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Child Protection Staff Perspectives of the SOFT Program: Touch, Textures, Weights, and Pressures

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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal children are overrepresented in Australia's child protection system, and limited tools are available to assist with connecting these children to their culture. The Stitching Our Future Together (SOFT) Program, developed in consultation with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, services, and other specialists, is used within the Department of Communities' Child Protection and Family Support (CPFS) Division in Western Australia to address big emotions and safe behaviours with Aboriginal children in care. This study used phenomenology and social constructivism to explore CPFS staff's perspectives and experiences of the SOFT Program. Seven semistructured in-depth interviews took place with CPFS staff. Five themes were identified: the SOFT Program and its use, culturally responsive practice, facilitating relationships, communication, and recommendations and implementation challenges. Participants expressed that the SOFT Program fostered an understanding of, and communication about, pertinent issues such as family and domestic violence, drug and alcohol addiction, mental health, and child neglect and abuse. The findings show how staff described the program's capacity to help them navigate complex situations, highlighting the need to incorporate more culturally centred and creative-based work into child protection practice.

IMPLICATIONS

- The SOFT Program positively supports culturally responsive practice and facilitates relationships and communication for child protection workers and children in care.
- The integration of creative and legislated practices assists with personalising and enhancing the effectiveness of child protection work with children in care.

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Aboriginal¹ children are overrepresented in Australia's child protection system. This overrepresentation highlights systemic issues, underlying inequalities, and the need for culturally centred programs to facilitate culturally responsive practice. In 2023, there were 22,328 Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, with Aboriginal children in Western Australia (WA) being 19.1% more likely to be in care when compared with other jurisdictions (Department of Communities, 2023; Family Matters, 2023). Child protection removals have significant impacts on health (physical, mental, and developmental) and social aspects (Chamberlain et al., 2022). Aboriginal children have described feeling unheard, misunderstood, or unsupported when communicating their concerns (Krakouer, 2023). Despite historical displacement due to the stolen generations and assimilation policies (Menzies, 2019), many Aboriginal Nations continue to practice their culture and maintain an unbroken connection to Country. In work with Aboriginal children, cultural connection is essential for wellbeing (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021).

To improve the safety of Aboriginal children in care, Aboriginal perspectives must be integrated into child protection, health, and violence-prevention sectors (Funston & Herring, 2016), and maintenance of cultural connection should take precedence in social work practices with Aboriginal communities and families. Cultural integration is evident in practices such as clinical yarning (Lin et al., 2016). Although yarning is an Aboriginal practice that includes sharing stories and communicating to create new knowledge, clinical yarning is described as the transfer of cultural practices into clinical settings (Lin et al., 2016). Additionally, employing codesign processes within services promotes the reconstruction of historically ruptured relationships with mainstream services and Aboriginal communities via communication, connection, collaboration, and awareness (Wright et al., 2021). Aboriginal-led and endorsed programs are essential to creating effective working relationships with Aboriginal people and ensuring Aboriginal children in care can have a continuation of culture and identity (Wright et al., 2021).

Arts-based Cultural Play and Practice

The benefits of arts-based therapeutic approaches to working with First Nations children and young people are well established in the literature. A New Zealand study, "We Light the Fire", demonstrated the impact of creative practices, codesign, and community-led programs to create a culturally relevant safe space for youth suicide prevention using art as a medium (Fanian et al., 2015). Art mediums can play an important role in cultural expression within Aboriginal communities (Stock et al., 2012). Atkinson (2013) proposed that art, music, dance, and play contribute to effective trauma-informed Aboriginal-based practices, aligning with traditional forms of Aboriginal communication. Art mediums can be developmentally targeted for children and young people, creating pathways to explore experiences, cultural themes, and a sense of self (Bauberger & Graham, 2019). Creativity in therapeutic settings supports individuals to navigate external stressors and express themselves (Hurdle & Quinlan, 2014), and art practices resonate with children's developmental inclination to make sense of the world through experiences and observations (Geldard et al., 2013).

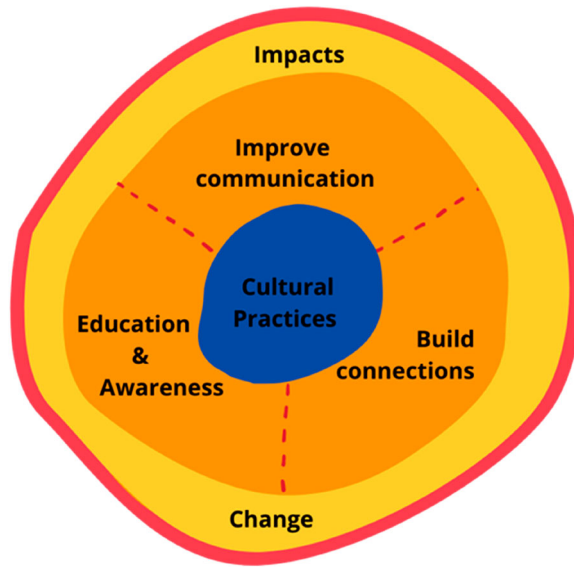


Figure 1 Stitching Our Futures Together (SOFT) Program framework

The Stitching Our Futures Together (SOFT) Program

There is ongoing concern about the failure to safeguard the cultural connections of Aboriginal children in care in Australia (Chong & Arney, 2016). Art mediums have been identified as a potential solution (Black et al., 2024; Ware, 2014). The Stitching Our Futures Together (SOFT) Program, established in 2018, aims to address the emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children in care, particularly those with trauma histories (Albany Senior High School, 2023; Roennfeldt, 2015). Cocreated by Verity Roennfeldt, a Social Worker and Program Director at Child Protection and Family Support (CPFS) and Dr Kelly Thompson a Clinical Psychologist and Principal Practitioner at MacKillop Family Services, the program was developed in consultation with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and services.

The SOFT Program uses metaphorical situations to help children explore challenging life experiences. Five years of collaborative work went into developing the program elements. It uses textiles, anthropomorphism, and storytelling through the Story Animal books, which include activity sheets, sewing patterns, stickers, and training resources. The Story Animal characters are hand-sewn toys made from recycled textural fabrics, used for therapeutic play. The NanaLinks community sewing groups help explore “tough stuff” in life that can lead children and their support networks to experience “big emotions” (Department of Communities, 2021; Wright et al., 2018, p. 46). The resources can be used flexibly to build relationships, establish trust, and explain difficult themes and issues, via directive and non-directive play, classrooms, home visits, with groups or individuals, or by carers, educators and child protection workers. [Figure 1](#) captures the program’s themes and aims, encompassing both practical and theoretical elements.

This research aimed to explore staff experiences and perspectives of the SOFT Program and its use.

Method

Research Design

The project utilised social constructivist and phenomenological methodologies. Social constructivism frames reality as locally constructed and defined by shared experiences (Howell, 2012), positioning the research to explore how CPFS staff understand and use the SOFT Program. A phenomenological lens was applied to understand staff perceptions and experiences, suspending any prejudgements (Rubin & Babbie, 2016).

Researcher Positioning

Social constructivist approaches require reflexive practice of the researcher (Howell, 2012) and exploration of personal experiences through a cultural and historical lens (Huisman & Tight, 2019). The first author (JK) was introduced to the SOFT Program during a social work student field placement and engaged with the program alongside a supervisor (VR), prompting this research project. The other researchers (BB, MO, RSJ) have conducted research alongside Aboriginal communities or exhibited a sincere interest in embracing person-centred holistic research approaches. Coauthor Goreng Menang Elder Aunty Eliza Woods, the originator of the Nanalinks project, and Whadjuk Noongar Elder consultants Aunty Cheryl Phillips and Aunty Carmel Culbong, working closely with their families, were part of the codesign of the SOFT project, and named the soft toys “the Story Animals”.

As non-Aboriginal people researching the experiences of staff working with Aboriginal people, the research team worked to unpack assumptions, particularly the problems associated with academic bias, such as researcher understanding being more valued than participant understandings, or nearer to “the truth” (Huisman & Tight, 2019). Given the absence of Aboriginal representation on the research team, there was an emphasis on culturally aware and competent research (Bateman et al., 2022). The clinical yarning framework (Lin et al., 2016) was integrated to structure the interviews, facilitate cultural allyship to mitigate the lack of Aboriginal presence, and mirror the storytelling approach of the SOFT Program. The three core elements of the framework (Lin et al., 2016) were used, including the social yarn, to build connection with participants through shared experience; the diagnostic yarn, to facilitate the development of the participants’ SOFT Program engagement story while interpreting it through an academic lens; and the management yarn, enacting metaphors and stories to encourage the participants to share their experiences to meet the interview objectives collaboratively. With attention to potential bias, author (VR) was not directly involved in data collection or analysis (Weisberg, 2010).

Participants

Purposive sampling (Suen et al., 2014) was used to recruit CPFS staff members who had used the SOFT Program to work with children in care. The CPFS Program Director (VR), sent a recruitment email to approximately 40 staff members who had used the program. Seven staff members participated from three different regions, ranging from the Kimberley to the Great Southern, and five metropolitan districts. Participants included six

caseworkers and one Aboriginal Practice Leader, responsible for mentoring CPFS staff to ensure adherence to cultural practices and Departmental and statutory requirements. Participants reported using the SOFT Program in various practice contexts: a Child Safety team ($n = 1$), a Long-term Children in Care team ($n = 5$), a Family Reunification team ($n = 2$), and a Best Beginnings (infant support) team ($n = 1$). The study did not specifically target Aboriginal staff, aiming instead to explore all staff perspectives and experiences of the program. Cultural identification was not required; disclosure was a personal choice; one Aboriginal staff member participated.

Data Collection

Ethical approval was received from Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number HRE2022-0255). All participants provided informed consent, and transcripts were de-identified before analysis. Semistructured interview questions were derived from a review of contemporary literature and a contextual interview with the program cofounder (VR) (Bateman et al., 2022). The interviews explored participants' understandings and experiences of the SOFT Program. Two interviews were conducted in person and five online. Recordings were transcribed verbatim using Otter.Ai (2023) transcription software, de-identified, and returned to participants for them to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences.

Data Analysis

A social constructivist methodology (Howell, 2012) framed the data analysis, positioning the research team as coconstructors of understanding. Collaborative discussions, reflexive journaling, and exploration of cultural contexts and professional understanding informed culturally sensitive data analysis. The team drew on their individual relationships and experiences of working and yarning with Aboriginal professionals, including Aboriginal Practice Leaders at CPFS, Aboriginal researchers, Elders, peers, and family, in coding and data analysis.

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of (1) data familiarisation, (2) coding, (3) creating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) write up, using Nvivo (QSR International, 2022) data analysis software. Inductive coding was employed, where themes were identified via reoccurring words and statements. A consistent theme emerged of cultural connection, meaning culturally responsive practice for staff, but also cultural connection for clients. The analytic focus then narrowed to specific cultural practices and how they impacted CPFS work. Subcategories were identified, including the direct incorporation of cultural elements into practice and the narrative of the program itself. These sub-themes aligned with existing literature around storytelling, art-based practices, and clinical yarning (Fanian et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2016; Stock et al., 2012).

Findings

Five key themes were identified during analysis: the SOFT Program and its use, culturally responsive practice, facilitating relationships, communication, and recommendations

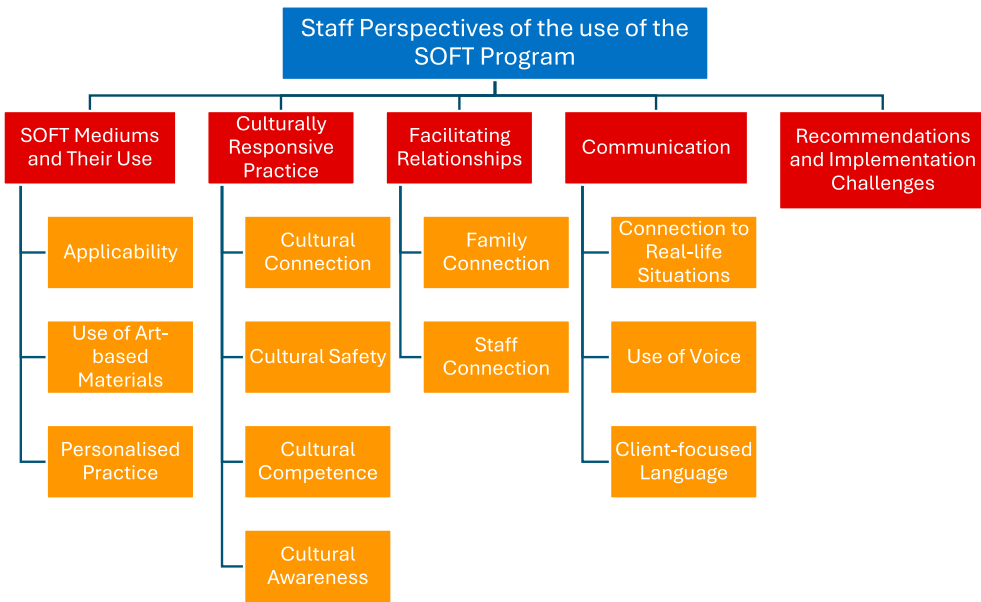


Figure 2 Coding tree from analysis

and implementation challenges, along with several subthemes, as shown in Figure 2, and discussed below.

SOFT Program and its Use

This theme discusses how participants used the SOFT Program, as outlined in the subthemes of applicability, use of art-based mediums, and personalised practice.

Applicability

All participants described the program as designed for Aboriginal children in care but said it could be equally utilised to support non-Aboriginal children. Participant three stated:

When I first was introduced to the Story Animals, I actually thought it was specialised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. But [Program Director] explained to me, actually it doesn't discriminate. You can use it ... with any type of child that's in the Department or out of the Department as well.

Participant seven also considered the program to be transferable: "Even though it was designed originally to look at Aboriginal kids. We looked at all kids, you know, how can we not? Because, I mean, like, all kids got families. How can we connect them?" Despite this, all participants stated that their experiences of using the program were with Aboriginal children and families due to the program's focus on making cultural connections, improving communication, and creating an avenue for building understanding of CPFS concerns.

Use of Art-based Mediums

Six participants had used both the Story Books and hand-stitched Animals, three participants had used the Stitching programs and Quillows,² whilst three participants had used extra techniques, such as informal drawings, painting projects, totems, and art-based safety plans.

Personalised Practice

CPFS legal and bureaucratic requirements can result in children and families feeling lost in the system. Participants described how children in care, often placed with nonkin carers and managed by a large government system, experienced feelings of loss and disconnection, and how the SOFT Program assisted in personalising and individualising their engagements. SOFT engagements were personalised to the child and their circumstances. Participant three explained:

... [name] came up with a really sweet idea of having a love heart zone on the snakes [a character from the book *Sapphire's Yarn*] so that if the girls ever wanted a hug from mum and dad, to press the heart, and they'd wrap the snake around them.

Six participants discussed developmentally focused practice and cognitive disabilities and suggested the SOFT project created opportunities to discuss adult themes with children in a developmentally appropriate way. Four participants outlined how they used the program to provide children with cognitive disabilities sensory-tailored, hand-stitched animals to meet their needs, and opportunities to be included in decision making:

... it was this huge two-metre-long weighted goanna. And this child had an intellectual disability and so really enjoyed sensory things, so touches and textures, and weights and pressures ... so [name] had done a good job of making sure to stick different textures on the animal, making sure it had ... like dot paintings and felt ... it was heavy enough, but not too heavy for her to use in a comforting way. (Participant two)

Culturally Responsive Practice

All participants discussed the importance of culturally responsive practice in the SOFT Program, with subthemes of cultural connection, cultural safety, cultural competence, and cultural awareness.

Cultural Connection

The goal of the SOFT Program is to establish and build cultural connections (shown in [Figure 1](#)). All participants considered cultural connection integral to working with Aboriginal children and families as it created stronger cultural ties for children and was appreciated by families. Participant four said:

... All Aboriginal people appreciate any connection that child protection workers make with their culture, or acknowledge their culture, have an awareness of their culture and understanding of how they interact with each other, how they interact in the community ... just having some knowledge. I think any Aboriginal family and person does, but in particular with the [SOFT] work ...

All participants recognised the importance of facilitating cultural connections for Aboriginal children in care. Participant four spoke about making a Quillow² to represent connection to Country and culture:

We looked at where the family's Country was ... trying to create a Quillow² that was going to be personalised for him, according to his culture, and his own situation ... On the Quillow² the roots were representative of connection to the earth and the Country ...

Participant six used one Story Animal book to make connections to a town in Northern Western Australia:

We're doing *Sandy's Yarn* about the stingray. In the community, the stingray is an important animal to them as a staple food source. You're further making ties to their community, which I think is something that they value as well.

Cultural Safety

Participants described the SOFT Program as providing CPFS, children, and families with safe avenues to voice concerns and fears. Participant seven described it as “a cultural safety tool for them. To have a voice even though it's a tool that can be used by the Department; it's also a tool that would make Aboriginal people feel safe”.

Participant five explored their experiences and own cultural awareness when working with Aboriginal people, and how these have impacted their ability to provide appropriate services:

When I've worked with Aboriginal families, I acknowledged that I'm not Aboriginal, and ... we can do as much training as possible and work with as many Aboriginal families as possible, we're never actually going to be able to be as appropriate as we want to be ... I need support to produce a good outcome, a positive outcome, instead of trying to do it, like the standard Departmental way ... it's not always the best way to do things.

Such reflections provided an avenue to acknowledge practice gaps and identify where support was needed to improve cultural safety, including challenging Western approaches. Cultural safety was identified as an important element to address clients' needs by all participants.

Cultural Competence

Five participants discussed cultural competence. This has been defined as a process that includes five interrelated cultural constructs: cultural knowledge, cultural skill, cultural encounters, cultural awareness, and cultural desire (see Sahamkhadam et al., 2023). It requires a critically reflective understanding and incorporation of culture into practice that responds to Aboriginal ways of working. Participant six said, “[The SOFT Program] definitely expanded my ability to engage [in Aboriginal ways of working].” Participant five stated, “[It] makes sense to have those kinds of ways of working that involve stories and that kind of communication.”

Cultural Awareness

Six participants discussed the importance of cultural awareness when working with Aboriginal children and families, suggesting that listening to the child and their family impacted how they would use the program to best meet the child's cultural, social,

and emotional needs. Participant four voiced, “I think it’s really important to have different ways of working with Aboriginal people, Aboriginal families, Aboriginal kids in care ... So, I think the more creative and the more ways we can work with Aboriginal people, the better.”

Participant five stated:

[The SOFT Program is] such a good way to ... explain things to Aboriginal children and families as well. So, they know that ... we’re trying to understand their experience and trying to tailor that to their grannies and their children.

Facilitating Relationships

This theme explored how the SOFT Program facilitated relationships and included the subthemes family connection and staff connection.

Family Connection

All participants discussed the importance of developing and strengthening children’s family connections and how the program provided pathways to explore the concept of family. Participant three described the use of dragonflies to ease separation anxiety:

... since the girls were having the separation anxiety, there was a dragonfly toy that was also part of the story that we were also asking Dad to give to the girls after each contact to let them know that, “if you miss me, this is my sign that you’ll see me again”.

Participant five used the program to build connection for a child who had not yet met their father:

[The child] had ADHD and [they] had PTSD and something else that [they were] unable to just sit and read a book. We gave [them] this, like, piece of paper that had Dad’s face on it and the animals, and then [they] just wrote stuff. We asked [them] questions to ask Dad, like, “Dad, what’s your favourite food? What’s your favourite animal?”

Staff Connection

Participants consistently prioritised relationship building with children on their caseload, describing how the program provided opportunities to build stronger connections based on sharing experiences and emotions, as opposed to “taking them down to Maccas and buying a hamburger ... having your whole relationship built solely [on] ... what I can provide you in food” (Participant two). Participants also used the program to negotiate barriers and strengthen relationships with clients who may have historical or ongoing adverse experiences of CPFS:

We find it very hard to engage [Aboriginal families] in our processes and our relationship with them is not very good ... you’re always trying to build that, and I see this tool is a way of breaking those barriers down. (Participant seven)

Communication

Communication included three subthemes: connection to real-life situations, use of voice, and client-focused language.

Connection to Real-life Situations

The Story Animal books explore issues frequently encountered by child protection workers, including safety and wellbeing. In one example, anxious siblings were asked to choose a book they felt connected to, which was used to convey what they needed:

... it was really enlightening ... these kids knew they were able to use that metaphor of the book and interpret it, that we are able to use it within their own life and in their own situation. They didn't seem to have any issues with understanding that. (Participant four)

Participants described how the adaptability of the stories assisted them to explain legislated practice and to create connections to children's circumstances in a child-focused way. Six participants described how the program supported children to develop appropriate boundaries and recognise unsafe behaviours. Participant three said:

The fact that it also covers different domains of emotion and behaviour. It covers protective behaviours, all those types of things that I think are really important for kids to be aware of at least and actively practising at that point in time. It's pretty crucial as well, depending on their trauma history and background. A lot of them may not ... have had that exposed to them.

Protective behaviours were discussed in the context of historical disclosure to give children an opportunity to share their experiences, facilitating communication. Other examples were provided of how participants had used the books to discuss CPFS concerns regarding family and domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, and other forms of abuse and neglect. Participant six used the program to discuss family and domestic violence, integrating the Safer Together framework, which includes a variety of practices, reflection ideas, and resource links (SNAICC, 2010).

Use of Voice

All participants discussed how the SOFT Program supported staff to include the "use of voice" in practice. Five participants also discussed the impact of "having a voice" on families. Participants described how the program assisted them in elevating children's voices, including personal reflection, discussion, planning, and expressing needs and concerns. Participants discussed voice in conjunction with empowerment, strength, and autonomy, particularly linked to the history of oppression of Aboriginal families and children by CPFS. Participant six highlighted how difficult it is for children to have their voices heard and the subsequent advantages of incorporating voice into practice:

The child's voice was silent in everything that was going on ... it gets drowned out when you've got parents arguing with Child Protection, [when] you've got lawyers involved, [and] when you've got doctors involved. Often the child who everyone is talking about doesn't really have a say in it. [The SOFT program] helps give a child a voice in what is going on, and what their hopes are ...

Participant six described a child who had been separated from their sibling group and whose placement was at risk due to behavioural issues, explaining the impact of using one of the books and holding space for the child to vocalise their needs: "... like hours and hours of thought and labour that was going into consults. All this child wanted was something simple [a map] to put on a bedroom wall so that she knew where her siblings were".

Safety planning is a mandatory CPFS practice due to the high levels of risk for children. Three participants conveyed that the program provided opportunities for children to lead or be actively involved in their safety planning. Participant six described how using the book *Sapphire's Yarn* assisted a child to create her own safety plan:

... she then used that story to create her own words and pictures, but she painted it, she's a young Aboriginal girl, she painted on a canvas and [it] also turned out to be like her own safety plan and her family story home and she could use that picture as a way to tell her story moving forward to reiterate to herself of what's going on.

This demonstrates the program's ability to incorporate the child's voice, build a connection to the family, and develop a client-centred safety plan.

Client-focused Language. Participants reported that the SOFT Program allowed staff to meet children's different developmental and educational levels using client-focused language. The program was seen to provide staff with an array of tools and mediums to discuss concerns and raise awareness in language that was relevant to their clients. Participant three described how the program helped explain to a child with separation anxiety why their parents could not see them:

It's not like you can sit down two young children under the age of five and let them know ... mum and dad have got an extensive history of drug and alcohol use, they're, like, unsafe within their relationship ... I think [the SOFT Program] has been the most helpful thing to have used, really.

Recommendations and Implementation Challenges

Participants spoke about the positive impacts of the SOFT Program; however, they also consistently identified the need for more funding, resources, and time. The development of a specific SOFT Program team was suggested. Further, challenges were experienced with implementation due to competing mandatory priorities such as quarterly reporting, plan reviews, and safety planning. Despite these concerns, participants identified that the SOFT Program had a positive impact on their practice.

Discussion

This study explored CPFS staff perspectives and experiences of the SOFT Program and its use. Participants viewed the program as a valuable cultural engagement tool for working with Aboriginal children and families, emphasising the importance of non-Aboriginal staff having access to culturally respectful, child-centred tools. This is crucial for promoting understanding of the significance of cultural connection for Aboriginal children in care, fostering cultural safety, competence, and awareness, essential components of culturally responsive practice (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021).

The history of Aboriginal people's engagement with CPFS is inextricably linked to the ongoing effects of colonisation and, more recently, the stolen generations. Past child removal and assimilation policies have had devastating impacts on cultural connection, an integral element of Aboriginal people's wellbeing (Menzies, 2019). The program incorporates cultural elements such as yarning, storytelling, and creative-based practices

to build communication skills and connections and create education and awareness-raising opportunities aligned with previous research (Atkinson, 2013). All participants recognised the program's role in incorporating culturally responsive practice in the child protection space, as reflected in the subthemes of cultural safety, cultural competence, cultural connection, and cultural awareness (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). These themes reflected how cultural practices built into the program provided developmentally appropriate ways for children to express themselves (Stock et al., 2012). The ability of non-Aboriginal staff to use the SOFT Program is significant and integral to its success, given damaging historical child protection practices (Oates, 2020). Participants reported that cultural connections, yarning, storytelling, and art-based practices evident in the SOFT Program helped them to build relationships with families and children, and highlight the importance of communication skills, which led to improved understandings about the cultural, emotional, psychological, and physical dimensions for children in care.

The program employed personalised strength-based approaches including voice and appropriate language. Participants creatively utilised the program in alternative ways, for example, informal drawings, painting projects, totems, communication with parents, family mapping, and art-based safety plans. Previous research supports the positive impact of cultural immersion and creative-based practices on Aboriginal wellbeing (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). Although the SOFT elements are not strictly a "cultural tool", they promote cultural safety as best practice. The program empowered CPFS staff to more confidently connect with local culture, facilitating connections between individual children, families, and Aboriginal communities.

Creative-based practices have been successfully utilised in other fields, for example, hospitals, with positive impacts on patients, staff, and extended family (Atkinson, 2013). The "We Light The Fire" program incorporated both culture and creative work and fostered resiliency skills, strong connections, and discussions around community change (Fanian et al., 2015). Similarly, the SOFT Program creates space for people to come together in an environment of reconciliation, negotiating complex barriers to develop trust and deepen relationships. Participants spoke about making connections; joining Aboriginal cultural elements, such as animals from different lands; storytelling; and personalised practice; reflecting the ethos of the program, "stitching" culture and professional practice together for the benefit of Aboriginal children in care. Previous research by Fanian et al. (2015), Bauberger and Graham (2019), and Hurdle and Quinlan (2014), as well as the current study, support a collaborative approach to incorporating culture and creative-based practices when working with Aboriginal families.

The increasing rates of Aboriginal children in care demonstrate an urgent need to shift from Western-based engagement tools to programs developed and led by Aboriginal people. This research contributes to the evidence supporting the need for culturally centred programs for children in care and their families that facilitate culturally competent engagement.

Limitations

This research has been endorsed by local Aboriginal Elders Aunty Eliza Woods (a co-author on this paper), Aunty Cheryl Phillips and Aunty Carmel Culbong; however, ideally,

the project should have been led or codesigned by Aboriginal people. Aunty Cheryl Phillips and Aunty Carmel Culbong have worked with staff for some years now to support programs like SOFT. The project was limited to focus on the experiences of SOFT practitioners and their interpretation of the benefits of implementing the SOFT Program with children and families. The views of children and families were not investigated, due to time limitations and lack of funding, though this would have greatly strengthened the work. Time constraints impacted participant recruitment, and the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings.

Opportunities for Future Research

This study provides a base for future research to capture the voices of Aboriginal children, families, and carers. It has highlighted the impact creative-based tools have on staff wellbeing and team building. One participant expressed that their team had used the SOFT Program as their team-building activity for the last two years, sewing animals and quilts for children on their caseload.

Conclusion

Aboriginal children are overrepresented in Australia's child protection system. Participants in this study proposed that the SOFT Program fosters culturally responsive practice, enhances cultural safety, strengthens connections, and improves communication with children, families, and carers for CPFS staff. This study adds to the body of evidence supporting the significance of incorporating creative, culturally centred approaches in child protection practice and calls for further research incorporating Aboriginal voices and researchers. In the spirit of reconciliation, opportunities must be sought to make connections and to better support children at risk and in care.

Notes

1. The term Aboriginal is respectfully used in this article to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples from the nation state now known as Australia. This project was conducted on Nyoongar Boodja, Aboriginal country, in Western Australia. The authors acknowledge that First Nations and Indigenous Peoples around the world may identify with their local clan or group name and mean no disrespect in using the term Aboriginal.
2. Quillows are quilts that fold into a pillow that often has a print on one side and is blank on the other, providing space to make connections to family and culture on the back.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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