



# Examining non-Indigenous teacher perceptions of Indigenous students in Taiwan through a Strategic Relational Approach

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## Abstract

This article examines non-Indigenous teachers' expectations of, perceptions of, knowledge about, and attitudes towards Indigenous students in Taiwan using a Strategic Relational Approach. Drawing on survey data that combined Likert-scale responses with reflexive, open-ended questions, we found that whilst teacher survey responses indicated a normatively positive view of Indigenous students, this was troubled by their open-ended answer responses which included many negative perceptions of Indigenous students' behaviours, family backgrounds, and capacity for educational achievement. We argue that this indicates an underlying tension held by non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous students, constructed through contradictory perceptions of self (open to and encouraging of Indigenous learners) and of Indigenous students (as less capable than non-Indigenous students, and uninterested in educational success). Using the Strategic Relational Approach's notion of a context conduct dialectic, we offer an explanation of this tension by positioning teachers centrally within Taiwan's cultural political economy, before considering implications for teacher education.

**Keywords** Indigenous students · Teacher education · Strategic relational approach · Agency · Structure · Taiwan

## Introduction

This article examines non-Indigenous teachers' perceptions of Indigenous learners in Taiwan's public schools. It also explores teachers' views on the need for changes in the education system in order to support Indigenous students. Just over 2.3% of Taiwan's population is represented by Indigenous peoples who belong to the Austronesian family (IWGIA, 2020). The vast majority of the island's population is Han Chinese. Taiwan's Indigenous peoples are divided into 16 officially recognised groups and ten unrecognised groups (*Pingpu*). Centuries of subjugation, oppression, and assimilation of Indigenous Taiwanese groups by external powers have led to the devaluation of Indigenous cultures, identities, languages, knowledge systems, traditional

structures, and sustainable lifestyles (Nesterova & Jackson, 2018).

In this article, we investigate in-service teachers' expectations of, perceptions of, knowledge about, and attitudes towards Indigenous students and their communities. We draw on the findings from a survey that combined a Likert-scale response section with reflexive, open-ended questions (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Surveys for this study were undertaken in three key locations inhabited by Indigenous peoples: Taichung, Taitung, and Hualien (Taiwan). We found that, whilst teacher survey responses indicated a normatively positive view of Indigenous learners, this was troubled by open-ended short answer responses from the same teachers. Themes which viewed Indigenous students as deficient in comparison to non-Indigenous peers, or which held highly prejudicial views of Indigenous students, emerged through many teachers' short answer responses. We propose that this indicates an underlying tension held by the teacher participants in our study, in which non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous students hold potentially contradictory views of self (open to and encouraging of Indigenous learners) and of Indigenous students (as less capable than non-Indigenous students, and uninterested in educational success). We theorise this tension by drawing on Hay's (2002) description

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of the Strategic-Relational Approach (SRA), which intends to transcend a structure-agency binary in order to consider complex social phenomena. We put the SRA to work to offer an understanding of teacher perceptions within a context conduct dialectic. Necessarily, this views the teacher as a central figure within the cultural political economy of their practice.

Taiwan's recent history has seen considerable cultural and political developments. In 1987, Taiwan's governance structure moved from authoritarian rule to democratisation. Since then, significant gains have been made in promoting Indigenous rights (IWGIA, 2020). In 2016 the Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Commission (原住民族歷史正義與轉型正義委員會) was established to seek reconciliation between settler and Indigenous populations and promote a more just and inclusive society. Despite this progress, Taiwan's Indigenous peoples continue to be overrepresented in low-education outcomes, and low-socioeconomic statistics. The Commission does not presently have a strategy to support reconciliation between groups which might draw on elements of transitional justice. Nor does the Commission have an education strategy to better support Indigenous student outcomes.

Democratic changes in legislation and policies in the 1990s and 2000s introduced some changes to address academic disadvantages of Indigenous students and the loss of Indigenous cultures and languages (Wang, 2014). However, teaching and learning in state-provided education institutions remains mono-cultural and mono-epistemic, and institutional structures remain resistant to change to accommodate Indigenous learners' needs (Nesterova, 2019a). Indigenous peoples are significantly overrepresented in under-achievement statistics and drop-out rates within state schools (Yen, 2009). Indigenous experimental schools that have been promoted since 2016 as a response to Taiwan's transitional justice processes have been critiqued for having non-Indigenous people in leadership positions, leading to lack of support offered to schools and Indigenous students, and increasing concerns over 'who holds the power' within this space (Kim & Layman, 2022, p. 66).

In spite of this, Indigenous students are considerably overlooked within education literature in Taiwan. For instance, a recent and comprehensive book on Taiwan's teacher education edited by Yang and Huang (2016) does not mention Indigenous learners in its modern history. Other research on teaching Indigenous students in Taiwan is limited and sporadic. From what has been published, Chou (2005) highlights how non-Indigenous teachers can misinterpret Indigenous students' behaviour as lack of interest or abilities, and thus feel uncomfortable working with them. Mason (2009) illustrates that even teachers who try to incorporate multi-cultural values into their lessons do not engage with issues of race and cultural conflict that are crucial for reconciliation

and achieving justice for Indigenous students in education. Yen (2009) found that teachers were prejudiced against Indigenous learners and thus unwilling to involve Indigenous families in their children's education despite the benefits for Indigenous students. It was also discovered that teachers do not receive sufficient formal training and do not informally engage with Indigenous communities to understand Indigeneity and related matters (Chen, 2016; Chou, 2005). At the same time, Indigenous people view non-Indigenous teachers as reluctant to adopt culturally suitable pedagogies, build trust, and develop ethical and equal relationships with Indigenous communities to benefit Indigenous students (Nesterova, 2019b). The literature is silent on mainstream teachers' perceptions of their Indigenous students and their families, communities, and cultures in Taiwan.

This article intends to begin to address this gap in the literature. Our findings have implications for current initial teacher education and in-service professional development programmes, and aims to understand mainstream teachers' perceptions of their Indigenous learners. Such an understanding is an important first step in identifying appropriate interventions targeting the improvement of Indigenous learners' school achievement. We begin by outlining foundational conceptual matters, before detailing our use of a survey. As we set out our findings, we begin to lay the foundation for a discussion which puts our conceptual foundations to work, before concluding with some potential implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education.

## Conceptual framing

The Strategic Relational Approach is a theoretical device intended to transcend a binary distinction between structure and agency. As Hay (2002, p. 93) illustrates, 'the question of structure and agency is about the explanation of social and political phenomena'. Within this understanding, an examination of factors contributing to educational outcomes, a 'structure' or 'agency' debate falls short. Citing Hay (2002), Lopes Cardozo (2009) explains that by 're-formulating Giddens' theory of structuration, and the related concepts of *structure* and *agency*, the SRA tries to understand *the relationship* between structures (or contexts) and agency (or conduct), and sees this relationship as dialectical' (p. 411, emphasis in original). In this sense, instead of locating structure and agency within distinct ontologies, an SRA transcends such dualism by

suggesting that rather than consign ourselves to references to structure and agency...we concentrate instead upon the dialectical interplay of structure and agency in real contexts of social and political interaction. Thus ultimately more useful than the abstract and arbitrary

analytical distinction between structure and agency is that between *strategic action* on the one hand, and the *strategically selective context* within which it is formulated and upon which it impacts on the other. (Hay, 2002, p. 127)

This dialectical relationship enables an exploration of the relationship between non-Indigenous teachers' perspectives of Indigenous students, and non-Indigenous teachers' understandings of the social and political contexts within which their Indigenous students attend school. Such an emphasis is in large part informed by our critical realist ontological position.

The findings reported on in this paper are part of a larger mixed-method project with in-service non-Indigenous teachers in Taiwan who teach Indigenous students. The project is informed by critical realism. As an ontology, critical realism draws on three building blocks of the world to study and understand reality (cf. Bhaskar, 2008). These are the *real*, the *actual*, and the *empirical*. Within the *real*, we find 'structures, mechanisms and powers that exist by virtue of an object's nature but that may or may not be activated' (Lopes Cardozo & Shah, 2016, p. 523). The *actual* is found when this potential is realised. The *actual* is known through observation and experience, and this evidence of the *actual* is what constitutes the *empirical* (Dean et al., 2006). Examining the gap between the *real* and the *actual* enables researchers to suggest some of the generative mechanisms which have led a particular phenomenon to occur (Bhaskar, 2008; Couch, 2022). Our survey of non-Indigenous teachers illustrates evidence that participants hold a normatively positive view of their own beliefs and practices towards Indigenous students, yet equally indicates a deficit view towards Indigenous students. These data present the *empirical* illustration of an *actual* phenomenon that has occurred.

There is clear synergy between our critical realist framing of this study and the SRA (cf. Jessop, 2005; Montiel, 2007). Falling under broader critical theories, a key purpose underpinning critical realist studies lies within their interest in attempting to 'understand social events located within wider historical, political and social settings and how these practices and events are influenced by wider social relations' (Lopes Cardozo, 2009, p. 411). In keeping with Choo's (2022) description of critical realism's rationale for critique, our explanation of the tension identified in this study is intended to locate the findings within broader historical, political, and social settings in Taiwan. Importantly, rather than intending to negatively position respondents to this survey, we offer our exploration of this tension in the discussion below within an understanding of the *context conduct dialectic* of teacher participants.

Why our focus on teachers? In her article on Bolivian teachers working in the context of power struggles, violence,

and tensions, Lopes Cardozo (2009, p. 410) noted that teachers are 'crucial actors in both the education system and social life' who can choose to play a role 'in the process of constructing a more equal, just and peaceful society' or can resist progressive and emancipatory change. Similarly, the question in this study is whether Taiwanese teachers see themselves as agents of social change who can choose to work towards justice and equity for Indigenous students, or if they simply see such outcomes as Indigenous children and families' responsibility, and non-Indigenous teachers merely as observers. While this study does not draw on voices of Indigenous students themselves, and this is acknowledged as a key limitation, the powerful position which teachers occupy adequately justifies an exploration of non-Indigenous teachers' own perspectives.

## Method

In this paper, we present key findings from a survey including both Likert-scale responses and open-ended short answers. Teachers responded on a 1–5 Likert-scale with descriptors such as strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree. The survey tool was initially developed in English. Items from the Multicultural Competencies Survey (Vassallo, 2012) were used and adapted to the needs of Indigenous contexts based on the literature review of currently available evidence on teachers and Indigenous students, families, and communities in Taiwan and other societies with Indigenous populations. It was then translated into Chinese by a native Chinese speaker and cross-checked by another native Chinese translator for accuracy and user-friendliness. It was administered to participants in Chinese on the SurveyMonkey platform.

In line with the conceptual methodological approach grounded in critical realism (Couch, 2022), survey data was analysed in phases. In Phase 1, we undertook a close reading of survey results and short answers. Through discussion as we read, the emergent tension between non-Indigenous teacher view of self, and of Indigenous student was identified. At this point, the decision was made to apply the SRA as a theoretical device which complemented our study's grounding in critical realism, and offered an explanatory framework for the patterns emerging from our data. When then undertook a second phase to elicit points at which responses could be attributed to structural or agentic factors, and whether responsibility for such actions was being allocated to Indigenous students, or non-Indigenous teacher selves. In a final phase we considered these data once more, and interpreted responses through an understanding of a context conduct dialectic, which was then used to shape our

**Table 1** Participants' background information

Gender	Women	Men	Did not disclose				
	55	17	1				
Age	25–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	Above 56
	7	3	11	11	19	12	10
Contract type	Full time	Part time	Substitute				
	51	9	13				
Level	Elementary	Junior high	Senior high	Work across levels			
	40	19	7	7			
Education level	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Another			
	27	41	3	2			

discussion below. This process foregrounded the conceptual tools found within the SRA in our approach to survey data.

The survey consisted of five parts. Part one included participants' background information; parts two to four assessed non-Indigenous teachers' views on (a) Indigenous students, parents, and communities (9 items), (b) school and classroom climate (7 items), and (c) their professional practices (10 items); and the final part included five open-ended reflective questions. As the use of the SRA was decided during data analysis, not all open-ended questions fully realised the exploratory potential of the device. None-the-less, as we detail below, this final section of the survey offered valuable data supporting our application of the SRA. There were 73 participants who met the required criteria. Table 1 presents the background information of the participants.

## Findings

In the section below, we begin by setting out the results from parts two to four of the survey in which participants responded using a Likert-scale. In addition to presenting responses in a series of tables, we note particular patterns or observations as we report on the data here in keeping with the study's qualitative methodology. The patterns and observations identified here work to construct the tension between respondents' perception of the (non-Indigenous) teacher self, and the (Indigenous) student. This tension is then examined more closely in relation to the short answer section of the survey before we move on to a discussion of our findings.

### Overall views on Indigenous students, parents, and communities

Part two of the survey examined participants' overall views on Indigenous students, parents, and communities. Set out in Table 2, participant responses to several questions can be seen as largely positive and hopeful. The majority of respondents indicated that they enjoyed teaching

Indigenous students, and viewed Indigenous students as possessing a potentially distinctive worldview that would be an asset to their classrooms.

A particularly interesting shift in the majority of responses occurs as the questions continue. This indicates what we identify as an emerging tension between the perspective of the (non-Indigenous) teacher self, and the (Indigenous) student. As the nature of the survey question becomes increasingly distanced from the teacher, the responses increasingly take a deficit perspective. Initially, questions are about the individual teachers' perception of Indigenous students—'I enjoy', 'I feel that', 'I am sensitive to', 'I can learn'—and we find that the majority of responses fall under the Agree/Strongly Agree categories. As questions become centred on Indigenous learners themselves, responsibility for achieving success in education is quickly allocated largely on to the Indigenous student, painting a stark picture of the Indigenous student.

### Views on school and classroom climate

Part three of the survey examined teachers' views on school and classroom climate for Indigenous students, set out in Table 3. Teachers are largely in agreement that their schools are safe and non-discriminatory spaces in which Indigenous students are welcomed, and receive equal teacher attention as non-Indigenous students.

However, the tension between perceptions of self and student re-emerges when 40% of respondents indicate that staff's use of discriminatory language and behaviour towards Indigenous students is highly evident. 40% of participants indicate that fellow staff members openly and regularly discriminate against Indigenous students. Whilst teachers appear to hold a positive view of their own actions to welcome and support Indigenous students in school, there is a clear disjuncture with their own observation of discriminatory behaviour by colleagues.

**Table 2** Overall views on Indigenous students, parents, and communities (69 respondents total)

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I enjoy teaching Indigenous students	25 (36.23%)	26 (37.68%)	16 (23.19%)	2 (2.90%)	0 (0.00%)
I am sensitive to Indigenous students' differences and try to adapt to them	23 (33.33%)	28 (40.58%)	11 (15.94%)	5 (7.25%)	2 (2.90%)
I feel that Indigenous students bring new perspectives, knowledge, and worldviews to the classroom and school, and this is great	25 (36.23%)	28 (40.58%)	12 (17.39%)	4 (5.80%)	0 (0.00%)
I can learn a lot from Indigenous students because their cultural background is different from mine	25 (36.23%)	25 (36.23%)	10 (14.49%)	8 (11.59%)	1 (1.45%)
Indigenous students behave well in the classroom	5 (7.25%)	24 (34.78%)	30 (43.48%)	9 (13.04%)	1 (1.45%)
Indigenous students want to adjust to school	15 (21.74%)	35 (50.72%)	16 (23.19%)	3 (4.35%)	0 (0.00%)
Indigenous parents are interested in education of their children	2 (2.90%)	13 (18.84%)	38 (55.07%)	11 (15.94%)	5 (7.25%)
Indigenous students are as capable as non-indigenous students	11 (15.94%)	23 (33.33%)	18 (26.09%)	14 (20.29%)	3 (4.35%)
Indigenous students should try harder to study	6 (8.70%)	29 (42.03%)	24 (34.78%)	7 (10.14%)	3 (4.35%)

**Table 3** Views on school and classroom climate (69 respondents total)

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My school provides a welcoming and safe environment for all	22 (31.88%)	34 (49.28%)	11 (15.94%)	1 (1.45%)	1 (1.45%)
There is no discrimination against Indigenous students at my school	24 (34.78%)	33 (47.83%)	9 (13.04%)	2 (2.90%)	1 (1.45%)
Non-Indigenous students are welcoming to Indigenous students	18 (26.09%)	40 (57.97%)	11 (15.94%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
I feel students receive equal attention by teachers and other students regardless of whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous	29 (42.03%)	34 (49.28%)	4 (5.80%)	2 (2.90%)	0 (0.00%)
In my school Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and teachers relate well together	27 (39.13%)	34 (49.28%)	7 (10.14%)	1 (1.45%)	0 (0.00%)
School staff consistently use non-discriminatory language and behaviour towards Indigenous students	13 (18.84%)	20 (28.99%)	8 (11.59%)	15 (21.74%)	13 (18.84%)
My school should try harder to help Indigenous students	16 (23.19%)	26 (37.68%)	24 (34.78%)	2 (2.90%)	1 (1.45%)

## Professional practice

Part four of the survey explored teachers' perceptions of their own professional practice. Set out in Table 4, participant responses to this section of the survey clearly indicate that a majority of participants are interested in maintaining professional learning, particularly with a focus on issues of Indigeneity in Taiwan. While responses that are specific to a teacher's ability to teach about Indigenous history or cultural practices elicit an increase in neutral responses from participants, this may partially reflect the identified dearth of content in Initial Teacher Education programmes which explicitly addresses Indigeneity in Taiwan (Chen, 2016; Chou, 2005).

Whilst two-thirds of the respondents indicate that they can maintain a positive relationship with Indigenous parents, in section two only one-fifth of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Indigenous parents were interested in their children's education. By taking responses from each section as part of the larger whole, a fuller picture of the tension between non-Indigenous teacher perception of self and of the Indigenous student is illuminated. The final short answer 'reflective questions' section of the survey provides additional data that helps to construct our understanding of this tension.



**Table 4** Professional Practice (68 respondents total)

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I continually educate myself about cultural diversity in Taiwan	37 (54.41%)	24 (35.29%)	7 (10.29%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
I continually education myself about Indigenous cultures and issues in Taiwan	31 (45.59%)	22 (32.35%)	13 (19.12%)	2 (2.94%)	0 (0.00%)
I continually educate myself about how to avoid stereotyping and bias	37 (54.41%)	27 (39.71%)	3 (4.41%)	1 (1.47%)	0 (0.00%)
I avoid stereotyping a student whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous	41 (60.29%)	26 (38.24%)	1 (1.47%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
I feel confident in my ability to teach Indigenous students successfully	23 (33.82%)	28 (41.18%)	13 (19.12%)	3 (4.41%)	1 (1.47%)
I know that I can maintain positive relationships with Indigenous parents when tensions arise	22 (32.35%)	31 (45.59%)	12 (17.65%)	3 (4.41%)	0 (0.00%)
I feel confident in my ability to deal with Indigenous history and culture in the classroom	19 (27.94%)	26 (38.24%)	17 (25.00%)	6 (8.82%)	0 (0.00%)
I pay attention to Indigenous students so I can understand their needs	20 (29.41%)	38 (55.88%)	9 (13.24%)	1 (1.47%)	0 (0.00%)
I use new types of practices and pedagogies to help my Indigenous students	21 (30.88%)	28 (41.18%)	15 (22.06%)	4 (5.88%)	0 (0.00%)
I include Indigenous-related material in my lessons	22 (32.35%)	25 (36.76%)	13 (19.12%)	7 (10.29%)	1 (1.47%)

### Short answer responses: identifying tensions through reflective questions

In this subsection, we explore each of five open-ended questions in turn. We focus on the manner in which short answer responses illustrate a tension between participants' responses to the Likert-scale questions, and demonstrate that this tension is between an openness to Indigenous students, and an emerging participant view in which non-Indigenous teachers framed Indigenous students from a deficit perspective.

#### Question 1: meeting the needs of Indigenous students

The first short answer question asked, "What are the 2–3 most important changes that should be made in the current curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogy to meet the needs of Indigenous students?" 38 teachers out of 73 (52%) responded by highlighting a need to incorporate Indigenous content into textbooks and curriculum. Others indicated the need to start using diverse, engaging, and creative teaching methods that increased the relevance of curriculum content for Indigenous students. For instance:

[As well as using] creative teaching methods, [schools need] to include the relevant life experience into the curriculum to give [Indigenous students] a sense of achievement. (Teacher 6)

These teachers believed such practices would support Indigenous students holistically, while also respecting other cultures.

27 teachers (37%) highlighted a need to include specific elements into teacher education for future teachers to understand Indigenous peoples' life, history, culture, perspectives, and real needs. 16 teachers suggested teachers should change their practice to support Indigenous learners. For instance, one teacher stated:

[Teachers should] explore learning methods that are appropriate to Indigenous students. (Teacher 30)

Overall, responses to this first short answer question largely indicated an awareness that the actions teachers take, and the role of various structures such as curriculum content, influence educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

#### Question 2: barriers to effective teaching

Our second short-answer question asked, "What are the 2–3 most important things that 'get in the way' of your ability to do your best work as a teacher when you teach Indigenous students?" In a similar pattern to some of the Likert-scale questions, responses to this question demonstrated a shift from responses in Question 1. While Question 1's short answers were focused on teacher actions, teachers' responses to barriers that got in the way of their effective teaching were framed largely from a deficit view of Indigenous students' families, and the students themselves.

Overall, 26 teachers indicated that Indigenous families were the problem as they were uneducated, or uninterested in their children's education or future. This was often coupled with answers that indicated that Indigenous students are unmotivated in class.

[Indigenous] parents don't care about whether their child goes to school or not. They don't care about anything related to education. (Teacher 65)

For seven teachers, Indigenous student ability was explicitly perceived to be lower than that of non-Indigenous peers, and this posed a barrier to effective teaching.

Generally speaking, their learning ability is not as good as non-Indigenous students. (Teacher 30)

The responses overwhelmingly allocate responsibility for things that get in the way of better teaching to Indigenous students and their families.

However, there were a handful of responses that did examine teacher practice, or broader structural factors. While some teachers responded that the economic situation of Indigenous parents was related to their undervaluing of education, one teacher contextualised historical reasons for poverty among many Indigenous students.

The gap between Indigenous family education and school education is related to the urban-rural differences in society and the past government's correspondence with cultural differences. These result in the enslavement of the rural adults, which further impact their children's self-confidence in learning. (Teacher 44)

One teacher's response to Question 2 clearly indicates the tension between the non-Indigenous teacher's sense of self, and of their Indigenous student's ability to achieve in the current education system, perhaps without intending to:

[Indigenous students have] low learning motivation, not enough family support, [and encounter] negative attitudes from teachers. (Teacher 50)

### Question 3: changes to support effective teaching

Our third short answer question asked, 'What should be the 2–3 most important changes in the school and/or in the curriculum that would make it more possible to do your best work when you teach Indigenous students?' One theme that began to emerge through responses to Question 3 was that of relationships, and how relationships with Indigenous students and families could alter pedagogy and curriculum in a positive sense.

Take the Indigenous life and relevant topics as the content to help students understand how knowledge is constructed. (Teacher 71)

One teacher's response squarely positioned the scope of action within broader societal structures as well as within the teacher's own professional responsibility.

View Indigenous education from a perspective of equality and justice and ensure the promise of high-quality education. (Teacher 45)

Conversely, some of the suggestions offered were concerned with how to 'fix' perceived deficits in the Indigenous students, and in their families. These responses focused on counselling which would provide better ways for Indigenous students to participate in society, or to remove the Indigenous student from their Indigenous (bad influence) peers. These teachers responded to the question by allocating responsibility largely onto Indigenous students, and perceived shortcomings of their families. Responses to Question 3 demonstrated a spread of views as to where actions could be taken, and who should take them, to support Indigenous students' educational outcomes.

### Question 4: suggestions for initial teacher education

The fourth question on the survey asked, 'What are the 2–3 most important changes that Initial Teacher Education should make in preparing future teachers to teach Indigenous students?' Responses to this section of the survey suggested that existing initial teacher education (ITE) programmes should look for fuller and authentic inclusion of content about Indigenous cultures, histories, and backgrounds.

Have a basic knowledge of the historical background and living habits of the indigenous people; Treat Indigenous students equally, and let non-Indigenous students recognise, understand, and respect Indigenous students. (Teacher 56)

For several teachers, this included experiential learning, in which non-Indigenous teachers might be able to have meaningful intercultural exchanges with Indigenous groups in Taiwan. Three teachers shared deficit-framed responses to this question (11 teachers shared no response). However, none of these three responses are straightforward. For instance one teacher noted:

To lower expectation on their academic performance;  
To appreciate their art talent; To respect their life goals. (Teacher 29)

Such responses clearly illustrate the tension we identified in this study. Initially, these responses frame the Indigenous student as coming from a disadvantaged background,

or unable to perform at the same academic level of non-Indigenous peers. Equally, they suggest that changes should be made to increase relevance of the curriculum for Indigenous students, and accept their identities in a wholistic and humanist manner.

### Question 5: Indigenous student and family actions

The final short-answer question asked “What are the 2–3 most important changes that Indigenous students, and their families should make to improve their academic outcomes?” An overwhelming sense from the responses indicated that Indigenous parents should care more about their children’s education, with 26 teachers explicitly stating this. Some teachers linked a perceived lack of interest by Indigenous parents with other harmful views.

[Indigenous parents] should care about their children’s study. Also, they should have the idea of saving money to invest in their children’s study. They should not spend money randomly, like buying wine, without saving. (Teacher 65)

[Indigenous students should] avoid disturbances from families; The family members should not drink too much [alcohol]. (Teacher 15)

Other teachers stated that Indigenous parents should simply “improve their economic situation so that they would value education more” (Teacher 24), or undertake an “economic change, and family atmosphere change” (Teacher 57). These teachers’ deficit perspectives of Indigenous students and their families are palpable. One teacher responded with a question of their own:

What would improving academic performance bring to the Indigenous student? (Teacher 71)

On the other hand, some teacher responses recognised broader social factors that can influence educational outcomes, or student perceptions of education. For instance, one teacher simply stated a need:

To improve social support for the Indigenous people. (Teacher 14)

Overall, responses to this final survey question are particularly interesting when read alongside responses to the first short answer question—asking what teachers might change. There, we found a subtle shift of responsibility on to the Indigenous student, who was framed by their (and their families’) perceived deficits. In this final question, the majority of responses once more saw Indigenous students’ ethnicities as a liability to their education.

## Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate a particular tension between non-Indigenous teachers’ views of Indigenous students. On the one hand, teachers presented a clear acknowledgement that structural factors, such as curriculum, and Taiwan’s history of cultural suppression of Indigenous groups (cf. Nesterova, 2019a), have consequences for Indigenous students within the education system. On the other, teachers displayed a consistent deficit view of Indigenous students and their families in comparison to non-Indigenous peers. In this section, we draw on the theoretical device of the SRA to explore this tension further, and consider implications for teacher education.

The tension that emerges within our data is clear. By offering an explanation of the tension (social phenomenon) that we identified in this study, Hay’s (2002) ‘question of structure and agency’ is central to our analysis. But should we allocate this tension to structural factors, or to agentic factors? For instance, are Indigenous students responsible for their own educational outcomes? Or are there insurmountable barriers placed in the way of many that require teacher/curriculum/training-focused changes? What if, rather than claiming one or the other as a defining mechanism that has led to this phenomenon, we can see an intriguing interaction *between* structural and agentic factors?

In keeping with Hay (2002), we argue the strategic action (here-after ‘conduct’) available to teachers is heavily prescribed by the strategically selective context (here-after ‘context’) they operate within. Locating participating non-Indigenous teachers’ conduct from this study within the broader context in which they work is central, we argue, to understanding the manner in which these teachers are able to describe such apparently contradictory positions in relation to Indigenous students.

### The context conduct dialectic of Taiwanese non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous students

What is the context these teachers operate within? Non-Indigenous teachers live in a society that, until recently and in some cases even now, has viewed Indigenous people as a destitute and dysfunctional population at risk. While colonial legacy has left the Indigenous peoples to grapple with issues of economic underdevelopment, social marginalisation, political disempowerment, health vulnerabilities (Tu, 2007), and destroyed traditional structures and knowledge systems (Hsieh, 2006; Nesterova, 2019a), non-Indigenous people were left with the legacy of viewing Indigenous people through a persistent deficit thinking that



has led to widespread societal discrimination (Kim & Oh, 2012; Lin et al., 2017). The construction of Indigenous as primitive and inferior people in need of aide has been incorporated into books, textbooks, tourist attractions, museums, and the media (Hung, 2013; Munsterhjelm, 2002). School textbooks failed to accurately and appropriately introduce Indigenous peoples to non-Indigenous students (Su, 2006, 2007), perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices about Indigenous peoples' lives (Chou, 2005).

Attempts to enhance the knowledge about Indigenous cultures (and to improve Indigenous students' outcomes) through a multicultural curriculum that focused on diversity, local issues, and prevention of prejudice (Jackson, 2014) have not succeeded (Nesterova, 2019a). The reasons for that include a view of Indigenous cultures, identities, and languages as hierarchically inferior those of the dominant Chinese groups (Damm, 2012; Huang, 2007; Liu & Lin, 2010) and the resultant expectation that Indigenous people should assimilate into Taiwanese society while still displaying their unique artistic performances (Nesterova, 2019a; Wang, 2004). This discourse was supported by research that 'discovered' that cultural differences of Indigenous people are seen as a key limiting factor in their academic underachievement as they prevented Indigenous children from adapting to the mainstream learning environment and adjusting to educational expectations (cf. Lee and Chen, 2014; Chen, 2015, Chen, 2012; Huang, 2007).

Socially, non-Indigenous people continue to see Indigenous people as slated for manual and low-paying jobs (Hsieh, 2016) and as prone to substance abuse (Chang et al., 2011) that keep them at the bottom of Taiwanese society. These perceived choices by Indigenous Taiwanese are seen as responsible for maintaining and even expanding 'the general wellbeing gap between Indigenes and the majority' (Huang & Liu, 2016, p. 304). Additional negative views of Indigenous people are widely held, including stories about high suicide rates associated with mental disorders and alcoholism (Lester, 2006), and the selling of Indigenous girls into sex work to pay off debts that was still widespread in the early 2000s (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2006; Stainton, 2009). These developments continue to stigmatise Indigenous people (Hsieh, 2016) while the general population remains unaware of the factors that had been forcing Indigenous people 'into the corner of poverty' (Chiu, 2005, pp. 2–3) where their focus is mostly on 'stay[ing] employed and mak[ing] ends meet' (Chou, 2005, p. 8).

The establishment of the Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee in 2017, following the official Presidential apology of 2016 for the island's colonial part and its legacy, opened a new chapter in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. However, reconciliation processes and the development of an accurate understanding of historical injustices will take time, while

the absence of education as a central focal point of the Committee may prevent teachers and schools from engaging with these processes and themes. There has been official recognition of Indigenous peoples and resultant education policies to protect Indigenous rights, to support the development of a particular kind of education, to revitalise Indigenous cultures and languages, and to remove barriers to education. However, the education system has remained unable to address inequalities and injustices Indigenous people face within the system (Nesterova, 2022a).

Teachers' conduct has been the subject of the findings in this paper. It is the conduct of non-Indigenous teachers who participated in this survey which draws out the tensions between perceptions of non-Indigenous teacher (self) and Indigenous student (other). While many teachers pointed to a need for useful amendments to curriculum, or an improved cultural understanding to support Indigenous student outcomes, most teachers did not acknowledge a need to change an unjust and culturally and historically insensitive structure Indigenous students study within. Neither did many teacher respondents acknowledge their own role in *maintaining* this structure and how teacher education could be re-shaped for teachers to help *transform* the structure. However, some did. Two participants in particular responded in depth about the need for teachers to act upon and alter structures such as curriculum—both within schools and within ITE programmes—to better reflect the multicultural reality of Taiwan.

It is through this interaction *between* structural and agentic factors, between non-Indigenous teachers' context and conduct, that we can better understand the context within which Indigenous students are learning. If we focus solely on teachers' conduct, we encounter a partial view of the broader phenomenon, and thus are only able to arrive at a partial argument. We could suggest that, for non-Indigenous teachers in Taiwan, holding such conflicting positions within the profession appears to be untenable. However, by introducing a dialectical understanding of these teachers' context (Hay, 2002; Lopes Cardozo, 2009), we find a contradictory set of views towards Indigenous students (conduct) that are a product of the broader social, political, and historical conditions (context) in which non-Indigenous teachers operate.

### Implications for teacher education

A natural next step is to consider what should be done about this tension, and who should do it. Does opportunity for action lie with non-Indigenous teacher agency in dismantling oppressive or exclusive educational structures? Or is this a task for Indigenous students and their families? The SRA helps us to see this problematic dichotomy for what it is—a partial response to only a part of the conduct context dialectic. Bringing together both conduct *and* context,

agentic opportunities lie in individual action—such as ceasing the acceptance of discriminatory language by teachers towards Indigenous students—as well as within the structures that such actions build and reinforce—such as what participants identified as a Han-centric approach to curriculum, and to teacher training. There are several implications for ITE, continuing professional development (CPD) for non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous students, and the curriculum. We briefly consider three.

First, ITE could include a substantial component that provides relevant knowledge about Indigenous peoples in Taiwan (e.g., Indigenous peoples' lives, histories, cultures, languages, perspectives, and real needs). Such work could encourage the re-thinking of teaching methods to consider ways Indigenous students acquire knowledge and skills, and that hold authentic relevance for Indigenous students. One powerful way to do so is by exploring opportunities to incorporate Indigenous pedagogies into pre-service teacher education. For example, adoption of talking circles that draw on Indigenous oral knowledge systems in teacher education will allow in-service teachers to learn Indigenous ways of relating, learning, and knowing and create a safe space and a sense of community in the classroom (Hanson & Danyluk, 2022). Pre-service teachers could also have lived experience in Indigenous communities and/or in schools with a substantial Indigenous population through internships to better understand Indigenous communities they serve. This approach may also work for in-service teachers to offer opportunities to build trust and genuine relationships with Indigenous communities. Indeed, this echoes suggestions made by study participants, indicating a willingness already at work.

Second, in-service and pre-service programmes could be built around components of transitional and historical justice processes, including reconciliation. There is scope to build in such understandings drawing on comparative and international education literature (cf. Cobb & Couch, 2018; Shah et al., 2017). In-service teachers could establish relationships with Indigenous parents, perhaps through parent–teacher committees, to cooperate in supporting students' education. These committees may offer authentic sites for interactions which lead to mutual understanding, trust, and respect to open pathways for culturally safe parental involvement in the students' education. Such work may support teachers' holistic understanding of their students, challenging dominant social narratives which legitimate a deficit perspective towards Indigenous students and their communities.

Third, curriculum could link Indigenous students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds to school classrooms. Such curriculum development could incorporate the issues of transitional and historical justice, including such aspects as historical truth and memories, colonial legacies, and their effect on Indigenous communities, as well as anti-racist and

relational justice values and components to establish new ways of living together that are devoid of stereotypes, prejudice, and bias.

## Conclusion

This paper has reported on the findings from a survey of non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous students in three locations in Taiwan. We have demonstrated that teacher responses demarcate a tension between participants' views of self, and of Indigenous students they teach. We drew on the SRA to locate this apparently contradictory set of positions held by teachers surveyed within a conduct context dialectic, which enabled us to argue that the tension we identified has its roots both within the actions that teachers are taking, and within Taiwan's broader history of marginalisation and exclusion of Indigenous peoples (Nesterova, 2019b). We concluded by indicating that teacher training holds a significant position in pursuing pathways forward, both to ensure ITE programmes authentically engage with Indigenous knowledges, languages, and histories, and that in-service teacher training addresses what participants identified as discriminatory practices towards Indigenous students. We also pointed to potential within future curriculum development which reflects the same authentic engagement we suggest for teacher education. Such steps are important parts of a broader project to support Indigenous students' educational outcomes in Taiwan.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** All authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

**Ethical approval** Ethical approval for this study was granted prior to conducting fieldwork.

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