

## Aboriginal education is the right move

Written by Taipei Times Editorial  
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Aboriginal culture in Taiwan has been marginalized ever since large numbers of Han Chinese started arriving in the 1700s and 1800s, and each successive government continued to work toward the eradication of Aboriginal culture.

On May 8, 1951, the then-Department of Education intensified its efforts to force Mandarin education on Aborigines: Teachers in Aboriginal areas were given a deadline to become proficient in Mandarin or risk losing their jobs.

Sixty-eight years later, Aboriginal culture has declined to the point where the government is “actively looking” for Aboriginal talent to help implement its proposed amendments to the Education Act for Indigenous Peoples (原住民族教育法), which cleared the Executive Yuan last week and is awaiting review by the Legislative Yuan.

Premier Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) last week said that “we need to use more practical means to strengthen our teacher training programs, so that we can properly cultivate Aboriginal-language teachers and create Aboriginal-language curricula so that they can carry the torch of an enduring Aboriginal culture.”

With the nation’s focus on transitional justice and diversity in the past few years, and the passage of legislation to preserve Aboriginal languages and cultures, the latest development might not seem significant, but it is still jarring to compare the policy shift: The “Aboriginal talent” that successive governments have tried to eradicate has become a valuable commodity to carry out the administration’s policies under a new social and political climate.

It does not matter how many people will answer the call or are qualified for the positions — the mere need for such talent gives young Aborigines a tangible reason to learn their culture, as it might have increasing economic dividends.

According to the amendments, education of Aborigines would no longer be a top-down process forced upon them by whoever takes control of Taiwan.

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“The implementation of Aboriginal education, therefore, should factor in the thinking, values and organization patterns of such groups,” the proposal states.

Only Aborigines who have suffered from culture loss would know how to educate their own people, who until the past few decades mostly felt compelled to deny their origins.

Not only would Aboriginal communities be consulted about school curricula in their regions, schools in Aboriginal regions could also invite local representatives of Aboriginal groups to sit on the curriculum development committees, according to the amendments.

The clause that garnered the most attention is one that proposes that all students up to senior-high school level be allowed to study Aboriginal languages, history and culture. It also seeks to provide incentives for private organizations that present public Aboriginal education programs.

Taiwan has long been plagued by ethnic differences. For example, earlier this month Aborigines and Han Chinese argued about the government’s endorsement of the worshipping of Cheng Cheng-kung (鄭成功), who has been compared to Christopher Columbus due to his treatment of Aborigines after Cheng established a kingdom in Taiwan in the 1600s.

It is the right move to open up Aboriginal education to non-Aborigines, as there is obviously still a lot of misunderstanding among the public.

It could prove to be a challenge to encourage non-Aboriginal students to take these classes and balance them with the students’ own culture without upsetting their parents, but the amendments are nevertheless promising.

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