

An Educational Ethnographic Study of Recognitional Struggles in an Indigenous Key Elementary School in Taiwan

Yi Yin Chen, Chungnam National University, South Korea
Changsoo Hur, Chungnam National University, South Korea

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the struggles of recognition that Indigenous students face within Taiwan's educational system through examining how an Indigenous school forms the Indigenous culture within a mainstream education system. Employing Axel Honneth's theory of recognition as an analytical framework, the research focuses on three dimensions: emotional support (love), cognitive respect (rights), and social esteem (solidarity). Through an ethnographic approach involving fieldwork, interviews, and participant observation, the study investigates how Indigenous culture is either affirmed or marginalized across school, family, and societal contexts. The findings reveal that, despite the Taiwan government's policies, such as the Indigenous Education Act, intended to support Indigenous cultural preservation, Indigenous culture remains at risk of marginalization and instrumentalization in curriculum design, language education, and societal valuation. In response, this study interprets from the perspective of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition and indicates the concept of cultural agency, emphasizing that students must be granted the freedom, institutional protection, and societal acceptance to shape their own cultural identities. By addressing the limitations of dominant educational paradigms, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of Indigenous educational challenges and offers theoretical and policy insights for advancing genuine cultural recognition and equity.

Keywords: indigenous education, Bunun, recognition, ethnography

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Introduction

This study explores the educational struggles of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples, focusing on their pursuit of recognition, cultural development, and the establishment of a knowledge system rooted in Indigenous perspectives. Drawing on Axel Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, the research investigates whether Taiwan's education system supports Indigenous students in realizing their self-identity. Through educational ethnography, this study documents curriculum practices and lived experiences in Indigenous key elementary schools, aiming to reveal inequalities, cultural challenges, and strategies of resilience, while fostering dialogue on Indigenous self-awareness in education.

Globally, post-WWII decolonization movements prompted Indigenous peoples to reclaim cultural rights and educational autonomy (Hanna et al., 2016; Lee, 2009). In Taiwan, Indigenous groups have endured layers of colonization and marginalization, resulting in struggles over cultural identity, land rights, and education (Chou, 2023; Tang, 2002). Although the Taiwanese government has introduced policies to improve Indigenous education, such as the Education Act for Indigenous Peoples in 1998 (amended in 2019), structural inequalities and Han-centric curricula persist, limiting Indigenous students' opportunities for identity development (Nesterova, 2019).

Amid growing democratic consciousness in Taiwan, attention to Indigenous rights has increased (Liu & Chen, 2022), but challenges remain. These include the lack of culturally responsive teaching, high teacher turnover, insufficient pathways for Indigenous educators, and educational materials that fail to reflect Indigenous worldviews (Chang & Tan, 2012; Wu & Lin, 2004). Such barriers often result in low academic achievement, identity confusion, and marginalization among Indigenous students.

As previously mentioned, the questions for this study are, firstly, how do the teachers form an Indigenous culture in the Indigenous Key elementary school? And, secondly, how do we interpret their struggles through the theory of recognition of Axel Honneth?

Literature Review

The History, Education, and Challenges of Taiwan's Indigenous People

Taiwan's Indigenous peoples have endured over 300 years of colonization, beginning with the Dutch in 1624 and continuing through Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and Nationalist rule, each imposing control that marginalized Indigenous societies and suppressed cultural identity (Simon & Mona, 2023; Van Bekhoven, 2016). Japanese colonial rule (1895–1945) emphasized assimilation through education, using “Banzin” and “Bandou” schools to instill imperial loyalty (Peng & Chu, 2017). After WWII, the KMT regime continued these policies, portraying Indigenous practices as primitive while promoting modernization (Liu, 2021). The rise of democratization in the 1960s and 70s catalyzed Indigenous activism, culminating in curricular reforms in the 1990s, including the 1993 curriculum inclusion and the 1998 Education Act for Indigenous Peoples, which aimed to promote culturally responsive education (Chiang, 2009; Tiun, 2020). Since then, bilingual programs and tribal cultural integration have expanded, with 139,000 Indigenous students enrolled in schools by 2023 (Ministry of Education of Taiwan, 2024).

Despite legal progress, substantial challenges persist. School-based ethnic education initiatives since 2013 promote cultural preservation, but goals remain ambiguous, and systemic inequality persists (Chang & Tan, 2012; Chou, 2023; Huang & Liu, 2016; Liu & Cheng, 2013; Yeh et al., 2014). Indigenous knowledge transmission is fragile due to past cultural displacement (Yeh, 2019), and while research supports embedding Indigenous languages and pedagogies (Duff & Li, 2009; Hare & Anderson, 2010; Renganathan & Kral, 2018; Sharma & Phyak, 2017), mainstream systems often reinforce stereotypes, and teachers lack multicultural training (Abacioglu et al., 2020). Although the Council of Indigenous Peoples offers guidance, it lacks decision-making power (Chiang, 2009), and education remains centrally controlled. Exam-driven curricula, urban migration, and resource disparities, such as economic hardship and linguistic barriers, limit educational equity (Chen, 2007; Liou, 2018; Yeh, 2020). As Yeh (2019) argues, truly transformative Indigenous education must move beyond recognition toward critical pedagogy and meaningful community empowerment.

Bunun Culture

Taiwan's Indigenous peoples, including the Bunun, belong to the Austronesian family and have historically maintained deep ecological and communal traditions (Giletycz et al., 2021). As of 2024, they constitute 2.6% of Taiwan's population across 16 recognized groups (Council of Indigenous Peoples of Taiwan, 2025). The Bunun, meaning "people," number 63,737 and primarily inhabit the Central Mountain Range, where their resilience was shaped by the harsh terrain and late subjugation under Japanese rule (Tien, 2013). Traditionally, their society emphasizes relational ethics, with status earned through communal contribution, especially in farming and hunting (Tien, 2002; Yang, 2005). Children are taught modesty, responsibility, and harmony, values reinforced through music such as the polyphonic *pasibutbut* and hunting chants like *Malastapang* (Chen, 2005; Tien, 1995). Spiritually, the Bunun revere *Dihaning*, a divine force representing moral order, with rituals like the *Ear-shooting Festival* sustaining social bonds and ecological reverence (Vava, 1997). Though Christianity has reshaped many practices, Indigenous values persist beneath new religious frameworks (Yang, 2022; Ye, 2001). Colonialism and modernization disrupted millet-based rituals, hunting customs, and kinship structures, especially through forced relocations and name changes (Wang, 2012). Still, storytelling, elder-led education, and hunting remain vital sources of cultural identity. Despite external pressures, Bunun traditions continue to provide a foundation for ethical living, collective identity, and culturally grounded education.

Theoretical Framework

Axel Honneth, a German philosopher and social theorist, developed the theory of recognition. His early work, *The Critique of Power* (1991), explored links between Frankfurt School critical theory and Foucault's notion of power. In *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995), Honneth examined Hegel and Mead to construct a theory grounded in mutual recognition, enabling individuals to form identities without harm. He identifies three key forms of recognition (love, rights, and solidarity) as essential to social justice. Denial of recognition, manifested through degradation or social exclusion, results in injustice. For Honneth, social struggles are ultimately moral efforts to gain recognition, and resolving social pathologies requires affirming diverse forms of relationships. This chapter uses Honneth's recognition theory as a normative lens to explore how education can support students' self-realization, addressing the implications and challenges of recognition in educational contexts.

The Concept of Recognition

The term "recognition" denotes a firm acknowledgment of oneself and others (Kima & Leeb, 2016). The German word *Anerkennung*, as used by Hegel, encapsulates both "acknowledgment" in the cognitive sense and "recognition" in moral and relational terms (Honneth, 2015). Honneth adopts "recognition" to emphasize its role in forming identity, respect, and social belonging. For him, recognition, through love, rights, and solidarity, is essential for individual self-realization and social justice. Its absence, manifesting as degradation or neglect, constitutes injustice (Honneth, 1995).

Taylor similarly views recognition as foundational to justice, advocating for equal respect and identity in a democratic society (Taylor, 1994). Fraser adds that recognition must be addressed alongside distributive justice in critiques of capitalism (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Honneth, drawing on Hegel, emphasizes uncovering hidden suffering and unmet expectations that drive resistance against social injustice. Thus, recognition becomes the moral basis for building just relationships (Kim, 2009).

In *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth, 1995), Honneth reinterprets Hegel's *System of Ethical Life* (1979), outlining three stages: emotional bonds in the family (love), legal relations in civil society (rights), and solidarity in ethical life. These correspond to phases of self-development, emotional, cognitive, and ethical (Lee, 2015). Each stage reflects a different form of personhood shaped through recognition. Because individuals develop autonomy through being recognized, Hegel's model insists on mutual recognition as its core.

Honneth develops this into an "ethics of recognition," integrating modern psychology, sociology, and history. He argues that social struggles stem from experiences of misrecognition, which may escalate into political resistance, including violence, when recognition is denied.

Recognition Theory of Axel Honneth

Unlike theories of justice rooted in abstract principles, Honneth's theory of ethical life (1995) emphasizes the social nature of individuals and their dependence on mutual recognition for self-realization, drawing from Hegel, Mead, and empirical studies (Anderson, 1995). He identifies three spheres of recognition, love, rights, and esteem. Each one is essential to personal development.

Love is the first and most foundational form of recognition, shaping early self-confidence through caregiving relationships (Honneth, 1995). Within the family, love allows a child to perceive themselves as irreplaceable and fosters trust in their own needs and emotions. This intimate recognition forms the basis for autonomy and social interaction. Without love, particularly when replaced by abuse, individuals may develop mistrust in themselves and others, inhibiting later recognition. Those who experience such misrecognition in childhood may unconsciously reproduce it in future educational or caregiving roles (Honneth, 2004, 2008; Stojanov, 2006).

Rights, the second form of recognition, are grounded in equal moral worth and expressed through legal systems (Honneth, 1995). Legal recognition affirms one's agency and supports self-respect. Denial of rights results in exclusion and moral invisibility. Civil society, characterized by market economies, provides the institutional space where individuals

articulate personal needs in socially intelligible ways (Anderson, 1995). For Honneth, education should prepare students not only to acquire knowledge but also to express their interests as rights-bearing subjects. Schools, therefore, play a key role in fostering discursive participation and civic self-respect (Honneth, 1995, 2009).

Esteem, the third form, relates to social appreciation of individual traits that contribute to collective goals (Honneth, 1995). Unlike rigid class-based hierarchies, modern esteem reflects value pluralism and personal merit. Social esteem, located within the state, confirms individuals' worth by recognizing their contributions to the common good. This recognition supports self-esteem and enables the realization of freedom through solidarity and democratic participation.

Honneth's theory extends beyond description. It outlines how recognition evolves historically through struggles against misrecognition, allowing individuals to increasingly see themselves as full members of society. These conflictual processes are essential to moral progress, as they expand the conditions under which recognition, and thus freedom, can be universally achieved (Honneth, 1995, 2004).

Research Method

This study employs ethnography to examine challenges and recognition struggles in Taiwan's Indigenous education, focusing on the Bunun community. Grounded in Honneth's (1995) recognition theory, it explores Indigenous educational values and practices through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Ethnography was chosen for its capacity to reveal shared meanings within cultural groups and to capture how recognition operates in everyday educational settings.

Fieldwork took place from March to December 2024 at a Bunun elementary school in Nantou County in Taiwan, serving about 80 students (including kindergarten students), 90% of whom are Indigenous. The teaching staff comprises both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. The curriculum blends national standards with local knowledge, such as hunting, language, and outdoor education. Fourteen teachers and 53 students participated in the study.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Five educators, including teachers, one Bunun language teacher, and one administrator, were interviewed on topics like pedagogy and cultural integration. Observations were conducted three times weekly for a year, yielding over 90 hours of data. The researcher adopted a non-participant role, documenting teaching practices and cultural expressions using field notes, audio recordings, and teacher reflections. Data included curriculum materials, student work, interview transcripts, and visual documentation.

Analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) four-stage model: data collection, condensation, display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure credibility and cultural sensitivity, the study applied triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity. Triangulation cross-validated data across methods. For example, when a teacher emphasized the Pasibutbut ritual (a polyphonic prayer for millet harvest) in an interview, lesson recordings and teacher and student participation confirmed its presence in classroom practice. Contrasting views across participant groups were also compared, for instance, differing attitudes toward Indigenous language use between teachers and students, highlighting cultural tensions. Member checking allowed participants to review transcripts, fostering authenticity. Reflexivity involved

journaling and consultation with Indigenous teachers, helping the researcher identify biases and respect community perspectives.

The Path to Recognition

Navigating Emotional Support and Cultural Belonging

In the Bunun context, emotional support extends beyond the nuclear family and is collectively sustained by families, schools, and tribal structures. However, despite these collective traditions, many Bunun students experience emotional care as fragmented due to structural challenges such as economic hardship and shifting family dynamics.

Many Bunun students come from single-parent or economically marginalized families. Based on field observations, this is closely tied to the tribe's geographic isolation and historical dispossession. The Wanfeng tribe, located in a remote mountainous region, faces limited access to employment beyond short-term agricultural labor. These constraints stem from Japanese colonial relocation policies that severed Indigenous communities from traditional lands and livelihoods. As a result, parents, who often engaged in subsistence farming, are absent during most of the day and sometimes evenings, leaving children unsupervised. A teacher explained that

Most parents start working on the farm around 6 AM. They usually return from the farms around 7 or 8 PM. When children return from school at 4 PM, often no adults are at home, and you'll see kids wandering around the tribe.

In this context, teachers have assumed a part of caregiving roles. One teacher, who also serves as the student affairs director, explained how an after-school program was initiated to provide both academic guidance and emotional care. Teachers often offer meals, monitor students' well-being, and even visit families to ensure basic needs are met. One teacher shared: "Sometimes, some children come to school without having breakfast... So you'll see that in the morning, I distribute some bread or milk on the children's desks." At mealtime, teachers and students eat together, building trust and modeling family life. "Eating with teachers not only fosters relationships but also allows us to guide students. This is part of family life education, I suppose," said the director of education affairs. These efforts represent a form of "substitute parenting," filling in emotional gaps where familial support is lacking. Such care practices are not merely pedagogical obligations but reflect an ethical commitment to collective well-being, resonating with the Bunun communal nurturing.

Tribal elders also play a crucial role in emotional support by transmitting cultural knowledge through ritual. Elders were invited into schools to teach traditional chants and ceremonies such as Pasibutbut (millet harvest prayer) and malastapang (collective hunting songs). These rituals serve not only as cultural education but also as intergenerational bonding practices. One elder emphasized that "We are gradually trying to restore our traditions because we believe that our traditional customs cannot simply disappear... This way, our children will want to return to the tribe in the future." By participating in these events, as one elder described, these events offer students a sense of "returning home spiritually," where cultural identity and emotional security intertwine. These communal efforts act as both cultural preservation and emotional healing mechanisms.

Thus, despite differing roles, families, schools, and the tribe together constitute a resilient, informal support network. The family initiates emotional bonding, the school stabilizes it through daily interactions, and the tribe enriches it through cultural rituals and shared moral grounding. Together, these layered practices affirm students not only as learners but as cultural subjects whose emotional and identity needs are recognized within a shared educational and cultural ecosystem.

Policy Expectations and the Classroom Realities in Indigenous Education

This section explores how the notion of cognitive respect manifests within Taiwan's Indigenous education policies and their practical implementation. Taiwan has made legislative strides in promoting Indigenous rights through the Education Act for Indigenous Peoples (1998) and the Indigenous Languages Development Act (2017), which legally recognize Indigenous languages as national languages. However, the gap between policy intention and classroom reality remains substantial.

Regarding language revitalization, fieldwork reveals that Bunun students receive only 40 minutes of Bunun language instruction per week, with limited materials mostly sourced from government websites. A Bunun student noted, "We prepare for tests in language class, but we don't use the language much at home because sometimes our parents speak Mandarin to us, or don't speak it well either." This limited exposure undermines language revitalization, reducing it to a formal requirement rather than a lived cultural practice.

Although policies like entrance exam bonuses aim to incentivize language learning, the system inadvertently shifts focus toward test performance. As one teacher lamented,

Talking about the language certification, it's just for advancing education, gaining extra points, or using the certification results to find better schools, or for the state to recognize you as Indigenous. But I realized it's sad. Why does it become a matter of needing state certification to prove you're Indigenous? We are Indigenous to begin with, even if some children can't speak the language, they are fundamentally Indigenous. So I'm confused too. Am I teaching (the mother tongue) to gain state recognition as Indigenous, or are we doing this (language revitalization) to preserve culture? So now I feel sorry for the children.

As a result, Bunun language classes are often treated by students and some teachers as a means of gaining extra points rather than engaging with cultural memory and heritage. This instrumentalization reduces the depth of engagement with the language, and the focus on test preparation overshadows the richness of oral traditions, worldviews, and intergenerational knowledge embedded in the language.

In the aspect of curriculum, curriculum autonomy policies encourage schools to localize content, yet most teaching materials remain Han-centric. The director who is in charge of course design indicated that the localized courses were originally designed to enhance students' cultural identification with the Indigenous group and provide an environment for learning traditional knowledge of the Bunun people. Not only is the course title named after the Bunun cultural elements, but the course design also incorporates the traditional knowledge and values of the Bunun people into the curriculum, allowing students to understand their cultural traditions while cultivating a sense of cultural belonging.

However, first, during the development of these courses, there is a lack of strong curriculum and teaching support systems. In practice, teachers often lack understanding of interdisciplinary integrated curriculum models and the core competencies involved, such as culturally responsive pedagogy. In addition, teachers are already burdened with routine teaching tasks and administrative work, they have insufficient time to participate in curriculum development. One teacher in the study acknowledged this dilemma, stating that:

Actually, I started thinking about and trying to incorporate some of our Bunun knowledge into the curriculum... For example, teaching about the plants and animals of our tribe, or our traditional concepts about nature. But honestly, I often don't have the time or resources to work on it.

This illustrates the tension between good intentions and institutional constraints. Localized curricula require significant time, effort, resources, and funding for tasks such as collecting curriculum materials, attending professional development workshops or training sessions, discussing and drafting curriculum plans, writing lesson plans and teaching materials, and preparing for curriculum evaluations. These often lead to teacher burnout or resistance to reforms during curriculum changes.

Second, there is too much top-down execution and administrative management. School-based and school-developed curriculum are intended to align with educational principles such as deregulation, decentralization, empowerment, teacher leadership, and school-based management. Teachers are expected to act as curriculum developers, researchers, and implementers, replacing the traditional top-down curriculum development model. However, in practice, the excessive top-down execution and administrative management still remain during curriculum development and promotion. The director of education affairs shared that:

Our curriculum is more like what the government wants us to do. So, I think about whether the policy requirements should be combined with something in my school. In theory, well, what is the difficulty? After aligning with all the indicators that are required, and without giving teachers extra work, teaching will be easy in real practice. In other words, (for the paperwork), they seem to do two things, but actually they still do the same.

This not only fails to inspire intrinsic motivation of school and teachers to participate in the curriculum development, but also causes the director of education affairs, who acts as a bridge between higher authorities and teachers, to experience high stress and low job satisfaction.

Social Esteem and Collective Recognition That Goes Beyond Tokenistic Inclusion

In the case of Bunun students, social esteem is often expressed through how their culture is integrated and valued within the school system. Yet, in practice, these efforts are often fragmented, symbolic, or superficial, risking cultural tokenism rather than fostering genuine esteem.

Such as the cultural tokenism in the school curriculum. Although curriculum reforms in Taiwan have increasingly emphasized multiculturalism, the representation of Indigenous knowledge remains marginal and often superficial. Even well-intentioned cultural integration often becomes symbolic rather than substantive. For example, textbooks may introduce

rituals such as the Shao people's Ancestral Spirit Festival or the Tao people's Flying Fish Festival to showcase the cultural value of Indigenous peoples in Taiwanese society. However, many teachers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, often remain at a surface-level understanding of these practices. Even Indigenous teachers may only briefly present representative ceremonies without explaining their historical origins or cultural meanings. As a result, such instruction fails to deepen students' understanding of Indigenous cultures and may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes.

Moreover, the challenges posed by globalization and modernization to Indigenous cultures persist, particularly among the younger generation. Since the implementation of Taiwan's 12-Year Basic Education curriculum in 2014, which included "Multiculturalism and Global Understanding" as a core competency, multicultural education has become a prominent policy focus. For instance, in the fourth-grade social studies textbook, cultural diversity is introduced through the experiences of four distinct characters: a foreign transfer student, a child of immigrant parents, a student with physical disabilities, and an Indigenous student. These symbolic representations and visual imagery expose students to multicultural content in daily life and promote learning and engagement with diverse cultures. However, the arrangement of such characters within the textbook constructs a cultural narrative of coexistence and tension, revealing the dual identity challenges faced by Bunun students. On one hand, they must integrate into a globalized and multicultural environment; on the other, they are encouraged to maintain and identify with their Indigenous identity and culture. This duality reflects the contemporary cultural reality for the Bunun people and the ongoing multicultural challenges they encounter. To improve mutual understanding between Bunun and non-Indigenous students, the school also implemented several programs for building bridges between students from different cultures. In these programs, Bunun students visit urban schools for homestays, while urban students are invited to the Bunun village for experiential learning. While these activities have value in increasing visibility and breaking stereotypes, they also often expose deep socio-economic inequalities and emotional vulnerabilities.

Before such exchanges, Bunun teachers provide counseling to prepare students for cross-cultural interactions. As one teacher noted that:

We always tell our children not to be afraid of their darker skin or different habits, and to be confident when they meet students from the city. But many children are still reluctant to go. They remember being laughed at for torn socks or their clothes.

Another teacher further explained that "Some host families take our children shopping or treat them very well, but our students may feel like they're being treated as poor or inferior. When they return, they feel embarrassed or frustrated." Although these activities create learning opportunities, they can also deepen students' awareness of marginalization, turning recognition into a double-edged experience. These remarks underscore how well-meaning inclusion can still reinforce otherness and inequality when social dynamics are not adequately addressed.

In conclusion, while symbolic inclusion of Bunun culture has become more visible in schools, this alone does not guarantee authentic recognition. For the Bunun students in this study, recognition must move beyond tokenism and performance toward sustained practices that affirm their culture as a valuable and evolving part of society. Only through such efforts can schools truly function as spaces of social solidarity and cultural affirmation.

The Transition From Recognition Struggle to Cultural Agency

This chapter builds on the previous analysis of Indigenous education through Honneth's recognition theory (1995) by exploring whether recognition can evolve into cultural agency. While the school fosters a sense of belonging among Bunun students, structural barriers, such as limited curriculum content and minimal language instruction, undermine cultural engagement. Cultural agency, as conceptualized by Ortner (2006), involves navigating and resisting institutional constraints through everyday practices, rather than passively receiving cultural content. However, in the studied school, the Bunun language is taught only one hour per week, with limited real-life use, reflecting symbolic rather than substantive inclusion. Honneth's dimensions, emotional support, cognitive respect, and social esteem, highlight how marginal access to cultural knowledge hinders identity formation and reproduces internalized inferiority. Though Taiwan has passed progressive legislation to protect Indigenous rights, implementation remains weak and Han-centric systems dominate. Cultural content is often treated as static or decorative, rather than dynamic and future-oriented. Moreover, under neoliberal pressures, families are pushed to prioritize Mandarin and English for social mobility, reinforcing Fraser's (2000) critique of cultural and economic marginalization. Cultural agency must thus be supported structurally, not merely tolerated. Drawing on Smith (2012) and Simpson (2014), this chapter argues for a transformative pedagogy rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, connecting heritage with contemporary expression and self-determination. True recognition requires not only legal inclusion but also institutional reforms, curriculum innovation, and broader social valorization of Indigenous knowledge as meaningful, evolving, and economically viable.

Conclusion

This study investigated the recognition experiences of Bunun students within Taiwan's Indigenous education system, applying Axel Honneth's theory of recognition (1995) to analyze how emotional support, cognitive respect, and social esteem shape students' cultural identities. While policy frameworks have increasingly addressed Indigenous rights, this research reveals that recognition remains fragmented, constrained by institutional structures, mainstream educational models, and social value hierarchies.

At the emotional level, family, school, and tribal networks offer partial support, but economic precarity and parental absence limit the depth of emotional recognition. Schools often compensate through caregiving roles and cultural programming, yet these efforts operate within a system that marginalizes Indigenous epistemologies. In terms of cognitive respect, although legislation such as the Indigenous Languages Development Act signals formal inclusion, practical implementation remains insufficient. Language revitalization efforts are weakened by limited instructional hours, test-oriented teaching, and symbolic curricular content. Structural inequalities continue to shape students' educational experiences, reducing cultural learning to a secondary or instrumental pursuit. Regarding social esteem, the visibility of Bunun culture has improved through school-based cultural symbols and events. However, these are often reduced to token gestures. Broader societal values tied to economic productivity and academic competitiveness continue to devalue Indigenous knowledge, limiting its perceived legitimacy and students' long-term cultural self-confidence.

To address these tensions, this study introduced the concept of cultural agency, according to Honneth (1995)'s framework, by emphasizing students' ability to actively engage with and shape their cultural identities. Cultural agency entails not only recognition but also the

freedom, support, and institutional conditions necessary to pursue one's cultural meaningfully within and beyond school.

The findings suggest that recognition alone is insufficient without systemic changes to educational structures. Deliberative governance, which involves Indigenous communities in decision-making, offers a pathway toward more responsive, contextually grounded policies. By shifting from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation, education systems can better support Indigenous students not just as learners, but as cultural agents with the capacity for self-determination.

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Contact email: wjp3270@hotmail.com