

## Shift from Distance to In-Person Learning of Indigenous People's Schools during the COVID 19 Pandemic: Gains and Challenges

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**Abstract :** The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the educational landscape of the Philippines. The groups affected by these changes are the poor and those living in the Geographically Isolated and Depressed Areas (GIDA), such as the Indigenous Peoples (IP). This was heavily experienced by the ten IP schools in Zambales, a province in the country. With this in mind, plus other factors relative to safety, the Schools Division of Zambales selected these ten schools to conduct the pilot implementation of in-person classes two (2) years after the country-wide school closures. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of the school heads of the first ten Indigenous People's (IP) schools that shifted from distance learning to limited in-person learning. These include the challenges met and the coping mechanism they set to overcome the challenges. The study is linked to experiential learning theory as it focuses on the idea that the best way to learn things is by having experiences). It made use of qualitative research, specifically phenomenology. All the ten school heads from the IP schools were chosen as participants in the study. Afterward, participants underwent semi-structured interviews, both individual and focus group discussions, for triangulation. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. As a result, the study found that most IP schools did not struggle to convince parents to send their children back to school as they downplay the pandemic threat due to their geographical location. The parents struggled the most during modular learning since many of them are either illiterate, too old to teach their children, busy with their lands, or have too many children to teach. Moreover, there is a meager vaccination rate in the ten barangays where the schools are located because of local beliefs. In terms of financial needs, school heads did not find it difficult even though funding is needed to adjust the schools to the new normal because of the financial support coming from the central office. Technical assistance was also provided to the schools by division personnel. Teachers also welcomed the idea of shifting back to in-person classes, and minor challenges were met but were solved immediately through various mechanisms. Learning losses were evident since most learners struggled with essential reading, writing, and counting skills. Although the community has positively received the conduct of in-person classes, the challenges these IP schools have been experiencing pre-pandemic were also exacerbated due to the school closures. It is therefore recommended that constant monitoring and provision of support must continue to solve other challenges the ten IP schools are still experiencing due to in-person classes

**Keywords :** In-person learning, indigenous peoples, phenomenology, philippines

**Conference Title :** ICEDEIET 2023 : International Conference on Education, Distance Education, Instructional and Educational Technology

**Conference Location :** New York, United States

**Conference Dates :** December 11-12, 2023