Connection to Culture by Indigenous Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Australia

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Abstract

Given the relatively large numbers of Indigenous children and young people in out-of-home care in Australia, and the fact that one third across the country are not placed according to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, it is important to ensure that those in care maintain contact with their families and cultural community to satisfy their basic human rights, and to contribute to identity formation and lifelong support. To explore the extent to which this is happening at present, 296 Indigenous children and young people aged 10-18 years from all states and territories were surveyed to determine the strength of their connection to culture, and to identify mechanisms that might facilitate this connection, including the level of cultural support planning and contact with family members. Findings revealed that 31% did not feel connected to culture, while only 14% reported being aware of a personal cultural support plan, in spite of the possession of such a plan being a requirement of the National Standards in Out-of-Home Care introduced in 2011. Knowledge of family story was found to be a major factor in predicting strength of connection to culture, as were support from carers and frequency of contact with father. Contact with siblings was found to be negatively associated with connection to culture, possibly because of competing time interests; with limited free time, periods spent with siblings, which has a high priority in young persons' lives, is time not available for other pursuits. Based on these findings, it is argued that those responsible for Indigenous children and young people in out-of-home care must do more to ensure that these young people understand the long-term importance of being part of their culture and, if the young people wish, do everything possible to help them maintain that connection.

Keywords: Child Placement Principle, Cultural connection, Indigenous children, National Standards, Out-Of-Home-Care.

Over-representation of Indigenous Children and Young people in Out-of-Home Care

Arguably, the most critical issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) in Australia at present is their over-representation. Although this group comprises only 5.5% of the total population of 0 to 17 year-olds (AIHW, 2016, Table A50), they constitute 35.6% of the children and

young people in OOHC (AIHW, 2016, Table 5.4). This national average is exceeded in WA (52.1%), and in NT, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up 42% of the 0 to 17 year olds yet account for 87.7% of all children on care and protection orders (AIHW, 2016, Tables 5.4, A46). In addition, while the number per 1000 of the non-Indigenous population in care has remained relatively constant over the last five years (now 5.5 per 1,000), the rate for Indigenous children and young people has increased steadily since 2006 from 24.1 to 52.5 per 1,000 children (SCRGSP, 2016, Table 15A.18).

Much attention now is being directed to early intervention programs designed to prevent neglect and maltreatment and reduce the likelihood that children will need to be removed from their families and admitted to OOHC (e.g. Pecora et al., 2014). Concerned observers have noted that, if the numbers of Indigenous children and young people in care continue to rise at the present rate, and if the current policies regarding Indigenous children and young people are maintained in child protection and juvenile justice, similar problems to those surrounding the 'Stolen Generations' are likely to be perpetuated (Cunneen & Libesman, 2000; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; Read, 2006). While every effort should be made to reduce over-representation, we must not forget to provide support for those already in the system.

The Value of Cultural Connectedness

Under the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989, Article 30), "a child … who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language." This specific stipulation contributes to the realisation of other rights relating to identity formation and the promotion of the child's social, spiritual, and moral well-being, and physical and mental health (see Articles 8 and 17). Regrettably, in OOHC in Australia, these aspirations are not always met.

Bamblett and Lewis (2010, p. 7) summarised the current situation in their criticism of a system that does not address the disadvantage of Indigenous children and young people and "ignores their cultural reality and enables subtle and disguised moments of racism to occur." The special relevance of family contact, in particular between siblings (McDowall, 2015), must be considered not only for continuity of kin connections but also for linkage to community and culture. As Higgins and colleagues

(2006, p. 44) reported, the young Indigenous people in their focus groups consistently expressed a desire to be back in their home communities, and to be reunited with their parents. Ralph (2015) argued cultural connection is vital for Indigenous children and young people, and an understanding of its importance is essential for those working with or caring for them. In this regard, Long and Sephton (2011) emphasised the relevance for both Aboriginal and mainstream child and family welfare of increasing our "understanding of Aboriginal child-rearing practices," and "recognising that there is a distinct Aboriginal understanding of what constitutes a best interests framework" (p. 96), especially concerning connection to culture. However, as Bamblett and colleagues (2012) observed, "mainstream approaches to assessment often ignored important aspects of Aboriginal children's social and emotional well-being, such as spirituality and cultural connection" (p. 7).

Indigenous children and young people who already have been removed from their birth family and placed in OOHC need to be supported and protected in the present, while hopefully retaining a positive relationship with their parents and community into the future to enhance their well-being (Dudgeon et al., 2014). Relationships with authorities can influence both these aspects. As Ivec, Braithwaite, and Harris (2012) noted, children and young people can be adversely affected if a negative relationship develops between government agents and the Indigenous people, for example, "through reports of procedural injustice, failure by the authority to communicate and demonstrate soundness of purpose, and through lack of interest in identity affirmation and relationship building" (p. 80). While their respondents voiced several criticisms of the system in Australia, they clearly wanted to make it fairer and more effective. These authors advocate employing methods of restorative justice, maintaining the ongoing dialogue that Arney, McGuinness, and Westby (2012) described in their family group conferencing, to ensure all parties remain connected and working towards family reunification.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

One action by authorities that can significantly affect the wellbeing of children and young people removed from their birth families is the choosing of where they will be placed while in care. McHugh (2003) believed that the likelihood of inappropriate placement of Indigenous children with non-Indigenous carers would be reduced because all states and territories have introduced legislation supporting the application of the

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. Recently, the implementation of this Principle has received considerable attention (Australian Centre for Child Protection, 2013; Tilbury, 2013). However as Arney and colleagues (2015) reported, little official monitoring of compliance has occurred in most jurisdictions, with the exception of Queensland (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (CCYPCG) (QLD), 2013). Arney et al. (2015) summarised these records showing that full compliance with the Child Placement Principle was achieved in 12.5% of the audit sample. Although such audits have not been conducted elsewhere, the data reported by AIHW (2016, Table A38) suggest that compliance may be a problem in other jurisdictions as well, with the percentage of Indigenous children not placed in an Indigenous context ranging from 20.8% in NSW to 65.2% in NT.

Arney et al, (2014) posited that the Placement Principle proves difficult to implement because of numerous barriers, including:

> …The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system, a shortage of Indigenous carers, poor identification and assessment of carers, inconsistent involvement of Indigenous people and organisations in decision-making, deficiencies in the provision of cultural care, and inconsistent quantification and monitoring of the Principle (p. 2).

Other strategies need to be employed to ensure that Indigenous children and young people in care receive appropriate cultural support.

Cultural Support Planning

Continuing concern for improvements to the conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children is reflected in the inclusion, in the third, three-year action plan guiding developments within the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*, of a "cross-cutting focus area" calling on State and Territory governments to give sustained attention to improving outcomes for Indigenous people in all areas under the Framework (DSS, 2015). When this National Framework was first implemented, a set of National Standards for OOHC were articulated by the Australian Government as part of the process (FaHCSIA, 2011). Standard 10 requires that "Children and young people in care are supported to develop their identity, safely and appropriately, through contact with their families, friends, culture, spiritual sources and communities and have their life history recorded as they grow up" (p. 12). This concerns

their knowledge of their family story, and for Indigenous children and young people, connection with their cultural community.

As Bamblett et al. (2012) emphasised, several factors need to be considered when exploring cultural understanding. They identified six issues that are particularly relevant for Indigenous children and young people to address when in care:

1. Who you are (personal identity);
2. Who you belong to (family, community);
3. Where you belong (country);
4. What you do (participation, expression);
5. Where you come from (family history, Aboriginal history); and
6. What you believe (values, beliefs and practices).

The literature is clear that the mental and physical health of Indigenous people is enhanced when they maintain their "traditional" culture (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). However, it is important for individuals to have this understanding not only for their own sense of identity and well-being but also, as Lewis and Burton (2014, p. 11) warned, because "children who become isolated from cultural and community networks when in out-of-home care are more vulnerable to being abused, and less able to seek help."

A proposed measure of the impact of National Standard 10 was the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who have a current Cultural Support Plan (CSP), although it should be remembered that children and young people from other cultural backgrounds can benefit from cultural support planning as well (e.g., Multicultural Services Unit, 2013). Hutt and Clarke (2012) stressed that because of the numbers of Indigenous children and young people placed with non-Indigenous carers, "cultural support planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people must be a high priority for all staff, carers and volunteers of out-of-home care services." (p. 76).

Most jurisdictions have mechanisms in places for developing Cultural Support Plans (CSP) for Indigenous children and young people in care. For example, in Victoria the government, building on the early work of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, has produced a comprehensive Cultural Support Plan Template and Guide (Department of Human Services [VIC], 2005). However, little work has been done in any jurisdiction evaluating the plans produced (Libesman, 2011).

Recently, Mendes, Saunders, and Baidawi (2016) produced a report into care-leaving support for Indigenous young people in Victoria. Participants in the focus groups conducted by Mendes et al, representing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous care agencies, were "unanimous in their declaration of the need for, and value of cultural support and connectedness" (p. 8). However, the subtle difference between the groups regarding the perception of the significance of culture could point to how priorities are established by workers in the system. As Mendes et al. explained:

> The majority of participants from non-Indigenous organisations appeared to espouse the view that cultural connectedness and support is *one of many hierarchical needs* of Indigenous care leavers, but not necessarily the primary need. Conversely, the alternative position described by many ACCO workers and some non-Indigenous staff from mainstream agencies is that cultural connectedness is *a primary and fundamental need* of Indigenous care leavers, through which their other needs may be fulfilled (p. 76).

One government that must be commended for its efforts concerning CSP development and monitoring is Queensland. As part of its annual audits into the Indigenous Child Placement Principle, Queensland's CCYPCG reported on the cultural planning process and indicated that, of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people included in the audit, 98.5% had a CSP, according to Child Safety Department figures. However, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (Qld) (2012, p. 3) has questioned this high incidence of plan possession stating that, from their own case file audits, "ATSILS is of the view that the accurate percentage of quality Cultural Support Plans will reflect significantly lower adherence."

While the actual incidence of CSPs may be disputed, the CCYPCG's (2013, p. 47) audit uncovered more concerning data on the scope and content of a random sample of 541 plans on file, namely:

- 142 (26.2%) did not have any information about the cultural group, geographical area or language group relevant to the identity of the child and/or the child's parents and extended family;
- 280 (51.8%) had information about one or more cultural groups relevant to identity of the child and/or the child's parents and extended family;
- 69 (12.8%) had information about one or more language groups relevant to identity of the child and/or the child's parents and extended family;

- 351 (64.9%) had information about the geographical area(s) relevant to identity of the child and/or the child's parents and extended family; and

- Only 49 (9.1%) had information across all three categories of information about the child's cultural identity (cultural group, geographical area and language group).

These results, particularly the last point, show as the auditors claimed that the figures "indicate significant room for improvement in this regard" (p. 48), even for a government intent on achieving the best outcomes for children and young people.

Plans are only useful if the information they contain is accurate and relevant—comprehensive and comprehensible. However, while data from case-file audits give one view of the activity within the care system, from the "official" government's perspective, it also is important to determine how the children and young people for whom, or ideally with whom, the plans were prepared, perceive the value of this resource. These views will form the substance of this paper.

Contact with Family

As well as planning for establishing and/or retaining connections with community and culture, young people in care need clear guidance and support for maintaining contact with immediate and extended family members. CSPs usually make provision for recording these details, but the information has to be located, which for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people can be difficult, and then included where relevant. The value of a CS plan depends on caseworkers making the effort to find the valuable details.

Moore, Bennett, and McArthur (2007) conducted two youth forums with 52 Aboriginal or Torres Islander children and young people during which participants were asked to talk about family. Respondents reported feeling that "family provided them with support, with belonging and often identified family as being the most important thing in their lives" (p.25). The views expressed were similar to those of other children and young people regarding sibling contact: "they wanted to be placed with their siblings or, at least, to be able to stay in constant contact during their placement" (p. 27). Older siblings felt a need to support and protect younger children; the younger ones felt safer with that support. Family was seen as providing individual nurturing; culture related to

the broader context of identity. As one young person commented, "culture is who you are, so if you don't know it you don't know who you are" (Moore et al., p. 29).

When Moore et al. (2007) compared the views expressed by those children and young people who were raised having strong cultural ties with those who had not experienced that connection, they found the former group appreciated the benefit of ongoing cultural immersion, while the latter wanted to achieve it. Interestingly, Moore et al. also noted that a number of young people felt disconnected from their families and some actively discouraged maintaining contact. How would these young people value cultural connection?

The present study was designed to explore the extent to which Indigenous children and young people in OOHC are aware of, or involved in cultural support planning. It also focused on respondents' views in terms of the strength of their connection to culture, and involvement with family. It was expected that those with Cultural Support Plans, who should be more aware of their traditions, country, and culture, would feel more connected with their community than those without plans and that those in contact with birth family members would be more likely to have preserved a connection to culture.

Methodology

Participants

Ethical approval for the project was obtained through Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference Number QCA/07/12/HREC) with the support of all state and territory governments, and following all required informed consent procedures. Most of the children and young people who participated in this study comprised the Indigenous respondents from a larger survey conducted by CREATE into the OOHC sector more broadly (McDowall, 2013). However, additional participants were drawn from NT, and from WA where the department had chosen not participate in the 2013 survey. In total, data are presented from 296 Indigenous children and young people placed in OOHC; 95.3% ($n = 282$) were Aboriginal, the others being Torres Strait Islander; 54.7% ($n = 162$) were female; and 66.2% ($n = 196$) were aged 10-14 years, with the remaining 33.8% aged 15-17 years. Contrary to the current published proportions of placement types in Australia, where kinship care is the most common, half these respondents were placed in Foster Care (n = 148). Furthermore, 20% were

located in Residential Care, much higher than the national average of 5.5% (see AIHW, 2016, for current distribution). Fewer Kinship Care representatives were recruited for this study than would be expected from AIHW data (22.3% here compared with 49% nationally). It is worth noting that in NT, approximately 45% of those children and young people designated as being in Foster Care actually are placed in kinship arrangements (AIHW, 2015, Figure 5.3, Note 3). The final Placement category (Other Care) included 7.8% of respondents living largely in semi-independent or independent accommodation, (sometimes designated as "self-placed"; Department of Communities, Child Safety, and Disability Services [QLD], 2016).

The distribution of participants over jurisdictions is shown in Table 1. Of these, 20.3% (n = 60) claimed (through self-report) to experience some form of disability, with the largest group reporting "Specific learning/Attention Deficit Disorder" (9.1%, n = 27). Most came into care around five years of age, had spent an average of between six and seven years in care; and 45.6% (n = 135) had two or fewer placements while in care, while feeling between "reasonably" and "quite" satisfied with their placement history.

Table 1

Number of Indigenous Children and Young People Respondents from Each Jurisdiction

Jurisdiction	Number	Percent
ACT	6	2.0
NSW	68	23.0
NT	60	20.3
QLD	76	25.7
SA	19	6.4
TAS	30	10.1
VIC	24	8.1
WA	13	4.4
	296	100

Materials

The 30 questions constituting the survey used in this study formed part of CREATE's more extensive investigation into young people's OOHC experience in Australia (McDowall, 2013). Ten questions gathered demographic information about participants (including sex, age, culture, placement type, and jurisdictional location) and asked about aspects of their OOHC experience (e.g., age entering care, time in care). Nine questions

dealt with respondents' knowledge of family (measured using a 6-point scale for self-report—1: Nothing; 6: Everything I need) and strength of connection with culture and community (1: Not at all connected; 6: Very connected). The remaining items addressed the extent to which contact was maintained with family members. Level of contact was determined using a 7-point scale (1: Not at all; 2: Annually; 3: Every 6 months; 4: Every 3 months; 5: Monthly; 6: Fortnightly; 7: Weekly).

Procedure

The relevant data for children and young people who had completed the CREATE 2013 Report Card survey were extracted for the questions of interest in this study. The additional respondents from NT and WA were located with assistance from the respective government departments. Based on information provided by the departments, CREATE staff contacted children and young people (generally by telephone) and invited them to participate in the study. The numbers obtained by this process were augmented by respondents sourced randomly from CREATE's *clubCREATE* database. The survey was made available online via the Survey Monkey tool, but most data were collected from telephone interviews between young people and trained CREATE staff, with some one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. Data were compiled and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics V22 for Macintosh computers.

Findings

Connection to Culture

A basic question asked of respondents was to indicate on a 6-point scale (1: Not at all; 6: Very) how connected they felt with their culture or community (Strength of Connection). The distribution of responses showed that 31.8% (n = 94) reported being quite or very connected with culture; 37.5% (n = 111) expressed a somewhat or reasonable connection; and 30.7% (n = 91) felt little or no connection with culture.

Sex, Age, Placement type, and Jurisdiction

First, the effect of demographic factors (Sex, Age, Placement type, and Jurisdiction) was considered on Strength of Connection to Culture. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed on the mean Strength-of-Connection ratings, with each of these independent variables to determine if any differences were greater than would be expected by chance. No significant differences (p > .05) were found in Strength of Connection to culture for Sex, Age Group, or Placement type. However, differences

were found between the means for Jurisdictions (see Table 2). Indigenous children and young people in TAS and WA rated Strength of Connection to culture lower than in the other states and territories, with the differences between these and the ratings from QLD and VIC unlikely to have occurred by chance ($p < .01$).

Table 2

Means and Significance Tests for Designated Variables on Strength of Connection to Culture

Variable	Mean	F	Significance
Sex	$M_F = 3.5, M_M = 3.7$	$F_{[1, 294]} = 1.2$	*ns.*
Age Group	$M_{10-14} = 3.7, M_{15-17} = 3.5$	$F_{[1, 294]} = 1.8$	*ns.*
Placement	$M_{FC} = 3.5, M_{KC} = 3.9,$ $M_{RC} = 3.6, M_{OC} = 3.7$	$F_{[3, 292]} = 1.0$	*ns.*
Jurisdiction	$M_{TAS} = 2.9; M_{WA} = 2.4$ $M_{QLD} = 4.0; M_{VIC} = 4.1$	$F_{[7, 288]} = 3.4$	*p* < .01

Cultural Support Plans and Connection to Culture

An increasingly important measure that should assist the development of a young person's connection to culture (stipulated in the National Standards, 2011, as the primary measure of the application of Standard 10) is the possession of a current Cultural Support Plan. Of the 296 children and young people in this sample, 20 claimed that having a CSP was not relevant for them. It is not clear what conditions might have led to this view (whether they were so immersed in their cultural community that they felt the Plan unnecessary, or the Order they were under did not require the preparation of a Plan, or whether they did not care at all about their culture). Because they did not believe that they needed to have a plan, their data were removed from subsequent analyses of CSPs.

Overall, 14.5% of respondents (n = 40) indicated they knew about their CSP; 20.3% (n = 56) were definite that they didn't have one, while 65.2% (n = 180) did not know whether a plan had been prepared or not. No Sex ($\chi^2_{[1]} = 0.01, p > .05$), Age Group ($\chi^2_{[2]} = 2.6, p > .05$), or Placement type ($\chi^2_{[6]} = 3.8, p > .05$) differences in awareness of CSP were observed. Because of the small number of children and young people possessing a CSP, a meaningful comparison across the eight jurisdictions was not possible; however, it was interesting that 35% of respondents with a CSP came from Queensland (see Table 3).

The association between having a CSP and Strength of Connection to culture was explored in a number of ways. A Pearson correlation between having a CSP and Strength of Connection showed no relationship between these variables ($r_{[276]} = .03$, $p > .05$). A crosstab analysis, comparing the plan awareness categories (Yes, No, Don't know) with the Strength of Connection categories (Strong [quite and very connected], Medium [somewhat and reasonably connected], Weak [little or no connection]) revealed that, again, part of the difficulty in achieving a meaningful analysis was the relatively low number of respondents reporting awareness of a CSP. Table 4 shows the distribution of numbers of respondents in the respective groups; the differences were not significant ($\chi^2_{[4]} = 4.3$, $p > .05$). Only 4.7% of the sample felt strongly connected and had a CSP, while 28.3% felt strongly connected even without a Plan.

Table 3

Number, Sample Size, and Percent of Respondents in Each Jurisdiction Who Reported Having a Cultural Support Plan

Jurisdiction	Number with CSP (Total Sample *n*)	Percent of Number with CSP
ACT	1 (6)	2.5
NSW	9 (68)	22.5
NT	5 (60)	12.5
QLD	14 (76)	35.0
SA	2 (19)	5.0
TAS	1 (30)	2.5
VIC	2 (24)	5.0
WA	6 (13)	15.0
Total	40 (296)	100.0

A further correlation was performed analysing the relationship between respondents' ratings of connection to culture and involvement in planning. A low but significant correlation was achieved ($r_{[276]} = .14$, $p < .05$), indicating that there was a tendency for those who felt most strongly connected with culture to be more involved in their planning. A one-way ANOVA confirmed that those respondents feeling strongly connected ($M_{Strong} = 2.7$) were significantly more involved in their culture support

planning than were those weakly connected ($M_{\text{Weak}} = 2.2$; $F_{[1, 169]} = 4.3$, $p < .05$), even though the level of involvement was not high.

Table 4

Numbers of Respondents Reporting the Designated Level of Knowledge About a Personal Cultural Support Plan (CSP) and Their Corresponding Ratings of Strength of Connection with Culture.

CSP	Strength of Connection			Total
	Weak	Medium	Strong	
Yes	8	19	13	40
No	19	16	21	56
Don't know	53	70	57	180
Total	80	105	91	276

Note. Weak: Ratings 1 and 2 (Little or No connection); Medium: Ratings 3 and 4 (Somewhat or Reasonably connected); Strong: Ratings 5 and 6 (Quite or Very connected).

Family Contact and Connection to Culture

Children and young people were asked to indicate how frequently they were in contact with birth family members with whom they did not live, including Mother, Father, Siblings, Grandparents, and Other relatives. Contact could be through face-to-face visits, telephone conversations, or other forms of social media. Frequency was estimated using a 7-point scale: Weekly, Fortnightly, Monthly, Every 3 months, Every 6 months, Annually, Not at all. Table 5 shows the percentage of the 296 children and young people who reported not having the respective family members as part of their lives. Fathers were twice as likely as mothers to be the absent parent. Siblings not living with the respondent were the family members most frequently contacted (38.6% Weekly); fathers were the most likely not to be contacted at all (48.5%). The percentages of respondents contacting family members at various frequencies are presented in Figure 1.

Table 5

Percentage of Respondents Reporting They Did Not Have the Designated People in Their Lives

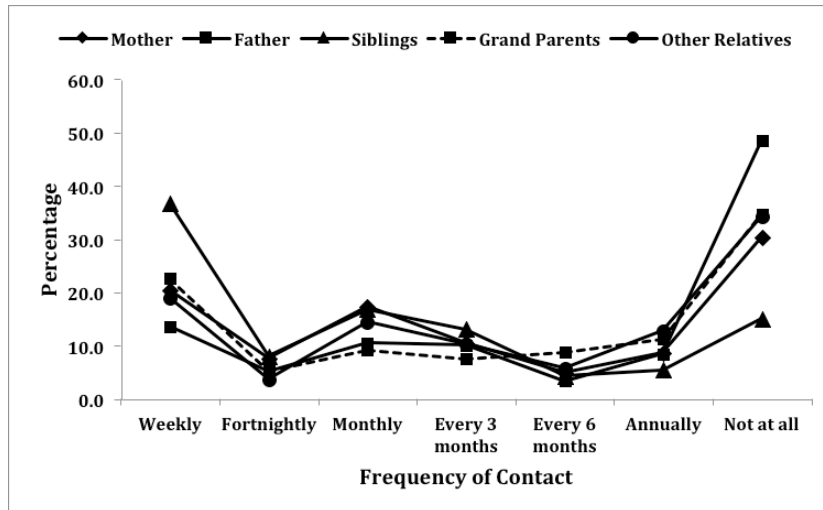|	Mother	Father	Siblings	Grandparents	Other relatives
No Such Person	9.8	20.3	7.1	15.2	16.2

Figure 1. Percentage of Indigenous children and young people reporting the estimated frequency of contact with the designated family members (*n* = 296).

Predictors of Strength of Connection to Culture

It was of interest to explore the association between amount of family contact and the strength of connection to culture. Would more contact be reflected in stronger connections? To answer this question, and to look for other factors that may influence the development of cultural connections, a step-wise multiple regression analysis was performed with Strength of Connection to culture as the dependent variable, and contact with family members as predictor variables. Also included in this analysis, as predictors, were measures of the level of support received from carers and caseworkers to maintain contact with family, extent of knowledge of family story, whether the respondent lived with brothers or sisters, and the possession of a cultural support plan. The variables Live with Sibs and Cultural Support Plan were categorical variables scored as 1: Yes; 0: No.

The correlations between the predictor variables and the dependent variable are shown in Table 6 that indicates significant but weak relationships between the contact variables and the criterion variable. The raw (*B*) and standardised (*Beta*) regression coefficients are presented in Table 7. The final model contained four of the 11 predictors and was reached in four steps with no variables removed. The model, while significant ($F_{[4, 278]}$ = 17.9, p < .001), accounted for only approximately 21% of the variance in Strength of Connection to Culture (R^2 = .21, Adjusted R^2 = .19). Other factors not able to

be included in this analysis could well play a part in influencing a child or young person's connection to their culture. However, of the variables included here, the extent of Knowledge of Family story emerged as the best predictor of Strength of Connection, accounting for almost 11% of the dependent variable variance alone. More knowledge was associated with a stronger connection.

Support from their carers to maintain birth family contact was also related to stronger cultural association for Indigenous children and young people, as was the degree of contact with siblings not living with the respondents (both factors accounting for about 3% of the variance). However, interestingly, the amount of sibling contact and strength of cultural links were negatively related; the more frequent the contact with siblings the less strong the reported cultural connection. Another unexpected predictor of the connection factor was the extent of contact with Father; there was a tendency for those children and young people who saw their fathers more frequently to report feeling closer to their cultural community. This was the weakest of the significant predictors, accounting for around 2% of the criterion variance.

Table 6

Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Dependent Variable (Strength of Connection to Culture) and Predictor Variables Listed

Variables	Variables										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Connection	1	-.01	.18**	-.12*	.08	.09	.04	.36***	.06	.18**	.06
Mother Contact	-	1	.17**	.37***	.22***	.25***	-.01	.03	.14	.19**	.00
Father Contact		-	1	.17**	.29***	.27***	.14***	.12*	.09	.08	-.06
Sibling Contact			-	1	.25***	.32***	.19**	.03	.09	.21***	.05
Grandparent Contact				-	1	.43***	.10*	.09	.05	.07	-.01
Relatives Contact					-	1	.08	.13*	.03	.10	.02
Live with Siblings						-	1	.01	.04	.15**	-.06
Know Family Story							-	1	.12*	.09	.14**
Support Caseworker								-	1	.39***	-.01
Support Carer									-	1	.13*
Cultural Support Plan										-	1

*Note. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001*

Table 7

Results of Stepwise Regression Analysis Predicting Strength of Connection with Culture from the Predictor Variables: Knowledge of Family Story, Support of Carer, Sibling Contact, and Father Contact

	B	SE B	Beta
Constant	1.68	0.36	
Know Family Story***	0.36	0.06	0.33
Support by Carer***	0.19	0.06	0.18
Sibling Contact***	-0.12	0.04	-0.19
Father Contact**	0.10	0.04	0.15

The anecdotal comments collected from respondents regarding who talked to them most about their family story and their culture confirms the importance of family members and carers imparting this information. Table 8 shows the percentage of respondents who reported receiving family and cultural information from the designated sources. Unsurprisingly, family members were the most commonly accessed source, with "mum," "dad," "gran," "siblings," and "uncle" all being mentioned. However, many carers also were heavily involved in this activity and clearly play a vital role, far more than caseworkers who should have greater access to information about family members' location and more resources at their disposal to facilitate connection. A very concerning finding is that about one fifth reported no one had taken the time to help them understand the significance of their family background or culture.

Table 8

Numbers and Percentages of Respondents Who Found Out About Their Family Story and Culture From the Designated Sources

Source of Information	Family Story		Culture	
	Number	%	Number	%
No One	53	17.9	69	23.3
Family member (not living with)	121	40.9	113	38.2
Carer	74	25.0	45	15.2
Caseworker	22	7.4	5	1.7
Teacher	1	0.3	25	8.4
Cultural Community Member	10	3.4	20	6.8
Other	15	5.1	19	6.4
Total	296	100.0	296	100.0

Discussion

Connection with Culture

The over-representation of Indigenous children and young people in OOHC is well documented and recent data reveal that levels of disproportionality have not improved over time. As Tilbury (2009) observed, more comprehensive child and family welfare policies are needed to address Indigenous disadvantage. This will require early interventions designed to support families that could help reduce the numbers of Indigenous children and young people removed from their parents as an initial protective measure. However, for those children and young people already in the child protection system, it is imperative that they are supported to retain connection to culture and family, thereby maintaining and even developing further their sense of identity (Libesman, 2011).

It is clear that considerable attention must be given to the 30% of Indigenous children and young people within the care system who report little or no connection with their culture, as identified in the present study, particularly in the states of TAS and WA. A large proportion of those with little interest (77%) reported that no one had talked to them about their culture. While some Indigenous young people may not want to be involved with their cultural community, they must have sufficient information to make an informed choice, and should not experience exclusion because they were unaware of their options. Being the professionals directly supporting children and young people, child protection and social workers must have the skills and capacity to ensure their Indigenous clients have access to the relevant information about culture. Bennett, Zubrzycki, and Bacon (2011) identified ways that experienced Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal caseworkers could integrate a range of knowledge, values, and skills in their work, especially concerning Aboriginal and Western world views that can influence "the development of relationships and the change that can be initiated once they are formed with individuals and communities" (p. 30). Culturally-sensitive social work practice needs to focus on encompassing communities, families, and collectives, not just concentrate on individuals. Connection to culture is an important part of this process.

Cultural Support Plans and Connection to Culture

The National Standards in OOHC (FaHCSIA, 2011) stipulate that all Indigenous children and young people within the system must have a Cultural Support Plan to guide

their connection to culture. While young people cared for by some Indigenous agencies are well supported in gaining an understanding of their cultural roots and developing connections, overall the majority (85.5%) know little about planning for such cultural engagement. Because the data collected here were equivocal about the value of Cultural Support Plans in enhancing connection to culture, it is not known whether young people see plans are irrelevant (or "anathema" as Hung & Appleton, 2016, reported in their study of care-leavers in the UK), or whether the plans available were not appropriate or accessible.

Intuitively, it would seem important for Indigenous children and young people to be aware of their family history, including genograms, totems, knowledge of country etc., so they can understand the cultural context to which they can relate. The importance of having this information documented should be beyond dispute (Kertesz, 2009). However, as Mendes et al. (2016) explained, based on caseworker feedback, there are several issues that make working with Cultural Support Plans problematic. Apart from some Indigenous young people in care not being motivated to engage with workers from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in the planning process, more often the agencies themselves are under-resourced and do not receive the number of referrals for planning commensurate with the demand in the system. When plans are instigated, it can be difficult to locate all the information required to produce a useful record; even families sometimes are unable to provide the necessary details. Until the planning process in all regions becomes engaging, and plans produced have meaning and relevance for the young people involved, it probably is unrealistic to expect that Cultural Support Plans will achieve their cultural-connection objective.

Contact with Family Members

Another issue that needs particular attention is the amount of contact Indigenous children and young people in OOHC have with fathers. One fifth of respondents did not have their father as part of their lives (this could be because the father was dead, in prison, absent, or unknown). However, of those who did know their father, almost half never had contact with him at all. Following the recent calls for a greater focus on engaging fathers in child protection because of demonstrable benefits (Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2013), such attention would seem essential with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people because of the observed limited presence of fathers. In developing Cultural Support Plans, caseworkers must give special

consideration to locating extant fathers and encouraging them where possible to play a meaningful role in their children's lives.

Predictors of Strength of Connection to Culture

While it was thought that more frequent contact with birth family members might be an important predictor of strength of connection with culture for Indigenous children and young people in care, this generally was not found to be the case. The factor that had the greatest influence of those measured was "Knowledge of family story": The more young people knew about their background, the narrative that usually was provided by a family member or their carer, the greater their interest in, and the stronger the connection they felt with their cultural community. The support for continued cultural connection by carers was critical, even though in many situations the carers have limited resources and are provided with little support to facilitate such connections. The practices outlined by Higgins and Butler (2007) need to be continued to maintain the primary support. Involvement of cultural community members probably would be greater than found in this study once a connection was forged between children and young people and their cultural community; it is difficult for elders and others to be involved before a need has been identified.

Contact with some family members did influence cultural associations, but in unexpected ways. For example, the amount of contact with siblings when they were not living together was negatively related to cultural connection; the more frequently respondents saw their brothers and/or sisters, the less involved they felt with culture. This could be a result of time constraints. Given that most people in contemporary society have limited free time, if young people place a higher priority on spending this resource on regular visits with siblings, other more varied cultural pursuits may appear less significant.

This is an issue that caseworkers and carers need to consider when facilitating connection between siblings who are not placed together, as these are the family members with whom contact is most valued. If siblings cannot be located in the same household, it is essential that they be supported to maintain connection with each other since this is the family relationship likely to have the greatest longevity (McDowall, 2015). However, in such situations, extra support must be provided to ensure cultural connections are not sacrificed in the process.

Although fathers were the least likely family member to be contacted by children and young people while in care, those who did see their fathers reported a

stronger attachment with their culture. This observation is consistent with recent evidence regarding the importance of child-father relationships in OOHC, particularly concerning the role of Indigenous fathers in promoting their children's well-being, connection to family, and social cohesion (Fletcher, May, St George, Stoker, & Oshan, 2014).

Conclusion

The results of this study clearly indicate that more must be done to help young Indigenous people in OOHC realise the importance of being a part of their culture and support them in achieving this outcome. While carers are bearing a considerable amount of this responsibility at present, it is vital that caseworkers, who have greater capacity and access to resources, should become more involved, both in cultural support planning, and in the direct facilitation of connection to culture. By ensuring that relevant family stories are passed on to Indigenous children and young people in care by people with that knowledge, as part of or an adjunct to case management, caseworkers and carers will maximise the likelihood of the young people establishing and maintaining an interest in, and connection with their culture. The involvement of fathers, where present, could enhance this experience. Those charged with engaging the young Indigenous people should be aware of the value of Cultural Support Plans in documenting the person's relevant family history. It is not sufficient merely for a Plan to be prepared for the individual; the children and young people must be involved in its development. Such participation is likely to create a situation where maintaining cultural connections is something they would want to realise in their future lives.

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