CULTURAL MATCHING
IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE

Maintaining and supporting cultural identity among children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in foster care

Final Report
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Department of Educational Studies
Macquarie University
Research Team

- *From Macquarie University:*
  
  Professor Manjula Waniganayake, Dr Fay Hadley, and MrMatt Johnson
  
  (Professor Jacqueline Hayden and Dr Katey De Gioia: 2015 – 2016)

- *From Settlement Services International:*

  Dr Tadgh McMahon, Ms Kathy Karatasas, and Mr Paul Mortimer

Please use the following citation for this report:

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Key Messages

- This research report explores how cultural identity - in terms of ethnicity, language and religion - is maintained and supported for children and young people in foster care placements.
- It was conducted as a partnership between Macquarie University’s Department of Educational Studies, and Settlement Services International (SSI).
- NSW legislation requires that agencies work to maintain cultural connections for children and young people in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC).
- SSI Multicultural Foster Care (SSI MFC) currently provides foster care to more than 130 children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.
- SSI MFC recruits culturally diverse carers and matches them, where available, with children and young people in care who share cultural identity, language and religion.
- SSI MFC gives attention to matching children with a caseworker or Bicultural Support Worker (BSW) who also share these cultural elements.
- The research gathered qualitative evidence from 17 caseworkers and 25 foster carers providing care to children and young people from African, Arabic, Turkish and Vietnamese backgrounds in culturally matched and unmatched placements.
- The data analysis identified three themes which supported cultural maintenance of children in care: foster care practices; foster carer attributes; and service systems and procedures.
  - Foster care practices that maintain cultural identity include: being responsive to cultural identity; being open about cultural differences; providing access to cultural texts and activities; speaking or teaching language; practicing or instruction in religion; maintaining networks with community; providing familiar food; being responsive to social customs.
  - Foster carer attributes that support cultural maintenance include: commitment to maintain the child’s culture; ability to maintain culture in complex care; respect for the child’s right to participate in decisions about engagement with their birth culture.
  - Service systems and procedures that support cultural maintenance include: Cultural matching of the child and carer, caseworker or BSW; well planned and active Cultural Care Plans; balancing cultural and other considerations in placement decisions; foster carer support groups; responding to complexities in the child’s cultural identity; access to accurate information on cultural identity.
- The research also identified issues including: the practical advantages of culturally matched placements; some complexities of cultural matching in mixed or hyphenated identities; some challenges of unmatched placements; preserving language skills; supporting cultural maintenance from a very young age; and the importance of contact with birth parents and families.
- These practices, attributes, systems and procedures can inform a framework for foster care agencies caring for culturally diverse children and young people in NSW and other jurisdictions.
Executive Summary

Research objectives
The aim of this research was to:

- Identify factors that support foster carers to maintain cultural, language and religious identity for children in culturally matched and unmatched foster care placements.

The research was designed to produce findings which can support government and non-government stakeholders in foster care to develop their service systems and practice frameworks for maintaining cultural identity, when placing and supporting culturally diverse children and young people in foster care.

The key research question this study set out to examine was:

- What factors in foster care practice and service systems support the maintenance of cultural, language and religious identity for children from culturally and linguistically diverse family backgrounds in foster care, when placed with culturally matched and unmatched carers?

The research was conducted as a partnership between Macquarie University’s Department of Educational Studies, and Settlement Services International.

Background
There are just under 17,000 children in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) in NSW, with about half in foster care, where the carer is not a close relative, and the other half in kinship care with a close relative or family member. This research examined foster care placements only.

NSW legislation requires that children in care maintain connections to their community, culture, language and religion. The NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) requires Cultural Care Plans as a component of care plans, for children in foster care from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) family background, or those who are identified as Aboriginal. Cultural Care Plans include strategies to maintain and benefit the child’s or young person’s connection to their birth culture, strengthen positive cultural identity and self-esteem, and influence positive long term outcomes for the child or young person.

SSI is a not-for-profit organisation and the SSI MFC currently provides care for more than 130 CALD children and young people, the largest numbers being from Arabic-speaking, Vietnamese and African backgrounds.

A key strategy of SSI MFC is to recruit culturally diverse foster carers and caseworkers, and, where possible, to culturally match children with carers. The implied logic of this model is that this can result in a greater sense of belonging for children and young people in foster care. SSI classifies a placement
as matched where the carer and child share at least two of the three key indicators of cultural identity/ethnicity, language and religion. Where cultural matching of a carer and child is not possible, the service model is to culturally match children in care with a caseworker or BSW. SSI MFC develops, implements and reviews Cultural Care Plans for all children and young people in its care.

**Literature Review**

The literature review identified little evidence in the area of culturally matched and unmatched placements in foster care. One research study found that a ‘cultural mismatch’ between children and non-kinship carers has negative effects on the psychological wellbeing of children. There is some research in Australia on best casework practice regarding culturally diverse children in care, but the literature review found no Australian research on the strengths of culturally matched placements.

**Methodology**

Data was collected through five focus groups and 10 semi-structured interviews. In the focus groups and interviews, foster carers and caseworkers were asked questions around what practices have been used successfully to maintain the cultural identity of children in care, and what personal qualities and skills of carers contribute to providing successful foster care, including cultural maintenance. The interviews also revealed information on other factors relevant to foster care and cultural connections. Participant recruitment and data collection spanned March-August 2016, and employed convenience sampling utilising SSI communication channels. A total of 17 caseworkers and 25 foster carers in SSI MFC participated in the study. Participants were foster carers drawn mainly from Arabic-speaking, Vietnamese, Turkish and Anglo Australian backgrounds, and SSI caseworkers in Sydney and Newcastle who work with these carers. About half of the children placed with these foster carers were culturally matched with the carer and half were not culturally matched.

**Findings**

The data analysis which synthesised the perspectives of foster carers and case workers could be grouped under three key themes which support cultural maintenance of children in care:

1. Foster care practices
2. Foster carer attributes
3. Service systems and procedures

**1) Foster care practices that support cultural maintenance**

This cluster of data describes the practices engaged in by caseworkers and foster carers, which they identified as significant in maintaining the cultural identity of children in care. These included:
• Being respectful and responsive to the child’s cultural identity, to develop connection and trust with the child.
• Being supportive of the child’s cultural heritage and open about any differences with the carer’s heritage, to build trust and the child’s positive cultural identity.
• Providing access to texts and activities which connect to cultural heritage, including books, films, videos, maps, games, dance, singing, and musical instruments, through libraries, online or events with the child’s birth community.
• Speaking the child’s birth language at home in a matched placement, enrolling in weekend language classes, and providing opportunities for the child to speak their birth language through contact with parents, extended family or community members.
• Practicing the child’s birth religion as a foster family in a matched placement, attending places of worship and important religious events, religious instruction at home or with a religious practitioner, and education on religious practices such as removing shoes and washing before entering a mosque.
• Maintaining social networks with the birth community, through contact with the birth parents and family, community members and events, and through Facebook/social media.
• Being responsive to needs regarding dress, grooming and personal care, such as hair braiding, and dress appropriate for religious practice.
• Providing food familiar to the child and the child’s birth community.
• Being responsive to social customs, including forms of greeting, showing hospitality, and traditional medicine practices such as coining.
• Caseworkers also being responsive to the culture and practices of the carer, to develop connection and trust with the carer, and give carers the support they need to provide quality foster care and maintain the child’s cultural connection.

2) **Foster carer attributes that support cultural maintenance**

Carers and caseworkers identified key personal qualities and skills of foster carers that supported cultural maintenance, and these included:

• A predisposition to support the maintenance of the child’s culture, language and religion, and to embrace and connect with diverse cultures.
• Commitment to undertake activities required to maintain the child’s culture, such as practice of language and religious obligations.
• An ability to provide appropriate cultural maintenance within complex care, which may involve care for a child with a disability, developmental delay, health or behavioural issues, or require trauma-informed practice.
• Respect for the child’s right to participate in decisions regarding engagement with their birth culture, and to determine their own personal cultural identity.
• The capacity to provide good quality care and a safe environment for the child, alongside a capacity to support the child’s cultural development; which may be derived from their previous experience as a parent or carer.
• Motivation by personal fulfilment or civic or religious duty, to maintain commitment to caring and supporting the child and their cultural development over a long term, including during difficult times.

3) Service systems and procedures that support cultural maintenance
The focus groups and interviews identified a number of factors around service systems and procedures which can impact on cultural maintenance of children in care. These are relevant to foster care services in NSW and other jurisdictions:

• Cultural matching of the child and carer is usually the optimal placement for a child, provided that a matched carer with the necessary capacity is available.
• Decisions around placing a child with a culturally matched or unmatched carer should take into account a number of factors to determine what is in the best interests of the child. Factors include: benefits of matching for cultural maintenance; availability of a culturally matched carer; carer willingness to provide cultural maintenance; carer capacity to provide safe and stable care; keeping siblings together; keeping a child in the same school and connected to local services and community.
• Where a child cannot be placed with a culturally matched carer, cultural maintenance can be supported through good practice under a Cultural Care Plan, and through cultural matching of the child with a Caseworker or BSW.
• BSWs are an effective means to actively engage the child in their birth culture where they are not culturally matched with their carer; these workers from the child’s community can be a positive role model and show children the benefits and enjoyable aspects of their birth community and culture, as well as putting them in touch with language, cultural practices and other members of their community.
• Carer family days and picnics involving culturally diverse children in care, and carer support groups including Arabic and Vietnamese carer groups that are part of SSI MFC, are a valuable way to keep carers and children in touch with other members of their community.
• Complexities of the child’s cultural background should be identified and the child supported to develop their own positive cultural identity over time. The child’s identity can include connection to one or more cultural backgrounds of their birth parents, in the case of mixed or hyphenated identities, as well as connection to general Australian cultural norms.
Carers should receive financial support to meet any significant costs involved with cultural maintenance.

Accurate information on the child’s cultural background, language and religion is needed when the child or young person and family intersect with the out-of-home care system, to inform cultural matching with carers and cultural planning for the child. This data is sometimes inaccurate or not available when the child is referred by FACS to the foster care agency, which compromises the cultural matching and planning processes.

**Discussion**

In addition to the above findings, the following issues identified by this study would be valuable to consider in improving service systems and practice standards for foster care agencies in NSW and Australia:

- Cultural matching of foster carers and the child in care provides ‘natural’ advantages for maintaining the child’s culture, as the carer and family are often able to develop the child’s cultural connection, language and religion through their own daily practice, and cultural familiarity can assist the child’s sense of belonging in foster care.
- Matched placements are likely to require less support for the child to maintain good connection to their culture.
- Cultural matching of children and carers needs to consider multiple factors and take into account complexities such as different dialects within languages, traditions and sects within religions, and class or cultural groupings or rivalries within communities; even in matched placements there can be some variation in how families practice their culture.
- Carers recruited from migrant and refugee communities often recognise the practical benefits of caring for a child from their own community, in terms of speaking the same language, attending the same temple, church or mosque, and having social connections with the child’s community through their own friends and family.
- Matched placements can have their own challenges, where the carer’s own culture can sometimes present ‘blind spots’ that make it harder for them to reflect on the dimensions of cultural maintenance for children in foster care, or they can make assumptions that cultural maintenance will ‘naturally’ occur.
- Culturally matched carers from small communities can face challenges in coming into contact with birth parents, at the community’s social events.
- Unmatched placements have challenges which need to be addressed through good cultural care planning and practice, to maintain the child’s cultural connection, language and religion.
- Preservation of birth language skills is a particularly important aspect of a child or young person’s access to their culture and maintaining their identity.
• Cultural maintenance of a child in an unmatched placement should take place from birth, and while consideration should be given to when aspects of cultural connection are age appropriate, a child’s identity will be affected from a young age by the foster family’s cultural and religious practices, and language spoken at home.

• Carer’s willingness and commitment to support cultural maintenance appears to be of major importance in both culturally matched and unmatched placements.

• Contact with birth parents and extended family can have an important role in keeping the child connected to their language and community, and also in developing and implementing care plans and providing advice on cultural practices, texts and resources.

• Similarly, bicultural caseworkers and support workers are also valuable in maintaining cultural connections.

**Conclusion**

This study set out to explore how cultural identity is maintained in foster care and the strengths and challenges of cultural matching in long-term placements. It found that the caseworkers and foster carers with SSI MFC maintain and develop the cultural identity of culturally diverse children in care, through a range of practices, service systems and procedures and building on carer skills and attributes. Key strategies included: placements where the child is culturally matched with the foster carer; unmatched placements where the child is culturally matched with a caseworker or BSW; and Cultural Care Plans implemented for all culturally diverse children in care.

These practices and systems can be replicated by foster care agencies in NSW and other jurisdictions. The report findings can enable us to identify some indicators that could be used to conceptualise a framework for intercultural engagement in foster care. The development of such a framework would require additional research as well as adequate ‘testing’ to assess its capacity for application by SSI and/or other foster care agencies in placing and supporting children from CALD backgrounds in long-term foster care.
Acknowledgements

The *Cultural Matching in Out-Of-Home Care* Project emerged in 2014 as a postgraduate internship, established through a research partnership between SSI and Macquarie University’s Department of Educational Studies (formerly, the Institute of Early Childhood). In 2016, this partnership was expanded under an *Enterprise Partnerships Scheme (EPS)* pilot research grant from Macquarie University. Under the EPS, funding from both the University and SSI was combined and enabled the strengthening of the research partnership in undertaking this current study.

The initial internship involved Professor Jacqueline Hayden, and when she retired, Dr Katey De Gioia took over as the Chief Investigator. She was joined by Professor Manjula Waniganayake, and when Dr De Gioia resigned from the University, Dr Fay Hadley joined as a Chief Investigator with Professor Waniganayake as the lead. Throughout this project, both Dr Tadgh McMahon from SSI and Matthew Johnson, as the postgraduate intern who later became the Project Research Assistant, have been a constant presence.

In presenting this report to SSI, as the final research team from Macquarie University, we acknowledge our sincere appreciation to all at SSI for their professionalism and commitment throughout this project. In particular, we thank Dr Tadgh McMahon, for his consistent support and insightful advice in maximising the achievements of this project. Likewise, we also acknowledge the assistance provided by Kathy Karatasas, Ghassan Noujaim and Paul Mortimer, including their perceptive insights during the second phase of data coding. We also thank the SSI MFC caseworkers for organising interviews and focus groups with the foster carers and for their own contributions during the focus group discussions. Importantly, we also record our deep appreciation to the foster carers who found time in their busy schedules to share their personal experiences with the research team.

The Macquarie University Final Research Team comprised:

Professor Manjula Waniganayake, Dr Fay Hadley and Mr Matt Johnson

May 2017
Introduction

There were just under 17,000 children in out-of-home care in NSW at 30 June 2015, with 3,440 admitted in 2014-15 (AIHW 2016). Out-of-home-care (OOHC) services involve a child or young person being placed with an alternative caregiver on a short- or long-term basis. Many children and young people come to the attention of Child Protection Services (CPS) each year and, where necessary, are placed in OOHC. The two most commonly used alternative care arrangements for children and young people in Australia are kinship care and foster care, accounting for 96.2 per cent of children in OOHC (AIFS 2016). Kinship care is usually provided by a close relative of the child or young person and foster care involves living in the home of a caregiver who is not related to the child’s family. In this research, we focus on the long-term foster care placements of children and young people specifically from migrant and refugee family backgrounds in NSW. Statistics on the numbers of children in foster care from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are not reliably collected or reported on by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS).

Currently, foster care in NSW is in the midst of a major reform process, with the NSW Government devolving the delivery of long-term foster care from FACS to accredited non-government organisations. At the same time, fostering in NSW is also undergoing a demographic shift with increasing numbers of children from culturally and linguistically diverse family backgrounds requiring long-term foster care (Fostering NSW 2013). SSI is the only agency specialising in foster care for children from these diverse backgrounds. It is therefore placed in a unique position to lead and respond to this demographic and policy shift.

Since 2014, under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act of 1998, guiding principles for the permanent placement of a child or a young person was defined as follows:

- family preservation or restoration
- guardianship
- open adoption (for non-Aboriginal children)
- parental responsibility to the Minister (FACS n.d.).

These principles are also incorporated into the Cultural Care Plans introduced in December 2016, with a view to strengthen the preservation of the children’s cultural identity and connectivities with their families. These plans, though not mandatory, outline strategies for
cultural maintenance that are agreed upon by caseworkers, foster carers and birth parents (FACS 2016).

The *NSW Child Safe Standards for Permanent Care* (OCG 2015) is based upon the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Charter of Rights for Young People in Out-of-Home Care in NSW*. Among the rights of young people that are prioritised by these three documents, connectivity is a central theme. Young people need to be connected to the decision making processes that affect them, they need to maintain a relationship with their families, peers and other significant people, and – crucially – they need to “maintain connections to community, culture, language and spirituality” (OCG 2015, p.2).

In meeting these obligations, SSI strives to achieve cultural matching between the child, foster carer and caseworker. Although ‘matching’ is a term that makes administrative sense, in reality, it is a crude moniker for what is a much more complex conceptual issue. In assigning foster children to an OOHC placement, SSI strives to achieve a match in terms of at least two elements out of three – cultural identity/ethnicity, religion and language, between the child, foster carer and caseworker. In practice, a variety of supportive strategies are essential in providing continuity for foster children as they move from the cultural environment of the birth family to that of the foster family.

This study explored the strengths and challenges of cultural matching in long-term foster care placements. The research was conducted through SSI MFC, with the aim of learning about the experiences and perspectives of the caseworkers and foster carers from this program. SSI MFC was established in 2013, with the number of children being placed with foster families and the cultural diversity of these children generally increasing on an annual basis.

As stated earlier, this study builds on work completed as part of a 2014 internship placement, conducted in partnership between SSI and Macquarie University’s Department of Educational Studies (formerly the Institute of Early Childhood). The 2014 study focused on strength-based explanations for positive outcomes within SSI MFC’s Vietnamese participants. These participants represented a cohort with primarily ethnically-matched OOHC placements – whereby the foster carer, foster child and, in most cases, the caseworker all shared the same cultural background. The present study extends this scope by investigating both culturally matched and non-matched placements. The participants in this study were drawn from four cultural backgrounds: foster carers from Vietnamese, Turkish and Arabic-speaking backgrounds, Anglo-Australian carers of children from African-backgrounds; and the SSI
caseworkers in Sydney and Newcastle who work with children and young people from these backgrounds and their carers.

This report presents research findings from the qualitative data analysis that emerged through five focus groups and 10 semi-structured interviews. In total, there were 17 caseworkers and 25 foster carers who shared their experiences and perspectives with the research team. In this report, the data reflects the perspectives of both caseworkers and carers, and has been clustered and presented under three broad themes regarding support for cultural maintenance of children in care:

1) Foster care practices
2) Foster carer attributes
3) Service systems and procedures

This report presents research findings from these three themes, and discusses them in relation to key research questions and their potential significance for SSI and other OOHC agencies.

**Literature Review**

Identifying relevant peer-reviewed and ‘grey’ literature, based on government and non-government publications that focused on multicultural foster care services was challenging. Database searches were conducted in search of relevant publications, based on foster care research carried out in Australia, and focusing on immigrant or culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Our aim was to locate studies about cultural matching or at least some degree of culturally-aware OOHC placements and, ideally, doing so using a qualitative research methodology. In this sense, much of the research canvassed below is at least partially tangential. There are accounts of: experiences of foster carers, often without or with little specific mention of cultural diversity (Whenan, Oxlad & Lushington 2009; Blythe, Halcomb, Wilkes & Jackson 2013); cultural matching in OOHC in Indigenous – rather than immigrant communities, both in Australia and overseas (Moss 2009; Filbert & Flynn 2010; Brown, George, Sintzel & Arnault 2009); and research that explored the parenting practices of certain immigrant communities, albeit with no focus on OOHC (see, for example, Renzaho, Green, Mellor & Swinburn 2011).
Those accounts that take a broad focus on the state of foster care generally make at least passing reference to culture. Bass, Shields and Behrman (2004) for instance, note cultural identity formation and “finding one’s place in a society that often categorizes and discriminates based on race are critical to healthy child development” (p.14). However, the broader literature on foster care has generally neglected how this development takes place from either a child or carer perspective. It is instead common to see research surrounding best practices from a service provider standpoint (Burke and Paxman 2008; Sawrikar 2009; Kaur 2014) or analysis of outcomes at the end of foster care (Barn et al. 2005; Dworksy et al. 2010; Harris et al. 2009). This tendency to focus on either service provider perspectives or post-care outcomes was visible in the Children’s Welfare Association of Victoria’s (2002) study of OOHC in Melbourne’s Vietnamese community. Key findings from that report focused on placement prevention and family reunification – a preference for ‘before and after’, rather than during OOHC – while recommendations were generally limited to the logistics of service provision, such as the need for language services, cultural awareness training or family-based respite care (CWAV 2002, pp.4-5).

The geographic diversity in OOHC case studies appears to be broadening, and the majority of research in the field comes from North American sociological studies. This has meant that ethnic groups most commonly studied were: Aboriginal Canadians (Daniel 2011; Brown et al 2012); white American, African-American, Native American and Hispanic (Hogan & Siu 1988; Anderson & Linares 2011; Jewell, Brown, Smith & Thompson 2010); and studies that included either aggregated ‘Asian’ cohorts (Clauss-Ehlers 2008) or simply an ‘other’ category (Dworsky et al. 2010). Added to this, there is some literature on unaccompanied refugee and asylum seeker children in foster care (Zulfacar 1987; Derluyn & Broekaert 2008; Ni Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh 2015), but relatively little on children from established migrant families. Burke and Paxman (2008) noted that, within the NSW child protection system, “further work [is needed] to accurately record the number of NESB [non-English speaking background] children in care” (p.10).

Where Australian research is concerned, the discussion has tended toward the contributing factors that lead to children’s involvement in the Child Protection System (CPS) or placement in Out-of-Home-Care (OOHC) (Sawrikar 2011; Kaur 2012). Kaur’s (2012) literature review has canvassed the limited Australian literature to identify several protective factors that can mitigate the involvement of CALD families in the CPS; these could also be considered salutogenic factors that may influence the quality of care once children are in
OOHC. Lewig et al (2009), meanwhile, outlined strong collectivist parenting cultures in some migrant communities, where children receive care from a variety of care-givers within extended family networks (such as siblings, uncles and aunts, and grandparents). The Layton report, a review of child protection practices in South Australia, noted that migrant families “have often migrated to Australia in order to improve the life chances of their children and therefore have strong protective relationships, high attachments and expectations about their children’s outcomes” (Layton 2003, section 25.2).

However, the limited research available does point to vulnerabilities in relation to cultural identity for children in foster care from Indigenous and culturally diverse backgrounds. This research has also highlighted different outcomes between children in foster or kinship placements. Moss found that Australian Indigenous and Indigenous-Anglo children in foster care (not with a close relative) had difficulty negotiating hybridity and finding pride in their cultural heritage, compared with those in kinship placements (with a close relative) who “fared best in terms of sense of self, self-esteem and a sense of connectedness” (2009, p.320). Anderson and Linares (2011) investigated the effect of ‘cultural dissimilarity factors’ – like caregivers having different ethnicities or speaking different languages at home to birth families – on the psychological wellbeing of children in non-kinship placements in the USA, finding that “cultural mismatch between foster children and their caregivers has measurable negative effects” (Anderson & Linares 2011, p.7).

Although there were no Australian studies of similar size or using similar measurements to Anderson & Linares 2011, international studies such as these illustrate the complexities of conducting research into foster care placements. The variety of stakeholders – comprising both children of varying ages, needs and capabilities, as well as adults – birth parents and other kin, foster carers and case workers, as well as other para-professionals such as healthcare workers, social workers and legal professionals, play different roles in foster care placements. Analysis of impact on children and young people, who are the focus of this research, requires longitudinal research, and this is only just beginning to emerge in Australia.
**Research Methodology**

**Ethics approval**

The project was submitted for review and approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (Human Sciences and Humanities – Project ID: 5201500972) in December 2015 (see Appendix 3 for letter of approval). Minor adjustments to the project methodology were approved subsequently in June 2016.

**Participant recruitment**

Participant recruitment took the form of convenience sampling based on the availability of participants for a particular focus group and/or an individual interview. Caseworkers were contacted through SSI’s usual communication channels, and those available to participate were primarily interviewed in focus groups at SSI Bankstown and SSI Newcastle (Northern Settlement Services – Hamilton). Some of these caseworkers assisted us in recruiting foster carers to participate in focus groups. Where time constraints of the participants negated the possibility of a focus group, semi-structured interviews were used instead.

The participants in this study were drawn from four cultural backgrounds: foster carers from Vietnamese, Turkish and Arabic-speaking backgrounds, and Anglo-Australian foster carers caring for children from African-backgrounds; and the SSI caseworkers in Sydney and Newcastle who worked with these foster carers and children in care. The carers and caseworkers selected represented a substantial proportion of SSI MFC’s foster carers and caseworkers as a whole. The four groups of carers that participated encompassed both culturally matched and unmatched placements. In general,

- Arabic and Vietnamese carers had predominantly matched placements;
- Anglo-Australian and Turkish carers usually had unmatched placements.

Usually, a ‘matched’ placement involved looking for similarities between the child and the foster carer using three elements - ethnicity, religion and language. Matching was achieved with compatibility on at least two of these categories; whereas ‘unmatched’ placements generally had no compatibility against these three elements. However, it should be noted also that cultural matching was not limited to the foster carers only; it was possible that the ‘matching’ for ethnicity, religion and language could also occur between the foster children, and the caseworkers or the BSWs assigned to their cases. Details regarding the spread of placement types in the study are provided in Table 2.
Study participants

Tables 1 and 2 below outline the study sample, grouping foster carer and caseworker participants according to their cultural backgrounds, and identifying whether the children placed with the carer participants were culturally matched or unmatched.

Twenty two foster carers and 17 caseworkers participated; the study recorded the cultural background of the participating foster carers, but not for the participating caseworkers. SSI MFC generally recruits caseworkers who can be culturally matched with children in care and foster carers, but in some circumstances this is not possible. For the program in Newcastle, where African children are in care, two Anglo-Australian caseworkers and two African BSWs (one Burundian and one Sudanese) participated in the study.

Table 1: Study participants by role and cultural background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural background</th>
<th>Anglo Australian</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Arabic-speaker</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseworkers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Culturally matched and unmatched children placed with study participant carers, by cultural background of carer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural background of carer</th>
<th>Anglo Australian</th>
<th>Arabic-speakers</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matched children in care</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmatched children in care</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The study calculated 44 children were under the care of the 25 participant foster carers during 2016, when this data was collected. The figures cited in Table 2 count the number of culturally matched and unmatched children placed with these carers. Some carers had both culturally matched and unmatched children in their care.

Data collection

Table 3 below lists participants according to the method of data collection they were involved in. The following points provide further detail on the circumstances that shaped this distribution of participants:

- Given the notable geographic distribution of carers in the Newcastle-Hunter region and the varying travel times to Newcastle, a face-to-face focus group was not feasible for this carer cohort. A teleconference-style focus group was touted as a possibility; however, this approach was ruled out given the limited availability of the carers and their conflicting schedules. Therefore, all foster carers with African-background children participated in face to face semi-structured interviews.
- Arabic carers were scheduled to participate in a foster group at SSI Bankstown in July. Due to poor weather and the unavailability of several foster carers, SSI caseworkers made the decision to cancel that month’s carer support meeting (after which the focus group was to begin). Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted instead.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Caseworkers</th>
<th>Focus groups</th>
<th>Semi-structured interview</th>
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<tr>
<td>Foster carers</td>
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<td>11</td>
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The focus groups and interviews with the foster carers of African-background children cohort and with all caseworkers were conducted in English. Using interpreting services, the other three cohorts of carers expressed their opinions in their community languages. Where telephone interviews with Arabic carers took place, the researcher spoke with participants via an interpreter. Focus groups that were conducted with Turkish and Vietnamese carers utilised
the language skills of SSI MFC caseworkers – the existing relationship that these caseworkers had with carers was also valuable in making participants feel comfortable in discussing their experiences. All data was collected using smartphone recording apps, and was either transcribed by the research team or was simultaneously transcribed and translated by an external supplier, the University of Queensland’s Institute for Modern Languages.

While two different data collection methods were used, ‘interview questions’ henceforth refers to the questions asked of participants in both focus group interviews and individual, semi-structured interviews. The interview questions focused on the following themes: foster child adjustment, perceived desirable qualities and skills in foster carers, maintaining cultural continuity, whether cultural matching was essential, and a range of other questions. A list of interview questions used in data collection is provided in the Appendices.

**Study limitations**

**Sample size**

Scheduling focus groups and interviews with foster carers and caseworkers proved to be challenging, as both groups have a range of personal and professional commitments that reduced their availability. Foster carers often have both biological children and children in foster care, with some carers providing care for more than five children. Caseworkers, meanwhile, often have multiple competing priorities. Subsequently, the sample size for the project is a modest 42 participants: 25 foster carers and 17 caseworkers.

The possibility of including care leavers (former SSI MFC children now aged over 18) in the study was explored. The lack of participation from children and young people in care and not giving them a ‘voice’ in research investigating their experiences is frequently mentioned in research literature (Gilbertson & Barber 2002; Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo & Richardson 2005; Bromfield & Osborn 2007). This research demonstrates “how important it is to provide opportunities for children and young people in care to be heard…and that this process is crucial to ensure their needs are met” (Bromfield & Osborn 2007, p.19). However, SSI caseworkers reported that the small number of care leavers still in contact with SSI were not able to participate due to a variety of personal reasons, which have been omitted from this report for the purposes of maintaining confidentiality.

The number of Vietnamese carers who attended the focus group was quite high (n = 16), however the number of Vietnamese carers who actively contributed to the group
discussion was smaller (n = 9). Of those carers who did respond to questions, four carers only answered the final question of the focus group (‘what advice would you give to prospective foster carers?’). Subsequently, demographic data on the number and ethnicity of children in the care of these four carers is unavailable. The data in Table 2 (above) uses an estimate of one foster child per carer, three of these children being matched and one unmatched (a ratio roughly equivalent to reported data).

**Translation issues**

One limitation to the Turkish foster carer focus group was the fact that two participants spoke Uighur Turkish, and the translator noted that this dialect was outside of their abilities. Hence, whilst some of these responses were translated, their presence in the data was sporadic. Added to this, the fact that two focus groups that were conducted in languages other than English (Vietnamese and Turkish carers) negated the ability of the research team to probe for further detail on certain responses or, indeed, to follow the content of the focus groups. Comments made by the participants were not available to the research team until they had been translated several weeks after the focus group had taken place. In contrast, in the telephone interviews with Arabic carers, which were conducted with an interpreter present, the researcher could ask for clarification or further information from the participants immediately. The discussion of questions about the manner in which religious beliefs motivated carers, illustrates this aspect later in this report.

**Research findings**

The research findings reported below are grouped according to three main themes which support cultural maintenance of children in care, emerging from the data collected: foster care practices; carer and caseworker perspectives on key foster carer attributes; and broader service systems and procedures.

1) **Foster care practices that support cultural maintenance**

The analysis of interview and focus group discussions indicated a strong sense of valuing the importance of building connections between those involved in the placement of children and young people in OOHC arrangements managed by SSI. Effective practice in foster care emerging from the findings reflecting the provision of support in cultural maintenance included: facilitating access to cultural texts, activities and events; awareness of specific food, dress, grooming and personal care matters relating to various cultures; language practices,
religious practices, social customs and social networks. Findings about each of these factors are discussed next.

a) Building connections

As stated above, connectivity is a central theme in the *NSW Child Safe Standards for Permanent Care* (OCG 2015), and it was interesting to see participants describing varying elements that contribute to building connections between foster children, foster carers, caseworkers and their wider sociocultural context. When asked questions like, ‘what strategies do you use to help foster children adjust to living in your family?’ (to foster carers) or ‘what factors do you think contribute to a successful placement?’ (to caseworkers), participants would frequently describe the importance of linkages, bonds and attachments. More specifically, connections are built by SSI MFC participants in the following ways:

- Cultivating relationships between the caseworkers, foster carers and foster children that are predicated on trust, transparency and rapport;
- Carers having an openness and respect for cultural plurality that enables them to connect with a different culture;
- The formal and informal supports that connect carers with knowledge, other carers and external service providers. One of the formal ways that SSI MFC keeps carers connected is with carer support groups. Some of these carer support structures are language specific with a Vietnamese and Arabic carers support group; and
- Unconditional love between foster carers (and, often, the carers’ biological children) and foster children, where the carers’ capacity for this love is viewed as both a prerequisite for becoming a foster carer and as essential to providing ongoing, sustainable care based on strong and secure relationships.

Within SSI MFC, building connections for foster children takes place at both an interpersonal, micro-level and a broader macro level. On the one hand, the success of cultural maintenance practices was often predicated upon the trust and attachment that was established over time between carer and child. In the following example, an Anglo-Australian carer describes honesty as being central to the relationship that has developed with her African foster child, something that was cultivated during commonplace, day-to-day interactions:

**NH1:** I suppose openness and honesty is definitely the way we've gone. We've been honest from day one, that they have different colour skin because their tummy mummy had different colour skin. And that they have African heritage… We talk about the reasons why mummy and
daddy don't have brown skin, ‘but you do, because your tummy mummy and your daddy – your other daddy – had brown skin’.

On the other hand, connection building can have broader, macro-dimensions that extend beyond the dyadic relationships of the family unit (carer-child) or service provider (caseworker-carer) contexts. The following quote, also from an Anglo-Australian carer of African foster children, describes how adhering to cultural maintenance practices in unmatched placements requires a predisposition to embrace and connect with different cultures.

**NH6:** I think you've got to be willing to take on that culture as part of your family. So like I said we consider ourselves African-Australian now, that's our family. And our house reflects that, with pictures on the wall, wooden statues in the corner. It's got that look about it now. The food that we eat... We're really willing to take that on and accept that and appreciate that it is important for the child. … And don't be tokenistic about it. Don't just stick a flag on the wall and think that's enough, or a map. You've got to really get out there and get involved in a community and really embrace the culture.

From the caseworkers’ perspectives, a sense of openness and honesty was also vital. Communication is the central issue here: if carers are not willing to be open and transparent with caseworkers, this could impact the quality of services provided and/or the wellbeing of the carer. Caseworkers also noted that carers can miss out on valuable information and training opportunities. For the most part, honest and secure relationships were being cultivated between caseworkers and carers through attentiveness, valuing each other’s work, being present and providing relevant material support as appropriate.

**CW10:** [It's about] working together and getting the carer to understand that we are there to help them, help the placement, help the carer, support the carer, and always to support the children as well...And I guess I need to add that: appreciation and support; basically, listening to them and providing that support. Maybe have a bunch of flowers, a Mother's Day card, maybe ...I don't know – a gift voucher, when we have it. That also helps building that trust and keeping that relationship...

**CW6:** Yeah. And sometimes it's just listening to them. Literally, that's it . . . But all you've got to do is sit there and listen and just support them, and sometimes that's all they need, [for you to] sit there [while they] let their frustration out.

**CW5:** And you are always appreciating what they are doing. Because sometimes, they are not really treated well by some other – not SSI – but some other caseworkers. So they become secretive, then they don't tell everything. So, building the trust, working with them, appreciating them and, also, providing ongoing training to upgrade their knowledge.

In the case of the Newcastle-Hunter region, where opportunities for culturally-matched placements are limited, BSWs work with foster children and carers to provide children with a connection to their birth cultures. Specific elements of this are discussed below regarding cultural activities, food and language, and regarding connection building:
Carers noted the enthusiasm that foster children had for spending time with BSWs, who were described as young, lively and affable people that children could relate to. However, one carer noted that often, the time with BSWs was spent with more ‘fun’, acultural activities (such as going to the beach), when some culture-specific activities (such as developing their skills with language, cooking or music) were preferred by the carer. The role is also about building connections with people who have strong cultural connections and this may be valued differently by various people.

Caseworkers stressed the importance of using BSWs to establish a “real social connection” (CW4) for children, given the difficulties in matching in the region. One case was noted where foster children had refused to participate in their birth cultures, until they had spent time with a BSW. After building a rapport with the support worker, the foster children “had seen positive things that their culture can bring to them” (CW1), and then started learning their birth language and taking an interest in their culture’s traditions in food, music and games.

b) Providing access to cultural texts, activities and events
Maintaining foster children’s exposure to their birth cultures involves providing access to cultural texts, often by having them in the home but also through external practices (like taking children to the library or children participating in ‘African music day’ at their pre-schools). These texts included: books, films, maps, CDs, YouTube videos, and so on. Cultural activities were also important, including culturally relevant games, dance, singing and musical instruments, often supplied with the assistance of birth parents, caseworkers or, in the case of the Newcastle-Hunter carers, the BSWs. A range of local events also help to provide some form of cultural continuity for foster children, such as local cultural festivals like ‘Refugee Day’ or SSI MFC picnics.

While providing access to these texts and activities appeared straightforward, participants noted that it was not entirely unproblematic, particularly since the success of these activities was often dependent on engaging with children and getting their cooperation. One carer noted how foster children often consider learning their birth language or reading books from their birth cultures as ‘hard work’ and akin to homework. Another carer described an unsuccessful effort at providing access to cultural texts for the children in their care:

NH4: I took them to go to the library one day, and it was like taking them to a funeral parlour. [laughing] They looked at one single book and they walked out. And I said, 'Listen, you know
Further discussion of this acceptance of children’s autonomy, even when problematic for cultural maintenance, is discussed later in this report.

c) Food, dress, grooming and personal care

Meeting the basic needs of foster children – food, clothing and shelter, to use Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs – also needs to be culturally appropriate, and carers cite a range of culture-specific foods, hygiene practices and sartorial or cosmetic considerations that help with cultural maintenance. The carer below discusses the challenges that arise from maintaining culturally-appropriate grooming habits in an unmatched placement (African foster children):

**NH5:** If you can imagine steel wool being used, over and over and over, and then you try to do something with it after, it's just a big mat. The girls' hair actually gets like that… Just having their hair done [braided], that's the most difficult thing for the girls, keeping up with their hair. And when it’s due to come out – because when it's braided, it only lasts six weeks, maybe two months at the most – it does cost a lot. The [SSI] office doesn't pay for it every single time, I have to pay for it sometimes.

Another carer of African foster girls mentioned the birth mother’s request that her daughter’s ears be pierced, which created some challenges regarding approval for the procedure given the foster child’s age. Common to African boys and girls, meanwhile, is the need for adequate moisturising for their skin, a situation that one carer reported as lengthening daily hygiene routines because “you can’t just say, ‘hop in the bath, hop out and get dressed’” (NH5). Failing to meet this hygiene need for African children, one carer suggested, is “really embarrassing for the kids and it’s quite shameful” (NH6). This fact highlights the way in which some cultures perceive status via grooming practices; girls having shaved heads rather than braided or extended hair was also mentioned, as a sign of lower social status in African communities.

For Muslim girls in OOHC, one foster carer reported the need to teach her foster children about their faith’s requirement for ‘covering up’. Along with prayer and fasting, she had encouraged her foster daughter to “wear something not too revealing, not show [her] body a lot” (A12) while – in this instance – attending pyjama parties at her friends’ houses. Another carer, of an African boy with Muslim heritage, mentioned how they would explain the hijab and other clothing practices to him, such as removing shoes before entering a mosque. Interestingly, however, these were the only mentions in the data of the unique sartorial expectations for Muslim girls and women, and even the above comments from an Arabic carer (A12) were followed by the concession that “I don’t force them”. 
d) Language practices
Maintaining children’s ability to speak their own language was an important element of cultural continuity, and one which was relevant to both matched and unmatched placements. Often this meant speaking the same language as the child around the home (in the case of matched placements); many carers also enrolled foster children in language classes outside of their regular schooling (both matched and unmatched placements). Carers identified language as being more than a practical consideration; instead, it is intrinsically linked to their cultural identity. The following passage is from the Turkish foster carers’ focus group:

T8: There are many children who are Turkish, but do not know their Turkishness.
T7: Of course… of course.
T9: They do not know their own language.
T8: My children are Africans but cannot speak with their parents. Because they do not know their own language… They talk to their parents through an interpreter

When asked whether they would consider taking on an unmatched placement, currently matched carers would usually cite language as the key barrier. Speaking the same language as the children in their care was important in terms of building trust and rapport (“they feel, ‘yes, mum understands me’” – V17), knowing how to respond to challenging behaviours. They maintained foster children’s language skills by either taking the children to language school or teaching them at home. Overall, if the children were from the same cultural background as the carer maintaining language was seen as potentially easier.

e) Religious practices
Maintaining faith continuity for foster children was viewed as more straightforward in matched placements. In the following example, a carer discussed her approach to maintaining connections to the child’s religious background in a matched placement as follows:

A16: Well, I don't have to do anything special because I do it anyway, for myself. So I try to keep that within my family anyway. I try to keep that, the culture and the religion going, in some sort of way. Even just a little... If there's any special festivities, yeah, definitely, we do it anyway.

In the case of unmatched placements, carers frequently discussed religious practices in practical terms: difficulties arise not from, say, incompatibility in belief systems, but from challenges like finding time to take children to a different location than their own faith institutions (eg. Carers that attend church having difficult in transporting children to the mosque). Where different beliefs came up, those carers with religiously-unmatched placements demonstrated flexibility. The following transcript from one focus group highlights different perceptions among carers:
T9: We can buy those, pork and… I buy sausages and that. The child eats that, likes that. There is no problem. I may not eat them, that doesn’t matter.

T7: There is no meaning in restricting the child, the child can eat anything. No problem.

Interviewer: So, you make things for yourself but you buy pork and feed the child with it with no problem?

T7: Of course. He can choose whatever, [choose] his own religion, whatever he is going to eat or not, when he grows up. Important thing is, the duty is to raise a good human-being.

That said, the following response from a carer with an unmatched placement, illustrates how issues about religious practice can be something of a balancing act. Responding to the question, ‘do your religious beliefs influence how you provide care?’, she said:

NH6: Yeah. Possibly we wouldn't be fostering if we weren't Christian…We've been very open, right from the start, that we're Christian and we go to church and that's how we raise our kids. And any kid that comes into our family, we're happy to take any kid from any background at all, but that's what we do. So I guess it's just a process, then, that's up to the caseworkers to decide if they [place the child with us]. And then if they do that, I guess it's not really reasonable for us to change, or for them to expect us to change what we do.

Having said that though, we accept that the child has got their own story and their own way of doing things. And, we'll expose him to both, we're sort of raising him as Christian but we're going to teach him about Islam. We're not going to raise him in two different religions, because – a few people do it – but I don't think it works really well. But at the end of the day, just like our biological children, he'll decide for himself what he wants to believe. But I would also argue that every person, regardless of whether they say they have a faith system or not, have this particular set of values that they impart on their children. And their children might cling to those values when they've grown up or they might reject them and take on their own values.

This notion of preparing a child for adulthood – exposing them to religious beliefs in youth, facilitating informed choices later in life – was expressed by other carers. In the case above, however, it seems that there is a priority for the foster carer’s religious affiliation being made over that of the child in foster care. Perhaps this has been done with practical considerations in mind; caseworkers noted that religious adherence in non-matched placements is difficult for carers, and with caseworkers not working on weekends, they are unable to fill this potential gap in foster children’s spiritual lives.

f) Social customs
Beyond cultural activities, texts, food and grooming, discussion of several social customs – such as health practices and sleeping arrangements – were cited in interviews with both caseworkers and carers. Vietnamese caseworkers identified several social customs that were potentially problematic but readily resolvable through existing placements that culturally matched the caseworker and the carer. These included health practices like coining, where the
resulting bruises can be mistaken as harmful and reported under ‘risk of significant harm’ guidelines, despite their innocuous nature. Similarly, co-sleeping arrangements – like adults and children sharing rooms or beds – were social customs considered appropriate to Vietnamese families, but can create concerns in relation to how foster care agencies apply out-of-home care service guidelines. One caseworker suggested that, when the caseworker and carer were culturally matched, “it’s something easy for us to understand…but as a carer, without being able to communicate that [as in an unmatched placement], it could be quite scary” (CW13). This example serves to illustrate a practice which may be considered the ‘custom’ of a particular birth family, that could be challenged within the OOHC service system.

Other social customs mentioned included: Vietnamese carers teaching foster children about how to greet visitors to their homes; caseworkers commenting on the expectations for receiving hospitality from Arabic and Turkish carers during home visits; and caseworkers noting the strong emphasis that Vietnamese carers can place on educational attainment, and that this often needs to be renegotiated in favour of respecting children’s autonomy and overall placement stability considerations.

CW14: So, I think – even though it's good for the child, for the carer to have a strong emphasis on education – sometimes as a caseworker you just need to step in and try to find that balance, in order to maintain that stability of the placement, the relationship between the child and the carer. Because sometimes you have to step in and then you have to explain to them that … 'you need to take a step back and allow the child to have his or her say in how he wants to engage with education'.

Social networks
The importance of maintaining the social networks of the foster child – connecting them with their birth parents, their siblings, other family members, their peers and ethnic community – was a recurring theme. Similarly, having foster carers that are connected to other foster carers and connected to the ethnic community of their foster child (whether matched or unmatched) was essential to establishing ongoing cultural maintenance practices.

NH4: I'm fortunate because, with the African children, I've been attending an African church for eight years. So most of my friends are African, and I'm very used to their ways. I'm used to their culture, I'm used to their food. A lot of my friends have African kids, of course, and my own children were brought up that way. So there was a time when they hardly had any [non-African] Australian friends at all, I was actually beginning to worry about that.

In the above example, the carer’s social connections to African background communities preceded their participation in SSI MFC. In other cases, carers were assisted in establishing social connections with other carers by SSI caseworkers through organised events like monthly SSI MFC training and support meetings and more occasional picnics and family days. In
addition, several carers had noted the role that their own extended families had played in the placement. This would often be in the form of informal ‘babysitting’, knowledge (in the case of carers who had close family members who were themselves foster carers) and the time that foster children would spend “visiting different members of the family who they had a lot of contact with, [like] grandparents, cousins, aunties and uncles” (A13). One carer also noted that her biological daughter was her respite carer, while another carer noted that their extended family had joined them on a holiday to the foster child’s birth country. These responses indicate that extended families of the carers frequently made very valuable contributions.

The term ‘social network’ can be used in a traditional, sociological sense – social connections that exist both within and external to family units and institutions like schools, religious communities and carer support groups – and in the contemporary, technological sense. Social media was raised. The following quote from a caseworker in the Newcastle-Hunter region poignantly links both notions of the ‘social network’:

CW4: I haven’t met many teenagers in care yet, who have not expressed some – even if they don’t want to see them – haven’t expressed a desire to know that their [birth] parents think about them or care for them. And if carers are allowed to get away with severing those ties, that child can always wonder…

I will just never forget, I met with a sixteen-year-old boy once. He told me he used to just stalk his Dad’s Facebook account every day, just for the purpose of seeing if he ever wrote about him. He didn’t want to see him and he said he hated him, but that still emotional desire to feel like that person cared for him caused huge emotional stress.

One carer noted how she had established contact with her foster child’s siblings via Facebook (since the child preferred contact with siblings rather than parents). One caseworker also noted how, in the absence of adequate information regarding a child’s background, establishing “spider webs” (CW1) that connected the child to family members was only possible by trawling though contacts and photos on social media.

2) Foster carer attributes that support cultural maintenance

Carers and caseworkers were asked questions including ‘what qualities or skills do you think foster carers need to have?’ and ‘what factors contribute to a successful placement?’ Their responses generally described attributes that supported and contributed to the cultural maintenance of cultural, religious and linguistic identity of foster children in SSI MFC. Sometimes, as is the case with carer commitments in general or in relation to complex care, these attributes have broader applications than cultural maintenance. Others, like respecting
children’s autonomy in determining their identity, or providing cultural maintenance from birth, speak directly to the challenges of providing cultural connection in the OOHC environment.

a) Carer motivation and commitment

Carers believed that having the motivation to care “for the sake of caring” was important, as opposed to monetary rewards like the foster care allowance or to be perceived as magnanimous and charitable in one’s own community. Personal fulfilment, religious inspiration and civic duty were all reported as positive factors influencing a carer’s motivation to become a foster carer. Muslim carers noted that “our prophet Muhammad had a foster child himself” (A13) and that “it is said in our Koran many times that when you take care of an orphan child, your deeds are unbelievable” (A16). Vietnamese carers’ responses about motivation for providing care were limited to more general comments about “opening your heart”, while detail regarding the influence of, say, Buddhist notions of karma and reciprocity (which came through strongly in an earlier pilot of this study in 2014), was negligible. As the carer focus group was conducted in Vietnamese, probing participants for further detail was not possible.

One Christian carer noted that “I believe that God placed this desire in my heart to love these children” (NH1). However, another Christian carer believed that “I don't think your religious beliefs have anything to do with foster care” (NH5), suggesting that religious motivation in faith-adhering carers is not universal. The motivation and commitment to caring was of course ongoing rather than just an initial prerequisite, as one carer described:

NH1: I think you have to have a desire to not give up, and keep going. Because I know a lot of people that I've spoken [to] that have given up children. And it's become too hard and they've decided to relinquish the child or whatever. We've never ever thought that, and we've never - it's never entered my mind. So I suppose, just a determination that I look at them as my children, and you don't give your children away, if I can say. So, yeah I suppose it's just that concept in your mind of what your goal is when you decide to take on these children. Ours was for life, through better, for good, bad, ugly, whatever. We made a conscious decision that we were going to stick to this and see it through to the end.

Carers’ capacity to provide care was also very important; both participant groups suggested having sufficient time to meet legislated requirements – predominantly contact with birth parents, mandated medical check-ups and education plan meetings with school staff – was fundamental. One carer also mentioned that self-directed learning and being educated in how to provide effective care was important in this commitment to foster caring: “I think it's good to be educated and [complete] a course about healthy and successful foster care” (Carer A12).
b) Commitment to cultural maintenance in complex care

Caseworkers identified the importance of foster carer commitment to complex care: being able to work with foster children who have physical and mental disabilities, suffer from trauma or have health and behavioural considerations that are more complex than routine parenting issues; and cultural maintenance with those children.

CW 8: “I would say [to some carers], it's no longer about you, it's about the foster child [and] what they need. In terms of health, education, emotional... And they're not like other children – they're children in foster care. They've had removal – they remember, [whether] they were babies, whatever – those children will come with trauma whether you like it or not. No matter when they were removed…

CW 10: …And I've come across that, [some carers] have zero understanding of what trauma is. And, you know, 'he was a two-year-old, what is he going to remember?' [laughs] It's a very common answer that we get.

CW 8: Make the child forget about his history…”

Most carer discussion of complex care needs was from a broader perspective, with culture not being mentioned at length. When asked about whether her foster children would be going to Arabic language school, one carer replied that her child had autism and didn’t speak. Ultimately, this carer felt that since all her children were still young, decisions about how to assist in cultural continuity would be delayed in any case. Another carer noted how her foster child had arrived in care with developmental delays; she believed that were it not for her own flexible schedule and a level of dedication from herself, her partner and the child himself, meeting the child’s needs would have been difficult.

A13: Later on down the track I was offered another couple of children…and they could not read or write at all and I said, ‘I'm sorry, I just don't have the time because I already have three foster children at home and I wouldn't be able to sit with these children and give them their due right, in order to sit there and teach them’

c) Previous parenting and foster care experience

Several carers noted that their experiences as parents to their own biological children had effectively prepared them to be foster carers. For example:

A14: I've brought up two children they are grown up now – one is in year 12 and the other one in year 10 – so as far as I'm concerned I feel like I have good experience to bring up some other children and I don't think they are very difficult.

Other carers noted the extensive OOHC care experience that they have, such as taking on a multitude of short-term and respite placements. In addition to this, some carers noted that their parents had also cared for foster children, which was both a source of inspiration and knowledge in providing foster care themselves.
Respecting children’s autonomy when developing cultural identity

Respecting children’s rights and their autonomy, in developing their cultural identity and connections, was something raised by both caseworkers and carers. Often, foster children’s reluctance to maintain aspects of their cultural identity was based on negative associations, due to trauma or neglect by their birth families. Alternately, these acts of autonomy were more attributable to simple variability in children’s personalities and the impetuousness or rebelliousness of youth. For example:

NH2: We have tried a few African meals for her… some she likes, some she doesn't like – like most kids. They eat some things more than others [laughs]

NH4: I had all these great visions when they came, because I've got a big world map and I said, 'ok, show me where your country is’… But he doesn't seem to be that interested in sitting down and talking about it. And I say, 'do you want to know about it?' – ‘Nah, not really’…

Caseworkers also noted the difficulty in adhering to planned cultural maintenance activities when they came against the wishes of the children in care. This suggests a persistent challenge for carers and caseworkers alike in balancing the autonomy of children – who were still minors, and would possibly be afforded less autonomy in many biological families – against the activities set out in their cultural care plan. The following passage is from the Turkish & Arabic caseworker’s focus group:

CW5: Sometimes children – if they are teenagers – sometimes they don't want to belong to that culture.

CW10: Not at all [laughs]

CW5: …And then they deny [their culture]. So, we cannot force them to do things.

Interviewer: What do you do in that situation? Do you try and… encourage them to engage more with the culture?

CW5: We can't force them. Maybe we can just set options and then see. Because we cannot just impose things - it doesn't work.

CW6: Yeah

CW10: And, like, a fourteen year old -

CW5: It will backfire!

CW10: It's just - you can have a conversation, you can [give] your opinion, ongoing... But if the child says no, it's no. We go with what [the] child says….We've had children who refuse to follow any religion, even though their carers and their birth parents follow certain religions and, ok, they don't want it – doesn't matter [laughs].
CW6: It's hard enough to have a relationship with some of the children as it is, because they've got so much trust issues. So if you try to force something upon them, you're going to be a person that they hate. So, you don't want that either.

CW9: …I have a sixteen-year-old who follows the culture of the carer. But he's not of the same culture! But he identifies as being of the same culture because he's been there for ever, since he could remember. So even though he knows [he’s from a different culture], it's just that it's his wish – he speaks their language, amazingly... So, our cultural care plan for him, is the culture he identifies with. And obviously the statement is that, 'he belongs to this culture, but this [other culture] is what he identifies with'.

Caseworkers and carers were in a position where encouraging a foster child to participate in cultural activities needed to be balanced against the risk of reduced rapport between the child and carer, or withdrawal of the foster child from the placement. In some cases, it was the culture that the child identified with that became most important. Other caseworkers also mentioned that foster children can identify more with the foster carer’s culture than their own, largely in an act of ‘belonging’ and being included in family activities.

e) Supporting cultural maintenance from birth

Caring for young foster children (less than 5 years old), and whether they may require less in the way of cultural maintenance, was a frequent topic amongst carers, particularly those with unmatched placements. Some carers suggested that cultural maintenance was less crucial at that early stage, because the children were too young to understand cultural difference. Caseworkers noted that some carers have requested younger children during their intake assessments, believing that babies and children below the age of five are less likely to have behavioural difficulties or attachment and adjustment issues. One caseworker supported this idea, saying that “the only placements that I’ve ever seen that I could say were really stable are generally the ones where a child has been placed as a baby” (CW4).

The following comment is from a carer with unmatched foster children ranging from infants to early primary school age:

NH3: We don't need to be going into cultural foods and cultural religions or that sort of thing at the moment, so it's the same as raising our own [children] virtually.

This carer went on to add that they do include cultural events (local African festivals) and texts (books and music) as part of the children’s lives, so long as these cultural maintenance activities were “age appropriate, of course”. Another carer, an Anglo-Australian carer with three African children in her care, suggested a similar notion of age-dependent cultural maintenance in relation to one of her foster children:
NH2: …at the moment she's four, so we don't think it's that complicated. We've introduced her to African music, we take her to African shows, she has African clothes. And at the age of four, that's appropriate at the moment. As time goes on, we might have to look at different things.

The implication of these views by some carers is that these carers seem to be withholding or delaying some elements of maintaining cultural identity, until they believe that the foster children are old enough to be ready. This is a contested area as these responses could be interpreted by some foster care practitioners as being a valid age-appropriate strategy. However, cultural identity and connection is formed from birth, and so it is important that age-appropriate maintenance strategies are in place from a very young age.

3) Service systems and procedures

Participants identified several service system and procedure issues with implications for the provision of foster care for children from CALD family backgrounds in NSW. These covered three broad aspects: access to children’s cultural background information, the consideration of culture in foster care placement decisions, and maintaining cultural identity with children of mixed or hyphenated identity.

a) Inconsistent information about children’s cultural backgrounds

Caseworkers (and the occasional carer) identified shortcomings in the accuracy and quality of information provided to them by the child protection system, about the cultural/ethnic, linguistic and religious heritage of foster children referred to SSI for placement in care. This had considerable implications for: SSI’s ability to culturally match the foster child with carers; caseworkers’ ability to support carers in providing appropriate cultural maintenance; and keeping foster children in contact with their birth families. One caseworker noted that the cultural matching process had been compromised through incorrect information:

CW 9: So, we've had cases where – in terms of culture, or religion – we've been given the wrong information to begin with. As in, we place a child with someone – like, we match them – but then it turns out this child is not of the same background, or the same religion. So then the [next] action becomes a bit more complicated.

The following transcript from Newcastle-Hunter carers also describes how birth families’ perceptions of foster care can influence the amount of information available to caseworkers regarding children’s identity.

NH CW 4: …some of it’s about the [birth] family themselves, not really understanding the significance or importance of sharing information about their children. So that’s [an area that] the staff and the carers are recognizing but yet the father, in that case, isn’t coming to the table, and doesn’t seem to understand.
**NH CW 1:** And [he] doesn’t want his family or parents to know that [child] is his, because [the child being in foster care] brings shame amongst the family. And it’s very hard for us because we don’t know who they are!

**b) The consideration of culture in placement decisions**

Participants discussed the circumstances in which children were placed in care, often involving decision-making procedures in which neither the carers nor the caseworkers (as in the cases of ‘pre-matched’ placements being transferred from government agencies) have had input. This often involved a ‘backgrounding’ or de-prioritisation of cultural maintenance due to pressing safety and stability issues. Sometimes the ability of a potential carer to build rapport was considered and weighed alongside the benefits of cultural matching with another potential carer. In the following example, Newcastle-Hunter caseworkers discussed assigning a caseworker or BSW to a particular case:

**CW4:** It’s not good enough us just finding someone from the same culture – that person has got to be really interested in engaging the children and building a relationship. Because at the end of the day, it’s more about that relationship that’s built and a child’s not going to be engaged in any part of the process if they don’t feel a real connection.

Other caseworkers described their assessment processes, whereby safety and the capacity of the carer to provide care (in terms of time management, physical wellbeing and other dimensions) are given at least equal consideration to cultural matching. Furthermore, several cases were mentioned where the coexistence of multiple variables – such as a desire to maintain a sibling group, to allow foster children to remain at the same school or to ensure that carers are able to access local service providers – needs to be considered in placement decisions. The best interests of the child, including likely stability of the placement and the safety of the child, are given priority, as well as options for cultural matching.

Another issue identified was that carers, in both matched and unmatched placements, often prioritised the well-being and happiness of their foster children, before cultural maintenance – at least while the child is adjusting to being in care. Often this prioritisation comes with a degree of immediacy. The following carer was very experienced in providing foster care, and noted how a range of factors need to be considered by foster carers, from day one:

**NH6:** …there's so many facets to a foster child. They come in the door and you've got to work out what the priority is. And the cultural considerations are always in the background. But their biggest issue might be...I don't know, they've got head lice and that's the focus for the first day [laughs]. Or they're terrified and hiding under the bed, and won't come out. So sometimes the cultural stuff gets pushed aside for a little bit.
c) Maintaining mixed or hyphenated cultural identity

The issue of hybrid, mixed or hyphenated cultural identity (Noble & Tabar 2002; Ali & Sonn 2010) is also noted by foster carers. Several carers, who were Anglo-Australians caring for African-background children, noted that while the children clearly have cultural ties to the same nations their birth parents were born in, they also have connections to Australia. Often this is because they were born here, or because they have spent large amounts of time living in Australia.

**NH4:** It's funny we should say that they're from a different background, but these kids have lived in Australia for nine years, so some of them don't really know anything different. We tend to look at a child and go, 'oh, this kid's from Africa', but actually, they've grown up in Australia. So they do have memories – the older ones – from living [overseas when they were] three or four or something. But I suppose they're quite really well adjusted to the Australian culture, because for some of them, this is all they know... I think it's important to keep their culture alive, they should have a real opportunity to learn about their [birth] country and their language – if they already speak it, it's important to keep that alive. But at the same time they are comfortable in this lifestyle here in Australia because this is all they know.

The child’s cultural identity is usually connected to their birth parents’ heritage. The following carer, an Arabic speaker with a range of matched and unmatched placements in her care, said that:

**Carer 13:** But in terms of me and my husband, [we] were both born in Australia, so for us, we identify as Australians and so I guess the kids…they know they're pretty much the same as us. They know that they have a Lebanese heritage, I guess they know a little bit about it.

Caseworkers often mentioned the complexity in maintaining the culture of a child, when – in some cases – both birth parents have hybrid identities themselves. In one example, it was reported that the child’s parents were Middle-Eastern/European and Pacific/South Asian heritage, and that the child was placed with South Asian carers. However, caseworkers thought that such a case would not actually be particularly difficult, provided adequate communication between caseworkers and birth parents and a thorough but realistic cultural care plan was implemented. The following passage is from the Turkish-Arabic caseworkers’ focus group:

**CW7:** Yeah, but actually, you know what, I noticed with a lot of the children, [when] they came to this program, I thought, 'Oh, yep, it has to be from the same culture, same religion, same language and everything'. But I did notice…a lot of the children that we have, I noticed, are half-half. Like, their mum is from two different backgrounds, and the father is two different backgrounds and one religion, and the mother is a different religion. So even with the children, it's like, ‘what background do you come from?’ They’d have to say four different backgrounds. And then they're with a carer who's from a completely different background. And I get confused, so I can imagine these kids [laughs] getting confused. And I think that's, yeah, that would be difficult. Especially if it's long-term.
Interviewer: So …on the caseworker end, is that a lot more complicated when you're not matching within multiple multicultural backgrounds rather than just an Anglo and multicultural background?

CW10: From a cultural point of view, we don't have much issues to be honest.

CW6 & CW9: Nah.

CW10: If, as I said, caseworkers are more than capable of researching and supporting the carer and the child… I don't think we face significant challenges, no.

CW9: It goes back to willingness.

CW10: Absolutely.

CW9: If we - if the child is safe, if the carer is willing to provide...to meet the needs of the child, then we don't have many issues that we can't fix. We can fix the little things, it just goes back to the core, the base of the placement of the child.

This example illustrates the practical challenges encountered in achieving cultural matching when the child’s birth family itself represents multiple ethnicities, religion and linguistic heritages. The mix of multiple heritages also poses challenges in terms of maintaining and supporting cultural connections during the placement, and requires proper consideration in cultural care planning.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how cultural identity was maintained and supported among children from CALD backgrounds in foster care, in culturally matched and unmatched placements. Maintaining and supporting the cultural identity of children and young people is a key requirement for agencies who provide OOHC in NSW. In this concluding section, we discuss key practice and service system issues emerging from the research findings presented in this report.

1) Desirability and complexity of cultural matching

The findings suggest that caseworkers believe that cultural matching of the foster child and carer is the ‘ideal’ placement option, for the long-term success of a placement. This example from Vietnamese caseworkers typifies a child’s sense of belonging with culturally matched carers. This was the view of most caseworkers and carers, treating cultural matching as inherently desirable and valuable for both foster children and their birth parents:
**CW13:** [Cultural matching] is probably easier. If it's carer and the child matched, I think it's good in the sense that the child is supported, and they feel that they belong. They're still attending the cultural events and being exposed to the same foods, so they're not in a totally different environment once they were removed. And matched with a case worker makes it easier because you understand the culture and when someone explains something in a certain way...

**CW 15:** And it's a bit of relief too [for] the parents, the understanding that their kids will be brought up on the same culture, with the same beliefs, and religion, language…

These examples highlight a sense of ‘natural’ belonging with a matched carer placement. A cultural match was in many ways an ‘ideal’ that could be challenging to always achieve. SSI records a placement as culturally matched if foster carers and foster children share two of the three indicators of cultural identity/ethnicity, language and religion. This view of a ‘perfect match’ was elaborated on by a caseworker in the Turkish-Arabic caseworkers focus group, discussing one particular case:

**CW 5:** [It involves] every aspect. Language, culture, religion, the carer, the caseworker – it's a full match. And it's a successful placement.

In many cases, however, the matching process is ‘messy’. Caseworker participants in this study have identified how finding willing and capable foster carers from the same ethnicity, religious background or language group remains a challenge. Linking foster children and foster carers with caseworkers from similar cultural backgrounds is an additional dimension to this matching process. Employing BSWs in the Newcastle-Hunter SSI MFC has enabled another dimension of cultural matching to occur, where there are multiple African ethnicities among the children in foster care, and there is no foster carer available from that particular African community.

The very definition of ‘cultural matching’ retains a measure of complexity, ambiguity and variability amongst the different stakeholder groups engaged with SSI MFC. For instance, this project used ‘Arabic-speaking carers’ as a cohort label, but even this simple descriptor is problematic. ‘Arabic’ is the native language of about 420 million people, and this umbrella term obscures the multitude of dialects that are spoken across a very wide geographic area, and two Arabic speakers are not guaranteed to be a linguistic match for their dialects. Caseworkers have noticed these distinctions in carers themselves: it was reported that speakers of Egyptian Arabic (“‘proper Arabic’ – CW10) possess a sense of elitism, while the caseworkers themselves have struggled to communicate with speakers of such ‘official’ dialects despite being ‘matched’ at the broader language level.
In addition to these linguistic considerations, faith and ethnicity are dimensions of culture that influence the notion of a ‘match’. For example, one Arabic-speaking carer in a matched placement (as defined in SSI casework documentation) was asked if her children were from the same culture; she replied, ‘No, because they are from Afghanistan and I am from Egypt’ (A14). Although adhering to the same faith as the child, the carer cited nationality to suggest they were unmatched with the foster child. Religion, meanwhile, highlights further complexity in cultural matching: the major religions all contain a number of sects and denominations (as do the minor religions and secular belief systems), and using terms like ‘Christian’ or ‘Islam’ for administrative convenience can only tell part of the story. Although this was mentioned only briefly by caseworkers, suggesting a minimal impact on most placements.

Finally, caseworkers in one focus group identified a placement in which the foster child was from a different caste to the foster carers. When these understandings of cultural difference were brought to the attention of SSI MFC, the child was ultimately transferred to an unmatched placement for the sake of the child’s long term wellbeing and continuity of care. This suggests that even if a ‘perfect match’ of the three components of cultural background, language and religion can be identified, other characteristics like class may complicate the picture, and ultimately complex cultural differences are a factor in many SSI MFC placements.

2) Practicality of unmatched placements

While there may have been some degree of acquiescence bias in participants – or, unwillingness to report socially undesirable opinions – carer perceptions about unmatched placements did not suggest that cultural difference per se was a difficulty. Carers in matched placements mentioned that they would happily accept children from ethnic and faith backgrounds different to their own, were it not for practical considerations. The challenges in providing religious continuity when attempting to balance attendance at two different religious institutions was noted by carers, as was the perceived desirability of linguistic matching noted elsewhere in this report. In addition to this, one carer described practical concerns about their own social network, and its limitations for cultural maintenance if they were to have unmatched foster children:

A12: It's not easy if [foster children] are from different cultures. Because, maybe, you don't have a friend from the same culture. You can't find always a friend from the same culture or same religion… [If the child] is Christian, you can find [people] easy. But if he's Buddhist, for
example, from where can I get a friend to make him communicate? I can't, it will be a bit hard. Or if he's Aboriginal; I don't have Aboriginal friends, for example. It will be a bit hard. Maybe I will ask the caseworker to help me with, maybe I can't... But I don't know how to help, by myself, in such a situation.

What this suggests is that foster carers from CALD backgrounds are open to the prospects of unmatched placements, albeit with a higher degree of formal support (language skills education for instance) and informal supports such as networking opportunities.

3) Challenges of matched placements

Whilst participants readily described the benefits of cultural matching, acknowledgement that culturally-matched placements presented unique challenges was comparatively limited, and mostly confined to a handful of caseworkers. The fact that both caseworkers and carers would often deflect or ‘play down’ the role of culture in matched placements was telling. For both sets of participants, there was a subtle tendency toward a notion of a ‘naturalising culture’ in matched placements: so long as ethnicities were ‘matched’, culture can become ‘invisible’ or taken as given. The key challenge in these cases was that carers perceived their role in cultural maintenance to be minimal, because “it’s more about what’s natural rather than forcing it upon [the children]” (V14). Although the study did not seek to include kinship placements, where the child is placed with a close relative – “meant to be the most culturally matched” placements (CW14) – this point was also made in relation to people caring for children in kinship care.

That said, caseworkers suggested that the challenges inherent in matched and unmatched placements were often very similar. One Turkish caseworker mentioned that the challenges of unmatched placements would not be “much different than the challenges we are facing when there is a matched placement, [if] the carer is not willing to do anything” (CW10). Another Sydney-based caseworker clarified that, “it's not just, 'oh yeah, they're from the same culture, same religion, we'll put them there.' But, was that person capable – physically and mentally - to take care of that child, who's at that age?”

It was also mentioned that cultural matching could also create some challenges, if there is close proximity of the foster family and the child’s birth parents. Overall, the consensus that seemed to emerge from the interviews was that while culturally-matched placements were considered easier, the ability to provide cultural connection in unmatched placements was contingent upon the carer’s willingness and commitment. Commitment also has substantial influence on the outcomes of matched placements. In addition, SSI’s ability to provide
culturally matched bi-lingual workers or caseworkers also contributed to the effectiveness of cultural maintenance and support provided for the child.

4) The role of birth parents in cultural connections

The relationship between birth parents and, either foster children or foster carers was not the focus of this study; nor were the relationships of the caseworkers and the Bilingual Support Workers with birth families. However, both these themes emerged from the research findings, and it is pertinent here to discuss their relevance to the cultural maintenance of children in foster care.

Caseworkers often mentioned that maintaining contact within birth parents was fundamental to the ongoing cultural connection of children in care. Some carers had also noted that birth parents had provided culturally-relevant material – like films and music – to their children’s foster carers. The potential for cultural support and maintenance that contact with birth family members can provide was considered an essential part of the cultural care plan. Often, maintaining contact was hampered when carers either had negative experiences with or had been warned against seeking connections with the children’s local ethnic community. Nonetheless, facilitating time for foster children to spend with their birth parents, to speak to them in their native languages, and participate with them in culturally-relevant activities – were all considered important facets of maintaining cultural identity and the children’s social ties.

5) Cultural maintenance with very young children in foster care

As mentioned above, many carers express a preference to be assigned to foster children when the children are quite young – either as babies or, in some cases, a maximum of two or five years of age. Their perception is that these children will have fewer issues in adjusting to life in foster care, and this notion is supported to a degree by caseworkers. In any case, when children were placed in care from a young age, the question of cultural maintenance persisted. As per carer comments (NH6), there was a belief among some carers that because these children were quite young, cultural maintenance should be limited to tangible, day-to-day interventions – like providing culturally-appropriate food, music or clothes – and questions surrounding issues such as culturally-relevant belief systems be postponed to when the child was older.

Some carers thus seem to be making a distinction between the ‘easier’ elements of cultural care, and those like introducing faith and beliefs, that are perceived to have a greater
level of difficulty or complexity. This raises the question of what elements of cultural maintenance are appropriate for young children in foster care, and at what age? Are there any facets of cultural continuity that are, in fact, best left until children have reached a certain age? Whilst the following point is anecdotal, in the majority of faith-adhering Australian families – in which birth parents live with and look after birth children as well as foster children – it would be reasonable to assume foster children would be exposed to the foster family’s faith concepts well before they reach school age. There appears to exist, then, some unresolved tension in foster care regarding maintaining children’s “cultural religions” (Carer 3), where foster parents are either unwilling or apprehensive about discussing more inscrutable or confronting spiritual questions. For foster carers, exposing foster children to the beliefs of their birth parents might require active planning and consideration, given the practical considerations of attending religious services. These dimensions have potential to affect children’s cultural development.

**Conclusion**

This study set out to explore how cultural identity is maintained in foster care and the strengths and challenges of cultural matching in long-term placements. It found that the caseworkers and foster carers with SSI MFC maintain and develop the cultural identity of culturally diverse children in care, through a range of practices, service systems and procedures and building on carer skills and attributes. Key strategies include: placements where the child is culturally matched with the foster carer; unmatched placements where the child is culturally matched with a caseworker or BSW; and Cultural Care Plans implemented for all culturally diverse children in care.

These practices and systems can be replicated by foster care agencies in NSW and other jurisdictions. The report findings provide an opportunity to identify some indicators that could be used to conceptualise a framework for intercultural engagement in foster care. The development of such a framework would require additional research as well as adequate ‘testing’ to assess its capacity for application by SSI and/or other foster care agencies, in placing and supporting children from CALD family backgrounds in long-term foster care.
References


Appendices

1. List of interview questions: carers’ focus group version

*Follow-up, ‘probing’ questions are in italics*

1. As a starting point, would you be able to tell me a bit about your family?
   
   a. How many children do you have?
   b. Are they all foster children?
   c. Can I ask how old they all are?
   d. What cultural background are they?

2. I realise this first question might be a bit personal, so please know that you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but can I ask why you decided to become a foster carer?

3. What’s strategies do you have to help the foster child or children adjust successfully to living with your family?
   
   a. *What things have helped you with your work as a foster carer?*

4. To be a successful foster carer, what qualities and skills must you have?
   
   a. *Are there any personal values that you think foster carers need to have?*

5. Thinking about your successful experiences of being a foster carer, can you identify the factors that make foster care a success?
   
   a. *Is it because you can speak the same language as the child/children?*
   b. *Is it because the child/children are of a certain age? (eg. Younger children might find it easier to adapt)*
   c. *Is it because of the love and care they receive?*

6. **[DIFFERENT cultural background]:** What strategies do you have to help the children adjust successfully to living with your family, given that there might be a difference in ethnicity, language or religion?
   
   a. *What do you do to help the child maintain continuity with their cultural background?*
   b. *What do you think matters most when caring for foster children from different cultural backgrounds?*

6. **[SAME cultural background]:** Even though you have the same cultural background, are there any special things you need to do to help them maintain their cultural identity?

7. Would you ever consider raising a foster child from a different background?
   
   a. Under what circumstances would you consider being the foster carer for a child from a different religious and/or cultural background to yours?
8. From your experience, does it matter that you share or don’t share the child’s cultural background and traditions in becoming a foster carer?

   a. Do you think it’s important that a foster carer has the same cultural background as the children in their care?

9. To what extent do your religious beliefs influence your approach to foster care?

   a. Is it important to have the same religious beliefs as the child in being a foster carer?
   b. [Different religious beliefs to their foster children] How do you work around the fact that you have different religious beliefs to your foster children? Do you have to do anything different?

If time:

10. [For everybody] What about their language? Do you have to do anything in particular to help them with their language skills?

    a. Do your foster children go to language school?
    b. Do you speak their language at home?
    c. Do you teach them their/your language at home?

11. Do you think there are differences between raising your birth children and foster children?

12. What do you usually do to develop trust with a foster child?

13. If you had one piece of information or advice for other foster carers, what would it be? Perhaps we could go around the group individually, so that everyone has a chance to say something.