"Klima' na Klehew": An Appreciative Inquiry into the Resilience, Dreams, and Educational Innovations of Blaan Teachers and Alumni in the Highlands of Glan

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Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Blaan teachers and alumni who have triumphed despite the persistent school physical inefficiencies in the highlands of Glan, Sarangani Province. Grounded in the indigenous concepts of "Klima'" (pains) and "Klehew" (joys), the research uncovered the unique journeys of resilience and aspiration within a marginalized yet vibrant cultural community

Methodology: Anchored on the Appreciative Inquiry framework, the study utilized a qualitative approach, particularly thematic analysis, to interpret narratives gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. seven participants—comprising indigenous alumni and teachers—were selected purposively. Their experiences were analyzed using the 4D Cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny.

Results: Results revealed that participants confronted various physical inadequacies—such as dilapidated classrooms and lack of instructional materials—but remained committed due to strong community ties, cultural values, and faith. They envisioned inclusive, safe, and culturally rooted schools. Their stories reflected transformative efforts, including local initiatives and collaborative innovations, which ultimately fostered pride, empowerment, and sustainable change.

Conclusion: Despite enduring systemic barriers, Blaan educators and alumni emerged as champions of grassroots development, redefining educational success through their own cultural lens. The findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive policies and the integration of indigenous strengths in educational planning.

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry, Blaan teachers, indigenous education, physical inefficiencies, resilience

INTRODUCTION

Education in the Philippines is often characterized by its contrast between urban progress and rural struggle. In remote Indigenous communities such as the Blaan-inhabited highlands of Glan, Sarangani Province, physical school inefficiencies—such as poorly constructed classrooms, lack of electricity, and limited access to instructional materials—are common. This study draws its conceptual anchor from the Blaan terms *Klima'* and *Klehew*, which originate from the Indigenous language spoken by the Blaan tribe in Southern Mindanao, Philippines (Tebtebba Foundation, 2016). *Klima'* refers to pain, hardship, or suffering, often associated with the struggles of daily life, while *Klehew* embodies joy, pride, and triumph, reflecting moments of success, harmony, and shared celebration. These terms do not merely describe emotions—they represent a way of understanding and framing lived experiences within the Blaan worldview. As such, they serve as a culturally rooted lens through which teachers and alumni narrated their stories of overcoming adversity and creating meaningful change in their schools. Grounding the research in these indigenous concepts allowed the study to highlight resilience not just as a psychological construct, but as a culturally situated process of surviving and thriving in marginalized educational contexts (Tebtebba Foundation, 2016; Yacat, 2020). Yet, within these geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs), stories of resilience emerge, where education becomes not just a right, but a mission. The present study seeks to understand this duality of experiences—"Klima'" (pains) and "Klehew" (joys)—among Blaan teachers and alumni, exploring how they triumphed despite systemic educational challenges.

While national and global initiatives have promoted educational equity (UNESCO, 2022), many indigenous communities continue to face infrastructural and systemic setbacks (Department of Education [DepEd], 2023; World Bank, 2021). In these areas, school conditions significantly influence both student outcomes and teacher morale. Studies confirm that physical environments—such as lighting, air quality, and classroom safety—affect learning performance and teacher stress levels (Barrett et al., 2019; McCallum & Price, 2016). Despite these barriers, Indigenous educators and alumni return to their communities not only to teach, but to inspire. Their lived experiences are testimonies of hope, perseverance, and the transformative power of cultural identity.

Existing literature often focuses on educational deficiencies in marginalized communities, overlooking narratives of strength, innovation, and collective action. For instance, projects like the Apu Palamguwan Cultural Education Center (Cerdeña, 2008) and Project Malasakit (Adalia, 2020) illustrate the capacity of community-driven educational responses. Similarly, Indigenous educators in Bukidnon, Davao del Norte, and Pampanga demonstrate that joy—rooted in success and cultural affirmation—can exist alongside pain (Franca et al., 2024; Garcia, 2020). Yet, there remains a scarcity of qualitative studies that frame these dual realities within a strengths-based lens like.

Education in Indigenous and geographically isolated areas is shaped by a complex interplay of hardship and hope. This study focuses on the lived experiences of Blaan teachers and alumni in Glan, where educational inequities are both structural and systemic. The literature reviewed below supports the dual lens of this research—examining both the "pains" and the "joys" (Klima' and Klehew) within Indigenous educational journeys.

Indigenous communities across the Philippines have long demonstrated resilience in the face of marginalization. Scholars have highlighted inspiring stories like that of Cecilia, an Aeta woman who became one of the few licensed teachers in her tribe through the Alternative Learning System (World Vision Philippines, 2019). Similarly, Bimiana Capuno, supported by Project Malasakit, succeeded despite financial and social hardships, graduating from senior high school and aspiring to become a journalist and advocate for Indigenous youth (Adalia, 2020; Garcia, 2020). These narratives underscore that amid scarcity, there exists a reservoir of cultural pride, determination, and educational ambition.

In Mindanao, the establishment of culturally rooted institutions such as the Apu Palamguwan Cultural Education Center (Cerdeña, 2008) and the Community Technical College of Southeastern Mindanao (International Indigenous Peoples Movement, 2019) exemplifies Indigenous agency. These schools blend formal learning with cultural preservation, allowing Indigenous learners to succeed academically while embracing their heritage.

The physical conditions of schools play a central role in shaping the academic experience. A significant body of research has shown that poorly maintained infrastructure and overcrowded classrooms negatively affect both student outcomes and teacher well-being. Barrett et al. (2019) found that environmental factors like lighting, ventilation, and spatial design influence cognitive performance. In the Philippine context, DepEd (2023) has reported that more than 90,000 classrooms are still needed nationwide, particularly in rural and Indigenous areas, leading to class shifts and reduced instructional time.

Teachers in these settings often resort to makeshift solutions—using painted plywood for blackboards or teaching under trees—demonstrating both the severity of the problem and the creativity of those affected. These conditions create not just physical discomfort but emotional strain, leading to burnout and attrition among educators (McCallum & Price, 2016).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) offers a refreshing departure from problem-based frameworks. Instead of focusing on what's lacking, AI celebrates what works and builds on it (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). In Indigenous education, this means spotlighting successful educators, strong community ties, and visions for a better future. By centering on stories of triumph rather than despair, AI affirms the lived strengths of educators who choose to serve in underserved areas—not as victims of the system, but as agents of transformation.

In rural Mindanao, AI has been shown to enhance leadership engagement, morale, and innovation, especially when applied in school-based management and curriculum contextualization (Francisco, 2021; Wa-Mbaleka, 2013). This theoretical lens complements the cultural concepts of "Klima'" and "Klehew," providing a structure to honor both adversity and achievement.

The literature affirms that while Indigenous education in rural areas faces persistent infrastructural challenges, the strength of the people within these systems is remarkable. Resilience, cultural identity, and community collaboration are recurring themes. When viewed through the lens of Appreciative Inquiry, these become not just coping strategies, but cornerstones of educational transformation. For the Blaan teachers and alumni in Glan, their stories are part of a larger movement of reclaiming education as a pathway to empowerment, cultural pride, and joy.

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This study addresses that gap by using the AI 4D Cycle—Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny—to explore the lived realities of Blaan teachers and alumni. The aim is to illuminate how they manage school physical inefficiencies while nurturing culturally responsive and joyful educational experiences. The study also draws upon Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Resilience Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) to frame how pain and triumph coexist and evolve in these learning spaces.

As the Philippines continues to recover from the educational disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this research becomes even more urgent. Indigenous communities—often the last to receive aid and reform—must be at the forefront of inclusive educational development. By amplifying their stories, this study not only honors the silent victories of Blaan educators but also contributes to policy discourse on equitable, culturally relevant, and community-anchored schooling.

Objectives

This study aimed to explore the duality of pains ("Klima'") and joys ("Klehew") experienced by Blaan teachers and alumni in addressing school physical inefficiencies in the highlands of Glan, Sarangani Province, using the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework.
Specifically, it sought to:

Discovery Phase
1. determine the challenges faced by teachers and alumni in improving the schools in the highlands of Glan;
2. identify the strengths, skills, and experiences that enabled them to overcome these challenges; and
3. analyze how teachers and alumni have collaborated with the community to address school physical inefficiencies.

Dream Phase
4. describe the dreams and aspirations of teachers and alumni for the future of education in their communities; and
5. examine how their experiences of "Klima'" (pains) and "Klehew" (joys) had influenced their educational hopes and goals.

Design Phase
6. tdentify the practical solutions and ideas proposed by teachers and alumni to improve school conditions; and
7. determine the ways in which teachers, alumni, and the community collaborate to implement these solutions.

Destiny Phase
8. assess the sustainable steps taken or planned by teachers and alumni to maintain educational improvements; and
9. explore how their success stories inspired and informed similar efforts in other Indigenous and disadvantaged communities.

METHODS

Research Design
This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework to explore the duality of "Klima'" (pains) and "Klehew" (joys) in addressing school physical inefficiencies and the triumphs of teachers and alumni in the highlands of Glan. The AI framework, developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), centers on a strength-based approach using the 4D Cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. Through this model, the study sought to understand not just the challenges faced but the resources, aspirations, and community-driven solutions that emerged from within.

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Population and Sampling

Seven participants, composed of Blaan teachers and alumni who returned to serve in their communities, were purposively selected. Criteria for inclusion included: (1) being a member of the Blaan community, (2) having studied in one of the identified far-flung schools, and (3) teaching in the same or similar setting for at least one year. Participants were chosen based on their ability to provide rich, first-hand accounts of the educational challenges they experienced and overcame. This purposive sampling approach ensured depth of insight over breadth, consistent with qualitative inquiry.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used, designed around the four phases of the Appreciative Inquiry framework. Questions were tailored to elicit responses reflecting the participants' strengths, aspirations, collaborative practices, and sustainability efforts in relation to school improvement. The guide was validated by a panel of experts including indigenous educators, a qualitative research specialist, and a guidance counselor to ensure cultural sensitivity and relevance.

Data Collection

Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate academic and local authorities prior to data collection. Participants were contacted through school administrators, and informed consent was secured. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in participants' preferred language (Cebuano, Filipino, or English), with sessions recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also maintained to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the qualitative data, following the Appreciative Inquiry 4D Cycle—Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. This method enabled the identification and organization of patterns within participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with open coding to capture initial ideas, followed by axial coding to connect and cluster codes into meaningful themes related to resilience, innovation, and community collaboration (Saldaña, 2021). Member checking was employed to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and ensure participants' voices were authentically represented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and all respondents provided informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by using pseudonyms and secure data storage. Ethical practices adhered to the standards of qualitative research, with particular sensitivity to the cultural background of the participants.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

This section presents the analyses and interpretation of data obtained from the participants of the study. The information is presented in themes with interpretation and implication.

Discovery Phase: Honoring the Strengths and Stories of Resilience

Themes
Overcoming Difficult Circumstances Amid Resource Scarcity
Drawing Strength from Personal Commitment and Community Solidarity
Cultivating Bayanihan: The Power of Collective Action

The Discovery Phase of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework focuses on "what is"—the strengths, resilience, and collaborative achievements of teachers and alumni despite the backdrop of school physical inefficiencies in the highlands of Glan. Their stories embody the interplay of "Klima'" (pains) and "Klehew" (joys), rooted in sacrifice, shared purpose, and cultural pride.

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Theme 1: Overcoming Difficult Circumstances Amid Resource Scarcity

The physical challenges described by the participants paint a vivid picture of the stark realities in GIDA (geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas). Limited infrastructure, lack of basic utilities, and poor access routes were recurring experiences.

> **"Adlaw-adlaw ko naglakaw og halos duha ka oras padulong sa eskwelahan… Usahay, mulabang pa mi sa sapa nga taas ang tubig."**
> **(Bryan, Alumni)**

> *(Translation: Every day, I walked for almost two hours to school… Sometimes, we had to cross a river with high waters.)*

Participants demonstrated innovation and resourcefulness in response to the lack of teaching materials.

> **"Wala koy tarong nga blackboard sauna… nangayo ra ko ug plywood sa mga ginikanan ug gipinturahan namo og itom para mahimong pisara."**
> **(Alona, Teacher)**

> *(Translation: I didn't have a proper blackboard, so I asked parents for plywood and painted it black.)*

Despite exhaustion and difficult terrain, these educators viewed their work as a higher calling. Their testimonies reveal that hardship—while real—became a pathway to inner strength, purpose, and transformation. These narratives align with recent research emphasizing that resilience is not an extraordinary trait, but a product of ordinary people responding adaptively to challenges through connection, routine, and meaning-making (Panter-Brick 2023). The capacity to persist in the face of adversity reflects not only personal grit but the strength found in relationships, cultural identity, and a clear sense of purpose.

Theme 2: Drawing Strength from Personal Commitment and Community Solidarity

The emotional connection between educators and learners served as a driving force. Teachers often drew inspiration from the perseverance of their students.

> **"Nahimo nakong inspirasyon ang mga estudyante nga bisan lisod ang kahimtang, naningkamot gihapon mosulod sa klase."**
> **(Marites, Teacher)**

> *(Translation: The students became my inspiration because despite their hardship, they never gave up.)*

Even when personal resources were limited, participants shared stories of walking long distances or teaching without food, motivated by the thought that learners were counting on them.

> **"Bisag layo ang balay ug walay baon, muadto gihapon ko sa eskwelahan kay kabalo ko nga naghulat sila sa akoa."**
> **(Michelle, Alumni)**

> *(Translation: Even if my house was far and I had no food to bring, I still went to school because I knew they were waiting for me.)*

These experiences exemplify the communal moral responsibility that connects Blaan educators to their community. Their actions are informed by a sense of collective uplift, echoing recent insights on relational trust and social capital, which emphasize that strong interpersonal connections, mutual support, and shared values are key drivers of sustainable community-based educational change (Amihan & Sanchez, 2023; Bryk & Schneider, 2020; Carvajal, et al., 2023).

Theme 3: Cultivating Bayanihan: The Power of Collective Action

Participants repeatedly emphasized the bayanihan spirit as an enabler in rebuilding schools and navigating adversity.

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"Nagkahiusa mi sa komunidad... Ang mga ginikanan ug barangay tanod nagtabang sa pag-ayo sa atop."
(Jojo, Alumni)

(Translation: We united as a community... Parents and barangay tanods helped repair the roof.)

Even in poverty, community members offered time, labor, and local materials to fix school structures. These efforts went beyond logistics—they reinforced a shared sense of ownership over education.

"Walay daghang kwarta ang mga ginikanan, pero motabang sila pinaagi sa ilang kusog... Kung maghimo og lamesa, motabang sila mag-assemble."
(Reden, Teacher)

(Translation: The parents didn't have much money, but they helped with their strength... If we needed tables, they helped assemble them.)

This spirit of collaborative agency shows how traditional values are reactivated in contemporary contexts to meet educational goals—an example of what Francisco (2021) calls "cultural resilience in practice."

By emphasizing collective responses to challenges, this phase demonstrates that success in Indigenous education is less about individual heroism and more about the synergy between personal commitment and community collaboration.

The Discovery Phase reveals a deep reservoir of strength within the highland communities of Glan. Despite severe physical inefficiencies in the schools, the stories shared by teachers and alumni highlight enduring resilience, solidarity, and hope. Their narratives reaffirm that transformation begins not just with external support, but from within the hearts of individuals and the spirit of a united community. These stories are not just examples of coping but are powerful models of *Klehew*—triumph through unity.

Dream Phase: Envisioning a Hopeful and Inclusive Future

The Dream Phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process invited participants to reflect on the highest possibilities they envision for their schools and communities. These aspirations were deeply rooted in their experiences of *Klima'* (pains) and *Klehew* (joys), and were shaped by their hopes for progress, dignity, and cultural preservation in education.

Themes
A Vision of Modern, Inclusive, and Culturally Rooted Schools
Empowered Teachers, Engaged Alumni, and Hopeful Learners as Agents of Change

Theme 1: A Vision of Modern, Inclusive, and Culturally Rooted Schools

Teachers and alumni described a collective dream of schools that go beyond mere survival. They envisioned physical improvements—such as safe, well-ventilated classrooms with electricity, clean water, toilets, and learning technologies—as necessary foundations for dignified learning environments.

"Nagdamgo ko nga ang among eskwelahan naa nay lig-on nga building, dili na among gamiton ang payag nga kung mag-ulan, mabasa ang tanang bata ug maestro."
(Alona, Teacher)
(Translation: I dream that our school will have a sturdy building, and we will no longer use a hut where, when it rains, both the students and teachers get wet.)

More than infrastructure, participants placed strong emphasis on integrating Indigenous culture into the school system. They envisioned schools as cultural sanctuaries—places where academic excellence and traditional knowledge coexist.

"Ang akong damgo, dili lang sila maalam sa Ingles ug Math, kundi mahibalo sab sila sa ilang kaugalingong kultura ug tradisyon."
(Bryan, Alumni)
(Translation: My dream is that they will not only be skilled in English and Math but also knowledgeable about their own culture and traditions.)

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This dream extended to the development of culturally relevant materials—local legends, environmental wisdom, traditional crafts, and mother tongue instruction. Schools would be decorated with Indigenous art and would host festivals celebrating tribal heritage.

> **"Gusto ko nga sa adlaw sa kasadyahan sa tribo, ang mga estudyante mismo ang mudala sa mga sayaw ug kanta sa ilang katigulangan."**
> **(Reden, Teacher)**
> **(Translation: I want that during tribal festivities, it will be the students themselves who lead the dances and songs of their ancestors.)**

Affirming Indigenous identity was central to the dream of educational transformation. Participants wanted learners to see their cultural heritage not as a hindrance, but as a source of strength and pride.

> **"Importante kaayo nga masabtan sa mga bata nga ang ilang pagka-IP usa ka garbo, ug dili ikauwaw."**
> **(Alona, Teacher)**
> **(Translation: It's very important that the children understand that being IP is something to be proud of, not something to be ashamed of.)**

Their collective vision aligns with the principles of inclusive and culturally responsive education (Gay, 2018), which suggests that academic success improves when students see their identity reflected and validated in the learning environment.

Theme 2: Empowered Teachers, Engaged Alumni, and Hopeful Learners as Agents of Change

Participants dreamed of schools where teachers are not only well-trained but also emotionally supported and professionally empowered. They expressed a desire for educators who serve not merely out of assignment but out of deep commitment to the community.

> **"Gusto ko nga naay daghang maestro ug maestra nga dili lang muanhi kay na-assign sila, kundi kay gusto gyud sila makatabang sa kabataan ug komunidad."**
> **(Jojo, Teacher)**
> **(Translation: I hope that there will be many teachers who come not just because they are assigned here but because they truly want to help the children and the community.)**

Alumni envisioned themselves returning to their barangays as professionals—role models who would inspire the next generation. Their dreams reflected a cycle of giving back, creating a community of empowered changemakers.

> **"Sa umaabot, gusto nako makita nga ang mga graduates diri mobalik ug mutabang sa ilang eskwelahan ug barangay."**
> **(Michelle, Alumni)**
> **(Translation: In the future, I want to see graduates return and help their school and barangay.)**

They imagined schools where students are not just recipients of knowledge but active dreamers—believing in their capacity to break cycles of poverty and pursue higher aspirations.

> **"Damgo nako nga ang mga bata diri mutuo nga kaya nila mahimong propesyonal bisan layo ta sa siyudad."**
> **(Reden, Teacher)**
> **(Translation: I dream that the children here will believe they can become professionals even though we are far from the city.)**

For many, the true measure of success was seeing former students return as teachers, doctors, or leaders who uplift the entire community.

> **"Usa sa akong pinakadako nga damgo mao nga makakita ko sa akong estudyante nga mahimong guro, doktor, o abogado, ug mubalik dinhi aron mutabang sa ilang barangay."**
> **(Marites, Teacher)**
> **(Translation: One of my biggest dreams is to see my students become teachers, doctors, or lawyers, and come back here to help their barangay.)**

These aspirations reflect the concept of transformative education, where learning leads to social justice, cultural continuity, and sustainable development (UNESCO 2022). The participants' vision extends beyond classrooms—it reimagines education as a powerful vehicle for leadership, pride, and intergenerational change.

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The overall results of the study indicate that despite persistent physical and systemic challenges in the highland schools of Glan, the Blaan teachers and alumni exhibit a remarkable capacity for resilience, innovation, and collective strength. Their lived experiences—marked by both *Klima'* (pains) and *Klehew* (joys)—underscore the transformative potential of education when grounded in cultural identity and community solidarity (Carvajal, et al., 2025; Gay, 2018; Sanchez, et al., 2024).

Anchored in the Appreciative Inquiry framework, the findings affirm that strengths-based, culturally responsive practices foster not only inclusion but sustainability in disadvantaged educational contexts (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) - Even amid resource scarcity, the participants demonstrated that shared vision, intergenerational commitment, and bayanihan can transcend infrastructural limitations and ignite grassroots educational change (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Francisco, 2021).

The themes across the Appreciative Inquiry phases reveal that Indigenous communities are not passive recipients of development, but active co-creators of educational transformation. Recent scholarship affirms that when community members are engaged as partners in shaping their own learning environments, transformation becomes more authentic, inclusive, and enduring (UNESCO, 2022; Gay, 2018). This aligns with the idea that education must be contextual, culturally grounded, and participatory, allowing both learners and educators to generate knowledge that reflects their lived realities and ancestral values (Santos & Cardoso, 2021; Yunkaporta, 2020). Ultimately, this study affirms that meaningful and sustainable transformation begins from within—when local champions lead with heart, cultural intelligence, and a shared commitment to their community's future. The Dream Phase illustrates that teachers and alumni in the highlands of Glan do not simply wish for better classrooms—they envision schools as beacons of hope, cultural sanctuaries, and launchpads for leadership. Their aspirations are grounded in the lived experience of overcoming *Klima'*, yet fueled by the enduring joy of *Klehew*. This phase reveals that when communities dare to dream together, they create not only visions—but blueprints—for transformative, inclusive, and Indigenous-rooted education.

Design Phase: Co-Creating Practical Solutions for Educational Transformation

The Design Phase of Appreciative Inquiry marks a pivotal shift from dreaming to doing—from imagining possibilities to planning realistic, community-led actions. Grounded in the lived experiences of both *Klima'* (pains) and *Klehew* (joys), participants in this phase articulated practical solutions that reflect their commitment to building equitable, culturally responsive, and sustainable schools in the highlands of Glan. Their proposals centered on strengthening partnerships, maximizing local resources, and institutionalizing programs that promote resilience and community ownership.

Themes
Strengthening Community Engagement and Ownership of Education
Innovating Practical Solutions for Sustainable School Development

Theme 1: Strengthening Community Engagement and Ownership of Education
Participants emphasized that genuine and lasting change in education begins with community ownership. By involving parents, elders, alumni, and barangay leaders in the educational process, they proposed building collective responsibility and shared pride in school development.

> **"Kung naay council nga magdala, dili mawala ang plano bisan mag-usab ug maestra o principal. Ang tibuok komunidad kabalo sa mga tumong."**
> *(Jojo, Teacher)*
> *(Translation: If there's a council leading, the plans won't disappear even if the teachers or principal change. The whole community knows the goals.)*

The idea of forming Community Education Councils surfaced as a solution for sustainability, continuity, and participatory governance. These councils, grounded in both traditional leadership and modern school management, would oversee school plans, gather resources, and guide culturally aligned practices.

Moreover, participants envisioned institutionalizing bayanihan—the spirit of collective volunteerism—as an official school program. Suggested initiatives such as "School Bayanihan Days" would invite parents, teachers, and learners to participate in school repair, cleaning drives, and beautification activities.

> **"Kung adunay adlaw nga nakalaan para magtinabangay, mahimutang nga malinawon ug limpyo ang palibot sa eskwelahan."**
> *(Michelle, Alumni)*

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(Translation: If there's a day set aside for cooperation, the school environment will be peaceful and clean.)

These practices not only improve school facilities but strengthen **social bonds**, empower stakeholders, and deepen community pride. Such collective agency aligns with participatory development frameworks (Mansuri & Rao, 2013), reinforcing that when communities co-create solutions, they also co-own progress.

Theme 2: Innovating Practical Solutions for Sustainable School Development

Beyond engagement, participants proposed concrete innovations grounded in cultural relevance, practicality, and sustainability:

1. Livelihood and Income-Generating Projects: Vegetable gardens, livestock, and handicraft initiatives were proposed to support school needs and promote food security and entrepreneurship.
   "Pwede ta magtanum og mga utan sa palibot sa eskwelahan… ipakaon sa mga bata… ang sobra ibaligya."
   (Jojo, Teacher)
   (Translation: We can plant vegetables around the school… use the harvest to feed the children… and sell the surplus.)

2. Localized Teacher Training and Mentorship: New teachers assigned to GIDA schools would benefit from support systems led by experienced local educators and alumni to ensure cultural responsiveness.
   "Kung naa kay kauban nga kasabot sa kahimtang sa bukid, mas sayon ang pag-adjust."
   (Alona, Teacher)
   (Translation: If you have a companion who understands the situation in the mountains, it's easier to adjust.)

3. Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS): Participants advocated embedding tribal stories, customs, and agricultural knowledge in the formal curriculum to preserve heritage and instill cultural pride.
   "Mas maayo nga ibutang sa leksyon ang mga sugilanon sa tribo ug ang mga pamaagi sa pagpanguma sa bukid."
   (Reden, Teacher)
   (Translation: It would be better to include in the lessons the stories of the tribe and the traditional methods of farming in the mountains.)

4. **Establishment of Learning Resource Hubs**: These hubs, including solar-powered tools and mini-libraries, would ensure access to books and educational media, especially in off-grid areas.
   "Gusto namo nga naay dapit diin pwede mubasa ang mga bata ug magtuon bisan walay klase."
   (Marites, Teacher)
   (Translation: We want to have a place where children can read and study even when there are no classes.)

These proposals are not only feasible but sustainable, as they capitalize on local resources, cultural knowledge, and the strong relationships already embedded in the community. This reflects the principle of "education with relevance" as emphasized by culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) and sustainable education development goals (UNESCO, 2022).

The results of this phase reveal that when Indigenous communities are trusted and empowered, they are capable of designing strategic, context-specific, and culturally grounded solutions to long-standing educational challenges. The Design Phase underscores a fundamental truth: transformation in rural schools is most effective when driven from within, by those who understand the lived realities of the learners and the cultural landscape they belong to. These community-driven innovations provide a blueprint for participatory, inclusive, and sustainable education, where learning spaces are not only functional but also culturally affirming and socially empowering (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Sanchez & Sarmiento, 2020).

Destiny Phase: Sustaining Success and Inspiring Future Generations

The Destiny Phase of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework represents the culmination of the participants' journey—moving from aspirations and planning to concrete steps toward sustainability. In this phase, the Blaan

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teachers and alumni reflected on how they could ensure the longevity of the educational improvements they co-created and extend their impact beyond their immediate communities. Their insights revealed a powerful sense of ownership, intergenerational responsibility, and a desire to serve as catalysts for change in other Indigenous and marginalized settings.

Themes
Commitment to Sustainable Community-Driven Education
Inspiring Transformation Beyond the Highlands

Theme 1: Commitment to Sustainable Community-Driven Education
A key insight that emerged was the emphasis on continuity—the belief that school transformation must extend beyond one-time projects or short-term involvement. Participants stressed the importance of creating formal structures such as Community Education Councils, which would be responsible for planning, monitoring, and sustaining educational initiatives.
> **"Dili lang sa sugod ra mutabang ang komunidad. Kinahanglan padayon nga maghiusa bisan og na-achieve na ang mga plano."**
> *(Alona, Teacher)*
> *(Translation: The community shouldn't just help in the beginning. There must be continuous unity even after the plans have been achieved.)*

The idea of institutionalized recognition was proposed to sustain community motivation and acknowledge those who continuously contribute to school improvement.
> **"Kung makita sa tanan nga ginapasidunggan ang ilang paningkamot, mas ganahan sila magpadayon."**
> *(Marites, Teacher)*

They also called for youth engagement through mentorship and leadership training, emphasizing the need for preparing the next generation to inherit and sustain these programs.
> **"Kinahanglan tudluan na nato ang mga batan-on nga mahimong lider para magpadayon ang mga programa sa umaabot."**
> *(Jojo, Teacher)*

This vision aligns with the principles of sustainable development and intergenerational leadership models, where continuity is ensured by empowering local stakeholders (UNESCO, 2022; Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

Theme 2: Inspiring Transformation Beyond the Highlands
Participants expressed their hope that their story could spark change in other underserved communities. They viewed their success not as an isolated victory, but as evidence that transformation is possible through unity and resilience.
> **"Kung kami nga naa sa kabukiran nakabuhat ug kausaban, sila pud makabuhat kung magkahiusa sila."**
> *(Reden, Teacher)*
> *(Translation: If we, who are in the mountains, were able to make changes, they can do it too if they unite.)*

Teachers and alumni proposed organizing storytelling forums, developing multimedia content, and hosting inter-school partnerships to share best practices and promote cultural pride and community-based education.
> **"Mas maayo nga ishare nato sa uban ang atong kasinatian para sila pud makaamgo nga posible diay."**
> *(Bryan, Alumni)*
> *(Translation: It would be better to share our experiences with others so they too will realize that it's possible.)*

Participants recommended the use of digital storytelling to reach broader audiences. Through videos, photos, and social media platforms, they hoped to show the tangible outcomes of their collective work and inspire action elsewhere (Jenkins et al., 2016).
> **"Ang uban gusto mutan-aw og ebidensya. Maayo nga naay video o picture nga magpakita unsa kaayo ang nahitabo sa eskwelahan."**
> *(Michelle, Alumni)*

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(Translation: Others want to see evidence. It's good to have videos or pictures that show what really happened in the school.)

The vision extended to regional collaborations—working across barangays and schools to replicate the success and support one another's educational development.

"Pwede magtinabangay ang lain-laing barangay, muuban sa ilang kasinatian, ug magplano para sa mas maayo nga edukasyon sa ilang lugar."
(Vil, Teacher)
(Translations: Different barangays can work together, share their experiences, and plan for better education in their communities.)

This outward-looking perspective affirms the ripple effect of localized change, where empowered communities become role models for others navigating similar challenges (Gay, 2018).

The Destiny Phase reveals that the participants are not only concerned with the success of their own schools—they are deeply invested in the broader movement for Indigenous educational empowerment. Their strategies reflect a commitment to continuity through community-led governance, youth engagement, and public recognition. Moreover, their intentional effort to share their story beyond their locality represents a strong sense of collective advocacy. These findings affirm that the sustainability of educational change in marginalized contexts is most viable when it is rooted in cultural pride, collective responsibility, and a desire to uplift others (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; UNESCO, 2022).

The Destiny Phase of this Appreciative Inquiry underscores a compelling insight: sustainable educational transformation is most powerful when it emerges from within the community it seeks to uplift. The participants' testimonies reveal that empowering local actors—teachers, alumni, parents, and youth—to take ownership of educational change leads to a deeper and more lasting impact. This community-led model shifts the narrative from dependency to self-reliance, intergenerational leadership, and cultural rootedness.

Their strong emphasis on continuity—through formalized councils, youth mentoring, and alumni engagement—demonstrates a grassroots model of educational stewardship. It reflects what Gay (2018) calls the "responsive pedagogy of place," where education is not detached from context but enriched by it. Moreover, the integration of local governance mechanisms aligns with participatory development theories that stress the value of shared decision-making in sustaining collective gains (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

Inspiring other communities through storytelling and cross-barangay collaboration reveals the participants' transformative leadership mindset. Rather than seeing their efforts as isolated achievements, they view themselves as catalysts for systemic change, echoing recent perspectives that emphasize how learner empowerment, narrative sharing, and participatory leadership foster social transformation, particularly in marginalized communities (MacDonald & Shirley, 2022; Yunkaporta, 2020). The use of digital media to amplify their voices also reflects an understanding of how narratives of success can reshape national conversations on Indigenous education (Jenkins et al., 2016).

Ultimately, this phase implies that a culturally affirming, community-centered, and participatory approach is essential to ensuring that educational innovations endure, evolve, and expand their impact. The success of the highland communities in Glan demonstrates that marginalized groups, when united by shared values and vision, are not only capable of driving change—they are essential to reimagining what meaningful education looks like in the Philippine context and beyond.

Conclusions

The following results were disclosed after the data gathered were analyzed:

This study explored the duality of *Klima'* (pains) and *Klehew* (joys) as lived by Blaan teachers and alumni in the highlands of Glan, Sarangani Province. Using Appreciative Inquiry, their stories were heard not as isolated challenges, but as threads of transformation—woven by courage, compassion, and community.

In the Discovery Phase, participants revealed how they endured long walks, taught in improvised classrooms, and taught using black-painted plywood instead of blackboards. But these hardships did not break them—instead, they gave rise to commitment. What emerged was not a narrative of lack, but of resilience and love for learning. The spirit of *bayanihan*, the strength drawn from faith, and the simple joys of helping a child succeed shaped their daily triumphs.

In the Dream Phase, their hopes were deeply rooted in their cultural identity. They envisioned schools where classrooms are safe and functional, yes—but also where Indigenous dances, languages, and traditions are

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honored side by side with Math and English. They dreamed of learners who are globally ready yet locally grounded—proud of their roots, prepared for their future.

In the Design Phase, their ideas were not grand or idealistic—they were real, doable, and sustainable. From planting vegetables to support feeding programs, to forming Community Education Councils, to mentoring new teachers and integrating Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum, their proposals showed that the best solutions often come from within.

Finally, in the Destiny Phase, participants expressed a powerful desire not only to sustain their own progress but to inspire others. They see themselves as storytellers and trailblazers—offering their experiences as proof that transformation is possible, even in the most remote corners of the country. Their legacy is not limited to physical structures, but to hearts awakened and empowered.

All in all, the study concludes that when communities are listened to, valued, and empowered, they do not merely survive—they flourish. The schools in the highlands of Glan are proof that education becomes truly meaningful when it is shaped by culture, carried by collaboration, and sustained by love.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and reflections in this study, several key recommendations are offered to sustain and expand the transformative efforts in Indigenous education. Schools and administrators are encouraged to support the creation of Community Education Councils composed of teachers, alumni, elders, and barangay leaders. These councils should co-lead school development efforts, ensuring that cultural relevance and local participation are at the core of every decision made. For local and regional educational leaders, there is a strong need to develop and fund localized, culturally responsive teacher training programs. Such programs should especially target teachers newly assigned in Indigenous areas and be supported by a mentorship system led by experienced local educators.

The Department of Education is urged to formally integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) into the curriculum through mother tongue-based instruction, storytelling, and localized modules in arts, agriculture, and traditional practices. Meanwhile, local government units (LGUs) should consider allocating resources for school-based livelihood and income-generating projects—such as vegetable gardens and traditional crafts—to reduce dependency on external aid while supporting school operations and student well-being.

Non-governmental organizations and educational partners are encouraged to highlight success stories from GIDA communities through national platforms, multimedia storytelling initiatives, and inter-school mentorships. These efforts can foster greater visibility and inspire wider replication of effective practices. Youth and alumni also play a crucial role and are encouraged to form associations or task forces to give back to their communities through service, mentorship, and resource mobilization. Their stories of resilience can serve as powerful inspiration for the younger generation.

Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of community-designed education strategies. Comparative research across other Indigenous and remote communities can also enrich understanding and guide national education policy. At the heart of these recommendations is the recognition that the success of education in Indigenous settings does not solely depend on external resources, but on the collective vision, cultural pride, and deep-rooted commitment of those who call these communities home. When these voices are heard and empowered, education becomes more than instruction—it becomes a legacy of dignity, identity, and hope.

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