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Reconsidering Recognition in the Lives of Children and Young People in Care: Insights from the Mockingbird Family in South Australia

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Abstract: This study explored the experiences of children and young people in the Mockingbird Family, South Australia, during implementation and roll-out. The study involved semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of 54 participants, including 21 children and young people, 12 foster carers, and 14 agency workers. Thematic analysis, with the application of Axel Honneth's recognition theory, showed the Mockingbird Family model to validate the emotional, cognitive, and social support needs of children and young people. Through interconnected experience, the nurturing of care and the promotion of rights-based, holistic approaches were crucial for achieving social recognition, dignity, and developmental growth. The study indicates the potential benefits of the Mockingbird Family model for addressing the needs of children and young people in care. The research suggests that a community-based support model such as the Mockingbird Family should be considered in child welfare practices. However, further research is necessary to fully understand the model's long-term effects and justify its integration into wider child welfare policies.

Keywords: Mockingbird Family; foster care; recognition theory; love; friendship; rights; solidarity



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1. Introduction

In Australia, child protection is the responsibility of six state and two territory governments. While variations exist in how children's rights are constructed, enacted, or implemented (Zodins et al. 2021), Australia's eight statutory authorities act as guardians that strive to advance children's rights. In doing so, each jurisdiction's child protection agency partners with foster and kinship carers, legal services, and a broad range of specialist human services in an attempt to ensure that children and young people are safe, supported, and protected (Ashton 2014). Government and non-government partnerships involving a range of multiagency and interprofessional development approaches have long been seen as critical to holistic support (Cooper et al. 2023; McLaren et al. 2008; Zannettino and McLaren 2014). This is backed by contemporary child protection discourse that increasingly advocates for holistic, comprehensive approaches targeted at child rights and their developmental needs (Ellis et al. 2022; Miller et al. 2023; Purtell and Mendes 2016).

Research evidence underscores family-based care as being optimal for children's and young people's physical, emotional, and social development, fostering recovery and resilience (Bernard et al. 2015; Humphreys et al. 2015; Martini et al. 2022; Wade et al. 2020). The positive influence of strong family relationships in foster and kinship care is shown to ameliorate the impact of both genetic predispositions and earlier experiences of adversity (Harold et al. 2017; Hostinar et al. 2014; Sellers et al. 2019). Especially in younger children, positive foster or kinship family relationships wield substantial influence over cognitive, emotional, and social development (Gunnar et al. 2019; Hostinar et al. 2015a, 2015b). In

this regard, families have a prominent role in shaping the developmental trajectories of children and young people in care.

Children and young people in care, themselves, have likewise expressed that family contexts are important to them. For example, [Ie et al. \(2022\)](#) undertook a systematic review of twenty qualitative studies on the concept of family, as reported from the perspectives of children and young people in care. They showed that good relationships, positive feelings, and performing activities together by choice epitomized family. [McDowall \(2013\)](#) surveyed over one thousand children and young people in out-of-home care in New South Wales and learned that feeling loved, being involved in daily family life, and being treated like the carers' own children were the main attributes of a successful foster or kinship family. Similar results by [Randle \(2013\)](#), who conducted a qualitative study that interviewed 11 young adult care leavers, showed that in the cohort's view, being loved and cared for, feeling wanted, being treated equally as biological children, and a sense of belonging constituted the best foster family. However, in their recent study, [Gribble and Blythe \(2022\)](#) showed some concerning results. While love and belonging were rated as the most important factors for achieving a quality foster placement, analysis of recruitment materials from 26 foster care agencies in New South Wales, Australia, showed that 42% did not mention the desirability of children feeling loved by their foster families, 38% did not mention the importance of children feeling a sense of belonging, and 31% did not mention either factor ([Gribble and Blythe 2022](#)). How best to support children and young people in care to make them feel wanted, loved, treated equally, and with a sense of belonging is a challenging but important endeavor.

The needs of children and young people to live with family and have positive family experiences resonate with the main concepts of recognition theory ([Honneth 1995](#)). Axel Honneth's theory of recognition offers a triadic interactive framework of recognition, i.e., emotional recognition based on affection, social recognition based on rights, and solidarity based on social relationships as part of an individual's socioemotional participation ([Honneth 1995](#); [Smith et al. 2017](#)). The nurturing environment that a family provides is essential for mutual recognition, whereby children receive and internalize the affection and support necessary for building self-confidence, learn to understand their rights and responsibilities, which contributes to their sense of self-respect, and feel valued for their unique attributes, which is vital for their self-esteem. All three forms of recognition are pertinent for children and young people in statutory care who may be grappling with stigmatization, attachment disruptions, insecurity, and maltreatment ([Lausten and Frederiksen 2016](#); [Ornacka 2022](#)). When emotional, cognitive, and social recognition are absent or negated through disrespect, this can be detrimental to children's growth and development (Table 1).

Table 1. Various dimensions of recognition for human development and social interaction *.

Mode of Recognition	Forms of Recognition	Practical Relation-to-Self	Forms of Disrespect
Emotional support	Primary relationships (love, friendships)	Basic confidence	Sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect
Cognitive support	Legal relations (rights, moral accountability)	Self-respect	Denial of rights, exclusion
Social support	Community of value (solidarity, belonging)	Self-esteem	Denigration, insult

* Adapted from [Honneth \(1995, p. 129\)](#).

Emotional recognition is fostered through primary relationships such as love and friendships. These relationships are said to significantly contribute to an individual's self-concept ([Gilmartin et al. 2023](#); [Honneth 1995](#); [Smith et al. 2017](#)), and play a pivotal role for children and young people in care as they journey toward developing self-confidence ([Gilmartin et al. 2023](#)). The nurturing of the innate need to feel valued and cared for forms the foundation for developing a sense of rights, self-esteem, belonging, and connection with

others. However, a counterpoint exists within this context. Forms of disrespect, including sexual or physical abuse or neglect, significantly undermine the rights of children and young people, affecting their future development and well-being.

Considering that recognition is experiential and intersubjective (Marshall et al. 2020; Munford and Sanders 2020), it is critical that carers and foster care agency workers support emotional recognition in their roles, through child-centered approaches that demonstrate authentic acceptance, respect for children's and young people's autonomy, and social support to assist relationship-building (Patmisari et al. 2023). Accordingly, Honneth (1995) underscores the essentiality of social recognition as a key factor enabling individuals to assert their rights within a community or social context (Table 1). These principles continue to be reflected in contemporary approaches that advocate for social recognition, as this supports belonging and healthy relationships among children and young people in care (Chimange and Bond 2020; Toros 2021; Wulleman et al. 2023). In the absence of acknowledgment, this risks what Honneth terms 'invisibilization' (Honneth 2001), such as when children are afforded limited legal rights due to the prevailing tendency to prioritize community safety above the optimal welfare and well-being of children (Walsh and Fitzgerald 2022). Smith et al. (2017) proposed that nurturing basic confidence and self-respect through self-discovery and family exploration may serve to counteract some of the shame and stigma harbored by children and young people in care.

Additionally, Honneth's theory addresses solidarity and belonging. The engaging and building capacity of the wider support network (foster carers, social workers, agency workers, family of origin) in therapeutic endeavors lays the foundations for the formation of self and the internalization of societal norms, concomitantly explored in our recent studies on the wellbeing of foster and kinship carers and agency workers (McLaren et al. 2023a, 2023b, 2024). Honneth's critique of psychoanalytic theories, particularly his shift from Freud's focus on drive theory to the importance of interpersonal relationships, highlights recognition as being a crucial human need beyond therapeutic confines (Honneth 2014). Recognition, in this context, represents a philosophical and socio-educational approach that is integral to a child's holistic development. The concept of solidarity emphasizes the idea of interdependence and the understanding that the well-being of each member is linked to the well-being of the whole community (Benson and Rosen 2017). Authentic recognition within therapeutic relationships fosters openness towards broader family connections, encouraging self-respect and self-esteem (Table 1). This solidarity proves pivotal for children and young people in care, promoting connections and self-esteem that transcend the therapeutic timeline (Gilmartin et al. 2023; Ornacka 2022). The need for recognition is an individual's basic moral right.

The individual's relationship-to-self depends on the processes of mutual recognition that take part throughout the life course (Lopes and Calapez 2012). Recognition is produced through struggle, which arises when recognition is not mutual or symmetrical. Honneth sees the struggle for recognition as a fundamental mechanism by which individuals and groups assert their identities and seek to transform social relations (Honneth 1995). Smith et al. (2017) argue that recognition theory is used in social work to conceptualize how to build and sustain respectful professional relationships with children and young people in care, involving interactions that are capable of promoting independence, interdependence, and self-realization. It considers relationship needs and the value of mutuality through communication between individuals, communities, and states. Lindahl (2021) conceptualized the relationship between children and young people in Swedish foster care and their child welfare workers using recognition theory. In seeking to understand the tension between different dimensions of their relationship, he showed that recognition was an important source of comfort, warmth, and familiarity to be gained from close relationships with a group, rather than biological ties. Carers or foster agency workers are the providers of close emotional connection, in which elements of mutuality enable learning, growth, and comfort in each other. As overviewed in Table 1, Honneth (1995) identified the various dimensions of recognition that shape conceptions of the self and

the relationship between the self and a broader social context. In consideration of these elements, the importance of recognition in and among children and young people in the Mockingbird Family was explored.

Theory of Recognition and the Mockingbird Family

The Mockingbird Family, developed by the Mockingbird Society in Washington State, USA, is a family-based foster and kinship care model. It forms micro-communities, termed 'constellations', of 6–10 foster or kinship care homes in a close geographical location. Initially known as the Foster Family Constellation Project (FFCP), the program was designed to improve foster care within African-American communities, taking into account their historical and cultural connections to kinship (NICF 2004). The model sought to mitigate the psychosocial, emotional, and academic challenges faced by children and young people in care. Life Without Barriers, a not-for-profit provider of foster care, is the Australian Mockingbird Family license holder. In Australia, the model employs and supports a centrally located Hub Home provider, tasked with connecting and supporting the other families in their constellation (McLaren et al. 2023a). The aim is to build strong, supportive relationships between the carers, their families, and their extended networks (Jones et al. 2024, in press) to collectively overcome difficulties before they escalate and present as risks and to ensure the protectiveness of environments for the children and young people. The first South Australian Mockingbird Family constellations were formed in 2021: one in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, a second in the northeastern suburbs of Adelaide, and a third in the Adelaide Hills. Three more constellations were launched across the greater metropolitan Adelaide area in 2022–2023.

The Mockingbird Family model has undergone extensive evaluation to assess its impact on and effectiveness in foster care. In the USA, the Washington State Institute on Public Policy (WSIPP) conducted an outcome evaluation from 2004 to 2017, which indicated greater placement stability in foster homes for young people who were in constellations, with notably high fostering continuation rates (Goodvin and Miller 2017; NICF 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007). The WSIPP's 2018 cost-benefit analysis found that constellations were cost-effective most of the time (Goodvin et al. 2018). In the UK, a collaboration between the Department of Education, Loughborough University, and Oxford University from 2017 to 2020 revealed positive outcomes, including high retention rates of foster families, strong support networks, and increased well-being among youth and families in care (McDermid et al. 2016; Ott et al. 2020). These evaluations showed that the collective model normalized the relationships among children and young people in each constellation and built a sense of community with others who knew what it was like to be in care. Additionally, the outcomes showed that the carers were better able to provide support for those children and young people who had a support network around them comprising others whom they perceived as being like them.

This study takes its point of departure from the theory of recognition by seeking an understanding of the relationships between foster carers, agency workers, and children and young people in care who were involved in the Mockingbird Family in Australia during its rolling implementation. Several authors have likewise employed Honneth's theory to comprehend the interactions between children and adults across diverse contexts (Houston and Dolan 2008; Lindahl 2021; Marshall et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2017; Thomas et al. 2016), aiming to empirically explore the practical applicability of its concepts. The current study focuses on how the Mockingbird Family model contributes space for children and young people in care to meet their emotional, cognitive, and social developmental needs. This perspective is explored through the individual and interconnected lived experiences of the children and young people and of the foster carers and agency workers involved in the South Australian Mockingbird Family. By considering Honneth's theory of recognition as a lens through which to understand how relationships are affected across different levels, three overarching aims are proposed:

To explore the experiences of children and young people as related to rights and participation at various levels, including family, school, and community systems.

To explore foster carers and foster care agency workers' perspectives on the contribution of the Mockingbird Family in supporting the emotional, cognitive, and social developmental needs of children and young people in care.

To interpret the interactive dimensions of recognition potentially operationalized in working with children and young people in the Mockingbird Family.

2. Methods

While not only prioritizing the experiences of the children and young people but also considering the perspectives of carers and agency workers, this qualitative phenomenological inquiry focused on the experiences, contexts, and outcomes associated with the Mockingbird Family. Their lived experiences represented a journey of interlocking, intersubjective connections that aligned with Honneth's theory and highlighted the children's and young people's need for authentic recognition. Phenomenological analysis was applied, which is consistent with its use in recent studies to explore the lived experience of children and young people in care, their experiences, psychological well-being, and service engagement (Gilmartin et al. 2023; Jaggar 2018), their dyadic fostering relationships (Sprecher et al. 2021), and social and trusted confiding relationships (Appleton et al. 2021; Eldridge et al. 2020), as well as carers and workers' experiences regarding their support roles in the system of care (Jaggar 2018). These lived experiences facilitated an understanding of the meaning of an individual's relation-to-self, as well as relational aspects shared among those involved in the Mockingbird Family. This research was conducted in accordance with strict ethical considerations. The design and methods were approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, Project ID 5777.

2.1. Data Collection

In this study, the participants, including children, carers, and agency workers, were recruited through Life Without Barriers. Participant information and consent forms detailing the study's purpose, duration, and potential risks and benefits were provided to all participants. Informed consent was emphasized as being voluntary, with special attention given to the children's participation, which required the consent of their adult foster carers and the children's verbal assent. Data collection occurred during regular Mockingbird Family meetings and art/fun activities, ensuring a familiar and comfortable setting for the children while remaining close to their carers. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the children's assent and engagement were closely respected, with no coercion to participate. Adult participants had the option to choose the format of their interviews, which were conducted either via Microsoft Teams or face-to-face in a private setting. Data were collected through individual interviews with participants involved in South Australia's first six constellations, three of which had been established in 2022 and three in 2023. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were undertaken with children and young people ($n = 21$; age $M = 7.1$), foster carers (women $n = 10$; men $n = 2$), foster care agency workers (women, $n = 9$), and statutory child protection workers (women, $n = 5$). While the participants were mostly white, with some being Aboriginal, Australian research ethics processes preclude the reporting of any further breakdown of age, race or ethnicity, and sex or gender of the participants. Further demographic breakdown would also present the risk of identifiability, especially regarding children and young people; hence, this has been avoided.

Interviews with the children and young people took place in a group environment while they undertook age-appropriate art and fun activities; this technique is commonly known to be beneficial for increasing engagement in the research process (Cavens et al. 2022; Modi 2020). The group dynamic used for the interviews with the children and young people adopted the format of a focus group to encourage open dialog and allow participants to build on each other's contributions. Some of the children and young people intermittently

engaged with the researchers and talked in pairs. The art and activities were facilitative and were not subject to analysis themselves. Interview questions posed to the children covered topics such as their definitions of family, feelings of self-worth, relationships with friends, school life, and their experiences with the Mockingbird community. For adult participants, interviews with foster carers involved questions on their role within the Mockingbird family, the well-being and academic performance of the children, support from health and social services, and the children's connections to their birth families, among other aspects. Workers were asked about changes that had been observed since the children joined the Mockingbird Family, including changes to communication practices and the children's sense of safety and support.

From a phenomenological perspective, the experiences of children and young people cannot be understood without understanding the contexts in which they occur (Goble 2016). Accordingly, this research contributed to contextualizing experiences by situating them within a broader theory to inform interpretation. The objective occurrence of events in terms of the participants' lived experiences was not questioned; rather, the current research involved the discernment and comprehension of the narrative of events, as articulated by the participants (Larsen and Adu 2021). Our reflective annotations, informed by our academic, professional, and personal backgrounds and mitigated by strategies such as data triangulation and reflexive journaling, enriched our understanding of the complex dynamics encountered during data collection with children, young people, and adults discussing their observations of these groups. This approach is in line with our commitment to transparency and our acknowledgment of subjectivity in our analysis process.

2.2. Data Analysis

Since qualitative data are complex, a multi-layered analytical approach was used to deconstruct the complexity of various meanings within the dataset. A hybrid analysis was applied, combining thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) and interpretive phenomenology (Smith et al. 2008). Thematic analysis helped uncover practical aspects of the phenomenon, while interpretative analysis offered an understanding of the participants' experiences and existential concerns. Understanding was sought regarding the phenomenon, in terms of 'breadth versus depth, explicit versus hermeneutic interpretation, and pragmatic versus existential' (Spiers and Riley 2019).

For the phenomenological analysis, two researchers (E.P. and H.M.) read each transcript multiple times, taking detailed reflective notes that assisted later in the formation of themes. To minimize individual interpretative bias and enhance the credibility of our findings, we utilized a two-fold triangulation process. We employed data triangulation by incorporating diverse sources of data and investigator triangulation, wherein both researchers independently analyzed the data. The process of triangulation involved creating skeleton tables of the reflective notes and themes for each analysis for each participant, developing comparison tables across cases, and looking for convergences and divergences until a master table for all participants emerged. This approach allowed a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon to emerge.

Thematic analysis, assisted by NVivo 14, involved the identification and refining of codes as they emerged. The coding process in our study involved systematically identifying and labeling significant elements within the transcripts. We first read through the data to become familiar with the content, then began to mark the relevant sections with codes—these are short labels that summarize and categorize the content, based on its core themes. As we progressed, similar codes were grouped together to form broader themes. This grouping was based on the connections and patterns that emerged from the data, reflecting the underlying concepts and ideas expressed by the participants. For instance, codes that captured discussions about school life, learning challenges, and academic achievements were assembled into a theme related to educational experiences.

3. Results

3.1. Nurturing Feelings of Care and Comfort

This theme highlights the significance of fostering emotional connections that go beyond words, creating a safe space where emotions are understood, accepted, and valued. The exploration of emotional recognition within the Mockingbird Family context unveiled a poignant theme that resonated deeply with the children and young people involved. Their candid and heartfelt responses shed light on the profound significance of emotional bonds, care, and a sense of belonging that characterized their experiences. One young person expressed their appreciation for their family by stating:

I like everything about my family. They're all kind. None of them are mean. They're very nice. And I never really cry with them. Oh, I never will.

This sentiment underscores the empathetic and supportive environment within the Mockingbird Family, where kindness prevailed as a cornerstone. When asked about their feelings within the family setting, several children and young people described them, succinctly, as 'safe', 'happy', and 'calm'. These terms encapsulate the emotional sanctuary offered and fostered by their Mockingbird Family constellations, in which a pervasive sense of security allows them to embrace feelings of contentment and serenity.

The children and young people further elucidated the emotional foundation of their experiences with reflections like, 'We have a bed, and we have a TV to watch'. Beyond the material aspects, this quote alludes to the emotional security ingrained in being provided with a comfortable and liveable environment. The emotional connections within the Mockingbird Family resonate on a reciprocal level, as evidenced by the statement 'that you are loved by other people, and that you love them, too'. This articulation of mutual affection emphasized the authenticity and depth of the emotional bonds characteristic of the relationship between carers and the cared-for. Some children and young people eloquently shared their perspectives on the essence of family. One of them said:

A family doesn't necessarily have to be blood-related. But really, what makes a family is the love and support that they give to each other.

This reflective perspective is a feature of the profound emotional recognition experienced within the Mockingbird Family, where love and support were foundational pillars that cultivated a genuine sense of belonging. Carers' comments likewise resonated with the emotional theme, showcasing the bonds formed and the comfort experienced:

The wonderful friendships we have formed are truly remarkable, benefiting both the children and us as carers. Connecting with like-minded carers has been invaluable. Our children have also developed strong bonds with their peers, and this brings me joy. My comfort in the situation helps them experience comfort.

A carer emphasized the sense of unity and pride in both foster and birth children, stating:

When I go to a house and chat with the foster kids and they proudly show me their school awards, and then the birth kids want to show off their awards too. It's like, Wow, we're all one big family!

This comment captures the inclusive and nurturing environment fostered by the model.

Foster care agency workers shared this sentiment when highlighting the positive transformations and connections observed in the children:

I think I've seen them come out of their shell. They've increased their confidence. They're more social. You know, they have found other kids that they can identify with, which, before the Mockingbird Family, they didn't have any connection with other kids that were also in care.

Likewise, a statutory child protection worker shared insights on children and young people in the Mockingbird Family, saying that 'they have had previous placement breakdowns but are doing really well because there are friends and there is stability'. These expressions of emotional well-being and positive transformation highlight the pivotal role of emotional

recognition as a cornerstone of holistic support for children and young people in care within the nurturing embrace of the Mockingbird Family.

Participants shared experiences that illustrated the importance of maintaining connections within the Mockingbird Family model. One young person reflected on their relationship with their siblings:

I have a brother and sisters, two of my sisters drive me a bit crazy. They don't live with me. Well, my brother come in to visit me for a while, which is pretty nice.

This highlights the value of preserving family ties, even when living apart. The complexity of fostering relationships with birth families was acknowledged by a carer:

We recognize that not every situation is the same, and there may be cases where it's not possible or safe to establish a relationship with birth families.

This underscores the varied nature of such connections and the care taken in evaluating each situation. Another carer highlighted the importance of building these connections: 'We believe that it's important to try and establish a relationship with birth families whenever possible. . . it can be challenging to overcome those emotions and build trust'. This perspective shows their commitment to nurturing these often difficult relationships for the well-being of the children. An example of the depth of support provided, which demonstrates the comprehensive care extended to the birth family, was shared by another carer:

We played a big part in the funeral arrangements and all end-of-life stuff for our kid's birth mother. . . it's impossible without the wrap-around support from the Mockingbird.

An agency worker recalled a unifying event that exemplifies the inclusive and community-focused approach of the Mockingbird Family:

I do recall an event you had like a picnic and one of the birth mothers came along to that and did some balloon artistry and was able to engage with the children and the other carers, which I thought was quite amazing, you know, that was a beautiful situation.

These narratives illustrate the theme of nurturing feelings of care and comfort, showing how the Mockingbird Family model facilitates emotional recognition by maintaining and strengthening family connections, providing a comprehensive support system, and fostering a sense of belonging and unity among all its members.

3.2. Negotiating Rights through Relationship and Resilience

This theme encapsulates the dynamic process of negotiating and affirming rights within the context of relationships, emphasizing the resilience developed through interactions and struggles. The voices of the children and young people resonated with a deep sense of empowerment and agency, exemplifying the pivotal role of upholding their rights. A common theme among the children was their growing awareness of their rights within the Mockingbird Family environment. One young person shared: *In my [foster] family, I can speak up. If something's not okay, I just say it and they listen.* This highlights the supportive and respectful communication encouraged in the family setup, contributing to a sense of being heard and understood.

One young person shared examples of an abusive past life and, in contrast, had enthusiastic visions for the future, saying, *'I am planning on going to university when I'm older. I'm really into studying Biology because it's super interesting'*. In describing their enthusiasm for learning through personal exploration, this young person shared:

My [foster] parents bought me this huge medical dictionary. That book had almost everything you could ever want to know about viruses and medicine. Reading it was so much fun, I really enjoyed it!

This experience highlighted the pivotal role of the carers' involvement in developmental needs, intellectual growth, and supporting the young person's thirst for knowledge. Confidence was powerfully expressed when this young person exclaimed, *'I feel good about myself. I never do anything wrong. Because if you feel bad about yourself, you should ask your mom what to do, or dad or sister'*. This quote shows their understanding of the importance of

family connection in maintaining self-esteem. It exemplifies the interplay between the self, moral integrity, and support in fostering a strong foundation of self-respect.

The sense of achievement and connection to their academic environment was entwined in the children's and young people's descriptions of recognition within the classroom. One child proudly shared, *'Because, in my class, we've been learning about service things. Yeah. And I've got a Belong award and a Service [award] too'*. This signified the recognition and validation of their contributions, reinforcing a sense of belonging, purpose, and achievement. Furthermore, the children's perspectives on their school experiences offered a glimpse into the multifaceted nature of advocating for and respecting their rights. Their enjoyment of maths, participation in special programs, and engagement in physical education collectively created a holistic environment where diverse needs and interests were respected and nurtured. As one young person said:

My favourite thing at school . . . I have two, math because I really like learning and the service program there is at school on Fridays, I think. And I like PE [physical education] because it's fun and you get really fit.

The experiences of carers and foster care agency workers provided contextual depth to the theme, showcasing the tangible impacts of safeguarding children's rights in real-life situations. One young person's journey, marked by their placement in residential care following statutory removal, revealed several challenges that had been overcome. A carer, in reflecting on the learning progress of a young child in their care, provided an example of significant developmental growth despite initial struggles:

His progress has been significant, as he went from struggling to count to 20 at the beginning of the year to now being able to count to some extent.

In parallel, the experiences of siblings within the family dynamic further underscored the theme's significance. The foster care agency worker highlighted their achievement:

The eldest, who's in grade three and has an intellectual disability, faces some school challenges. Despite this, their performance is improving consistently each [school] term. The two younger siblings, in grade one and grade two, have shown remarkable growth. They have moved beyond their catch-up classes, where they received extra help, and are now excelling in their schoolwork.

Improvements at school were confirmed by a statutory child protection worker reflecting on children and young people in the Mockingbird Family. When asked to share the most significant change, it was that friendships improved confidence, and *'they are able to focus better . . . and they've made quite a lot of progress'*.

These narratives illustrate the theme of safeguarding the rights of children and young people as being vitally important in creating an environment that is nurturing, where young individuals are recognized and daily life is celebrated. In essence, this active role in safeguarding children's rights serves as a cornerstone for their comprehensive growth and well-being.

3.3. Interdependence and Strengthened Family and Friendships

This theme underscores interdependence and interconnectedness among members of the community, where the well-being of everyone is linked to the collective welfare of the entire group. The shared sense of community was captured in the words of a young person: *'That's how we stay with good friendships, because we don't just care about ourselves. We care about other people here too'*. This statement encapsulates the essence of solidarity across the Mockingbird Family constellations, emphasizing a holistic approach towards care that extends beyond self-interest. A sense of interconnectedness is exemplified by the opportunities for communal activities, as highlighted by quotes from both children and young people and their carers. The sentiment of togetherness and shared experiences is palpable in a variety of statements, such as: *'Yeah, we all get to play together, and go to special park'*, *'We all have iPads and phones and all that'*, and *'The other families that come together today [Mockingbird Family catchup] are all cousins'*. These expressions accentuate the fostering of a

collective identity, where shared activities and gatherings contribute to a sense of belonging and family connectedness.

The concept of solidarity further extends to the relationships between carers within the Mockingbird Family. Carers described how mutual support and a sense of community prevailed, as expressed by one carer at a Mockingbird Family catch-up: *'A lot of lovely friends and so it made it easier for, like this weekend, because my child and I know everybody'*. At a camping weekend, another carer reflected: *'They chat and [have] play dates and stuff outside of their bed sometimes as well'*. The interconnectedness among carers was observed by a foster care agency worker, who saw carers supporting each other while the children and young people were developing their friendships:

She had a problem with her iPod, so they were chatting about it in the park while their children were arranging to come over for play dates.

These interactions highlight the ripple effect of solidarity, where connections are nurtured not only for the children but also for the caregivers, fostering an atmosphere of shared experiences and collaborative support.

Foster care agency workers recognized the unique sense of community that the Mockingbird Family model cultivated. They highlighted the active fostering of community connections and shared experiences within the Mockingbird Family. One worker articulated that they:

Definitely are community connections, sleepovers, they have with each other, the carers looking to each other.

Statutory child protection workers commented on the solidarity and mutual support between carers in the Mockingbird Family constellations, which was important for supporting the socialization of the children and young people. One said, for example:

They have greater flexibility in their schedules. There are a lot of school meetings for carers because of the trauma and those circumstances. But because there is always someone in the group who can come get the kids right away and take them home, to a friend's house, or things like that, the kids don't miss out. If foster carers don't have that sort of support and flexibility, it gets quite difficult.

The act of carers looking out for one another emphasized the collaborative and supportive nature of the network, wherein a collective sense of responsibility contributed to the well-being of both the children and young people and the carers.

The Mockingbird Family emerged as an essential companion cluster for children who may lack traditional friendships through school connections.

A lot of these young kids, they don't have those school connections and people don't come to their birthday parties, so they've got their Mockingbird families, they go to gatherings outside of Mockingbird, you know, they go as a little hub.

This quote portrays the Mockingbird Family as filling emotional gaps by providing a supportive and inclusive environment. The reference to *'gatherings outside of Mockingbird'* exemplifies the concept of a *'little hub'*, wherein shared activities and interactions foster a sense of belonging and social connection that may have been absent in other aspects of the children's and young people's lives.

There's more of that sense of community and familiarity for the children and for the carers as well, as opposed to families that aren't connected with Mockingbird.

Foster care agency workers drew a clear distinction between families connected with the Mockingbird Family and those that were not. This comparison draws attention to the distinctive nature of the Mockingbird community. The sense of community and familiarity that permeates the Mockingbird Family environment becomes a source of strength for both children and carers. This heightened sense of interconnectedness contributed to a deeper understanding of each other's experiences, further enriching the relationships within the Mockingbird Family.

4. Discussion

Our study aims to contextualize Honneth's recognition theory within the lived experiences of children and young people in the Mockingbird Family. Rather than applying the theory prescriptively, we used it as a heuristic tool to interpret and understand the nurturing environment provided by the Mockingbird Family. This study delved into the multifaceted aspects of holistic support within the Mockingbird Family, as experienced by the children and young people and their carers, which was also confirmed through observations by foster care agency workers. Three distinct forms of recognition, as outlined by Honneth (1995, 2001), were applied, these being love, rights, and solidarity. In translation to the current study, Honneth's theory of recognition aligned with concepts related to nurture, care, and comfort, navigating rights, and interdependence through supporting the development of strong bonds. These context-based feelings resonated in the words of the children and young people interviewed and in the observations made by carers and foster care agency workers, who spoke about the impact of experiences and relationship dynamics within the Mockingbird Family on the children and young people involved.

The benefit of the Mockingbird Family is its function as a micro-community of support. The collective endeavor of multiple carers and foster care agency workers appeared to have greater potential to enhance emotional, cognitive, and social support for children and young people, compared to single-family fostering or kinship caring (Patmisari et al. 2023). In the current study, Honneth's theory was applied and centered on the importance of validating human experience. In applying aspects of recognition theory to explore the lived experiences of children and young people in the Mockingbird Family, insights drawn predominantly from speaking directly with the children and young people were garnered. The experiences, mostly of children and young people, and the additional perspectives of carers and foster care agency workers showed consistency with extant research on the importance of caring, loving parental relationships and extended support networks for optimal human development (e.g., Bernard et al. 2015; Humphreys et al. 2015; Martini et al. 2022; Wade et al. 2020).

Likewise, the results from the current study include emotive statements by children and young people about their foster and kinship families. The statements suggested that they felt loved, liked their families, appreciated the kindness, and felt safe, happy, and supported. A sense of belonging via the Mockingbird Family was expressed by many, as was seen in the words of one respondent who cited having '*wonderful friendships*' due to being part of a family within the Mockingbird Family constellation. This sense of belonging is contrary to research that often reports how children and young people in the foster care system frequently experience stigma, bullying, and exclusion, then exhibit the emotional and behavioral problems associated with the internalization of these experiences (Appleton et al. 2021; Dansey et al. 2019). Nonetheless, research on the capacity for good relationships in fostering and kinship to buffer the effects of trauma histories and experiences such as stigma has been cited (Harold et al. 2017; Hostinar et al. 2014; Sellers et al. 2019), which was reflected in the current study's results, as framed around the words of these children and young people. Young voices echoed the sentiments of carers and agency workers, indicating positive transformations associated with positive parenting, involving consistent messaging within the Mockingbird Family. The carers socializing and training together, as well as the provision of respite for each other, ensured consistent approaches to the nurturing of those for whom they collectively cared.

All the children and young people interviewed had histories of abuse, neglect, and rights violations, as well as attachment disruptions, difficulty making friendships, and ongoing exclusion by their peers. In considering previous research on the associations between cognitive, emotional, and social recognition (Gilmartin et al. 2023; Lausten and Frederiksen 2016; Ornacka 2022), in the current study, we observed an expressed need for loving and nurturing families that supported personal growth, educational interests, and enabled hopes about the future to flourish, irrespective of biological ties. This constant was reflected by children and young people in substantial research by Ie et al. (2022),

McDowall (2013), and Randle (2013), specifically, the want for positive feelings, the right to be treated like other children and young people who are not subject to statutory care, opportunities, and good family and social relationships.

Several authors have applied Honneth's recognition theory to identify the multifaceted aspects of emotional, cognitive, and social development associated with the interactions between children and adults across diverse contexts (Houston and Dolan 2008; Lindahl 2021; Marshall et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2017; Thomas et al. 2016). The current study findings contribute to our knowledge of the importance of holistic support, with the results showing some positive changes in emotional, cognitive, and social skills among the children and young people after being cared for by families attached to the Mockingbird Family. As is relevant to the research published by Gribble and Blythe (2022), finding love and belonging was highly rated by Australian children and young people as being most important in their care placements. The current study likewise showed experiences of love, nurture, inclusion, and a sense of belonging to the Mockingbird Family as important. These appeared to contribute towards improvements in confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, enhanced by carers who are working together with others in the Mockingbird Family and approaching caring collectively and consistently in an extended family-like system. In the application of recognition, this finding supported emotional, cognitive, and social modes of recognition and also overall development.

While several authors have sought to understand the multidimensional aspects of home-based care, in terms of what makes a family capable of providing context and a space that is beneficial for children and young people (Je et al. 2022; McDowall 2013; Randle 2013), few studies have considered collective caring or mutual support models such as the Mockingbird Family. Through exploring the children's and young people's experiences relating to rights and participation at various levels, including family, school, and community systems, the current study contributes to understanding the dynamics of holistic support and its implications for child welfare. Foster carers and foster care agency workers' perspectives on the contribution of the Mockingbird Family in supporting the emotional, cognitive, and social developmental needs of children and young people in care were explored. Finally, the interactive dimensions of recognition as operationalized via the Mockingbird Family were considered. Key findings during the early implementation and roll-out of the Mockingbird Family model in Australia showed it to provide multifaceted opportunities for children and young people to achieve love and friendship, rights and moral accountability, and solidarity and belonging, in contrast to their trauma-filled pasts. Supporting children and young people in care to feel wanted, loved, treated equally, and with a sense of belonging is a challenging but critically important endeavor.

5. Conclusions

Our study highlights the importance of a community-centered approach to providing comprehensive care and support for children and young people in care. This study emphasizes the need to acknowledge their past experiences and actively involve them in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Through triangulating perspectives from children, young people, carers, foster care agency workers, and researchers, the study aligns the principles of the Mockingbird Family model with Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. The themes identified, including nurturing emotional well-being, safeguarding rights, and fostering interdependence, reveal the multifaceted and empowering support offered by the Mockingbird Family. While these findings shed light on the potential benefits of such holistic support programs, the study remains cautiously optimistic about their broader societal impacts.

The current study acts as an amplifier, magnifying the marginalized voices of children, carers, and foster care agency workers and encouraging inclusive and informed child welfare decision-making. The findings suggest that the Mockingbird Family model has the potential to align with the holistic needs of children and young people in foster care, particularly by encouraging connectedness and nurturing support, as well as by promoting

a rights-based approach. The implication for child welfare practice is that the Mockingbird Family model could be a positive contributor to the well-being and social integration of children and young people in care. However, further research is warranted to fully understand the long-term impact and to substantiate the integration into broader child welfare policies. Limitations include sample size constraints for the broader generalizability of the findings beyond the specific Mockingbird Family context; the interpretations of themes and quotes are also subject to researchers' subjectivity and bias, despite rigorous analysis attempts. Finally, the study's focus on immediate perspectives leaves room for further investigation into the long-term impacts of the Mockingbird Family's holistic support approach on well-being.

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