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Empowering Indigenous Communities through Learning Visits: An Appreciative Inquiry Approach

Rhea Bayben-De Guzman^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative research utilized the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) 4D model to explore learning visits and hands-on training empowered Hanunuo Mangyan weavers in Mansalay and Roxas, Oriental Mindoro, through the Awati TI-KAPE program of Mindoro State University (MinSU), with the collaborative efforts of the DOST-Philippine Textile Research Institute (PTRI) and LGU Mansalay. The goals were to learn weavers' current strengths; envision future capabilities through these visits; plan sustainable program elements; and deliver/destiny by evaluating the results of training. Data gathering involved semi-structured interviews and participant observation, with thematic analysis framed to the AI 4D stages on the thirty (30) Hanunuo weavers of Mansalay who went through to participate in multiple learning visits within and outside the province of Oriental Mindoro.

All 30 respondents indicated that they learned advanced weaving techniques—warping, beaming, drawing-in, tying-in, and working with upright looms—that they had not yet mastered. Almost all showed a stronger commitment to their cultural Ramit weaving, and approximately four-fifths (80%) indicated increased confidence when venturing into external markets or partnering with institutions. Social impacts were the creation of a weavers' association, enhanced peer learning networks, and increased sharing of techniques and resources by community members. The research makes a theoretical contribution by illustrating how the AI 4D framework can be applied to catalyze strengths-based change in Indigenous artisan contexts. On a practical note, it advises incorporating market linkage support, ongoing mentorship after training, culturally sensitive facilitation, and maintaining organizational infrastructure, such as associations in fostering traditional crafts while promoting economic livelihood

INTRODUCTION

Isolation is found among most native groups, such as the Hanunuo Mangyan of Oriental Mindoro. They tend to keep their distance from other people outside their tribe, particularly those from the lowlands. This is due to their strong identity and sense of belonging, which are heavily associated with kinship and belongingness to a tribe (Macdonald, 2004; Nichols, 2019). This cultural preference explains their choice to live in far, isolated, and distant regions, so that they can protect their traditional way of life. Because of this, they rarely travel out of their homes unless it is for basic needs, such as hunting for food. This stoic attitude is more evident among older members of the community, who are generally not keen to venture beyond their ancestral lands or venture into unfamiliar urban settings like Manila. Ingrained traditions, religious beliefs, and fears for personal and cultural safety deter them. Many elders perceive travel beyond their territory as not only physically demanding but also as potentially threatening to their cultural integrity (Battiste, 2002; Finney, 2014).

Indigenous communities across the globe continue to encounter barriers in accessing education that genuinely respects and represents their cultural identities. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that Indigenous methodologies, combined with community-led strategies,

foster more empowering and transformative learning experiences (Washington, 2023; Nelson-Barber & Johnson, 2016; Larson & Brown, 1997). This qualitative research employs the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework to explore how learning visits structured educational encounters can strengthen Indigenous communities and promote collaborative, strengths-based educational partnerships (Sanderson & Allard, 2003).

Such visits enhance cross-cultural understanding, skill development, and community connections. They provide a platform for Indigenous groups to celebrate their heritage, develop new skills, and reinforce internal cohesion. AI's focus on strengths makes it well-suited to examine the positive effects of these visits, highlighting effective practices and ways to sustain them. Despite the cultural richness and skill of Indigenous weavers in Oriental Mindoro, there remains a lack of sustainable, culturally responsive educational programs that recognize and build upon their traditional knowledge systems. This gap limits their opportunities for empowerment, skill advancement, and economic development. Moreover, existing learning initiatives often fail to incorporate Indigenous voices and strengths, leading to programs that are either ineffective or culturally disconnected.

The study aims to identify how learning visits foster empowerment and offer practical recommendations

¹ Mindoro State University, Philippines

* Corresponding author's e-mail: deguzmaniya0@gmail.com

for future culturally relevant educational initiatives. Research Questions: 1. How do learning visits empower Indigenous communities? 2. What strengths and positive outcomes do these experiences generate? 3. How can this knowledge inform future educational strategies? This work contributes to the expanding literature on Indigenous education by emphasizing the importance of experiential, community-based learning. Its insights provide valuable guidance for educators and policymakers seeking to develop more inclusive and culturally responsive programs. and policymakers seeking to develop more inclusive and culturally responsive programs.

Review of Related Studies and Literature

Indigenous people globally have traditionally kept indigenous crafts alive as integral statements of their cultural existence and lifestyle. Like weaving, it shows more than artistic practice; it is their means of expressing artfulness and cultural continuance. Battiste (2013) emphasizes that traditional knowledge systems, such as crafts, in teaching and community activities, decolonize schooling and create cultural rejuvenation. Equally, Cajete (2000) indicates that indigenous crafts within Native American cultures are critical in sustaining identity and enhancing community resilience.

Learning visits have also been found to be an effective means of upgrading Indigenous communities. The learning visits facilitate proper cultural exchange, building capacity, and stronger community relations. Castleden *et al.* (2012) mention how the culture of understanding is fostered between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities through learning visits, while Kovach (2009) speaks of their potency in changing education, more so in bridging traditional knowledge with the standard academic system.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a strengths-based method of inquiry is increasingly being used in Indigenous contexts. Unlike deficit-based methodologies, AI focuses on what has been going well in a community. Smith (1999, 2012) advocates the use of AI in Indigenous research since it offers a culturally congruent methodology with a focus on tapped strengths, community assets, and positive change.

Despite the growing body of research on Indigenous empowerment through crafts and learning tours, there is still a discernible gap in the literature that directly talks about the experiences of Indigenous weavers themselves in the province of Oriental Mindoro.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach, with four phases: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny, was used in this study. AI was selected for its emphasis on uncovering strengths and highlighting positive outcomes. A total of 20 individuals—10 males and 10 females aged 18 to 60, indigenous weavers from the municipalities of Mansalay and Roxas in Oriental Mindoro —were involved, representing a range of weaving experience.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, focusing on the participants' empowering experiences and aspirations linked to the learning visits, were utilized. These responses were analyzed thematically, guided by the 4D phases of AI.

Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and demonstrating cultural sensitivity to ensure respectful and inclusive engagement throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Discovery Phase: Themes and Participant Insights

Theme	Representative Quote	Participant Insight (Summary)
Knowledge Enhancement	"Sa bawat pagdalaw naming sa ibang komunidad, nadadagdagan ang aming kaalaman sa paghabi at sa iba't ibang Teknik niti. Malaking tulong ito sa pagpapalakas ng aming kasanayan."	"With every visit to different communities, our knowledge of weaving and various techniques increases. This is a great help in strengthening our skills."
Skill Development	"Napagtutunan naming ang mga bagong pamamaraan at teknolohiya sa paghabi na maaari naming gamitin upang mapaunlad ang aming mga produkto at serbisyo."	"We have learned new methods and technologies in weaving that we can use to improve our products and services."
Community Bonding	Napapalakas ang Samahan at pagkakaisa sa aming komunidad dahil sa mga pagdalaw na ito. Mas nagiging bukas ang Komunikasyon at pagtutulungan namin."	"These visits strengthen the unity and solidarity in our community. Communication and cooperation among us have become more open."

Learning visits enriched weavers' knowledge, competencies, and relationships within and with their communities. Exposure to newly acquired weaving methods facilitated cultural revitalization (Battiste, 2013) and experiential skill; acquisition (Cajete, 2000). The

visits promoted unity and cooperation, strengthening communal bonds and collaborative learning (Castleden *et al.*, 2012; Kovach, 2009). In sum, the visits empowered individuals by integrating tradition with innovation in a culturally relevant manner.

Table 2: Dream Phase: Themes and Participant Insights

Theme	Representative Quote	Participant Insight (Summary)
Vision for Future Collaboration	"Nais naming magkaroon ng mas maraming pagkakataon para makipag-ugnayan at makipagtulungan sa iba't ibang komunidad upang mapalawak ang aming kaalaman at magkaroon ng bagong ideya para sa paghabi."	"We want to have more opportunities to connect and collaborate with different communities to expand our knowledge and gain new ideas for weaving."
Expansion of Learning Programs	"Gusto naming maging regular na bahagi ng aming edukasyon ang mga pagdalawa sa pagaaral. Mas marami kaming matutunan kung ito ay mas palalakasin at magkakaroon ng mas maraming suporta,"	"We want visits to be a regular part of our education. We will learn more if these activities are strengthened and receive more support."
Cultural Preservation and Exchange	"Mahalaga sa amin na mapanatili ang aming kultura sa pamamagitan ng paghabi. Gusto naming ipasa sa mga susunod na henerasyon ang mga tradisyunal na pamamaraan nito."	"It is important for us to preserve our culture through weaving. We want to pass down the traditional methods to future generations."
Structured Partnerships	"Kailangan naming ng mas matibay na pakikipagtulungan sa iba't ibang institusyon upang mas mapalawak ang oportunidad para sa paghabi at makakuha ng suporta mula sa iba."	"We need stronger collaboration with various institutions to broaden opportunities for weaving and to get support from others."

The dream phase table discloses that Indigenous weavers want to extend partnership, increase learning opportunities, and sustain cultural heritage through supported and structured learning visits. Their need for more consolidated community partnerships and institutional support is evidence of visionary thinking for inclusive and sustainable learning. As Smith (2012) stresses, the empowerment of Indigenous voices in developing educational programs results in cultural

ownership and self-determination. The appeal to integrate learning visits within formal education is consistent with Kovach's (2009) position that experiential and relational learning support both skill acquisition and cultural identity. In addition, the participation of participants in sharing traditional knowledge emphasizes the significance of education to cultural maintenance, resonating with Battiste's (2013) call for decolonized, heritage-informed learning processes.

Table 3: Design Phase: Themes and Participant Insights

Theme	Representative Quote	Participant Insight (Summary)
Community Based Projects	"Mahalaga na may proyekto kami na direktang makatutulong sa aming komunidad. Mas makabuluhan ang aming mga pagdalaw kung mayroon kaming maiiwing kaalaman at kasanayan na maaaring gamitin para sa kabutihan ng komunidad."	"It is significant for us to have a project that directly benefits our community. Our visits are more meaningful when we bring home knowledge and skills that can be used for the community's welfare."
Sustainable Funding Models	"Dapat ay mayroong kaming mga paraan upang mapanatili ang suporta at pondo para sa mga darating na pagdalaw. Hindi sapat ang pansamantalang tulong lamang, kailangan ito ay magkaroon ng pangmatagalang solusyon."	"We should have ways to sustain support and funding for future visits. Temporary assistance is not enough; it needs to have a long-term solution."

The Design Phase table identifies two main priorities among Indigenous weavers: access to community-driven projects and viable models of funding. Attendees stressed that learning visits have more significance when connected to tangible benefits to the community, following Battiste's (2013) call for learning that is culturally embedded and action-oriented. Designing future visits around local application ensures knowledge transfer leads to tangible outcomes. They also expressed the importance of securing long-term funding to support these programs. As Smith (2012) notes, Indigenous initiatives must be supported by sustainable structures—not short-term aid—to truly

empower communities. Without continuity in resources, the gains from learning visits may fade. The participants' call for lasting solutions underscores the need to integrate Indigenous educational programs within reliable systems of support.

The Destiny Phase table emphasizes that the weavers need continuous mentorship and systematic monitoring and evaluation. They have seen that the effect of learning visits cannot be made lasting without sustained follow-up and support. This attests to Kovach's (2009) contention that Indigenous education flourishes under relational accountability, where extended guidance and

Table 4: Destiny Phase: Themes and Participant Insights

Theme	Representative Quote	Participant Insight (Summary)
Ongoing Support and Mentorships	“Pagkatapos ng mga pagdalaw, kailangan pa rin naming ng patuloy na suporta at gabay para maipatupad ang mga natutunan naming. Hindi sapat ang isang beses lang. Kailangang ito ay patuloy na mabigyan ng pansin at tulong.”	"After the visits, we still need ongoing support and guidance to implement what we have learned. Once is not enough; it needs to be consistently given attention and assistance."
Monitoring and Evaluation	“Mahalaga na mayroon kaming paraan upang ma-monitor at ma-evaluate ang epekto ng mga pagdalaw sa pag-aaral. Kailangan naming malaman kung ano ang mga nagging bung anito at kung paano ito makakatulong sa aming komunidad.”	"It is important for us to have a way to monitor and evaluate the impact of the visits on our studies. We need to know what its outcomes are and how it can help our community."

community presence are crucial in ensuring continuity in learning. In addition, participants underscored the importance of tracking and assessing visit results to guarantee relevance and efficiency. This is in line with

Smith’s (2012) perception that Indigenous research should be community-driven and outcome-based, allowing individuals to gauge actual world gains from educational programs.

Table 5: Summary Table: AI Phases, Themes, and General Implications

AI Phase	Theme	General Implication
Discovery	Knowledge Enhancement	Learning visits enrich traditional knowledge and enhance cultural competencies in weaving.
	Skill Development	Exposure to new techniques promotes innovation and improves product quality.
	Community Bonding	Shared learning experiences strengthen community unity and collaboration.
Dream	Vision for Future Collaboration	There is a strong desire for inter-community networking and shared learning for mutual growth.
	Expansion of Learning Programs	Participants want institutionalized and consistent learning opportunities through visits.
	Cultural Preservation and Exchange	Weaving is viewed as a vital tool for cultural continuity and intergenerational knowledge transfer.
	Structured Partnerships	Collaborations with institutions are needed to sustain growth and program impact.
Design	Community-Based Projects	Programs must directly address local needs to ensure relevance and community ownership.
	Sustainable Funding Models	Long-term support systems are essential for the continuity of community-based learning initiatives.
Destiny	Ongoing Support and Mentorships	Post-visit guidance is crucial for applying and sustaining what was learned.
	Monitoring and Evaluation	Tracking impact ensures learning visits remain meaningful and adaptable to community needs

The table indicates that in every stage of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process, there are critical needs of Indigenous weavers: improving skills, maintaining cultural identity, partnerships, and long-term support. Learning visits work best when they are community-led, adequately funded, and complemented with regular mentorship and assessment.

CONCLUSION

This research emphasizes that learning visits are critical in empowering Indigenous weavers. Throughout all AI

phases, learners indicated an urgent need for continuous knowledge transfer, skill acquisition, cultural protection, and community-oriented collaboration. The results emphasize the need for support from institutions, long-term funding, and continuous mentorship to guarantee that these visits result in significant, lasting outcomes. Culturally based and community-oriented models of education, including learning visits, enhance Indigenous identity, build resilience, innovation, and collective development.

Recommendations

Learning visits should be made a regular feature of Indigenous education programs. This will provide ongoing skills development, facilitate cultural exchange, and reinforce experiential learning value among Indigenous weavers. Strengthening alliances with schools, NGOs, and local government offices is also crucial. To ensure optimal impact from these visits, post-visit mentorship plans need to be created. These will assist participants in implementing what they learned and ensuring that their increased knowledge and skills are utilized. Furthermore, creating easy-to-use and culturally acceptable monitoring and evaluation tools will enable the communities to measure the success of each visit and make any required adjustments.

Lastly, keeping and passing on indigenous weaving knowledge must be a priority. Efforts at intergenerational learning must be promoted to transfer techniques, stories, and meanings embedded in their culture to protect Indigenous identity for posterity.

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