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The connection between health and well-being  
and Indigenous language use and learning  
– An annotated bibliography

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## Research Process Description

This annotated bibliography aims to contribute to a better understanding of and document current trends as well as gaps in the published literature on Indigenous language use and learning and their connection to health and well-being.

A three-stage approach was used to identify a pool of existing literature: First, three previous literature reviews related to the topic were consulted to establish a starting point for our follow-up work. McIvor, Napoleon, and Dickie (2009) published the seminal piece in the field, and so only publications from 2009 onwards were included in our review to narrow results and ensure research was current. Secondly, the search tool *Summon*, which aggregates scholarly material found in various databases, journals, theses and dissertations online, and *Google Scholar* were used to identify research that cited articles from the three seminal literature reviews. Through this, we captured articles that cover similar topics but are more current than the originally cited article. For the final part of the review, an open search in *Summon* was completed, using various combinations of key words including: language, language revitalization, language learning, Indigenous, Aboriginal, Native American, well-being, wellness, health, healing, and balance. A total of 39 articles were located.

We further reduced this number for our analysis by 1) only retaining articles that explicitly discussed language and its connection to health and wellbeing, and 2) by further omitting articles that explored the relationship between culture and well-being more broadly with only brief mentions of language's relationship as a cultural component. The final 16 articles included in this annotation therefore either discuss a direct connection between language, health and wellbeing or use language as a measure for cultural continuity and its connection to health and wellbeing.

McIvor, O., Napoleon, A., & Dickie, K. M. (2009). Language and culture as protective factors for at-risk communities. *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 5(1), 6-25.  
<https://doi.org/10.3138/ijih.v5i1>

## **Annotated Bibliography (alphabetical)**

**Anderson, G. (2010). Introducing Wiradjuri language in Parkes. In J. Hobson, S. Lowe, S. Poetsch, & M. Walsh (Eds.), *Re-awakening languages: Theory and practice in the revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous languages* (pp. 67-74). Sydney, Australia: Sydney University Press.**

Through a personal account of language revitalization, Anderson explores the impact of revitalization on his own personal healing as well as healing in the community. In his account, Anderson describes working with Elders and children to revive Wiradjuri in southern Australia. Anderson describes how language made some participants feel safe, gave autonomy to individuals in the community, and helped him fill a void in his soul by connecting him with his ancestors. On his journey, he contributed to the implementation of a language revitalization program in a school that resulted in an environment with near zero racism between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners (who learn side-by-side). He argues that learning the language together helped the children overcome differences in worldview that contributed to racism. The parents of the children also formed an adult language class where people both come to learn the language and participate in interpersonal healing. Participants reported being given strength and social healing within a few weeks, with one participant saying, "learning the language that belongs inside will heal you" (p. 73). The methodology of using personal accounts makes generalizing findings difficult. However, within a wholistic research approach the knowledge gained from Anderson's experience still supports the notion that language is able to heal on an individual level as well as heal relationships between individuals and their ancestors, between community members, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Anderson's work thus provides further evidence to the relevance of health and well-being research from an Indigenous perspective.

**Ball, J., Moselle, K., & Moselle, S. (2013). *Contributions of culture and language in Aboriginal Head Start in urban and northern communities to children's health outcomes: A review of theory and research*. Ottawa, ON: Division of Children, Seniors & Healthy Development, Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention Branch, Public Health Agency of Canada.**

In their report, the authors set out to connect current concepts and empirical support for the importance of language and culture to Indigenous children's wellness, education, and quality of life. The authors begin with a literature review that outlines conceptual models that link language and culture, as mediators between community-level health risks and health outcomes for individuals of those communities. In the second section of the report, Ball, Moselle, and Moselle perform a data analysis that characterizes links between culture, language, and aboriginal head start participation with determinants of health and health outcomes. The authors found language and culture, specifically cultural identity, are factors in promoting healthy development of children by mitigating other factors such

as poverty. This in turn, protects against poverty-related health outcomes, such as high-risk sexual behaviour, suicide, depression, and mental health. In their findings, cultural identity by way of participating in cultural events, language learning, and experiencing social support is correlated with increased self-esteem. While this research explores the contribution of macro-level social determinants of health to individual well-being, the discussion is centred on individual wellness and the relationship between individual well-being and culture is treated as being one directional. The authors propose that participating in culture strengthens the individual, but overlook the individual's contribution to strengthening the community, thus ignoring an important part of Indigenous concepts of wellness and relationality.

**Biddle, N., & Swee, H. (2012). The Relationship between wellbeing and Indigenous land, language and culture in Australia. *Australian Geographer*, 43(3), 215-232.**

In their paper, Biddle and Swee explore factors associated with three measures of sustainability and wellbeing. Using national cross-sectional survey data of the Australian Indigenous population, the authors found a positive relationship between the sustainability of (home)land, language, and culture and a person's subjective experience of emotional well-being. Biddle and Swee acknowledge that the use of cross-sectional data in their research makes it impossible to establish causality (whether happy people are more likely to learn their language or if learning their language creates happiness). However, their findings show that maintaining a connection to one's homeland (through harvesting activities or acknowledgement), learning an Indigenous language, and participating in cultural are associated with higher levels of happiness.

**Brown, H.J., McPherson, G., Peterson, R., Newman, V., & Cranmer, B. (2012). Our land, our language: Connecting dispossession and health equity in an Indigenous context. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research*, 44(2), 44-63.**

Reflecting on the findings from several community-based participatory research studies with 'Nāmgis First Nation, Brown et al. explore how neoliberal mechanisms sustain medical colonialism through dispossession of land and language and investigate the connections between culture, Indigenous knowledge, and health. Part of their findings reveal that the dispossession of language contributes to feeling uncertain about one's identity. According to participants in the study, "preserving uniqueness through language and culture is seen to be both restorative and constitutive of identity" (p. 52). Language, according to the authors, emerges as an expression of identity that defines what is important in the past, present, and future. This reflects descriptions from youth in their study on how language is a way of learning from the past to live in today's world, and about gaining contemporary feelings of value and self-worth. This article provides a complement to the work of Biddle and Swee's (2012). Where Biddle and Swee demonstrate how sustainability is important to well-being, Brown et al. show how

neoliberal mechanisms continue to interfere with the relationship between language and well-being, and in doing so furthering health inequities for Indigenous people. A notable area for further research is in Brown et al.'s brief discussions about the importance of language in connecting Indigenous youth to their ancestors and the importance of this connection to well-being across time and historic healing.

**Eichstadt, K. (2016). “*The Responsibility to Learn*”: An investigation into the language ideologies of you women speakers of Chinuk Wawa. Retrieved from <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honorstheses/267/>**

In her honours thesis, Eichstadt demonstrates the complexity of language ideologies (ideas or beliefs about language) held in a community of people working to revitalize Chinuk Wawa, a language spoken in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Drawing from six semi-structured interviews with women of varying fluency in Chinuk Wawa, Eichstadt identifies several themes in language ideology that include identity, authenticity, and responsibility. Within these themes, participants recognize language as being a core component of individual, familial, and tribal identity, and even pan-Indigenous identity. Language reclamation is found to combat shame and promote healing from trauma imposed and inflicted through colonialism. The author also discusses how learning the language in intimate learning environments often created bonds between the women and promoted the necessary trust that someone will hold you with care when you make a mistake. This observation contributes to a better understanding of how language promotes community healing by strengthening Indigenous concepts of relationality.

**Galla, C., & Goodwill, A. (2017). Talking story with vital voices: Making knowledge with Indigenous language. *Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing* 2(3), 67-75.**

Galla and Goodwill share in this paper their research practice of accessing Indigenous knowledge systems and understandings of well-being from Indigenous language speakers. Using Storywork practices, they show that it is language that revitalizes its people, rather than people that revitalize language. The Storywork procedures involved working with two plurilingual speakers (Hawaiian-English and Anishinaabemowin-English) who shared their stories of well-being in their language and then transformed their stories to English. This paper focuses on the benefit of this methodology towards decolonization and healing, while another forthcoming paper will discuss results. Here, the authors are able to show how this methodology, through the centring of the Indigenous language itself, promotes forms of well-being within the participants by *listening with three ears*, connecting the head and heart. By centering the language and storytellers, the listeners participate in an opportunity to learn and share that is in alignment with Indigenous percepts of knowledge making with the emphasis on respect, relationality, relevance, responsibility, reciprocity, and resiliency. The authors claim that

the language and process of Storywork creates well-being in both storytellers and listeners. While we await the follow-up paper, the initial discussion about language and well-being is promising. The work signals that language has the capacity not only to promote individual well-being of the speakers, but also to repair and enhance relationships with others, indicating that language may be a facilitator for relational repair contributing to community well-being. This research could also lend support to the idea that language exists in a bi-directional relationship with healing, where one influences the other and vice versa.

**Gonzalez, M.B., Aronson, B.D., Kellar, S., Walls, M.L., & Greenfield, B.L. (2017).**

**Language as a facilitator of cultural connection. *AbOrig.* 1(2), 176-194.**

This study explores language as a unique component of culture and its contribution to improving health of Indigenous people. Using data from Mino Giizhigad (Ojibwe for “A Good day”), a large community-based participatory research project, the authors measured Ojibwe language proficiency and its relationship to cultural variables. The analysis revealed that greater language proficiency is associated with increased participation in traditional and spiritual activities and promotes associated values. . The authors suggest that this strong connection between language and cultural values provide the basis for future research that considers the relationship between language, cultural involvements and health. The present study uses Western conceptions of health (that emphasize physical health), but is not making the connection to an Indigenous’ understanding of health and well-being. If language proficiency is highly associated with increased participation in traditional and spiritual activities, then there may also be implications for the impact of language on the well-being of the community. Instead of only exploring language as a factor that supports cultural and spiritual healing in individuals, we might consider language as a vessel that holds/supports the activities that bring us to wellness both individually and as a community.

**Harvey, N., & Myint, H. (2014). Our language is like food: Can children feed on home languages to thrive, belong and achieve in early childhood education and care?**

***Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 39(2), 42-50.**

Harvey and Myint explore the role a home language can play in early childhood education environments where a different language is the main medium. Using a qualitative analysis of the narratives of five Burmese bilingual teachers, the authors show ways in which the use of Burmese (home language) nourished trusting relationships, restored safe spaces, and affirmed bilingual identities for teachers and children. Though this study does not directly explore the relationship between Indigenous people, language, and well-being, it was included in this review because it centres home language and shows the importance of that language to aspects of well-being relevant to Indigenous people. Harvey and Myint’s finding that using home language creates a sense

of safety and improves relationships supports the argument that language can promote well-being through Indigenous concepts of relationality. Furthermore, the authors show that home language plays a role in cultural continuity and relationship building necessary for participating in the community.

**Iwama, M., Marshall, M., Marshall, A., & Bartlett, C. (2009). Two-Eyed-Seeing and the language of healing in community-based research. *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 32(2), 3-23.**

In this article, the authors, share how their group used two concepts in the context of making the university a welcoming place for Indigenous peoples: “Two-eyed Seeing”, an “Indigenist pedagogy, research, practice, and way of living that incorporates Western and Indigenous knowledges” (p. 3), and two linguistic Mi’kmaq components of health, i.e., the *healing* and *spiritual* verb tenses. The article is based on several conversations that were exchanged between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the Cape Breton University’s Institute for Integrative Science / Toqwa’tu’kl Kijitagnn and Health (IISH). Using critical analysis and dramatic re-enactment, the group participants explore language revitalization and the restoration of relationships with each other and with the land. They discuss the healing potential of language through the Mi’kmaq healing tense that connects people with their past, present, and future. According to one participant, the healing tense only makes sense when used in relationship with others. This links to the idea that language facilitates relational repair and is expressed here by the structure and use of the Mi’kmaq healing tense.

**James, H. (2017). *Aboriginal language, identity formation and health*. Retrieved from: [http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/Language/Aboriginal\\_Language\\_Identity\\_Formation\\_and\\_Health.pdf](http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/Language/Aboriginal_Language_Identity_Formation_and_Health.pdf)**

Building on van Beek’s (2016) literature review (included in this bibliography), James explores additional resources on how an “Indigenous person’s cultural coherence impacts their identity formation [and] their ability to practice good health” (p. 4), and in doing so adds depth to our understanding of the connection between language and health. James identifies that language reintegration or revitalization is used as a (contemporary) treatment and prevention strategy for poor health. She also shows that language use is an important piece of identity formation, in that creating a sense of identity and community belonging has a direct impact on wellbeing.. James also finds that to promote better health outcomes, Indigenous frameworks are needed that extend beyond concepts of physical health to encompass balance and wellbeing. Through this, she responds to van Beek’s critical reflection on the emphasis on Western values by centering the importance of balance and overall concepts of wellness in Indigenous health.

**Jenni, B. Anisman, O., McIvor, O., & Jacobs, P. (2017). An exploration of the effects of Mentor-Apprentice Programs on Mentor's and Apprentices wellbeing. *International Journal of Indigenous Health* 12(2), 25-42.**

This article reports findings from the research project NETOLNEW “one mind, one people”, which studied adult Indigenous language learning through the Mentor-Apprentice Program (MAP) method. During the study, which primarily focussed on the successes and challenges of MAP, the authors also observed comments from participants on the impact MAP had on individual and community well-being. The findings are summarized under 6 themes: cultural and spiritual healing; health outcomes; negative impact of language loss on the well-being of Indigenous people; relationships between the commitment of MAP and well-being among participants; strengthening MAP apprentices to become future community leaders; and Elder's healing through becoming language mentors. The results of this study support previous findings that language functions as a facilitator of protective factors of well-being. The authors document participants', frequent references to strength, strengthened identity, strengthened connections (to ancestors, knowledge, land, and way of length), and strengthening the community. As evidenced in other studies, language use and learning appear to act as a bridge or vessel that connects people (or repairs connections) in order for healing to take place. Further research is necessary into the exact role that language plays in healing.

**Morcom, L. (2017). Self-esteem and cultural identity in Aboriginal language immersion kindergarteners. *Journal of Language Identity and Education*, 16(6), 365-380.**

In her research, Morcom explores “the impact of Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) immersion education on the personal and collective self-esteem of kindergarteners” (p. 1). The study used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and data from, self-esteem assessments as well as academic and linguistic assessments to gain insight into the impact of language immersion on the overall experience and success of Indigenous children between the ages of 4-6 years old. Findings were also compared to previous studies with children from different cultural geographies and educational contexts. Morcom found that children who participated in language immersion had higher self-esteem compared to those who did not participate in such a program. The author describes that the children who participated in this study had a strong sense of themselves as Anishinaabek, but unlike children from other studies, they had not yet developed a concept of race that preferred their own in-group identity against any out-groups. Morcom concludes that the high personal self-esteem also supports increased collective self-esteem, in which race is not a factor determining the worth of others or leading to desirability of others. Other research has highlighted the importance of self-esteem for health, and so understanding how language promotes self-esteem can provide directions for program development aimed at improving health outcomes of Indigenous people.



**Oster, R., Grier, A., Lightning, R., Mayan, M., & Toth, E. (2014). Cultural continuity, traditional Indigenous language, and diabetes in Alberta First Nations: A mixed methods study. *International Journal for Equity in Health* 13(1), 1-11.**

Using a sequential mixed methods approach, Oster, Grier, Lightning, Mayan, and Toth explore the connections between cultural continuity, self-determination, and diabetes prevalence in First Nations in Alberta, Canada. The authors used qualitative descriptions of cultural continuity and self-determination yielded from interviews with 10 Cree and Blackfoot leaders to analyze data on diabetes prevalence. Participants defined cultural continuity as “being who we are” and stated it was foundational to their health and thriving. , and in particular mentioned language as a vital and inseparable aspect of culture. Based on this, measures of language knowledge were used as a proxy to determine whether cultural continuity was related to diabetes prevalence. The study found that increased language knowledge had a negative relationship with diabetes, meaning that First Nations that are better able to maintain their culture (in part through their language) are relatively protected from diabetes. This is one of the few studies that tie physical health to language.

**Pitawanakwat, B. (2009). *Anishinaabemodaa Pane Oodenang – A Qualitative Study of Anishinaabe Language Revitalization as Self-Determination in Manitoba and Ontario (Doctoral dissertation)*. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1828/1707>.**

In his Doctoral dissertation, Pitawanakwat uses autoethnographies and individual and group interviews to explore the motivations, methods, and mobilization strategies of those involved in the revitalization of Anishinaabemowin. Pitawanakwat discusses that people participating in Anishinaabemowin Revitalization (AR) consider language as something that fortifies identity, heals, and protects. Participants describe the healing properties of AR as necessary to replace the shame that was imposed on people through residential schools, and healing is described in a relational sense where the language facilitates relationships between Elders and youth to pass along values and wisdom necessary for strong culture and sustenance. The language has intrinsic qualities that promote harmony within the community and have the ability to connect people with one another and the community. A finding in this Dissertation that is noteworthy for future explorations is participants’ description of language as healing in a historic sense. One participant shares how shame was forced on her Grandmother and in turn passed along to her, but also how learning the language was healing for her Grandmother and in turn for healing for her as well. An exploration of historic healing through language reclamation could contribute to a fuller understanding of healing from an Indigenous perspective.

**Thompson, J. (2012). *Hedekeyeh Hots'ih Kāhidi – “Our Ancestors are in us”*: Strengthening our voices through language revitalization from a Tahltan worldview. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1828/4213>.**

Thompson's Doctoral dissertation is grounded in Hedekeyeh Hots'ih Kāhidi – “Our ancestors are in us”, a Tahltan worldview describing the connection of Tahltan people with their Ancestors, land, and language. This worldview informs Thompson's methodology, Tahltan Voiceability, for culturally relevant/useful, rational, and transformative research. This methodology involves receiving, knowing, and sharing teachings from ancestors and Elders to answer the question of how Tahltan language revitalization could positively affect the lives of Thompson's people. Thompson finds that language is the gateway to the Tahltan mindset and way of life that connects its people to their land, ancestors, and identity. Her findings highlight the importance of having a strong sense of individual and cultural identity and self-esteem for health and overall well-being. Participants in her research identify language as a protective factor that increases the likelihood of positive health behaviours as well as revitalizing and healing for wounds created through colonization. One participant notes that the connection between language and healing is not one-directional. He emphasizes that speaking the language can heal, but also that being hurt is an impediment to language revitalization. Further research might focus on this circular relationship and the most effective ways to penetrate the cycle, so that language can be used to its fullest capacity in the healing of Indigenous people.

**Toombs, E., Kowatch, K., & Mushquash, J. (2016). Resilience in Canadian Indigenous youth: A scoping review. *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Resilience* 4, 4-32.**

Toombs, Kowatch, and Mushquash compiled literature related to Indigenous youth's resilience in Canada and how it was measured in a systematic search of published grey and peer-reviewed literature and synthesized the located sources. The authors found that resilience is defined in some studies in terms of how it was measured (e.g., via the Child and Youth Resilience Measure or the Cultural Connectedness Scale), but most studies support a collaborative approach to creating a holistic model of resilience that engages community-based notions of culture. The authors describe consensus within the literature about the importance of resilience in the promotion of positive outcomes for Indigenous youth, including overall wellness, academic performance, increased confidence, and skill development. Protective factors to youth resilience include participating in community programs, positive personal identity, relationships that foster community connections, positive peer and family relationships, engaging in cultural activities, creating a sense of place, and having positive experiences of social justice. The authors discuss that use of traditional language is an indicator of resilience, thus having a positive relationship on the wellness of Indigenous youth.

**Townsend, C. (2014). Impacts of Hawaiian language loss and promotion via linguistic landscape. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/100360>.**

In her Doctoral Thesis, Townsend explores the impacts of language loss and language promotion on her own Native Hawaiian community. While one focus of Townsend's research is on the attitudes toward a Hawaiian-English bilingual linguistic landscape, she also identifies five themes that speak directly to the connection between language (loss) and health and wellness. The first theme speaks of the importance of Hawaiian language to individual, family, and community identity. Participants identified that language, regardless of each person's ability to speak it, provides them with a meaningful way in the world. Participants also identified language as a link to the past that provides unity and strength to the community, by passing on information on habits, lifestyles, and values meaningful to the Native Hawaiian community and their well-being. Townsend's findings show how a bilingual language landscape has increased pride and self-worth and improved health status. One participant comments that the bi-lingual language landscape shows Native Hawaiians that they are valued and when they are valued, they know they have worth.

**Van Beek, S. (2016). *Intersections: Indigenous language, health and wellbeing*. Retrieved from: [http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/Language/Intersections\\_Indigenous\\_Language\\_Health\\_and\\_Wellness\\_WebVersion.pdf](http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/Language/Intersections_Indigenous_Language_Health_and_Wellness_WebVersion.pdf)**

In her literature review, van Beek explores the link between Indigenous language and health, or in other words, how the cultural aspect of language could act as an indicator of health. She found that information on the direct relationship between language and wellbeing is limited, but she was able to identify connecting topics between language and health from the existing literature. These connecting topics include: indicators of well-being, indexes of social determinants, mental health, Indigenous concepts of wellness, academic achievement, identity and resilience (p. 6). Van Beek uses these topics thematically to describe five aspects of and contributing factors to wellness and health. For example, language immersion creates wellbeing that contributes to cognitive advantages later in life, such as abilities to cope and the prevention of the onset of dementia. While the review provides valuable insight into individual aspects/relationships of health and wellbeing, the findings emphasize Western values. A linear relationship between the themes and health is created, omitting Indigenous values of e.g. the balance between relationships and overall wellbeing.

## Conclusion/Summary

In the pieces included in this annotated bibliography, it is language that heals the damaged or severed connections. The studies provide evidence that language relates to all aspects of wellness through relationality. Much of the research, including prior literature reviews, work to pinpoint how language is connected to wellbeing, rather than trying to understand how language flows through and supports all aspects of wellbeing. At times, Western research methodologies are used that focus on wellbeing as a tool for good health, missing an opportunity to center wellbeing/balance with health being a component of and existing in a bi-directional relationship with wellbeing.

The lack of research on the subject, including the existence of quantitative or qualitative data, shows an ongoing disconnect between Western notions of health and the varied Indigenous perspectives on health and well-being. Van Beek for example discusses language as an *isolated independent variable*. Much of the research reviewed in this bibliography attempts to treat language in a similar way. Because language, for Indigenous people, is comprised of spiritual, rational, emotional, physical, and many other components, attempts to isolating it as a single variable limits our understanding of how language relates to wellbeing and health. The many components of language influence and are experienced on the individual, familial, and community level, and so their consideration needs to occur in a way that is non-linear (and non-Western). A circular and interconnected research approach, using or expanding on existing Indigenous methodologies, could provide a more wholistic and accurate description of the relationship between Indigenous languages health and wellbeing.