



Strategies for Fostering Peer Relationship Development Among Indigenous Elementary School Students in Taiwan

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Published Online: 06 September 2025	In classrooms where Han students constitute the majority, Indigenous students often face the dual challenge of being both a numerical minority and a socially disadvantaged group in Taiwan's elementary schools. Their distinct cultural backgrounds can further complicate the formation of meaningful peer relationships. As a result, identifying effective strategies to support indigenous students in developing positive peer connections within Han-dominated educational settings has become an urgent concern for educators. This article focuses on indigenous education, specifically exploring approaches to promote peer relationship development among Indigenous elementary school students. Three strategies are proposed: (1) enhancing teachers' cultural sensitivity in supporting students from diverse backgrounds, (2) fostering students' positive and inclusive perceptions of ethnic diversity, and (3) preventing gender segregation among children. Through this exploration, the article aims to inform both
Corresponding Author: Yi-Huang Shih	theoretical understanding and practical interventions in the cultivation of positive peer relationships for indigenous students.
KEYWORDS: Elementary School, Indigenous Education, Peer Relationship	

INTRODUCTION

Taiwan is a diverse society that includes Indigenous people as well as settlers who migrated from Mainland China and other parts of the world throughout history. While centuries of assimilationist policies have led to systemic disadvantages to Taiwan's Indigenous people, in the past few decades, diversity and multiculturalism have been increasingly recognized as positive features of Taiwan worth appreciating and cultivating.

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establish a deeper connection with and understand the meaning of their ethnic identity (Lin, Jackson & Yan, 2025). Under the dominant influence of Han mainstream culture, the social structures and economic systems of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples have undergone profound transformations. With the island's rapid economic development, indigenous modes of production likewise shifted, as many families, in pursuit of improved living conditions, were compelled to abandon traditional agriculture and seek employment in urban centers. This demographic transition led to increasing migration to metropolitan regions, where indigenous and Han students interact more frequently in elementary school settings. Within such contexts, however, indigenous students often encounter significant challenges in cultivating positive peer relationships. Research has shown that indigenous children who relocate to metropolitan areas frequently experience difficulties in life adjustment due to peer relationship barriers. In classrooms where Han students constitute the majority, indigenous students, in particular, are positioned as a numerical minority and a socially disadvantaged group. Their distinct cultural backgrounds further intensify the obstacles they face in establishing meaningful peer connections. Consequently, identifying effective strategies to support indigenous students in fostering positive peer relationships within Han-dominated educational environments emerges as a pressing issue that warrants careful attention from educators (Liu, Wu, & Chen, 1995; Shih, 2018, 2020; Teyra, Lai, Hsieh, Shen & Leung, 2024; Wang & Shih, 2022).

2. PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Peer relationships represent a fundamental form of interpersonal connection that plays a critical role in both individual development and the process of socialization. For children, these relationships provide opportunities to acquire social skills, develop empathy, and negotiate conflicts, all of which are essential for their overall emotional and cognitive growth. In educational contexts where Indigenous students are in the minority. Research indicates that Indigenous students often face unique challenges in forming meaningful connections with their peers due to cultural differences, language barriers, and experiences of marginalization.

Consequently, understanding and supporting the development of positive peer relationships among Indigenous students is vital, not only for fostering their academic engagement and social inclusion but also for promoting their sense of belonging within predominantly Han-majority school environments. Teachers can play a pivotal role by implementing culturally responsive pedagogies, facilitating collaborative learning activities, and promoting inclusive classroom interactions that recognize and value indigenous students' cultural identities. Such strategies not only enhance peer interaction but also contribute to a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all students (Rubin, Bukowski & Laursen, 2011; Shih, 2024; Teyra, Lai, Hsieh, Shen & Leung, 2024).

3. STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING PEER RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG INDIGENOUS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

3.1 Enhancing Teachers' Sensitivity for Students from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

In the context of classroom management and peer interaction, teachers must develop a heightened awareness of the challenges Indigenous students may encounter due to ethnic differences. This requires not only avoiding inadvertent labeling of Indigenous students but also actively guiding all students to appreciate and respect peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. From the perspective of multicultural education, schooling should recognize and affirm students' cultural differences, treating them as educational resources rather than deficiencies (Banks, 2009; Shih, 2020, 2024). Banks (2015) further delineates five dimensions of multicultural education—content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture—that provide a comprehensive framework for addressing ethnic and cultural diversity in classrooms. For example, teachers can integrate Indigenous perspectives into curriculum content, foster critical reflection on cultural assumptions, reduce prejudice through positive intergroup contact, adapt pedagogy to ensure equitable participation, and cultivate a school environment that empowers marginalized groups (Banks, 2015).

In Taiwan, relevant educational policies have echoed these principles. For instance, the *Indigenous Peoples Education Act* explicitly safeguards indigenous students' cultural rights and educational needs, emphasizing the respect and integration of indigenous languages and cultures within schools (Council of Indigenous Peoples, Executive Yuan, R.O.C., 2016). Likewise, the *2019 Curriculum Guidelines* (commonly referred to as the 108 Curriculum) identify multicultural competence as one of the core literacies, underscoring the importance of fostering cultural understanding, respect for diversity, and social solidarity (Ministry of Education, 2019). Against this backdrop, it is essential for teachers to establish classroom norms grounded in respect and equality in order to prevent discriminatory or mocking behaviors and to cultivate a safe and inclusive learning environment for indigenous students. Furthermore, Gay's (2018) theory of culturally responsive teaching highlights the need for pedagogy that affirms students' cultural identities, incorporates their cultural knowledge into learning, and builds meaningful connections between home and school experiences. Implementing peer-support mechanisms, such as buddy systems, aligns with this approach by promoting interethnic cooperation, strengthening friendship and trust, and expanding students' social support networks (Gay, 2018). Such practices not only embody the principles of “equitable participation” and “social justice” central to multicultural education but also concretely realize Taiwan's educational commitment to multiculturalism and ethnic equality (Banks, 2015; Council of Indigenous Peoples, Executive Yuan, R.O.C., 2016; Ministry of Education, 2019). Ultimately, these approaches help indigenous students develop a positive sense of belonging and motivation in the classroom while enabling all students to achieve deeper cultural understanding and empathy in diverse learning environments.

3.2 Enhancing Students' Positive and Friendly Ethnic Images

In the context of indigenous education, the exploration of interethnic relations constitutes a critical area of inquiry. Within the interactions between Indigenous and Han students, particular attention must be given to the role of ethnic images in shaping peer relationships. The concept of ethnic image,

closely related to that of ethnic stereotypes, is central to both ethnic identity formation and the study of intergroup relations. While ethnic stereotypes often carry predominantly negative connotations, the notion of ethnic image is comparatively more neutral, allowing for a more accurate reflection of shared perceptions. Ethnic images may be defined as “collective beliefs about the attributes of members of a specific ethnic group, usually referring to personality traits and behavioral characteristics.” For instance, Hakka people are often perceived as diligent, frugal, and cohesive. In classroom interactions, both in-group and out-group ethnic images subtly influence students' ethnic identity development as well as the degree of ethnic social distance that exists within the class (Chen, 1997). For indigenous students, whether ethnic images contribute to or hinder the development of positive peer relationships is a matter that educators must carefully consider. Teachers, therefore, play a vital role in cultivating positive and respectful ethnic images among students. Practical strategies for enhancing students' positive and friendly ethnic images include: (a) integrating multicultural content into curricula such as language, social studies, and the arts, thereby exposing students to indigenous stories, literature, art, and everyday knowledge to highlight cultural diversity; and (b) encouraging critical reading and discussion, which enables students to reflect on potential stereotypes or biases within learning materials and to approach cultural understanding from multiple perspectives.

3.3 Prevent Gender Segregation Among Children

From the perspective of educational history, learners' experiences of education have often varied according to gender. Consequently, gender issues have recently become a central focus of inquiry within educational contexts. Gender is a complex relational construct, defined by cultural and social norms. In educational settings, discussions frequently center on gender differences, and teachers may be required to address challenges that students encounter while developing their understanding of gender, such as issues related to sexual orientation and gender expression. Educators, therefore, need to remain sensitive to these concerns and strive to create gender equality within the classroom. Moreover, Geri's research has shown that children begin to recognize gender roles embedded

in society from an early age (Biklen & Pollard, 2001; Klein, 1993; McNeely, 1997). In schools, however, boys and girls tend to form gender-based peer groups, interacting primarily with same-gender peers within their own social spaces. They rarely participate in one another's groups and prefer to remain with peers of the same gender. This phenomenon of gender separation becomes increasingly pronounced as children grow older. Importantly, such separation is not imposed by external forces but rather reflects boys' and girls' own tendencies to avoid cross-gender interactions. Hallinan's (1979) study of friendship cliques among elementary school students in grades four to six found that these groups were exclusively composed of same-gender peers, with no mixed-gender cliques at all, suggesting that gender is a stronger factor of separation than ethnicity (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 1999; Tian, 1998). Thus, the phenomenon of gender separation among elementary school children indicates that most students at this stage develop deeper peer relationships with same-gender classmates while avoiding close connections with peers of the opposite gender. Inevitably, this pattern of gender separation also affects the development of peer relationships among Indigenous students. Accordingly, teachers must seek to minimize gender separation in classrooms in order to prevent negative impacts on Indigenous students' peer relationship development.

4. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of educational history, learners' experiences in education have often varied according to differences in race and social class, making racial issues within education a central concern of scholars. In major Western educational systems, the issue of race in education has increasingly been regarded as a significant topic. In the United States, racial problems permeate various institutions and interpersonal relationships, highlighting culture as a fundamental dimension of society as a whole (Apple, 2001; Gillborn, 2000; Klein, 1993). However, cultural differences frequently lead to conflict. In response to this challenge, the concept of multicultural education emerged. Multicultural education seeks to accommodate cultural diversity and promote equal educational opportunities. Its aim is to dismantle the assimilative dominance of majority groups, provide

disadvantaged groups with pathways to educational success, and reduce the gap between democratic ideals (fairness) and social realities (inequality). In Taiwan, Taiwan's Indigenous children are culturally and linguistically different and socially and economically marginalized compared to their Han Chinese peers. For decades, education assimilated Indigenous people into the mainstream society by undermining their languages, cultures and traditional spaces. Since the 1990s, multicultural policies have been cast as the remedy for the inequalities and injustices they experienced and, since 2016, Taiwan has started the process of reconciliation and transitional justice (Nesterova, 2019). In addition, driven by the forces of democratization and localization, a wave of multicultural education reform has emerged, with Indigenous education and gender equity education identified as two central themes (Chang, 2000). This article takes Indigenous education as its primary focus, specifically examining ways to enhance peer relationship development among Indigenous elementary school students. Two directions are proposed: (1) enhancing teachers' cultural sensitivity in supporting students from diverse backgrounds, (2) fostering students' positive and inclusive perceptions of ethnic diversity, and (3) preventing gender segregation among children. It is hoped that this exploration will contribute to both the study and practice of peer relationship development for Indigenous elementary school students.

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