

Fostering Cultural Identity and Connection: A scoping review of Indigenous children's social and emotional wellbeing initiatives

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Background

Middle childhood (5–12 years) is a formative period for identity development, emotional regulation, and cultural learning; it is shaped by children's relationships with family, community, culture, and Country. However, limited evidence exists on social and emotional wellbeing initiatives designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children during this life stage. To address this gap, a team of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous researchers conducted a scoping review to identify and map initiatives that strengthen cultural wellbeing, relationships, and community connections for Indigenous children aged 5–12 years across Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.

Methods

The review followed the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology and was led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. Academic and grey literature, published between 1946 and 2025, were searched across multiple databases.

Results

Nine studies met the inclusion criteria, revealing shared characteristics across identified initiatives including culturally grounded Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) frameworks, co-design approaches, Indigenous governance, and delivery within school and community settings. Initiatives that engage Elders and embed cultural practices are most aligned with Indigenous concepts of wellbeing. The review illustrates the scarcity and promise of culturally responsive wellbeing initiatives for Indigenous children in middle childhood. The findings also reveal underrepresentation of Indigenous researchers in research leadership and governance roles.

Conclusion

The review highlights that strengthening Indigenous leadership and ensuring community-driven design are critical to building culturally grounded programs that foster identity, belonging, and emotional wellbeing in Indigenous children. These approaches are key to creating sustainable, impactful initiatives that reflect community strengths and priorities.