'The Truth of Our Stories': A mixed method evaluation of Elder and community-led cultural training for out-of-home care agency workers and non-Indigenous foster carers in Australia

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Abstract

Globally, Indigenous peoples have incurred significant harm due to colonisation of their lands. Dispossession of culture, language, family and land, and the historical, systematic removal of children in Australia (the 'Stolen Generation'), has resulted in evident ongoing negative outcomes in the contemporary lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The trauma of child removal has been felt across generations and the rising rates of child removal is an ongoing concern, as well as an insult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in care processes can repair harm and promote healing. Truth-telling is emerging as an important approach to healing and repairing colonial harms. This out-of-home care research study provided truth-telling as a form of cultural training to mainstream out-of-home care agencies. The delivery and evaluation of 'The Truth of Our Stories' cultural training was co-designed with Elders and Aboriginal community advisory groups. A mixed methods approach was used to evaluate the training, inclusive of 42 participants recruited from out-of-home care staff and foster carers. Participants were informed of historical, cultural and social contexts, and the results show that they benefitted from the training, with

moderate to large improvements in knowledge and confidence for providing culturally secure service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. Qualitative feedback suggested that the training was well-received by participants. We conclude that this type of cultural training provides important opportunities to share information and knowledge. This training may initiate change by supporting cultural, family, and community connectedness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

Keywords: Cultural training, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, out-of-home care, cultural connection, cultural resources

Introduction

Globally, European colonisation has caused significant harm to Indigenous peoples' long-term health and wellbeing (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019; Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013; Smith, 2021; Whitbeck et al., 2004). Policies of separation and assimilation have exposed Indigenous peoples to multiple instances of physical and cultural genocide, including the forced removal of children to reserves, missions, and residential schools. In Australia, the systematic removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children resulted in what is widely known as the 'Stolen Generation' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997). The negative impacts of this practice on the emotional, physical and spiritual health and wellbeing of individuals and communities are detailed in the landmark 'Bringing them Home Report' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997). These include lower rates of employment, over-representation in the youth and adult justice systems and out-of-home care (OOHC), as well as increased risk of self-harm and suicide compared to non-Indigenous people (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022, 2023; Leckning et al., 2023). Despite many changes in systems and policies, these negative impacts span multiple generations (Davis, 2019; Lima, 2018; O'Donnell et al., 2019). The impacts are complex, multifactorial, and highlight the urgent need for reparative and healing responses.

To promote healing, Indigenous peoples must be included and centred when conceptualising and implementing the relevant policies, strategies, and frameworks that impact them (Darwin et al., 2023). One significant approach to promote healing from colonisation induced trauma is truth-telling (Barolsky, 2023; Corntassel, 2009; Guthrey, 2014; Leigh-Osroosh et al., 2023). Truth-telling is the personal storytelling of lived experience that includes counter-narratives to Eurocentric, dominant worldviews (Leigh-Osroosh et al., 2023). Internationally, truth and reconciliation bodies have emerged to address the harms of colonisation (MacDonald, 2020; MacDonald & Garcia-Moores, 2024). The Yoorook Justice Commission in Victoria has undertaken the most significant body of truth-telling work in Australia to date. This commission broadly frames stories to encourage shared understanding of the severity of historical acts, as well as highlight the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples interactions with contemporary colonial-settler systems (Maddison et al., 2023; Russell, 2024). By developing a shared understanding of history, and promoting a mutual form of social responsibility for the

future, truth-telling is a powerful vessel that can reclaim cultural identity and self-determination, challenge negative stereotypes, and reforge relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Barolsky & Berger, 2023). This article details the incorporation of truth-telling and lived experience into cultural training for OOHC agency workers and foster carers.

Literature Review

In Australia, child protection systems are the responsibility of the States and Territories, with practice guided by the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 (Australian Government, 2020). This framework is based on the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which priorities the 'best interest of the child' (UN General Assembly, 1989). Yet, it is well established, that the Australian child protection system is risk-averse, intrusive for children, families and communities, and has repeatedly failed to protect the wellbeing of children (Braithwaite, 2021; Hamilton & Maslen, 2022; Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997; Maslen & Hamilton, 2020). Moreover, the system often lacks transparency and accountability, and neglects the voices of children, their parents, and family members (Davies et al., 2023; Hamilton, Cleland, et al., 2020; Ivec et al., 2012; Lätsch et al., 2023).

From Australian community workers' perspectives, risk averse practices have resulted in 'false positives and false negatives due to overly reductive, process-oriented judgements' (Maslen & Hamilton, 2020). In this context, false positives and false negatives occur when risk assessment tools inaccurately identify non-evidential risks, which can result in parents being wrongly accused of putting their children at risk; or the tools do not accurately assess risk, which can leave children in potentially dangerous situations (Maslen & Hamilton, 2020). Risk assessment tools in child protection services often use parental group membership (e.g., single or young parents, alcohol and other drug use, disability, mental health problems) to make decisions rather than using client-centred observations (Gillingham, 2006). This approach can further marginalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents by subjecting them to unnecessary, increased scrutiny of child protection services (Maslen & Hamilton, 2020). Risk aversity in child protection has also been identified as fundamentally at odds with strengths-based

approaches, and the state has been increasingly criticised for the use of authoritarian approaches which fail to prioritise family assistance (Braithwaite, 2021; Hamilton, Cleland, et al., 2020). The associated long-term harms to children, families, and communities are well-established, and are compounded by inherent, systemic racism (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997; van Noppen et al., 2024).

Systemic racism is pervasively and deeply embedded in the laws, policies and practices associated with the child protection system and is often found at the core of political, legal, economic, health, education, and justice systems (Braveman et al., 2022; Cunneen, 2019). Furthermore, inaccurate established beliefs and attitudes can produce, enable, and perpetuate widespread discriminatory treatment of people from different races (Braveman et al., 2022). This is particularly evident for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who are overrepresented in adult and child criminal justice and child protection systems, and there is an intricate connection between the two systems (Baidawi & Ball, 2023). Living in OOHC is a recognised pathway for children to contact with the criminal justice system. Care criminalisation describes the intersections between child protection and criminal justice involvement, yet there is scant attention paid to how this occurs (Cunneen, 2019; McFarlane, 2018). Some scholars argue though, that care criminalisation is exacerbated by poorly trained and renumerated staff, who have little understanding for managing the behaviours of children and youth in OOHC residential services (Cunneen, 2019; McFarlane, 2018). Staff tend to rely on police interventions for minor incidents, as well as managing absconders, which leads to excessive criminal sanctioning (Cunneen, 2019; McFarlane, 2018). Yet, many justice-involved children require a caring rather than punitive approach due increased rates of neurodevelopmental disability, and/or trauma-related mental health problems caused by colonisation (Bower et al., 2018; Cunneen, 2019; Hamilton, Reibel, et al., 2020). This approach is likely to be exacerbated by processes of systemic racism, particularly given the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at all stages of the criminal justice and child protection systems, along with the substantial interaction between the two systems, systemic racism becomes glaringly apparent.

Systemic racism can also be seen in record-keeping systems in the child protection sector. Record systems continue to be developed using colonial-settler discourses, which undermine

cultural identity, cultural recognition and associated individual rights (Rolan et al., 2020). Discourses can directly or indirectly influence readers to support dominant values and ideas, which in turn influence their practices (van Noppen et al., 2024). Risk discourses, for example, are based on predominantly White, middle class ideals of what it means to be a 'good' or 'bad' parent, alongside expected behaviours and attitudes that are deemed as appropriate' ways of parenting children (Sonnenburg & Miller, 2021). Currently, there is no consideration of traditional, communitarian ways of parenting in Indigenous communities that were disrupted through the systematic dismantling of communities during colonisation (Muir & Bohr, 2019). Thus, there are significant implications for those receiving services, as they reinforce norms and ideas that are oppressive and harmful (Rolan et al., 2018). Therefore, it is imperative to change the predominant, White discourses and the way parenting assessments are undertaken, as well as transforming child protection record-keeping systems to ensure cultural integrity and security (Muir & Bohr, 2019; Rolan et al., 2018; van Noppen et al., 2024).

Cultural security is a broad concept that encourages building understanding and respect for people who have differing cultures and belief systems (Gray et al., 2021). It is often described in relation to cultural safety, cultural security, cultural responsiveness, and cultural humility (Gray et al., 2021). Currently, cultural competence, cultural security, and/or cultural responsiveness are extensively promoted to address systemic racism and re-align service delivery (Collings et al., 2018; Savreemootoo, 2020; van Noppen et al., 2024). Although there is disagreement on the interchangeable use of these terms (Coffin, 2007), the focus of social services on this discourse use rather than effective culturally centred training is detrimental to promoting change.

Effective cultural training and consideration for Indigenous ways of 'knowing, being and doing' (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003) is essential for cultural connection, i.e., an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child's right to develop and maintain connections to family, community, Country and culture (Krakouer, 2023; Liddle et al., 2022; SNAICC, 2017). Culture and connection are pivotal determinants of health and central to the promotion of life-long physical, social, emotional, spiritual, and ecological wellbeing, for individuals, families and communities (Verbunt et al., 2021). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle

(ATSICPP) was implemented as a structured guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children placed in OOHC (SNAICC, 2017). The ATSICPP aim is to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are placed with immediate or extended kin whenever possible, or with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander foster carer to help maintain connections to their kin and cultural knowledge, activities, language, and to prioritise reunification with family (SNAICC, 2017).

Despite the implementation of the ATSICPP in 2013, 59% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children live in non-Indigenous care arrangements (i.e., 37% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children live in non-Indigenous arrangements and additional 22% live with non-Indigenous relatives or kin) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have limited or no access to their culture, relationships or social networks, their long-term social and emotional health and wellbeing is negatively impacted (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997; Verbunt et al., 2021). OOHC practices must support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with experiencing cultural immersion, and maintaining relationships with their families and communities to ensure the continuation of cultural knowledge and to promote cultural belonging and identity (Krakouer, 2023). Nevertheless, health and social service professionals report being underprepared for working collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and lack the knowledge or skills to effectively deliver culturally appropriate services (Bennett & Gates, 2024; Bennett & Morse, 2023; Gray et al., 2021). This lack of cultural knowledge and responsiveness contributes to poorer social, emotional, health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and highlights the importance of cultural training to remove inequitable barriers to optimal care (Bennett & Morse, 2023). Given the historical and contemporaneous harms associated with child removal practices, developing a culturally competent workforce through cultural training is a critical component of child protection work (Gray et al., 2021).

Central to culturally appropriate service delivery in child protection, is the quality of training for agency workers and foster carers. Quality training fosters the knowledge and skills to build trust and develop culturally-responsive relationships between workers, Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander children and families, which can result in improved wellbeing for families and communities (Bennett & Morse, 2023). There is a significant amount of cultural training in the child protection sector, however, cultural training often focuses on knowing about culture without focusing on historical oppression, issues of systemic racism, or prejudices and stereotypes that influence contemporary social work practice (Dittfeld, 2020; Sawrikar & Katz, 2014; van Noppen et al., 2024). This represents a critical gap in cultural training. Authentic Indigenous storytelling that incorporates the historical context of trauma and harm and the impact of forced removal policies is scarce, and the quality of training is both variable and rarely evaluated (Finan et al., 2018). Cultural training should be informed by historical, cultural and social contexts to foster an understanding of intergenerational trauma and ensure workers can effectively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Bennett & Gates, 2024; Bennett et al., 2018).

For cultural training to be truly effective, the embedded White discourses and ideals that that influence current cultural training frameworks, child protection assessments, practices, and record-keeping would benefit from incorporating truth-telling about colonial history and the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. If child protection services is to sufficiently address systemic racism and racial discourses, the system needs to include and centre the voices of Indigenous peoples in both its development and delivery of assessments and cultural training (van Noppen et al., 2024). Doing so, can increase cultural humility and support reflective practice that can benefit children, families, and communities (Gray et al., 2021).

The Ngulluk Moort, Ngulluk Boodja, Ngulluk Wirin (Our Family, Our Country, Our Spirit) study, is a large National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Aboriginal Elder and community-led study being conducted between 2022 and 2026; in partnership with three mainstream OOHC agencies managing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in non-Indigenous care arrangements in Perth and surrounding districts (Study Protocol available at: Hamilton et al., 2024). The aims of the study are:

1. To work with Aboriginal Elders and community, alongside stakeholders from OOHC agencies, to provide cultural knowledge, resources and activities to bolster current cultural support plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their care.
2. To work with non-Indigenous foster carers and OOHC agency workers to develop a suite of culturally secure training and workforce support materials.
3. To provide recommendations from the research that can assist address structural challenges to collecting and sharing cultural information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care with non-Indigenous foster carers.

This article reports on the development and findings of a cultural training workshop titled 'The Truth of Our Stories'. In this article, we assess the perceived effectiveness of this cultural training workshop on the confidence and knowledge of OOHC agency workers and foster carers.

Methods

Study Context

In Western Australia, OOHC services are provided through the Department of Communities, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and non-government organisations. The Department of Communities is currently reforming the OOHC sector, to establish a system where the statutory and community sector work together in a way that is better co-ordinated, more flexible, sustainable and economically viable, and aims to ensure that services are of high quality and accountable (Government of Western Australia, n.d.). Previously, the Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort project, was conducted in Western Australia between 2016-2021 that brought together Perth Elders' and Aboriginal community perspectives of what is important for the development of strong Aboriginal children; the aspects of kin and community that are protective for Aboriginal children; and what Aboriginal children need for happy and healthy futures (Farrant et al., 2019). The project identified three Elder-identified research priority areas: (1) child protection system involvement and the impact of child removal; (2) the importance of early childhood education and care, and early schooling; and (3) housing security and homelessness for Aboriginal families (Farrant et al., 2019). The work this article represents

is a continuation of the translation of the Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort project, in relation to child protection system involvement and the impact of child removal.

Research Team

The research team is made up of Aboriginal Elder Co-researchers (Authors: MP, CP), Aboriginal team members (Authors: LJ, CM, SH), and a non-Aboriginal quantitative researcher (Author: AWB). The study is also supported by Chief Investigators, including a senior Māori academic and researcher (Author: RM) and non-Indigenous investigators and researchers who have previously been involved in co-designing innovative, and high-quality participatory action health research (Authors: BF, CS). The team are accountable to the broader Aboriginal community and present all research activity at meetings which bring together a wider network of Western Australian Elders for consultation, co-design and endorsement of activity (Farrant et al., 2019).

Study Background and Methodology

The methods and findings of the Ngulluk Moort, Ngulluk Boodja, Ngulluk Wirin study are reported elsewhere (Hamilton et al., 2025; Hamilton et al., 2024). There are no Torres Strait Islander participants in the study, therefore, we refer only to Aboriginal peoples when discussing the study.

To provide greater context for the purpose of this article, we provide a brief overview of the Ngulluk Moort, Ngulluk Boodja, Ngulluk Wirin study methodology. The study follows an Aboriginal Participatory Action Research Approach (Dudgeon et al., 2020) and is Aboriginal Elder and community-led. The approach utilises co-design, which included iterative and inclusive processes with Aboriginal Elders and community, including professional and community advisory groups, focus groups, consultations at all stages of the research study (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Aboriginal Participatory Action Research Framework
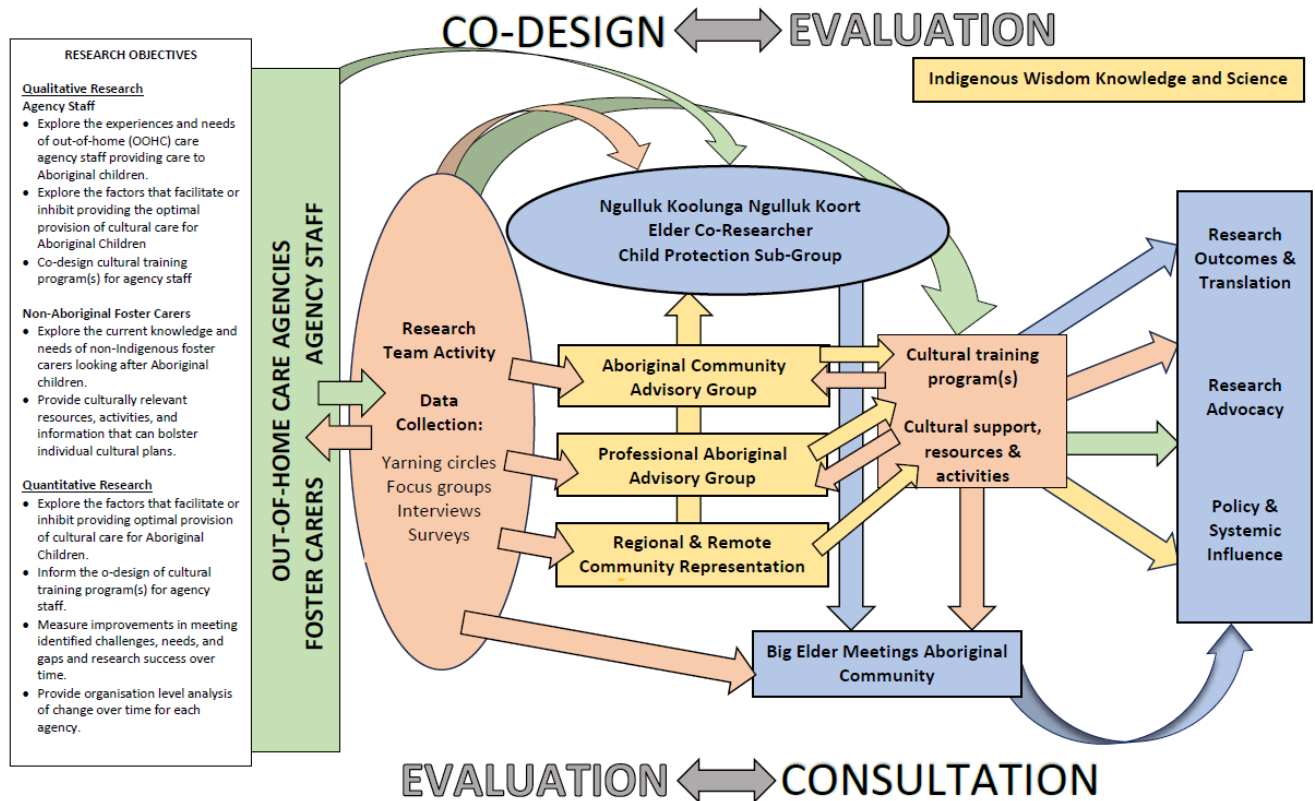
Reproduced from: Ngulluk Moort, Ngulluk Boodja, Ngulluk Wirin (our family, our country, our spirit): An Aboriginal Participatory Action Research study protocol" by Hamilton, S. L. et al. (2024), PLoS ONE 19(7): e0301237. (https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0301237)

Advisory Groups

An Aboriginal Community Advisory Group, comprising Aboriginal community members with lived experience of OOHC, and a Professional Aboriginal Advisory Group comprising Aboriginal representatives in the community sector whose work intersects with child protection services were formed at the beginning of the research. Both groups meet quarterly through the study to guide the co-design, study development, implementation, evaluation and research translation.

Development of the Cultural Training Workshop

'The Truth of Our Stories' cultural training workshop was developed as part of the Ngulluk Moort, Ngulluk Boodja, Ngulluk Wirin study. The cultural training workshop was co-designed, and the process involved is detailed below. Fully informed written consent was provided by all participants. Prior to their involvement, participants received an information statement and consent form and were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research before providing written consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any point without negative consequences. Confidentiality was assured with all data appropriately deidentified for storage and publication. Data were securely stored with access provided only to approved researchers.

Part 1: Identifying the cultural training needs of the OOHC agency workers

The cultural training needs of OOHC agency workers were ascertained during focus groups conducted between November 2022 and March 2023. We recruited a total of 39 participants across four focus groups, with participants mainly employed to manage foster care arrangements with Aboriginal children. To provide context, a selection of participant comments that informed the Elder and community-led cultural training co-design are reported.

Limited access to cultural training:

We've got some training that is really basic and to be honest I don't think I pulled anything new from it. We don't really have anything. I mean unless we go out and get it ourselves, there's nothing. (Participant, Focus Group 3)

While discussing the training needs of the organisations, one participant identified the need to include foster carers:

[we need] *cultural training for us but also for our foster carers. We don't have sufficient for them and so that then means that some of those carers really don't get why it is*

important that the Aboriginal children living with them are connected with family and ideally are cared for by family. We really need them to be exposed to the in depth understanding of the impact for those kids when they're older if they're not connected to culture. (Participant, Focus Group 2)

Participants highlighted the need for training that is comprehensive, considers the historical context of child removal for Aboriginal children in care, and that is presented by Aboriginal community members with lived experience of child protection interventions:

It's about in-depth training … you know, people need to understand the history and what intergenerational trauma is. (Participant Focus Group 3)

We would love some support [with cultural training] because I think lived experience is something that not all carers necessarily get to hear … (Participant, Focus Group 3)

Participants identified an absence of knowledge among agency workers about the policies, practices, and experiences related to the Stolen Generation era:

When we talk [with colleagues] *about Stolen Generation people, we talk about it like it's in the past. They don't make the connection that we actually have more children in care today than were ever recorded as part of the Stolen Generations. Even our own mob talk about Stolen Generations like it happened, you know, fifty years ago and I think that we have to be much more explicit about the fact that it continues. Even though those policies have changed, the practice has not. (Participant, Focus Group 4)*

Part 2: Development of the cultural training workshop

Using data collected during co-design process (Figure 1), the research team designed a workshop titled 'The Truth of Our Stories'. The cultural training objectives were to:

1. Provide stories of lived experience of child removal and child protection involvement across time, to increase knowledge of the contextual links between historical and contemporary child protection practice.

2. Describe the research evidence that links historical and contemporary child removal and child protection practices and narratives.

3. Explore participant confidence, knowledge and practices for providing culturally specific resources and culturally secure services to Aboriginal children in care.

The Elder Co-researchers identified appropriate community storytellers. These included three senior respected Aboriginal community members, as well as younger community members with recent lived experiences of child-removal. The senior Aboriginal storytellers shared their experiences of being removed from their families and communities, some as members of the Stolen Generation and discussed their experiences in missions. One told their story of having been removed from their family and taken overseas. Two community members told their stories as parents with recent lived experience of child removal, and two young people who had recently exited the OOHC system and returned home, told their stories of living in OOHC and what they thought would help young Aboriginal children currently living in OOHC.

To tell their story, the study's senior Aboriginal researcher (Author: SH) designed a research presentation to assist participants link aspects of historical and contemporary child protection ideologies and practices. The researcher had lived experience of being removed from their family and growing up in non-Indigenous foster care and showed snapshots from their own 1960's welfare files. The presentation provided details on the following topics:

- Overview of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prior to colonisation, and actions following the violent invasion of the British colonisers.
- Policies and narratives used to shape and justify decisions for systematically removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- Policy impacts on health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

- Contemporary child protection statistics and information relating to the experiences of kin, family and community and impediments to progressing effective systems change.

- Linking colonial legacies to the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with the child protection system and subsequent involvement with the criminal justice system and care criminalisation.

- Narratives and historical classifications (e.g., derogatory language such as "half-caste") and current research highlighting the colonial nature of contemporary child protection record-keeping.

This presentation of truth-telling and research captured a plethora of intergenerational stories of child removal and child welfare involvement from the 1940's to 2023. These stories reflected the colonial intentions of policies of the early 1900's, which were designed to forcibly integrate and control Aboriginal people and communities. The presentation emphasised the importance of Elders, family inclusion, ACCOs, keeping siblings together or connected, as well as connection to Country and culture.

The final aspect of the workshop included information about cultural resources across Western Australia. Participants received information specific to urban, remote and regional communities across Western Australia. Information included insights into ACCOs, cultural resource centres, early years education programs for Aboriginal children, and cultural activities and resources.

Part 3: Implementation and evaluation of the cultural training workshop

Forty-two participants, including 35 OOHC agency workers and seven non-Indigenous foster carers providing care to Aboriginal children for the agencies, attended the cultural training workshop. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling techniques through their involvement in other aspects of the Ngulluk Moort, Ngulluk Boodja, Ngulluk Wirin study.

The cultural training workshop was conducted over four hours, and the impact of the training was measured using an identical brief pre- and post-training survey with Likert style questions to assess confidence and knowledge, and a case-scenario with short answer questions. These surveys were administered to participants immediately prior to the delivery of, and at the end of the training. Participants were given 15 minutes to complete both pre- and post-training surveys. Surveys were developed in plain English, printed and completed in hardcopy form and using facilitated delivery were necessary.

Confidence and Knowledge Survey

The confidence and knowledge items (Appendix One) were developed using peer-reviewed literature, and the training needs identified in the focus-groups before being refined utilising the Elder and community co-design approach. Items related to participants' confidence in engaging with Elders and Community, ACCOs, and their knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture. Participants were instructed to self-rate their confidence and knowledge against 10 items, by ticking the most relevant response on a Likert Scale: not at all confident, slightly confident, confident, very confident, or does not apply.

Short Answer Scenario

Participants were presented with a scenario (Appendix Two) that described a typical situation heard during the focus groups and interviews. Participants were asked to provide short answers to six statements about ways to connect a child to kin, Country and family, and where information could be found about Aboriginal professional services for the child.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Likert scale items were compared pre- and post-training using the Wilcoxon matched pair signed rank test. An alpha value of less than 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance. Qualitative data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and

data were analysed using descriptive content analysis. Descriptive content analysis was used to evaluate participant responses to the scenario statements. There were 18 possible answers to the six statements, exploring activities, resources and practices.

Evaluation Results

Confidence and knowledge survey

In total, 42 participants undertook the cultural training and completed the pre-training evaluation, and 39 participants responded to the post-training evaluation. There were 40 women and two men. Participant groups consisted of 35 agency workers (6% Aboriginal and 94% non-Indigenous) and 7 non-Indigenous foster carers. Wilcoxon analysis showed that levels of confidence increased post-training for all items with r-scores indicating medium to large effects (range 0.5 – 0.73; Table 1). "Does not apply" answers were removed for this analysis. The largest improvements were for confidence engaging with Regional Elders, Perth Elders, Regional Carers and Children ACCOs, and Perth ACCOs and Community. There were no significant differences between agency workers and foster carers for individual items. Post-hoc Mann-Witney tests showed a significant difference in pre-and-post scores between foster carers and agency workers for making connections with Elders and Aboriginal knowledge holders in remote areas. Agency workers reported larger increases in confidence with the median score increasing of 1.00 (not at all confident) pre-survey to 3.00 (confident) post-survey compared to a pre-workshop median confidence score of 2.00 to a post-workshop confidence score of 2.50 for foster carers (U=39.00, Z=-2.49, p=0.02). No other significant differences were found in overall confidence ratings between groups.

Table 1: Confidence and Knowledge Growth

	N	z-Score	r-Score	P value
Family	39	3.30	0.53	<0.001
Perth Elders	39	4.56	0.73	<0.001
Regional Elders	39	4.69	0.75	<0.001
Country	39	4.00	0.64	<0.001

Colonisation	39	4.24	0.68	<0.001
Cultural Activity	39	4.23	0.68	<0.001
Perth ACCOs and Community	39	4.37	0.70	<0.001
Regional ACCOs and Community	38	3.98	0.65	<0.001
Perth Carers and Children ACCOs	38	3.80	0.62	<0.001
Regional Carers and Children ACCOs	36	4.37	0.73	<0.001

Short answer responses to case-scenario

Participant responses to the scenario pre-training survey were coded to establish a baseline of self-reported knowledge and practice. A coding framework was developed from the main messages the training aimed to deliver: (1) kin/family; (2) siblings; (3) Elders; (4) Country; (5) inclusion; (6) contact; (7) language; (8) ACCOs: ACCO named services/activities; (9) early childhood/education; (10) cultural activities; and (11) cultural support plans. Participant responses in the post-training survey, were coded using the same codes, to explore whether participant answers suggested increases in knowledge from the training. The codes were explored in two ways. Firstly, looking at differences in the level of responses. Most participants were able to provide more information following the cultural training session. Twenty-five participants provided more responses than in their pre-training evaluation, nine participants provided fewer responses, and the number of responses for five participants did not change. Twelve of these participants provided between three and seven more responses. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank test indicated a statistically significant pre- and post-training difference for ACCOs ($z=-3.10$, $r=-0.5$, $p=0.002$) and named ACCOs ($z=-3.46$, $r=-0.6$, $p=0.001$). There were no statistically significant differences for the other codes.

We then explored participant responses where more detailed information was provided in the post-training survey. Three researchers conducted a manual qualitative comparison, to explore participant references to specific aspects of the training presentation. The results suggest an increase in both knowledge and confidence in the potential for actioning the knowledge gained. There was greater use of descriptions of actions, using words like organise; arrange; plan; seek and a greater focus on the importance of voice: ask; yarn; speak to; listen. There was a

further emphasis on contact and connection, particularly 'regular' contact; phone; 'in-person' visits and exchanging photos. and an increased focus on 'relevant' and 'accurate' information and resources. There was more detailed information on the importance of the child's Country and a much greater focus on the significance of connections with family, Elders and Aboriginal community than in pre-training responses. Finally, there were significant increases in answers about the importance of early years programs specifically for Aboriginal children, and the important role of ACCO's. Participants more frequently named an ACCO service than in the pre-training responses.

Post-training feedback survey

Participants completed a post-training feedback survey (Appendix Three). Participants were instructed to self-rate their experience of the training against five items (developing support, clear delivery, new information on colonisation, connection to kin, family, community, and country), by ticking the most relevant response on a Likert Scale: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree. Responses were grouped into 'agree' and 'disagree', with results displayed in Figure 2. In total, 35 participants completed the training feedback survey, and positive response percentages ranged from 94%-97% for all items. One participant reported strongly disagree for all items but reported positive qualitative feedback. Member checking with this participant after the training suggested that this was a typographical error when completing the form.

Figure 2: Training Feedback
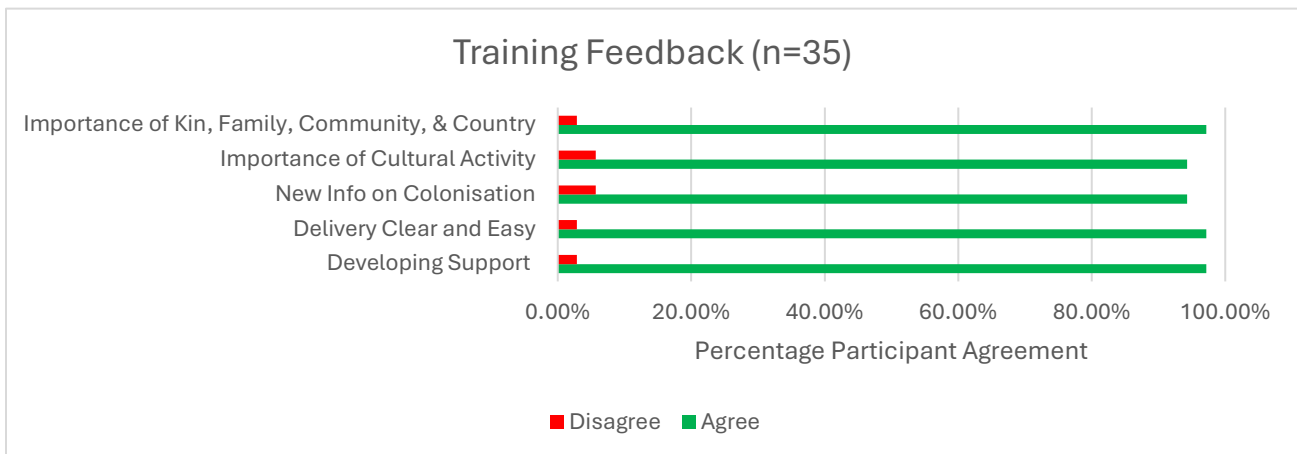
Participants were given the opportunity to comment, and in total, 18 participants provided additional qualitative responses. The feedback provided was positive with no negative or neutral comments. Some participants provided constructive feedback suggesting additional time for reflection or methods for disseminating the training and information. Descriptive content analysis was used to categorise the qualitative feedback into codes and report the frequency of concepts. Results showed that participants were thankful or grateful they had undertaken the training (n=10), thought that those providing the training were brave (n=3), that the training prompted introspection through emotion and self-reflection (n=4), that they better understood the need for cultural connection (n=3), that the training was transformative (n=12) with participants commenting that the training was impactful, valuable, humbling, informative and insightful, and that they thought change was required to right the systemic wrongs (n=3).

> *Thank you for all those that shared their stories - it was very powerful and very wrong that we are in 2024, and the terrible injustices are still happening … things need to change. (Foster carer)*

> *This was one of the most powerful presentations I have been to … (Agency worker)*

> *Very powerful presentations that bring reality to an often only professional conversation in some forums … (Agency worker)*

Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop and assess the perceived effectiveness of 'The Truth of Our Stories' cultural training workshop on the confidence and knowledge of OOHC agency workers and foster carers. Participants in this research identified a previous lack of high-quality cultural training that supports workers to develop the knowledge and skills needed to increase cultural competency and provide culturally secure practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Cultural competency within child protection services is dependent on workers who are able to make evidence-based decisions, who utilise information provided by kin and family members, and who can identify the support required for the children in their care

(Menzies & Grace, 2022). The lack of quality training limits the ability of care staff and carers in developing cultural competency or providing culturally safe care (Bennett, 2019; Bennett & Gates, 2024; Bennett & Morse, 2023; Finan et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2021; van Noppen et al., 2024). Effective cultural training must incorporate truth-telling and challenge White-norms by centring Indigenous voices (van Noppen et al., 2024). This can foster understanding of intergenerational trauma through focusing on historical, cultural and social contexts.

A key element of 'The Truth of Our Stories' cultural training was truth-telling. The cultural training provided significant opportunities for truth-telling by sharing knowledge and information with agency workers and non-Indigenous foster carers. Responses to the training suggest that participants found the authentic story-telling impactful. As truth-telling is emerging as an influential tool that can empower self-determination in Indigenous peoples and communities, strengthen the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and change negative narratives and stereotypes, incorporating it into training can enhance cultural security and drive practical change (Barolsky & Berger, 2023; Bennett & Gates, 2024; Maddison et al., 2023).

The cultural training shared a diverse range of lived experiences across multiple generations. This diversity enabled greater understanding of the ongoing intergenerational trauma associated with child removal. In line with previous research, the results from the training evaluation clearly show that participants felt better informed by the historical, cultural and social contexts explored in the training, and that they developed greater knowledge and understanding (Bennett & Gates, 2024; Bennett et al., 2018). Interestingly, there were no significant differences in levels between agency workers and foster carers except for confidence in engaging with Aboriginal Elders in regional and remote communities. Agency workers reported greater increases in confidence compared to foster carers who were already more confident on average. This is likely due to foster carers having greater exposure to regional and remote communities through caring for Aboriginal children who are off-Country. Participants reported greater confidence for all elements of the training, with moderate to large gains in knowledge and confidence in many aspects of the training. The largest gains were related to information provided about Elders, ACCO's and specific cultural resources. Post-training there were

significantly greater use of descriptions, where participants were more inclined ensure information and resources were relevant, accurate and inclusive.

The findings suggest that 'The Truth of Our Stories' cultural training workshop was successful for increasing confidence and knowledge of OOHC agency workers and foster carers. The training promoted effective, culturally secure practices to work collaboratively and respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, which can enable culturally secure care (Dittfeld, 2020; Gray et al., 2021; Savreemootoo, 2020; van Noppen et al., 2024). Strengthening ways of providing culturally secure services in OOHC will assist to preserve cultural practices that are important for the transfer of cultural knowledge and for promoting identity and belonging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Krakouer, 2023). This is particularly important in child protection work and policy, where Indigenous peoples have experienced historical colonisation-induced trauma and the forced removal of children from their kin, culture and lands (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019; Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013; Smith, 2021; Whitbeck et al., 2004). By building knowledge, confidence and working in culturally secure ways, the cultural training will contribute to improved social, emotional, health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and assist with reducing other areas where children and adults are over-represented, such as the contact with criminal justice system (Cunneen, 2019; McFarlane, 2018).

Limitations

The study had several limitations. Firstly, there was a potential case of careless responding in the post-training survey where a participant selected strongly disagree with all Likert items, whilst also reporting positive feedback. Member checking found that the participant misread the scale, which is common for survey-based research (Ward & Meade, 2023). Future research in this area should consider additional strategies for prevention of careless responding in survey design. Secondly, the study relies on self-reported differences, which may not necessarily translate into practical change. There is potential for social desirability in responses and the study does not explore additional enablers and barriers to practice change as it was beyond the study

scope. Future research should explore how cultural training translates into practical change within the OOHC setting. Thirdly, the sample is small and consisted of an uneven sample of agency workers and foster carers. There is likely to be some differences in the participants who chose to attend compared to those who were invited but did not attend. Future research should aim for a larger sample with greater group balance to better reflect the OOHC population. Finally, the study population is specific to OOHC in Western Australia, which may not be reflective of OOHC in other states or territories, who are each responsible for OOHC policies and process. Future research should explore cultural training specific to OOHC across Australia.

Conclusion

'The Truth of Our Stories' cultural training, which centred Indigenous voices and incorporates truth-telling, was effective for improving knowledge, confidence, and understanding of the historical, cultural and social contexts on contemporary OOHC practice. The findings suggest that OOHC agency workers providing child protection services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families can benefit from having first-hand knowledge through lived-experience stories. The training was transformative in nature; therefore, we recommend that mainstream social services across Australia consider co-designing cultural training that incorporates truth-telling tailored to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in which they work. Truth-telling offers an opportunity for healing and reconciliation and for offering community-led solutions to stem the rising rates of children being removed from their families.

Ethics Approval

This research has ethical approval from the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (#1137) and reciprocal ethical from the University of Western Australia. The study honours the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have control over their cultural intellectual property, communities, resources, and Country in the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination, and reuse of data (Maiam Nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective, 2018).

Appendix One: Confidence and Knowledge Items

I can describe the importance of connection to family and kin for the wellbeing of Aboriginal children

I can describe the importance of cultural activity for the wellbeing of Aboriginal children

I can describe the common effects colonisation has had on Aboriginal families and communities

I can describe the importance of country for an Aboriginal child

I can connect with Elders and senior knowledge holders in Perth and surrounding regions

I can connect with Elders and senior knowledge holders from regional and remote areas

I can connect with Aboriginal organisations and the community from Perth and surrounding region

I can connect with Aboriginal organisations and the community from regional and remote areas

I can connect carers and children with an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation in Perth

I can connect carers with an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation in remote and regional areas

Likert Scale: not all confident, slightly confident, confident, very confident, and does not apply.

Appendix Two: Scenario and Statements

Martin, a 5-year-old Wardandi Noongar boy came to your agency in Perth from Bunbury. Martin has been in multiple care placements since he was 3 years old and has been with his current carers for the past 6 months. Martins' family live in the southwest and he has an older brother and cousins who are in care with another agency in Perth.

Martin has complex health and behavioural needs, that make it difficult for the carers to engage with community activities. Cultural activities and attending cultural events are not a priority for the carers, as they consider Martin too young to benefit. His carers have taken Martin to their mainstream health centre for solutions to his complex needs, but Martin was quiet and anxious during the appointment.

Martin's cultural support plan has minimal information, and he has no connection to his family, kin, culture, and country. Martin constantly tells his carers that he misses his family and wants to see them. You are worried about Martin's placement security, and you know that Martin's connection to his family, culture, country, and participation in cultural activities are central to helping Martin and his carers.

Name three cultural activities that would be age-appropriate for Martin.
Name three cultural resources that would be age-appropriate for Martin.
Name three places Martin could attend for culturally secure health services.
Name three ways you can connect with Martin's family and kin.
Name three ways to connect Martin with his sibling and cousins.
Name three ways you can source information about Martin's culture and country.

Appendix Three: Post-Training Feedback Survey

Please **tick** ✔ the circle that best describes **your training experience.**

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
The information provided in the training was helpful for developing support for Aboriginal children I work with	○	○	○	○
The training was delivered in a way that was clear and easy for me to understand the information	○	○	○	○
I learnt new information about colonisation and its impacts	○	○	○	○
I learnt new information about ways to connect Aboriginal children in my care to kin, family, community and country	○	○	○	○
I learnt new information about the importance of cultural activity for Aboriginal children in my care	○	○	○	○

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