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The S.E.L.F. Framework for Keeping Children Connected to Their Culture in Out-of-Home Care

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ABSTRACT

For children entering out-of-home care due to child protection concerns, meaningful connections to family and culture are important and necessary. In this article the complexities of promoting cultural connections for culturally and linguistically diverse children in out-of-home care are explored. Through the use of the settlement, ethnicity, language and faith (S.E.L.F) cultural framework, practitioners and leaders working in the child and family sector can consider the cultural elements of the children in their care. The framework provides questions to explore what culture may mean for families and encourages practitioners to self-reflect on their own cultural assumptions. The framework development has been informed through community of practice reflections and learnings by the authors who have held multiple practice, leadership, and research roles in the child and family sector.

IMPLICATIONS

- The S.E.L.F. framework encompasses curiosity questions that guide the collection of information from children and families to aid in better understanding and enhancing cultural connection practices and to build organisational cultural competency.
- The framework promotes practitioner critical thinking and reflection on their own cultural bias and assumptions.

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As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Australia is committed to honouring the rights of all children, including those from First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022), to remain connected to family and culture. For children who enter out-of-home care due to child protection concerns, their relationships with family, community, and culture are influenced by decisions made by professionals and carers involved in their lives. Out-of-home care services supporting children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia need meaningful cultural background information to keep children culturally connected. National (Department of

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Social Services, 2021) and state out-of-home care legislation and policies vary in making explicit statements about the rights of children in care to maintain their cultural practices, connections, and identity. This contributes to practice inconsistencies and lack of cultural details in case files. Although there are pockets of good practices, as evidenced through organisations meeting accreditation and commissioning requirements, the care needs of children from culturally diverse backgrounds are generally not well-documented, despite indications that cultural diversity is increasing in out-of-home care (McMahon et al., 2021).

In contemporary Australian child welfare services, cultural attention often defaults to Aboriginal children, while the cultural needs of children from other culturally diverse backgrounds may be overlooked. As at June 2023 there were over 45,400 children in out-of-home care in Australia. First Nations children make up over 50% of this population (AIHW, 2024), despite First Nations Peoples constituting 3.8% of the population (ABS, 2021). The disproportionate numbers of First Nations children in out-of-home care contributes to this praxis of focusing on First Nations children and less on the cultural care needs of other children. Data categorisation of children as Indigenous and non-Indigenous also contributes to data on children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds being collected inconsistently and unreliably (AIHW, 2024). There continues to be evidence gaps in guiding better practices for this cohort of children (McDonald, 2011). There are multiple possible explanations for this knowledge-for-practice deficit, including the competing priorities for practitioners in the care system; difficulties in understanding the scope of the meaning of culture for children and how culture can be maintained; and variation in the cultural competence of practitioners and organisations (Cénat et al., 2023; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020).

This article contributes to increased understanding about cultural connections for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. We provide a practice framework using four elements to explore how settlement, ethnicity, language, and faith may inform what culture means to individual children and families alongside guidance for social workers to ask curious questions, collect information, and nurture opportunities for meaningful cultural connections. Through this process, professionals can reflect on how their own cultural views shape their assessments and interventions. At an organisational level, the framework can be used to review and mitigate strategic barriers to data collection.

Children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds in Out-of-Home Care

Australia's demographics are increasingly multicultural, with 1 in 4 Australians born overseas and nearly half with at least one parent born overseas, while nearly 1 in 5 speak a language other than English at home (ABS, 2021). In Australia, the term "culturally and linguistically diverse" can have multiple definitions, leading to inconsistent data recording on cultural backgrounds (ABS, 2021; AIHW, 2022). Australian census data (ABS, 2022), for example, includes a standard set of 12 cultural and language indicators, which include history, traditions, language, literature, religion, and country of birth. In NSW, there is no consistent public reporting on children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in out-of-home care, with published annual reports referring to Indigenous and non-Indigenous children (NSW DCJ, 2024). Where children's

heritage includes First Nations and other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, the NSW out-of-home care administrative information system allows for only one record, in which Aboriginality is prioritised.

Children who are non-Indigenous and non-Anglo Australian are referred to as being from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Australia's state policies require child protection and out-of-home care service providers to keep data on these children; however, data collection systems vary, and in practice there are no accountabilities if data recording is incomplete. As a result, it is not clear how many children in out-of-home care are from culturally diverse backgrounds. Culturally different beliefs and expectations around parenting behaviours can result in child protection involvement. The experience of trauma and social isolation among migrant and refugee families can negatively impact parenting practices and attachment (Degener et al., 2022; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). Data from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study affirmed the widespread nature of child maltreatment affecting Australia's children and youth (Mathews et al., 2023). It is therefore reasonable to consider that children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds likely may be impacted by maltreatment and proportionally represented in the out-of-home care population. There are indicators that the numbers of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in out-of-home care are increasing, with reports suggesting they make up to 30% of the out-of-home care population (Herbert et al., 2022; McMahon et al., 2021).

The absence of consistent data and a lack of underlying shared understanding of how to measure cultural and linguistic diversity leads to inconsistency in measuring practice outcomes. Where references are made to children from non-Indigenous and non-Anglo backgrounds, reports infer homogenous groups, lacking details on children's diverse cultural elements. Identifying children as culturally and linguistically diverse does not provide guidance on whether children and families are new arrivals as migrants or as asylum seekers or refugees. This is further exacerbated by data entry inaccuracies and confusion by social workers as to what should be recorded to guide efforts for cultural connections. The absence of cultural details in turn contributes to a lack of nuanced understanding of children's individual cultures, which further creates difficulties for social workers to understand what culture may mean for a child or family. For some children, data errors result in practices responding to inaccurate cultural connections. This has influenced practice recommendations for improved accurate administrative data collection and reporting (McMahon et al., 2021).

Exploring Culture for Children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds in Out-of-Home Care

Culture influences how individuals make sense of life events, what is acceptable or unacceptable, assumptions, beliefs, knowledge, norms, and values as well as attitudes, behaviour, dress, and language (Causadias, 2020). Culture shapes identity often through behaviours and thoughts that are below the level of consciousness and not easily noticed (Allen, 2022; Krakouer et al., 2018).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socioecological theory draws attention to the importance of children's cultural and social contexts and the ripple effects that cultural experiences can have on children. The model places the child within a set of five nested contextual levels,

emphasising the processes by which the child and their contexts interact and highlights the importance of the intersectionality between various aspects of relations that influences a child, including their family, community, cultures, and broader systems. At a practical level, Bronfenbrenner's approach calls out the complexities and layers of influence on a child, which is particularly important to consider for children in care (Grace et al., 2022). For children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who are in out-of-home care, these important elements can include their own history, family, and community, as well as those of the carers, practitioners, and others whose decisions directly and indirectly impact them.

Children's relationships are the building blocks for their socioemotional development and wellbeing (Collings & Wright, 2022). Western theories of child development have been criticised for not fully accounting for cultural and historical influences on the development of ethnic minority children, including those in out-of-home care (Luu & Kong, 2023; Sawrikar, 2017). Children's pathways in out-of-home care and in turn their life trajectories are influenced by their relationships and subsequently the decisions and actions taken by social workers and carers to nurture new relationships, respond to past care, and provide alternate care. Given that cultural identity is developed through social relationships and experiences of social groups, the impact of these decisions and actions can be significant in how children reshape and develop their sense of self and belonging (Degener et al., 2022). The importance of culture, community, and Country are clearly evident through research on First Nations children in out-of-home care and how they draw strength and meaning from their cultural identities (Allen et al., 2022; Krakouer et al., 2018). These learnings about First Nations children suggest that the same may be true for children from other diverse backgrounds.

Relationships with carers are critical for children's cultural experiences. Ideally, children should be matched to carers on cultural elements such as ethnicity, language, and culture. However, this is often very challenging given the limited pool of foster carers, the child's relationship with kinship carers, or kinship carers' relations with the child's birth family (Waniganayake et al., 2019). Maintaining safe birth family relationships and cultural connections enable children to explore and experience cultural events, activities, and social relations that can enhance their positive sense of self, belonging, and identity (Collings & Wright, 2022). Practitioners need guidance and institutional support to guide these efforts (FitzGerald & Hurst, 2017). This article contributes to addressing this gap in practice guidance.

Method

Designing a Cultural Practice Lens for Children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds in Out-of-Home Care

The S.E.L.F. cultural framework was conceptualised by the two lead authors (Authors One and Two) in response to monitoring the implementation of an out-of-home care program established primarily, but not exclusively, to care for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, over a ten-year period from 2013 to 2022. The program aimed to match children with carers who shared the same cultural backgrounds or, when this was not possible, link the child or the carer to a bilingual caseworker or a

bicultural support worker who shared their culture. The program started with an initial care responsibility for 10 children in 2013 and provided foster and kinship care to over 700 children and 200 kin and foster carers by 2022.

The process driven by the two lead authors utilised cooperative inquiry and Communities of Practice approaches. Cooperative inquiry is a deliberative process used to pursue a mutual interest, concern, or practice (Heron & Reason, 1997). The focus of our inquiry centred on the question of “how can we better understand culture so that we can be clearer on what we seek to provide to children to nurture their cultural experiences?” Communities of Practice facilitate learning through group discussions sharing knowledge and seeking meaning knowledge sharing (Kedrick et al., 2023; Wenger, 2011). These two phases enabled continuous learning and through curiosity questions enabled the developing of constructive practice strategies that contributed to stronger culturally responsive practices and shaping the S.E.L.F. cultural framework.

The framework was informed by two key implementation phases: phase one and phase two.

Phase One

Phase One (2014–2016) involved six weekly practice discussions to:

- use cooperative inquiry to explore what elements could best identify children’s and/or carer’s cultural profiles, so that the data could inform decisions regarding placement matching or practitioner allocations
- collect data against agreed cultural elements
- measure cultural maintenance activities, which included at a starting point at least one connection to a cultural element and considering all cultural elements as they reflect the child’s family, care, and circumstances.

Phase Two

Phase Two (2017–2022) maintained the cooperative inquiry approach and invited involvement of practitioners with an interest in cultural practices to join Community of Practice forums. The forums were held on average bimonthly, including virtually during COVID, and used reflective and exploratory approaches to learning. They included:

- using participatory and dialogical approaches to share learnings from practice activities connected to cultural elements
- reflecting and exploring issues related to casework, leadership, and professional practices
- monitoring children’s cultural connections and experiences.

Results

Phase One

Establishing a data collection system was an initial goal aligned to cultural matching. Although referring data identified children as culturally and linguistically diverse, meaningful information about their cultural background often was not included. Three key

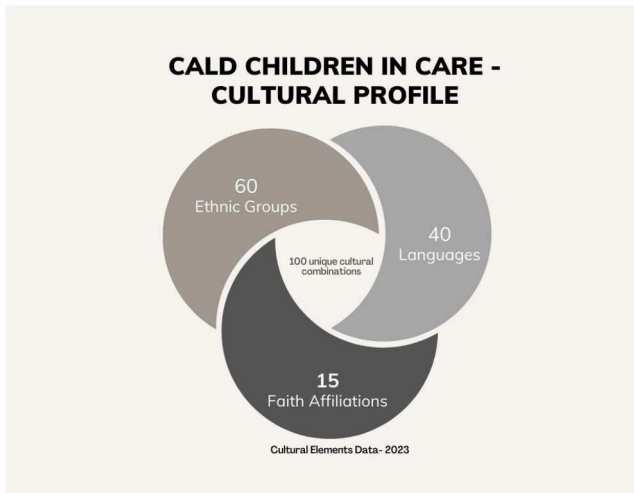


Figure 1 Three cultural elements—ethnicity, languages, faith

categories were initially identified for data collection, as core to understanding culture: Ethnicity, Religion, and Language (see [Figure 1](#)). Overall, the 520 children referred in the first seven years (2013–2020) represented 60 different ethnic groups, 40 languages, and 15 faith groups, and over 100 unique individual cultural combinations of ethnicity, faith, and language.

The cultural knowledge required to understand these 100 cultural profiles was confronting for many practitioners. Many perceived that individuals who share elements of their same cultural background with children and families were best placed to deliver services and that others who did not share cultural elements were less able to facilitate cultural connections. However, not everyone who shares cultural elements shares the same experiences. Cultural alignment between children and practitioners may be helpful in some circumstances, but it is not practical from a workforce management point of view. Furthermore, those who share cultural elements need to consider to what extent this contributes to communication processes or assumptions made.

Cultural maintenance has been identified as a element in developing positive relations between children and carers (McMahon et al., 2021). This involves, at a minimum, the child engaging with at least one person or activity that connects them to their culture. The task was achievable and alleviated many practitioners' concerns that their capacity to understand cultural elements was limited due to not sharing cultural connections with a child or a carer. The program goal of keeping each child connected to at least one cultural element was consistently met, with 100% compliance and an average 80% compliance for all three elements of ethnicity, religion, and language.

Phase Two

As individual children's care needs were being explored and responded to, the authors reflected on further placement matching considerations such as the following:

Table 1 Community of Practice Forum

 Examples of program-focused reflective questions

1. How can we better understand what we mean by culture?
 2. What factors are we considering in making decisions about cultural connections?
 3. How are we weighing up the importance of the family language in children's placements?
 4. What information are we exploring to understand the importance of a child's ethnic background to potential placements?
 5. How does the child's age or developmental stage influence an approach to cultural connection?
 6. How have the child's, family's and carer's faith-based activities been considered in placement matching?
 7. What guided considering all three elements or prioritising one over another in determining meaningful cultural experiences?
 8. How might this child's culture consider family roles or connections with community?
 9. What role does a family's settlement journey, whether through migration or as a refugee, have on cultural importance?
 10. How do we consider cultural supports when a child's parents have cultural connections with different ethnic backgrounds, languages, and faith practices?
-

- Was matching a child with a carer who shared the same ethnic background a cultural match?
- Was matching a child with a carer who shared the same faith but different language a cultural match?
- Was placing a refugee child with a carer who shared cultural connections but also had connections with the country from which the child's family experienced persecution a match?
- Which cultural elements were key to cultural matching?
- Were all cultural elements used for matching equally important or were some more significant than others?

A community of practice forum explored program-wide reflective questions (see [Table 1](#)) as well as more specific children placement matching issues (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2 Community of Practice Forum

 Examples of child-focused placement matching questions

1. What impacts would faith alignment have on a placement, whether other cultural elements such as ethnic and/or language are aligned or not?
 2. To what extent are language differences in a kinship placement important?
 3. What experiences might the child be exposed to in a placement where cultural or religious practices are not aligned to the child's family's practices, and when are these practices important to consider?
For example, where a child is Arabic speaking and Arabic, placed with a carer who shares the child's family ethnic background and language but are of a different faith such as Christianity and Islam?
 4. To what extent is the approach to traditions or religious practices important to consider?
For example, if the carers are conservative faith-based followers and the child has been raised with less intensity or regularity of cultural practices such as where a carer is practising praying five times a day while the child's parents were not.
 5. What issues are assessed when the child's placement with the proposed carers is likely to expose them to cultural experiences they may not have otherwise had?
 6. What is the minimum goal to measure the frequency or value of cultural connections?
 7. To what extent are the carers considering adjusting their routine to accommodate the child and their culture and/or vice versa, and how much are carers expecting the child to adjust to the carers' routines?
 8. To what extent is the child's family's cultural views on raising children reflected in child placement considerations?
 9. To what extent does the child's age or level of cultural connections with their birth family impact the level of cultural connections considered in the child's cultural care/support plan?
 10. How has a child's potential cultural trajectory shifted compared to what they may have experienced if they had stayed in their parent's care?
-

Over time, it became evident that the settlement experience, whether the child's family were newly arrived refugees, asylum seekers, or migrants contributed to cultural nuances. For some, it reflected trauma related to their country of origin and circumstances for the settlement journey to Australia, but for others it related to acculturation challenges in Australia. Learning about the settlement journey was a significant factor in understanding the child's and family's culture, whether they were multigenerational or newer migrants, and/or how they experienced cultural adjustment (Galligan et al., 2014; Schwartz et al., 2010). As such, the practice of monitoring, reflective discussions, and learnings culminated in the development of the four-tiered S.E.L.F. framework.

The S.E.L.F Cultural Framework

The S.E.L.F. cultural framework provides an approach to explore four key elements that can inform what culture may mean to a child or a family. It guides the collection of information through curiosity questions that seek to better understand what may be important to a child or family and/or what activities may enhance cultural connections. The four cultural elements are Settlement, Ethnicity, Language, and Faith (see Figure 2).

Each cultural element has ten prompt questions to guide learning and reflection on the child's culture. Collectively, the intersectionality of the cultural elements can inform practitioners on what might be influencing a child's or family's behaviours, what is considered important to them culturally, and what might need to be further explored to enhance positive experiences for children that nurtures safety, stability, and cultural connections.

The Settlement Journey—the Before, the After and the Now

The settlement journey of going from one country, region, or place of residence to another varies in duration. The *National Settlement Framework* launched in 2015 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020) refers to the first five years as the settlement period.

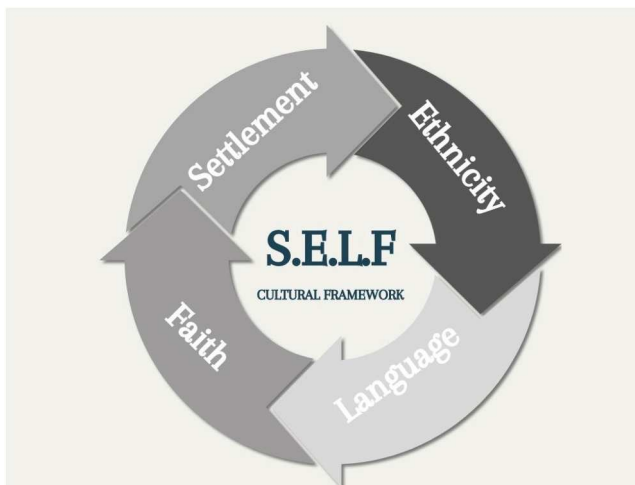


Figure 2 The S.E.L.F. cultural framework

However, it is not a linear process and can be complex, involving a breadth of causes, interplaying factors, experiences, and cultural adjustments. Settlement is generally considered a place-based process occurring postarrival in one country over a finite time. For some, such as migrants, it may be a journey undertaken by choice, but for others, such as refugees, it is one of force. Although migrants and refugees are not homogenous groups, there may be similar processes in readjustment to the loss of the familiar, including language, social structures, and support networks, which may include feelings of stress, loss, and grief, and reconstructing their sense of identity and belonging.

How cultural elements are maintained or adjusted may be influenced by the family's approach to assimilation and acculturation processes, and to what extent there is an interest in maintaining or adjusting cultural practices (Cheruvallil et al., 2022; Heath & Schneider, 2021). The assimilation process generally involves taking on the traits and customs of the dominant culture while rejecting one's cultural traditions and social customs (Cormoş, 2022). This approach can include name changes, changing religion, using the language of the country of settlement, or rejecting traditional practices, food, or clothes. Acculturation is the process of change that evolves as people are exposed to a new culture and to varying degrees adapt to new customs, beliefs, and values without dropping the traits of their original culture (Cormoş, 2022). Exploring what settlement may mean for individual children and families can contribute to understanding their thinking, behaviours, and the impact of related trauma (see Table 3).

Ethnicity—History, Traditions, Customs, and Social Practices

Race and ethnicity are both social constructs related to ancestry. Race focuses on shared distinctive, physical traits, and ethnicity refers to large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origins, or background (Blackmore, 2019). Developing an ethnic identity is a lifelong, dynamic, and reciprocal process, influenced by social and societal context. Ethnic practices evolve and can vary over time, especially through assimilation or acculturation settlement processes (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020).

Limited research in this area indicates that nonmatched or trans-racial placements can impact children's ethnic identity and may lead to a sense of disconnection from their ethnic backgrounds and family. How the views of family and carers are shared with the child will influence their sense of identity and how they manage social differences with their carers, parents, and other family members (Degener et al., 2022). Checking

Table 3 Exploring Connections Between Settlement and Culture

-
1. What were the drivers for the family to migrate or seek refuge to Australia? For example, what was happening in their country of origin? Were there any ethnic, social or religious conflicts in their country of origin?
 2. What was the individual's and/or the family's experiences when they moved from their previous country?
 3. What were the circumstances and or experiences in settling in Australia?
 4. How was the individual and/or the family received when they arrived in Australia?
 5. How long has the child or family lived in Australia?
 6. How many of the family's generations were born and have lived in Australia?
 7. What are the family's cultural expectations of family members' roles in raising children?
 8. How connected was/is the family with their geographic community/neighbourhood?
 9. How would the carers view the family's perceived views on family roles and/or relationships with the local neighbourhood?
 10. Which community leader or community member/s could discuss child protection, out-of-home care, and the child's culture with the family or carer?
-

Table 4 Exploring Connections Between Ethnicity and Culture

1. What is the history of the family's country/ies?
2. Where is the country located on the map? What flag represents the country?
3. What are important national or cultural celebrations?
4. What are the family's traditional foods?
5. What are the cultural nursery rhymes, songs or music?
6. What can assist the carer to learn about the ethnic traditions important to the child or their family?
7. How is the carer planning to maintain the child's customs, traditions, way of life, food and diet, music, and celebrations?
8. What are the potential issues for the child being exposed to different practices? What can help them adjust? What can help them feel more comfortable in any transition process?
9. Who has been consulted in the ethnic community to understand cultural issues and how this may impact the child and family members?
10. Where else can information be accessed to build knowledge on the family's ethnic history and practices?

in with the child and family, and sources such as cultural leaders will assist the social worker's appreciation of what ethnic traditions and practices may be important to a child. This can involve a breadth of questions and considerations (see [Table 4](#)).

Language—Exploring Languages, Accent/s, Dialects, and Terminology

For numerous families from diverse cultural backgrounds, maintaining language fluency is an important aspect of connections with identity, history, and culture. For migrants and refugees, the intergenerational transmission of a language, referred to also as a heritage language, can be critically important (Forrest & Dandy, 2018). For culturally and linguistically diverse children in care, connections to their heritage language may require thinking outside the box and using a range of resources, especially where the children's first language is English, but not their parents' first language.

Exploring what language may mean for individual children and families can involve a breadth of questions (see [Table 5](#)). Tailoring curiosity questioning and information gathering conversations can promote understanding of the importance of language as well as identifying potential resources that may support children and young people to maintain or develop their family language. Cultural practice activities that contribute to language development and cultural connections include the use of multilingual audiobooks, nursery rhymes, and music through digital social media, as well as language or community schools and social networking on a one-on-one or group level.

Faith—Rituals, Beliefs, Routines, Celebrations

Religious rituals and beliefs can preserve values within the community and foster a sense of belonging (Santiago, 2023). Rites of passage can be important in the development of an

Table 5 Exploring Connections Between Culture and Language

1. What is the family's preferred language or languages? How important is shared language for the birth parents?
2. How fluent is the child in the shared language?
3. What may be the language or communication issues between the birth family and the carer?
4. How fluent are the carers in the birth family's preferred language/s?
5. How fluent is the social worker in the birth family's preferred language/s?
6. Who can support communication between the child, family members, carers, and practitioners if assistance is needed?
7. What is the impact on a permanency placement and family relations if the child loses a non-English language through a placement where the carer's primary language is English, and the birth family's primary language is not English?
8. What is the impact on a child placed with a kin carer whose preferred language is not English and the child's is English?
9. What is the impact of losing language fluency if restoration or reunification is the goal?
10. How does a dialect or a regional accent impact on communication?

Table 6 Exploring Connections Between Faith and Culture

-
1. What are the religious beliefs held by the birth family members?
 2. What are the religious beliefs held by the child?
 3. What or how is religion practised within the family?
 4. What are the religious beliefs held by the carers?
 5. Is there an alignment between the religious practices and expectations?
 6. Is there any historical religious issues which may impact the child, birth parent, and carer relationship?
 7. Where there are faith-based differences between the child's birth family and the carers, how may this impact on the child?
 8. What are the significant religious calendar events?
 9. What are significant religious milestones related to the child's developmental age?
 10. Which faith-based community leader have you consulted with? Why and how?
-

individual's cultural identity, influencing the degree to which an individual will be accepted within the cultural group. For migrants and refugees, holding on to religious practices can be important in shaping their social responsibility and cultural sense of identity and belonging (Cheruvallil et al., 2022). Some migrants, refugees, or communities may have fled persecution and war from their country of origin due to religious conflict. Particular attention may be warranted should a placement be considered for a child with a carer whose religious affiliation conflicts with the family's. In these circumstances, consulting with the child, the carers, and other professional and cultural social workers may assist in weighing up the issues likely to impact on the child and family and lead one to consider the effectiveness of alternate interventions and support services.

It is important to have conversations with individuals to explore their beliefs and the impact these may have on caring for a child (see Table 6). It is equally important to seek out the views from cultural faith leaders, who are well placed to provide guidance on religious instruction and may be helpful conduits between social workers and family members or carers to clarify religious practices. When seeking consultation from a community leader or community members, consent from the child and family is important. In these circumstances, it is important to ensure conversations with community cultural leaders include information on privacy laws and the importance of navigating compliance with cultural responsiveness.

S.E.L.F. Cultural Framework Case Study

The following case study outlines the information collected through using the S.E.L.F. framework to engage with a child's carer and to create a plan for the child's permanent care.

The Child

Three-year-old Maddie was initially cared for by unrelated carers when she came into care at 8 months of age following her mother Bella's struggles with substance use, mental health, and gambling. Maddie's father, Noor, is Muslim, married, and until recently has been reluctant to visit with Maddie.

Carers

Maddie's initial carers shared elements of her cultural faith but not cultural heritage or language. Maddie's maternal grandparents, Yousif and Warda, known as Joe and Rose, took over Maddie's care six months later, cautiously optimistic for Maddie's reunification

with Bella in their care. Joe and Rose have an ambivalent attitude towards Noor, whom they did not know well.

Practice Issues

Given Joe and Rose's maturing age, health needs, and reunification focus, the practitioner explored extended family capacity to support Maddie's care and family visits with Noor. An Arabic-speaking Muslim practitioner met with Maddie's grandparents over a number of occasions and used the S.E.L.F. framework's cultural elements and curiosity questions to explore issues.

Applying the S.E.L.F. Framework

Settlement

Joe and Rose married in Lebanon and migrated to Australia 40 years ago in 1982, fleeing war in Lebanon, which brought significant national instability and conflict between the Lebanese Muslim and Christian communities. During this period, they lost a number of extended family members. They financially support family in Lebanon who continue to live with economic and social instability. They have strong views and conflicts with the Muslim faith and by extension Maddie's father. The decision to migrate was made with apprehension and courage seeking safety in a country whose main language they did not know. They changed their names at the suggestion of neighbours who could not pronounce their Lebanese names.

Ethnicity

Joe and Rose's traditions centre around Lebanese Christian values relating to parenting and family roles. The family and children are considered sacred and parenting is considered the most important roles, especially for mothers. The use of drugs, children born outside of marriage, and gambling are considered social evils. Joe and Rose feel a sense of shame, disappointment, and grief with Bella's lifestyle choices and parenting abilities. Further family losses were experienced with the tragic death of an adult son, which has contributed to increased withdrawal from social activities. Service provider records have described them as "overprotective and elusive". There were no background details to such comments.

Language

Joe and Rose's first language is Arabic. They do not speak English fluently, though their understanding is better than their verbal communication. Maddie and her parents are bilingual.

Faith

Joe and Rose hold strong connections to the Christian Maronite faith. Childbirth within marriage is considered a most sacred value. They have a strong connection to the local priest who has reinforced to them the religious belief that maternal grandparents are ultimately responsible as carers of grandchildren. The priest also has been instrumental in bringing together Lebanese community members from both the Muslim and Christian faiths.

Practice Outcomes

Child

Collecting information using the S.E.L.F. framework facilitated engagement and relationship-building with Maddie's carers, Joe and Rose. It contributed to discussions about Maddie's care needs, sharing information, and exploring opportunities for further conversations with the Maronite Christian community leader and Noor to support Maddie's paternal cultural connections.

Practitioner

Professional reflective dialogues provided opportunities to explore how information and assumptions were integrated to inform assessment, decisions, and actions.

Organisational

Data from the S.E.L.F. framework can inform strategic activities to recruit cultural staff, carers, and community collaborations.

Discussion

Children have a right to be connected to their culture. Out-of-home care policy requires services to keep data on children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, yet collection of data is not consistently practised, and when data is collected the content is varied and inconsistent. Some data categorise children as Indigenous and non-Indigenous or group children under an umbrella category of culturally and linguistically diverse, suggesting the group is homogenous. Both approaches hide children's cultural diversities. Given Australia's multicultural demographics and recent national research affirming the widespread nature of child maltreatment (Mathews et al., 2023), it is reasonable to assume that children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are captured in these numbers.

Children's culture and trajectory is influenced directly and indirectly by those who care and interact with them. Those involved in children's care have a responsibility to actively consider how they interact and impact on children's immediate and longer-term care. Self-awareness, and a willingness to question, reflect, and learn can contribute positively to how practitioners interact and support children in care, especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Practice environments that facilitate opportunities for professional forums to explore practices, share knowledge, and learn can contribute to better approaches to facilitating children's positive cultural experiences.

The S.E.L.F framework has been developed through learnings from implementing an out-of-home care program that primarily focused on supporting children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. A commitment to cooperative inquiry to explore, question, and better understand culture and how out-of-home care practice decisions impact children's cultural experiences contributed to shaping the S.E.L.F cultural framework. The team's interest in better monitoring of cultural data, self-reflection, and reflective dialogues, using curiosity questions to explore and learn, and Communities of Practice forums enhanced the framework's development.

A series of prompt questions have been developed to guide information gathering in relation to each of the four cultural elements. Collectively, the S.E.L.F. framework of four cultural elements provides guidance to support a range of casework and program-wide activities to keep children connected to their culture. The framework can guide the establishment of clear data collection categories that prompt information on children's settlement, ethnicity, language, and faith to better identify children's cultural profiles. It can encourage asking questions in relation to the families' settlement, ethnicity, language, and faith as part of the information-gathering process to explore what culture could mean to the child and family. It can also guide practitioners to consider their knowledge, thoughts, views, ideas, and assumptions about cultures and how these may impact on their assessments and work with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Finally, it can be used to monitor practices and to collate practice evidence on how children's cultural care needs are aligning to policy or accreditation requirements.

Conclusion

The S.E.L.F. framework provides an approach to explore and understand important cultural elements for children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in out-of-home care to better facilitate opportunities to nurture cultural connections. The four elements—Settlement, Ethnicity, Language, and Faith—can guide data collection and information-gathering conversations with children, families, or carers to better understand what culture can mean to them, so that children's cultural connections and activities are individualised and meaningfully supported.

The framework's four elements provide reference points to guide practitioner discussions that explore ideas and assumptions about cultures. It can be used to facilitate self-reflective learning and group discussions that contribute to building cultural knowledge and skills in responding to children in care from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Ultimately, the framework is a tool that can complement other practice resources and promote better opportunities for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in out-of-home care to stay connected to their culture.

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