

Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge into Curriculum Construction for Justice-Sensitive Inclusive Education

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Abstract

To promote historical justice and educational justice for Indigenous peoples in post-colonial societies, it is important to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and historical narratives into school curriculum, not only for enacting inclusive education but also for implementing justice-sensitive pedagogy for social justice in curriculum change. Over the past decades, in Taiwan, there have been endeavors to support the construction of Indigenous knowledge systems, and the newly reformed national Curriculum Guidelines have incorporated some historical and cultural perspectives of Indigenous peoples. However, the content and supporting mechanisms are not quite relevant, and the goal of promoting historical justice and educational justice for Indigenous peoples has not been fully understood and implemented. With the attempt to explore and develop collaboratively feasible plans for justice-sensitive oriented Indigenous Education for All, this study conducted focus group interviews and individual interviews to learn from Indigenous education leaders, scholars, and practitioners about their experiences in Indigenous education and their aspirations for incorporating Indigenous perspectives into school curriculum for justice-sensitive inclusive education. Based on the learning from 46 Indigenous participants and 14 non-Indigenous participants, the findings are very insightful and constructive, which can serve as a foundation for further development of justice-sensitive pedagogy and inclusive curriculum for promoting Indigenous Education for All.

Keywords: inclusive education, Indigenous Education for All, Indigenous perspective, justice-sensitive pedagogy

1. Introduction

In the pursuit of promoting historical justice and educational justice for Indigenous peoples in post-colonial societies, many countries around the globe have actively incorporated Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and historical narratives into school curriculum. In line with such a global trend, in Taiwan, the government has developed a powerful policy and legal framework to protect Indigenous rights and development over the past decades, and there have

been endeavors to support the construction of Indigenous knowledge systems. However, in view of the fact that although the newly reformed 2019 Curriculum Guidelines has incorporated some historical and cultural perspectives of Indigenous peoples, the content and supporting mechanisms are not quite relevant, and the goal of promoting historical justice and educational justice for Indigenous peoples has not been fully understood and implemented. Therefore, it is imperative to explore feasible approaches and suitable inclusive curriculum knowledge construction that will help enhance historically and culturally sensitive knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples. Also, it is vital to involve both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers to be attended to the concerns of historical justice and educational justice of Indigenous peoples, and thereby promoting justice-sensitive oriented inclusive curriculum and teaching practices of Indigenous Education for All.

This study, as the beginning exploration of a three-year research project, aims to look into and to sort out the experiences of and aspirations from Indigenous scholars, experts, and educators regarding their endeavors in promoting and constructing Indigenous knowledge systems. It is intended that the findings and outcomes from this initial exploration can serve as a foundation for further development of feasible plans for justice-sensitive inclusive education with Indigenous perspectives and aspirations. Based on this, the purposes of this study include:

- (1) To understand the perspectives and aspirations of Indigenous education leaders and practitioners regarding the historical justice and educational justice for Indigenous peoples.
- (2) To understand Indigenous scholars' as well as practitioners' expectations for and experiences in constructing Indigenous knowledge systems and to collect the resources they have used and created in the process.
- (3) To analyze and to sort out the Indigenous peoples' histories, cultural perspectives, knowledge contents, and ways of learning that can be historically, culturally, and cognitively sensitive incorporated into school curriculum for inclusive Indigenous education.

2. Imperative need for justice-sensitive Indigenous Education for All

Today, schools and classrooms in many countries are increasingly diverse, encompassing immigrants, ethnic minorities, and Indigenous peoples. To address this diversity, ensuring inclusiveness and equity in education is crucial [1]. It involves a transformative pedagogical process that aims to eliminate all forms of prejudice and discrimination through education. It also requires a commitment to education that enables all students to experience a sense of well-being, self-worth, and belonging, helping them to reach their full potential.

The OECD [2] suggests that adopting a multidimensional and intersectional perspective can help education systems promote equity and inclusion, enhance the well-being and learning of all students, and enable them to interact with others in an increasingly complex and diverse societies. According to the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report on Inclusion and Education [3], more equitable and inclusive education has been shown to benefit all students and improve the quality of education as students have better opportunities to realize their potential, improve their academic performance, and more importantly, promote their socio-emotional growth, self-esteem and peer recognition. Therefore, the importance of promoting equitable and inclusive education in schools and classrooms, as Mezzanotte [4] points out, has various clear rationales, spanning from human rights, to educational, individual and societal gains.

Since fair and inclusive education is one of the most powerful levers for building more equitable and cohesive societies [2], we need to consider the inherent human, cultural, social and political reasons for promoting more equitable and inclusive education policies and approaches, not only for the development of individuals but also for building meaningful relationships among individuals, ethnic groups and nations. Especially in postcolonial, ethnically diverse societies, promoting justice-based inclusive education is crucial as it upholds the fundamental human right to education for all, fosters social and historical justice, elevates the voices of vulnerable minorities, and creates more equitable and cohesive societies. In recent years, many countries, including New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, have actively incorporated the knowledge, perspectives, and historical narratives of Indigenous peoples into the promotion of justice-based inclusive education [5], [6], [7]. Not only increasing efforts have given to the enactment of inclusive education that helps resist the coloniality of knowledge, of power, and of being [8], [9], [10], but also increasing advocacies have been placed on “justice-sensitive pedagogy for social justice” as a vital theme in curriculum change and teacher education [11], [12], [13].

However, in order to provide a basis for enabling dialogues on the conceptualization of justice-sensitive pedagogies and practices for inclusive Indigenous Education for All, it is indispensable to articulate the recognition of the realities of oppression, repression, domination, and exclusion and to accentuate the recognition of alternative form of Indigenous knowledge [14]. Also, it may necessarily involve “the work of decoloniality,” as Walton [10] stresses, to dismantle the relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of mainstream values, and, as Makoelle [14] points out, to enable constructive dialogues for equitable inclusive education from cultural diversity and cognitive justice perspectives without qualifying standards of western hegemonic discourse of thought and practice. It is imperative to acknowledge the coexistence of different forms of knowledge and different ways of knowing. Schools need to recognize this diversity, responsively incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems into school curricula, and consider the cognitive justice of students from different cultural backgrounds [15]. Studies in many countries may indicate that Indigenous students have relatively low academic achievement, and many students show a distinct lack of enthusiasm for or even aversion to schooling. Some scholars believe this is due to a lack of sensitivity among educators toward Indigenous peoples’ cognitive styles and worldviews, as well as a failure of mainstream school curricula and teaching practices to reflect Indigenous worldviews, resulting in curriculum that is culturally incompatible with Indigenous students [16], [17]. Indeed, without genuinely understanding of Indigenous worldviews and truly shifting epistemologies to reflect the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, it is impossible to teach in a more just way that meets learning needs of students with diverse worldviews and cognitive styles.

Faced with this problem, in Taiwan, though the Ministry of Education has resorted to enriching the curriculum with Indigenous elements, this has not fundamentally altered the core values, assumptions, and logic of the curriculum. According to the recent study conducted by Couch and his colleagues [18], the education provided in schools has been limited to the dominant Han Chinese culture, and the institutional structure has not yet changed to respond to the learning needs of Indigenous students. Further, most Han teachers do not know how to teach properly the content about Indigenous history and culture being presented in the curriculum guidelines and textbooks, nor how to deal appropriately with inequity, stereotype, or microaggression issues related to Indigenous peoples. There are still many underlying political, cultural, social, school environment, and other influencing factors need to be clarified and resolved. Given these pressing needs, this study explores feasible approaches for developing justice-sensitive oriented Indigenous Education for All. It

aims to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into inclusive curriculum knowledge construction and pedagogical transformation, with the intentions to enhance teachers' insight and sensitivity to Indigenous worldviews and educational justice, as well as their capacities in teaching equity-related issues. Hopefully, all students will have the opportunity to learn about, understand, and appreciate Indigenous worldviews, histories, cultures, knowledge systems, and ways of knowing, thereby achieving a more equitable and inclusive Indigenous Education for All.

3. Research methods and data sources

Based on the research purposes, this first-year study (2024/8/1~2025/7/31) was designed to conduct focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews with Indigenous educators, leaders, and academics. Firstly, with the attempt to understand the perspectives, aspirations, and experiences of Indigenous education leaders, advocates, and scholars, six focus group interviews and three in-depth individual interviews were conducted. Altogether, there were 32 participants being interviewed, including 15 Indigenous scholars/academics, 12 Indigenous school leaders and experienced teachers, and 5 Indigenous culture promoters from 13 different tribes in different parts of Taiwan. Then, followed up with the attempt to understand the experiences and expectations of educational practitioners involved in Indigenous Student Programs, visitations to 12 secondary schools in different parts of Taiwan were arranged along with 11 group interviews and 1 individual interview were conducted. Altogether, there were 28 secondary teachers being interviewed, including 14 Indigenous teachers and 14 non-Indigenous teachers.

Each interview lasted for about two hours. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and all the interviews were audio-recorded with written consent from the participants. Each interview had been transcribed verbatim in English. Grounded theory approach was used in data analysis of this study. While deductive coding and theme development were used, the data analysis was largely inductive with themes emerging from the data. After each interview was transcribed and analysed, the results of preliminary analysis were sent to the participants for member check, and their reflective responses were collected for amendment of the analysis.

4. Findings and discussion

Since promoting justice-sensitive education for Indigenous peoples must be linked to thinking on issues related to educational justice from Indigenous peoples' perspectives, the analysis of the findings is focused on (1) how the Indigenous education scholars, leaders, and practitioners perceive and assess the

feasibility of the existing resources of Indigenous knowledge systems; (2) what Indigenous knowledge, cultures, values, historical narratives, as well as issues and perspectives should to be incorporated into school curriculum; and (3) what are their expectations, concerns, and suggestions regarding Indigenous intellectual sovereignty and the politics of Indigenous representation in textbooks. In response to the barriers to educational justice for Indigenous peoples in Taiwan [19], the discussion will delve into how to translate and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and resources into school curricula; and how to transform and apply the teaching experiences and practices of Indigenous teachers in Indigenous communities to general public schools, so that all students have the opportunity to learn and to appreciate Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing.

4.1. Aspirations for justice-sensitive inclusive education

Inclusive education requires culturally responsive and justice-sensitive pedagogy that appreciate and respects Indigenous languages, traditions, values, knowledge and ways of knowing, fostering empathy, cultural understanding. To promote equitable and inclusive education that incorporates Indigenous world views, epistemology and perspectives, pointed out by Indigenous education leaders and scholars, it is necessary to clarify the concept and the purpose of Indigenous Education for All—to help every student gain the culture awareness and literacy they need or to help Indigenous students have equal opportunities to understand their own culture? It is also important to identify well-intentioned and appropriate themes, elements and principles that can be linked to school curriculum in ways that reflect Indigenous knowledge systems. They believe “visioning around the ethos,” coupled with intent for transformation and intent for reinvention, is key to Indigenous resurgence through more equitable and inclusive education.

They expect that the related efforts should seek to establish rapport in Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborations: advance the goals of equity-based inclusive education in relevant and respectful ways; engage in curriculum knowledge construction in ways that enhance respectful and reciprocal relations; develop culturally appropriate and justice-sensitive pedagogies in the implementation of Indigenous Education for All; and provide safe, supportive and resourceful learning environments where all students, colleagues, and perspectives are valued and respected, and prejudices, racism can be proactively addressed.

To meet these expectations, they anticipate that a support system for teacher professional development in inclusive Indigenous education must be established so that teachers can become agentic curriculum designers, draw on cultural experiences to make meaningful connections to subject matter knowledge,

and integrate Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing into school curricula and pedagogy. In addition, it is necessary to extend the concept of Indigenous Education for All from campus to the wider society and establish various collaborative networks—not only to carry out interdisciplinary collaborative research with different communities, construct Indigenous knowledge systems, integrate and strengthen scattered Indigenous resources and disconnected platforms, but also to uphold Indigenous sovereignty, advance Indigenous thoughts on policy and praxis to promote policies that support Indigenous rights and eliminate culturally prejudiced practices within educational institutions.

4.2. Noteworthy themes and principles for inclusive curriculum knowledge construction

Many Indigenous scholars and education leaders believe that incorporating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into school curricula can lead to more effective and culturally appropriate learning of the Sustainable Development Goals, contribute to a better understanding of the world's collective heritage, and provide valuable inspirations for living in balance with the natural world. They suggest that their traditional ecological knowledge, ethics of land and relationality, agricultural and food economics, hunting and trapping, forestry, marine culture, and sustainable resource management and governance practices should be introduced into school curricula to provide lessons for addressing global challenges and encouraging environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, Indigenous scholars, education leaders and advocates point out that given the many misconceptions and microaggressions against Indigenous peoples in schools and society, it is crucial to address Indigenous culture and identity issues in school curricula. They argue that schools should expose students to important themes such as Indigenous languages and literatures, spirituality and worldviews, oral traditions and storytelling, cultural expressions, the history of Indigenous colonization and movements for Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Through teaching and learning about these interconnected themes, it not only helps students recognize and value Indigenous cultural perspectives and practices, inspiring them to promote and protect Indigenous cultural identity, but also helps schools promote inclusion and employ justice-sensitive pedagogies to address the pressing cultural and identity issues facing Indigenous Peoples and their communities today.

Based on the experiences of high school teachers (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who teach Indigenous education programs, the most frequently addressed topics include traditional knowledge in areas like harvesting, crafting, and stories, songs,

rituals and ancestral spirituality; hot-button issues such as historical accounts of transitional justice, development on Indigenous lands, microaggressions, naming, identity, as well as health, work philosophies, religious and cultural conflicts, etc. To ensure that Indigenous knowledge is relevant to its essence, experienced Indigenous teachers advice that the chosen topics or issues should be contextualized and explored in a holistic manner so that Indigenous knowledge does not become an objective, fragmented set of content external to students. Teachers must be mindful that the process of drawing on Indigenous knowledge requires thoughtful social and ethical considerations, and that respectful, responsible, relevant and reflexive engagement is required when accessing or exploring Indigenous knowledge.

To incorporate Indigenous perspectives for the construction of inclusive curriculum knowledge, Indigenous scholars and education leaders are reminded of the importance of considering the relevance topic selection and theme organized across different educational levels, and pay attention to the sequence, continuity, interconnectedness, and progression of Indigenous knowledge learning across different disciplines and educational stages. School curriculum design must go beyond superficial cultural activities and incorporate the essence and spirit of Indigenous knowledge. Furthermore, it is necessary to integrate Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing with Western scientific approaches, encourage dialogue and critical thinking, and seek commonalities of knowledge and experiences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Doing so will not only help integrate Indigenous perspectives into all subject knowledge and content to break through a single dominant perspective, but will also help enhance understanding and appreciation of Indigenous knowledge and practices, which contribute to the world's collective heritage. For example, they offer vital wisdom for living in harmony with the natural world and provide alternative solutions to environmental conservation, disaster preparedness, and other global challenges.

4.3. Challenges of and possibilities for Inclusive justice-sensitive pedagogical practices

Taiwan current National Curriculum Guidelines has incorporated some content on Indigenous history, culture and emerging issues, the pedagogical practices that promote Indigenous knowledge and justice have not yet been fully implemented. Many structural barriers, prevailing societal values, and pedagogical challenges remain to be overcome, such as systemic biases, lack of recognition, socio-cultural issues of diverse values and negative perceptions, as well as institutional and resource constraints. The challenges and barriers frequently brought up by Indigenous

scholars and education leaders are fundamental ones, including disparities in Indigenous knowledge across tribes and even across regions and ethnic groups; insufficient culturally relevant learning materials written from an Indigenous perspective; inadequate communication and collaboration between knowledge centers, Indigenous education centers, and schools; and a shortage of adequately trained teachers to teach Indigenous knowledge. In order to bridge the gap between traditional Indigenous and mainstream Western knowledge systems and ensure cultural sensitivity, they suggest that teachers urgently need specific professional development and expertise in cross-cultural communication, as well as mutual collaboration between Indigenous people and teachers to explore and develop courses that integrate Indigenous knowledge with subject content.

However, for teachers (both indigenous and non-indigenous) who teach Indigenous education courses, the challenges they face are often more practical, including challenges from students, colleagues, curriculum, and school culture. They point out that most non-Indigenous students lack empathy and identification with Indigenous peoples and may have dismissive attitude toward Indigenous knowledge. Even more regrettably, many Indigenous students lack understanding and appreciation of their own culture, which sometimes leads them to reject cultural learning and performance. Many non-Indigenous colleagues also lack understanding of Indigenous culture and issues, making it difficult for them to shift their perspectives and understand the situations and perspectives of Indigenous students. Even some Indigenous colleagues may lack the confidence to teach their own cultural knowledge and may hide their identity for fear of being required to teach Indigenous courses because of their identity. When they try to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their teaching, very often they often struggle to create constructive, inclusive learning environments due to inflexible curriculum, limited class time, and a lack of necessary teaching materials and assessment tools appropriate for all students. Furthermore, many teachers admit that due to rigid school structures, they often struggle to obtain adequate administrative support for learning activities that explore Indigenous knowledge and culture. This is particularly true in a traditionally test-driven education culture where teachers are less likely to teach Indigenous-related topics.

Despite these challenges, there is still hope for achieving the ideal of incorporating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into the curriculum, thereby promoting more equitable inclusive teaching practices in schools. To achieve this goal, it is important to call on all stakeholders to work together, guided by culturally sensitive frameworks, through participatory inquiry, and through constructive communication and collaboration across research, education, and policy development. As suggested by Indigenous scholars and education leaders, key

strategies include creating culturally safe research, teaching and learning environments, collaborating with Indigenous communities to incorporating oral traditions, land-based learning, and traditional hands-on practices, and developing policies that prioritize the hiring of Indigenous teachers and provide teacher training programs that enable teachers to implement inclusive Indigenous education in their teaching. Encouragingly, in recent years, the government has strongly supported research projects on constructing Indigenous knowledge systems and has established local institutions, such as the Indigenous Resource Centers across Taiwan, offering courses accessible to Indigenous and Han Chinese teachers and students to promote cross-cultural learning and dialogue. The government has also implemented policies to establish Indigenous Experimental Schools and offer Indigenous education programs in public schools near Indigenous communities. Because of these measures, many programs or workshops for teacher professional development have emerged and tailored to the needs of different regions and tribes. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers of the same subject are encouraged to form regional curriculum co-design learning communities. Many teachers have experienced the benefits of “Indigenous-Han co-learning” through collaborative teaching in experimental schools or tribes. In the process of teaching together, a collaborative cross-cultural learning community naturally forms and gradually grows. By understanding the shared life experiences of Indigenous and Han Chinese, non-Indigenous teachers can better empathize with the issues and challenges faced by Indigenous peoples, develop a caring attitude towards them, and be willing to create a more equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive learning environment for all students. More importantly, through interactions with both Indigenous and Han Chinese teachers and tribal members, students have deepened their understanding of Indigenous life and worldviews, cultivated their ability to shift perspectives, and enhanced their cultural awareness. These advances offer hope for promoting inclusive, justice-sensitive pedagogical practices in Taiwan.

5. Conclusion

Promoting justice-sensitive inclusive Indigenous Education for All is vital because it helps create equitable learning environments where all students, regardless of ethnic background, are valued, respected, and empowered to learn, and are equipped with the critical thinking and empathy needed to challenge social injustices and actively promote positive social change. Drawing on the aspirations, experiences and suggestions shared by Indigenous scholars, education leaders and teachers, and non-Indigenous teachers, this study explores the promises and opportunities of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into school

curricula to provide a more equitable and inclusive education for all students.

There are many valuable topics and resources of Indigenous cultural and natural knowledge being identified and developed; however, they must be further translated and incorporated into school curricula so that all students (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) can learn about and appreciate the worldviews and perspectives of Indigenous peoples. It is important to go beyond the superficial coverage of Indigenous content and extract the essential meaning and values of Indigenous culture and knowledge systems. Also, it is necessary to make dialectical connections with the mainstream Western knowledge in school curricula and reflect critically on the differences and the commonalities between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. In order to effectively and thoughtfully integrate Indigenous perspectives into school curricula and foster culture-awareness and justice-sensitive learning, Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers need to learn and collaborate together. Only then can the relational pedagogical practices be mutually exercised and the aspirations for Indigenous Education for All be truly realized.

With the intention to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into curriculum construction for justice-sensitive inclusive education, the findings of this study may help build empathic understanding and mutual collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and meet the learning needs of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It is hoped that an increased sense of participation and more proactive pedagogical practices will happen in various regions and schools in Taiwan and other countries.

6. References

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