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Teachers' understandings of barriers to Indigenous children's academic success in Taiwan

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Abstract

This paper explores how non-Indigenous teachers understand challenges and barriers to academic progress and success for Indigenous students in Taiwan. Drawing on data from a study with 17 teachers of Han Taiwanese and Hakka background who had worked closely with Indigenous students from elementary to high school across Taiwan, we utilise Expectancy-Value Theory to explore teacher participants' views of the barriers and challenges to educational success for their Indigenous students. Previous research suggests a deficit view among majority background teachers, depicting them as biased against Indigenous peoples and lacking relevant knowledge that would allow them to teach Indigenous students and about Indigenous cultures and histories. In contrast with this previous research, the teachers we interviewed exhibited a good and nuanced understanding of the obstacles and challenges of Indigenous students, families and communities which prevent their success. The teachers in our study indicated that they lack agency and are limited by structural forces in effecting meaningful change. Far from holding deficit views, the teachers interviewed pointed to the importance of working together with Indigenous families and communities to support the learning of Indigenous students. In our conclusion we point to ways of capitalising on the non-deficit positive views captured here to effect long-term sustainable change to support teachers to, in turn, support the learning of Indigenous students.

KEYWORDS
indigenous education, indigenous students, Taiwan, teachers

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

- The paper presents the views of non-Indigenous teachers in Taiwan about the challenges and barriers to academic progress and success Indigenous students face, with a focus on structural inequities Indigenous communities experience and the influence of various socialisers (e.g. families, parents, and teachers) on Indigenous students.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

- We find that teachers in this study exhibited a good and nuanced understanding of the challenges and barriers Indigenous students are confronted with. However, they believe that they lack agency to effect change and point to the need for collaboration between schools and Indigenous communities to enhance support provided to Indigenous students.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, Indigenous peoples continue to experience educational disadvantage, and many have been failed by education systems that have now normalised educational inequalities and injustices (Breidlid, 2013; Brown, 2018; Ma Rhea, 2015). This is despite the significant targeted work that has been done in many countries, including Taiwan, to move towards more inclusive, more culturally and linguistically sensitive, and more rights- and equity-focussed policies, curricula and pedagogies to meet the needs of Indigenous peoples (Nesterova & Jackson, 2019; Weuffen et al., 2023). Research shows that education for Indigenous peoples continues to be plagued by persistent challenges. These include disconnects between school and Indigenous home and culture, unaddressed historical trauma and colonial legacies, the erasure of Indigenous epistemologies and histories, racism and discrimination, and a myriad of other issues, all of which contribute to trauma and inhibit progress (Brown, 2018; Khanolainen et al., 2022; Masta, 2016; Nesterova, 2023; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

Responsibility to address the persistent educational disadvantage of Indigenous students has been placed on teachers who primarily come from ethnic majority, non-Indigenous backgrounds, and are viewed as contributing to the educational disadvantage of Indigenous learners and the devaluation of their cultures (Savage et al., 2011). Research shows that teachers tend to be biased towards and prejudiced against Indigenous and minority students (Kumar & Hamer, 2013; Nesterova, 2019b; Yen, 2009) and hold deficit views of Indigenous peoples (Harrison, 2012; Nelson & Hay, 2010). Studies conducted in Taiwan have noted how non-Indigenous teachers see Indigenous students as less capable and less interested in education than Han[1] Taiwanese students (Chou, 2005; Couch et al., 2023). Concomitantly, many teachers feel discomfort and unpreparedness when working with minority students

(Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). Few teachers who work with Indigenous students have opportunities to engage with Indigenous studies (e.g. histories, colonial legacies, challenges, lived realities) and communities in pre-service and in-service training (Ma Rhea, 2015). Consequently, teachers tend to know little about Indigeneity (Chen, 2016; Harrison, 2012). Previous studies also highlight how teachers' limited knowledge of Indigenous cultures, as well as of ways to engage with Indigenous communities, has created a significant lack of trust between Indigenous communities and schools (De Plevitz, 2007; Hynds et al., 2011). In some instances, this has generated hostility between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous peers and teachers (Martinez, 2011).

Such research findings are disturbing if we accept that teachers have 'the most influential impact on learning' (Vass et al., 2019, p. 344). Teacher expectations have a critical impact on students' learning outcomes (Rubie-Davies & Turner, 2022; Wang et al., 2018), with particularly adverse effects on Indigenous students owing to often lower expectations and a lack of culturally responsive teaching (Rubie-Davies & Turner, 2022). High expectations often correlate with higher student achievement, increased motivation and better engagement. Conversely, low expectations can lead to poorer performance and perpetuate negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Improving teacher training and awareness of these biases is essential for promoting educational equity and enhancing academic success for Indigenous students (Rogers, 2018; Rubie-Davies & Turner, 2022). Teachers' expectations arise from their attitudes, beliefs and understandings of students and the environment in which students live. We thus posit that it is important to understand what teachers know, think, believe and expect as regards Indigenous students and their families. This paper thus seeks to answer the following research question: *what barriers and challenges to academic success and progress do Indigenous students in Taiwan face according to non-Indigenous teachers?* To answer this question, we conducted semi-structured interviews with non-Indigenous teachers as one group of socialisers (i.e. people who have a strong influence on children's learning and development), to understand these teachers' views.

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, we set out key conceptual matters for the study. The study is framed by Expectancy-Value Theory, a theory which contends that students' beliefs about their own abilities are linked to the expectations of key socialisers such as teachers within their context. Second, we provide a brief overview of the Indigenous peoples of Taiwan, how histories of colonial and nationalist rule have impacted Indigenous educational experiences, and the outcome of a range of powerful policies and laws that have been implemented to date to support Indigenous rights and progress in education. Third, we describe the study's methodology, and share key findings from semi-structured interviews with 17 non-Indigenous teachers. Finally, we discuss the findings in light of previous literature on majority background teachers working with Indigenous students. Our findings suggest that non-Indigenous teachers are increasingly aware of key barriers to Indigenous students' academic success, yet locate these barriers in structures such as curriculum and assessment which are beyond their own perceived agency. We conclude the paper by drawing out three recommendations for pre-service and in-service teacher education which are intended to support an understanding of the importance of high expectations by non-Indigenous teachers for Indigenous students in Taiwan.

CONCEPTUAL MATTERS

In analysing teachers' understandings of barriers and challenges to academic success faced by Indigenous students, we draw on expectancy-value theory (EVT) that sets up some important grounding concepts for this research. Expectancy-value theory focusses on how expectancies and values of various socialisers (e.g. parents, families, teachers), as well as the

cultural milieux in which people live, influence students' own expectancies and values and thus their achievements, persistence and performance (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Wigfield & Gladstone, 2019). Following EVT, parents/carers/guardians' beliefs about their children's abilities and the importance of formal education have a direct impact on how children perceive their own competencies, abilities and values, what they expect of themselves and how motivated they are to proceed with and complete tasks (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Wigfield & Gladstone, 2019). Additionally, parents/carers/guardians' supportive behaviours (e.g. discussing school experiences, concerns, and wellbeing, assistance with learning tasks), in addition to encouragement and advice, have a strong impact on children's learning (Malaeb & Ware, 2023). Similarly, teachers' expectations for students may have a positive or negative impact on students' expectancies and values (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Home and school are, in turn, influenced by cultural and social expectancies, beliefs, and values (i.e. cultural milieux), which may lead to stereotypes, prejudices, biases (e.g. relating to students' ethnic background) and their consequences.

While EVT is grounded in educational psychology fields, our application of EVT in this paper is largely sociological. The premises of EVT are that: (1) students put in effort, persist despite difficulties, and perform well if they *expect* to succeed; and (2) the more value people place on a task (e.g. education as a whole), the more motivation they will have and the more effort they will make (Eccles, 2009; Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). There are myriad socialisers that construct student experiences of education, such as educational level, geography, gender and sexuality. The current paper takes a necessarily narrowed emphasis on teachers themselves. In seeking to understand non-Indigenous teachers' views of the barriers and challenges to Indigenous students' academic success, we are informed by Robertson and Dale's (2015) view of a critical cultural political economy of education. According to this view, culture, politics and economy offer interstices, or ways into, examinations of dimensions of the complex assemblage that constructs educational spaces. We do not undertake this analysis as a totalising account. Rather, this study opens up the complexity of socialisers to examine one group of actors, acknowledging non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous young people as one socialising group within a complex whole.

There is precedence in connecting EVT with researching Indigenous student outcomes. In a study with Métis students in Canada, Ferguson (2019) applied EVT to determine the limiting effect of racist prejudice held by key socialisers on motivation for post-secondary participants. Importantly, Ferguson (2019) highlights that Indigeneity is not uniformly viewed as a significant social identity among Métis participants. There are many factors that constitute identity. In this paper, in the same way that we do not view non-Indigenous teachers as a totalising socialiser of Indigenous student experience, Indigeneity is acknowledged as one identifier of students about whom non-Indigenous teacher participants speak. As Ferguson (2019, p. 37) highlights, this is consistent with an EVT framing:

> When applied to intergroup relations, the theory implies that a percieved threat of prejudice from a member of a dominant group will mediate a number of 'causal' variables and negative attitudes, including the expectations of a potential victim of prejudice about being able to achieve a goal, the value placed on achieving a desired outcome, and the motivation needed to sustain and focus goal-directed behaviour.

Our application of EVT focuses on how the expectations and values held by our participants, as members of a dominant group, might shape the conditions in which their Indigenous students pursue academic outcomes.

For our study, the constructions of expectations and values held by non-Indigenous teachers within the education space are understood to be constructed with/in/through the

wider context. Hence EVT was deployed to understand teachers' views as well as to gain a more nuanced picture of the cultural milieux of Indigenous students and the educational and learning support they receive from key socialisers such as parents and carers. We note a clear limitation here, as the data that we draw on for this paper do not engage with parents or carers, or Indigenous young people themselves. Further studies are needed that specifically explore the expectations and values of these key socialisers within Indigenous students' education in mainstream Taiwanese schools. Teachers are powerful socialisers in setting the learning environment and conditions for students (cf. Couch et al., 2023; Ferguson, 2019; Rubie-Davies & Turner, 2022). Therefore, this paper's examination of non-Indigenous teacher expectations and values concerns but one influential actor within a complex interplay of socialisers which shapes the educational landscape for Indigenous young people in Taiwanese schools.

TAIWAN'S INDIGENOUS POPULATION AND THEIR EDUCATION

Taiwan has 16 Indigenous groups that are officially recognised in the Constitutions as First Peoples of the island. They belong to the Austronesian family that is culturally, linguistically and socially distinct from the majority of the population. They account for approximately 2.42% of the population in the society dominated by Hoklo/Minnan people (about 70%), the Hakka (15%) and Chinese Mainlanders (12%) (Blust, 2013). Indigenous peoples are the most disadvantaged group in Taiwan (Jan & Lomeli, 2022) owing to centuries of colonial and nationalist rule by European, Chinese and Japanese powers and settlers and pervasive colonial legacies (Hsieh, 2006; Nesterova, 2023; Teng, 2004).

Since democratisation, a process begun in 1987, Taiwan has made substantial progress to support Indigenous peoples' rights and development (Nesterova, 2023). Taiwan has enacted laws and policies to support, protect and promote Indigenous rights and development. These include, among others, the *Indigenous Peoples Basic Law* (2005), the *Education Act for Indigenous Peoples* (1998) and the *Indigenous Languages Development Act* (2017) to protect Indigenous peoples' collective rights across all domains and ensure their self-determination and cultural revitalisation, including in and through education. Additionally, in 2016, the government established the Historical and Transitional Justice Commission to correct past wrongs and build a more just society.

However, research shows vast discrepancies and conflicting representations within policies and textbooks where decolonial and emancipatory themes such as Indigenous sovereignty are overshadowed by, and clash with, the overwhelming focus on mainstream positionality, stereotypes, values and viewpoints (Ho, 2022). Multicultural policies, set to remedy the injustices and inequities Indigenous peoples face in education, have proven ineffective as they only introduced superficial changes to the curriculum and pedagogy (Ferrer, 2021; Nesterova, 2019a). Public–private partnerships that were established to promote Indigenous self-determination in education and Indigenous epistemologies in fact curtail local participation and strip Indigenous people of the possibility of defining Indigeneity and conceptualising education (Davies, 2022). This can be seen in Indigenous experimental schools that have non-Indigenous people in leadership and decision-making positions (Kim & Layman, 2022). Previous research also identified that while non-Indigenous teachers acknowledge structural factors (e.g. curriculum, history of suppression of Indigenous groups), deficit views of Indigenous students and families persist (Couch et al., 2023).

As a result, Indigenous people continue to be confronted with multiple disadvantages. They experience 'significant disparities in most subjective indicators of development' (e.g. income, human development, employment, education, health) (Majumdar, 2024) and,

TABLE 1 List of research participants.

	Highest degree	Teaching experience	Subject	Current assignment	Ethnicity	Gender
T1	Master's	12 years	English	Junior high	Han	F
T3	Master's	19 years	Mandarin, Mathematics, nature	Elementary	n/a	n/a
T4	PhD	41 years	Mathematics, Mandarin, nature, and society	Elementary	Han	M
T5	Vocational school	2 years	Farming education	Elementary	Han	F
T6	Bachelor's	22 years	Comprehensive	Junior high	Hakka	F
T7	Bachelor's degree	1 year	Chinese and art	Junior high	Han	F
T8	PhD	46 years	Chemistry	Junior high, High school	Hakka	n/a
T9	PhD	10 years	All subjects	Elementary	Han	F
T10	Bachelor's	15 years	Mathematics	Junior high	Han	F
T11	Bachelor's	3,5 years	English	Elementary	Han	F
T12	Vocational school	6 years	Painting	Elementary school	Hakka	M
T13	Bachelor's	30 years	Physical education	Currently retired	Han	F
T14	Master's	15 years	History	High school	Han	F
T15	Master's	12 years	Mathematics	Junior high	Han	F
T16	[Not specified]	23 years	Citizenship, extracurricular activities	Junior high	Han	F
T17	[Not specified]	5 years	English	Elementary	Han	F

when compared with non-Indigenous people, have lower educational levels and family income, shorter life expectancy, higher rates of unemployment and higher rates of exclusion from social welfare (specifically medical, housing and financial support) (Wang & Wang, 2019). Indigenous communities are undergoing language and culture loss, erosion of identities and knowledge systems, fragmentation and unsustainability of traditional communities (Davies, 2022; Jan & Lomeli, 2022; Nesterova, 2022) and racial discrimination (McNaught, 2021; Wang & Wang, 2019). Importantly, distrust in the mainstream education system among Indigenous people is yet to be addressed. While certainly there have been substantial improvements in Indigenous education in the past few decades, Indigenous people who are now parents and grandparents attended schools that enforced assimilation. Assimilationist practices in schools used targeted approaches to erode Indigenous identities, cultures, languages and self-esteem, including by presenting Indigenous peoples as savages and discriminating against their cultural practices and languages (e.g. Cheng, 2004; Chou, 2005; Hsieh, 2006; Nesterova, 2019b, 2023).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The data come from semi-structured interviews with 17 non-Indigenous teachers[2] (Table 1) working in Taichung, Taitung and Hualien, the cities that have high rates of Indigenous populations, coming from diverse groups. Each teacher has three to 20 Indigenous students in their classes and, for some teachers, 90% of their classroom comprises Indigenous students. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone with a few participants who preferred not to meet in person. They lasted 40–60 min and were conducted in Chinese, then transcribed and translated into English. Chinese to English translation was cross-checked by a native Chinese speaker to ensure quality and accuracy.

We used manifest content analysis as we sought to 'organise and elicit meaning from the data collected', describe what the participants said staying close to the text, and draw realistic conclusions (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 8). We followed four stages of content analysis, each performed several times to ensure quality and trustworthiness, as described by Bengtsson (2016). The first stage was decontextualization (or open coding) in which we familiarised ourselves with the data and identified meaning units (collection of sentences from participants on various issues) that we then labelled with codes. This process was inductive. The second stage was recontextualisation in which we re-read the original text against the codes and checked that all the content from the interviews was coded in relation to the objective of the study. The text that did not correspond to the objective was then disregarded. In our third stage, categorisation, we condensed meaning units and grouped codes into homogenous sub-categories, categories and then themes based on patterns until a reasonable explanation for each theme was reached. In the fourth stage of compilation, we chose appropriate meaning units as quotes to present in each theme and did some quantification of how many participants spoke about particular (sub)categories and themes. We then considered how these findings align with available literature and whether the results are reasonable.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In this section, we present key findings from the study. The first sub-section presents the voices of non-Indigenous teachers regarding Indigenous students' academic success. We then showcase their opinions on the impact of socialisers such as parents, families and teachers on Indigenous students' learning and achievement. The third sub-section focuses

on the 'cultural milieu' as influencing Indigenous students' learning and achievement, as discussed by the participants.

Teachers' assessments of Indigenous students' academic success

Teachers believed that, except for a few 'outstanding' and 'very talented' children who have big dreams and ambitions for themselves and their communities, most Indigenous students do not do well academically and perform much more poorly compared with other ethnic groups. However, in these teachers' experiences, Indigenous people's academic performance has gradually been improving since the introduction of Indigenous policies. Nevertheless, T1 explained that a third of their school population is Indigenous, but 'less than five students … are successful', if success is measured by test scores and graduating from high school. Most teachers identified the dominant learning and assessment framework as not working for Indigenous students. T3 noted, 'If you use the current standards to measure [Indigenous students'] academic performance, they are not doing well, but it's because you are using this standard'.

In classes that do not use testing, '[Indigenous students'] performances are great' (T10). In art classes, '[Indigenous] students are generally more engaged, because they may be more relaxed, no homework, so they are very happy' (T7). In T14's experience, 'they have outstanding performance in arts', but not so much in other subjects, although Indigenous students 'are more likely to ask questions' than their Han Taiwanese peers. Although the teachers agreed that students need to reach particular learning objectives, they believed that schools should acknowledge differences among their student population and support students' interests and talents. As T5 concluded, the assessment system 'is actually unfair' to Indigenous students and the education system should abandon the practice and focus on developing student potential. T17 was the only teacher who said that the Indigenous students she has taught tended to be successful, and it was her view that this was because her school values and incorporates Indigenous cultures. She shared that her 'school emphasises culture a lot, so our students are proud of their own culture. Thus, they build up confidence, which is very meaningful to their own value'.

All teachers had favourable views of Indigenous students' behaviour and effort. As they shared, Indigenous students tend to be 'more friendly and they're more sincere and committed to treat people' well (T1), 'working with [them] is great; they help each other … they are very enthusiastic' (T12), and they 'respect teachers a lot' (T13). Apart from a few instances of misbehaviour and breaking of school rules (e.g. being late, fighting, drinking, smoking) mentioned by a few teachers (T14, T15, T16, T17), T8 stated that 'misbehaviours are all non-Indigenous students. I must admit that the Indigenous students are following school rules. They may not be that responsive in learning, but their chance of fighting is very low'.

Teachers shared that they could see how, with proper support, students learn to work hard when they see possibilities for a better future. These teachers try their best to understand their students, and support their learning, while acknowledging the limits of their support. In their view, limiting factors included a sense that families did not value education or were experiencing hard economic circumstances. As T13 explained, with their support, teachers hoped that Indigenous students could attend universities 'so that they could improve their family situation'. T12 emphasised that teachers need to be a 'good example to children' to make an impact through role modelling instead of just telling them how to behave, work and treat others.

T7 was the only participant with a slightly negative experience but she said that while most of her students are 'good children', she had students who used their Indigenous identity to justify their poor performance. Interestingly, she was also the only participant who said

that her 'school is relatively passive' and she 'feel[s] they kind of abandoned the students'. This is not the only teacher to show cultural bias (i.e. 'good children') as the others attributed students' academic success to good upbringing, family education and discipline. Some teachers referred to unsuccessful students as 'lazy' (T6), 'passive' and 'lacking motivation' (T7) while noting that it is both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who can be 'very serious about their studies' (T4). However, negative traits were largely attributed to parents' lack of involvement and support as well as families' financial situation as such 'pressure has caused children to encounter great difficulties in going to school' (T11) and performing well. Most teachers noted that there is a disconnect between the values and expectations of teachers and schools, on the one hand, and Indigenous parents and communities, on the other. In the next sub-sections, we present teachers' perspectives on the role and influence of various socialisers and cultural milieux on Indigenous students' values and expectancies, and, consequently, learning experiences and outcomes.

Non-Indigenous teachers on socialisers' beliefs, values and expectations

Expectations and values of Indigenous parents and communities as perceived by teachers

In T8's view, 'the main thing [Indigenous parents] care [about] is whether their child could get along with the ethnic group, the accumulation of their life experience, and the inheritance of the traditional memories'. Similarly, other teachers stressed that the focus in Indigenous communities is 'to share responsibilities and to take care of each other. They are not selfish; they are very generous' (T3), 'always honour their family' (T14), and try to 'bring family glory that worth celebration' (T4). These are the values that they want to transmit to younger generations and, as T4 explained, 'they want to fight … for their family and their tribe. They want to have their dreams', and these dreams include the cultural and economic sustainability of their own communities. In T12's understanding, Indigenous people 'are living in the moment' which makes them 'only think about today'.

Most teachers believed that while some Indigenous families appreciate the opportunities of mainstream education and individual teachers who support their children's learning, some parents struggle to see how their children's education within the mainstream system can translate into tangible outcomes, such as income. T1 noted that her students, when sharing with their parents that teachers praise them and their progress and grades, have parents who reply with 'So what? This good grade can feed you?' Similarly, when students receive awards for academic excellence, 'parents say the same thing, "it's nothing, we need money"'. T7 explained that 'some parents might feel their child has no future' which forces them to decrease their expectations. As a result, they prefer learning that is 'practical' and 'useful in their life' (T1). In T7's experience, the 'education values of Indigenous families are more practical, such as learning technology, direct sales, or more convenient future employment like military schools or nursing'.

Consequently, teachers believed that many Indigenous parents and students do not care about grades and the opportunities education offers and are happy when students just receive a pass in examinations. T1, for example, said that:

> Most Indigenous students, they don't like to study. They don't see the value or the meaning in having a higher degree or learning more. They just feel like 'if you're teaching me some skills and you want me to survive in my tribe or village … I probably feel more useful or practical',

T1 stated that teachers can see how children internalise this disinterest and that 'they feel disappointed, they feel upset'. When the family's lack of support is the only issue, the teachers said it may be easy to resolve. In such cases teachers visit families to explain what their school can give to children and how they, with such support, 'know more and can contribute more to [their] community or even to the family' (T1). The teachers believed that parents showing even a little support of their children's studies could help reduce high drop-out rates.

Expectations and values of non-Indigenous teachers

Contrary to the belief that teachers value grades (although schools do), teachers have other expectations for their students, especially as they understand that everyone is different and they 'have [their] own level to catch up on whatever the final goal' (T1). While many teachers noted that they need students to meet basic requirements, including good behaviour and minimum learning outcomes, what they value most is the process: students working hard and enjoying studying, trying their best, having passions, building confidence and understanding their value, caring for their wellbeing and health, and showing progress, respect and a responsible attitude. T8, for example, shared that 'having good working or learning attitude would be much more beneficial than just having good grades' so they tell their students 'You just try your best'. T3 tried to explain to their students that 'As long as you have progress, as long as you know you are studying, it doesn't matter how quickly or slowly you are improving'. T4 was the only teacher who shared that 'every child has a future when they have good grades', which is why he encouraged Indigenous students to work hard on their grades to 'change their path in life'.

In this regard, the solution the teachers offered is for school, Indigenous communities, families, students and the society to work together as 'a big family' (T3) to create a better learning environment and better education for children—an education that focuses on their interests, passions and strengths but also motivates them to work hard. The teachers stressed the importance of including the Elders of the community in schooling for their wisdom, support and skills that cannot be taught by anyone else. T17's school already does that by making the school 'an important part of the tribe' by working closely with the Elders and other community members.

Teachers also acknowledged the importance of understanding and supporting each child. As T4 shared, 'instead of looking at their shortcomings, we should first find their strengths'. T7 elaborated on this point:

> the students told me that they're used to being blamed. However, if you praise or affirm them, you will have very different results. What they need should not be blamed for their low academic performance, but to recognise their good performance in other aspects.

T5 was the only teacher who expected Indigenous students to integrate into the mainstream with the expectations and values of the school. She said:

> We try to promote the idea of ethnic integration, but when they go back home, their families still tell them that they are Indigenous. I mean, they still categorise people based on ethnicity. Therefore, it takes time for children to understand ethnic integration.

Non-Indigenous Teachers' understanding of cultural milieu and its influence on Indigenous students

Culture of Indigenous families of low socio-economic status

Teachers stressed that poverty of Indigenous families is one of the main barriers that prevents Indigenous children from continuing their education beyond secondary schooling. T1 said that 'it's very easy … to spot them knowing they just don't have enough resources'. In many instances, teachers noted, families cannot afford to keep children in school or do not have enough financial resources to purchase such basics as a uniform, school supplies, and meals.

T6 explained that as Indigenous parents started working after finishing junior high school, they expect their children to do the same. In some instances, students work part-time while in school (e.g. in hostels). T1 also shared that in some families there is an expectation that older siblings will take care of younger ones and any other family member that needs care, instead of going to university. T9 thus stated that:

> Their problem is not learning, but how to survive, because [for them] surviving is much more important than receiving education. It is good enough for them to attend vocational school learning how to build ships, to fish, and to apply the government funding or employment subsidies.

Interestingly, as T1 shared, some parents' thinking is that further education does not offer opportunities, but risks, unlike their known path towards vocational training and manual labour, although it only offers stability in poverty. As one parent said to their child: 'how do you know you can really be successful or achieve your goal, as things can change and as if you have always people to support you?' (T1). As T1 explained further, children then 'feel like [they] don't need to be that good in academics' as they 'can survive' leading the life their parents have instead of seeking to improve their fate. This shows that financial hardship in Indigenous families forces parents to prepare children from early on to rely on themselves, seek stability and avoid risk.

In such cases, T3 inquires 'what [a student] wants to do in the future' and helps students 'work for it, while T7 maps out other options for such students and explains that lifelong learning is very important. T4 explained that this helps some students when "they are gradually realising … their future and possibilities"'. Similarly, T6 tries to communicate to Indigenous students the importance of formal education, and the possibility of them attending and graduating from university.

Home environment and support

Teachers' perception was that some parents do not have capacities or time to support their children's learning, and, in some cases, children do not have a conducive home learning environment. They noted that the family environment, which is very important for learning, suffers in many Indigenous homes. In some homes, parents are not present, and children are raised by extended family and community. According to teachers, parents may have addictions or be unemployed, may not mind when children misbehave (it is important to note that dimensions of behaviour are informed by cultural bias), have no expectations for their children's education or have internalised failure. T3 shared:

> Sometimes it is the family environment that causes children to think 'I just can't'. Because families usually say something after getting drunk 'We are not as good

> as X at school; we are not as good as X at work'. In fact, it is because [Indigenous students] feel suppressed due to this long-term family educational environment, they would have such a mentality.

According to teachers, this results in inappropriate behaviour of some students, and, unlike non-Indigenous parents, Indigenous parents do not ask teachers to help them solve their children's behavioural problems (T11). Also, unlike non-Indigenous parents, they do not check children's homework and do not consult teachers when they encounter difficulties in helping their children learn. For T12, this 'means parents are not very concerned about this child', although he noted that 'there are parents who make changes for their child', including creating a better family environment. While other teachers also expressed concerns about some parents' disinterest in their children's education, behaviour or extracurricular activities at school, they avoided blaming parents. T4 stressed that:

> We shouldn't just blame the parents, saying something like 'You don't educate and care about your child, you only drink'. How could these unbearable words bring support for parents and students? They are struggling, and they've been labelled with many negative things.

T3 also added in support of Indigenous parents that:

> sometimes, if they are making very little money, they have to work [more], so they can't respond to me immediately. But that does not mean that they don't care about their children … they care about their children, and the way they care may be different from our imagination, that is, the mindset of non-Indigenous teachers and families is definitely different from that of the Indigenous people.

T16 thus emphasised the need for cooperation between schools and parents by saying 'if one of us three parties [school, child, and parent] is missing, it is difficult to solve' problems and improve teaching and learning.

Discrimination against Indigenous people

Indigenous people's financial situation (T8, T13, T17) along with 'the social environment [that] is unfair to them' (T9) intensifies the discrimination they already face at school. T3 shared that Indigenous students think 'they would lose face if they were known as Indigenous people … they feel ashamed if they speak their own language'.

T1 provided an example of discriminatory treatment of Indigenous children by their non-Indigenous peers: 'they will say something derogatory in a cute way… "they are wild, they are not that easy to be controlled"'. Indigenous students also behave and speak differently to Han Taiwanese students according to participants, including preferring to sit on the floor, being barefoot, having darker skin, being very friendly, and using their own slang, body language and accent. T3 claimed that in some instances teachers become bullies when they say to Indigenous students 'You are just stupid, you are Indigenous person, so you would not be as good as others in study anyway' instead of appreciating their advantages and preparing them for 'their future with hope'. T17 cautioned that there is hostility between Indigenous groups and students from one Indigenous group may discriminate against students from another.

Teachers noted that most discrimination is 'unconscious and not intentional' and 'comes from the cultural prejudice that [people] may not realise. They are not intentional, but it does

hurt' (T4). However, the teachers believed that Indigenous students internalise it and start disrespecting their own cultures and themselves – as T1 pointed out, they 'use themselves as a joke'. Discrimination also precludes Indigenous families from participating in school life as Indigenous students may feel ashamed of their parents and may not want them to visit the school.

The teachers stated that they try to address instances of discrimination by doing activities and having educational talks on related issues such as that 'it is normal to be different physically' (T6) and having one-on-one discussions with abusive students to explain that everyone is equal, and no one is superior or inferior (T8, T11). T1 also explained that it takes time to build a strong relationship between students of different cultures, but after some time, when they become familiar with each other, they become friendly, respectful and supportive of one another. Ensuring that children from different groups grow up and learn together from early ages is key, as was noted. T11 explained that 'it may be because the environment they grow up in is different. Not growing up together, they are relatively unfamiliar with each other'.

Lack of trust and relationships between schools and home

For teachers, 'a strong sense of trust' (T7) between families, students and school is critical. Yet, as they explained, Indigenous parents do not trust schools and teachers owing to their own experiences as students. While the teachers did not elaborate on the reasons for the lack of trust, as we noted earlier, previous studies show that Indigenous people who are parents and grandparents now attended schools that were hostile towards their Indigenous identities and communities. Teachers acknowledged that this is hard for them to overcome as to support Indigenous students, they need to have a relationship and 'mutual understanding' (T16) with parents and 'communication with each other' (T13) to discuss what support is needed and to bridge the expectations of the school and those of the community. T6 elaborated on this point saying that 'parents coming to participate in school activities and knowing what we are doing is very important'. In T6's view, parental involvement is 'related to the expectations they have for their children' as the more parents know about their children and their education, the more they can support them.

T12 noted that Indigenous people 'have different ways to get along with people', that is, their cultural way of engaging with others is different to the Han Taiwanese approach, which may result in misunderstandings between the two groups. T13 also stressed that teachers may not be able to 'communicate with parents due to the language issue' so at times, they must seek the help of interpreters.

Nevertheless, teachers emphasised that they want to establish relationships with parents and ensure that Indigenous students are connected to their homes and cultures, and 'have a good relationship with their family' (T1). Some teachers 'take the initiative to strengthen the interaction with the parents, such as home visits, use Line [social media app] to keep close contact with the parents' (T10). When a child drops out, for example, teachers travel to Indigenous communities and/or homes to talk to parents and carers in person. Teachers acknowledged, however, that they feel powerless as they have few channels to offer much support to overcome barriers (T6, T11) and many Indigenous parents do not seem willing or able to participate in school events and meetings and, in some teachers' eyes, do not express interest in their children's learning. T4 offered a potential explanation of their reluctance by explaining that 'when parents come to school, they are prepared to be punished, or acknowledge that their children are wrong'.

Teachers thus try to assure parents that they are committed to their children's development and progress and that they are on the same page. T1, for example, shared that she

tells parents that they all want the same for their children: to 'receive better education' and 'have a better future' to help them trust her and discuss how they can support the child together. Building a strong relationship with Indigenous students and supporting them as much as possible also helps in building relationships with parents as they then show more trust and initiative. T1 warned, however, that they are just teachers and they 'can only do this much', so the change in the type of relationships should be systemic, not simply at the level of one teacher.

Absence of Indigenous cultures and languages in schools

Teachers expressed respect for Indigenous peoples calling them 'hosts' of Taiwan, referred to Indigenous cultures as 'the most special part of [the island's] identity' (T3), and stated that the 'Taiwanese society should also have a worldview of the Indigenous people' (T7). Currently, there is little relevant content in the curriculum and textbooks as the curriculum is 'based on Han people's ideology' (T7), and what is available, 'is very shallow' (T9). T16 said that 'we promote multiculturalism and equality, it's not equal in reality' as the curriculum 'doesn't meet the needs of Indigenous students because the mainstream is Han'. Teachers were relieved that at least there is nothing harmful as in previous textbooks that contained stereotyping and derogatory content. Although, as T5 noted, the fact that education is Han Taiwanese-focussed is harmful enough as Indigenous 'children have no experience or understanding of many things so they cannot learn'.

Consequently, T4 noted, as 'Indigenous students are confronted with conflicts of values at school' compared with their home and community values, education continues to lack meaning and value in their eyes. T8, for example, claimed that because many Indigenous students do not see the value in education, 'they are not motivated to participate in independent classes or subsides tutoring', even when such opportunities are freely available. According to T6, some students also do not invest energy and time in their education as they know they can depend on extra points because they are Indigenous (i.e. through affirmative action). T1 explained that she thinks that 'most of them can do better, but they are not really willing to, or they lack motivation to do that. And it's just like they feel they don't need to'. The teachers did not blame Indigenous students or families, however, they pointed out that it is crucial to transform education by incorporating Indigenous cultures and knowledges. T4 stated that 'the more they know their culture, the better they are' while T3 shared that Indigenous 'definition of success is that they first recognise their own culture, and then they do not discard their own culture. If they completely abandon their culture and just pursue high scores, they are unsuccessful'.

Teachers also said that non-Indigenous students should have access to such content to 'have a certain degree of understanding of the historical background and cultural knowledge of different ethnic groups on this land' (T9). However, the teachers acknowledged the difficulty of incorporating Indigenous material into teaching and learning as textbooks do not include much information about Indigenous history and cultures. As T6 shared:

> When I am teaching something related to Indigenous people, I would ask Indigenous students whether they know this particular culture or tradition. I also ask them some very detailed expressions. They would try share with me but sometimes I still feel their understanding is not enough. I feel they are not familiar enough with their communities. I am not sure whether it's because they are still too young or because their families didn't share enough with them.

Teachers noted that they encourage Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to do their own research and participate in activities of local Indigenous groups. These teachers try to bring 'Indigenous wisdom' (T1) into the classroom, especially knowledge related to environmental sustainability. T6 and T8 also mentioned that they incorporate traumatic colonial history into their teaching. As T8 pointed out, the teaching of history 'is distorted because whoever writes history is the one who takes the power' and it is thus important to 'integrate Indigenous culture in the teaching' to counter that.

Still, it is very rare for schools and classrooms to incorporate Indigenous cultures, teachers noted, despite their importance for Indigenous learners. Unlike other schools, T17 explained, her 'school emphases culture a lot, so our students are proud of their own culture. Thus, they build confidence, which is very meaningful to their own value'. Teachers said that if Indigenous students are forced into the education system without adjustments to their culture, 'it is easy for them to lose motivation' to study (T8) and the absence of Indigenous content and languages 'puts [Indigenous students] into a very disadvantaged position' (T3). Conversely, if there is more focus on Indigenous cultural references in the classroom, teachers can draw on students' strengths instead of their weaknesses (T1) and help build stronger relationships between students (T16).

Teachers also shared that they cannot teach Indigenous languages, although T10 learned some words to help Indigenous students and make lessons more fun. They noted that they want Indigenous people to speak their languages fluently for cultural continuity and more practical reasons such as the strong foundation the mother tongue builds for further learning. However, teaching them in school is not enough and schools and society 'could provide more opportunities for students to learn Indigenous language, to make it as popular as English' (T16). Language, among other aspects of Indigeneity, should be taught by Indigenous teachers, as many noted. As T5 explained, 'they don't have any teaching qualifications', but they have relevant knowledge and expertise that will help bring 'a positive energy' and 'affirm cultural identity'. The teachers thus suggested that textbooks and the curriculum need to be redesigned 'based on the needs of Indigenous students' (T3).

DISCUSSION

Teachers are crucial socialisers. Their value base and expectations can either contribute to supporting local communities and addressing and redressing injustices and inequities various marginalised and vulnerable groups face, or will maintain the status quo (Lopes Cardozo, 2009; Nesterova, 2019b). Our study investigated teachers' understandings of the barriers and challenges that inhibit Indigenous students' academic success. Such data helps us understand the expectations and views teachers have of Indigenous students and families and the support they provide to meet these students' needs. These aspects are critical to determine whether and how teachers can contribute to addressing persistent inequities and injustices in the education system and what specific support they need to act as agents of change.

Existing literature treats majority background teachers with the deficit model as responsibility for Indigenous students' underachievement is placed on non-Indigenous teachers who are considered to be biased, culturally insensitive and lacking relevant knowledge about Indigenous peoples. In contrast, our analysis of teacher voices revealed that, in this study's context, teachers held a very good understanding of the realities that Indigenous peoples lived with. Importantly, these teachers viewed Indigenous peoples, cultures and worldviews in a positive light and as central to Taiwan's development and identity. Discussing the education system, the teachers identified the absence of Indigenous curriculum content (e.g. values, worldviews), lack of culturally sensitive and fair assessment methods, and traumatic

histories of colonialism and discrimination. These concerns are widely acknowledged by Indigenous people in the literature in Taiwan (Nesterova, 2019b, 2023).

An important aspect identified in this study is that teachers largely avoided blaming Indigenous parents. On the contrary, teachers shared their ideas on the obstacles they believe Indigenous parents face that inhibit their engagement with children's learning and a general sentiment, aptly put into words by one participant was 'Just don't kill their dreams'. The key obstacle teachers identified was economic rather than cultural. Participants noted that it was poverty, disproportionately impacting Indigenous student families, that led to all sorts of hardship. This included Indigenous parents having limited time and capacities to support learning, tough environments at home that were not conducive to learning, increased children's responsibilities and a lack of awareness about available opportunities and a level of acceptance of the inequalities by Indigenous people. In keeping with EVT's explanatory potential, such factors clearly limited Indigenous students' perceptions about achieving academic success in schools. Importantly, the teachers understood that education does not have the same meaning for some Indigenous parents as Indigenous parents may place more emphasis on cultural transmission and the responsibility to Indigenous communities that their children should develop. This was an interesting finding that showed participating teachers' awareness of this aspect of Indigenous lives. As the review by Sianturi et al. (2022) explained, Indigenous parents have a vital role as cultural guardians to transmit Indigenous cultures and identities to their children at home, especially in the contexts where these are at risk of disappearance.

The teachers also noted the reluctance and discomfort that Indigenous parents felt when they needed to engage with schools owing to their own negative experiences in school which have led to distrust and disengagement. They stated that Indigenous parents expected to be punished if they were invited to their child's school. This finding is explained by previous studies that showcase the discriminatory, hostile and assimilative nature of previous education for Indigenous peoples in Taiwan (see Cheng, 2004; Chou, 2005; Hsieh, 2006; Nesterova, 2019a, 2019b, 2023). It is also in line with two systematic reviews on the topic. First, Sianturi et al. (2022) identified across the literature on parental involvement that parents feel discomfort when engaging with schools and teachers owing to assimilationist policies and detrimental and discriminatory practices and views, as well as persistent colonial legacies that threaten local communities. Second, Lowe et al. (2019) found that the experiences of racism encountered by Indigenous parents and students as well as schools' ongoing failure to acknowledge historical injustices and their legacies eroded their trust in schools, despite schools' efforts to engage them.

The teachers also noted how they can and do support Indigenous students: by role modelling and visiting families to have conversations; showing a range of opportunities to students; and investing in peer relationship building. Importantly, they talked about the importance of relationships, collaboration and trust between Indigenous communities, families, students and non-Indigenous teachers to work together for the benefit of Indigenous learners. Participants also emphasised the need to focus on each child's strengths and talents for a more targeted approach.

Another important finding is teachers' belief that they do not have sufficient agency (e.g. feel powerless) nor opportunities (e.g. they are 'just teachers') to effect meaningful change for Indigenous students and communities. While this is an important aspect, as teachers operate within a restrictive framework of national and school policies and a broader society which gives them little space and time to manoeuvre, our previous findings (see Couch et al., 2023) demonstrate that teachers do hold significant power to shape experiences for Indigenous students.

Three main recommendations emerge from these findings to capitalise on these non-deficit positive views to help effect long-term sustainable change to support teachers and, in turn, support Indigenous students.

First, the findings clearly indicate the central importance of investing in building a relationship of trust and respect between schools and teachers on the one hand and Indigenous communities and families on the other. This is consistent with previous research, which identified low trust and poor relationships as factors preventing teachers from understanding culturally specific needs and realities for Indigenous students (Jorgensen et al., 2010). It is important to note, however, that teachers need to receive support in navigating ethical aspects of working with Indigenous communities, which takes time and resources, and often involves a level of discomfort for the teachers themselves (Nesterova & Jackson, 2018). The teachers in our study also pointed out how different Indigenous ways of engaging are from hegemonic cultural practices, and for this, teachers need to receive support. Mentoring by Indigenous teachers or community members can be one way of developing this knowledge among pre-service and in-service teachers.

Secondly, professional development that enables a greater recognition of teacher agency can be valuable. Additionally, work at the policy level can support enabling conditions for teachers to exercise their agency. One potential support system can be through communities of practice that can be extended to actual Indigenous communities. These initiatives should be small-scale, localised and delivered in collaboration between teachers and communities.

The third recommendation is supporting teachers in developing more awareness of their expectations and views of Indigenous students as well as the values they hold regarding progress, success in and outcomes of education. While the teachers in this study exhibited awareness of Indigenous peoples' status and concerns, and an eagerness to build trust with Indigenous students and parents, we must understand this as an emerging perspective among previous scholarship, including ours in Taiwan (Couch et al., 2023), that pointed to non-Indigenous teachers holding largely deficit views as well as a few statements by a few teachers in this study with colour-blind (T4) and slightly assimilationist (T5) views. Professional development may be valuable where it includes teachers' critical reflections on the deficit model, moving towards a more 'agentic thinking' and reshaping relational practices in the classroom (Bishop et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

This paper sets out key findings from semi-structured interviews with non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous students in Taiwan. Participants were quick to identify several key barriers to Indigenous student academic success, including structural factors such as entrenched poverty, to key cultural factors such as limited, and therefore limiting, expectations of academic success for Indigenous students. This was reflected in the limited content which related specifically to Indigenous cultures and histories, to expectations that assessments were not adequately measuring Indigenous student performance. Participant observations that Indigenous parents avoided coming to school further highlighted the broad prevalence of a value which assumed that schools were not places that valued, welcomed or reflected Indigenous cultures and knowledges. Tentative ways forward include (re)building trusting relationships between schools and Indigenous communities, developing Indigenous curriculum content that is integrated authentically into every classroom and continuing to hold high expectations for academic success of Indigenous students.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee, the University of Hong Kong in August 2019. The research was conducted in line with all relevant procedures and guidelines outlined in the policies of the Human Research Ethics Committee, the University of Hong Kong.

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ENDNOTES

[1]The majority ethnic group descended from the Han Chinese group in China.

[2]Teacher 2 is excluded from this sample as the interview recording was of insufficient quality.

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