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What are Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care telling us? A review of the child voice literature to understanding perspectives and experiences of the statutory care system

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Abstract

Aboriginal children and young people are over-represented in the out-of-home care system, yet their voices are largely absent in practice and policy decision-making. This paper presents a review of research that captures the voices of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care. Three key themes are discussed: connection to culture, connection to family and participation. This paper argues for culturally meaningful research that honours child and youth citizenship, voice and roles in decision-making as critical to quality care and positive outcomes. This paper aims to highlight the importance of listening and responding to the voices of Aboriginal children and young people as critical to the provision of appropriate care and supporting positive outcomes.

KEYWORDS

aboriginal, children and young people, cultural connection, out-of-home care, participation

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Internationally, the prevalence of Indigenous[1] children and young people from colonised nations who have been removed by the state and placed in out-of-home care (OOHC) is very high, and this trend is increasing (Grinnell Davis et al., 2023; Tamariki, 2018; Whittaker et al., 2023). In Australia, recent figures suggest that Aboriginal children are 10.5 times more likely to be in OOHC compared to non-Aboriginal children (AIHW, 2023; SNAICC, 2023). This means that 42.8% of children in OOHC in Australia are Aboriginal, despite Aboriginal children making up only 5.98% of the total number of children in Australia. There is a clear need for research to identify and address the elements that lead to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC, alongside working to understand and acknowledge the systemic racism and cultural hegemony that exists across all levels of the system. Acknowledgement of the sheer number of Aboriginal children and young people currently in OOHC also requires research to ensure that they are well supported and are provided high-quality and culturally appropriate care. The literature review provided in this paper is part of a larger program of work focused on how we can provide the best possible care for Aboriginal children and young people when they are in OOHC and, in the process, challenge the systems, practices and assumptions that are so embedded and leave Aboriginal children and young people, who are already struggling to feel physically and emotionally safe, at the mercy of a system that often does not offer cultural safety. The project will contribute to this by centring the voices of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC.

The importance of children and young people having a voice to inform good and impactful practice, and recommendations for organisations to prioritise this, is well documented. The Australian Children's Rights Report (National Children's Commissioner, 2019) recommended that the voices of Aboriginal children be present at all levels of policy and practice decision-making. It is the right of children and young people to have a voice on matters that affect them, and for their views to be taken seriously, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989). A study on best practices for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations found that every participant emphasised the importance of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC being respectfully listened to and engaged and for the feedback loop to be closed by actioning their voices appropriately (Creamer et al., 2022).

The meaningful participation of Aboriginal children and young people has been shown to support positive outcomes, including increased chance of placement stability, increased self-esteem and confidence and a smoother transition into adulthood (Davis, 2019). Beyond these individual benefits, there are benefits for service provision where practitioners come to gain information that can guide practices and influence systemic change from the ground up (Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020; Moore et al., 2007). There is much that those working within the system can learn about how services should be delivered to support positive outcomes from those who have the most to gain or lose from a system that is accountable for their care.

[1]*This paper uses the terms Aboriginal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, First Nations and Indigenous to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The terminology changes across the paper to reflect the terminology used in the paper being cited or discussed. The use of these umbrella terms to collectively describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures is not intended in any way to diminish the great diversity that exists across Indigenous peoples in Australia.*

Despite an increase in understanding the importance of ensuring children and young people have a voice, the research literature surrounding this remains scarce for children and young people in general and even more scarce for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC. Research provides a mechanism through which voice can be documented and elevated. The existing literature largely focuses on the voices of practitioners and community members representing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Also, it includes the voices of young non-Aboriginal people to a small extent. Determining the prevalence of Indigenous child voice within the literature is made difficult by the lack of specificity in some published research papers around whether or not they included Indigenous participants and any analysis of whether or not the perspectives of Indigenous children and young people differed from those of their non-Indigenous peers. This challenge of non-specific identification extends to research gathering the perspectives of professionals and community members. The Indigenous voice can become lost in the amalgamation of data.

This paper provides a comprehensive review to bring together the available Australian research literature and explore what Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC have already told us about their experiences. We seek to honour the story-telling and sharing that has gone before to answer the question: What have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children told us about their experience in OOHC, and what is important to them? While we have conducted an Australian-centric search, given the parallel nature of challenges in other colonised nations, our intention is to contribute to the growing body of international research on how to better engage Indigenous peoples, including children and young people, as stakeholders in their own care.

Positionality

The first author is an Indigenous Kamilaroi man who brings 6 years of experience working in the OOHC sector in a variety of roles, from working on the frontline to roles in senior advisory positions within not-for-profit organisations. The authorship team includes one other Indigenous academic and two non-Indigenous academics. Collectively, we bring a range of perspectives and experiences and share a strong commitment to transforming the OOHC system to better support children and young people.

METHOD

A comprehensive review approach was chosen because the objective was to develop a broad picture of the currently available literature pertaining to the voices of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC, knowing that the literature would be scarce, and to enable appropriate boundaries in searching the literature while also retaining the ability to ensure breadth.

Identifying the research question

Searching the available literature began with identifying the core search question: What literature currently exists in the Australian context in relation to understanding the perspective of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC?

Identifying relevant studies

We used keywords such as Aboriginal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, First Nations, Indigenous, child, children, young people, foster care, OOHC, voice, voices and participation.

In searching for research literature, we used the Informit and Scopus databases and followed this with a search of Google Scholar to identify any other available literature.

A total of 10 publications comprising both scholarly and grey literature were identified (See Appendix A). Of these 10 publications, one was a quantitative study, one used a mixed method approach and the remaining eight employed a qualitative design. Four publications captured the voices of Aboriginal children and young people in care, three captured the voices of Aboriginal children and young people previously in care, and three captured the voices of Aboriginal community members or professionals in relation to Aboriginal children and young people in care.

While our primary aim was to privilege the voices of children and young people, we were aware that the current body of relevant literature is limited. We made the decision to extend our search to include studies that capture the perspectives of community members and professionals. While adult voices can contribute to understanding the key issues, it is not our intention to imply that adults can speak on behalf of children and young people when it comes to their lived experiences.

Publications that captured the voices of non-Aboriginal children and young people in care were not included unless the paper identified the voices or data of Aboriginal children and young people specifically. To be included, the study needed to explicitly identify (1) that Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC were participants in the study and (2) their unique perspectives were discussed separately from generalised findings.

A date limit for relevant literature was not set capitalise on the amount of literature to be reviewed with a topic that has limited literature available. While we initially aimed to include only peer reviewed journal articles, this was expanded to include other literature (e.g. commissioned reports) in order to gather more information and perspectives. Since the completion of our analysis, we have become aware of a small number of outputs that our literature search did not pick up. Omission of relevant papers is always a risk in a review. To be true to our described search strategy, we have not retrospectively included these papers, however, we have listed them in Appendix B as a reference point for interested readers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In critically reviewing available literature on what Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC are telling us, three key themes were identified, including connection to culture, connection to family and the opportunity for Aboriginal children and young people to be involved in and make decisions about matters that affect them. It should be noted that none of these themes existed in isolation from the other. However, all are interconnected and contribute to the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC.

CONNECTION TO CULTURE

Available literature demonstrated that connection to culture is a core need for Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC. This is consistently stated by Aboriginal people, with almost

all relevant literature making reference to the importance of connection to culture in some way (e.g.Black et al., 2023; Krakouer et al., 2023; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). Connection to culture is a critical element for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and is the key to further connection with family and kin as well as social, emotional and spiritual well-being. Aboriginal children and young people who are strongly connected with culture are more likely to experience positive outcomes than those who lack connections (Black et al., 2023; Krakouer et al., 2023; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). The concept of cultural connection is also discussed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in article 30, where it notes that an Indigenous child will 'not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language'.

Culture is 'everything'

Moore et al. (2007) conducted cultural workshops with Aboriginal children and young people. One-third of their participants were either currently in care or had previously been in OOHC. Another one-third were living with an extended family member but had not been removed through official statutory processes. It is noted that the Aboriginal community guided the design of the research, requiring the equal inclusion of children, young people and community voices. Young people who participated in this research concluded that 'culture holds you together, keeps you going', 'culture is who you are, so if you don't know it, you don't know who you are' and 'it's like your family, where you come from, something you've got in common, it's like everything' (Moore et al., 2007, p. 29).

Similarly, Krakouer (2023) explored the perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC, specifically in relation to cultural connection. The findings from this research echo the assertion that cultural connection is a core need. The study explored a number of avenues through which cultural connection may be present for Aboriginal children and young people, including children and young people's experiences of immersion in culture, the relationship between cultural connection and identity and cultural connection as a choice. One Aboriginal young person stated:

> there's just more to it [cultural connection] that people don't really understand. And, as you're young, we don't really understand it either though. When you're older you understand more of the stories... what they actually mean to you as a person and what they mean to our culture
>
> (Krakouer, 2023, p.828).

Higgins et al. (2007) also found that cultural connection was a consistent theme raised by Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC, with many expressing that they wanted to return to their families and communities. It is also noted that Aboriginal children and young people see connection to culture as a way of healing (Black et al., 2023), which supports the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of children in OOHC.

Connection to culture was also explored by McDowall (2016) using a quantitative survey approach to gain insight into the experiences of Aboriginal children and young people in care. This study found that 31.8% of respondents reported being quite or very connected to culture, 37.5% reported some connection to culture and 30.7% reported little to no connection with culture. It

is concerning that such a significant number of children and young people felt only some or no connection to their culture.

Service professionals have also noted that cultural connection is important for Aboriginal children and young people in care, and they see this as being primarily facilitated through one practice tool, the 'Cultural Care Plan', and one policy tool, 'The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle' (Mendes et al., 2021).

The cultural support plan

A cultural support plan is a mandated plan that all Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC must have. The plan is individualised for each child and aims to ensure that Aboriginal children and young people can maintain their identity and connection to culture and family. The plan should thoroughly document the child or young person's family, relationships, family tree and information about how the child or young person will remain connected with their family and culture, including actions to ensure this work can be done for Aboriginal children and young people.

Although professionals identified cultural support plans as important in supporting the connection of children and young people to culture, they also observed that the plans were often absent or of poor quality (Mendes et al., 2021).

Findings from research with children and young people reinforced the inconsistent and problematic use of cultural care plans in practice. McDowall (2016) found that only 14.5% of their youth respondents indicated they knew about their plan, 20.3% stated they did not have one and the large majority at 65.2% were unsure if they had one or not. In exploring the role that a cultural support plan plays in supporting a child or young person's connection to culture, the research showed no relationship between the two, with 4.7% of young people reporting feeling strongly connected to culture and having a cultural support plan, while 28.3% reported feeling strongly connected to culture and not having a plan. It is noted, however, that this data are limited given the low number of participants who were aware of having a cultural support plan. In McDowell's study (McDowall, 2016), 20 out of 296 Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC claimed their cultural support plan was not relevant for them. While this is a relatively small number at less than 10% of the participants, future research is needed to increase understanding of why this is the case.

It is of interest that adults believe a cultural support plan is key to connecting children and young people to culture, when children and young people themselves are not always reporting the same benefit. The difference between these perspectives could come from the possibility that cultural support plans are not completed to the standard they should be, and there may be a breakdown in communication between the practitioner creating the plan and the children and young people for whom the plan is intended to benefit. There are many questions to be asked about who is involved in creating the plan, whether or not children and young people are involved as important stakeholders or even told about the plan, and how plans are implemented over time. This seems to be an example of an area of practice that is frequently not implemented well.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principle

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle was founded to explicitly recognise and centre the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and the

understanding of how vital culture is for the safety and well-being of children and young people (SNAICC, 2019). It covers a variety of areas within the child protection and OOHC system, including prevention of entering the system, culturally appropriate placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in OOHC, connection with family and culture, partnership in service delivery and design and participation of children, family and community in decision-making (SNAICC, 2019).

Across the studies, Aboriginal children and young people expressed a strong preference for living with Aboriginal carers rather than non-Aboriginal carers (Moore et al., 2007) because it enabled Aboriginal children and young people to remain connected with their culture in daily life and experience immersion in culture. One young person stated, 'I reckon if we had been placed with anyone else, we would be completely disconnected. It's pretty much all been nan and granddad' (Krakouer, 2023, p. 827). However, they identified that these carers and families are often not receiving the support required to maintain stable placements, including a lack of training, resources and financial support, which led these families to struggle, threatening their stability and the opportunity to remain connected to culture (Moore et al., 2007). Not only does this reflect a lack of resourcing but it also demonstrates that Aboriginal young people are aware of these bigger issues and are able to adequately articulate them.

The voices of children and young people in research demonstrate that connection to culture is of high priority for Aboriginal children and young people. Culture is a key part of identity, belonging and strength.

The translation gap

The importance of cultural connection cannot be understated, however, it is a concept that is often difficult for Aboriginal children and young people to express, particularly to non-Aboriginal service providers. Krakouer et al. (2023) discuss expanding the understanding of connection to culture in the OOHC sector context, acknowledging that implementation of practices and policies such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle has not had the intended effect of reducing cultural disconnection to the extent required. This study identified a need to ensure that cultural connection is understood rather as an ongoing process that involves knowledge and feeling. Bamblett et al. (2023) describe the conceptual map created during their research with Aboriginal service professionals, which looks at identifying the features of cultural connection and cultural needs for Aboriginal children and young people. This framework includes identity, history, family and community, participation and beliefs. Non-Aboriginal workers can struggle to understand, in a tangible way, what cultural connection is for Aboriginal people, and this could present an obstacle to prioritising cultural connection for Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC.

It is clear from the findings of the studies reviewed that connection to culture is crucial for the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC and that ensuring connection to culture is not just about 'ticking a box' but about supporting children and young people in going on the journey to understand who they are and where they fit into the world. This is a key element for an Aboriginal child or young person placed within the OOHC system, with many disconnected from their family and community

as the result of the trauma of removal and the ongoing impact of the history of past policies and practices.[2]

The difficulty and limitation in all of this research literature are that there is little exploration beyond acknowledgement of the importance of cultural connection and little focus on addressing how to create cultural connection or support Aboriginal children and young people to stay connected. Conceptual mapping (e.g. Bamblett et al., 2023) is very helpful in supporting practitioner understanding of the elements that make up cultural connection, but how do service providers and practitioners use this framework to make a genuine difference? While the available research asks children and young people about their experiences, it does not ask them to identify ways that they think practitioners could better support them to be connected or what this may look like in practice outside of enabling the child or young person to attend cultural events within community, which by itself has been identified to be purely tokenistic (Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance, 2019). The research translation piece in response to what Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC are telling us is important to them is lagging. There is little evidence that voice has led to positive change within the system.

CONNECTION TO FAMILY

Connection to family is a strong theme throughout the research literature when Aboriginal children and young people are provided space to have a say. Connection to family is very closely linked with connection to culture, as family is how culture is passed from generation to generation. The intrinsic link between family and culture is why it is so important that Aboriginal children and young people have every opportunity to remain in the care of their family or within their kin network whenever possible. In the research literature, connection to family was specifically identified as a separate theme because, despite the overlap, it was clear that family connection itself was important for Aboriginal children and young people beyond connection to culture. Aboriginal young people have also identified that connection to family was crucial as a precursor to connection to culture, with one participant saying: 'I think you firstly need to be around your people [Aboriginal people]' (Krakouer, 2023, p. 827).

'We should all be together'

For Aboriginal people, the term 'family' encompasses biological family (both immediate and extended) as well as kin (community and other non-biological families sharing the same totems and moieties).

Similar to the importance of connection with culture for the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of Aboriginal children and young people, connection to family also provides belonging

[2]Discriminatory child protection policy has a long history in Australia as in other colonised nations. For example, from 1910 to 1970 between one in three and one in 10 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their communities depending on their location, with the justification simply being that they were Aboriginal (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), 1997). Many families had children removed over several generations, significantly disrupting family relationships and cultural knowledge. The children removed under this policy are known as the "Stolen Generations".

(Moore et al., 2007). Aboriginal children and young people have stated 'Family's what gets you through' (Moore et al., 2007, p. 26). There is a consistent message that they want to be able to live with their family and siblings, or at the very least, be able to stay in contact and have ongoing relationships. This often does not occur, as noted by a young person who stated 'We used to cry ourselves to sleep because they wouldn't let us see Mum or the other kids' (Moore et al., 2007, p. 26). A report by the Commission for Children and Young People in the state of Victoria found that the children and young people they interviewed were more likely to be living away from their siblings, with one Aboriginal young person stating, 'We have two younger brothers and two older brothers. We should all be together' (Commission for Children Young People (CCYP), 2019, p. 191).

When Aboriginal children and young people have been asked what the one thing they would change in their life, overwhelmingly, children and young people want to return to family. This is expressed in responses such as 'get out of foster care', 'to be with your family' and 'go back to my mother' (Higgins et al., 2007, p. 5). Higgins et al. (2007) raised the interesting point that children and young people who were asked this question did not revert to what practitioners may generally assume might be the response, which would be the desire for a safe place and for abuse to end. Instead, children and young people needed and longed for connection to their families.

Aboriginal children and young people in care also said that they wanted more contact with their parents and siblings. Examples of their statements include the following:

> We see mum mainly on our birthdays. I would like more. She doesn't have a job, single parent pay, so can't afford to see us much. DHHS pays for her to come here for couple of weeks. I want to see her every two weeks.
>
> (CCYP, 2019, p. 197)

> I want to go back to [name of township] to mum and dad. Know I miss my little brother and my mum and dad. I love them so much
>
> (Higgins et al., 2007).

Inconsistency and the need to prioritise family relationships

Aboriginal children and young people were also able to talk about the bigger picture in that many commented that they believed that professionals had not provided adequate support to their families for them to remain with their parents or family and did not understand the impact of removal (Moore et al., 2007).

Outside of immediate family visits, Aboriginal children and young people spoke about spending time with their extended family and kin, with some reporting that they had regular time with their extended family, however, others reported that they wanted more time (Commission for Children Young People (CCYP), 2019). The Commission for Children and Young People Report (Commission for Children Young People (CCYP), 2019) found that practice is inconsistent, and there are many barriers when it comes to ensuring Aboriginal children and young people remain connected with their families. These barriers include poor case planning, communication breakdown, distance and transportation issues.

The issue of loss of culture through loss of family connection was also raised by some Aboriginal children and young people. One young person said that 'Although I was exposed to programs, I feel at times it doesn't make up for the cultural connection you could achieve being

surrounded by family' (Black et al., 2023, p. 6). This quote from a young person amplifies the importance of connection to family, and how this impacts on a range of other things, including connection to culture and overall well-being. Aboriginal children and young people have also spoken about the importance of connection to family and mob through yarning[3] 'Having a yarn with my Nan sometimes is just something that I need to just get back on track' (Black et al., 2023, p. 8) which again demonstrates the interrelated connectedness between family, culture and well-being.

In a study involving the conduct of interviews with service professionals about the experiences of Indigenous young people leaving care, it was found that professionals also saw the importance of family connection and emphasised the importance of holistic and trauma-informed service provision (Mendes et al., 2022). Other studies found that professionals viewed cultural support planning as an important element in ensuring information regarding the child's family was captured in order for them to be able to continue relationships post-care (Bamblett et al., 2023; Mendes et al., 2021). It was noted by participants, which included Aboriginal and non-Indigenous professionals, that cultural plans were best completed by Indigenous people and organisations in order to ensure that Aboriginal care leavers were able to feel supported and strengthened by their connections with family (Mendes et al., 2021). This links with the work of Bamblett et al. (2023) and their conceptual map around knowing who you are and knowing who your family is. The importance of identifying and maintaining family connections is further reinforced by the research of Murrup-Stewart et al. (2021), with one of their young participants (a young person not identified as having been in OOHC) speaking about the importance of 'knowing who I am, I think knowing who my mob is, knowing all my family history' (p. 1838).

It is evident from the voices of Aboriginal children and young people captured in research that connection to family is important to them. Concerningly, this research demonstrates a lack of consistency in practice when it comes to ensuring children and young people remain connected with their families. This is true despite the fact that Aboriginal families are much larger than the standard nuclear family unit, increasing the pool of family members who could potentially be engaged. While there have been practice changes within the sector, such as the introduction of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, which privileges family connections and determines a hierarchy for placement order (SNAICC, 2019), it is evident that there is still much to be done in practice to ensure that Aboriginal children and young people remain connected with their families.

Differing worldviews: Reliance on non-Aboriginal professionals in a non-Aboriginal system

Valentine and Gray (2006) found that, while each jurisdiction is supportive of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, the difficulty in applying this policy direction lies in the fact that it is most often non-Aboriginal service workers who are attempting to apply them in a service system designed by non-Aboriginal people. This is to say that the differing worldviews create a misalignment of values and ways of being and knowing that stand in the

[3]Yarning is a term commonly used by Aboriginal people and has a meaning of conversation that allows sharing of experiences and knowledge through telling stories and narrative conversation which builds connection and establishes trust (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

way of being able to provide an appropriate level of cultural safety for Aboriginal children and young people in care.

If these policies were effective, we would be seeing consistency in how they are applied, where all Aboriginal children and young people would be connected with their families in the way that is needed, guided by their choice. Instead, we continue to see Aboriginal children and young people reporting disconnection from family. If these policies are unable to identify the changes needed, why are we not asking Aboriginal children and young people about how we may be able to bring about positive change?

PARTICIPATION

The meaningful participation of children and young people, and the opportunity to have a voice on matters that affect them, is not a new concept. Within the sector, there has been a growing understanding and acknowledgement that this should be occurring within practice, although this practice is not consistent. As noted in the introduction to this paper, it is the right of children and young people to have a voice on matters that affect them and for those views to be taken seriously and acted on. Higgins et al. (2007) argue that including the voices of children and young people in decisions that affect them 'has implications for the young person's sense of agency, self-esteem and placement satisfaction' (p. 7). As identified in this paper, there is limited published research that looks at what Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC think, and what experiences they have within the system. Unfortunately, the voices of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC are often missing from the narrative around best practices and culturally safe care.

'Everyone else gets a say … But what about us?'

In the available literature, it was found that Aboriginal children and young people emphasised the importance of being provided information and being involved in the decision-making processes when decisions would affect their lives (Moore et al., 2007). Moore et al. (2007) observed that when young people are consulted, conversations remain focussed on decisions directly relating to their own care. Children and young people are not seen as contributing stakeholders to discussions about the broader sector or in organisational decision-making processes. Having a voice on issues that affect them includes being supported to express their views and have an influence on the systems by which they are surrounded.

Aboriginal children and young people in research said that they often felt as though their voices were tokenistic and secondary to others. To quote one young person: 'Everyone else gets a say. Your worker decides where you get put and your foster carer chooses if they want to keep you. They even ask their kids. But what about us? Who cares if we wanna stay or not?' (Moore et al., 2007, p. 36). It was also found that some young people felt that their case workers manipulated their voices, opinions and stories to fit within their case plan (Moore et al., 2007). Research has demonstrated that Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC report that they feel less heard than non-Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC (McDowall, 2013).

The Commission for Children Young People (CCYP) (2019) study also found that children wanted to be heard and listened to and reported feeling left out of decision-making. The report noted that children and young people have differing levels of opportunity for participation, however, practice is inconsistent, and it is often the individual caseworker that makes the difference

in terms of whether or not their voices are given weight. Commission for Children Young People (CCYP), 2019 also looked at a number of barriers to the implementation of inclusive practice for participation. This included elements such as the high numbers of children and young people who did not have an allocated caseworker, lack of face-to-face contact with caseworkers and caseloads and high turnover. A potential lack of skill or ability to perceive these barriers is also a barrier to enabling the voices of Aboriginal children and young people as a practitioner.

Avoiding tokenism: Hearing and 'doing something about it'

The report found that most often, children and young people felt like they could only have a voice on minor decisions, for example, what they want to eat or what they would like to play, with one Aboriginal young person stating, 'Sometimes they ask me what sport I want to do. I can choose what I'm going to have for dinner' (Commission for Children Young People (CCYP), 2019). Aboriginal children and young people in this study often identified that participation in meetings was difficult because the meetings were not always accessible, with one Aboriginal young person saying, 'I can go to care team meetings, but they talk shit and put things over me' (Commission for Children Young People (CCYP), 2019) and another saying 'I think it's like ya get dropped out of the loop... But basically we all are feeling so left out of things, these things are happening, we might be young but some sort of explanation would just go a mile and to have a say' (p. 118).

A study completed with Aboriginal professionals regarding best practice occurring within Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations found that every participant emphasised the importance of Aboriginal children in OOHC being respectfully listened to and engaged and for the feedback loop to be closed by actioning their voices appropriately (Creamer et al., 2022). Creamer et al. (2022) emphasised that listening and acting on the voices of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC was the only way to build trust and rapport. This is consistent with the views of Aboriginal children and young people presented in the above literature.

The importance of acting on the voices of children and young people is also clear in this literature. Aboriginal children and young people have emphasised the need for participation to be meaningful rather than tokenistic. Not only should their voices be heard, but their voices should also be acted upon. Young people have said, 'They expect us to put in so much effort, it's such a drain, but then they don't do anything with it' and 'Our stories are too hard, you've got to laugh about it or you're just gonna cry... But you gotta talk about it. And people've gotta listen... and do something about it!' (Moore et al., 2007, p. 37). The theme of acting upon the voices of Aboriginal children and young people was also raised by Aboriginal professionals as an important mechanism to ensure gathering voice is not tokenistic (Creamer et al., 2022).

The actioning of Aboriginal children's voices and their ideas is key in delivering real and lasting change, while empowering children and young people. Aligning with what Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC have said about ensuring action, Lundy (2007) argues that voice alone is not enough and does not meaningfully provide children a voice under their rights as detailed in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Henaghan, 2017; Lundy, 2007). Lundy (2007) identifies four key elements of participatory change with children and young people. These are (1) space, which references that children are to be given the time and opportunity to have their say and provide their voice; (2) voice, which references that children and young people should be supported to express their views; (3) audience, which references the fact that adults need to listen to the voices of children and young people and be appropriately trained to do so, as well as respond appropriately and (4) influence, which is about having those

views being acted upon and closing the feedback loop (Grace et al., 2018; Lundy, 2007). These elements align with what Aboriginal children and young people have told us and support meaningful participation in decision-making.

It is clear that Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC should have the ability to make decisions about issues that affect them on all levels of the continuum, including placement, how they spend their time, service and support decision-making, and policy change. In voicing their views, Aboriginal children and young people should be able to expect that their voices will be respectfully listened to and actioned appropriately with best practice to follow up with the young person again. It is a fundamental right that children and young people have a voice and are heard. This right is currently not being upheld consistently within the OOHC sector, even though the sector is aware of its importance as reflected in legislation and policy, for example, Safe and Supported—The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 (Australian Government, 2021). There remain a number of barriers to enabling and acting upon the voices of children and young people, and it is the responsibility of government and service organisations to address organisational cultural, policy and professional development approaches to break down these barriers (Michail et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed the Australian research literature that reported on the lived experiences of Aboriginal children and young people who are in care, and Aboriginal child protection workers. There were 10 papers that looked at the views of Aboriginal children and young people in care, previously in care and also professional views within the system. Despite these papers discussing experiences and the views of Aboriginal children and young people, there was nothing written about using these voices and information to translate into practice. These papers also predominantly focused on youth voices rather than also including child voices.

Collectively, this research tells us that the priorities of children are connected with their family and culture, as well as being able to have the opportunity, and participate in the decisions that ultimately affect them. The priorities of the children align with the priorities presented in policy documents. However, the fact that children are calling for these things reinforces the findings from the reviewed papers and others (e.g. Davis, 2019; Valentine & Gray, 2006) that these policies are not being embedded in practice. Children and young people should be engaged as key stakeholders in closing the gap between policy and what it means to meaningfully respond to policy in culturally appropriate ways.

The challenges of providing culturally safe and appropriate care are experienced on an international scale. Connolly et al. (2013) talk about the Māori sense of belonging in family and community and how important it is that social workers understand the family and community lineage of Māori children and young people and have an ability to engage them. Manuel (2018) talks about how a lack of consistent connection to family and community while in OOHC inhibits the development of a sense of self for Aboriginal children and young people in Canada and the importance of social workers and carers to support connections. Fast and Lefebvre (2021) discuss how practitioners need to be able to implement appropriate cultural safety mechanisms to ensure children and young people remain connected to community as this provides support for well-being and self-determination.

Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC have the fundamental right to be involved in decisions that affect them. The literature has made it clear that when given the opportunity to

provide their voice and have a say, Aboriginal children and young people are able to look beyond their own needs to reflect on bigger decisions at the practice and policy level and their implications. Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC hold an expertise that is required if we are to achieve the systemic change needed. Afterall, 'Who better to rewrite the rules than those who experienced them?' (Black et al., 2023, p. 1358).

The findings support the practice recommendations of the recent 2023 Family Matters report (SNAICC, 2023) that calls for the creation of effective and culturally safe youth-led and community-based mechanisms for young people to have self-determination and be included in decisions that affect them. These changes in practice and policy can only occur when Aboriginal children and young people, as well as their families and communities, have the balance of control to make the decisions affecting them.

This review is limited by the small volume of research literature that specifically reports on the voices of Aboriginal children and young people in care and highlights the importance of identifying Aboriginal voices in research with larger cohorts of children and young people. Limitation also exists in this review, as the available research does not step beyond description of experiences to engage child and youth stakeholders in the co-design and translation of their views into practice and policy. It is unknown from this literature if any change came about as the result of gathering these perspectives. Further limitation exists in the lack of explicit research with Torres Strait Islanders.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research is needed on the translation of the voices of Aboriginal children and young people into practice and service system change. Children and young people themselves can be engaged in the translation piece and play an important leadership role as active agents of positive change. Future research that includes Aboriginal child voices, not just youth voices, is also needed in order to complete the picture and understand the priorities of all children and young people, not just those within a specific age group. Aboriginal children and young people of all ages have the right to be involved in and make decisions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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APPENDIX A

Author(s)	Title	Year of publication	Study design	Participants	Key findings	Voices gathered
Aboriginal children and young people in care						
Commission for Children Young People (CCYP)	In our own words	2019	Mixed, qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis of documentation on file	82 Aboriginal children and young people with experience of the care system were interviewed. Participants were located in Victoria, Australia.	• Participants interviewed were more likely to be living away from their siblings. • Importance and inconsistencies of Aboriginal children and young people spending time with their extended family: some reported that they had regular visits, while other reported they wanted more time. • There are a number of practical and systemic barriers that prevent the inclusion of children and young people's voices in decision-making.	References Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; however, this is not differentiated.
Higgins, J. R., Higgins, D. J., Bromfield, L. M., & Richardson, N.	Voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care.	2007	Qualitative interviews	A total of 16 Indigenous participants participated. Three focus groups of Indigenous young people currently in care were conducted in Queensland, Australia and Western Australia. One group of six was mixed, one group of seven were girls and one group of three were boys.	• Including young people's voices in decision-making has implications for their sense of agency, self-esteem and placement satisfaction. • Importance of maintaining cultural connections to their family, community and culture while in OOHC. • Family is important to Aboriginal young people, with young people saying they want to go home to family.	References Indigenous people, no differentiation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

(Continues)

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Author(s)	Title	Year of publication	Study design	Participants	Key findings	Voices gathered
McDowall, J. J.	Connection to culture by indigenous children and young people in out-of-home care in Australia.	2016	Quantitative survey.	296 Indigenous children and young people aged between 10 and 18 from all states and territories were surveyed.	• 31.8% of respondents reported being quite or very connected to culture, 37.5% reported some connection to culture and 30.7% reported little to no connection with culture. • 14.5% of youth respondents indicated they knew about their plan, 20.3% stated they did not have one and the large majority at 65.2% were unsure if they had one or not.	Outlines that 282 participants were Aboriginal and 14 were Torres Strait Islander, however, responses are not differentiated.

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Author(s)	Title	Year of publication	Study design	Participants	Key findings	Voices gathered
Moore, T., Bennett, B., & McArthur, M.	They have gotta listen: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in out-of-home care.	2007	Qualitative, forums, interviews, focus groups.	52 children and young people participated. All identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Thirty-two participated in the first forum from ages 12 to 17. Twenty-two participated in the second forum from ages 7 to 16. One-third of participants identified as currently being within or having been on OOHC. An additional one-third was identified as living with or having lived with another family member or friend but not being officially place in care. Seventy-two professionals participated in the OOHC conference and came from a variety of organisations and services.	• Aboriginal children and young people expressed a strong preference for living with Aboriginal carers rather than non-Aboriginal carers. • Carers and families are often not receiving the support required to maintain stable placements. • Connection to family provides belonging. • Young people want to be able to live with their family and siblings, or at the very least be able to stay in contact and have ongoing relationships, however, this does often not occur.	References Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, however, this is not differentiated.

(Continues)

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Author(s)	Title	Year of publication	Study design	Participants	Key findings	Voices gathered
Aboriginal children and young people with previous care experience						
Creamer, S., Blair, S., Toombs, M., & Brolan, C. E.	Indigenous services leading the way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.	2022	Qualitative interviews.	Twenty-eight participants were interviewed. Ten participants were elders, 10 were OOHC professionals and eight young adults between the ages of 19 and 26 years old who had transitioned out of OOHC at the age of 18 within the previous 10 years. Participants were from across Central Queensland, Australia.	• Importance of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC to be respectfully listened to and engaged and have their voices actioned. • Listening and acting on voices is the only way to build trust and rapport.	References Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, although this is not differentiated.

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Author(s)	Title	Year of publication	Study design	Participants	Key findings	Voices gathered
Black, C., Frederico, M., & Bamblett, M.	'Healing through culture': Aboriginal young people's experiences of social and emotional well-being impacts of cultural strengthening programs.	2023	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews	There were four participants in total. One participant was a non-Aboriginal professional working as the Team Leader of the Children and Youths Programs at VACCA. Three members of the Narrun Yana collective participated. All three participants are Aboriginal women in their early to mid-twenties living in Naarm (Melbourne, Australia). Two participants had out-of-home care experience.	• Connection to culture directly supports the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of those in the program. • Cultural strengthening programs help to build resilience, understanding of intergenerational trauma and address the impacts. • Importance of listening to young people's need and interests in developing programs.	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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APPENDIX A (Continued)

Author(s)	Title	Year of publication	Study design	Participants	Key findings	Voices gathered
Krakouer, J.	Journeys of culturally connecting: Aboriginal young people's experiences of cultural connection in and beyond out-of-home care.	2023	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews	Ten participants were recruited. Participants were Aboriginal young people living in Victoria, Australia between the ages of 15 and 25 who had previously lived in OOHC and exited OOHC either via reunification with parents or via permanent care.	• Cultural connection is developed over time from childhood onwards. • Being with family immerses children in culture and enables cultural learning and connectedness. • Issues in OOHC placements can prevent Aboriginal young people from learning about their family and culture	Aboriginal people only.
Professionals						
Bamblett, M., Frederico, M., Harrison, J., Jackson, A., & Lewis, P.	'Not one size fits all': Understanding the social and emotional well-being of Aboriginal children.	2023	Qualitative, interviews, focus groups.	Twenty-four adult professionals were interviewed, 15 of these were Aboriginal people. Twenty-three were based in Victoria, Australia, while one participant was from outside Victoria, Australia.	• Literature on Aboriginal children's social and emotional well-being is minimal.Importance of organisational and staff cultural competence.	References Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, however, this is not differentiated as the term 'Aboriginal' has been used to include both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Author(s)	Title	Year of publication	Study design	Participants	Key findings	Voices gathered
					• Importance of organisational and staff cultural competence. • Importance of embedding an understanding of Aboriginal children's social and emotional well-being, leading to the discussion of the conceptual map.	
Mendes, P., Standfield, R., Saunders, B., McCurdy, S., Walsh, J., & Turnbull, L.	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) young people leaving out-of-home care in Australia: A national scoping study.	2021	Qualitative, interviews, focus groups.	Fifty-three individuals participated in a total of 21 focus groups, 45 participated in 13 focus groups. There were also nine individual interviews. Nine participants were from government departments, 32 from non-government organisations, 12 were from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).	• Cultural support planning was seen as important, but noted that they are often absent or of poor quality.	Cultural background of participants was not collected.

(Continues)

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Author(s)	Title	Year of publication	Study design	Participants	Key findings	Voices gathered
				Data was not collected on the Indigenous or non-Indigenous status of individual participants.	• Transition plans are completed to poor quality or often not finalised. • Cultural plans are best completed by Indigenous people and organisations. • Importance for non-Indigenous organisations to partner with Aboriginal communities and Elders.	
Mendes, P., Standfield, R., Saunders, B., McCurdy, S., Walsh, J., & Turnbull, L.	Indigenous youth transitioning from out-of-home care in Australia: a study of key challenges and effective practice responses.	2022	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews and focus groups	Participant group of this published paper was the same group from the above-noted paper—Mendes et al. (2021) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) young people leaving out-of-home care in Australia: A national scoping study.*	• Connection to family, community and culture is central to facilitating positive transitions from care.	Cultural background of participants was not collected.

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Author(s)	Title	Year of publication	Study design	Participants	Key findings	Voices gathered
					• Many Indigenous youth leave care without having acquired independent living skills. • Best practice requires active collaboration with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and community. • Overall greater self-determination for Indigenous organisations and communities is needed for policy development and decision-making.	

APPENDIX B

Baidawi, S., Mendes, P., & Saunders, B. (2016) The complexities of cultural support planning for Indigenous children in and leaving out-of-home care: the views of service providers in Victoria, Australia. *Child & Family Social Work*, *22*(2), 731–740, https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12289.

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Rebekah Grace's research is focused on the service and support needs of children who experience adversity as well as their families and communities. Her expertise is in applied research and in the translation of that research so that it is transformative to policy and practice. Rebekah has particular expertise in the conduct of rigorous effectiveness trials within human service settings and in supporting service workers' understanding of the importance of this kind of research to achieving positive outcomes for children and families. Rebekah is also well known for her research using participatory methods with children and young people and for her work in the co-design of services with Aboriginal communities.

Gabrielle Drake is Associate Dean Engagement at Western Sydney University. She is a recognised expert in the areas of social policy, mental health and disability and homelessness and housing pathways. Her research interests include social work practice in mental health, disability, boarding houses, housing and homelessness pathways, consumer and carer voices in social work education and inclusive and emancipatory research.

Scott Avery is an Indigenous disability researcher and advocate on health and social inequalities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability. He has undertaken extensive community-based research while with the First Peoples Disability Network, a non-government organisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, people with disability and their families.