Practice Paper

The development of a positive sense of identity and culture by ages and stages: contextual factors and potential risk and protective factors

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The Nest

The Nest is the wellbeing framework that underlies the work of ARACY. It is composed of five domains that cover the areas in which a child or young person needs to be supported in order to be happy, healthy and thriving. The domains were formed through consultations with children and young people. The domain of ‘Having a positive sense of identity and culture’, however, was a later addition following further stakeholder consultations.

Since its introduction, the Nest has been used by government and non-government bodies to coordinate and support policy priorities, service provision and data analysis. This reflects its functionality as a template for:

- planning cross-sectoral, coordinated and collaborative responses to issues affecting the wellbeing of children and young people;
- ensuring a holistic approach to providing services and support to children and young people that considers the ‘whole’ child; and/or
- designing research about children and young people that reflects an ecological model of wellbeing.

In response to requests from stakeholders to clarify what having a positive identity and culture means in the context of applying the Nest, this paper provides summary responses to five key questions:

1. What does having a positive sense of identity and culture mean?
2. What are the potential risk and protective factors for the development of a positive sense of identity and culture?
3. What does the development of a positive sense of identity and culture look like at different ages and stages?
4. What does this mean for service providers?
5. What does this mean for educators and the education system?

Further information on why, when and how to measure children and young people’s sense of identity and culture can be found in the complementary Practice Paper Measuring children and young people’s sense of identity and culture with associated resources found in Resources for measuring children and young people’s sense of identity and culture.

The concepts and themes discussed within all three Practice Papers are explored in greater depth in A Positive Sense of Identity and Culture, a report prepared by ARACY for the Australian Government Department of Social Services.
What does having a positive sense of identity and culture mean?

What is culture?
The concept of culture is ambiguous and no one definition accurately reflects all circumstances and experiences\(^2\). However, the preamble of the United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity (2001) provides the following definition of culture:

\[
...the \ set \ of \ distinctive \ spiritual, \ material, \ intellectual \ and \ emotional \ features \ of \ society \ or \ a \ social \ group, \ and \ that \ it \ encompasses, \ in \ addition \ to \ art \ and \ literature, \ lifestyles, \ ways \ of \ living \ together, \ value \ systems, \ traditions \ and \ beliefs.\]

The literature, including the robust definition developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics within its *Measuring Wellbeing: Frameworks for Australian Social Statistics*, identifies culture as a combination of the following features:

- shared approach used by people to understand their existence in relation to other people and their environment;
- composed of intangible paradigms displayed within collective beliefs, stories, behaviours and practices; imbued with symbols and rituals that have shared meaning; and
- exists as a function of time as it is generationally shared, taught and re-interpreted – displaying a balance and potential conflict between fluidity, dynamism, active utilisation and re-imagination (particularly by children and young people); with an element of distinctiveness and persistence.

What is identity?
Theories and research on identity – what it is, how it is formed, how it is expressed – can be divided into those that focus on identity at the individual level, at a social level, as a process, or centred on geographical place\(^3\). It encompasses concepts such as:

- Self-concept – how a person describes themselves. Collective self-concept relates to a person’s sense of self as a group member (see social identity description below).
- Self-esteem – a form of self-evaluation.
- Perceived self-efficacy – a person’s belief in their capacity to achieve intended results.
- Identity exploration and commitment – process of gathering information about, and experimenting with, identity before making a firm decision on what applies and having defined goals (i.e. developing a final *ego identity*).
• Social identity and group membership – self-identifying and behaving as a member of a social group.

• Narrative identity – internal narrative that makes meaning of past, current and aspirational experiences and actions.

• Situational identity – process of activating different identities according to the social situation or context.

• Place and national identity – a personal and group identity aligned with physical locations, political and civic roles.

What is apparent across all these perspectives is that identity is multi-dimensional, both in terms of whether it relates to a personal (self-concept) or group level (collective self-concept) or related to self-efficacy in certain domains (e.g. academic) and in certain situations (e.g. at school or at home). Therefore, an individual may have positive measures in some domains in some contexts but not in others.

How are these two concepts related?
Theories, such as the sociocultural approach to identity formation, tie the development of a person’s identity to their values, beliefs and socially shared activities⁴.

Cultural or ethnic identity is also a specific domain that involves an individual’s identification and engagement with cultural groups. Cultural identity has shown to be complex and become more nuanced among children as they get older.

In summary, having a positive sense of identity and culture, as discussed in academia, comprises the level of positivity and coherent meaning one perceives in relation to their past and their family’s past; their current state; their social relations; their ability to achieve; and their future.

What do children and young people say about identity and culture?
Children and young people describe culture, cultural identity and general identity more broadly than academic definitions, consisting of activities they like to do; people they like to spend time with; personal and social history; family; events; and celebrations. They also use descriptions that pertain to relative social status and the acknowledgement of judgement and external appraisals¹.

Conceptual framework
Based on the literature review undertaken on the formation of identity and connection to culture¹, a conceptual framework was developed to outline the areas that affect their formation and how they relate to one another.
Figure 1 Conceptual framework for having a positive sense of identity and culture.

Note: Spaces and influencers in bold/italic are those considered most relevant to children and young people. Self-worth comprises the perception of the capacity to achieve (self-efficacy); perception of self-value (self-esteem); and hope for the future (aspirations). Social connectedness comprises access and participation with groups, society and communities; perceptions of belonging/connection; perceptions of safety; experiences of discrimination/bullying; and measures of tolerance/openness.
What are the potential risk and protective factors for the development of a positive sense of identity and culture?

Although largely based on observational and qualitative research, potential risk and protective factors emerge from the current literature on children and young people developing a positive sense of identity and culture (Renshaw, 2019). This includes the development of key measures of self-worth and social connectedness.

Potential risks include:

- the removal from (or absence of) positive exposure to people, places and methods important for transferring family or cultural heritage;
- lack of parental and social support; and
- experiences of trauma, oppression, marginalisation and/or discrimination.

Potential protective factors include young people and children having:

- exposure to a caring and stable home environment, familial relationships and parenting practices;
- the opportunity to safely explore and experiment with dimensions of their identity;
- peer relationships based on supportive and non-competitive group norms;
- exposure to positive and constructive messages about people and groups with a diverse array of characteristics and abilities;
- positive perceptions of their neighbourhood and local community;
- opportunities to participate and contribute to their community;
- access to knowledge and meaningful engagement with cultural heritage and practices; and
- timely and appropriate support for trauma.
What does the development of a positive sense of identity and culture look like at different ages and stages?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early years to primary school (0 to ~7 years)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key influencers and spaces</strong></td>
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<td>The formation of a child’s sense of self and connection to family and community begins at birth. In the first six years of a child’s life, family (both household and extended) provide the backbone of this development, in particular relationships with primary carers and siblings. Early learning environments also act as a key space for a child to explore who they are, their strengths, interests, and connections with adults and peers.</td>
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<td><strong>Potential risks and protective factors</strong></td>
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<td>Having <strong>safe and supportive relationships</strong> with primary carer/s framed by secure attachments is one of the identified potential protective factors for developing positive measures of self-worth and social connectedness at this age-range. This extends to early learning environments, and the importance of children forming secure attachments and a sense of belonging with educators and their peers. This is reliant on parenting styles and the capabilities of early childhood educators. <strong>Caring styles that are sensitive and responsive</strong> to the needs of a child and their individual temperament facilitate healthy attachment and socio-cognitive development.</td>
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<td>Even at this young age, children are sensitive to the <strong>messaging they receive</strong> about the <strong>identity and cultural markers</strong> that they associate with or that have been externally attributed to them. Social identity begins early. Infants as young as 3-6 months can distinguish individuals by age, gender and race, and can display a preference for their native language⁵. At age five children can subjectively identify with specific social groups and assess their relative status⁵,⁶. Therefore; it is never too early to promote positive and constructive messages about people and groups with a diverse array of characteristics and abilities; and to facilitate peer relationships based on supportive and non-competitive group norms.</td>
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For children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, having access and exposure to the transmission of language, beliefs, practices, heritage and history has increased importance in establishing meaningful connections and pride in their cultural identity. Extended family and community elders often have an important role in this transmission\(^7,8\).

For infants and young children at risk of or who have experienced trauma, violence or neglect, early identification and intervention may prevent longer term impacts on self-esteem and self-worth.
Middle years (~8 years to 12 years)

Key influencers and spaces

Spaces outside of the home emerge within this age range as an increasingly important environment for the formation of identity and connection to culture. School and other learning environments are a key site for peer relationships and exposure to feedback about personal skills and self-worth.

Peer groups and educators become increasingly important influencers in the formation of a young person’s identity in this age-range, however, family and the home environment continue to act as a touchstone for social support and social cues.

Key risks and protective factors

In this age-range the impacts of the messaging young people receive from others about ‘who they are’ from birth onwards becomes markedly apparent. This includes aspects of gender, race, class, abilities and disabilities. Exposures to negative stereotypes, bullying or discrimination can impact on their self-concept, self-esteem, aspirations and perceptions of self-efficacy. This in turn can have negative effects on academic and mental health outcomes. However, having strong cultural identity, and family, social, community and peer support have been shown to offset these outcomes9,10,11,18,19 – acting as important protective factors.

As in the early years, exposure to positive and constructive messages about people and groups with a diverse array of characteristics and abilities (including gender, race and disabilities); and the facilitation of peer relationships based on supportive and non-competitive group norms; continues to act as an important potential protective factor – particularly in the school environment. For example, there is emerging evidence that shows reading storybooks to young children that promote positive messages about a child with a disability and refugees reduces negative attitudes about these groups12, and intergroup contact among children of different backgrounds reduces racial biases13,14.

Gender differences also start to emerge among young people in this age-range. This includes differences in career and educational aspirations and performances15,16,17, effects of discrimination18,19,20, and interactions between cultural identity, self-esteem and academic and cognitive outcomes21,22.

Studies have also highlighted the importance of having positive perceptions of the local community and neighbourhood. Poor perceptions have been shown to have a negative impact on young people’s psychosocial and academic outcomes23,24.

Experiences and exposures to trauma, neglect and violence continue to act as potential risk factors for children and young people in this age range in their development of a positive sense of identity and culture. As in the early years to primary school age-range, the early identification and intervention may prevent longer term impacts.
Adolescence (13 years to ~19 years)

Key influencers and spaces
Theories on identity formation place this age-range as the pinnacle of an individual's personal development of a sense of self. It coincides with a greater ability to self-reflect, sensitivity to peer group acceptance/rejection and an expansion in the spaces and dimensions applicable to a young person's identity.

It is established as a time of exploration where young people experimentally identify with different sub-groups/cultures and associated behaviours. 'Identity work' is undertaken as they construct images of themselves and others through fashion, style, musical preferences, social and anti-social behaviours (e.g. sports, hobbies, smoking, illicit drug use etc.) and/or through shared stories and language. This can create conflict and tensions in certain spaces; including the home, school, public and online.

Key risks and protective factors
Exposure to discrimination and negative stereotypes continue to be a key risk in the development of a positive sense of identity and culture, particularly around their self-perceived ability to achieve goals (self-efficacy) and aspirations.

Theories of identity formation place the process of exploration and experimentation of identity and sub-identities as an important process for adolescents – helping them to ultimately achieve a stable sense of self and form a narrative around who they are and what they wish to become. Therefore, the adults in their lives providing opportunities to safely undertake this process is a potential protective factor and is structured through secure relationships formed early in life. This includes having access and the opportunity to explore aspects of cultural identity and family/community heritage and history; and to meaningfully engage and participate in community related events and activities.

This age-range is also a key point in a young person’s life where trajectories in anti-social behaviour and self-expectations may be diverted due to their increased ability to self-reflect and develop nuanced understandings of their past, present and future experiences and aspirations.
Early adulthood (~20 years to ~30 years)

Key influencers and spaces
At this age-range, an individual’s identity expands to include complex personal and social responsibilities – including carer roles. Spaces for development also expand to include work/employment and potentially greater involvement in the governance structures of society; including social welfare, medical, and crime and justice sectors.

Key risks and protective factors
Young people have theoretically reached an achieved identity at this age-range – a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Young adults that have established clear personally motivated conclusions about their self-identity (as opposed to externally imposed or motivated), have been shown to have better psychosocial outcomes\(^{32}\). This is the theoretical end-point of the period of exploration and conflict that occurs during adolescence.

The expansion of spaces young people conduct their daily lives in at this age-range coincides with an increase in the areas they can face issues of inequality of access or discrimination. This can be internalised to effect measures of self-worth and social connectedness. Again, familial, peer and social support are important protective factors for these effects. Opportunities to engage with and access their cultural identity and family/community heritage and history has continued importance for young adults in this age-range.
### Contextual and potential risk and protective factors for the positive formation of identity and connection to culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Key Points</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Early years to primary school (0 to ~7 years)</strong></td>
<td>- The ability to recognise in-group and out-group characteristics form in the first few years of a child’s life.</td>
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<td>- Parents, siblings and family comprise the key domains and spaces for identity formation.</td>
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<td>- Exposure to parental support and, for children from minority groups, strong cultural socialisation from nuclear and extended family, are potential protective factors.</td>
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<td><strong>Middle years (~8 years to 12 years)</strong></td>
<td>- Gender differences start to emerge, and the importance of friends and peer groups increases.</td>
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<td>- School becomes an important site for identity formation, with identity dimensions moving beyond the home and family.</td>
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<td>- Potential risk factors include bullying and experiences of discrimination.</td>
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<td>- Potential protective factors to offset experiences of discrimination include strong social and parental support.</td>
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<td>- Perception of neighbourhoods and exposure to negative stereotypes may impact on academic achievements and aspirations.</td>
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<td><strong>Adolescence (13 years to ~19 years)</strong></td>
<td>- Identity formation culminates, with identity exploration and negotiation among peers and with family intensifying, potentially causing conflict.</td>
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<td>- An increase in the capacity to self-reflect develops, in addition to identification with sub-cultures and responses to peer group acceptance and rejection.</td>
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<td>- Cultural identity becomes more nuanced.</td>
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<td>- Dimensions to an adolescent’s identity expands to include public, online and possibly law and policy spaces*.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Experiences of discrimination and negative stereotypes continue to be potential risk factors for academic achievement and aspirations.</td>
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<td>- Potential at this point to change the trajectories of behaviours and self-expectations.</td>
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<td><strong>Early adulthood (~20 years to ~30 years)</strong></td>
<td>- Theoretical resolution of identity conflict.</td>
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<td>- Those that reach a commitment to intrinsically motivated aspects of identity emerge better on psychosocial measures.</td>
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<td>- An individual's identity expands to include workspaces and more complex social and personal responsibilities.</td>
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*Through contact with the criminal justice system or related diversionary programs*
What does this mean for service providers?

Child protection system and service providers to at-risk children and young people with complex backgrounds and high needs (family support services)

From the broader learnings of the literature on identity formation and connection to culture, specific research on children and young people that have had contact with the child protection system and inquiries into the sector – emerge the following child protection system and case responses that may assist children and young people to create and maintain positive self-worth and social connectedness outcomes:

- early and effective treatment for trauma and loss;
- exposure and access to positive role models and mentors;
- facilitating a variety of social connections via meaningful participation with communities (based on family, school/education, friends/peers, religion, hobbies/interests, and/or civic engagement);
- facilitating aspirations and goals; and
- ensuring healthy attachments to primary care-givers.

These also hold relevance to broader family support services.

How can this be achieved?

The same sources recommend the resourcing and funding for the appropriate services to undertake the following activities:

- investigation and consideration of the child or young person’s background and existing social connections, including peer and sibling relationships;
- development and implementation of meaningful cultural support plans;
- permanent placements that account for maintaining links with familial cultural heritage and background;
- regular reviews of case management and transition plans;
- cultural competency training for service providers, including the use of Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs) to case manage Australian Indigenous children and young people;
- workforce capacity to identify trauma and appropriately refer to specialist services; and
- age-appropriate facilitation of a young person providing input into what they want in life.
What does this mean for educators and the education system?

The learning environment emerges from the literature as an important site for children and young people to form their sense of self, a confidence in their abilities, establish friendships and areas of belonging. Therefore, early learning centres, preschools, primary and secondary schools have a responsibility to mediate potential risk factors related to the behaviours and environments children and young people are exposed to while learning; and strengthen potential protective factors. This includes:

- tackling bullying and discrimination;
- facilitating a sense of belonging among students to the school community, staff and peers;
- facilitating aspirations and goals;
- creating a culture of support; and
- enhancing workforce capacity to identify trauma and appropriately refer to specialist services.

How can this be achieved....?

Building on the strengths of the Early Years Learning Framework: The Framework has strong outcomes regarding the facilitation of a child’s sense of belonging and sense of personal and group identity. Establishing a clear approach in measuring or recording a child’s progress in these areas, and the methods used by educators to achieve this, would create accountability for and clarity around its deliverance.

Establishing an inclusive learning community within schools that is welcoming, values family engagement and prioritises the wellbeing of students. As well as improving students’ school engagement and achievement, strong family engagement with learning can help support and value children’s cultural and personal identities. There are existing resources that can assist with meaningful family and community engagement, and preventative measures for ensuring the mental health of students and school staff (see Box 1 for examples).

Providing opportunities for — and encouraging and supporting — staff and students to participate in Indigenous language teaching and learning. This can enhance links between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their culture, promote pride and respect for culture, and social cohesion. This may involve working with or utilising resources provided by the network of Indigenous language centres across Australia.

Explicitly linking good practice in supporting culture and identity to existing frameworks and school improvement agendas. For example, the Australian Professional Standard for Principals refers to principals recognising and engaging with “the rich and diverse linguistic and cultural resources in the school community”, while the
National School Improvement Tool (NSET) requires consideration of “the extent to which the school appreciates and values students’ varying cultural backgrounds and works to build the cultural competence of school staff”.

**Workforce training on unconscious bias regarding gender, race or other characteristics.**

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<th>Box 1 Resource examples</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BeYou tools and resources</strong> A national mental health initiative for educators which aims to promote and protect positive mental health in children and young people in every early learning service and school in Australia. The online platform offers a range of evidence-based tools, resources and professional learning. Educators, early learning services and schools are required to register to access these resources.</td>
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<td><strong>Emerging Minds resources</strong> Includes toolkits for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children; Dealing with community trauma; and Establishing Child and Family Partnerships.</td>
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<td><strong>Partners 4 learning</strong> A resource to assist teachers and school personnel to strengthen their capacity to engage with parents, families and communities to support children’s learning.</td>
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<td><strong>Australian Government Family-Schools Partnerships Framework and resources</strong> Developed to promote partnerships between schools and families.</td>
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<td><strong>Student Wellbeing Hub</strong> Resources for educators, parents and students to build safe, inclusive and connected school communities.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ARACY’s The Common Approach</strong> A way to have quality conversations with young people and their families about all aspects of their wellbeing including identity and culture. Includes resources for educators to use with students and parents to support the use of the child-centred, strengths-based, holistic and collaborative approach.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ARACY Family Engagement</strong> ARACY has a wealth of research and resources on family and parent engagement in learning, including resources on how schools can embrace and honour children’s cultural identity. Look out for our schools toolkit, produced for the Department of Education, in early 2020.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


31 Waerdahl, R. (2005). 'Maybe I'll need a pair of Levi's before Junior High?' Child to youth trajectories and anticipatory socialization. Childhood, 12(2), 201-219
38 Commission for Children and Young People. (2016). 'Always was, always will be Koori children': Systematic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria. Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People.
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