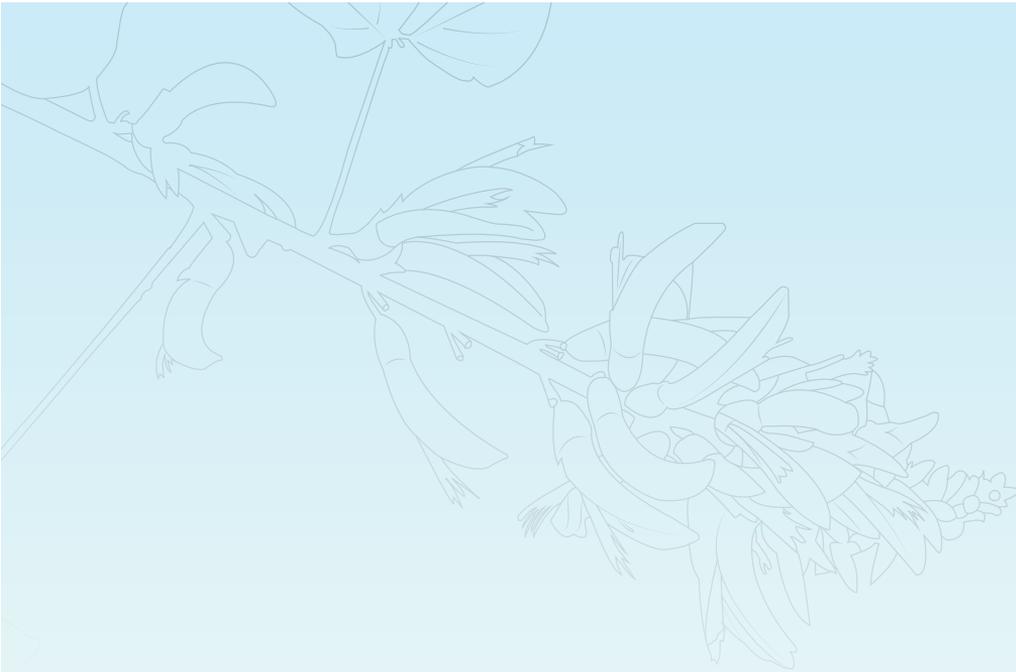# Quest to the City: Reflecting on the Transformative Learning of Ethnic Students

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Abstract

This research aimed (1) to analyze the transformative learning processes of ethnic students, and (2) to synthesize best practices for promoting transformative learning among these students. The study employed a phenomenological research framework using Transformative Learning as theoretical grounding, incorporating in-depth interviews and participant observation with 10 first-year ethnic students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (elementary education) program during Phase 1, as well as focus group discussions in Phase 2 with 5 faculty members from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and 5 staff members from the Foundation for Applied Linguistics. The findings revealed that ethnic students encountered a dynamic transition related to linguistic and cultural adaptation, alongside shifts in their perspectives on identity—leading them to engage in deep, transformative learning. This learning involved critical self-examination, the acquisition of new skills and practices, and the integration of their original identities into a new urban context. Furthermore, the synthesis of data indicated ten best practices: establishing a flexible learning environment; providing linguistic and communicative support; managing living conditions in dormitories; offering financial counseling; reinforcing social support networks; enhancing psychological well-being; integrating ethnic identities; developing leadership; fostering collaboration with families and communities; and offering support for professional teaching pathways.

Keywords: Transformative Learning, Ethnic Students, Empowerment, Phenomenological Research

Introduction

Under globalization, a segment of the population has come to perceive that the cultures of various communities must inevitably align in a singular direction. However, it becomes evident that "area, people, and culture" do not neatly overlap. Each area, group of people, and culture is constantly intertwined, leading to the realization that globalization does not necessarily drive all localities toward the same trajectory. In other words, no local community can preserve its identity in isolation, as external influences invariably come into play. Globalization fosters relationships between multiple localities through the interconnection of societies from both origin and destination. Even as individuals migrate away from their birthplace, they often retain behaviors that link them to their homeland which suggests that migration does not signify a complete severance from one's origin. Instead, migrants establish new social fields to sustain their identities within a new environment [1].

One manifestation of the creation of new social fields aimed at preserving identities could be observed among ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. Their pursuit of success in urban settings had driven them to leave their homes in search of educational opportunities. In the 2023 academic year, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University—where this study was conducted— enrolled 69 first-year ethnic students out of 88, constituting 78.41% of the cohort. The aforementioned ethnic student population comprised a diverse range of groups, each with distinct cultural and linguistic heritages. The ethnic distribution of the cohort is illustrated in Figure 1.
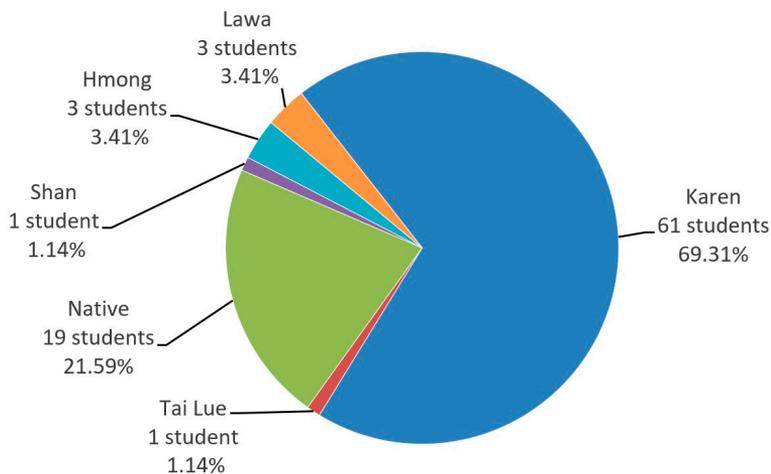

Figure 1. The ethnic demographic of the students enrolled at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, academic year 2023

Source: Created by the author

While all new students inevitably undergo adaptations to navigate both academic and social challenges in an unfamiliar environment, ethnic students encounter an additional layer of adjustment arising from the societal and cultural differences embedded in their upbringings. Many of them come from rural or highland areas where access to Thai mainstream education is limited, and their early learning experiences are mediated through their own ethnic languages and community-based knowledge systems. Religious affiliations also vary—Buddhist, Christian, and animist—shaping differing moral frameworks and social expectations. Consequently, their prior educational experiences and value orientations differ substantially from those of local urban students. This diversity highlights that "ethnic students" do not constitute a homogeneous category but rather a constellation of distinct cultural communities, each with unique trajectories of adaptation, negotiation, and identity formation within the university context. [2]

The term "ethnic minority group" in this context referred to a social group whose members share a collective identity based on a common name, culture, and historical background. This shared identity is expressed through distinctive elements such as language, traditional attire, housing styles, modes of production, beliefs, rituals, and other cultural markers that members use to define their group. Beyond these cultural characteristics, being classified as an ethnic group also implies a minority status within the framework of the modern nation-state. Leepreecha [3] noted that ethnic groups are not part of a country's dominant national identity. Generally, they hold less political, social, and cultural power within the state, even though they may not always be numerically smaller or economically disadvantaged. The distinction lies in the fact that their cultural and historical narratives are not recognized as central to the nation's identity of the state. Within this context, the perception of being a minority group may contribute to feelings of marginalization among ethnic population which could potentially erode their self-confidence and self-esteem.

This observation aligned with the researcher's experience in conducting fieldwork for screening students for the Kru Rak Thin program in various ethnic communities. Through this experience, the researcher observed that even within the same ethnic community, significant diversity exists among individuals. Some students were confident, articulate, and able to express qualities that reflected the characteristics of a good teacher—one who could return to their hometown and contribute to local development. In contrast, others were shy and lacked self-confidence, particularly when interacting with unfamiliar individuals, to the extent that the researcher could hardly collect any useful data.

Drawing from over two decades of experience as an educator, the researcher had the opportunity to closely engage with students both within and beyond formal education

systems, encountering a diverse range of economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, through the aforementioned fieldwork, the researcher has come to believe that the adaptation process in forming new social fields is influenced by certain mechanisms that enable some students to adjust more quickly while specific factors hinder adaptation for others. By identifying the processes that facilitate adjustment as well as the barriers that obstruct it, we can develop effective strategies to support students in achieving their full potential. Importantly, such adaptation does not imply transforming ethnic students into urban dwellers, but rather equipping them with the ability to coexist with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. A key theoretical perspective that expands our understanding of the possibilities within these adaptation experiences is Transformative Learning Theory. This concept, as articulated by Mezirow [4], describes a process in which individuals shift from an unclear or limited frame of reference toward a broader, deeper, and more nuanced perspective. Through this transformation, learners develop the ability to distinguish differences, engage in critical reflection, articulate their thoughts and emotions more clearly, and ultimately adopt a more inclusive and accurate way of interpreting change.

Given these considerations, the researcher was particularly interested in exploring the transformative learning experiences of ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. This study aimed to foster self-appreciation among students from diverse cultural backgrounds, encouraging them to take pride in their artistic and cultural heritage which aligns with the university's mission to "enhance knowledge, understanding, appreciation, and pride in both local and national art and culture." Through this view, a teacher who takes pride in their own cultural identity is more likely to instill in their students a deep understanding, appreciation, and pride in both local and national cultural heritage.

Objective

1. To analyze the transformative learning process of ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University.

2. To formulate best practices for supporting and facilitating transformative learning among these students.

Literature Review

A review of the literature on Transformative Learning revealed that this concept was developed by Mezirow, who emphasized the process by which learners can transform their frames of reference through critical self-reflection and critical discourse [4-6].
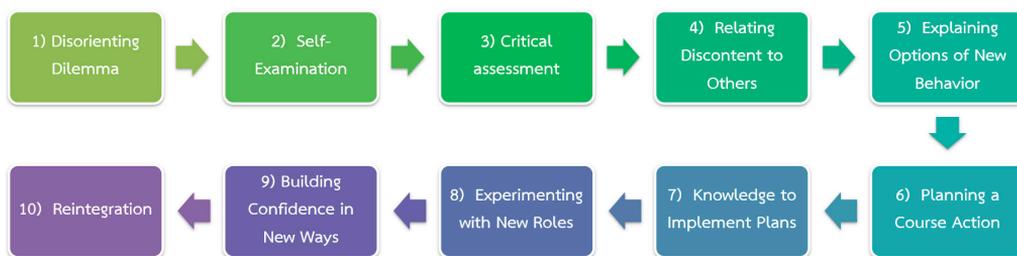
Figure 2. The ten stages of Mezirow's Transformative Learning

Source: Mezirow (2009, p. 94)

Mezirow conceptualized Transformative Learning as a process comprising ten sequential stages, as displayed in Figure 2. It begins with a disorienting dilemma—an experience that challenges existing assumptions—followed by critical reflection on one's beliefs, engagement in rational discourse with others, and culminates in reintegrating new perspectives into one's life. However, most previous studies had primarily focused on transformative learning in general educational contexts, paying limited attention to the unique linguistic, social, and cultural characteristics of ethnic students [3, 7-9]

In the context of ethnic students, a substantial body of research has explored the identity, culture, and social transformations of ethnic groups in Thailand [1, 3-4, 10]. However, studies specifically addressing the transformative learning processes among ethnic students in higher education remain scarce. This was particularly evident in the context of Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, where a significant number of Lawa, Karen, and Hmong students are enrolled. To date, no comprehensive research has been conducted that clearly and deeply investigates the learning experiences that contribute to the transformation of these students' frames of reference.

Moreover, research related to the process of empowerment—an essential factor in supporting both personal and social transformation—had often been limited to groups facing explicit social problems [11-12]. There remains a lack of studies focusing on ethnic minority groups who must navigate the challenges of adapting to urban societies or new educational systems. These challenges may significantly influence their learning processes and the development of empowerment, particularly in relation to identity formation and positive transformation.

Furthermore, in terms of research methodology, phenomenological research—particularly suited for exploring and understanding the in-depth experiences of ethnic students—had been employed relatively infrequently. Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology, which allows for deeper interpretation of meaning, remains underutilized in this context [13-14].

This study was grounded in Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which views learning as a process of meaning transformation through reflection and discourse. The framework is complemented by concepts of empowerment [15] and cultural identity formation providing a multidimensional lens through which to interpret the experiences of ethnic students. These theoretical perspectives collectively explain how learners negotiate between inherited cultural assumptions and new worldviews encountered in higher education, leading to both personal and social transformation. This integration underscores that transformative learning is not solely a cognitive shift but also an emotional and cultural process shaped by power relations, identity, and social context.

Therefore, it could be concluded that the existing body of research had yet to address a significant knowledge gap: the study of transformative learning processes that involve critical self-reflection and critical discourse, specifically among ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. This gap was particularly evident in the limited application of qualitative research methods based on phenomenology. This study aimed to address this gap by employing phenomenological inquiry, thereby contributing new insights that can support the promotion of learning and empowerment among ethnic students within diverse social and cultural contexts.

Methodology

The research was designed as a phenomenological study, as this approach focuses on capturing the essence of experiences and the meanings constructed by individuals who share common life experiences [13].

Key Informants

The study identified key informants in two phases, in alignment with the research objectives. In the first phase, ten first-year ethnic students enrolled in the Elementary Education program, Faculty of Education, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, for the 2023 academic year were selected. The selection of ten key informants was based on purposive sampling following the form aiming at representativeness approach using the comprehensive selection technique [16]. The purpose was to ensure that the group reflected the experiential diversity of the 69 first-year ethnic students rather than statistical representativeness. Participants were proportionally selected from the three main ethnic groups enrolled in the program: seven Karen students (3 males, 4 females) from a total of 61, two Hmong students (1 male, 1 female) from a total of 3, and one Lawa student (female) from a total of 3, as there were no male Lawa students in the cohort. This proportional distribution was designed to capture variations across gender and ethnic backgrounds, which are key contextual dimensions

influencing learning adaptation. Collectively, these factors ensured that the ten participants represented a comprehensive range of lived experiences relevant to the phenomenon of transformative learning among ethnic students. For the second phase, the subjects consisted of five faculty members from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and five representatives from the Applied Linguistics Foundation. The selection process aimed for representativeness using the comprehensive selection technique [16].

Protection of Research Participants' Rights

This research had been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, as documented in IRBCMRU 2024/021.04.01. Upon receiving approval, the researcher provided key informants with a detailed explanation of the study's background, objectives, research procedures, potential risks, and benefits. All informants were required to sign an informed consent form. Throughout the study, participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Their withdrawal would not impact their academic standing.

Research Instruments

The research instruments consisted of field notes, an in-depth interview guide, participant observation notes, and focus group discussion notes. Prior to data collection, the researcher conducted a thorough review of relevant literature and research to develop these instruments. The instruments were then evaluated by three experts for question relevance, content validity, clarity, and language appropriateness. The Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) was calculated, yielding a range between 0.7 and 1.0. Following expert recommendations, necessary revisions were made before proceeding with data collection from the key informants.

Data Collection

The data collection process was divided into two phases in alignment with the research objectives.

Phase 1: Analyzing the transformative learning process of ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. This phase involved the following methods:

1) Examining relevant domestic and international research on Transformative Learning, ethnic students, and phenomenological research to establish a theoretical framework to analyze the transformative learning process of ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University and identify key components and common characteristics that contribute to learning transformation.

2) Reflecting on the researcher's teaching experience in the Elementary Education course with ethnic students at the Faculty of Education, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, during the first semester of the 2023 academic year and using field notes and photographs

to document the current learning environment and capture factors that influence students' thoughts and beliefs.

3) Conducting in-depth interviews and participant observation with 10 first-year ethnic students enrolled in the Elementary Education program at the Faculty of Education, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University and utilizing interview guides and participant observation notes as data collection tools.

Phase 2: Formulating best practices for supporting transformative learning among ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. The data collection methods included:

1) Conducting focus group discussions with 5 faculty members from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and 5 representatives from the Applied Linguistics Foundation. Discussions centered on factors that facilitate and hinder transformative learning for ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. The goal was to exchange insights, validate findings, address contradictions, and refine information to ensure a comprehensive understanding. Data were recorded using focus group discussion notes as the research instrument.

2) Analyzing the data from the focus group discussions and formulating best practices for effectively supporting transformative learning among ethnic students.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was divided into two phases, corresponding to the research objectives.

Phase 1: Analyzing the transformative learning process of ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. The data analysis methods included:

1) Conducting analysis in the field, meaning data were analyzed immediately after each data collection session. Findings were used to formulate temporary hypotheses to guide the next stage of research in conjunction with document analysis techniques [16].

2) Reflecting on the researcher's experiences by conducting analysis after leaving the field to allow for self-reflection without the influence of personal relationships formed during fieldwork while also applying category or typological analysis using domain analysis by grouping key terms based on their relational meanings [16].

3) Analyzing in-depth interviews and participant observations by conducting analysis in the field which occurred after each data collection to develop a temporary hypothesis for the research in the next phase. Category or typological analysis was also conducted using domain analysis [16].

Phase 2: Formulating best practices for supporting transformative learning among ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. The data analysis methods included:

1) Analyzing the focus group discussions by conducting analysis in the field, ensuring

insights were captured and refined immediately after each discussion, in conjunction with Analytic Induction, a method that derives general abstract conclusions from multiple concrete observations [16].

2) Synthesizing data from all sources to formulate best practices for supporting transformative learning among ethnic students. The findings were compiled into a research report, serving as a foundation for developing a curriculum aimed at enhancing self-empowerment and self-worth among ethnic student-teachers at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University in future initiatives.

Results

The results and discussion were divided into two phases, corresponding to the research objectives.

Objective 1: To analyze the transformative learning process of ethnic students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University

The transformative learning experiences of the ethnic students could be understood through Mezirow's ten stages of transformative learning, which unfold from the initial disruption of perspective to the reintegration of new insights into self-identity. These processes were illuminated through life experiences narrated by the participants, each representing diverse ethnic backgrounds—Karen, Hmong, and Lawa—whose migration from highland communities to the urban environment of Chiang Mai signified a complex process of negotiation between old and new worlds. To clearly demonstrate how the findings of this study align with Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning, excerpts from the interviews and their corresponding transformative learning stages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Stages of Transformative Learning and Supporting Interview Excerpts

Stages	Excerpts from interviewing with key Informants
1. Disorienting Dilemma: encountering experiences that challenge existing beliefs and assumptions	Chaba (personal communication, January 31, 2024) also spoke about adapting to new friends: "The differences make it hard to fit in. Most people from the same ethnic group tend to stay together. Sometimes it's about language — we speak our language, they speak theirs, so we don't really understand each other. Sometimes it's even about the difference between the central Thai language and our dialect. It's about not using Thai correctly or not speaking clearly. Sometimes I mean to say something, but it doesn't come out the way I intend."

Stages	Excerpts from interviewing with key Informants
2. Self-Examination: emotional self-assessment and recognition of discomfort or inadequacy.	Koon (personal communication, January 14, 2024) shared his anxiety about studying: "In my first year, I completely lost confidence. I was scared of others because I've always been a slow thinker and a slow learner. When grades came out, I'd ask myself, 'Why did I fail again?' It made me wonder if there was something wrong with how I learned. When I had to work with others, I was always nervous. For example, during group projects or meetings, everyone else could come up with ideas right away, while I just sat there thinking, 'Why can't I think of anything at all?'"
3. Critical Assessment: re-evaluating personal beliefs, values, and assumptions	Sak (personal communication, March 3, 2025) spoke about his desire to change himself and become more confident in class: "If we keep thinking we can't do it, then we'll never be able to. Sometimes opportunities only come once. If we keep letting ourselves lose confidence, we'll end up missing many important chances. I feel that I've missed out on a lot in the past because I wasn't confident and was too shy. But now I think I can't let myself stay that way anymore — because, actually, I can do it. I just need to keep practicing."
4. Relating Discontent to Others: realizing that similar struggles are shared by others	Champi (personal communication, December 5, 2024) talked about joining a club, which was founded to help and support students from different ethnic backgrounds both academically and in daily life: "When I joined the club's activities, I got to go out, meet lots of people, and I felt that I'd changed for the better. I used to be too shy to share my thoughts with others, but now I've become braver, more confident in my own ideas, and ready to exchange them with my friends."

Table 1 Stages of Transformative Learning and Supporting Interview Excerpts (continue)

Stages	Excerpts from interviewing with key Informants
5. Explaining Options of new Behavior: considering new perspectives and behavioral possibilities	Teng (personal communication, February 28, 2025) shared how he adjusted his strategies for learning English: "When I don't know something, my friends help me a bit, and I also look things up myself sometimes. Now I'm memorizing more vocabulary. I search for new words online. When the teacher gives an assignment, I try to find the answer on my own first, then memorize it and practice writing by hand. I think writing things out myself helps me remember them better."
6. Planning a Course Action: strategizing ways to enact new learning and behaviors	Kaew (personal communication, January 20, 2024) talked about her plan to prepare for the teacher licensing exam: "I've already started preparing and planning. I'm thinking that next year I'll message my older friend who has already passed the exam to ask how it went and get advice — like where she found study materials or how she started preparing — so I can use that information as my own guide."
7. Knowledge to Implement Plans: gaining abilities to implement action plans	Bua (personal communication, December 6, 2024) talked about developing her communication skills while participating in the university beauty pageant: "The seniors gave me advice on how to speak and answer questions — how to use language that touches people's hearts and makes the audience feel what we feel. I practiced answering questions, mostly by watching videos. I studied how people respond — the general direction of their answers — or watched videos about persuasive communication and psychology on YouTube to learn how to express myself in a way that lets others truly feel the emotions I want to convey."
8. Experimenting with New Roles: testing new behaviors in real contexts	Mali (personal communication, November 27, 2024) described her new role as someone who contributes ideas and takes action in group work: "Now I'm confident enough to share my own ideas. Before, I didn't dare to speak up or volunteer for anything. In group projects, I wouldn't even tell my friends, 'Can I write this part?' or 'Can I share my idea?' But now I can say to them, 'Do you have any good ideas? I have one — want to hear it?'"

Stages	Excerpts from interviewing with key Informants
9. Building Confidence in New Ways: strengthening self-efficacy through practice	Pikun (personal communication, December 1, 2024) affirmed her confidence in balancing her dual role as a student teacher and part-time worker: "Deciding to study and work at the same time has made me feel confident that I can handle many things at once. It's also helped me practice managing and organizing my time properly. Especially when friends compliment me, asking how I manage to study, work, and still get good grades — it makes me feel that I must be managing my time well and not neglecting my main responsibilities."
10. Reintegration: internalizing new perspectives into everyday life	Phai (personal communication, March 2, 2025) described his new way of communicating in daily life through a "hybrid language" he developed himself: "Now I feel that my communication has improved compared to before, because I use several languages when speaking. For example, in everyday conversation, I often mix in simple Northern Thai words. It becomes a kind of new hybrid language — but when others hear it as standard Thai, it doesn't sound quite clear."

In summary, the ethnic students' transformative learning journey involved moving from disorientation to empowerment, framed by both personal introspection and collective dialogue. This aligns with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2009) while extending it to account for cultural hybridity and minority identity work, situating this study within the broader discourse on education for diversity and inclusion. Through this, the participants not only adapted to urban academic life but redefined what it means to belong—integrating their ethnic heritage into new educational and social realities.

Objective 2: The findings revealed that crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries is not merely an adjustment to a new environment—it is a profound transformation of self-identity, fostering deep learning and adaptation. Drawing on the experiences of ethnic students, faculty members from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, and representatives from the Applied Linguistics Foundation, ten best practices for fostering transformative learning in ethnic students, along with their possible implementations, were synthesized and are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 The Ten Best Practices on How to Foster Transformative Learning in Ethnic Student Group

Best practices	Implementations
1. Creating a flexible and inclusive learning environment	• Active learning should be prioritized, allowing students to engage in hands-on experiences, interactive discussions, and real-world applications. This approach aligns with Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of reflection, application, and integration of knowledge into daily life [6]. • Assessment methods, particularly in language-intensive courses, should be adaptable to student workload to ensure manageable academic expectations. • Providing supplementary courses, personalized tutoring sessions, and structured Q&A forums can help students reinforce foundational knowledge, reduce academic stress, and enhance their learning confidence.
2. Enhancing language and communication support	• Universities should implement foundation courses in standard Thai and English, specifically designed for ethnic students, while also facilitating language exchange opportunities with native-speaking instructors or experts through structured speaking and listening activities both inside and outside the classroom. • It is essential to promote the use of students' native languages, fostering pride in their cultural identity and enabling them to leverage their linguistic and cultural assets as a foundation for effective learning. This approach aligns with the concept of Translanguaging, which encourages the flexible use of multiple languages in communication and learning, allowing students to develop their skills freely without being confined to a single language [7]. • By integrating language and cultural diversity into learning activities, institutions can create an environment that inspires students, enhances motivation, and fosters perseverance in their academic and personal development.

Table 2 The Ten Best Practices on How to Foster Transformative Learning in Ethnic Student
Group (continue)

Best practices	Implementations
3. Improving dormitory living conditions and overall well-being	• Universities should prioritize the development of inclusive communal spaces that accommodate diverse lifestyles, ensuring that infrastructure and essential facilities remain well-maintained and accessible. • Establishing residential committees or mentor programs can provide peer support and help address common challenges related to noise management, cleanliness, and respect for personal property. • Fostering open communication and active listening among residents can cultivate a culture of mutual respect, reduce conflicts and promote a harmonious and supportive living environment.
4. Providing financial support and guidance	• Universities should promote basic financial literacy, including budget management, savings strategies, and student loan repayment planning, alongside personalized financial counseling. • Institutions should facilitate flexible part-time job opportunities that align with students' academic schedules. • Online financial advisory resources could ensure easy and timely access to essential financial information. • By fostering financial discipline and a habit of saving during university years, these initiatives lay the foundation for long-term economic resilience and the sustainable development of students' financial well-being in the future.
5. Building social support systems and networks	• Universities should establish ethnic-based student clubs as platforms for cultural exchange, academic support, and mutual assistance in daily life. • Implementing peer mentorship programs with senior students from similar backgrounds can provide guidance, positive role models, and practical support for new students. When ethnic students feel connected to a supportive community, they develop a sense of empowerment and pride in their identity.

Table 2 The Ten Best Practices on How to Foster Transformative Learning in Ethnic Student Group (continue)

Best practices	Implementations
6. Taking care of mental and emotional well-being	• Universities should establish accessible, private, and multi-platform psychological counseling services, including in-person and online consultations, to accommodate students who may feel insecure about their language skills or hesitant to seek help in unfamiliar environments. • Offering stress management and mindfulness workshops equip students with emotional self-regulation skills, fostering resilience and psychological balance.
7. Fostering respect for and integration of ethnic identity	• Universities should provide platforms and events that allow students to showcase their cultural heritage and local wisdom, transforming ethnic roots into valuable learning assets that inspire creativity and academic engagement [7, 16]. Additionally, this approach facilitates critical intercultural exchange, which serves as the foundation for transformative learning [4].
8. Promoting leadership and teamwork	• Universities should implement leadership development programs, team-based projects, and constructive conflict resolution training, all within an inclusive and respectful environment. • Assigning ethnic students to lead challenging projects can empower them to recognize their values and gain practical leadership experience.
9. Involving families and the students' community	• Given the close ties between ethnic students and their hometowns, universities should involve families and the community in planning activities that reinforce sense of purpose and commitment to contributing back to their localities. • Teacher training programs in students' communities can help them recognize the value of integrating cultural heritage and local wisdom into education.
10. professional and career development support	• Structured planning in areas such as civil service exam preparation, advanced language proficiency, and professional networking will help build confidence and readiness for teaching careers. • Equipping these students to become culturally responsive educators will enable them to bridge linguistic and cultural diversity in ways that contribute to sustainable educational development.

Ultimately, effective support strategies must be comprehensive and multidimensional, addressing both internal and external factors. By implementing diverse and inclusive strategies, ethnic students can overcome barriers and transition into professional educators capable of meeting the needs of learners in multicultural societies.

Discussions

This study provided a comprehensive perspective on the learning and adaptation processes of ethnic students transitioning into an urban academic environment. The findings revealed that this transition extends beyond physical relocation, constituting a profound shift in consciousness that fosters deep learning and a gradual restructuring of thought processes. Confronting linguistic, cultural, and socio-environmental challenges creates conditions that challenge students' prior frames of reference and cultivate internal empowerment. These findings reinforced the importance of an educational approach that goes beyond academic instruction, emphasizing the need to integrate students' life experiences, identities, and socio-cultural contexts into learning processes to ensure a more holistic and inclusive educational experience.

From a phenomenological research perspective, data collection through in-depth interviews and participant observation had unveiled hidden dimensions of the adaptation process among ethnic students. These included anxiety, critical self-examination, and reliance on social networks, both within their ethnic communities and the broader university environment. These findings highlighted that learning extends beyond the classroom into "lived spaces", where the students encountered real-world challenges, developed problem-solving skills, and redefined their identities in alignment with their aspirations as future educators.

Moreover, in a culturally diverse urban environment, the dynamics of learning extend beyond conventional academic instruction, positioning the university not only as an educational institution but also as a learning community that needs to acknowledge and integrate ethnic and cultural identities into the learning experience. This requires a pedagogical approach that incorporates students' cultural backgrounds into academic activities, such as providing spaces for cultural expression, promoting the use of native languages, and implementing flexible assessment methods. These initiatives reaffirm the role of higher education institutions as key drivers in shaping selfhood and fostering internal empowerment among ethnic students.

Other than that, the identification of facilitating and inhibiting factors in the transformative learning process expanded the understanding of conditions that support student development. Internal factors, such as beliefs, values, and life goals, play a crucial role in shaping intrinsic motivation, while external factors, including peer networks, faculty

support, family, and community engagement, represent social capital that enabled the students to overcome challenges and achieve academic success. This led to a systemic conclusion that higher education institutions should integrate multilateral resources and uphold cultural responsiveness as core principles in student development.

Lastly, this study synthesized best practices for fostering sustainable and full-potential transformative learning among ethnic students. Collectively, these elements reflect a new paradigm that views learning as a multidimensional process, shaped by the dynamic interaction between individuals and society. This perspective underscores the importance of context-sensitive education, which recognizes the intersecting social, cultural, and economic factors influencing student success, ultimately driving meaningful and lasting transformation.

Conclusion

The transformative learning journey of the ethnic students began by encountering new experiences that challenged their existing perspectives, prompting emotional assessment, belief evaluation, and openness to change. As students navigated this transition, they explored alternative approaches, developed action plans, acquired necessary knowledge and skills, and gradually applied them in real-life situations. Over time, this process fostered confidence and integration into a new way of life. This transformation did not occur in isolation but was supported by family, peer networks, ethnic communities, educational institutions, and the broader society. While students faced obstacles such as language barriers, urban adaptation, and maintaining cultural identity within the university context, they learned to overcome these challenges through self-assessment, openness to guidance, and skill development aligned with their future professional aspirations. Ultimately, this process not only enhanced the learners' personal resilience but also underscores the role of education as a transformative space that prepares culturally diverse students for adulthood and professional teaching careers in multicultural settings.

The process of transformative learning among ethnic students is shaped by the interaction between internal and external factors, both of which played critical roles in either facilitating or hindering their adaptation and growth. Internal factors, such as personal beliefs, values, lived experiences, and self-determined goals, and external factors, including family, peers, faculty members, and dominant cultural influences, serve as sources of both support and constraint in their academic and personal development. To effectively promote transformative learning at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, it is essential to implement a holistic and integrated approach that addresses multiple dimensions of student support. The findings of this study highlighted ten key best practices which foster intrinsic motivation among students

while ensuring access to sufficient external support systems. By addressing both personal and structural factors, universities can create an educational environment that not only enhances students' capabilities but also facilitates sustainable transformative learning.

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