

School-based educational programs, cultural identity, and mental health among urban Indigenous youth

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Study rationale

Cultural identity and mental health

- A strong sense of cultural identity predicts better mental health, social and emotional well-being, and positive overall adjustment into adolescence¹
- Bicultural identities (wherein an individual identifies with both their ethnic /cultural identity and the mainstream culture) are associated with the most benefits²

Schools and cultural identity

- Adolescent identity development, including cultural identity development, is strongly influenced by the school's socialization opportunities and ethnic composition¹
- While schools with a disproportionate ratio of any ethnic group facilitate strong ethnic pride, they undermine development of a bicultural identity¹, so an even mix is best

School-based cultural connectedness programs

- Cultural connectedness programs in schools promote cultural identity and belongingness, and help Indigenous students synthesize their Indigenous and academic identities³
- There is a lot of variability across programs. Two major types are:
 1. Traditional Indigenous creative arts programs (e.g. drum making, crafts, song and dance), which promote cultural connectedness, identity, and pride⁴, as well as spiritual healing and well-being⁵
 2. Indigenous mentor- and peer-based programs (e.g. sharing cultural knowledge), can increase intergenerational relationships and help preserve traditional knowledge⁶, as well as self-confidence, feelings of support, and peer connectedness⁷

Research objectives

1. Identify what cultural connectedness programs are available for urban Indigenous youth
2. Determine the efficacy of the programs, and what youth would like to see in the future
3. Examine the potential link between cultural connectedness programs and mental health in urban Indigenous youth

Relationship building

To ensure cultural appropriateness, the researchers collaborated with local Indigenous individuals and communities throughout the study's entire process

Study formation

- During the creation of the study, researchers consulted with with Centre for Indigenous Research and Community-Led Engagement (CIRCLE)

Community presence

- Throughout the study, the researchers have remained in frequent contact with the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC) by volunteering and attending VNFC community events to build a strong relationship

Participant recruitment

The three main modes of recruitment for this study were:

- Posters distributed throughout the community and available online
- Through the VNFC, with the help of individuals we built relationships with, as well as by connecting with youth at VNFC community events
- Word of mouth and personal connections

Preliminary results

- Data collection and analysis is ongoing
- So far, two main themes have been identified using thematic analysis: 1) Lack of guidance, and 2) Cultural pride

Lack of guidance

- Youth have expressed interest in participating in cultural connectedness programs, but uncertainty about where to access programs and who to talk to for guidance

Cultural pride

- Urban Indigenous youth who participated in school connectedness programs (e.g. Indigenous language classes, sharing of knowledge, etc.) reported an increase in cultural pride, and a desire to further connect with their own culture

Challenges

Participant recruitment

- It has been challenging to recruit youth for this study. We have relied heavily on word of mouth to spread awareness of this study, and have found that existing personal connections have been vital to recruitment

Time constraints

- Fostering strong relationships with Indigenous individuals and communities is an essential part of this study, and this inevitably takes time. Building strong relationships is difficult to do under time constraints

Acknowledgments

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