

## A sociological analysis of indigenous curricula in Taiwanese universities: Power and identity

Ming-Kuo Chen<sup>1</sup>, Yi-Huang Shih<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Insurance and Finance Management, Chaoyang University of Technology, Taichung, Taiwan.

<sup>2</sup>Center of Teacher Education, Minghsin University of Science and Technology, Hsinchu, Taiwan; shih78465@gmail.com (Y.H.S.).

**Abstract:** Education serves as a critical instrument for promoting social equity, reducing systemic disparities by creating opportunities for upward mobility and fostering inclusive participation in civic life. Within multicultural contexts such as Taiwan, education also assumes the essential responsibility of sustaining cultural diversity and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge systems. However, the educational experiences of Indigenous peoples have historically been shaped by assimilationist policies that marginalized their languages, cultures, and epistemologies. As Indigenous students transition into higher education, particularly universities, it is vital to examine how their curricular and learning experiences are influenced by underlying power relations and processes of identity construction. Adopting a sociological lens, this article critically investigates these dynamics and reflects on their implications for advancing educational equity and fostering inclusive educational practices. Drawing on the interrelated concepts of power and identity, this article proposes the following strategies for the development of Indigenous curricula in higher education institutions: (1) Curricula should be grounded in Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems; (2) Indigenous scholars and communities must lead the curriculum development process; (3) The design of curricula should reflect the authentic needs, voices, and lived experiences of Indigenous peoples; (4) Learning experiences that reinforce students' cultural heritage can support the reconstruction of identity and the development of cultural confidence; (5) Curriculum frameworks must recognize and respect the cultural diversity of Indigenous students and avoid reducing their identities to singular narratives or stereotypical representations.

**Keywords:** Higher education, Identity, Indigenous curricula, Power, University.

### 1. Introduction

Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place - indeed how we/they came to be a place. [1].

The implementation of education is a pivotal factor in shaping a country's development and long-term success. A well-structured and inclusive education system not only enhances individual potential but also fuels national economic growth by cultivating a skilled and innovative workforce. Moreover, education serves as a powerful tool for promoting social equity, helping to reduce disparities by offering opportunities for upward mobility and fostering inclusive participation in society. In multicultural contexts, such as Taiwan, education also plays a vital role in sustaining cultural diversity and revitalizing indigenous knowledge systems. By integrating both global competencies and local traditions, education can empower learners to engage meaningfully with their communities while contributing to the global knowledge economy. Therefore, the implementation of educational policies and practices must be approached holistically, with an emphasis on sustainability, equity, and cultural relevance. In Taiwan, Taiwan's Indigenous students are culturally and linguistically different and socially and economically marginalized compared to their Han Chinese peers. For decades, education

assimilated Indigenous people into the mainstream society by undermining their languages, cultures and traditional spaces. Since the 1990s, multicultural policies have been cast as the remedy for the inequalities and injustices they experienced and, since 2016, Taiwan has started the process of reconciliation and transitional justice. Further, the educational experiences of Indigenous peoples have been historically shaped by assimilationist policies rooted in colonial and postcolonial state-building agendas. During the Japanese colonial era (1895–1945), Indigenous education was used as a mechanism of Japanization, wherein schools for Indigenous children promoted loyalty to the Japanese emperor, Japanese language acquisition, and cultural assimilation. Following World War II, the Nationalist (Kuomintang, KMT) government implemented Sinicization policies, emphasizing Mandarin Chinese as the official language and suppressing local linguistic and cultural diversity. These policies further marginalized Indigenous identities, leading to generational disruptions in language transmission and cultural continuity. The enduring effects of these assimilationist frameworks have contributed to pronounced educational disparities. Research indicates that Indigenous students continue to experience lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and limited access to culturally sustaining pedagogies. These challenges reflect not only historical marginalization but also systemic inequities embedded within Taiwan's mainstream educational structures. However, since the 1990s, Taiwan's democratization and the rise of Indigenous social movements have catalyzed a shift toward greater recognition of Indigenous rights, particularly in education. Key legislative milestones include the 1997 constitutional amendment affirming the state's duty to protect Indigenous languages and cultures, and the passage of the Indigenous Peoples Basic Law in 2004, which institutionalized Indigenous rights to cultural preservation, self-governance, and educational equity [2]. Subsequent reforms have sought to address historical injustices through inclusive educational policy initiatives. These include: (1) Government of Ontario [3] which codifies Indigenous students' rights to linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical representation in schools. (2) Bilingual education policies, encouraging the use of both Mandarin and Indigenous languages, with active community participation and employment of Indigenous educators. (3) Mother tongue instruction, mandated since 2001 in elementary schools, supported by teacher training and certification systems. (4) Curriculum integration of Indigenous knowledge, such as oral traditions and local cultural practices, often co-developed with community elders and cultural bearers. In addition, the 'Program on Developing Indigenous Education (2021-2025)' (hereinafter referred to as 'this program') was jointly established and promoted by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Council of Indigenous Peoples (abbreviated as CIP) in accordance with Article 9 of the 'Education Act for Indigenous Peoples', and continued the '5-Year Project of Indigenous Peoples Education Development and Improvement' (from 2006 to 2015 this title was adjusted to the '5-Year Medium Project for Independent Cases of Indigenous Peoples Education Development', and from 2016–2020 was adjusted to the '5-Year Mid-term Project on Developing Indigenous Education') which was commenced in 1993, thereby continuously promoting indigenous education systematically. (5) Higher Education Initiatives: Affirmative action policies, such as lowered entrance thresholds, have facilitated greater access to universities for indigenous students. Several institutions have also established Indigenous Studies departments and support centers to assist these students. Despite these notable advancements in higher education, further investigation is required into the educational experiences of indigenous students as they transition into the university system. Specifically, attention must be given to how these experiences are influenced by power relations and the construction of identity, all viewed through a sociological lens [4–20]. This article aims to critically analyze and reflect on these factors, with a focus on their implications for educational equity and broader social integration.

## 2. A Sociological Analysis of Indigenous Curricula in Taiwanese Universities: Power and Identity

### 2.1. *Analyzing Indigenous Curriculum in Universities from the Perspective of Power*

Analyzing indigenous curriculum in universities from the perspective of power reveals the underlying power relations within the education system, the construction of knowledge authority, and who has the right to interpret, deliver, or regulate Indigenous knowledge. The analysis can be approached from several key dimensions:

#### 2.1.1. *Knowledge and Power: Whose Knowledge is Recognized?*

According to Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, knowledge is not neutral or objective, but rather produced through complex relations of power [21]. Within this framework, universities function as institutional sites where knowledge is not only disseminated but also authorized and regulated. This has significant implications for the development of Indigenous curricula, which, although centered on Indigenous content, are often constructed, reviewed, and evaluated within dominant academic structures rooted in Western epistemologies. As a result, Indigenous knowledge systems may be constrained by prevailing academic norms regarding validity, evidence, and pedagogical legitimacy. For example, oral histories, ceremonial practices, and localized ecological knowledge—central to many Indigenous cultures—are frequently excluded or devalued because they do not align with Western notions of scientific rationality and formal scholarship. Foucault's concept of subjectification further elucidates how Indigenous peoples are often positioned not as co-producers of knowledge but as passive subjects or objects of study. This reproduces hierarchical power relations within academia, where Indigenous voices may be included only insofar as they are filtered through institutionalized frameworks. Thus, even when Indigenous perspectives are present, they may be refracted through epistemological lenses that preserve the authority of the university as the arbiter of "legitimate" knowledge. This process leads to what might be termed epistemic authority, wherein universities decide which forms of Indigenous knowledge are deemed acceptable for inclusion. Such authority often marginalizes alternative ways of knowing, particularly those transmitted intergenerationally through oral transmission or spiritual practice, which do not conform to dominant modes of academic production. Consequently, curricular reforms may inadvertently reinforce colonial knowledge hierarchies, despite intentions to promote inclusion [15, 16, 22–24].

#### 2.1.2. *Cultural Representation and Interpretive Power*

The representation of Indigenous cultures in formal curricula is not a neutral process; rather, it involves complex dynamics of power, interpretation, and symbolic authority. Drawing on postcolonial theory and critical Indigenous studies, three interrelated concerns emerge: cultural appropriation versus cultural articulation, the persistence of stereotypes, and the politics of curricular representation. (1) Cultural appropriation vs. cultural articulation: When Indigenous-focused courses are taught by non-Indigenous faculty or designed without meaningful collaboration with Indigenous communities, questions of authenticity and legitimacy inevitably arise. While such courses may claim to promote Indigenous perspectives, they risk becoming symbolic gestures that appropriate rather than genuinely reflect Indigenous epistemologies and lived experiences. Authentic cultural articulation requires not only content inclusion but also the empowerment of Indigenous voices as knowledge creators and pedagogical leaders. (2) Stereotypes and reductive representations: Curricula that foreground folklore, music, or traditional dance without engaging with the lived realities of Indigenous peoples—including colonial histories, land dispossession, ongoing structural violence, and political self-determination—risk reinforcing romanticized or exoticized images of Indigeneity. Such representations can marginalize critical narratives of resilience, resistance, and contemporary political agency, thus contributing to what Said [25] called "cultural othering." (3) The politics of representation: Decisions about which tribes, cultural elements, or historical periods to include in educational materials reflect broader exercises of epistemic and institutional power. Certain Indigenous groups or traditions may be privileged over

others, often aligning with state narratives or educational standardization frameworks. This selective inclusion shapes public perceptions and constructs a partial, often sanitized image of Indigenous cultures. As a result, representation becomes a political act—one that can either challenge or reinforce dominant ideologies. These issues underscore the need for critically reflexive, community-engaged curriculum development processes that resist tokenism and actively work toward epistemic justice and pedagogical decolonization [1, 15, 24–26].

### *2.1.3. Institutionalized Power Dynamics*

The structural organization of curriculum design and policy implementation in higher education reveals embedded power dynamics that influence the legitimacy and positioning of Indigenous knowledge systems. These dynamics manifest in three interrelated areas: curriculum authority, marginalization through credit structures, and instrumentalization via performance metrics. (1) Curriculum authority and participation: A central issue concerns who has the authority to design and approve Indigenous curricula. Frequently, such decisions are driven by state education policies or institutional governance structures, rather than by Indigenous scholars or community representatives. This raises concerns about the degree of authentic participation and self-determination in curricular matters. When Indigenous communities are excluded from curricular governance, educational content risks becoming extractive or misrepresentative, further entrenching colonial power relations in knowledge production. (2) Credit allocation and curricular marginalization: Indigenous courses are commonly offered as elective components within general education frameworks rather than being embedded within core curricular requirements. This elective status symbolizes their epistemological marginalization, positioning Indigenous knowledge as supplementary rather than foundational to the academic canon. As a result, students may encounter Indigenous perspectives as peripheral or optional, rather than as integral to understanding historical and contemporary social realities. (3) Strategic inclusion and performance incentives: Universities may incorporate Indigenous courses to satisfy external mandates related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, or to meet accreditation standards and performance-based funding indicators. While such measures may increase the visibility of Indigenous issues, there is a risk that these efforts function more as strategic compliance than as genuine commitments to epistemic justice. In such contexts, the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge may be instrumentalized—valued for its utility in advancing institutional goals rather than for its inherent cultural and intellectual worth. These structural patterns reflect broader systems of symbolic and material power that shape how Indigenous knowledge is positioned within the academy. Meaningful decolonization of curriculum requires redistributing authority, re-centering Indigenous worldviews, and resisting tokenistic forms of inclusion [1, 15, 24, 26–29].

### *2.1.4. Resistance and the Assertion of Indigenous Agency*

While power in educational settings is often perceived as repressive, it also creates opportunities for resistance and agency. In the context of Indigenous education within higher learning, Indigenous peoples have actively contested and redefined the structures of knowledge production, asserting their roles as knowledge creators and cultural leaders. This assertion of agency is visible through three key avenues: the establishment of autonomous Indigenous programs, the implementation of practice-based curricula in cultural and language revitalization, and the development of critical curriculum frameworks.

#### *2.1.4.1. Autonomous Indigenous Programs*

Indigenous peoples in academia have sought to reclaim control over the narrative of their own histories and cultures by establishing Indigenous-focused programs, colleges, or offices. These initiatives, often led by Indigenous faculty and scholars, represent a critical move toward epistemic sovereignty, enabling Indigenous communities to directly shape curricular content and cultural representation. Through these spaces, Indigenous scholars challenge colonial power structures, fostering a more authentic and culturally relevant educational environment for both Indigenous and

non-Indigenous students. (2) Practice-based courses in language and cultural revitalization: Practice-based courses that focus on language revitalization, cultural practices, and community engagement stand in contrast to traditional, compartmentalized academic disciplines. These courses emphasize experiential learning and active participation, helping to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and the lived realities of Indigenous communities [1, 26, 28, 30]. By focusing on community-based learning and the transmission of oral traditions and Indigenous languages, these programs resist the abstraction and depersonalization often inherent in academic structures, fostering a more embodied form of knowledge transmission that centers Indigenous ways of knowing. (3) Critical curriculum design: Certain Indigenous-led programs have strategically designed curricula that challenge colonial narratives by integrating content related to colonial history, transitional justice, and land rights. These programs invite students to critically engage with issues such as historical land dispossession, the impacts of settler colonialism, and Indigenous sovereignty. In doing so, they encourage a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous struggles for justice and self-determination, empowering students to see these issues through a decolonial lens. This approach not only broadens the scope of Indigenous representation in academia but also provides a platform for Indigenous political agency and resistance to colonial structures of power [24, 31]. These initiatives highlight the dynamic role of power in shaping educational spaces—not just as a tool of domination but as a force for transformation and resistance. By asserting control over curriculum and pedagogy, Indigenous communities in higher education are actively reshaping the boundaries of knowledge production and cultural representation.

## *2.2. Analyzing Indigenous Curriculum in Universities from the Perspective of Identity*

With the increasing emphasis on multiculturalism and epistemic justice in higher education, the development and institutionalization of Indigenous curriculum has emerged as a transformative response to the legacy of colonialism and the persistent marginalization of Indigenous peoples. From the perspective of identity, Indigenous curriculum plays a critical role in re-centering Indigenous knowledge systems, enabling cultural resurgence, and affirming Indigenous students' sense of belonging and self-worth within academic spaces. In addition, identity, in this context, is understood not as a fixed or individual attribute but as a socially and historically mediated construct, shaped by colonial histories, cultural narratives, and power relations [15, 26, 32, 33]. As Smith [15] argues, decolonizing education requires more than including Indigenous content; it involves fundamentally reshaping how knowledge is produced, validated, and transmitted. Indigenous curriculum, when authentically embedded, provides students with opportunities to reclaim their ancestral languages, ontologies, and epistemologies—thus enabling the formation of identities that resist assimilation and affirm cultural sovereignty. Furthermore, empirical research has shown that culturally responsive and land-based pedagogies significantly contribute to the positive identity formation of Indigenous learners [34]. When curricula are rooted in community engagement, Indigenous languages, and relationships with land, they foster a more holistic and relational understanding of knowledge and self. Such approaches challenge the Eurocentric model of education that privileges abstract, decontextualized knowledge, and instead promote epistemic pluralism and intergenerational continuity [24, 26]. However, despite institutional commitments to inclusion, many universities still grapple with the structural limitations of integrating Indigenous content in meaningful ways. Issues such as tokenism, lack of Indigenous faculty, inadequate funding, and the persistence of Western-centric evaluation mechanisms undermine the potential of these curricula to support identity development [29, 35]. These challenges can lead to further alienation for Indigenous students, whose lived experiences and cultural knowledge often remain undervalued or invisible within dominant academic frameworks. In the end, analyzing Indigenous curriculum from the lens of identity thus entails interrogating whose knowledge is legitimized, whose voices are centered, and how institutional structures either empower or suppress Indigenous ways of being and knowing. It calls for a shift from content-level inclusion to structural transformation—one that reimagines the role of higher education in advancing Indigenous self-determination, cultural sustainability, and social justice [15, 36].

### 3. Towards Decolonization and Curriculum Justice

Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars used a decolonial conversation framework to build a meaningful bridge between Indigenous and Western worldviews [37]. The higher education sectors in countries such as Canada, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand have adopted initiatives to implement Indigenous specific curriculum programs. In Australia, commitments are outlined in the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022–2025, which requires Indigenous academic staff to lead programs for implementing Indigenous curricula that are ‘... meaningful, appropriately developed and appropriately resourced’ [38]. In Taiwan, Analyzing Indigenous curricula through the lens of power requires critical reflection on the structures and assumptions underlying knowledge production in higher education. Several key questions emerge: Who possesses the authority to teach and construct Indigenous knowledge? Does the curriculum enable Indigenous peoples to act as epistemic subjects rather than as mere objects of inquiry? And importantly, can institutions of higher education become sites of decolonial practice rather than spaces of epistemic domination? These questions foreground the issue of epistemic justice and call attention to the uneven power dynamics that continue to shape curricular representation. As Foucault [21] suggests, power and knowledge are co-constitutive—those who control discourse also define what counts as legitimate knowledge. Within the context of Indigenous education, this dynamic often manifests in the marginalization of oral traditions, lived experience, and spiritual worldviews that do not align with dominant Western academic paradigms. A genuine shift toward decoloniality requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion to ensure substantive participation of Indigenous peoples in all aspects of curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and epistemological framing. When Indigenous communities are given meaningful discursive power and institutional agency, curricula can serve not only as tools for cultural affirmation but also as mechanisms for knowledge emancipation and social transformation [1, 15, 22, 26, 39]. Without such shifts, Indigenous curricula risk becoming performative—appearing inclusive while reinforcing colonial hierarchies of knowledge. Ultimately, decolonial curriculum design must be rooted in reciprocity, respect, and the recognition of Indigenous peoples as active knowledge producers. Only then can higher education foster educational environments that genuinely reflect plural epistemologies and contribute to cultural resurgence and justice.

### 4. Conclusions

The common consensus is that education can significantly change human attitudes, values and behaviors. The implementation of education affects a country's development and success, and education is a catalyst for personal development and a powerful tool for global change. Its influence extends beyond the development of skills required for economic success. It can contribute to nation-building and reconciliation. This affirms education's essential role in life [40–42]. In recent decades, Taiwan has made notable efforts to acknowledge the rights and cultural identities of its Indigenous peoples, including the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems into higher education curricula [43] and strengthen Taiwanese higher education is a catalyst for personal development and a powerful tool for global change. This paper presents a sociological analysis of Indigenous curricula in Taiwanese universities, with particular attention to the ways in which power relations and identity formation are negotiated within academic institutions. The development of Indigenous curriculum in Taiwan is not merely an adjustment of educational content; it entails a renegotiation of knowledge authority, a reconstruction of cultural identity, and a deconstruction of systemic oppression. Examining these issues from the theoretical perspective of power and identity helps reveal the underlying structures of knowledge power and cultural politics within the domain of higher education [21, 44, 45]. The following presents a strategic analysis:

#### *4.1. Examining Curriculum Development Strategies from the Perspective of Power*

##### *4.1.1. Decentralizing Knowledge Authority*

Indigenous knowledge (IK) refers to the traditional knowledge systems, practices, and beliefs passed down from generation to generation within Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities are reshaping higher education governance structures worldwide. Guided by Indigenous knowledges, Taiwanese higher education has long upheld Western mainstream knowledge as the standard, resulting in the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge [46, 47]. The decolonization of knowledge should go beyond symbolic inclusion and be realized through the following strategies:

##### *4.1.1.1. Curricula Should Be Grounded in Indigenous Worldviews and Knowledge Systems*

Colonial authorities, the world over, have persistently ignored, misunderstood and even decimated Indigenous peoples and their knowledge. Indigenous curricula should not be reduced to cultural exhibitions or supplementary content but should be centered on Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems [15, 48, 49].

##### *4.1.1.2. Indigenous Scholars and Communities Must Lead the Curriculum Development Process*

Curriculum development must be led by Indigenous scholars and communities to ensure that interpretative and discursive power is no longer monopolized by mainstream knowledge producers. In addition, contradictions imposed by institutional practices that hinder progress towards reconciliation and decolonization [26, 50].

##### *4.1.2. The design of curricula should reflect the authentic needs, voices, and lived experiences of indigenous peoples*

Even when Indigenous curricula are formally incorporated into universities, they remain marginalized if decision-making power is concentrated within dominant structures (such as curriculum review or faculty recruitment processes).

To establish culturally sensitive curriculum review mechanisms that include Indigenous representatives and community members, ensuring that curricula reflect the genuine needs and perspectives of Indigenous peoples [15, 46, 48].

#### *4.2. Responding To Curriculum Strategies from the Perspective of Identity*

##### *4.2.1. Learning Experiences That Reinforce Students' Cultural Heritage Can Support the Reconstruction of Identity and the Development of Cultural Confidence*

Indigenous students often face cultural marginalization and crises of self-identity. Curricula that strengthen students' connections with their cultural heritage can support identity reconstruction and the development of cultural confidence [51]. Develop curriculum modules centered on Indigenous languages, traditional knowledge, and historical memory, emphasizing cultural practices and the transmission of local experiences. It responds to increasing requirements on the tertiary sector to incorporate Indigenous content into courses, and to ensure that university students acquire the knowledge and skills widely in demand from professions [38, 52].

##### *4.2.2. Curriculum Frameworks Must Recognize and Respect the Cultural Diversity of Indigenous Students and Avoid Reducing Their Identities to Singular Narratives or Stereotypical Representations*

Identity is not essentialist but is constantly shaped through historical contexts and cultural practices. Indigenous students in Taiwan may come from urban areas, be of mixed heritage, or have multi-tribal backgrounds. Curriculum design should respect students' diverse cultural experiences and avoid reducing Indigenous identities to singular narratives or stereotypes. Furthermore, teachers can examine how students' cultural identities are discursively constructed in curricula for universities [33, 53].



## Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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