 2022).

In summary, this study examines the experiences of Indigenous professionals working in workplaces. Drawing on frameworks such as cultural interface, resilience, and identity leadership, it demonstrates how these professionals balance their cultural identities with dominant organizational cultures. Indigenous professionals utilize their cultural strengths and community support to maintain resilience. Effective leadership in these contexts not only incorporates Indigenous perspectives but also actively integrates and empowers them. The frameworks indicate that supporting Indigenous agency and identity benefits both individuals and organizations, fostering more inclusive and culturally responsive workplaces.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

A generic qualitative research design was employed. The foundational principles of generic qualitative research are closely aligned with the objectives of this study. All aspects of data collection were managed independently by the researcher, following Creswell's (2014) recommendations, rather than being delegated to research assistants. An inductive approach was used to identify and categorize themes that emerged from the interviews. The primary aim of the study was to capture the essence of Indigenous professionals' experiences working within mainstream society. This qualitative methodology was chosen to provide in-depth and authentic insights into these experiences, as outlined by Kostere and Kostere (2021), thereby supporting genuine representation and trustworthiness in the research.

3.2. Participants

Indigenous professionals were purposefully selected as participants in this study. The sample was drawn from self-identified Indigenous professionals residing in a town in Davao del Norte, Philippines. The initial recruitment target was three to five participants. Bekele and Ago (2022) recommend a sample size of 5-25 participants for qualitative research. However, the final number of participants was determined by data saturation. Saturation was defined as the stage at which no new themes or information emerged during data collection (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). In this study, saturation was achieved after interviewing three indigenous professional participants.

Participant A has a strong background in public service and law enforcement. They assumed leadership roles in local government and have worked to support Indigenous rights under the 1997 IPRA. Likewise, Participant B is a secondary English teacher who has taught in remote areas of Davao del Norte. They encourage culturally responsive teaching for Indigenous students and are working toward a doctorate in applied linguistics. Finally, Participant C has worked in local government health care and health education.

They are dedicated to providing culturally responsive services and making healthcare more accessible for Indigenous communities.

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were utilized. The inclusion criteria specified that participants must self-identify as Indigenous professionals employed in mainstream workplaces in a town in Davao del Norte, Philippines. Organizations contacted were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, research questions, participant roles, consent procedures, and contact information. The researcher's professional network was leveraged to facilitate snowball sampling and to access additional Indigenous professionals. Snowball sampling was deemed suitable for this study, which aimed to recruit Indigenous professionals from a population often considered vulnerable and difficult to reach (Wright & Stein, 2004). Consistent with Wright and Stein (2004), a chain-referral approach was implemented as part of the snowball sampling process. Recruited participants disseminated information within their networks and encouraged eligible individuals to contact the researcher.

3.3. Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Indigenous professionals. Face-to-face interviews were selected to enable personalized and in-depth dialogue. This method aligns with Indigenous epistemologies, supporting relationship-building and storytelling traditions. Interviews were scheduled based on participants' preferences, either within their organizations or in community meeting rooms. A topic-based interview guide featuring practice-oriented, open-ended questions was used. The interview protocol and questions were informed by the literature review. Open-ended questions generated comprehensive data regarding participants' experiences navigating mainstream work environments while maintaining their Indigenous identity. Active listening during interviews respected and validated the narratives of Indigenous professionals. All interviews were audio recorded.

3.4. Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected from Indigenous professionals were analyzed through thematic analysis. This approach entailed repeated examination of the data to generate codes, assign labels or categories, and organize the data into themes to establish definitions and meaning (Creswell, 2014). Interview data were systematically organized into words, phrases, patterns, categories, and themes that aligned with the research questions. The data underwent multiple rounds of review until consistent patterns were identified. The analysis process included refining the information to emphasize content relevant to the final report and excluding data deemed unusable.

In a nutshell, this study employed a generic qualitative approach to examine the experiences of Indigenous professionals in mainstream workplaces in Davao del Norte, Philippines. Purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were utilized to recruit self-identified Indigenous participants from sectors including public service, education, and healthcare. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which incorporated open-ended questions and honored Indigenous storytelling traditions. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify key patterns and themes, elucidating how Indigenous professionals navigate the balance between cultural identity and the expectations of mainstream work environments.

4. Results And Discussion

This study aimed to determine the opportunities for Indigenous professionals in the mainstream workplace. The data analyses revealed three main themes: receiving recognition, developing leadership skills, and gaining community trust. The first theme has three subthemes: support and teamwork, continuing learning, and serving. Likewise, the second theme has three subthemes: being respected,

inspiring fellow Ata-Manobo tribe members, and inspiring non-IP peers through excellent work performance. Similarly, the third theme has three subthemes: transparent communication, active community engagement, and delivering on promises (Figure 1).

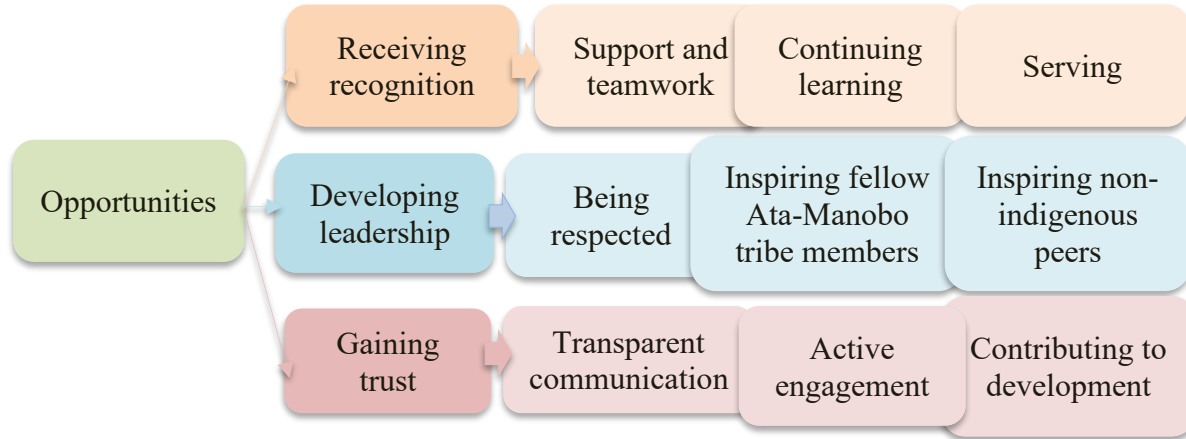


Figure 1. Opportunities the Indigenous professionals experienced while working in the mainstream workplace.

The first main theme is receiving recognition. Participant A claimed he was recognized three times as an Outstanding Police Officer. Participant A narrated:

“I have been recognized three times as an outstanding police officer. I feel that God gave me the duty to protect my community by making me a policeman. This belief motivates me to work hard and stay dedicated to serving those around me” (Participant A).

The recognition highlighted Participant A’s steady professionalism, discipline, and excellence in police work. Participants described their roles as a calling from God, underscoring the importance of values and ethical conduct in the mainstream workforce. They emphasized that recognition was earned through outstanding performance and service, rather than external influence. Furthermore, they asserted that authentic leadership begins with personal responsibility and accountability within one’s professional role. These narratives are echoed in the statements of Participants B and C, who articulated:

“For me, being a teacher is a special opportunity, especially as a member of the Ata-Manobo tribe. I see it as both an honor and a way to use my skills to help shape young minds” (Participant B).

“When I joined DepEd as a medical doctor, I saw it as a chance to help my community. They valued my unique medical skills, especially in caring for children’s health needs” (Participant C).

Recognition at work is a strong motivator that increases job satisfaction and boosts productivity (Tessema et al., 2013; Adim & David, 2020; Ewool et al., 2021). According to Herzberg (1966), job satisfaction and dissatisfaction come from different sources: motivators and hygiene factors. Recognition serves as a motivator, improving employee morale and performance. Research shows that recognition is an important workplace resource that increases employee engagement (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017; Baqir et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022). Other studies suggest that recognition supports employees’ sense of achievement and value within the organization, thereby further increasing their engagement (Kooij et al., 2017; Pincus, 2023).

The first subtheme is teamwork and collaboration. Salas et al. (2007) state that teams must comprise two or more members, while Wageman et al. (2012) note that team membership can change over time. Although teams are often viewed as consistent, research has typically treated them as stable entities (Hirst, 2009). In this study, teams include those promoting the school’s activities, such as the principal, master

teachers, and finance division staff, who serve as internal stakeholders. These teams are generally stable. Collaboration supports division of labor, brings diverse perspectives, generates new ideas, and enables multi-source evaluation, all of which enhance quality (Graesser et al., 2018). Participant B expressed appreciation for the encouragement received from school leaders:

“I am truly grateful for the support I received from the principal, master teacher, and the accounting staff. They helped me with school activities, and to me, that feels like recognition. It shows that none of us can do everything alone” (Participant B).

This narrative demonstrates how support from principals and staff enabled Participant A to implement new initiatives. When colleagues and leaders collaborate, they foster a shared purpose, provide mutual support, and facilitate professional growth (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023). Teamwork offers participants feedback, encouragement, and practical assistance, which enhances confidence and performance (Bruhin et al., 2024). Additionally, effective teamwork contributes to productivity and cultivates a sense of community and trust within organizations (Kiffin-Petersen, 2004). In the case of Participants A and C, they also narrated:

“As a mayor, I always make sure to recognize the people who work with me. Their contributions are essential, and without them, I could not succeed (Participant A).”

Work is easy and fun if you are surrounded by a team of people who share the same passion for work. I always acknowledge the contributions of my medical staff as we advocate for the health and wellbeing of our school’s stakeholders (Participant C).

Collaboration is seen as an essential skill for the 21st century, supporting efficiency, effectiveness, and innovation in today’s workplace (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017a; Fiore et al., 2018). Teams can improve collaboration when members bring in different viewpoints, help resolve conflicts, assign roles, encourage open communication, and support the group in solving problems (Fiore et al., 2010).

Participants also emphasized their beliefs that learning should not stop after completing college, which is the second subtheme, continuing education, within the first theme, receiving recognition. Participant B narrated:

“After I finished college, I did not stop schooling. I pursued my master’s degree and plan to pursue my PhD after earning my master’s degree; this is my dream.”

Continuing education is lifelong learning (LLL), the continuous acquisition of knowledge throughout a teacher’s career (Berkhout et al., 2018). As individuals acquire knowledge, they develop ideas, skills, talents, and educational competencies (Ran & Josefberg Ben-Yehoshua, 2020). Pedagogical training programs emphasize the importance of life-long learning, enabling teachers to convey its significance to students, accumulate knowledge, and foster independent learning (Sunthonkanokpong & Murphy, 2019). Individuals committed to this process can effectively organize and manage their learning needs (Erdogan & Ayanoglu, 2021). In this context, Participant A narrated:

“I should improve my governance skills. That is why I attend seminars and conferences. Correspondingly, meeting with fellow mayors broadens my perspectives on how I could best serve my constituents” (Participant A).

In this regard, the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) provides free training through the Newly Elected Officials Performing Leadership for Uplifting Service (NEO PLUS) Program. This initiative is designed to help new local leaders fulfill their responsibilities. First-time elected officials are eligible to participate in the Course on Strategic Leadership for Good Governance, while returning

officials may enroll in a refresher course on Transformative Leadership for Elevated Governance. NEO PLUS, administered over three years by the DILG's Local Government Academy (LGA), aims to equip local officials with essential skills and tools for effective and responsible leadership, thereby enhancing local governance and public service (Caliwan, 2025).

Participant C, likewise, articulated that:

"In the field of medicine, we really need to keep abreast of the recent breakthroughs in health care. Although the department's budget is not open, I use my own money to finance my continuing learning" (Participant C).

The third subtheme, serving, highlights participants' initiative, readiness, and responsibility to use their skills for the greater good. Their willingness to step in demonstrates that professionals, particularly from underrepresented backgrounds, seek opportunities to give back and support their communities (Gauvin et al., 2025). Participants reported feeling supported and respected while serving in their professional roles.

Participant C narrated:

"I felt supported and respected despite being an IP since I am also their section chair (Participant C).

Briefly, the first opportunity identified by Indigenous professionals was recognition, encompassing three subthemes: teamwork and collaboration, ongoing education, and service. Recognition was attributed to professionalism and ethical conduct, while authentic leadership was associated with accountability. Teamwork facilitated professional growth and fostered a sense of belonging among participants. Despite limited resources, continuous learning remained a priority. Service to the community was consistently valued, as participants applied their skills to benefit others. These elements were considered essential to Indigenous professionals' contributions and experiences within mainstream environments.

The second main theme is developing leadership skills through experience with three subthemes: being respected, inspiring fellow Ata-Manobo tribe members, and inspiring non-IP professionals. The participants traced their leadership growth from working in the mainstream workplace. They demonstrated that leadership was cultivated through hands-on experience and progressive responsibility. Participant A acknowledged that, rather than immediately seeking higher office, he first served at the grassroots level, learning governance through community engagement. These experiences allowed them to develop leadership skills, understand local needs, and build confidence as a public servant. Participant A articulated:

"I became a Barangay Captain in Barangay T., and God gave me the opportunity to serve my community as a mayor. I became a leader through hard work and dedication. My experiences taught me that leaders should prioritize the needs of their constituents more than their wellbeing (Politician)."

Bennis (2009) identifies several characteristics commonly shared by leaders: a guiding vision, passion that inspires hope in others, integrity (including candor, maturity, and self-knowledge), curiosity, and a willingness to take risks. These qualities align with the ongoing processes of identity construction and maintenance. The IP Framework suggests that individuals continually evaluate and adapt their identities to meet contextual demands, striving for coherence, distinctiveness, continuity, and self-esteem. Thus, the leadership characteristics Bennis (2009) describes are not innate; they are cultivated through life experiences as leaders navigate and negotiate their identities in response to social and environmental cues. Bennis (2009) contends that leaders invent themselves by developing character and vision, a process that mirrors the IP Framework's emphasis on self-reflection, adaptation, and agency. Leaders seek

opportunities, pursue skill development, and adapt to external circumstances, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between personal identity and leadership development. Participants B and C articulated: “As teachers, we need to use a variety of teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of our students. When we were encouraged to use culturally responsive teaching, I felt a connection because of my indigenous background. My principal made me the point person in this endeavor (Participant B).”

“Sometimes, we run out of medical supplies, and the problem keeps getting worse. This affects the health of our children at school. My indigenous background helps me understand alternative health care, but I know I cannot depend on that alone. That is why I reach out to others in the community, such as our mayor. I am grateful that our mayor listens and responds seasonably to these concerns (Participant C).

These stories fit within the resilience framework. Rather than remaining stuck, indigenous professionals find ways to move forward. For them, resilience means using cultural strengths, community ties, and shared values to navigate workplaces shaped by mainstream norms (Walls et al., 2024). This often involves handling cultural differences, balancing traditional values with job expectations, and resisting pressure to conform (Thiessen, 2023). Maintaining cultural identity and wellbeing while adapting to mainstream work settings demonstrates a broader, culturally rooted form of resilience (Walls et al., 2024). Likewise, the narratives of Participants B and C manifest the acceptance that Indigenous professionals felt in the mainstream workplace, which supports the first subtheme, being respected, under the second theme, developing leadership. The respect is manifested for their skills and professionalism, transcending cultural background. Workplace inclusion shows that when Indigenous professionals are recognized and valued within institutional spaces, it contributes to individual self-esteem and challenges broader societal stereotypes and discrimination against Indigenous peoples. In healthcare settings worldwide, Indigenous staff have reported feeling integrated and valued when their contributions are respected at all levels of the organization (Taylor et al., 2020). This underscores the importance of inclusion for professional empowerment. Participant C’s becoming the first Ata-Manobo nurse and doctor represents a milestone both personally and for the community. Participant C shared:

“I felt supported and respected despite being an IP since I am also their section chair (Participant C).

This achievement corresponds with the second subtheme, inspiring fellow Ata-Manobo tribe members. This demonstrates that overcoming educational barriers signifies progress and empowerment for the cultural group. The dual professional accomplishments exemplify dedication and illustrate potential pathways for others within the community. Indigenous professionals emphasize that such representation can influence community attitudes, broaden opportunities, and motivate younger generations to pursue education and professional careers, thereby contributing to broader social change and empowerment (Balaba, 2023). Additionally, they observe that occupying professional or higher positions facilitates access to agencies that support cultural preservation (Semblante, 2024). The participants shared:

“Working as a medical doctor in a government institution has given me the chance to show other indigenous professionals that we can achieve our dreams, even when we face many challenges. It takes focus and determination” (Participant C).

“Honestly, only a few of us in the IP community manage to finish a degree and land a job. It takes real courage and strong conviction to get through the challenges. Still, it can be done (Participant B).

“In politics, money, family ties, and behind-the-scenes deals often decide who wins. Someone like me rarely gets the chance to serve. But by working hard and keeping my promise to make a difference, I was given the rare opportunity to become a mayor (Participant A).

These narratives fit within the IL framework, which is based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner, 1991). Both theories highlight the importance of individual and group identity. IL is especially important because Indigenous professionals often have to balance their Indigenous identity with the dominant culture in their organizations (Hunt, 2024). The Indigenous professionals in this study said that, while they have the chance to work in mainstream settings, their journey to get there has been difficult. This study aligns with Minthorn and Chavez (2015), who stress that leaders should go beyond surface-level inclusion and create environments that truly respect, include, and empower Indigenous identities.

The third subtheme examines how non-Indigenous people find inspiration in Indigenous professionals who succeed in their fields. When Indigenous leaders hold influential roles, they can better advocate for cultural heritage and rights (Alves, n.d.). Their presence in professional settings helps build connections with important institutions and programs that support cultural preservation, education, and inclusive growth (Clarke, 2024). Working together, government agencies and community groups can increase Indigenous involvement in policies and programs that protect cultural identity and promote equality (Canadian Heritage, 2019). This access also helps meet community health needs and gives Indigenous leaders a stronger voice in cultural preservation (Lavoie & Dwyer, 2016). Being recognized as professionals enables these leaders to work within institutions that were once difficult for Indigenous people to reach, turning their visibility and networks into avenues to promote cultural heritage, education, and community empowerment (Queupil & Álvarez-Figueroa, 2024). When Indigenous professionals take on decision-making roles, they help create policies rooted in culture, encourage educational inclusion, and keep traditional practices and knowledge alive for future generations (Ingram et al., 2021). The participants narrated:

“As a mayor, I am proud to support our annual celebrations that highlight our cultural heritage. I encourage everyone to take part in our patron feasts, as these events reflect our shared faith. These traditions show who we are, and I hope each of my constituents embraces their identity, both as individuals and as a community” (Participant A).

“As I mentioned before, our budget is limited. However, we do have another option. At the parents’ assembly, I spent about 30 minutes discussing how parents can care for their children during common illnesses using positive deviant medicine. I shared my own experiences from growing up in an indigenous family (Participant C).

“When I notice my students having a hard time with their studies, I talk with them and remind them that poverty does not decide their future. I encourage them to see it as motivation to do well in life, sharing my own story to inspire them” (Participant B).

These accounts of Indigenous professionals discuss the concept of cultural interface (Nakata, 2007), a way of understanding the complex space where Indigenous and mainstream knowledge systems meet. The Indigenous professionals in this study work to balance their cultural identities within dominant organizational cultures. They handle different values, expectations, and practices while also supporting Indigenous perspectives, such as positive deviant medicine, annual celebrations like patron saint feasts that honor cultural heritage, and making time to share personal struggles to encourage students who are having a hard time, all within mainstream settings (Odgers-Jewell et al., 2024). The study shows that

Kearney et al.'s (2025) argument extends beyond simply including Indigenous people in mainstream roles. It creates a space where Indigenous agency can lead change, offer an alternative route to established norms, and raise the profile of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing. This interface helps Indigenous professionals share their experiences, build mutual understanding, and encourage culturally responsive practices at work.

Briefly, this study's phase examines the development of leadership among Indigenous professionals in mainstream workplaces, with particular attention to three subthemes: earning respect, inspiring fellow Indigenous community members, and motivating non-Indigenous colleagues. Participants indicated that leadership often emerges from practical experience, community involvement, and increasing responsibility, typically originating at the grassroots level. Their accounts underscore the significance of dedicated service, prioritizing community needs, and cultivating integrity and resilience.

Finally, the third main theme is gaining community trust, with three subthemes: transparent communication, active engagement, and contributing to development. Participant A emphasized that his electoral victories were based on public trust rather than financial influence. They narrated:

"I came from nothing, no family name, no wealth; my victory came from the votes of the people who trust me that I can serve them from my heart (Participant A)."

This narration shows a leadership model built on moral credibility and local recognition instead of elite backing. The community's support suggests that his earlier work as a police officer and barangay captain helped him earn a reputation for fairness, integrity, and real concern for people. Trust was the foundation of his authority, demonstrating that ethical leadership resonates with the public (Basilio, 2024).

Notwithstanding, Participants B and C shared:

"Studying medicine is tough, and being part of the Indigenous community makes it even harder. Still, I got through it. Some individuals trusted that I could succeed in mainstream schools. They were my inspiration. Now, it is my second nature to trust those trustworthy" (Participant C).

"Although organizations supported us as IP students, earning a degree remained challenging. Some questioned our place in mainstream schools, while others believed in us. I chose to focus on those who supported us. Now, as a teacher, I trust my students to achieve their goals" (Participant B).

The experiences shared by Indigenous professionals in this study reflect transactional and social-ecological views of resilience. These perspectives view resilience as a process that unfolds within families, communities, and society, in which people find new resources and adapt to challenges (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Folke & Carpenter, 2014). This also connects with positive adaptation approaches, which show how Indigenous professionals can thrive and grow even when facing difficulties (Bonanno, 2015; Smith & Zautra, 2018). Together, these ideas suggest that resilience comes from psychological, social, and biological factors, and is more than just a personal trait. The study's findings also support Rutter's (2020) view that resilience develops as people gain new strengths from their environments and social experiences, highlighting how resilience varies across contexts for Indigenous professionals in mainstream workplaces. The first subtheme is transparent practices. Arlı (2011) argues that transparent practices in an organization enhance employees' trust in the administration and reinforce perceptions of fair decision-making. When employees experience trust, they are more likely to exceed job requirements and contribute to the organization's success. Klein (2012) shows that transparency supports employees' voluntary behaviors. Tosun and Çelik (2024) also found significant relationships between transparency and trust. Transparency means presenting information, decisions, and processes openly, accessibly, and clearly to all stakeholders. Participant A articulated:

“Scandals are common in today’s government, and many people see elected officials as greedy. I promised to make a difference during my campaign. That’s why I signed a memorandum to ensure accountability all year, so everyone can see how their taxes are spent” (Participant A).

In education, transparency allows teachers, students, and parents to understand and monitor institutional activities. This requires administrators to communicate openly with employees and consistently share decisions. A transparent management style strengthens trust between employees and administrators and fosters fairness (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008; Rawlins, 2009). Kahveci and Babayiğit (2024) note that trust in administration increases employees’ motivation and willingness to engage in organizational tasks. Participant B shared:

“Financial scandals in schools often involve the School Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE). To promote transparency, our principal follows government policies and posts monthly liquidation reports for public review. Seeing this example, I started updating parents about their children’s progress after each grading period. This has helped students do better in school” (Participant B).

According to Indigenous professionals in the study, effective leadership is grounded in concrete actions that help them maintain their cultural identity while advancing in regular workplaces (Hamby et al., 2026). They said that trust helped them take part in work, and they worked to build trust to support strong leadership. Steffens et al. (2014) found that leaders who notice Indigenous contributions and shape workplace values to include them help shift the focus from individual achievement to group success, which makes teams stronger and inclusion more real. Khumalo et al. (2022) agree that this kind of leadership helps Indigenous professionals by supporting group goals, fostering a shared identity, and ensuring that all cultural groups are valued as part of the organization’s identity.

The second subtheme is active engagement. Rong et al.’s (2023) study found that establishing a trusting relationship with community members is the primary enabler of effective community participation. The literature emphasizes the significant time investment required to build trust (Kim et al., 2020; McGowan et al., 2021a; Norman et al., 2022). Bestman et al. (2020) documented the development of a respectful, trusting relationship over five years, underscoring the necessity of both financial and personal commitment when engaging with communities. Brown and Baker (2019) fostered trust through neighborhood activities and events, recognized the community’s existing knowledge, and consistently fulfilled commitments. Norman et al. (2022) created a safe and supportive environment by incorporating enjoyable, child-directed activities to promote trust and cultivate respectful relationships within their physical activity program. In this vein, the Indigenous professionals chronicled:

“Since we introduced clear guidelines for all financial transactions, my team has strongly supported our projects” (Participant A).

“My team at the clinic is fully involved in everything we do. They know that it is our responsibility to track every peso in our emergency medicine budget for our internal stakeholders” (Participant C).

“I regularly ask parents to help make sure their children are doing well in school. We have scheduled meetings at the end of each quarter to discuss their progress (Participant B).

Active engagement underscores the need to build trust with community members to facilitate effective participation. Existing literature emphasizes that trust is established through sustained, respectful engagement and transparent practices (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2017). In the present study, trust is fostered through clear guidelines for all financial transactions, tracking every peso in the

emergency medicine budget for internal stakeholders, and holding quarterly meetings to discuss students' progress (Jackson et al., 2025).

The third subtheme, contributing to development, enhances the effectiveness of community engagement by emphasizing the importance of building community members' capacity for meaningful and sustainable change (Brown & Baker, 2019). This process fosters greater pride and a stronger sense of belonging among individuals, contributing to improved wellbeing. Over time, such development can motivate community members to advocate for issues that impact their wellbeing. Biddle et al. (2018) emphasize that initiatives should originate within the community rather than being externally imposed. Achieving this requires leveraging existing neighborhood strengths and skills and supporting the emergence of community leaders through training, power-sharing, and trust-building before initiating any engagement process (Brown & Baker, 2019). Accordingly, the Indigenous professionals' anecdote revealed:

"I introduce positive deviant medicine for common illnesses to parents to help reduce the high cost of medicines today" (Participant C).

"When I use culturally responsive teaching, my lessons connect better with my students" (Participant B).

"I want to offer a different kind of leadership compared to traditional politicians (Participant A).

Brown and Baker (2019) argue that development initiatives enhance community engagement by fostering local capacity for sustainable change. This is supported by Biddle et al. (2018), who highlight the importance of community-driven advocacy arising from such capacity-building. Additionally, Wallerstein et al. (2017) emphasize leveraging local strengths and cultivating leadership through training and power-sharing as critical steps before engagement. In the present study, the emphasis is on introducing positive deviant medicine for common illnesses, using a culturally responsive teaching strategy, and offering a unique kind of leadership. These strategies promote wellbeing and facilitate community-driven advocacy. Concisely, this phase of the study examines how trust serves as a foundation for effective community engagement and leadership among Indigenous professionals, identifying three subthemes: transparent communication, active engagement, and contributions to development. Transparent practices, as supported by the literature (Arli, 2011; Klein, 2012; Tosun & Çelik, 2024), foster both trust and organizational effectiveness. Active engagement enhances trust through sustained, respectful interactions and transparent processes (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2017), as demonstrated by the study's examples of financial transparency and inclusive decision-making. Contributions to development focus on building local capacity and leadership to enable sustainable, community-driven change (Brown & Baker, 2019; Biddle et al., 2018; Wallerstein et al., 2017). These findings, consistent with resilience research (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Bonanno, 2015), underscore the importance of ethical leadership, cultural responsiveness, and community empowerment to facilitate meaningful participation and advocacy.

5. Conclusion

The study's findings underscore the significance of transparent communication, active engagement, and community-driven development in building trust and facilitating meaningful participation among Indigenous professionals. Existing literature affirms that these practices foster both individual and collective resilience (Arli, 2011; Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Brown & Baker, 2019; Wallerstein et al., 2017). Participant experiences indicate that leadership rooted in cultural responsiveness and integrity benefits not only Indigenous professionals but also enhances organizational cultures by promoting inclusion and

sustainability. Policymakers and organizations should prioritize culturally responsive initiatives, support Indigenous agency, and address persistent structural challenges to advance equality and wellbeing for Indigenous professionals. Further research is necessary to identify context-specific strategies that empower Indigenous leadership and participation across diverse sectors.

6. Implications

The findings of this study present several significant implications for mainstream organizations, policymakers, and researchers aiming to support Indigenous professionals in the workplace. Mainstream organizations should prioritize developing culturally responsive policies and practices that acknowledge and incorporate Indigenous knowledge, values, and leadership models. Institutional processes should embed transparent communication, active engagement, and community-driven development to foster trust, inclusion, and resilience. Additionally, organizations are encouraged to invest in leadership development programs that empower Indigenous professionals and facilitate their progression into decision-making positions. These programs should encompass mentorship, training in navigating cultural interfaces, and opportunities for agency within organizational structures. Collectively, these implications underscore the importance of sustained and collaborative efforts to promote equality, organizational effectiveness, and the holistic wellbeing of Indigenous professionals.

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