

Cultural mentoring in out-of-home care: Enhancing knowledge, connections, and outcomes for children and adult stakeholders

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Cultural mentoring
Out-of-home care
Children
Cultural diversity
Cultural identity
Cultural reflexivity

ABSTRACT

Cultural mentoring has been recognised in research as a valuable mechanism for enhancing knowledge, strengthening connections, and improving support for children at risk of cultural disconnection. However, there has been limited focus on applying its usefulness in supporting positive outcomes for children from culturally diverse backgrounds living in out-of-home care. Reporting on findings from qualitative interviews and focus groups, this paper examined the perspectives of key stakeholders: children from culturally diverse backgrounds and the adults who care for them, such as birth parents, carers and caseworkers. A grounded theory approach supported the identification of divergent yet interconnected pathways to cultural mentoring for child and adult stakeholders. Our findings supported the development of a Culturally Meaningful Mentoring (C2M) model. The model shows each cultural mentoring pathway as unique in its context, approach, needs, and outcomes. While the adult stakeholder pathway leveraged cultural mentoring to develop skills for engaging meaningfully across diverse social and cultural contexts, the child stakeholder pathway potentially led to the shaping of personal cultural identities. This paper discusses the potential of the C2M model to redefine how cultural mentoring is utilised for child and adult stakeholders involved in the out-of-home care system.

1. Introduction

Children who have been removed from their birth families and statutorily moved into the out-of-home care (OOHC) system often experience disconnection from their birth families, communities and cultures. This can be especially disruptive for children with a cultural background different from the mainstream and from the culture of the carer with whom they live. Children from culturally diverse backgrounds are either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas, speak a language other than English at home, and may observe different religions or cultural practices from those in their host country (Ezekwem-Obi et al., 2025). There is an inconsistency in the data regarding the identification and representation of these groups in the OOHC system (Abdul Rahim et al., 2024). However, a recent New South Wales (NSW) Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) found that 14.8% of the children in the OOHC sample were culturally diverse (Asif

et al., 2024). Research suggests that factors such as cultural differences, language barriers, differences in parenting styles, migration history and settlement experiences continue to increase their involvement in OOHC (Sawrikar, 2016c). Studies show that living in OOHC can inadvertently expose them to a loss of, or a fractured sense of identity and belonging, and can have a detrimental impact on their psycho-social wellbeing (Degener et al., 2023; McMahon et al., 2021).

Beyond the recommendations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), Nation-States signatories to the provision continue to make specific provisions to safeguard children's rights and best interests to be supported in maintaining cultural connections and identity, even while in OOHC (Department of Social Services (DSS), 2021). Research indicates that those expected to support this provision for children in care, including their birth parents, carers and caseworkers, often encounter tensions and challenges when cultural differences, limited cultural knowledge, or conflicting

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2026.109240>

Received 25 December 2025; Received in revised form 16 May 2026; Accepted 13 August 2026

Available online 16 August 2026

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acculturation orientations exist between them and the children they support (Rip et al., 2020a, 2020b). Increasingly, the literature is exploring the efficacy of mechanisms such as cultural mentoring in enhancing cultural knowledge and outcomes for children (Sánchez et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2024). However, very few studies and practice initiatives have addressed how mentoring can be leveraged specifically for children from culturally diverse backgrounds and those involved in their care. While this study includes both children and young people, the term “children” is used primarily in this paper to describe the group for consistency.

1.1. Understanding mentoring in the context of OOHc

Mentoring is a relationship-based approach recognised to support individual development across diverse social, cultural and psychological contexts. It is increasingly recommended for those at risk or experiencing challenges across service settings, including education, youth justice, and OOHc (Roche et al., 2023; Taussig & Weiler, 2017). Mentoring is broadly categorised as formal or informal. Formal mentoring involves program-based relationships with structured strategies to address specific needs, while informal mentoring develops organically through naturally formed relationships (DuBois & Karcher, 2014; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2019). Although its purposes and forms vary, mentoring generally considers children as the primary beneficiaries (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). This is because the relationship often involves a more experienced adult (mentor) and a younger person (mentee).

For children in or transitioning out of care, maintaining an ongoing relationship with a mentor has been associated with positive outcomes. These include improved academic performance and engagement with community opportunities, stronger family relationships and enhanced skills or knowledge to support their social integration, development and behaviour (Hurd & Sánchez, 2012; Lohmeyer et al., 2024). Taussig and Weiler's (2017) review on youth mentoring in foster care found that young people received mentoring from their teacher, therapist, caseworker, close friend, or a relative, whom they sometimes described as a “trusted advisor”. While mentoring may offer opportunities for advocacy, guidance, counselling and skill development, Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) argued that care must be taken to avoid approaching it as a one-way interaction or a one-off intervention to fix a problem.

1.2. What is cultural mentoring, and how is it relevant for children from culturally diverse backgrounds in OOHc?

The growing number of children from culturally diverse backgrounds entering the OOHc system and a persistent shortage of carers from culturally diverse backgrounds continue to drive children's overrepresentation in transcultural placements, where children are supported by carers who do not share their cultural backgrounds (Tonheim et al., 2025). Researchers have observed that these placements often pose challenges for both children and carers due to cultural differences and limited cultural understanding (Degener et al., 2023). In response, cultural competency, primarily operationalised through training, is often utilised as a strategy to foster cultural awareness and support the development of skills for respectful engagement across cultures (Kaur, 2012). Although cultural competency can support the development of intercultural relationships, its suitability for building context-specific knowledge and maintaining relationships across diverse cultures remains an ongoing debate (Adebayo & Sunderman, 2025). In this context, the concept of cultural mentoring, sometimes referred to as intercultural mentoring, emerged as a strategy that builds on relationships with individuals and, sometimes, cultural authorities from specific cultural backgrounds to facilitate learning or change (Liaw et al., 2016). Intercultural mentoring relationships typically involve a mentor and a mentee who come from different cultural backgrounds (Osula & Irvin, 2009). This differs from the concept of cultural brokerage, which

refers to processes that bridge, link, or mediate between individuals or groups from differing cultural backgrounds, with the aim of interpreting a cultural practice or reducing conflict (Liaw et al., 2016).

This study uses the term “cultural mentoring” as it encompasses mentoring relationships characterised not only by cultural diversity but also those among individuals from similar cultural backgrounds. Some researchers define cultural mentoring as a transformative mechanism for fostering social consciousness, challenging Western hierarchies of knowledge and creating a sense of collective awareness and accountability among those from different cultures (Burgess et al., 2022; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). It has also been associated with supporting identity development, particularly for mentees who share a similar cultural background with their mentors, allowing mentees to see reflections of themselves in their mentors (Batiste et al., 2022; Sánchez et al., 2019).

Shared cultural backgrounds or values between a mentor and a mentee can both reinforce cultural connections and serve as a domain for matching in cultural mentoring (Raposa et al., 2019). It is important to note that shared cultural values do not necessarily imply the absence of challenges, given the complexities of culture, especially due to changes in acculturative orientations (Berry, 2019). Australian research examining the experiences of immigrant families found that intergenerational gaps and differing migration histories can complicate family adjustment and frequently give rise to tensions between members of the same families and cultures (Gatwiri & Anderson, 2021; Renzaho et al., 2017), often resulting in acculturative stress (Berry, 2019). While Sánchez and colleagues (2013) argued that similar cultural or racial attributes in cultural mentoring could yield positive outcomes, they emphasised the importance of considering the cultural nuances and assumptions that might exist within the relationships.

1.3. Exploring a child's care and cultural community as a resource for cultural mentoring

Maintaining a healthy and strong cultural identity as an individual and as part of a cultural group or community can be a protective factor for children from culturally diverse backgrounds in OOHc (Eaude, 2020; Sawrikar, 2016b). As a heterogeneous population characterised by differing migration histories and cultural backgrounds, their diverse contexts raise concerns regarding who or what constitutes the children's “community” and how it can be leveraged for cultural mentoring. The concept of family and community for children from culturally diverse backgrounds in OOHc continues to shift to include both immediate and extended birth family members, their carers' family and unrelated kinship and community networks (Mugadza et al., 2021). However, potential placement instability can impact how they establish and sustain these connections (Edwards et al., 2023). In such cases, supporting children's cultural connections and identity can become an expectation placed on carers and caseworkers, who may or may not be able to bridge the relational and cultural gaps (Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), 2022). A recent study by Ezekwem-Obi and colleagues (2026) found that some carers and caseworkers in such circumstances questioned both the authenticity and appropriateness of their role in supporting children's cultural connections. While the role of birth families in bridging cultural knowledge gaps is increasingly recognised in the literature (Foote et al., 2025), a reinforced sense of powerlessness and exacerbated traumatic experiences associated with their OOHc involvement continue to compromise their wellbeing and subsequent engagement in care (Davies et al., 2023; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025). The barriers to engagement experienced by birth families may be reduced through collaboration with other members of their communities (Reupert et al., 2022; Sawrikar, 2016b), who can play an important role in supporting birth parents and children, as well as carers and caseworkers through cultural mentoring.

Children from culturally diverse backgrounds and their families embody a collectivist cultural orientation, which emphasises child-rearing as a shared communal responsibility (Mugadza et al., 2021;

Sawrikar, 2016d). This orientation emphasises a shared respect for children's individuality alongside their sense of community belonging and relationality with their families, cultures, and communities, which Evans and colleagues (Evans et al., 2019) argue are mutually constructed and equally valued. Many other non-Western collectivist cultural societies, including Australia's Indigenous communities, also prioritise socio-cultural connectedness, and the interdependence of family and community towards the wellbeing of children (Krakouer et al., 2022). Insights from Indigenous cultural mentoring recognise the importance of keeping children rooted in their cultures and communities through positive cultural markers, such as one's country or land, spirituality, kinship networks, and Indigenous art (Fauk et al., 2024; Thorner et al., 2018). These connections, sometimes involving an Indigenous elder, also aim to help children deepen their appreciation and pride in their cultural identity (Black et al., 2024).

This paper addresses a significant empirical gap in the literature by examining the perspectives of key stakeholder groups: (i) children from culturally diverse backgrounds in OOHC and (ii) the adults involved in their care, including their birth parents, carers and caseworkers. Insights from key stakeholder groups informed the development of a cultural mentoring model, which may be useful in informing practice.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and research question

This study is part of a larger qualitative project titled 'Upholding the Right to Cultural Connection for Children in Care', which examined the perspectives of various stakeholders within the OOHC system across Australia. These stakeholders include children ($n = 34$), carers ($n = 31$), birth parents ($n = 10$), as well as caseworkers and casework managers ($n = 76$) (see Table 1 for participant attributes). Drawing on interview data collected for the larger study, this paper reports a grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2024). This approach was valuable in exploring stakeholder views on whether and how cultural mentoring is utilised to enhance cultural knowledge, foster meaningful connections, and improve care practices. This study adopts a social constructivist paradigm, emphasising the importance of lived experiences and interactions with others in interpreting and co-constructing meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Through an iterative process of data collection and analysis, this study addressed the following research question: How do children living in OOHC and the adults who care for them (including birth parents, carers and caseworkers) understand the role of cultural mentoring; how it is undertaken, and what are the associated outcomes?

2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited for the larger study through eight non-government OOHC service organisations operating on the east coast of Australia. Most of the participants were from NSW (98%), while the others were from Victoria and Queensland (2%). Based on specific selection criteria, participants were identified and selected through purposive sampling. The criteria included children aged 5 to 18 from culturally diverse backgrounds, who were neither Anglo nor Indigenous to Australia. Cultural diversity among the participating children was defined using three key indicators: religion or faith, ethnicity, and linguistic composition (see Table 1). Although the sample encompasses a wide range of ethnicities, such as Lebanese, Sri Lankan, West African, Fijian, Afghan, Korean, and Vietnamese, it does not represent all cultural groups within the OOHC system. The service organisations identified potential participants and extended invitations to be part of the research. Those who were interested completed Expression of Interest form, and were then contacted directly by members of the research team. Participants included carers and caseworkers who had experience of caring for a child from a culturally diverse background. Birth parents

Table 1
Participants' attributes.

Care and cultural attributes for children, carers and birth parents				Descriptive data
Children's OOHC Type				
Foster care				N = 20 (59%)
Kinship care				N = 13 (38%)
Adoption (from foster care)				N = 1 (3%)
Children's age range				
Early childhood (5 yrs)				N = 3 (9%)
Middle childhood (6–12 yrs)				N = 19 (56%)
Adolescence (13–18 yrs)				N = 12 (35%)
Identified religion/faith				
	Muslim	Christian	Other (e.g. Buddhist and Hindu)	Non-religious or not specified
Children (N = 34)	N = 14 (41%)	N = 17 (50%)	N = 2 (6%)	N = 1 (3%)
Carers (N = 31)	N = 9 (29%)	N = 14 (45%)	N = 3 (10%)	N = 5 (16%)
Birth parents (N = 10)	N = 3 (30%)	N = 5 (50%)	N = 2 (20%)	N = 0 (0%)
Ethnicity				
	Single ethnicity (e. g. Lebanese, Sri Lankan, West African, Fijian, Afghan, Korean, Vietnamese)	Mixed-ethnic heritage and identity		Anglo Australian
Children (N = 34)	N = 23 (68%)	N = 11 (32%)		N = 0 (0%)
Carers (N = 31)	N = 17 (55%)	N = 5 (16%)		N = 9 (29%)
Birth parents (N = 10)	N = 7 (70%)	N = 0 (0%)		N = 3 (30%) Note: The other non-interviewed birth parents had an ethnic background.
Linguistic composition				
	English-only speaking	Other languages and English		Limited or no English
Children (N = 34)	N = 28 (82%)	N = 6 (18%)		N = 0%
Carers (N = 31)	N = 11 (35%)	N = 17 (55%)		N = 3 (10%)
Birth parents (N = 10)	N = 2 (20%)	N = 6 (60%)		N = 2 (20%)

were invited to be part of the research if they were from a culturally diverse background and had a child currently in OOHC. Cultural attributes were collected from all participants, except the caseworkers, some of whom voluntarily shared their cultural backgrounds during the interviews.

2.3. Data collection and procedure

Two data collection methods were employed: in-depth, semi-structured interviews with children, birth parents, and carers; and eight focus

groups with caseworkers and casework managers. While the majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face, focus groups were conducted using an online platform. Research questions explored several domains, including the child's immediate and broader environments (ecology) and their cultural contexts (routines, relationships, roles, beliefs, values, and cultural practices learned and shared by family and community members, along with their meanings).

For children, data were mainly collected in their care homes, as this was their preferred location for interviews. This involved using age-appropriate, conversational prompts to build rapport and trust, and to elicit authentic accounts of their experiences and meanings in formats familiar to their daily routines. We adapted an activity-based method, specifically the Label Selection activity recommended by Marks and colleagues (Marks et al., 2007), for assessing children's knowledge of their cultural identity.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, the researchers were careful not to ask questions that might make a child feel different or "othered" (Udah, 2018). Instead, children were encouraged to use images, writing pads, drawing tools, and their own words to describe themselves and their experiences in ways that felt comfortable and meaningful to them. They reflected on their understanding of cultural identity, as well as the individuals who constitute their families, support networks, or cultural mentors, and the significance of these concepts both within and outside their care homes. While this approach fostered a relaxed and participatory environment for children's expressions, we utilised active listening skills, which Halpenny (2020) notes as crucial for understanding children's interviews beyond mere spoken words, while capturing their emotions and gestures. We observed that employing creative methods supported children's engagement and encouraged conversational prompts, especially among children who initially showed limited enthusiasm. It offered flexibility by allowing children to set the terms of their participation in the interview without feeling compelled to do so.

Four members of the research team participated in data collection at different times. Two were often present at each interview: one led the discussion, and the other took notes and provided prompts as needed. Interviews with carers and birth families were mainly conducted face-to-face, except for three who requested either a phone or virtual arrangements due to being out of state or overseas. Participating birth parents and carers were asked to nominate their preferred interview locations, where they would feel most comfortable engaging with the researcher. The majority chose their homes. Just as with the children, the researchers recognised the sensitive nature of the research and the importance of not asking questions that might seem judgmental or upsetting for the participants. The researchers were trained and committed to privileging participants' voices, respectful engagement, and culturally humble practices.

All interviews were recorded, and audio files were transcribed verbatim using human transcribing services. One carer and one child participant declined to be recorded, and data were subsequently collected through note-taking. All participants were interviewed in English, except for four carers and two birth parents, who requested professional translators. We made minor editorial adjustments to some transcripts, including those that involved translators, to improve readability. Filler words, repetitions, and non-lexical utterances were removed while retaining the original meaning and tone of the participants' accounts. Minor grammatical errors were left intact if adjusting them would risk altering contextual or cultural nuances. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14, a qualitative data management software, to support analysis.

The interviews comprised questions and prompts that included, but were not limited to, the following: (i) Beyond the care home, who or what in the community acts as a cultural mentor for the child? (ii) Can you describe what typically occurs during this engagement? (iii) How is this mentoring opportunity or relationship utilised to support the maintenance of the child's cultural connections and identity?

2.4. Data analysis

Grounded theory guided our analytical approach, enabling the inductive analysis of the data and the development and testing of data-informed theory (see Charmaz, 2024). We incorporated a reflexive interpretive lens (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018) to deepen our understanding of participants' perspectives on the child's relationships and sense of community within and beyond the child's care environments. Through inductive analysis, we immersed ourselves in the dataset to thoroughly explore participants' views on how these relationships offered cultural mentoring. The first author analysed all the transcripts. The other authors analysed a subset of transcripts assigned to them. We collectively developed the coding framework and came together regularly to discuss and compare findings and interpretations. We conducted systematic coding in NVivo 14 to identify patterns and relationships, categorise codes, and generate a shared interpretation of participants' perspectives.

As varied narratives across stakeholder groups began to emerge, we employed a grounded theory approach, primarily for its capacity to provide a robust methodological process for capturing dynamic relational and social patterns. This approach facilitated iterative comparison not only across participants' accounts but also in relation to our interpretive analyses, which were informed by our reflexive positions (Braun et al., 2022). These positions included researchers at various career stages (Professors and HDR students), representing both Anglo and culturally diverse backgrounds, and from a range of disciplines, including Social Work, Psychology, and Nursing.

The analysis progressed to a theory-building phase, as we conducted constant comparative analysis within and across stakeholder groups to refine the emerging theory. We carried out iterative rounds of more focused and explicit engagements, testing and sampling the targeted theory. These discussions and activities were accompanied by reflexive drafting (see Charmaz, 2024). The first two authors engaged in a series of collaborative sessions over three days, using a whiteboard to progressively conceptualise and refine the model. Each session lasted several hours and involved ongoing revision until consensus was reached. The preliminary model was then shared with the full research team, who contributed to further refinement. We discussed alternative interpretations of the data to ensure we achieved positive conceptual rigour and theoretical saturation. Transparency was maintained regarding how our positionalities might influence our analytical perspectives. This understanding was also valuable in how we managed our data interpretations when they differed, fostering deeper insights into our analysis. This process resulted in the development of a cultural mentoring model that emphasises narratives clustered across two broad participant groups: adult stakeholders (birth parents, carers, caseworkers) and child stakeholders (see Fig. 1).

2.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations included awareness of the sensitivity of the research area and of potential power dynamics that may arise when conducting research with participants who are facing vulnerability (McAuliffe et al., 2023). Hence, the researchers prioritised rapport and trust-building, ensuring that participants' rights to confidentiality and to discontinue at any stage without consequences were clearly communicated. The researchers prioritised safe and respectful processes by explaining the research and interview procedures and addressing any concerns raised about participation and expectations. Once participants demonstrated understanding and confirmed their interest in participating in the study, the children signed an assent form to participate and to be audio-recorded, while the adults provided both verbal and written consent.

A distress protocol with detailed support procedures and the contact details of relevant support services was developed by the research team in partnership with the collaborating service organisations. However, no

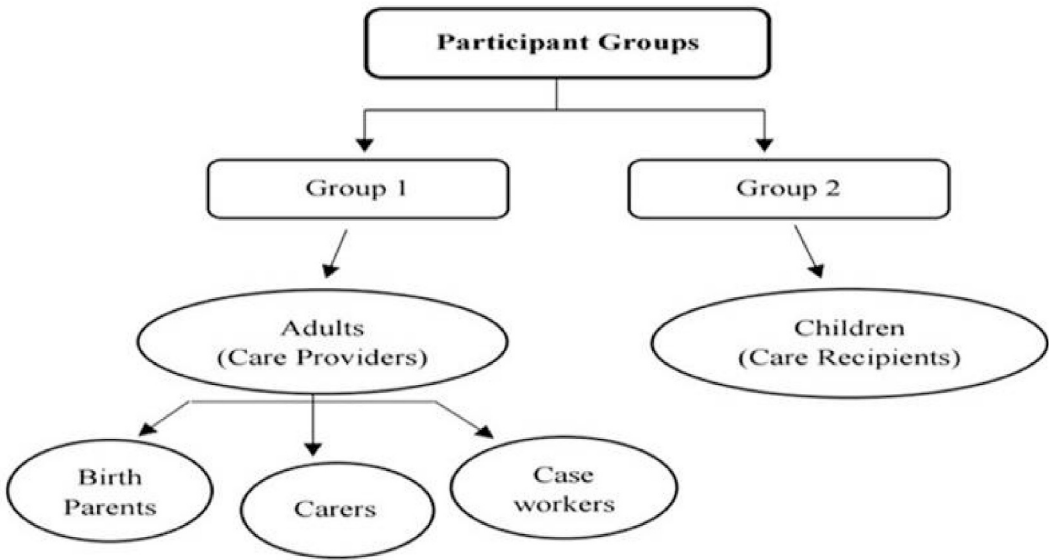


Fig. 1. Participant groups.

disclosure or indication of distress necessitated the use of the distress protocol during this research process.

3. Conceptualisation of a model

Adult stakeholders (birth parents, carers and caseworkers) and child stakeholders relayed experiences that indicated quite different

perspectives on the motivations that underpinned their desire for cultural mentoring, the processes undertaken in the establishment of impactful mentoring relationships, and the outcomes of cultural mentoring. This understanding is helpful in guiding practitioners to enhance cultural understanding and knowledge for adults involved in children’s care and to support the cultural connections and identities of children in OOHC.

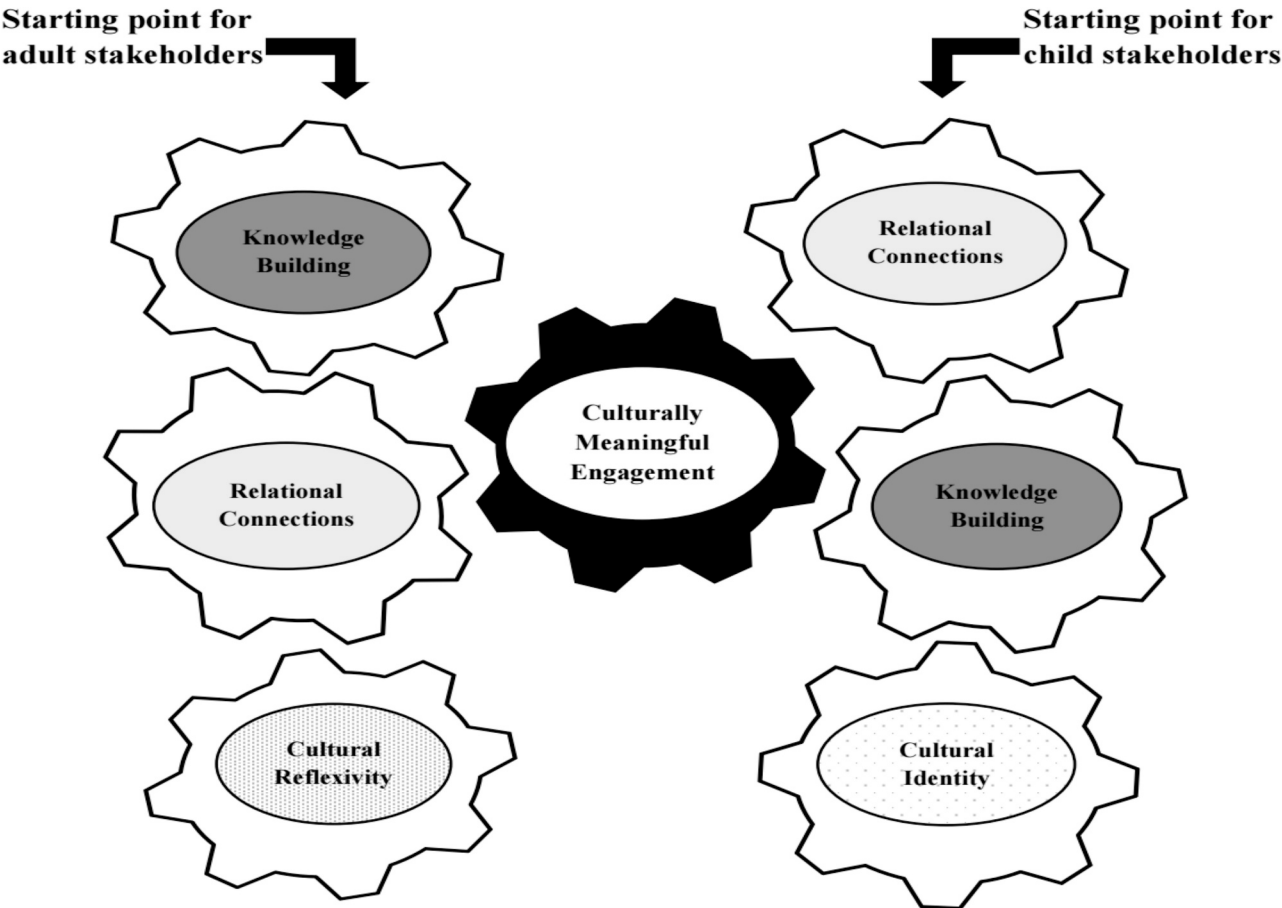


Fig. 2. The model: culturally meaningful mentoring (C2M).

The different perspectives have informed the proposal of a model we call the Culturally Meaningful Mentoring (C2M) model, which directly speaks to the role of cultural mentoring for stakeholders in the OOHC system. The C2M model is depicted in Fig. 2.

The C2M model argues that adults and children have different starting points for cultural mentoring. Adults often begin with a desire for information, driven by a sense of responsibility to support a child's cultural connection and identity. The seeking of new information to build knowledge opens the way for the development of new relationships and identifying cultural mentors. The influence of mentors on an ongoing basis supports and sustains cultural reflexivity in the adults. In contrast, the children and young people in our study did not deliberately seek information or cultural mentoring. Instead, they sought connection and a sense of belonging. When a person they felt connected to and shared cultural similarities with naturally started providing cultural mentoring, they became open to learning and interested in cultural ways of being. This shaped their sense of cultural identity.

The cog in the middle of the diagram (culturally meaningful engagement) represents stakeholders' engagements. This captures the idea that as the adults pursue their learning journey to build cultural knowledge and skills, they become more responsive to meeting the child's cultural needs. Additionally, as the child travels their journey of cultural identity, they, in turn, contribute to the learning of the adults in their lives and help to set cultural priorities. The middle cog represents motion, driving meaningful engagement between adult and child stakeholders.

Central to this model is the idea that cultural mentoring is relational, reciprocal and iterative, where one process or cog can activate or reinforce another, and outcomes are viewed not as final goals but as catalysts for continued engagement. The C2M model recognises the dynamic and evolving nature of culture, especially for child and adult stakeholders in constant intercultural contact. The empirically grounded elements of the model are discussed below.

3.1. Pathways in the mentoring of adults

Many adult participants in this study described a desire to expand their knowledge bank by actively seeking cultural information. Some had not progressed beyond the information-gathering stage. Others had found that information gathering led them to establish contact and maintain relationships with cultural mentors.

For carers and caseworkers, cultural mentors might be found amongst a child's cultural community members, or they might be the birth family members of a child in their care. For the small number of birth parents who spoke about cultural mentoring, while the pattern was the same, there were differences. The birth parents spoke largely about first trying to gather information and find language support to improve their understanding of the OOHC system and the current living situation of their child. This led, for some, to the development of relationships with people who offered ongoing guidance and served as cultural mentors. Culture, in these cases, refers to the culture of the system or the culture of the family caring for their child.

For several adult stakeholders, exposure to cultural mentoring led them to challenge previously held ideas and to think differently. In this way, they progressed beyond the development of knowledge and exposure to different cultural ways of being, to a form of personal transformation as they became culturally reflexive. These processes, which include knowledge building, relational connections and cultural reflexivity, are further discussed below.

3.1.1. Knowledge building

Knowledge building was found to be the starting point for adult stakeholders engaging with cultural mentoring. For carers and caseworkers, this was rooted in motivation to bridge knowledge and cultural gaps in order to provide meaningful cultural care to either a specific child or a group of children from culturally diverse backgrounds. For

birth parents, this was driven by a desire to overcome language barriers, as well as to learn how to navigate the system and understand their child's current circumstances. To build knowledge, many of the adult stakeholders proactively gathered cultural information, with the internet being a common first source. They also participated in training programs and gathered second-hand information from colleagues and friends. This initial information seeking was often quite generic, leaving adult stakeholders at risk of engaging in tokenistic practices.

Challenges arose for the participants from unsupported information gathering, as it did not always account for the evolving nature of culture, often treating culture as static and neglecting to capture the nuances of change over time, the diversities of cultural interpretation, and the blending of different cultures for many children and families. A challenge described in our data related to the provision of limited or inconsistent information about children from culturally diverse backgrounds when they first entered care or while in care. This often left caseworkers and carers uncertain about the child's cultural background, while birth parents lacked sufficient support to learn about the culture of the system caring for their child.

3.1.2. Relational connections

The challenges associated with knowledge building in isolation were largely overcome when adult stakeholders developed a mentoring relationship. Genuine and sustained relationships with cultural knowledge holders, such as members of a child's birth family and cultural community, brought a new level of cultural understanding. Sometimes, mentoring relationships did not develop organically for adults; rather, they came about as the result of formal requests for support. These could be productive relationships, albeit quite transactional and hierarchical. However, the mentoring became most impactful when relationships evolved to include a shared sense of trust and mutual benefit.

Consistency and authenticity helped build trust over time and fostered emotional and cultural safety. Some caseworkers and carers who maintained ongoing relational connections with a child's birth family and cultural community members recognised that they could learn from and support one another. There were a small number of occasions in our data in which birth family members and carers served as cultural mentors for one another, significantly enhancing collaboration between the families in supporting the child's cultural care. Some birth family members developed a close mentoring relationship with a person whom the OOHC service had initially employed as a language translator or interpreter. This translator soon began to act as a cultural broker, evolving into a cultural mentor due to their knowledge of the service system's culture, and that of the birth parents.

3.1.3. Cultural reflexivity

Cultural reflexivity describes the transformative process experienced by some participants as a result of cultural mentoring. Adult stakeholders spoke of deepening their understanding of culture and its nuances, the power dynamics within relationships, and the complex circumstances surrounding children and their evolving familial and cultural contexts. Reflecting on their own values, assumptions, and positionalities, they discussed learning how cultural understanding could influence their interactions, connections, and the quality of the care provided to a child.

Cultural reflexivity means continually and consciously engaging in deeper thinking to assess, reshape, and challenge one's perceptions of cultural understanding, and to re-examine the information gathered to ensure it is meaningful. It is grounded in humility, contextually meaningful interactions, and a continued commitment to improvement and growth; otherwise, cultural mentoring could be limited to being an information-gathering or language-translation exercise. Cultural reflexivity demonstrates an attitudinal shift away from a well-intentioned effort or a tick-box approach to an outcome that is more impactful in the cultural care of children.

3.2. Pathways in the mentoring of children

For most child stakeholders in this study, cultural mentoring was not actively sought; rather, it developed as the result of sustained relationships with those who shared their cultural backgrounds. Some of the terms participants used to describe cultural mentoring for children were “natural,” “organic,” or “accidental”. Some adult participants observed that enforcing relationships or cultural learning on children, especially in structured settings, often led to unsustainable outcomes.

Children who observed their culture being expressed and upheld with dignity often felt a sense of pride, inspiring them to pursue a deeper understanding and immersion in their culture, which was pivotal in shaping their cultural identity. This pathway, capturing relational connections, knowledge building and cultural identity, is described further below.

3.2.1. Relational connections

Relational connection served as a starting point for cultural mentoring for most child stakeholders in this study. Those who described receiving cultural mentoring recognised qualities within an existing relationship with a person who made them feel safe, fostered trust, and dignified their culture. These qualities strengthened connections and laid the foundations for cultural mentoring.

Some children who maintained stable and meaningful relationships with their birth family members were mentored within these relationships. Some children, whose carers or caseworkers had a similar cultural background, sometimes experienced the evolution of this relationship into one that included cultural mentoring. Other participating children and young people developed mentoring relationships with people they encountered in their lives, such as through school, religious organisations, or as the result of exposure and socialisation within their local cultural community.

3.2.2. Building knowledge

Through existing engagement with those with similar cultural backgrounds, some of the children in our study took a proactive approach to knowledge building, seeking out information and learning opportunities. In these cases, knowledge building was inspired by witnessing their culture being expressed with dignity by those around them. For others, it was motivated by wanting to understand who they were and where they had come from. Of note is that knowledge building most often came about as the result of connection and mentoring, rather than as a precursor to the establishment of cultural mentoring relationships (as was the case with adult stakeholders).

The participating children and young people described wanting to learn by engaging in cultural activities. For example, they were generally not interested in just observing their traditional dances or watching how their cultural foods were made; rather, they expressed a desire to learn by doing and being part of it. Some children spoke of seeking to emulate the positive qualities of their cultural mentors, and developed knowledge and understanding of their culture in the process.

3.2.3. Cultural identity

For the children in this study who had developed cultural mentoring relationships, this was instrumental in leading to increased cultural awareness, which in turn boosted their confidence to embody and shape a positive cultural identity. Having cultural mentors who also served as role models was influential in how children nurtured not only their sense of self but also the collective identity of their cultural group. For most children, this helped them to perceive their differences as a strength rather than a deficiency, a critical element in negotiating their own sense of identity and belonging across diverse families, communities and cultures.

Participants acknowledged that children navigating diverse relationships and cultural environments often faced challenges that could impact their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Cultural mentoring

was a valuable resource when it developed out of relational connections and children exercised agency in choosing their own cultural mentors. This led to a sense of belonging and increased confidence in negotiating challenges as they arose.

3.3. Cultural mentoring stories from our data

We have selected four stories from within our data that demonstrate the hypothesised model of cultural mentoring for stakeholders within the OOHC system. Each of the four stories represent a different stakeholder perspective. These stories are presented below.

3.3.1. A carer's experience: Iffy

An Anglo-Australian carer, Iffy, shared her experience of caring for a child of West African and refugee background who was in her long-term care. Having raised her own biological children and fostered several children into adulthood, she described experiencing “a very steep learning curve” as she started caring for “black children”. When she first started caring for her West African foster child, she sought out information on how to meet his basic physical care needs, which she believed were interconnected with the child’s cultural wellbeing:

“I was educating myself. I found online forums. I found Facebook groups. I bought books... finding out just how important it is to be well-groomed for these children. It is just talking to people, reading, and learning. Going to hair salons, asking people questions there. Going to multicultural festivals, picking up things that way... You've got to think outside the box a little bit. And you've got to be proactive. It is work and not a quick thing.”

Iffy expressed disappointment that the OOHC agency and caseworker could not provide any resources or guidance on how to support the child’s unique cultural needs:

“They did not know anything really about basic skin and haircare for African children, let alone food or language or other cultural needs and practices in the family. And also specifically, the needs that refugee families have are quite different, I think, to immigrant families, just because of the trauma they've been through.”

Iffy recognised the child’s birth parents as a valuable source for building cultural knowledge and as potential ongoing cultural mentors. Although she indicated that maintaining a relationship with them could sometimes be challenging, she explained that she felt it was important to put in the effort, including connecting with, and learning from, extended family members and others who shared the child’s cultural background:

“I can't tell what's important for a particular culture if I haven't grown up in it. Only reading and buying things is only going to go so far. When I've sat down with family and said to them, ‘what's important to you?’ They often say, ‘you're the first person that's ever asked us what's important.’ And they're the ones that know. In some cases, I have to go back to their grandparents or to other family members because the parents might not be in a place to help or talk about it, or they're too distressed... Unless you immerse yourself and make the effort, then you can't.”

It was important to Iffy that she maintained a consistent connection with different cultural mentors in her local community who had lived experience, to provide her with guidance on managing complex situations. She spoke about seeking mentors, not only for herself, but also for her foster child, whom she referred to as her son. She emphasised the significance of gender-specific cultural mentoring and role modelling, as she said:

“Our son's hairdresser, who does his dreadlocks, is very close to him. He is Ugandan. [And] there are strong black men who are his role models at church as well for him. From what I've read, it's ideal if

children grow up with better racial mirrors than what we can offer them right here in our suburb.”

Iffy described being mentored by her sister-in-law, who has an Asian background, from whom she continued to learn how to respond to incidents of racism. Iffy shared that the child was often a “target of racism and discrimination” at school. She reflected that she had previously approached incidents less seriously due to her limited understanding and lack of lived experience of racism. She described how she had applied her learning to later situations, going beyond what she considered tokenistic responses:

“I went from being a bit gentle in my approach with the school and the way that they handled it [racial discrimination], because they did not handle it well, to now, I go in all guns blazing, and I do not care what they think. They need to address it really seriously. I’ve got zero tolerance for it. I am a bit embarrassed that I did not take it seriously enough when the kids were younger... They [cultural mentors] have been helpful in teaching me how to manage, and teaching the children how to manage it. That has been big and a lot of education for me. Obviously, that is something I did not encounter growing up, and I did not think about a lot until I had children who were black.”

Iffy attributed her transformative learning to her desire to provide the best possible nurturing for the child, driven by her commitment and intentionality in being mentored by those who practised the culture and had lived experience. She emphasised not waiting for information or resources to come to her; instead, she made efforts to seek knowledge and sustain genuine connections with key individuals who provided cultural mentoring in practical ways.

3.3.2. A birth parent’s experience: Parika

Parika, a first-generation migrant birth parent of Sri Lankan background, had two children removed from her care following incidents of domestic violence in her home. She described feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the OOHC system and by her limited English proficiency, which was both the language of the host country and the main language her child had adopted after entering care. Parika blamed her child’s loss of their native language on being raised by multiple carers from different cultural backgrounds at different times. She emphasised the challenges of navigating these cultural and linguistic barriers with no trusted support network. Parika spoke about seeking guidance online as her first step, but the more she explored that pathway, the more unproductive it proved to be. She pointed out facing emotional and psychological stressors, which she believed were common with most birth parents involved in the care system:

“I was self-representing myself. I did not have a spokesperson for me. I was spending time with the Child Protection authority, the practitioner and the child. I did not have someone to speak on my behalf and say ‘excuse me, ohh you might not think of it in such a narrow way’. You know, she is coming from a different cultural background. Everyone scared me. The lawyers scared me, ...remember that the Child Protection authority did not understand that when the children are taken away from a parent, that parent mentally crashes. They don’t get it.”

Considering her circumstances, Parika believed she benefited from using a language translator who interpreted cultural nuances and, at the same time, showed awareness and sensitivity to her struggles. She believed it was important for birth parents, like herself, to find and maintain a particular translator on an ongoing basis, who could also offer support beyond linguistic considerations. Believing this as instrumental in building trust and possibly developing and sustaining a cultural mentoring relationship, Parika explained:

“Someone who is playing a role that is independent. They can build a relationship quickly... Because the birth mother or the birth family might not have the right lingo or the right way of approaching and

explaining it. And so, it needs to be that third party that does that for them. So, like an advocacy for them- communicates and just makes everything clear... And there will be cultural nuances that those mentors might be able to help them translate to child protection workers and court systems. ... if you have got a mentor or someone who is an advocate who could step in and translate not just language, but the concepts, so that mums and dads and extended families won’t be triggered within the process, as hard as it already is.”

Parika expressed that having a cultural mentor while navigating the statutory care system felt like having a trusted ally who helped her feel safe, understood, and less isolated. She emphasised that engaging in cultural mentoring strengthened her voice, boosted her confidence, and improved her relationships with both her child and the child’s carer. Drawing on these experiences, she expressed a desire to advocate for other birth parents in the care system to seek cultural mentoring.

3.3.3. A caseworker’s experience: Pete

Pete, an Anglo-Australian caseworker who had extensive experience in the OOHC sector, spoke about recognising that each child’s cultural identity and needs were uniquely expressed and experienced. He was motivated to build knowledge that would be meaningful to a specific child at a specific time. He believed that the first step in achieving this was to draw on cultural information collected when the child first entered care. However, he noted that this was often inconsistent:

“We get some pretty basic information from the [Child Protection] Department. It’s not always accurate information. Sometimes you’ll get the wrong culture or the wrong religion, or sometimes I find that they’ve just made assumptions as to what culture or religion the family identifies as.”

To identify and understand a child’s cultural background, Pete first leveraged other sources, such as the internet, formal training, and consulting with colleagues who shared a child’s specific ethnic background. He observed that these were often inadequate for gaining a deeper cultural understanding of a child:

“All the training in the world is never going to give you a sense of being part of a culture. You don’t learn it from Google. You don’t learn it in a four-hour training course. Wikipedia doesn’t tell you about it either.”

Engaging birth parents, when possible, to gather information about their child’s cultural background sometimes provided Pete with an opportunity to develop relationships with them, opening the door for them to also serve as cultural mentors. However, he found that relationships with birth parents were sometimes challenging to sustain, due to factors such as cultural barriers, stigma, and a history of trauma. In such cases, Pete noted he would try to identify one or more persons in the local community who shared the child’s ethnicity or race, or he would attend cultural events to become familiar with a child’s cultural community. He said he had formed some trusting connections that he could reach out to when he had questions about a particular child. However, maintaining these connections required consistency, patience and genuine presence:

“For lots of communities, the idea of anyone associated with the government holds a lot of stigma, so it can often be a slow process. But it’s about really starting to build up some of those relationships and having a bit of a presence... And so, they feel comfortable to share their cultural knowledge that they trust that you’re going to hold that knowledge safely. And that you’re going to use that to help support their child to feel connected to them and who they are in some way.”

Through ongoing cultural mentoring, he learned how to engage a child’s cultural community, including their birth families and carers, with humility. He noted that it was important his engagements with them were built on mutual knowledge exchange and respectful

collaborations.

Pete noted that cultural mentoring encouraged him to think more deeply about the cultural knowledge he acquired. He noted that cultural information differed across contexts, even amongst children who shared similar race, ethnicity, or religion. He discussed having to examine if he was interpreting and using information in ways that were respectful and meaningful in the context of a specific child. This was also associated with his understanding that children's cultural identity and needs sometimes differed from those of their parents. Hence, he learned not to approach culture as a one-size-fits-all concept. This learning was also impactful in how he approached matching a child with a carer. He discussed understanding that the nature of culture and his professional responsibility required him to maintain ongoing engagement in cultural mentoring:

"I think it is something that's always evolving as well, like reframing what we see as culture. It is not as simple as cultural background, faith and language. It differs between people and families, and it is constantly evolving. It is about constantly revisiting. It is skills that are picked up over time, but it is not something you can get directly from a training."

Through cultural mentoring, which mostly began with information-gathering, Pete understood the importance of continuing to build cultural knowledge and of employing a humble approach to cultural engagement and context-specific interpretation.

3.3.4. A child's experience: Amaka

Amaka identified as an African-Australian young girl who had lived with multiple carers from different cultural backgrounds. She recounted how she always felt different and mostly out of place growing up as a 'dark skin' girl in predominantly Anglo-Australian communities. Looking back, she recognised that this may have affected her sense of self. Although she noted not being able to clearly understand the experience at the time, she knew she wanted to feel a sense of belonging beyond existing friendships:

"You know how you pretend to be this one person, but you feel really uncomfortable because you want to be yourself, but you don't know how to? Because you feel like you're going to be judged, because they're not the same... I really felt isolated. I didn't feel like I fit in, even though I had friends at school. I was never really truly myself. I tried to fit in. I really tried."

Amaka discussed feeling uncertain about her cultural identity and sense of belonging until she connected with a caseworker who shared her ethnic-racial background. The caseworker played a multifaceted role in Amaka's life, including providing cultural mentoring. She noted that their shared physical similarities and relatable experiences were instrumental in helping her feel safe enough to build trust and develop a connection beyond a strictly professional one. Within the relationship, she started to learn how to embrace her culture and take pride in the differences:

"She [caseworker] was an auntie to me. She helped me see that I was different... I didn't know what culture was until I met her. She taught me there is culture... She is the reason why I feel comfortable with being the person that I am now... Yes, it really changes a person. I was really uncomfortable with my background. Kind of ashamed."

Some of Amaka's cultural mentoring experiences included cultural socialisation, facilitated by her caseworker. She acknowledged that the caseworker's efforts to connect her with her cultural community not only reinforced her pride in her culture and identity but also nurtured a sense of belonging among others who looked like her:

"She [caseworker] took me to places. Being around people who are like me. Like, there was this African day, where everyone comes to a park and we celebrate, and that was my first time ever! I was like,

whoa, these are people of colour, the same as me... I really just felt at home with these people. It was nice. I felt like I could truly be myself without anyone really judging me."

As Amaka nurtured more connections with members of her cultural community, her interest in her culture grew, fostering her desire to seek a deeper understanding of her culture:

"I was able to go out and learn my culture and everything... My everyday day was that we would go out. We would do things. I started learning a lot more of my culture with them. I asked them to teach me parts of my culture, so I was learning how to cook. I was learning how they dress. I was learning different parts of cleaning. I really started feeling myself. I was genuinely really happy."

Amaka expressed admiration for the significant influence her caseworker had on her perception and the development of her positive cultural identity. Beyond being her cultural mentor, she regarded her caseworker as a role model from whom she developed confidence to express her culture, not only through direct guidance but also by observing her conduct:

"She really inspired me. When I was a kid, I really wanted to be her because she was so confident being the person that she was. The way she walked. The way she carried herself. The way she talked. She was confident, and that's what I wanted."

Amaka advocated for every child like herself from a culturally diverse background in OOH, especially those with limited contact with their birth families, to be supported in connecting with a cultural mentor:

"I feel like if you can't find family that's similar to them, it's really important that you should connect them with them [cultural mentors]. Because you're going to have a kid that's going to be doubting themselves. You're going to have a kid that's going to be feeling uncomfortable with themselves... Linking up someone with their culture, I feel like it will prevent a lot of bad things, I guess... I feel like it's very important. It's that number one thing."

Amaka valued the relationship she shared with her caseworker, whom she regarded as a cultural mentor and a role model. This relationship fostered cultural connections and cultural pride, through which she started to shape her cultural identity.

4. Discussion

The C2M model was developed based on the perspectives of key stakeholders characterised by diverse cultural backgrounds, age groups and care involvement. It hypothesises that cultural mentoring in OOH develops along two divergent yet interconnected pathways for adult stakeholders compared to child stakeholders. This is in contrast to the often one-dimensional, hierarchical engagements emphasised in the existing literature (Lohmeyer et al., 2024; Raithelhuber, 2021). The pathways differed in their starting points and transformative outcomes; however, the model emphasised the importance of relational connections across all stakeholder groups. This was essential in reducing the risk that cultural mentoring would become superficial or transactional, or add further distress to those already experiencing vulnerability due to care involvement or cultural marginalisation (Broadhurst & Mason, 2020; Ezekwem-Obi et al., 2025).

Beyond knowledge building (DeWaard & Chavhan, 2020), the C2M model suggests that the outcome of cultural mentoring does not need to be limited to gaining expertise in one's own culture or even another's. This is because culture is not a fixed body of knowledge that can be taught or fully mastered, given its complex and evolving nature over time and across intercultural contacts (Clarke, 2008; Eade, 2020). For instance, the cultural and social contexts of many children in this study differed from those of their birth parents. These differences stemmed

either from having one birth parent or a carer with a different cultural background, or from variations in their acculturation orientations within a mainstream culture, all of which influenced their behaviours or identification. While knowledge of each child's cultural background was important to adult stakeholders, especially caseworkers and carers, the attitude with which they engaged with that knowledge and with those who held it was found to be equally impactful, if not more so.

Cultural reflexivity became important for adult stakeholders to shift cultural mentoring from being a competence-building exercise to an iterative process of critical examination of self and knowledge. It is presented not as a destination but rather as a process grounded in intentionality, consistency, and humility to learn, reflect and do better. This involved interrogating one's assumptions and seeking to interpret knowledge meaningfully within the social and cultural contexts for which it is meant. As reflected in Pete's story, he moved from questioning "what" cultural information was needed for a specific child or situation and identifying "who" could provide it, to arriving at the "how" and the "why". The "how" aimed to understand how the information could be used in a way that would be meaningful to that specific child or situation, while the "why" questioned the implications of doing or not doing it (meaningfully). Smith and colleagues (2022:211) described this as an "interactive dance between the reflexive self and experience." This was evident in Iffy's experience, as she critically reflected on her foster child's experience and what she believed was a tokenistic approach previously taken by both her and the child's school in addressing behaviours that sustained racism. Through cultural reflexivity, cultural mentoring not only fostered social consciousness (Chan, 2018; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021), but also showed potential to transform practices, build trust in the care system and uphold the dignity of those involved. Cultural reflexivity reinforces scholarly arguments that unexamined knowledge risks being interpreted through biased lenses, thereby perpetuating stereotypical constructions of culture and privileging dominant practices in ways that may be harmful (Tascon & Ife, 2020).

Most child stakeholders were experiencing continued trauma and navigating multiple care environments, carers, caseworkers and several other support services (Keddell, 2023). Overall, they did not overtly demonstrate a strong desire to learn about culture, even though their experiences mostly indicated a fragmented sense of belonging and cultural identity, consistent with the findings of Degener and colleagues (Degener et al., 2021). Rather, they primarily desired to nurture authentic connections and to feel a sense of belonging. The C2M emphasised the strength of relational connections in organically cultivating children's cultural awareness and interest, particularly when they had established trust, felt safe and experienced a sense of dignity in their culture through others. Some familial, social, and professional relationships evolved into cultural mentoring, without the pressure to engage as an obligation and free from adult control. Tascon and Ife (2020) noted that professional boundaries could potentially constrain authentic care and connection when imposed. This flexibility in nurturing relationships organically supported children's emotional stability and appeared to sustain the longevity of their relational connections, which often serviced as quality mentoring (Raitelhuber, 2021; Raposa et al., 2019). The association between relational and emotional connections was underscored as an essential pathway, not only for nurturing cultural mentoring relationships, but also critical for sustaining lifelong connections, even after children leave care.

Some children who did not have existing relationships that could offer cultural mentoring appreciated the intentional support from adult stakeholders who facilitated cultural socialisation and positive role modelling, as demonstrated in Amaka's case. As with Iffy, intentionally leveraging children's family or cultural community for cultural mentoring underscored adult stakeholders' responsibility to facilitate reciprocal care, learning, and connection. Beyond that, the effort was deeply valued by children who longed to feel a sense of belonging and significance. Ursin and colleagues (2022) argue that children's

interconnectedness with others who share cultural similarities is a relational right, through which they can interdependently nurture their identity. This perspective "foregrounds collectivism over individualism" in the development of cultural identity, considered a fluid and evolving process (Burgess et al., 2022:5), socially constructed through cultural attributes assigned by birth and by belonging in cultural groups (Batiste et al., 2022). The children in this study observed and mirrored their mentors and others around them who reflected positive cultural attributes, gradually fostering pride in their culture. Ultimately, these experiences empowered them to embrace and actively shape their cultural identity. Kochan & Pascarelli (2012) contend that mentees may encounter a cultural shift characterised by the dual challenge of nurturing a positive sense of their cultural identity while simultaneously adapting to socio-cultural environments that are substantially different from their own. Therefore, the potential of the C2M model is in helping children cultivate a grounded understanding of their "self", and a sense of belonging within their cultural community and the larger mainstream culture, while also helping adult stakeholders understand and support children through their journey.

The C2M's inclusive approach is intended to challenge power structures and dispel common stereotypes among stakeholder groups. For instance, research highlights the expectations often placed on carers and caseworkers when working with children and their birth families in the OOH system (Sawrikar, 2016a). For birth families, their experiences in the OOH system, including unmet needs stemming from trauma, stigma and service barriers (Ross et al., 2023), might discourage their engagement in cultural mentoring. As evidenced in Parika's story, our research also demonstrated their resilience and ability to contribute to knowledge building and engage in cultural mentoring when actively supported with sensitivity, compassion and patience. Foote and colleagues (2025) emphasised the significance of family inclusion in children's care and the crucial role of carers in facilitating and strengthening connections with birth families through open, non-judgmental, and collaborative communication. While relational and cultural connection between birth families and their children can enhance their interdependent wellbeing (Ursin et al., 2022), it also presents an opportunity for birth families to serve as cultural mentors for both carers and children.

In the same vein, children's perspectives significantly contributed to the development of the C2M model, deepening our understanding of how they navigate their multilayered family, community and cultural contexts and interpret their complex realities. Notably, they exercised agency in determining how cultural mentoring was leveraged in ways that were meaningful to them. This inclusion marks a departure from the traditional deficit model, which portrays children in care as passive contributors to knowledge building or as excessively vulnerable and mainly in need of intervention (Balsells et al., 2017; McCafferty & Garcia, 2023). Tascon and Ife (2020) suggest that existing systemic privileges, particularly between care providers and recipients, adults and children, or cultural majorities and minorities, can inherently reinforce unequal power relations. Ignoring power relations can unintentionally position some stakeholders as knowledge experts, while limiting opportunities and outcomes for those who typically wield less social power and fewer resources. Therefore, the C2M prioritises power-sharing among stakeholders and a child's cultural community, built on foundations of mutual knowledge exchange, respect, as well as authentic care and connection.

The key strength of this study is that it is the first data triangulation research in Australia to include and analyse the perspectives of diverse participant groups, including children from culturally diverse backgrounds, their birth parents, carers, and caseworkers, with the goal of informing cultural mentoring in the OOH sector. Nevertheless, the study also has limitations. The purposive sampling approach may have introduced selection bias through selection criteria influenced by organisations' definitions of cultural diversity and by the possibility that organisations extended the invitations to participate in the research to

those they judged most likely to be amenable to research engagement. The participants were located in particular geographic areas, and so consideration must be given to the potential for findings to reflect specific policy and local contexts. We were successful in recruiting only a small number of birth parents for this study, reflecting their contested and limited involvement in the care system more broadly. While the use of interpreters for some birth parents and carers allowed for the inclusion of participants who might otherwise have been excluded, the process of language translation could have influenced the contextual meaning of the data. Additionally, the study relied on single-point qualitative data collected within a broader project, in which the interview protocol regarded cultural mentoring as a secondary focus alongside other key research areas. Taken together, these constraints may have restricted opportunities for more in-depth data collection and shaped the nuances of the perspectives captured in the study. Nevertheless, a reflexive analysis of participants' perspectives and the meanings they attributed to their lived experiences revealed consistent patterns, thereby enhancing the validity and integrity of the results.

5. Conclusion

This paper contributes to ongoing research on how to meaningfully leverage cultural mentoring for children from culturally diverse backgrounds, as well as for the birth parents, carers, and caseworkers involved in their care. This study shows that cultural mentoring, when meaningfully utilised, can be a valuable resource for both child and adult stakeholders, potentially leading to personal or practice transformative outcomes. Further, the study underscores the importance of prioritising cultural mentoring as a collective need for both stakeholder groups, an approach that can ultimately enhance cultural care experience for everyone involved, both in care provision and reception.

Implications for practice

We make the following recommendations based on the results of this study:

- As demonstrated in the C2M model, we recommend that cultural mentoring be encouraged across stakeholder groups and approached as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event.
- Stakeholders, especially caseworkers and carers, can benefit from the flexibility of building relational connections with members of a child's cultural community with whom they feel comfortable maintaining respectful, culturally meaningful engagements.
- Caseworkers and carers can facilitate genuine relationship building with a child's immediate or extended birth family, demonstrating greater awareness and compassion towards their circumstances. This can create opportunities to strengthen child-parent relationships and, in turn, foster interconnected cultural mentoring across all stakeholder groups.
- We recommend supporting children to nurture relationships that a child or young person chooses for themselves, which can evolve naturally into cultural mentoring. This is because imposing cultural mentoring or a mentor on children is unlikely to yield the best outcomes and may expose the children to additional distress or behavioural issues.

Ethics approval

The Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approved this study's ethics. Ethics approval number: H14911.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. However, it was completed as part of the fulfilment of a doctoral program supported by a Western Sydney University scholarship.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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