

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reconnecting with the Warrior Within: Australian Indigenous perspectives on the development of a social and emotional wellbeing program

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Abstract

Issue Addressed: Australian Indigenous youth are at high risk of developing mental health problems. Historical determinants and socioeconomic disadvantage continue to impact their social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and sense of identity. Previous literature suggests connecting to culture significantly impacts SEWB in Indigenous youth. Given the diversity of Indigenous culture, collaboration and consultation with specific cultural groups is required to develop appropriate and relevant psychological treatments for SEWB. The Warrior Within Program was developed to improve SEWB in Indigenous youth by assisting them to better understand their identity through participation in group-based cultural activities. This research aimed to understand Central Queensland Indigenous Development staff perspectives around (1) the process of developing the program and (2) how group-based cultural activities contributed to staff perceived improvements in SEWB of program participants.

Methods: In this qualitative study, semi-structured individual interviews of 60–90 min were conducted with four Warrior Within Program staff of Central Queensland Indigenous Development. Transcripts were thematically analysed and the subthemes identified were categorised into main themes.

Results: The process of developing the Warrior Within Program, cultural and Indigenous identity, reconnecting and knowledge emerged as the four main themes.

Conclusions: This study makes a unique and important contribution to the Australian Indigenous literature regarding the role and nature of culture in group-based programs and the importance of collaborating with Indigenous groups to increase our understanding of their usefulness and efficacy. This study also helps to bridge the

Authors statement: This research was undertaken by non-Indigenous Australian psychologists who, at the time it was conducted, were enrolled in a clinical psychology training program. Based on their first-hand experiences working with disadvantaged Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (referred to throughout as Australian Indigenous), training in clinical psychology and knowledge of the discipline, the authors recognised the paucity of culturally appropriate evidence-based interventions directly addressing mental health-related problems for this population. Guided by the ethical principles of the psychology profession (e.g., the right to social justice and self-determination), the authors sought to better understand and incorporate Australian Indigenous experiences into clinical practice. The authors met with an Australian Indigenous community organisation (with a previous research connection to CQUniversity), to learn more about the methods and efficacy of locally developed and delivered programs for improving SEWB. They learned that collaboration between members of the community, local knowledge and Australian Indigenous ways of knowing were central to the development, delivery and perceived success of these programs. Notably, staff of the organisation highlighted the urgent need for ongoing program funding and legitimising Australian Indigenous methods (that do not always include data that can be evaluated). The authors created this culturally grounded study to better understand and empirically describe Australian Indigenous methods for developing programs and their impact on SEWB.

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gap between Indigenous ways of knowing in program development and non-Indigenous methods of evaluation.

So What? Acknowledging Australian Indigenous methods and ways of knowing are essential to the development and delivery of culturally appropriate group programs for addressing the psychological needs of this population. The methods used in this study could be used by others seeking to legitimise cultural ways of knowing.

KEYWORDS

Australian Indigenous, culture, identity, social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) reconnecting

1 | INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the First Nation's people of Australia and have lived in Australia for approximately 120 000 years. Before colonisation, the Australian Indigenous population was estimated to have 260 language groups and 500 local dialects. Since British settlers first arrived in 1788, Australian Indigenous people have experienced dispossession of land, massacres of entire communities, introduced diseases and oppressive legislation, forced removal of their children, racism and discrimination. An ongoing devaluation of their culture continues to negatively impact their kinship ties, connection to Country, identity, SEWB and health outcomes.¹ Australian Indigenous young people experience higher rates of mental health problems than their non-Indigenous counterparts and there is an urgent need for research, development and delivery of clinical interventions for this population.^{2,3}

It has been suggested that SEWB for Australian Indigenous people is an interaction between the concept of self and the ways in which they experience and express their connection to family and kinship, community, culture, Country, body, mind and emotions, spirituality and ancestors.^{4,5} Understanding SEWB through this holistic lens is essential for clinicians working with Australian Indigenous people in mental health settings. However, the resources and time needed to collaborate with Indigenous community organisations is a barrier to developing evidence-based clinical interventions.² It has been suggested that western clinical interventions such as cognitive behavioural therapy may be applied effectively with Indigenous people however, such therapeutic methods alone may be insufficient to provide a holistic approach to SEWB.^{6,7} Furthermore, Australian Indigenous culture is diverse and varies between localities leading to complications with generalising evidence-based interventions across cultural groups.⁸

Given the diversity of Indigenous culture, there is a need for mental health clinicians to acquire specific knowledge, skills and attitudes to understand and work appropriately with Indigenous clients of various nations.⁸

To address the problem, local Indigenous community organisations develop and deliver their own culturally appropriate SEWB and empowerment group programs. These programs privilege local ownership and knowledge and their content varies between cultural groups and localities.⁹ Consultation between mental health clinicians and

specific Indigenous communities has increased awareness of Indigenous perspectives on healing which is broadly viewed as a process of reconnecting with culture, family and community and spiritual understanding of self, identity and belonging.^{10,11} Local programs typically refer to the use of individual and group cultural activities for this purpose which includes traditional rituals and ceremonies, language of their Nation, dance, music, art, storytelling and talking circles.^{5,9,12} The reason for including specific cultural activities in local programs and how they improve SEWB is largely unknown. Australian Indigenous people report that connecting with culture, family, community and spirituality improves SEWB. There is a clear need to better understand Australian Indigenous methodologies and ways of knowing.

2 | RECONNECTING WITH THE WARRIOR WITHIN

The Warrior Within, as a standalone program, was created in 2018 by Central Queensland Indigenous Development¹³ as a way for Australian Indigenous youth to connect with their culture during a school holiday period. Program participants were identified as disengaged by Central Queensland Indigenous Development staff working in safety, family and student liaison roles within the community. Through group cultural activities and sport, the program aimed to improve SEWB in participants by focusing on increasing resilience, self-confidence, cultural knowledge and leadership skills. Program activities were led by local Indigenous role models and traditional owners and included: boomerang throwing; playing the didgeridoo (for males); making of the coolamans (for females); painting boomerangs, didgeridoos and coolamans; fishing; and touch football. Subsequent iterations of the Warrior Within Program were not run due to difficulties demonstrating its efficacy using non-Indigenous methods of evaluation and lack of ongoing Government funding. The Warrior Within Program has yet to be empirically studied.

This exploratory qualitative study draws attention to Indigenous decision-making and the ways in which group cultural activities are operationalised for improving SEWB within programs such as the Warrior Within Program. Obtaining first-hand Indigenous perspectives will help to inform future research investigating how local programs are constructed to increase SEWB in disengaged youth.

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

Between November 2018 and February 2019, the researchers met with staff of the group-based program on separate occasions in order to better understand the needs of the organisation and how the research could benefit their team. The researchers learned about the history of Darumbal country and its people, discussed historical determinants and contemporary experiences of SEWB problems for Indigenous youth and participated in cultural activities guided by a Central Queensland Indigenous Development youth worker. Over this period, a semi-structured interview was developed utilising cultural awareness and the types of cognitive probes suggested by Klein et al. for eliciting expert knowledge about the reason for program content inclusion.¹⁴

A semi-structured interview format was utilised for flexibility and to gather specific information through conversation, similar to research topic yarning. Yarning, the sharing of information and stories in Australian Indigenous culture, has been found to be a culturally appropriate, safe and transferable form of communicating with Indigenous people.¹⁵ Australian Indigenous people are the best source of knowledge regarding their experience of SEWB problems and ways of solving them.¹⁶ The semi-structured and conversational format of interviews was therefore used because it privileges Indigenous perspectives of healing, demonstrates respect for collaboration in research with Indigenous people and acknowledges the cultural differences between the non-Indigenous researchers and Indigenous participants.

Of the six Central Queensland Indigenous Development staff contributors to the Warrior Within Program (who all identified as Australian Indigenous), two members of senior management and two youth workers participated in a face-to-face interview lasting 60–90 min in duration. Two other youth workers involved in the program declined to participate for unknown reasons. The interviews were recorded with permission and conducted at a neutral off-site location so participation could remain anonymous to other staff members.

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee (No. 2019-005).

4 | ANALYSES

In keeping with the authors' position and aims of this research, an inductive six-phase thematic analysis of the audio-recorded interviews was conducted.¹⁷ Responses were given initial codes that reflected latent features of the data. The initial codes were then reviewed by each of the researchers separately for consensus, accuracy and fidelity. Sub-themes were formed by grouping initial codes into common themes. Extracts from initial codes were then compared within each sub-theme and across the data set to ensure that sub-themes were grounded in the data. Sub-themes were further refined and defined to identify main themes that accurately reflect their respective meaning within the overall data set and in relation to each other. No discrepancies were detected between the researchers in the inclusion of sub-themes into the main themes. A statement of the results was provided to Central Queensland

Indigenous Development staff. No comments regarding interpretation were received.

5 | RESULTS

Four main themes identified across the data set were: (1) the processes of developing the Warrior Within Program; (2) cultural and Indigenous identity; (3) knowledge and (4) reconnecting with culture, community and identity. The main themes and their respective sub-themes are depicted in Figure 1. Staff perspectives of the contribution of cultural activities and the decision-making process that informed the Warrior Within Program are described thereafter.

5.1 | Theme 1: The process of development

Staff identified six sub-themes that they considered to be relevant to the process of developing the Warrior Within Program.

Identifying needs (engaging and culturally meaningful). Staff were concerned that without the structure of school during the holidays, Indigenous youth already linked to Central Queensland Indigenous Development services were more likely to engage in risky behaviour. Although there were no explicit expectations made by Warrior Within Program staff, the collective aim was to provide positive connections to culture through a fun, engaging and educational program with local Indigenous role models. This involved collaborating with local cultural experts and leaders to provide a meaningful and culturally appropriate program.

'I seen it as an opportunity for kids to stay connected to culture and do those cultural activities that they may not have in their lives already. And introduced them to Elders and community role models that they can look up to as well. It was just sort of giving them an alternative to possibly getting in trouble around doing nothing at home over the holidays. So that's why we developed it.'

(Pt_2)

Meeting needs (through cultural activities). Staff recognised the need to understand the purpose and relevance of the selected activities that they used intuitively to reduce distress.

'... even if it meant that that person was having a good old cry because they were unhappy, or even if they got frustrated or angry, but to realise that's okay. We were doing some bark drawings, how about we use that, that might be one way that you can bring down your emotions'.

(Pt_1)

Participants coming together in group activities also served as a mechanism for sharing knowledge and helping others connect with culture. Staff recognised that the lived experiences of participants

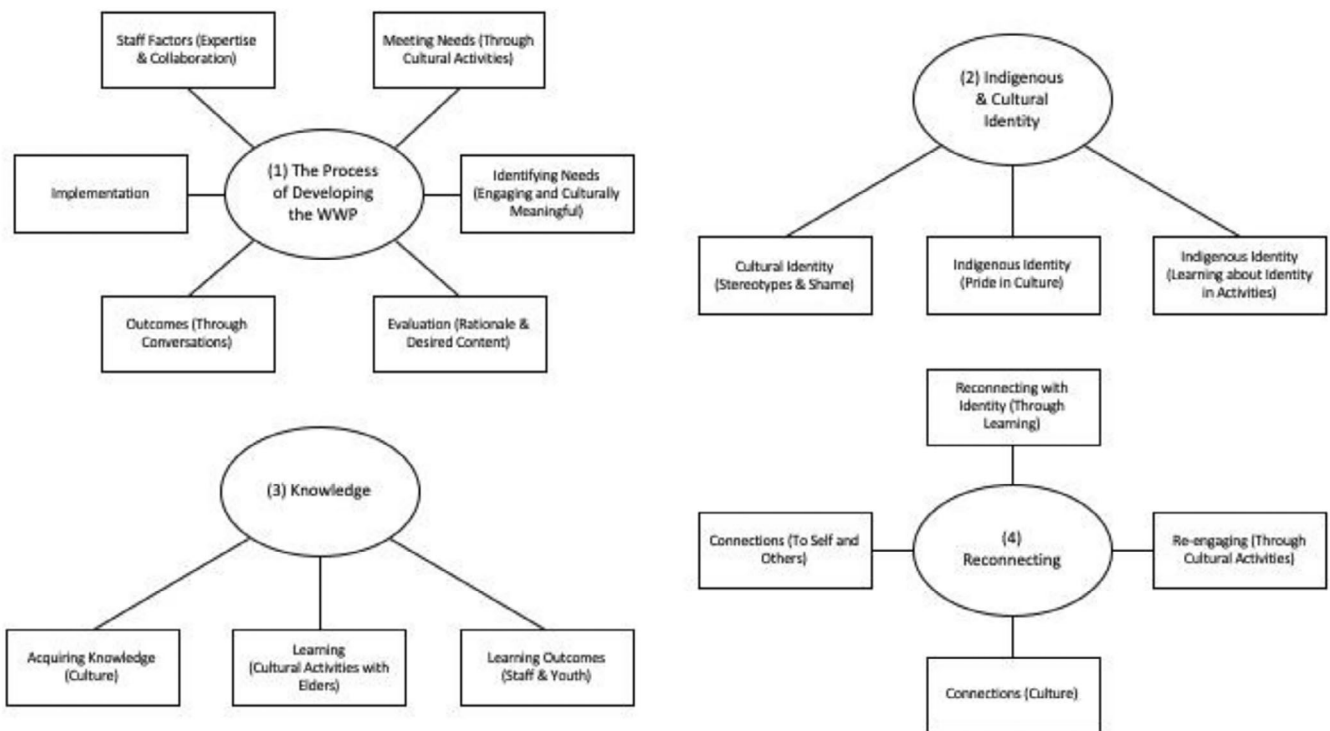


FIGURE 1 Main themes and sub-themes of the contribution of cultural activities and the decision-making process that informed the Warrior Within Program.

could be used to impart this diverse knowledge and therefore meet the greater need of connecting youth with culture.

'I know we had, um, the young boy... he was just so, um, in and out of some of those groups, so worked up that we actually said, alright, let's bring it back, let's actually, so we actually put him in another group and made him a leader and then he was able to teach a dance. So we were able to, to utilise him to actually, actually lead some of that cultural activity cos he actually had a strong connection to culture'.

(Pt_1)

Staff factors (expertise and collaboration). Yarning between staff and stakeholders provided different levels of cultural knowledge. This was considered important as conversation and collaboration are fundamental to Indigenous ways of knowing.

'Because we all came from different paths, walks of life, and knowing our culture. I wasn't brought up around my culture. So, to me, belonging and that sense of belonging was strong. We had other members of our team that had such a rich understanding of their culture and where they're from. They brought a whole different type of perspective. I think that helped to sort of cover all of our bases'.

(Pt_2)

'We all sort just came together for one vision and one goal and think we pulled it off really well'.

(Pt_3)

The staff also inadvertently brought along their own lived, often traumatic experiences, of being Indigenous.

'... I found with the staff I was working with, because of the environment they were working with, it triggered a lot of their own traumas... But a lot of the times they haven't dealt with it'.

(Pt_1)

Implementation. Initially, the group format for activities was utilised for ease of delivery and efficient use of funds and time.

'I think it was more for us, like, easier for service delivery... but made sure to pay Darumbal Enterprises because, like, you know, that's their trade... and we wouldn't have been able to afford it, to do it for each individual child in a one on one context. Or, it, we just wouldn't have the time...'

(Pt_4)

However, staff perceived the implementation of the program as a coming together of multiple elements including management, Elders and youth.

'Um, but if you sort a wanna [pause] like pack that sort of platform even more it [pause] developing it is like management, then it comes down to us to you know, um, deliver it. And then to deliver it, needs the help of the elders. But, we need the clients there too because that's why we're doing it. So, they're almost like our audience but, yeah'.

(Pt_3)

The perceived benefits of group activities led by Elders were peer support and a positive learning environment.

'...they [the youth] were together but rarely talking to each other. It's like they were in each other's space and they were focusing on whatever they were doing, they were listening to the elders speak and they were responding to that. So, it was sort of like, that comfort of being that, the same group of people, not on your own with an elder [laughs] that would be a bit um frantic for some. But, um, sort of sitting together around, you know, in a circle and they were doing their own thing and just listening... So, they were still learning, um, but it was sort of a different environment again, even though it was a group'.

(Pt_2)

Outcomes (through conversations). The benefits of delivering cultural activities to disengaged youth exceeded staff expectations. Staff spoke about observing increased social skills and engagement in activities with a desire to know more about culture. For example, learning in culturally appropriate ways (e.g., group-based gender-specific activities) assisted the youth to feel comfortable while having important conversations about what it means to be Indigenous.

'And they'd all tell jokes, they'd all, like this is how I would weave and they'd put the music on, they'd all sing music together, they'd all ask for what music they wanted to be played and what not. And that's what I think, like that's how I noticed a difference anyway. Was just the general communication of just talking about anything'.

(Pt_4)

'You know, it's, it's not something for them to be ashamed of. Um, and having healthy conversations, you know, in a safe environment. Um, and that they can have that conversation where everyone can hear. They don't have to be ashamed of... yeah and then sharing it and then just really proud of it'.

(Pt_3)

'If they're painting they could have some really hard conversations with you or just be comfortable. Because, it's like the focus is on the painting and something that

they're doing and that shame factor, that I'm looking at you or I'm judging you sort of falls away'.

(Pt_2)

Staff also observed that program participants strengthened bonds and made friendships with their peers through engagement in group activities. The connections that were built during the group activities extended beyond the Warrior Within Program.

'We did girls sessions. And so like they'd go to the gym together and they'd just do activities together, just as part of Ngudyu Yadaba [Youth Program]. They interacted a lot better. Like they spoke to each other better, and like, I think it was that context of sitting around, you know, building that identity together, talking, like what would happen back in, in the day...'

(Pt_4)

Evaluation (rationale and desired content). Although staff observed improvements in the youth, they identified the need for more research, structure, collaboration between cultural therapy and non-Indigenous psychological methods, and tailoring the program towards a specific age group. On reflection, staff also wanted more collaboration with psychologists, opportunities to increase traditional cultural knowledge and application for contemporary society.

'I've got the cultural therapy, I've got the mainstream way of doing it, and I need to know how do they work together and how I evidence that. I know it's making a difference but how do I evidence it?'

(Pt_1)

5.2 | Theme 2: Indigenous and cultural identity

Cultural identity (stereotypes and shame). Before developing the program, staff identified that many youth held and were aware of negative perceptions of Indigenous culture.

'... you know the expectation of me, maybe, that I'm not going to achieve, I'm not going to attend, that I'm actually going to get into trouble. So, if that's the expectation because of my skin colour, then maybe that's the way I need to act. So, I'm normal'.

(Pt_1)

For some of the youth, being Indigenous meant living up to stereotypes.

'If you said, okay, look what's an Aboriginal? Most of them would probably just go, doin' what we want, being on the riverbank...'

(Pt_4)

Staff suggested that this may also lead youth to distance themselves from an Indigenous identity.

'...they were following another culture... the American culture...they relate to something like the music... the clothes that helps them identify'.

(Pt_3)

However, staff perceived that coming together was a way of restoring traditional group connections which are an essential element of Indigenous identity.

'... because that's our culture... We're family bonded, we're, we're, we're strong with family. When we move, we move the whole tribe. When that season changed, we gather up all our family, we move again... I think so. Because we don't like to be without family. We don't. That's our culture. Um, even in the grieving process, family together. We'll move for months, for sorry business'.

(Pt_3)

Indigenous identity (pride in culture). Staff noticed that many Indigenous youth in the area struggled with knowing who they were and this was considered a barrier to getting along well with others at school and the local community.

'Um [sigh] if you don't have a good sense of yourself, and you don't understand who you are, then it's really hard for you to take that step beyond that and, um, and share yourself with other people, in a team environment, so a school environment'.

(Pt_1)

'... I don't want to say that they had no identity, because they are a person, but they had no sense of identity, they had no sense of who I am...'

(Pt_4)

Staff thought that if youth could have a positive experience with their culture this may lead to increased pride in culture and build self-esteem.

'So, the aim is really around, if we could get young Indigenous kids to have a really good sense of who they are and to be proud of the culture, rather than embarrassed of the culture'.

(Pt_1)

'If you do something well you get praised. It's sort of all the good things that our culture does have involved, you know, that group, that community focus that we have as well'.

(Pt_2)

'And that's why we went with the culture, to build that identity and give them that self-esteem... but the aim was to give a sense of identity and a sense of purpose with the cultural side of things'.

(Pt_4)

Indigenous identity (learning about identity in activities). To address the negative perceptions of culture, the staff included activities that would provide positive cultural experiences to help heal and increase sense of pride and belonging.

'So [participant name] had not mentioned his dad's name at all, since his dad passed away... but his dad was a really good didgeridoo player. And once he learned how to play didgeridoo he was really good at it. And once he learned to play didgeridoo he started talking about his dad. So it gave him a sense of healing. He could connect his identity to the didgeridoo'.

(Pt_4)

'... if they were new to it, you know, that's why we had some of the activities that we sort of like had the ability to teach them a lot of things for that long-term sort of self-worth and you know, knowing who you are without overwhelming them...'

(Pt_2)

5.3 | Theme 3: Knowledge

Acquiring knowledge (culture). Staff wanted the youth to learn about respect for themselves and others through culture and sharing it with peers. To increase active participation, group activities needed to be educational and fun. Staff identified that traditional owners, as positive role models, were better placed than themselves to impart cultural knowledge.

'But through those activities, I find that they learn that patience for one another and that respect for one another and what better place to learn that with, people that are very similar to you'.

(Pt_2)

'That was the ultimate aim... how would a positive Aboriginal role model act in a community setting, instead of the negative stereotypes that they see all the time'.

(Pt_4)

Learning (cultural activities with elders). For staff, group program activities were a way of teaching life skills and traditional ways of knowing.

'... like an Elder sitting there, the men's business in the circle saying, "when you sit here, I'm the Elder, you listen,

this is what we did, sat here, I'm the tribe Elder, you listen to me" ... So, maybe that's them teaching the boys that when you go to school, you sit in that seat, all your job is to do is to listen to that teacher. Look at that teacher, like, it's your Elder and you listen and you learn'.

(Pt_3)

'The assumption is if you're Indigenous you know how to throw a boomerang... And the majority of those kids have never thrown a boomerang in their life... So we get in a local Elder who tells a few yarns, shows them different types of boomerangs, and they throw them. So then, you know, now we're Indigenous and we know how to throw a boomerang'.

(Pt_1)

Learning outcomes (staff and youth). Although staff experienced difficulty articulating the benefits of cultural knowledge, they noted the importance of learning about their culture and creating a sustainable program.

'A lot of it you couldn't put into words. Words are meaningless in terms of what we seen there'.

(Pt_4)

'I did the coolaman where we actually cut the bark from the tree. For myself growing up with not my culture I just felt that really strong sense of, this is what I would have been doing, for my family'.

(Pt_3)

'What we were doing was actually trying to really build a sustainable program, we were building mentors'.

(Pt_1)

Staff observed that hands-on activities increased participation and led to some youth teaching and leading others in cultural ways of knowing.

'Yeah, he became a leader... around culture, around cultural stuff, cos his dad was, um, a very strong, um, Indigenous man in community, but had [died]... he was one who was also, had never been taught the didge, so, even though his dad was a great didge player, so, by us teaching him the didge and him learning that, he was then teaching his brother...'

(Pt_1)

5.4 | Theme 4: Reconnecting

Re-engaging (through cultural activities). Staff wanted to be able to provide youth with a different and positive experience of being

Indigenous. It was thought that group cultural activities could be used to assist them to better engage with others and in an educational environment. That is, learning to reconnect together could help them learn how to engage in other ways.

'I seen it as an opportunity for kids to stay connected to culture and do those cultural activities that they may not have in their lives already'.

(Pt_2)

'Well definitely, youth, ah, coming together in one common goal. And the reason why they're all coming together, is because they're Indigenous youth, young boys young girls, um, and giving them maybe some experiences that they might not have had before'.

(Pt_3)

'Um, I think this time around, it was like how can we give them something that they can go home with and do it and practice it and do it and do it and you know like cos times have changed [laughs], you can't really go outside and throw a boomerang around the neighbourhood, you might hurt someone's dog... I think that, for me I chose those activities because of that, because you could do 'em so frequently and it wasn't expensive, you know all you needed was a reel line and hook and you could go fishing in the closest river or area'.

(Pt_2)

Connections (culture). When developing the Warrior Within Program, staff wanted to ensure that culture was accessible to all participants regardless of Country of origin and level of cultural knowledge. This also included helping participants to establish connections to culture.

'It's about giving them the opportunity to connect to their culture even if they don't know their specific culture. That's why it was really important for us to have Darumbal Enterprises on board. We were following traditional laws'.

(Pt_4)

'A lot of our guys don't know their mob... but we'll still talk about what is a totem. You can then create your own totem until you can find out. Or we know someone that knows your family, maybe we can track down what your totem is'.

(Pt_1)

Connections (to self and others). Facilitating a connection to culture was also about wanting to offer the youth, who often had complex needs, an emotionally and physically safe environment. Staff

lived experience, the group context and cultural ways of knowing were all considered essential to this process.

'But now, they've got that sense of belonging. They don't have to say or feel that way when they're getting outed at school. You know, that they're not alone. They've got a whole tribe, they've got a whole culture behind them'.

(Pt_3)

'... the cultural ways, was to be in a group, in a community as a collective. Not on your own, isolated. The kids will come together and you'll have those leaders in the group that sort of help everyone else come out of their shell'.

(Pt_2)

'... a lot of the case managed girls our case goals were connected back to culture. And it was just about giving them the self-confidence, self-esteem, you know, this is not so much this is who you are but them deciding this is who I am'.

(Pt_4)

'... and, I'm thinking that I've got heaps of kids that probably are already seeing a psychologist, that aren't having any results. Then my question will be, well what can I be doing differently and where's the expertise in my team. My expertise in my team really is their connection to their culture'.

(Pt_1)

Reconnecting with identity (through learning). Staff observed individual improvements in participants through the process of learning about cultural identity and engaging in group activities.

'I had one of my clients, when we're fishing go "my dad used to take me fishing" and that was the first time I had ever heard him talk about his father... was when we were fishing in a group'.

(Pt_2)

'I had one girl who wouldn't speak because I don't think she was confident in her speaking and by the end of it she was yelling. The differences like that were good... So, although the Warrior Within is a great thing to do over the holidays a lot of the girls kept doing physical activity and learning about their health'.

(Pt_2)

Ultimately, being part of a group, such as the Warrior Within Program, is more than a connection to others. As noted above, for Australian Indigenous people, it is also intrinsically connected to their SEWB.

'Teaching or handing down that information in a family group, all the roles were all important for this family to be able to survive and function. You know, what it's like to have family, look after family, provide for family. At the end of the day, when they've gone hunting, when the women have gathered, they come back as a group, and they live, they love, they learn, and they flourish'.

(Pt_3)

6 | DISCUSSION

By drawing on observations in their respective roles within Central Queensland Indigenous Development and lived experiences with culture, developers and facilitators of the Warrior Within Program identified a need to provide Indigenous youth with an opportunity to learn about their culture, connect with other Indigenous people, their culture and identity. This required Australian Indigenous methods of knowing how to meet psychological needs. The process of providing Indigenous youth with this opportunity involved collaboration with other staff, local Indigenous role models, traditional owners and Elders. Staff observed positive changes in program participants' SEWB; in some cases, the benefits were unexpected and difficult to articulate. The bonds formed during group activities transcended the Warrior Within Program and into the school and broader community. Warrior Within Program staff reported that the strong ties the youth built with each other contributed to their sense of self and cultural identity. Although reflecting on the process of developing the Warrior Within Program, staff noted the need to provide evidence for the efficacy of their methods and ways of knowing. They viewed this as essential to establishing a sustainable program providing more opportunities for Australian Indigenous youth to access their culture and improve SEWB.

Staff noted that before the Warrior Within Program many participants had little to no knowledge of their mob, Country and culture. They observed that many were disconnected from school and community and were aware of the negative perceptions of Australian Indigenous people which impacted their self-esteem, sense of belonging and identity. This is consistent with the well-documented effects of colonisation and social disadvantage that can impact the Indigenous concept of self that contributes to the SEWB of Indigenous people.^{1,4} Staff highlighted that the Warrior Within Program led to observed improvements in confidence, pride in culture, sense of belonging and emotional expression as evidenced by increased participation in cultural activities and school, talking about family and sharing cultural knowledge with others. This finding provides support for previous research which emphasises the critical role of strong kinship ties and networks and to Indigenous sense of belonging and identity.^{18,19} When young people feel connected and accepted by others in a safe environment, they can begin to establish a secure self-identity.²⁰ From a Warrior Within Program staff perspective, participants were able to connect cultural activities to a positive Indigenous identity and increased pride in what it means to be Indigenous. Cultural

activities were also perceived as healing by staff in that they provided youth with a connection and increased sense of belonging to others, the community and culture. It is worth noting that increased connection between youth and staff facilitated the sharing of personal stories. These stories, in themselves, were often traumatic. Warrior Within Program staff reported that these stories were confronting and at times emotionally overwhelming which resulted in unintended consequences (e.g., extended leave). Therefore, a part of the process for developing and delivering Australian Indigenous programs is not only considering the psychological needs of participants but also the facilitators.

The findings of this study also draw attention to the lack of research addressing clinical interventions for Australian Indigenous youth living on Darumbal Country and the difficulties of finding an evidence base for group-based cultural therapy. Staff valued their methods however, found them difficult to describe and identified a need to collaborate with psychologists to evidence and legitimise the cultural methods they used. This is consistent with previous research findings that suggest there is a need to collaborate with Indigenous community organisations and specific cultural groups to develop and implement culturally appropriate and evidence-based interventions.^{2,3,8}

In this study, the decision-making process for the Warrior Within Program emphasised meeting the needs of disengaged Australian Indigenous youth living on Darumbal Country and was based on lived experience and the cultural expertise of staff. Previous attempts to identify the common elements of healing, empowerment and SEWB programs have yielded little consensus in this regard.^{10,21,22} The findings of this study have identified themes considered to be important by staff to the development of a group-based cultural program that aims to improve SEWB within the Darumbal context. Although the findings of this study also highlight the idiosyncratic nature of SEWB programs, they provide evidence for legitimising Australian Indigenous ways of knowing. A model of care that acknowledges and utilises Australian Indigenous methods would be most appropriate to address the psychological needs of this population. Future research could focus on integrating Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing to ensure the continuity of these much-needed programs. The methods used in this research could also be used by others seeking to legitimise cultural ways of knowing in addressing the psychological needs of Australian Indigenous people.

7 | LIMITATIONS

It is worth noting that the findings of this study reflect only the perspectives of Central Queensland Indigenous Development staff involved in developing and delivering the Warrior Within Program. However, local role models, traditional owners and Elders also made decisions about program content and were key contributors to the delivery of activities. Therefore, interviewing these contributors may have yielded more specific information about the reason for inclusion, contribution and meaning of cultural activities. In addition, a more comprehensive exploration would include the perspectives of program participants. This would also have helped to identify specific benefits of cultural activities. Nonetheless, Central Queensland Indigenous Development staff led the development process and facilitated

the delivery of the program and the findings make a unique and important contribution to the Australian Indigenous literature around the use of cultural therapies for improving SEWB in Indigenous youth.

8 | IMPLICATIONS FOR CLINICAL PRACTICE

The importance of collaboration with Australian Indigenous organisations and cultural expertise of Australian Indigenous people was evident throughout the consultation and research process of this study. For the researchers, this required learning about historical determinants and how they contribute to contemporary experiences of SEWB problems for Australian Indigenous youth. Within the context of this study and in line with previous research findings,^{23,24} psychologists working in areas where they are likely to encounter Australian Indigenous people need to establish partnerships with Australian Indigenous organisations and seek appropriate supervision to improve cultural competence. Understanding the cultural realities and acknowledging Australian Indigenous methods of addressing psychological needs is essential to working with this population.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was granted ethical approval by the CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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