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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Lived Experiences of Former Students and Community Stakeholders on Recruitment Pathways in *Salugpongan* Lumad Schools: An Inquiry

Bismark D. Gumela

56th Infantry (TATAG) Battalion, 7 th Infantry (KAUGNAY) Division, Philippine Army, Vintar, Ilocos Norte, Philippines
Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University - Open University System, City of San Fernando, La Union, Philippines,
Bismark D. Gumela, ORCID No.: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0000-430X

*Corresponding author: *bgumela@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

While alternative school systems are designed to provide education in remote areas, they can be systematically exploited by non-state actors as institutional pipelines for insurgent recruitment. Understanding how these educational networks manipulate geographical isolation helps identify the critical interventions needed to safeguard vulnerable indigenous youth. However, empirical research tracing the precise, step-by-step socialization and tactical training mechanics within these specific alternative school systems is limited. The main objective of this qualitative phenomenological study was to analyze how the *Salugpongan* Lumad schools in Talaingod, Davao del Norte, that were operational until 2019, were structurally utilized to transition indigenous youth from classrooms into active combat roles by the CPP-NPA-NDF. Data were generated from semi-structured interviews with ten key participants, including former students, former rebels, parents, and tribal *Datus*, and analyzed through Content Analysis. The results revealed that the recruitment pipeline relied on three distinct phases. First, a complete lack of government services forced families to rely entirely on the schools for free basic goods. Second, untrained volunteer teachers replaced standard subjects with subversive lessons and used peer pressure to drive radicalization. Third, older students received intense physical and weapons training in insurgent camps. This was finished with a three-month 'Revolutionary Integration' phase that made it mentally impossible for them to leave. The findings suggest that the government must urgently continue to broaden the construction of permanent public schools in isolated ancestral domains.

Keywords: *Alternative schools, CPP–NPA recruitment, IP education, Lumad, Salugpongan*

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INTRODUCTION

Confucius emphasized that education has a positive domino effect on a person's life by molding thoughts, values, and decisions. It provides a foundation for personal growth through its intrinsic dimension and shapes broader societal interactions through its extrinsic dimension (Niemiec, 2023). Consequently, young people view education as vital for building their future, leading to significant efforts to achieve academic excellence. However, a stark disparity exists in educational access; in remote areas, poverty, geographic isolation, and limited government support frequently force children to rely on alternative learning programs (Ainscow, 2020). These programs are often non-formal and managed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Covaciu, 2025). In resource-deprived settings, schools do more than teach basic literacy; they actively shape student behavior and social identity, serving as an institutional environment that can either empower students or expose them to external political influences (Abacioglu et al., 2023).

Globally, education is recognized as an institutional tool that can be exploited by non-state actors, insurgents, and extremists to manipulate collective minds. These actors establish informal schools and specialized curricula in conflict-affected areas to shape the ideologies of vulnerable children (Opacin and Čehajić-Clancy, 2025; Salih, 2024). For example, radical elements in Finland inserted political lessons into educational activities (Niemi et al., 2018). Similarly, the Taliban in Afghanistan and extremist networks in Pakistan utilized specialized religious schools (*Jihadi Madrasas*) to embed political agendas, attracting impoverished families by offering free food and shelter (Hanif et al., 2021; Sahar, 2025). Other groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, utilized community schools like the "*Tsangaya*" or "*Almajiri*" systems to masquerade as traditional religious institutions while injecting messages that reject state legitimacy and glorify extremism (Onapajo, 2026; Oluyemi and Badmus, 2025; Kazibwe, 2025). During the height of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the *Diwan al-Tal'lim* (Ministry of Teaching) institutionalized textbooks for standard subjects like mathematics that integrated examples praising armed combatants, effectively shaping youth beliefs within their strongholds (Deslandes-Martineau et al., 2022; Arvisais et al., 2025; Al-Jablawi, 2016).

Recruitment in extremism is defined by Bahadhal et al. (2026) as a three-stage social pipeline rather than a single event. First, cognitive alignment occurs when alternative curricula systematically erode state legitimacy to build anti-state psychological alignment, mirroring practices seen in *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) schools in outskirt communities in Colombia (Bodini et al., 2024). Second, organizational mobilization converts this learning into underground membership as volunteer teachers and peer networks actively transition individuals through targeted tactical tracking and recruitment intermediaries, matching how the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK) in Kurdistan, Turkey utilized student centers (Musil, 2022). Third, armed engagement marks the final physical and logistical transition of the student from the school perimeter into active insurgent operations, tactical training, and weapons handling within peripheral mountain encampments (Gates, 2017).

In the Philippines, Indigenous Peoples (IPs) face similar structural challenges due to economic disparities and geographic isolation. In Talaingod, Davao del Norte, the functional literacy rate was recorded at 69%, the lowest in the region, attributed to limited access to Department of Education (DepEd) facilities (Pilapil, 2017; Saligumba, 2012). In response, NGOs like the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines (RMP) and *Silangang Dapit sa Sidlakang Mindanao* (SILDAP) developed the *Salugpongan Ta' Tanu Igkanogon* (Unity of People to Defend the Ancestral Land) Community Learning Centers (STTICLCI) in 2003. Initially, the *Salugpongan* schools started as an informal literacy-numeracy program with volunteer teachers facilitated by the RMP (Kagula, 2019. This network of schools originally emerged from the Manobo community's resistance headed by *Datu* Guibang Apoga against the Alcantara and Sons logging company in 1994 (Alcarde et al., 2025; Sy, 2025). By 2018, the system had expanded into 20 centers offering formal Kindergarten to Grade 10 education.

However, subsequent government investigations by DepEd, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) alleged that these schools were heavily influenced by left-leaning organizations (LLOs) with direct operational links to the Communist Party of the Philippines–New People's Army–National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF) matrix (Blanco, 2024; Nepomuceno, 2019a). The Philippine government identifies the CPP-NPA as a terrorist organization whose 58-year insurgency remains a primary driver of regional poverty and instability (Casuncad, 2017; Fabe and Toledo, 2024). State security narratives and testimonies from certain former students and tribal leaders describe a specialized curriculum aligned with Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theories and anti-government sentiments (Caliwan, 2018; Pineda, 2024). Following these investigations, the *Salugpongan* schools were officially dissolved in 2019 for non-compliance with educational standards. This led to the creation of temporary *bakwit* (displaced) schools where the students of the dismantled *Salugpongan* schools transferred that resulted in the high-profile legal incidents, such as the 2018 interception of a convoy led by Satur Ocampo and France Castro, and the 2021 rescue operations of indigenous students from the University of San Carlos campus in Cebu (Ayalin, 2024; Luna, 2021; Espiritu, 2022). Advocating networks and left-leaning organizations have utilized these closures and allegations of militarization as platforms for political advocacy to gain international sympathy and fund their operations (Luistro, 2021; Rosete, 2024).

Despite extensive reporting on these closures, a significant gap exists in scholarly research (Palicte, 2019; Cudis, 2019). Most existing academic literature tends to defend the *Salugpongan* system, focusing primarily on IP rights and educational access (Alcarde et al., 2025; Sy, 2025b; Imbong, 2023; Jabilles et al., 2025), or is restricted to journalistic and government reports (Chua, 2019; Gotinga, 2019; Talabong, 2019). This study is unique because it explains the actual step-by-step process of how an educational institution can be structurally utilized for insurgent recruitment, analyzing how teaching culture can sometimes be mixed with teaching insurgent ideas. Also, this study avoids political debates and focuses entirely on classroom socialization. Changwook (2024) notes that schools in conflict zones can reshape political identity outside of state control. Therefore, analyzing Talaingod, Davao del Norte, from 2012 to 2019, where the *Salugpongan* School was formerly operational, this inquiry provides an objective look at the institution without bias.

To explain this process, the study is conceptually guided by Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1977), as cited by Rumjaun and Narod (2025). This framework posits that individuals acquire behavioral patterns and value orientations through interaction with trusted models, such as teachers or community guides, operating within a continuous cycle of observation, imitation, and environmental reinforcement. Hence, Bandura's framework removes political judgments, treating the setting strictly as an ecosystem of social learning. This matches the findings of Ong et al. (2023), proving that trust in local authority figures drives group identity changes and institutional compliance. Therefore, the main goal of this study is to explore and describe the lived experiences of individuals who directly interacted with the *Salugpongan* Lumad educational ecosystem in Talaingod, Davao del Norte, as guided by the following research questions.

1. What were the lived experiences of the participants when the *Salugpongan* schools first opened in the community?
2. What were the lived experiences of the participants regarding their encounters with the instructional behaviors and roles of the volunteer teachers?
3. How did the participants describe their experiences during guerrilla training and weapons handling in the mountains?
4. What were the experiences of the participants regarding how political ideas were taught during daily classes?
5. What key life experiences and turning points made the former students decide to join the armed movement full-time?

Moreover, this study fills a critical gap in the literature by providing an empirical, theory-driven analysis of the socialization processes in alternative IP schools such as *Salugpongan*, a topic largely confined to grey literature and policy reports until now. Also, these findings will help the local government of Talaingod with the support of security forces to create better school programs that protect Manobo culture while keeping students safe from being used by armed groups in the future (NTF-ELCAC, 2024; Llemit, 2025).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Description of the study

The research was conducted in Talaingod, a second-class municipality in the province of Davao del Norte with a total area of 656.83 km^2 and an identified Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Area (GIDA) in the Philippines (Mendoza, 2023) as shown in Figure 1 below. Based on Census by the Philippine Statistics Authority (2024), the population of Talaingod, Davao del Norte is 28,665 which is also known as the "*Lumad* Capital" of the province due to approximately 72% of its population belonging to the Talaingod Manobo tribe. Moreover, the municipality is landlocked, situated within the

rugged foothills of the Pantaron Mountain Range which is a strategic corridor in Southern Mindanao that spans across Region 11 and Northern Mindanao (DSWD Field Office 11, 2025; Discover Davao, 2025).

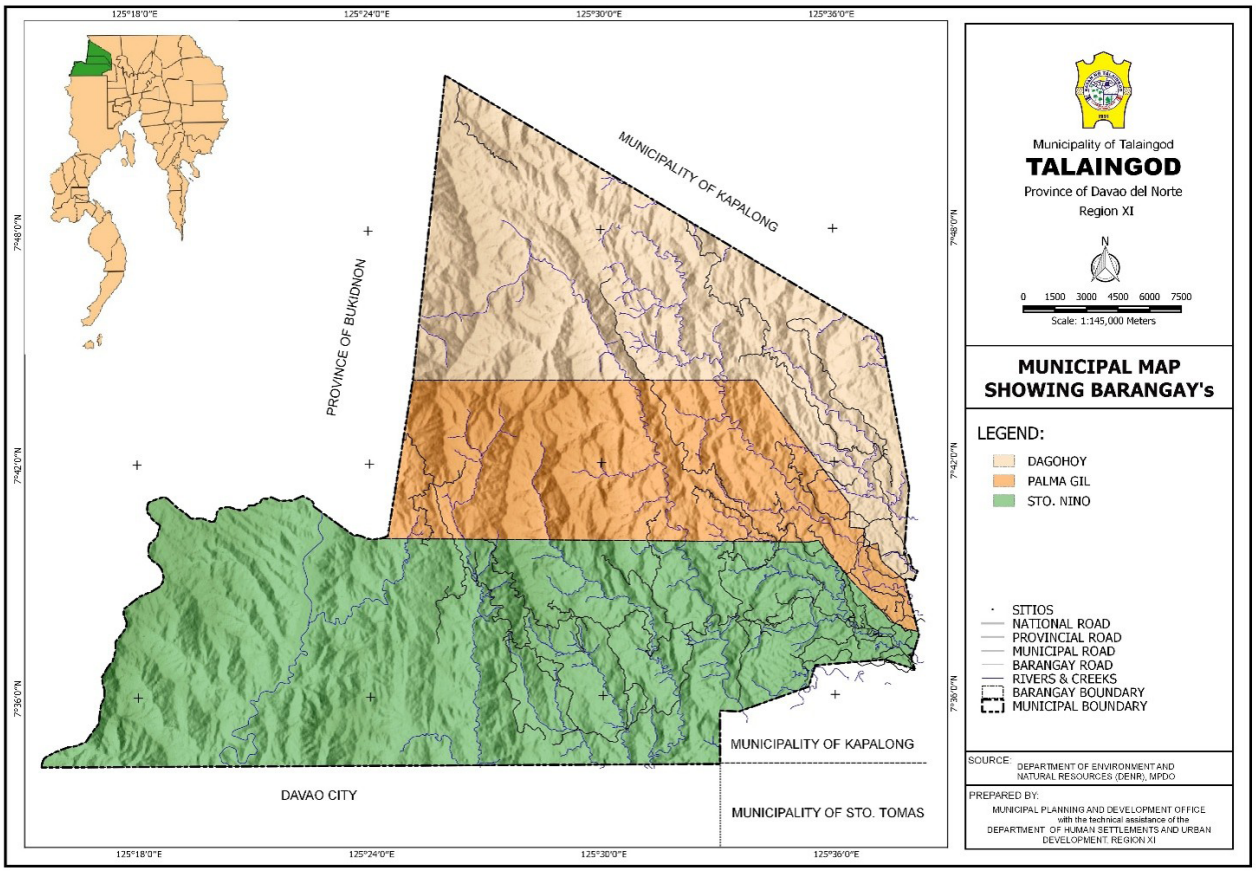


Figure 1. The map of the municipality of Talaingod, Davao del Norte.

The study specifically focused on barangays Palma Gil and Dagohoy, where the concentration of 20 *Salugpongan* Learning Centers was evident during its operational existence. Unlike traditional single-site schools, the *Salugpongan* learning center functioned as a distributed educational system comprising multiple "sitio-based" schoolhouses. These structures were typically made of indigenous materials and situated in remote villages (sitios), which are accessible only by several hours of trekking or "*habal-habal*" (motorcycle) travel through steep terrain (Cagula, 2019).



Figure 2. A *Salugpongan* School in Sitio Dulyan, Barangay Palma Gil, Talaingod, Davao del Norte during the flag ceremony (Cabusao, 2020)

Research design

The research design is grounded in a qualitative framework, specifically adopting a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the recruitment processes within the *Salugpongan* school system. Qualitative inquiry is suitable for this study because it allows for the exploration of real-life stories and complex social situations within their natural settings (Lim, 2024). This approach helped gain a better understanding of the sensitive phenomena surrounding the radicalization of Talaingod Manobo youth. Hence, the researcher was able to collect deep, personal stories and capture how the participants understood their own experiences.

Meanwhile, the phenomenological approach was specifically chosen because it values human experience more than just numbers or statistical data (Daruhadi, 2024; Adeniran and Tayo-Ladega, 2024). This concept is particularly important when studying sensitive topics, such as how people are recruited into rebel groups. Hence, the researcher effectively excavated deeply meaningful personal narratives and captured the participants' unique interpretations of their time within the *Salugpongan* system.

Participants and sampling method

This study used key participants with direct experience of how the schools operated, including their academic schedules, alternative curricula, student boarding setups, and everyday community interactions. The participants had to meet three strict inclusion criteria to qualify for the study. First, they had to possess a direct association with the *Salugpongan* schools in Talaingod, Davao del Norte, as a former student, community parent, traditional tribal leader (*Datu*) and a former rebel. Second, their first-hand involvement or observation of these schools had to align precisely with the timeline from 2012 to 2019, the period of its operational peak. Third, they had to be a phenomenological witness, meaning they possessed personal knowledge or first-hand experience regarding how students transitioned from classroom activities into the armed movement. Table 1 provides a simple overview of the participants' demographic data based on these qualifications.

Table 1. Demographic and operational data of participants.

Participant code	Stakeholder group	Prior organizational affiliation	Geographic area of observation in Talaingod, Davao del Norte	Duration of exposure (Years)
P1	Former student / Former rebel	DGF55,SRC5, SMRC	Sitio Pongpong, Brgy. Dagohoy	6
P2	Former student / Former rebel	DSRGU, SRC5, SMRC	Sitio Peroy, Brgy. Dagohoy	6
P3	Former student / Former rebel	DSRGU, SRC5, SMRC	Sitio Dulyan, Brgy. Palma Gil	5
P4	Tribal leader (Datu)	-	Sitio Pongpong, Brgy. Dagohoy	7
P5	Community parent / Former rebel	DGF55,SRC5, SMRC	Sitio Nasilaban, Brgy. Palma Gil	7
P6	Former student / Former rebel	DGF55,SRC5, SMRC	Sitio Sambulungan, Brgy. Palma Gil	5
P7	Community parent	-	Sitio Badyatan, Brgy. Dagohoy	6
P8	Former student / former rebel	DSRGU, SRC5, SMRC	Sitio Nalubas, Brgy Palma Gil	4
P9	Former student / former rebel	DSRGU, SRC5, SMRC	Sitio Bulo, Brgy Dagohoy	4
P10	Tribal leader (datu)	-	KM31, Brgy Dagohoy	6

In this qualitative study, the sample size was determined by data saturation rather than statistical formulas (Bouncken et al., 2025). The participant pool included ten individuals who shared the same geographic, cultural, and historical experiences with the school system. This shared background ensured that the interviews provided rich, deeply detailed data about the topic. Data saturation happens when collecting more data no longer reveals new perspectives or thematic codes (Saunders et al., 2018). For phenomenological studies looking at a shared experience within a close-knit group, small sample sizes are highly effective and preferred (Morse, 2015; Rahimi and Khatooni, 2024). Furthermore, qualitative researchers state that 5 to 25 participants are fully sufficient to achieve depth in phenomenological designs (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Sharma et al., 2024). During the tenth interview of this study, the primary codes and story patterns repeated completely, and no new data emerged. Therefore, using ten key informants aligns with established qualitative research standards (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Research instrument and validation

The primary instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview guide, which ensures the study remains a descriptive inquiry rather than a judgmental or accusatory one (Naz et al., 2022). The interview guide was created directly from the study's main objective, resulting in an instrument containing exactly five primary, open-ended questions. However, to fully capture the depth of the participants' lived experiences, the primary questions were supplemented by a total of 196 spontaneous probe questions across the ten interviews.

These probe questions were used dynamically to clarify complex narratives and ask for specific examples without leading the participants. In qualitative research, while primary questions establish the thematic boundaries, probe questions are essential for achieving data depth and uncovering hidden nuances that a rigid, structured format might miss (Price, 2002; Robinson, 2023).

Adhab and Abed (2024) argue that focusing on a small number of core questions prevents participant fatigue and

maintains strong thematic alignment. Also, the researcher used flexible probing questions during the interviews to expound on the participants' answers when needed to gather deeper details. This concept is supported by Kallio et al. (2016) and Rubin and Rubin (2005), who stated in their research that a semi-structured guide must remain flexible, allowing the researcher to use follow-up probes to explore unexpected but valuable details. This design aligns perfectly with the descriptive phenomenological approach, which relies on open dialogue to capture true lived experiences and personal meanings without forcing answers or using biased language.

The research instrument underwent a comprehensive validation process covering face, content, semantic, and linguistic validity. Face validity was ensured by evaluating the clarity, structure, and overall appearance of the questionnaire to determine whether the items appropriately reflected the research objectives. Content validity was established through expert review by a professor with a doctorate degree in Kapalong, Davao del Norte, a DepEd Principal with a doctorate degree in Talaingod, Davao del Norte, and a Philippine Army officer with a master's degree in National Security Administration, who assessed the relevance, accuracy, and adequacy of each item in relation to the study objectives.

Semantic validity was addressed by the experts by ensuring that the meaning of each item was consistent and accurately interpreted by both experts and participants, particularly with respect to sensitive terms used in the context of recruitment and indigenous experiences. Linguistic validity was ensured by reviewing the language for clarity, simplicity, and cultural appropriateness, with revisions made based on expert recommendations of a Manobo Teacher and a tribal datu to ensure comprehensibility among participants. Following these validations and revisions, the instrument was pilot-tested with three former *Salugpongan* students to assess clarity and effectiveness before the actual data collection.

Data gathering procedure

The data gathering procedure was executed in a systematic phase, strictly adhering to ethical and legal protocols. In compliance with the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (RA 8371), the researcher first secured Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) through formal coordination with the Municipal Tribal Council of Talaingod and the Indigenous Peoples' Mandatory Representative (IPMR). Following this, administrative permissions were obtained from the 56th Infantry Battalion, which was the former Philippine Army unit overseeing the reintegration of these former rebels, the Barangay Captains of Sto. Niño, Palma Gil, Dagohoy, and the respective tribal datus and purok chairmen. Moreover, the researcher secured a written Informed Consent (ICF) from all participants. Finally, participants were also briefed on their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions, and all personal identifiers were removed to ensure anonymity and safety.

Data collection

The actual data collection involved conducting individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews in a safe and private location within the military post at Alsons Compound in Brgy. Sto. Niño, Talaingod, Davao del Norte. Utilizing the validated interview guide, the researcher facilitated one-on-one dialogues that allowed informants to narrate their experiences in their native tongue (Cebuano or Manobo) for maximum accuracy and comfort. This was facilitated by a Manobo teacher who is proficient in these dialects. These sessions were recorded using an Android device with the participants' explicit permission.

Notably, the study implemented data source triangulation to ensure a thorough and rigorous validation of the findings. Data source triangulation was achieved in two ways. First, the researcher cross-referenced and compared the personal narratives across different participant groups, matching the accounts of former students with those of traditional Datus, former rebels, and community parents. Second, the researcher compared these primary interview accounts with various secondary document sources, including official government records, investigative reports, news articles, and published academic literature. Hence, the researcher minimized personal bias and ensured a balanced, rich qualitative analysis by cross-examining the verbal testimonies with what was recorded in public and state documentation (Valencia, 2022).

Data analysis procedure

The collected data were analyzed using Content Analysis, a systematic method for interpreting text and categorizing themes to discover underlying messages (Lyhne et al., 2025; Nicmanis, 2024). Following the standard protocols for phenomenological data analysis as described by Julien et al. (2008), Ridder (2014), and Assarroudi et al. (2018), the researcher immersed himself in the data by transcribing and repeatedly reviewing the audio files to gain a holistic impression of the narratives. Afterwards, significant parts of the data were then coded and grouped to identify recurring ideas, which were further organized into broader categories representing common patterns across participants' responses. These categories were carefully reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the interview data. Each category was clearly defined and given an appropriate name, and the final analysis was written by integrating these findings with selected verbatim quotes to maintain the authenticity of the participants' experiences.

After a month, the researcher gathered the participants to present the extracted themes, analytical categories, and translated quotes with the help of a translator. The participants reviewed and verified these findings, confirming that the final themes accurately captured their true lived experiences. Additionally, every stage of the analysis was fully documented. The raw audio recordings were mapped directly to the verbatim Visayan/Cebuano transcripts, English translations, isolated meaning units, and final themes. To allow independent verification, every quote in Chapter 4 is linked to a permanent tracking tag containing the participant code and precise transcript line numbers.

To further strengthen the rigor of the study, the researcher conducted peer debriefing and an external audit of the coding process with two distinguished researchers with extensive backgrounds in publishing. They were able to provide recommendations and helped cross-check the codes and minimize personal bias. Moreover, the researcher also performed a negative case analysis by manually re-reading each transcript line-by-line to actively look for outlier responses or dissenting views that did not fit the dominant patterns. During this process, any contrasting viewpoints were intentionally highlighted and integrated alongside the major themes to ensure a balanced interpretation. Furthermore, the audit trail documentation was also expanded by creating a clear master ledger that links the raw participant expressions directly to the codes and themes, showing the step-by-step logic behind every analytical decision.

The researcher also kept a handwritten reflexive journal during fieldwork to record immediate emotional responses, field notes, and personal biases. During data analysis, these journal entries were used to practice bracketing, which means the researcher consciously isolated their own background and assumptions.

RESULTS

This section presents the results based on the narratives of the informants by using the content analysis of interview data.

Theme 1: Lived experiences and community perceptions during the initial opening of *Salugpongan* Schools

Table 2 details the experiences of the participants when the *Salugpongan* schools first opened, highlighting their emotional relief, physical circumstances, and initial structural interactions with the school system.

The participants experienced the initial opening of the *Salugpongan* schools as a direct answer to geographic isolation, characterized by immediate emotional relief and physical cooperation. Because there were no DepEd facilities available in the mountains, youth rushed to enroll out of a desire for education. Traditional leaders (Datus) and parents accepted the schools with gratitude and blind trust, operating under the impression that the initiatives were completely legal and designed to protect ancestral lands. Likewise, to sustain daily operations during this opening phase, the schools provided total material support, giving students free food, notebooks, and pencils, which alleviated the financial burden on impoverished families. Furthermore, community members physically participated in the opening by manually gathering timber from nearby rivers to construct the school walls under the direction of local figures.

Table 2. Participants' experiences and meanings attached to the initial school openings.

Analytical categories	Verbatim Exemplars (Significant Quotes / Observations)
Relief through improved access to local education	*...nig pasaligan kuy dugman nu ka mgo batu ug makaeskwela un kayt marani su duon un skwelahan... Sikan iyan ka mgo batan on nag sigiras ug skwela tu Salugpongan su waro man skwelahan nu lain diyot bubungan*" (...we were promised that the children could finally go to school because it was nearby... That is why the youth rushed to study at Salugpongan, because there was no other school up in the mountains.) [P4, Lines 14–18] "*Tungod kay walang eskwelahan na gikan sa DepEd, mao ng napugos ang mga kabataan na moeskwela nalang sa Salugpongan... Gipasabot sa mga tao nga walay bayad ang pag eskwela. Didto na nidaghan ang nag eskwela*." (Because there was no DepEd school, the youth were compelled to study at *Salugpongan*... They explained to the people that schooling was completely free. That is when enrollment surged.) [P6, Lines 22–27]
Experiences of deception and misplaced trust in tribal leadership	"*Sa sinugdanan gyud sir... Ang mga datu kay na-blind pud sila sa NPA kay una mga legal ang nag-sulod diha sa mga kumonidad... Dakog pasalamat ang mga datu na nay eskwelahan nga libre pero wala sila kabalo nga lahi ang nagsuporta...*" (In the very beginning, sir... the datus were blinded by the NPA because it started with legal groups entering the community... The datus were deeply grateful for a free school, completely unaware that a different group was supporting it.) [P3, Lines 08–13] "*Gi istoryahan, unya, kami na wala nakabalo, nagtoo mi kay ingon sila ang among yuta dili makuha sa gobyerno. Wala mi nakabalo nga NPA diay.*" (We were talked to, and since we didn't know any better, we believed them when they said our land wouldn't be taken by the government. We had no idea it was actually the NPA.) [P5, Lines 31–35]
Influence of free material support on school engagement	"*Ang pinakaunang rason nganong dali mi na-recruit nga mosulod sa Salugpongan school kay ang giingon nila sa amoa, libre tanan. Libre ang pag-eskwela, libre ang gamit ug libre ang kaon, libre tanan.*" (The very first reason we easily entered Salugpongan school was that they told us everything was free. Free schooling, free supplies, and free food—everything was free.) [P9, Lines 04–08] "*...kung unsay kinahanglan sa mga bata sir ihatag gyud na nila pareha anang notebook, lapis, ballpen, ug pagkaon, sila naga pakaon sa studyante. Sila mag gasto tanan...*" (...whatever the children needed, sir, they provided—like notebooks, pencils, ballpens, and food. They fed the students. They paid for everything...) [P1, Lines 19–24]
Community participation in school construction efforts	"*...ang mga NPA ang nagistorya sa mga tao nga magtukod ug eskwelahan unya sila Bugsong nagsugo sa mga tao na manguha ug kahoy sa sapa aron himuong bongbong sa eskwelahan.*" (...the NPA told the people to build a school, and [Commander] Bugsong ordered the community to gather timber from the river to use as walls for the school.) [P5, Lines 48–52] "*...Si Datu Doloman nag adto sa sentro para makipag istorya sa mga dagkong tao. Unya, nibalik siya sa bukid para ibalita nga pwede magtukod og eskwelahan... Mao ng natukod ang Salugpongan...*" (...Datu Doloman went to the town center to speak with prominent people. Then, he returned to the mountains to share the news that a school could be built... That is how Salugpongan was established...) [P10, Lines 72–77]

The participants experienced the initial opening of the Salugpongan schools as a direct answer to geographic isolation, characterized by immediate emotional relief and physical cooperation. Because there were no DepEd facilities available in the mountains, youth rushed to enroll out of a desire for education. Traditional leaders (Datus) and parents accepted the schools with gratitude and blind trust, operating under the impression that the initiatives were completely legal and designed to protect ancestral lands. Likewise, to sustain daily operations during this opening phase, the schools provided total material support, giving students free food, notebooks, and pencils, which alleviated the financial burden on impoverished families. Furthermore, community members physically participated in the opening by manually gathering timber from nearby rivers to construct the school walls under the direction of local figures.

Theme 2: Participants' lived experiences of encountering instructional indoctrination behaviors and roles of volunteer teachers

Table 3 details how participants described the specific instructional behaviors, operational roles, and interpersonal influence of the volunteer teachers within the Salugpongan learning environment.

Table 3. Participants' lived experiences and encounters with volunteer teacher behaviors.

Analytical categories	Verbatim exemplars (Significant quotes / Observations)
Dissemination of anti-government content	"*Ang gitudlo sa maestra sa Salugpungan kung unsaon pagkalaban sa gobyerno ug unsaon pagbag-o sa sistema.*" (The teacher taught us how to fight the government and change the system.) [P2, Lines 24–27] "*...Gipangtudluan me ug bisag unsa, labi na pag-daot sa gobyerno.*" (...we were taught many things, especially criticizing and speaking ill against the government.) [P9, Lines 38–41] "*...didto sa sulod sa eskwelahan, ang ginatransmit sa mga maestra kay kung unsa ang pamaagi nga magdumot ang mga tao sa sundalo ug sa gobyerno.*" (...there inside the school, what the teachers were transmitting was how the people could harbor hatred toward the soldiers and the government.) [P3, Lines 45–50]
Recruitment into the armed underground movement	"*Kung dagko na sila ginaingnan na sila sa mga maestra nga pwede na sila makaadto sa NPA para mag-full time.*" (When they grow older, the teachers tell them that they can already go to the NPA to become full-time members.) [P5, Lines 56–69] "*Ingon nila kung didto ka sa NPA mas dali lang ka makatuon.*" (They said if you go to the NPA, learning is easier and faster.) [P2, Lines 33–36]
Enforcement of student-led peer mobilization	"*Kaming mga anak sa NPA, kami ang ginasugo... Ginasugo pud mi sa maestra na magdala ug mga classmate namo...*" (We, as children of NPA members, were ordered... we were also told by the teacher to bring our classmates along...) [P8, Lines 14–19] "*...Ang maestra mismo ang magsugo sa amoa nga duna mi bitbiton nga uban padulong didto sa unhan.*" (...The teacher herself would order us that we must bring others along with us heading further into the area.) [P9, Lines 62–65] "*Kaming mga anak sa NPA, kami ang ginasugo nga musulod sa kampo ng NPA para tudluan ug PADEPA... Ginasugo pud mi sa maestra na magdala ug mga classmate namo...*" (We, as children of NPA members, were sent to camps to teach PADEPA... we were also told to bring our classmates.) [P8, Lines 63–67]
Deployment of unlicensed and untrained teaching staff	"*Nagpasulod sila ug mga maestra nga recruited na nila nga dili professional, mga high school graduate.*" (They brought in teachers who were already recruited by them, who were not professionals, just high school graduates.) [P10, Lines 41–44] "*...Dili man to sila parehas sa tinuod nga DepEd nga naay kaagi sa pagka-maestra. Ang uban gani kay batan-on pa kaayo nga gikan lang gihapon sa laing bukid.*" (...They were not like real DepEd teachers who went through proper teacher training. Some were even very young individuals who just came from other mountain areas.) [P3, Lines 88–92]

Participants described the volunteer teachers as highly persuasive, political, and focused on changing student behavior. In the classroom, teachers showed open hostility toward the government. They explicitly taught students how to oppose the state and demand systemic changes. This aggressive teaching style heavily shaped the students' mindsets. It normalized anti-state ideas during regular school hours and taught students to hate government soldiers. Furthermore, teachers used their authority to encourage older students to leave school and join the armed movement full-time, promising them faster, more practical training inside insurgent camps. To expand their reach, teachers ordered specific students especially those from rebel families to bring their classmates to outside meetings, using school pressure to drive peer recruitment. Finally, participants noted that these teachers lacked professional standards and legitimate academic degrees. Instead, they were high school graduates or uncertified young people who also held administrative and organizational roles within the CPP-NPA network.

Theme 3: Lived experiences during guerrilla training and weapons handling in the mountain encampments

Table 4 details how participants describe their actual physical experiences, skill development, and personal transitions during guerrilla training and weapons handling within the mountain encampments.

Table 4. Participants' experiences during guerrilla training and weapons handling.

Analytical categories	Verbatim exemplars (Significant quotes / Observations)
Technical instruction in firearms maintenance and assembly	"*Gitudluan gyud ko nila unsaon pag-assemble sa pusil, M16, garand, ug carbine.*" (I was taught how to assemble firearms such as M16, Garand, and Carbine.) [P1, Lines 52–55] "*Dili lang pag-gunit... gitudluan mi unsaon paglimpyo, pag-karga sa bala, ug pag-ayo kung mag-jam ang pusil sa tunga sa combat.*" (Not just holding it... we were taught how to clean, load ammunition, and fix the gun if it jams in the middle of combat.) [P9, Lines 84–88] "*...pangotan-on mi kung kabalo ba mi mag assemble ug pusil. Unya motobag ko nga dili, unya tudluan mi nila unsaon pag assemble sa pusil... Hangtod nga nakabalo na ko mo assemble ug pusil bisan pag tabunan akong mata.*" (...we would be asked if we knew how to assemble a gun. And I would answer no, then they would teach us how to assemble the gun... Until I learned how to assemble a gun even if my eyes were covered.) [P2, Lines 22–27]
Field training in small-unit tactics and maneuvers	"*Gitudluan mi sa pang-ambus, maniobra kung naay kalaban.*" (We were trained in ambush techniques and tactical maneuvers whenever enemies are present.) [P6, Lines 61–64] "*Tulo mi kabuok nga mag-uban didto mi gitudluan... Grabe ang kakapoy sa dagan ug tago sa kasagbutan.*" (There were three of us together who were trained there... The exhaustion from running and hiding in the vegetated areas was intense.) [P8, Lines 49–53]
Direct exposure to active combat operations	"*Na apil mi sa engkwentro sa sundalo ug pasabot sa masa...*" (We were included in actual encounters against government soldiers and conducting mass propaganda to the public...) [P9, Lines 95–98] "*Wala sir. Kato rang bombing sa Paredes sa Agusan.*" (No sir. Only that bombing at [Mount] Paredes in Agusan.) [P2, Lines 81–82]
Experiences of age-based selection and deployment	"*Ipatawag ang mga studyante nga nag-edad ug 17... didto sa Pantaron range, sa 'Bato'.*" (Students aged 17 were systematically called out... to undergo training at the Pantaron Range, specifically in the area called 'Bato'.) ...) [P10, Lines 55–58] "*...kay kug dagdakol un si kandan ug dumuhon un ka mgo batu tu NPA nug hiphipanow.*" (...once they grow bigger, the youths are taken by the NPA to walk/travel with them.) [P4, Lines 142–145]

The participants described their experiences during guerrilla training and weapons handling as physically exhausting, highly structured, and operationally dangerous. Trainees underwent rigorous, hands-on mechanical instruction where they mastered the assembly, cleaning, loading, and troubleshooting of high-powered firearms, specifically including M16 rifles, Garand rifles, and Carbines. This weapons handling was accompanied by intensive small-group tactical drills where participants learned how to execute ambushes, maintain stealth or tactical formation, and perform combat maneuvers under high physical stress.

The transition into full insurgent life was structurally organized based on age milestones, with older students systematically selected and sent to specialized camp environments, such as the Pantaron Range, for formal training. Ultimately, this training shifted from simulated drills into live operational exposure. Participants experienced direct combat by being included in live fire encounters against government soldiers and as well as aerial bombing, while simultaneously being deployed to conduct public propaganda operations among local communities.

Theme 4: Lived experiences of participants regarding how political ideas were taught during daily classes

Table 5 details the specific instructional methods and classroom activities used in *Salugpongan* School to transmit CPP-NPA ideological frameworks and counter-state concepts, as described by the participants.

Table 5. Participants' experiences of political instruction in daily classes.

Analytical categories	Verbatim exemplars (Significant quotes / Observations)
Instruction on structural and systemic societal grievances	"*Tulo ka batakang problema: Burakrata Kapitalismo, Emperyalismo, ug Pyudalismo.*" (Three basic problems: bureaucrat capitalism, imperialism, and feudalism.) [P9, Lines 42–44] "*...gina-explain sa amoa sa klase kung ngano naglisod ang mga mag-uuma ug ngano walay yuta ang mga taga-bukid.*" (...it was explained to us in class why the farmers are struggling and why the mountain people do not own land.) [P8, Lines 28–31]
Categorization of socioeconomic groups	"*Kung dili nato lumpagon ang Pulitiko, Burges ug Kapitalista, mailog gyud ang atong yutang kabilin.*" (If we do not fight politicians, bourgeoisie, and capitalists, our land will be taken.) [P2, Lines 41–44] "*...gitudlo sa amoa kung kinsa ang nag-gunit sa kwarta ug yuta, ug kinsa ang nagpatrabaho sa mga kabos.*" (...we were taught who holds the money and the land, and who exploits the poor laborers.) [P2, Lines 49–52]
Participation of armed group members as classroom lecturers	"*Sila ang muadto sa eskwelahan para magpasabot sa mga estudyante.*" (They go to the school to explain to the students.) [P6, Lines 53–55] "*...naay mga panahona nga naay mu-atubang sa amoa sa unahan nga armadong NPA aron mag-storya mahitungod sa sitwasyon.*" (...there were times when an armed NPA member would stand in front of us to speak about the current situation.) [P1, Lines 66–67]
Incorporation of political anthems and songs into daily instruction	"*Gitudluan mi ug kanta na dili Lupang Hinirang kung di Bayang Mahiwaga sa Malayong Silangan... nagakanta me ug Internationale kada klase.*" (We were taught a song that was not Lupang Hinirang, but 'Bayang Mahiwaga sa Malayong Silangan'... we sang the Internationale every class.) [P8, Lines 74–78] "*...gipatawag nila ang mga estudyante kung walay klase... Ang gitudlo didto sir... mga kanta na pang NPA... Ipatawag ang mga estudyante unya kantahon to namo pirme.*" (...they would call the students when there were no classes... What was taught there, sir... were songs for the NPA... The students would be summoned and then we would sing those all the time.) [P9, Lines 52–55]
Characterization of state security forces	"*Nig storyahan kuy tu mgo maestra wuy NPA nu... kinahanglan kalabanun nuw ka mga sundalo.*" (When the teachers and the NPA spoke to us... [they said] the soldiers must be opposed.) [P7, Lines 81–84] "Istoryahan mi sa among maestra nga ang mga sundalo matud pa kay naga-dala ug gubot diri sa atong lugar." (We were told by our teacher that the soldiers bring trouble into our area.) [P6, Lines 99–102]

The participants described their experiences regarding how political ideas were taught during daily classes as highly standardized, structured, and integrated into routine instructional activities. Daily lectures explicitly focused on specific political and economic conceptual models, such as the "three basic problems" of bureaucrat capitalism, imperialism, and feudalism, which were used to define current societal structures. Within these classroom discussions, teachers categorized specific socioeconomic groups including politicians, the bourgeoisie, and capitalists framing them as systemic figures responsible for the potential loss of ancestral lands.

This instructional routine was reinforced by external personnel which was the CPP-NPA Political Cadres who visited the classrooms to deliver direct explanations and lectures to the student body. Furthermore, daily school rituals were modified; participants experienced the singing of alternative revolutionary songs like the *Internationale*, the international anthem that was considered as the anthem of various anarchist, socialist and communist and *Bayang Mahiwaga sa Malayong Silangan* during class hours, entirely replacing standard national hymns such as the singing of *Lupang Hinirang*. Finally, teachers explicitly addressed the presence of state security forces during class discussions, instructing the students that government soldiers were adversaries who needed to be actively opposed, thereby defining the military forces as an adversarial element within the classroom space.

Theme 5: Key life experiences and turning points influencing the decision to join the armed movement full-time

Table 6 details the definitive events, psychological realizations, and turning points experienced by former students that led to their final decision to transition into full-time roles within the movement.

Table 6. Participants' turning points and decisions for full-time commitment.

Analytical categories	Verbatim exemplars (Significant quotes / Observations)
Assumption of logistical and intelligence responsibilities	"*Gihatagan kog posisyon nga mangita og supply… magmonitor sa lihok sa sundalo.*" (I was given a role to gather supplies and monitor the movement of soldiers.) [P6, Lines 44–45] *...nakauban nako sila sa Partido, nakagunit sila ug armas, ug kabalo na magpasabot sa masa.*" (...I was with them in the Party, they were holding weapons, and they already knew how to give explanations and propaganda to the masses.) [P3, Lines102–106]
Movement between educational settings and camp environments	"*Gipauli napud kay mueskwela pag-balik.*" (We were sent home to return to school.) [P5, Line 22-25] "*...mabalik-balik mi sa bukid ug sa eskwelahan hangtod nga naanad na lang mi sa pamaagi didto.*" (...we would keep going back and forth between the mountains and the school until we just grew accustomed to the lifestyle there.) [P6, Lines 74–78]
Participation in structured integration processes	"*Ang R.I. ay tulo ka kabulan ka musolod. Unya kung dili na gusto mohawa, pwede na sila mag full time.*" (The Revolutionary Integration phase takes three months of entry. Then, if they no longer wish to leave, they can already go full-time.) [P2, Lines 68–71] "*...kung makahuman na sila sa tulo ka bulan nga pag-sulod sa unahan, didto na sila mo-desisyon nga dili na mobaba.*" (...once they finish the three-month entry period in the far interior, that is when they decide never to come down again.) [P8, Lines 55–59]
Recognition of long-term commitment and organizational constraints	"*Kung nag full time na di na basta basta makababa.*" (Once you go full-time, you cannot easily go back down [to civilian life].) [P1, Line 93-94] "*...kung musulod na ka sa unahan ug mag full-time, dili na ka basta-basta tugutan nga makabiya o mag-usab sa imong desisyon.*" (...once you enter the interior and go full-time, you are not easily allowed to leave or change your mind.) [P2, Line 104-107]

Participants described the key life experiences and turning points that led to their full-time commitment in the armed movement as a clear progression from initial tasks to formal, strict integration. A major turning point occurred when students were trusted with specific field responsibilities, such as buying supplies and tracking government military movements. Succeeding in these tasks built practical skills in handling weapons and spreading propaganda, which increased their value to the group. This involvement grew through a routine where students constantly moved between attending classes and visiting mountain camps, making them deeply familiar with the rebel lifestyle. The final step toward full-time commitment was made easier by completing a formal three-month trial period known as "Revolutionary Integration" (R.I.). Completing this trial was the final milestone where participants chose to stay in the mountains permanently. Once they made this choice, strict group rules prevented them from easily returning to their families or civilian life.

DISCUSSION

The initial opening of *Salugpongan* schools

The findings demonstrate that the establishment of *Salugpongan* schools was primarily accelerated by severe geographic isolation and a total vacuum of state schools in the area. This spatial abandonment created an educational void that the insurgent apparatus systematically filled, using basic literacy as a soft-power entry point to establish alternative governance. This operational reality mirrors recent conflict literature emphasizing that contemporary insurgent movements heavily depend on long-term environmental grooming and structural positioning rather than immediate, forced abduction (Beber et al., 2013; Richards, 2025; Rao, 2026). The movement effectively engineered a deceptive, low-risk presence within the ancestral domain, a pattern consistent with models of subversive institutional capture in marginalized regions, by presenting these facilities as legitimate, free academic institutions (Arvisais et al., 2025; Asal et al., 2022; Saehudin and Ridha, 2022).

Hence, traditional leaders (*Datus*) and parents accepted the schools under the false impression that these initiatives were legitimate government-approved programs explicitly designed to protect their ancestral lands from external exploitation (Haer et al., 2019). The normalization of the rebel presence was further achieved through calculated behavioral adaptation, specifically, unarmed CPP-NPA members maintaining a constant, non-threatening presence on school grounds to assist with routine community tasks. This highly localized approach lowered immediate community resistance, obscured the group's underlying militant objectives, and built a false sense of institutional security among the tribal population (Paglayan, 2022).

Furthermore, the high reliance on free material incentives such as meals, notebooks, and pencils served as an operational lever that exploited the profound economic vulnerability of impoverished Manobo families. Providing basic sustenance and educational supplies successfully transferred the community's survival dependency from the state to the revolutionary apparatus (Palik et al., 2025).

Experiences and encounters with volunteer teacher behaviors

The narratives reveal that classrooms were systematically transformed into unmonitored spaces for radicalization through the deliberate employment of unlicensed and untrained teaching staff. Utilizing young high school graduates from neighboring mountain areas served a specific dual purpose: it bypassed regulatory oversight while embedding instructors who were already integrated into the insurgent network. These volunteer educators utilized an explicitly hostile pedagogical approach, introducing the subversive *Pambansang Demokratikong Paaralan* (PADEPA) curriculum to frame armed revolution as the sole mechanism for systemic survival (Hellmuth, 2018; Bronsard et al., 2022). The youth accepted these radical narratives because they placed absolute trust in the institutional authority and perceived wisdom of their educators, a psychological compliance dynamic well-documented in classical authority models (Russell, 2011; Gregory and Ripski, 2019). Beyond classroom instruction, teachers leveraged their institutional authority to enforce student-led peer mobilization. The school system weaponized existing kinship and peer networks by specifically ordering the children of active insurgent members to bring their classmates to external setups and mountain encampments. This institutional pressure effectively decentralized recruitment, turning students into active vectors of mobilization within their own age cohorts (Almazroui, 2025; Lauter, 2015).

Guerrilla training and weapons handling

The progression from classroom indoctrination to hands-on tactical instruction signifies a highly structured process of physical and mechanical weaponization. The rigorous training regimen where youth mastered the cleaning, loading, and blindfolded assembly of high-powered firearms such as M16 rifles, Garand rifles, and Carbines was deliberately designed to instill immediate mechanical confidence and psychological proficiency before active combat deployment (Saleh et al., 2024). Field training in small-unit tactics and ambush maneuvers reinforced this technical instruction, utilizing an isolated training paradigm to forge intense peer accountability, shared physical endurance, and unyielding loyalty to the collective unit (Tornero-Aguilera et al., 2024; Rosello, 1988; Banerjee, 2024).

The transition into active combat operations, including direct participation in live-fire encounters against government soldiers and exposure to aerial bombing operations, served to systematically normalize warfare in the minds of the youth. The movement reframed violent conflict from an extraordinary danger into an ordinary, structured lifestyle choice by embedding trainees directly into live operational hazards. (Bronzard et al., 2022; Emmelkamp et al., 2020).

Indoctrination of political ideas

The interviews show that structured daily lectures were heavily anchored on the "three basic problems" (*batakang problema*): bureaucrat capitalism, imperialism, and feudalism. This explicit socio-economic framing was used to establish a rigid, unyielding "Us vs. Them" binary, effectively defining all state institutions, politicians, and capitalists as existential threats to the survival of the ancestral domain (Etaywe and Giles, 2025; Scalice, 2021). Within this ideological framework, state security forces were systematically demonized and characterized as adversarial elements responsible for local instability, thereby legitimizing armed resistance as a protective necessity (Nepomuceno, 2019b; Bafadhal et al., 2026).

This adversarial worldview was reinforced through the total modification of daily school rituals. Institutionalizing the singing of alternative revolutionary anthems like the *Internationale* and *Bayang Mahiwaga sa Malayong Silangan* to completely replace national symbols like *Lupang Hinirang* functioned as a deliberate mechanism of civic erasure. Therefore, the alternative school successfully reconstructed their personal identities to align entirely with the insurgent movement by systematically unbinding the youth from national and state identities (Sargeant, 2017; Nunez Seixas, 2024; Fletcher, 2002).

Decision to join the armed movement full-time

The step-by-step trajectory from civilian student life to total integration into the armed underground movement highlights a sophisticated, low-risk escalation model. Initially, trusting students with minor logistical and intelligence responsibilities, such as securing supplies and monitoring the movements of government soldiers, served as a psychological bridge. Succeeding in these low-risk tasks provided the youth with institutional validation and built the practical confidence necessary to execute higher-risk operational duties, rapidly diminishing the psychological distance between civilian life and guerrilla warfare (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Ellenberg & Kruglanski, 2024). This operational involvement was sustained by a fluid routine where students constantly alternated between attending school and visiting mountain camps, making the insurgent lifestyle completely familiar.

The definitive turning point occurred upon completing the formalized three-month probationary period known as Revolutionary Integration (R.I.). This institutional milestone functioned as the mechanism for identity fusion, a psychological state where the individual's personal identity becomes completely inseparable from the collective goals and survival of the group (Atran, 2025; Reese & Whitehouse, 2021). Once identity fusion was achieved, returning to civilian life became exceptionally difficult due to a powerful sunk-cost effect, where individuals feared that their previous physical sacrifices, losses, and collective struggles would be rendered meaningless if they deserted (Schuurman and Carthy, 2023; Reinares, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how the *Salugpongan* alternative school systems in remote indigenous communities of Talaingod, Davao del Norte were used to recruit youth into an armed movement. The findings show that these schools first opened as a welcome solution to geographical isolation and a complete lack of state infrastructure. This absence of government facilities created immediate emotional relief and led to strong community cooperation; however, it also made poor families highly dependent on free food and school supplies, which hid the true extent of the school system's support. Within this setup, untrained and unlicensed volunteer teachers systematically influenced the students by teaching subversive and anti-government lessons explicitly, replacing national anthems with revolutionary songs, and using their authority to make students recruit their own peers.

As the youth grew older, they moved into a rigorous and physically exhausting guerrilla training routine inside mountain camps. Here, they learned how to clean, load, and assemble high-powered firearms and practice small-unit battle tactics. This training quickly turned into real combat experience, including live gunfights and air bombings, which made violence and warfare feel like a normal part of daily life. The final decision to join the armed group full-time followed a step-by-step path that started with low-risk tasks like gathering supplies or monitoring military movements. After moving back and forth between regular classes and mountain camps, students reached a turning point by completing a three-month probationary period called Revolutionary Integration. This final milestone locked in their commitment to the movement, creating strong psychological and social barriers that made it very difficult to leave and return to civilian life.

These empirical results align with Social Learning Theory because volunteer teachers acted as primary models for anti-government behavior and peer recruitment through direct observation. However, the results also extend this framework since the transition to full-time combat was not driven by social imitation alone; instead, long-term commitment was locked in by economic dependency, gradual task involvement, and a probationary period that created powerful psychological exit barriers that traditional learning models do not fully capture.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

B. D. G: Writing, conceptualization, methodology, data gathering and analysis, validation, review and editing

DECLARATIONS

Informed consent statement

The study explicitly considers and follows the international standard for ethics in research set by the World Health Organization in order to respect the interviewees' safety, privacy, and rights. Before the interview commenced, informed consent was obtained from the informants, and they were also informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. They were also briefed that they can withdraw at any time without any consequences. The researcher also used code names to anonymize the participants in this manuscript. The data collected were treated with utmost confidentiality in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Only the sole researcher had access to the recordings and transcripts. Moreover, due to the sensitive nature of the topics, the researcher had been sensitive in asking questions to avoid violation and discomfort on the part of the informants.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

AI Declaration

The authors declare that no Artificial Intelligence (AI) or AI assisted technologies were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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