



# Relational and cultural continuity for children in foster care; A critical exploration of national policies in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, England, Ireland and Scotland

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## ABSTRACT

Based on an analysis of 14 national child welfare policies, the paper explores how relational and cultural continuity are framed in national foster care policies in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, England, Ireland and Scotland, particularly focusing on the implications for children with migrant backgrounds. While most policies tend to recognise the significance of the child's cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic background, most appear to lack specific guidance of how to ensure relational and cultural continuity of children when placed in foster care. Overall, we find little specific reference to circumstances of children with migrant backgrounds in the policies. The paper critically discusses four patterns. The first is the policies' emphasis on relational continuity of children's adult relationships over peer relationships. Secondly, there seems to be a strong emphasis on the significance of parental contact, with much less attention to contact with family members like siblings, grandparents and other relatives. With one exception, we observe no reference to transnational family relationships. Thirdly, with little attention to cultural variations, the policies appear to presuppose that everyone share the norms and values of the Western and dominant culture. The last pattern points to an apparent dilemma or a difficult balance between attending to the child's immediate care and safety needs simultaneously as cultural and relational continuity are promoted.

## 1. Introduction

The number of children and families with migrant backgrounds involved with European child welfare services is increasing (Skivenes et al. 2014). Still, we continue to have insufficient knowledge regarding how child welfare services address the growing cultural pluralism of children and families and how policy and practice ensure continuity for children with migrant backgrounds while in foster care. Promoting continuity denotes ensuring a cohesive thread through the child's life, from past to future (Bryderup & Johansen, 2021; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). Most of the literature and research on continuity and foster care refers to continuity as placement stability, but there are other aspects of continuity that deserve our attention. In particular, this article focuses on relational and cultural continuity and how these are represented in foster care policies in five European countries. Our focus is especially on

children from migrant backgrounds in foster care.

Foster care policies at a national level are likely to be influenced by international legal instruments, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). When considering solutions for children who cannot live with their biological family, the UNCRC indicates that due regard should be paid to 'the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background' (UNCRC, 1989, Art. 20). The Implementation Handbook of the UNCRC emphasises that continuity in upbringing for children in foster care implies, whenever possible contact with parents, family and the wider community (UNICEF, 2007, p. 289). The flexibility inherent in the phrase 'due regard' in the UNCRC's article 20 leaves states and child welfare workers with the space to exercise discretion in each individual case. Continuity rights are also visible in other articles; like the child's right to preserve his or her identity (Art.

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8); the right to have contact with parents from whom the child is separated (Art. 9); the right to live in harmony with his or her culture and religion and to practice his or her language (Art. 30). In practice, various rights may come into conflict and must be interpreted, weighed, and negotiated by adults authorised to secure the best interests of children living in foster care.

Influenced by the UNCRC, European legislation often includes aspects of children's retention of links to their cultural backgrounds when placed in foster care (e.g., Thoburn, 2010, p. 30), recent policy analyses identify limited attention to aspects such as religion and culture and race or racism in child welfare policies (Collins & Scott, 2019; Edwards et al., 2023). Foster care policies are an important point of departure for research (as well as for practice), since policies convey values and ideals and what state authorities think ought to be done about public issues (Phillips, 2007; Britton, 2007; Stone, 2012) and can be expected to inform service delivery and decision-making of child welfare workers. Thus, the objective of this paper is to explore how relational and cultural continuity are framed in national child welfare policies in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, England, Ireland and Scotland and to critically discuss some patterns in the data and their potential implications for children with migrant backgrounds. By relational continuity we mean the continuity of relationships with parents, family and community (cf. UNICEF, 2007) and cultural continuity encompasses the continuity of the child's cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic background (cf. UNCRC, 1989, Art. 20). The two components of continuity are closely intertwined, not least for children with migrant backgrounds (McDowall, 2015; 2016); continuity of relationships is likely to positively impact on maintaining the children's connectedness to their ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic background and vice versa. Children with migrant backgrounds are defined as persons below 18 years who are descendants of migrants or who have themselves migrated, alone or with caregivers.

### 1.1. Culture, continuity and change

Culture is often considered difficult to define and has been referred to as a fuzzy concept that takes on different meanings depending on situations (Causadias, 2020; Gjerde, 2004). Scientific disciplines tend to conceptualise the concept of culture differently. Many academic definitions, but also common use and understanding of the concept, share the view that culture is about human interactions, locations and shared elements (such as traditions and systems of beliefs and values), transmitted across time and generations. Such definitions are critiqued for promoting an essentialist view of culture as something fixed and stable; 'the continuity between past and present is taken for granted' (Gjerde, 2004, p. 141). As argued by Gjerde (2004), the process of passing on traditions and practices from one person to another always involves a transformation. Cultural continuity may, thus, situate culture as fluid and dynamic, as something that may change and take on a different form over time (Gjerde, 2004). Cultural continuity is 'not simply about preserving the past but equally about forging strong commitments to the future' (Kirmayer et al., 2009, p. xviii). When combined with a dynamic view of culture, continuity can imply change as past experiences are re-experienced in new contexts and transformed through time (Sirriyeh, 2013). Culture, then, involves dynamic processes through human activities and, also, persistent processes of meaning-making (Williams, 1958; Nikielska-Sekula, 2018). Culture is a system that organises differences and make them meaningful and manageable (Kronenfeld, 2008).

For the purpose of this paper cultural continuity is conceptualised as the process of maintaining (and potentially resisting or reconstructing) aspects of the child's cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic background. These four parts of the child's background intersect with one another and are all viewed as crucial aspects of an individual's identity and belonging (Eriksen, 2010). Thus, they overlap in meaning and are often used simultaneously in policy documents. We therefore include all

four aspects when employing the term cultural continuity. Like culture, we understand ethnicity, religion and language to be dynamic and subject to change over time (Eriksen, 2010; Wimmer, 2008).

It is important to note that, within this paper our focus is not on practices that are widely viewed as harmful (e.g. female genital mutilation, child marriage, negative social control, honour related violence). While we recognise that some of these practices may be considered connected to culture and religion, the focus here is on aspects of culture that tend to be considered positive. In some case countries, harmful (cultural) practices would fall under the responsibility of the Justice department rather than Child welfare/protection and would therefore appear in policy documents separate to those on foster care which are included in the present analysis.

### 1.2. Research on relational and cultural continuity in foster care

The significance of relational aspects of continuity is emphasised in a vast body of research (Boyle, 2017; Farmer et al. 2013; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011; Lundström & Sallnäs, 2012; McCormick, 2010; McDowall, 2015). While relational continuity is important in all foster care placements, it may be especially relevant for children with migrant backgrounds as they often experience additional losses related to language and cultural and religious practices (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Ljones, Fylkesnes & Tonheim, in review). Research emphasises birth family contact to be significant to children's belonging and identity process and with the potential to connect them with their cultural roots (White et al., 2008; McDowall, 2016). How to ensure cultural continuity and 'healthy' identity development has recently received more attention in research. Children who are placed with foster carers who are sensitive to their cultural needs are more likely to thrive (Coakley & Gruber, 2015). For instance, Trenson et al. (2023) point to the cultural sensitivity that kinship foster carers may provide. While much research emphasises the benefits of same-cultural placements (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2021; LaBrenz et al., 2022; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012; Degener et al., 2020; Wade, 2019; Brown et al., 2009), other research shows evidence of children and youth experiencing a sense of belonging and wellbeing regardless of whether or not there was a 'cultural' match between the children and the foster carers (White et al., 2008; Crea et al., 2018; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Selwyn & Wijedasa, 2009; Watters, 2008). Research draws attention to the important role of foster carers' openness and facilitation of continuity of the child's background (Herrero-Arias & Tonheim, in review; Degener et al., 2022; Van Holen et al., 2019; Coakley & Gruber, 2015; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015).

There are temporal as well as individual variations related to children and youth's own wishes and views on continuity. Some children may associate their cultural and/or religious background with neglect and other negative experiences and may therefore wish to maintain a distance (Tyrell et al., 2019; Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2021; Hansen & Flakerud, 2020). Research also indicates that an ethnic, cultural, religious and/or linguistic match between children and foster carers may be important for some children and youth while not for others (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Rip et al., 2020). Indeed, some children – perhaps particularly unaccompanied children – may be more concerned about learning about the new context and the new language than maintaining continuity and as a result may wish to have a foster family from the new majority culture in the society to which they have migrated (Watters, 2008).

### 1.3. The context of migration and child welfare

The six countries included in our thematic analysis of foster care policies, includes three liberal welfare states (England, Ireland, and Scotland) and three social democratic welfare states (Denmark, Norway and Sweden). We expect that the child welfare systems in all six case countries are characterised by a mix of a child-focused and a family-

service orientation (cf. Gilbert et al., 2011). In other words, that they are oriented towards the individual child's wellbeing and needs here and now and in the future as well as emphasising parental support and the strengthening of family relations. All six countries have ratified the UNCRC, but only Norway (2003), Sweden (2020) and Scotland (2021) have incorporated the convention into national legislation, although to various degrees.

In terms of migration, there are historic and present variations among the six countries. England has the longest history of immigration and therefore also the longest history of being an ethnically and culturally diverse society. Ireland, Scotland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden have historically been more homogenous societies, but have been experiencing increased immigration over the last few decades. In the Nordic context, Sweden has by far received the largest number of immigrants. In Ireland and Sweden, the number of non-EU immigrants exceeds that of immigrants from EU member states (Eurostat, 2022), while the majority of immigrants in most case countries are from other EU/EEA countries. In all case countries except Ireland, the population growth between 2014 and 2019 was due to migrants, i.e. foreign-born populations (Bagavos, 2022; Cangiano, 2023).

While research and some national statistics suggest that children with migrant backgrounds are overrepresented in European child welfare systems, this data is not always collected and available (Skivenes et al., 2014). This seems to be the case for several of our case countries, although some, like Ireland, have statistics on unaccompanied children specifically. In Norway, research indicates that the overrepresentation of children with migrant backgrounds are visible for in-home-services (advice, guidance and poverty reduction measures), but recent statistics reveal that they are also more often in out-of-home care than their ethnic majority peers (Dyrhaug & Haugstvedt, 2024). A recent register study of out-of-home care in Sweden finds a similar overrepresentation (Socialtjänsten, 2024). This overrepresentation often relates to low socio-economic status among families with migrant backgrounds (Socialtjänsten, 2024; Kojan & Storhaug (eds.), 2021). Lack of statistics and research addressing these issues make it difficult to say whether this is the situation also in the other case countries.

European countries struggle to secure a sufficient pool of foster carers (Reimer, 2021). A shortage of foster carers appears indeed to be a global phenomenon (Colton et al., 2008). In Norway, for instance, around 200 children are currently waiting for a foster family (The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Families, 2023). The pool of foster families available, in most countries, does not reflect the cultural diversity of the children in need of foster homes (Chowdhury, 2021; Skivenes et al., 2014; Ní Raghallaigh, 2013; Gruber, 2020). Consequently, children are often placed in foster families that do not match their cultural, religious or linguistic background.

## 2. Method

The analysis of foster care policies is part of the research project 'Home and (dis)continuity: Foster care for children with migrant backgrounds' (HoMi), funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The project explores foster care for children with migrant background from policymaking to policy-outcome. The present paper is based on a descriptive qualitative thematic analysis of 14 policy documents in Norway (3), Sweden (2), Denmark (2), England (3), Ireland (2) and Scotland (2). The identification of the documents was carried out by social work experts in each country,<sup>1</sup> three of whom co-authors this paper. All the experts are members of HoMi's Academic advisory board. The experts identified two to three key national policies/standards in force in autumn 2022, when the analysis took place. Additional searches

and dialogue between individual national experts and the first author led to some changes in the selection of policies. In Sweden and England policies on unaccompanied refugee minors were included because they were deemed relevant due to the countries' high number of unaccompanied minors and their practice of placing these youth in foster homes. The time gap between the oldest and the most recent policy document is 18 years. Some policies are detailed handbooks, often referring to research and other relevant policies, while some are shorter and more legal in their form. National child welfare legislation is not part of the present analysis, but they are often referred to in the policy documents. The large amount of information in the 14 policies, implies some level of abstraction and generalisation in the analysis (cf. Malterud, 2001, p. 486) (Table 1).

The first author had primary responsibility for identifying text extracts on relational and cultural continuity in foster care. This was done in collaboration with members of HoMi's Academic advisory board, particularly the three co-authors. Text on emergency placements, after care and adoption were excluded. The policies were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), with particular attention to a children's rights perspective within that analysis. Co-authors analysed one policy document in their respective countries and the first author analysed the remaining eleven policies. Preliminary codes were discussed among the co-authors and the final thematic codes are a result of joint decisions in these discussions. The first author revisited all the policies to check for overlooked, but relevant text extracts and to ensure a consistent approach to the analysis across policies (Table 2).

### 2.1. Limitations

An analysis of policy documents can only be a snapshot of the policy reality at one specific time, in our case the autumn of 2022. Some case countries, for instance Denmark, had recently undergone reforms of

**Table 1**  
Overview of policy documents.

	National policies	Abbreviation for reference in the text
Denmark	- Handbook of the Children's Reform (2011)	- Denmark P1, 2011
	- Handbook for a good placement process in foster care (2019)	- Denmark P2, 2019
Sweden	- Children and youth in care. Handbook for social services (2020)	- Sweden P1, 2020
	- Unaccompanied children and youth. Handbook for social services (2020)	- Sweden P2, 2020
Norway	- Guidelines for foster care (2004)	- Norway P1, 2004
	- Handbook for the municipalities' work with foster homes (2006)	- Norway P2, 2006
	- Foster care placements in the child's family or close network, and sibling placements – professional recommendations (Bufdir recommendations, 2021)	- Norway P3, 2021
Ireland	- National standards for foster care (2003)	- Ireland P1, 2003
	- Alternative Care Handbook Tusla (2014)	- Ireland P2, 2014
England	- Children and young persons, England, The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010	- England P1, 2010
	- Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards (2011)	- England P2, 2011
	- Care of unaccompanied migrant children and child victims of modern slavery Statutory guidance for local authorities (2017).	- England P3, 2017
Scotland	- Guidance on the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 (2011)	- Scotland P1, 2011
	- The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 guidance.	- Scotland P2, 2014

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**Table 2**  
Overview of analytical themes.

Main themes	A. Relational continuity	B. Cultural continuity
Sub themes	A-1 Birth family contact A-1.1 Sibling placement and contact A-2 Kinship and network placement A-3 Peer relationships	B-1 Matching of children and foster carers B-2 Measures to address ‘cultural’ differences

While sibling, kinship and network placements may be understood as both relational and cultural continuity, these are coded as part of relational continuity in the present analysis.

child welfare policies, while others, like Norway and Scotland, were in the process of reforming child welfare legislation and guidelines when the analysis was done. Our focus on policies at the national level, means that we have not examined policies at the municipality level, policies that, in some countries, may be more detailed and practice oriented. As with all qualitative research, an analysis of policy documents runs the risk of selection bias and consequently a distortion of findings. We have identified what we believe to be key policy documents in each country but acknowledge that other important documents also exist and that analysis of them might have led to different findings. In countries like Norway, the most recent guidelines are split into several smaller thematic digital guidelines, not compiled in a large Handbook common in some of the other case countries. This complicated the criteria for selecting the key national policies and may have caused us to ignore highly relevant guidelines. While we aim to compare and look for patterns across the data material, we acknowledge that contextual differences between the case countries make it difficult to draw firm conclusions. Variations in the care system of children with migrant backgrounds exist, which have implications both for the policy making as well as our analysis. Lastly, unlike a thorough policy analysis (cf. [Weimer & Vining, 2017](#)), our analysis does not include an elaboration of benefits and costs of such recommendations, despite suggesting important policy recommendations. We also emphasise that our analysis does not capture how policies are operationalised and employed in practice.

**3. Presentation of findings**

The analysis of how the foster care policies of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, England, Scotland and Ireland frame continuity, reveals that relational and cultural continuity are considered to be pivotal yet are often addressed in a vague and un-specific manner. This may reflect the complexity involved and/or that culture and ethnicity are topics that are difficult to address. Continuity is often linked to the identity development of children and young people in care (Sweden P2, 2019; Scotland P1, 2011; England P3, 2017; Ireland P2, 2014) and policies acknowledge that children and young people in care ‘may struggle to retain a positive sense of their own cultural, racial and religious heritage’ (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 4–5). Irish policy advises child welfare workers to encourage pride in children’s personal and cultural identity (Ireland P1, 2014, p. 308). Only Swedish policy refers to the broader societal responsibility to ensure continuity rights related to cultural identities and minority language (Sweden P2, 2020, p. 51).

*3.1. Relational continuity*

We start by presenting relational continuity in terms of birth family contact, with a specific attention to sibling placement and contact, before turning to kinship and network placements and peer relationships.

*3.1.1. Birth family contact*

The importance of birth family contact is emphasised in policy

documents in all six case countries but is referred to somewhat differently. In Denmark and Sweden, contact between the child and parents, siblings and family is referred to as a right. Norwegian policy refers to contact as an aspect that must be taken into account, Scottish policies talk about contact as a duty, whereas policies in England and Ireland include birth family contact as one of several standards guiding child welfare work. Neither the right to contact nor the duty to promote it, are viewed as absolute; policies in all six countries present reservations related to birth family contact. Formulations like ‘unless otherwise determined’ and ‘unless special reasons speak against it’ are common. The Nordic and the Irish policies, in keeping with Article 9(3) of the UNCRC, often refer to the ‘best interest principle’; contact should be promoted if not contradictory to the best interest of the child. Policies in England and Scotland refer to the practicability and the protection of the child’s welfare; contact arrangements should be made ‘so far as is reasonably practicable and consistent with C’s welfare’ (England P1, 2010, p. 24). Other aspects to be considered in contact arrangements are the practicability of contact (England P1, 2010; Scotland P1, 2011), distance between the foster home and the birth family home (Norway P1, 2004) and the likely duration of the placement (Norway, P3, 2021).

While all the case countries acknowledge the child’s right to participation, the child’s views on contact with birth family are only explicitly noted in policies in Denmark, Scotland and Ireland, which states that the child’s views and wishes may restrict or terminate birth family contact. Scottish policy provides the most thorough elaboration of the complexities of the child views on family contact, emphasising that the child’s wishes should not only be ‘discovered’ but also be ‘monitored’. Child welfare workers should help the child ‘to understand what is likely to be of greatest benefit to him or her, both in the immediate and in the long-term’ (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 33). Considerations of the child’s needs and wishes on this matter are described as a continuous process; as children mature in their views on and ability to benefit from contact with birth family may change. Scottish policy also provides in-depth guidance on communication with birth parents on the purpose and opportunities of contact (see Scotland P1, 2011, p. 31–32).

When contact and visitation are addressed, the policy documents typically have a broad perspective that includes relationships outside the nuclear family, indicating that contact with extended family and social networks ‘needs similar attention as contact with parents’ (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 32). However, apart from presenting a short list of a few important relationships other than parents, little specific attention is paid in any of the analysed policy documents as to how contact with wider family can be planned. Swedish policy, however, states that ensuring contact with the child’s relatives ‘means that social services may need to help the child re-establish relationships that have been broken for some reason’ (Sweden P1, 2020). Policy documents are largely silent on the importance and facilitation of contact with transnational extended family for children with migration backgrounds. Transnational contact is only mentioned by Swedish policy (Sweden P1, 2020; Sweden P2, 2020) particularly related to unaccompanied minor refugees’ contact with parents.

*3.1.1.1. Sibling placement and contact.* Continuity of sibling relationships is valued through same-sibling-placements or facilitation of sibling contact, though explicit reference to children with migrant backgrounds is not made in this regard. Same-sibling-placement is the preferable choice in all the case countries but appears to be most strongly emphasised in Denmark, England, Scotland and Ireland. Same-sibling-placements shall be used ‘to the greatest extent possible’ (Denmark P2, 2019, p. 106) and ‘where possible, taking account of children’s wishes’ (Ireland P1, 2003, 2.2). Despite favouring same-sibling placements there are clear indications in the policies that this is not always possible. The policies’ main argument for placing siblings together is that it is seen to strengthen the possibility of maintaining close and continuous relationships during and after growing up.



In some case countries, attention is drawn to the potential of negative or harmful sibling relationships, suggesting this to be a reason for placing siblings in separate foster homes (ex. Sweden, P1, 2020; Scotland P1, 2011). Scottish policy provides more nuances to the matter. First, it draws attention to harmful sibling relationships only being true for 'a small number of situations' (Scotland P1, 2011; this is also emphasised in Sweden P1, 2020). Second, same-sibling-placements are viewed as potentially helping to heal negative relationships; children who have challenging sibling relationships may 'need to learn together about healthier ways of interacting' (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 114). However, no guidance on how to assess the quality of a sibling relationships, nor any reference to potential cultural variations in sibling relationships is provided in any of the six case countries.

Contact when siblings are not placed in the same foster home is acknowledged in all case countries. Again, no reference to contact transnationally is made. As with extended family members, siblings are most often just listed as part of general guidelines for contact, without further guidance given. This applies not least to Norway and England, while Sweden, Denmark and Ireland address sibling contact and its significance to a greater extent, although also here quite briefly. Having shared an often-turbulent childhood, sibling relationships are viewed as important as they become adults (Denmark P2, 2019, p. 106) and as representing continuity in an unstable situation here and now (Sweden P2, 2020). Swedish policies emphasise that respect for family life (cf. European Convention on Human Rights, 1953, Art 8) also applies to the right to contact with one's siblings and recommends that siblings should be placed geographically close to one another as a way to facilitate frequent contact. Irish policy emphasises facilitation of 'high levels of contact [between siblings], including holidays together, provided this is in their best interests' (Ireland P1, 2003, 2.2).

Again, Scottish policy (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 33) stands out with the most nuanced approach to the child's contact and relationships with siblings. First, it points to the need for early attention to sibling relationships and that separate contact arrangements between siblings are necessary, apart from contact with parents (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 33). Second, it elaborates on the term 'sibling', referring to the national regulation which uses the term 'any other child in the same family' rather than sibling. By drawing attention to the existence of complex family structures as well as research showing that children's perceptions of siblings can be rooted in more than biological connectedness, the policy 'highlights the need for awareness of the child's view of siblings' (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 33). Lastly, Scotland appears to be the only country in our sample that recommends working towards and plan to reunite siblings that have been split in an emergency placement.

### 3.1.2. Kinship and network placements

There is a general agreement across the six countries that kinship and network placements may ensure continuity in the child's life. In Norway and Sweden, there is a clear political aim that kinship and network placements should play a greater role in foster care than what is currently the case. The child welfare services in the two countries are required by law to first assess relatives and networks before considering other potential foster families. Also, Scotland and Ireland recognise kinship as (normally) the first option, but Scottish policy emphasise that the placement of a child should not be delayed because appropriate kinship carers are not available (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 18).

Policies across the six countries highlight several and similar positive continuity implications of kinship and network placements; promotion of a sense of coherence in the child's life, a greater degree of normality, less stigma and shame, continuity of culture and heritage, and belonging and attachment in important relationships. Many of these aspects are likely to be of particular importance to children with migrant backgrounds. Norwegian and Irish policies also explicitly mention that kinship placements have a potential of reducing moves within the care system. Benefits are linked to children being allowed to live with people who know them and love them and whose commitment to them is

extremely strong, bode well for greater consistency and security and less placement disruptions (Ireland P2, 2014, p. 96).

Swedish policies refer to the child's right to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations (cf. UNCRC, 1989, Art.8), as the backdrop for the 'kinship principle', and argues that kinship placements reduce linguistic and cultural differences between foster carers and children. Also Scottish policy refers to the cultural aspects, focusing mostly on continuity of culture and heritage, the child's sense of identity and place in the family, and the fact that kinship carers will understand the child's history and previous experiences. Norwegian policy argues that a cultural match is more attainable when the child is placed with relatives, referring to the existence of cultural variation within the same country and ethnic group (Norway P3, 2021). Scottish policy draws attention to how issues related to religious persuasion, ethnicity and cultural heritage may cause tensions even within families; 'For example, the religious persuasion of a birth parent may have diverged from the proposed kinship carer, or a grandparent may disapprove of a multiracial relationship within their family' (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 56).

Some policies, Scottish policy in particular, point to potential risks and vulnerabilities of kinship care. Kinship placements may constitute a continuity of something that may cause stress or be harmful for the child. The Scottish policy draws a complex picture of vulnerabilities such as issues around protection of the child, managing complex contact across the family network, handling conflicting emotions, the degree to which the birth parents are or have been isolated or antagonised, and the extent to which the birth parents' problems are reflected in the wider family. Interestingly, when Swedish policy draws attention to potential risks with kinships care, it does so only in relation to the care of unaccompanied minor refugees; honour-related violence and oppression, human trafficking, exploitation through domestic slavery and sexual exploitation (Sweden P2, 2020, p. 45).

It is only in Norwegian policy that integration is specifically referred to when addressing issues of kinship care. The Norwegian child welfare service is urged to 'make sure that the relatives are positive about integration into Norwegian society and that they will allow the child to connect to this society' (Norway P3, 2021, Recommendation no. 2). Except for Danish policy which makes a mention of foster carers ability to navigate two cultures and two religions, attitudes towards integration are not referred to in any of the other countries.

### 3.1.3. Peer relationships and children's social domains

Continuity in relation to peers and schooling does not appear as a strong theme in the policy documents that were analysed. The emphasis on continuity of peer relationships is weak. For Denmark, England, Scotland and Ireland friends are included in general recommendations and standards on contact. Although friends may be understood as part of contact with 'significant others', emphasis on maintaining friendship seems to be ignored in Norwegian and Swedish policies. To continue education (avoiding periods where there is no access to education) is strongly emphasised in all six countries, but policies make less reference to the importance of ensuring that children can continue in the same school, day-care or leisure activities when moved to foster care. Maintaining peer relationships and affiliations to various social arenas is most evident in Irish policy. Friends are more often specified as important relationships and Ireland is the only country that explicitly recommends that 'Where possible and in their best interests, children are facilitated to remain at the school attended prior to placement' (Ireland P1, 2003, 1.6).

### 3.2. 'Cultural' continuity

National policies in all the six countries agree that foster home placements must aim to safeguard and promote the child's attachment to his/her ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious background. The analysed policies propose to ensure the child's cultural continuity (and

identity) through cultural, ethnic, religious and/or linguistic matching (hereafter 'cultural matching') or through measures addressing 'cultural' differences when placed in transcultural foster care.

### 3.2.1. Matching of children and foster carers

Policies across all six countries draw attention to the many different needs and aspects to consider when matching children and foster carers. Whereas Swedish policy states that ethnic minority children *may* need a foster home with specific cultural competence, linguistic qualifications and other abilities that may ensure good cooperation with birth parents (Sweden P1, 2020 – authors' emphasis), Scottish, Norwegian and English policies employ similar formulations as the UNCRC; cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic background are aspects to be considered when a child needs a foster home.<sup>2</sup> The English policy on unaccompanied minor refugees explicitly states that the child's cultural and religious background are 'not overriding considerations', but should be taken into account alongside the child's needs as a whole (England P3, 2017, p. 24). What is important is to find the most appropriate foster family available, one that is able to meet the child's needs as a whole: the policy states that it is 'not necessary to find a foster family that exactly matches the child's background' (England P3, 2017, p. 24). According to Danish policy, matching 'must place emphasis on the placement's ability to offer close and stable adult relationships, just as emphasis must be placed on the child's ability to maintain contact with family and networks' (Denmark P1, 2011, p. 193). The intention herewith is to ensure, as far as possible, stability, continuity and security in the child's upbringing.

Denmark and Ireland stand out as the two countries with the clearest priority of cultural matching of children and foster families. Danish policy explicitly states that safeguarding the child's background and identity 'can best be done' through matching them with foster carers who can meet these requirements (Denmark P2, 2019, p. 103). Similarly, Irish policy cites a set of local guidelines that state, 'where possible, children should be placed within their own culture and religion to ensure their identity needs are met within their placement' (cited in Ireland P2, 2014, p. 306). However, drawing on a UK document called 'Working Together,' the Irish Handbook also states that 'an exclusive focus on 'culture' in social work can be dangerous if the assessment then fails to address the child's fundamental needs' (Ireland P2, 2014, p. 309).

Despite using a somewhat weaker formulation than, for instance, Denmark and Ireland, the legal requirement in Sweden and Norway to always search for kinship and network foster homes first, may be understood as a prioritisation of cultural matching. For example, Norwegian policy emphasises that the child's background 'can only be disregarded when it is not in the individual child's best interest to move to foster carers within the child's own culture' (Norway P3, 2021).

Norwegian policy problematises culture and cultural matching as something that can easily be oversimplified (Norway P3, 2021). It notes cultural variations related to age, gender, class and religion, but also variations within national borders and ethnic groups. Attachment to the same country or ethnic group can, therefore, be a too narrow basis for a cultural match (Norway P3, 2021). Danish policy, on the other hand, draws attention to possible cultural and religious conflicts that may exist between parents and children. It calls for an assessment of potential foster parents' abilities to accommodate opposing demands and wishes from children and their parents, be it related to language, food, boy/girlfriends, education or leisure interests (Denmark P2, 2019, p. 105). Some policies, like the Norwegian (Norway P3, 2021), points to the dilemma of how to protect the child's rights as part of an ethnic minority and simultaneously safeguard the child's right to be treated as an

individual.

All the case countries recognise that a cultural match is not always possible. In situations where it is impossible to find a religious or linguistic match, Norwegian policy recommends the child welfare services to avoid, as far as possible, 'placing children with foster parents who have a philosophy of life that differs significantly from that of the parents' (Norway P1, 2004, 6.5). Scottish policy refers to the aspect of practicability; the child's background should be considered 'so far as is practicable' (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 5). This may be understood in the light of limited numbers of foster carers with various cultural backgrounds and the goal to avoid delayed foster care placements for children with minority cultural backgrounds.

The general principle of participation is incorporated and present in the policy framework of all the case countries and the child's and the parents' say in choosing a foster family appears in several policies in our analysis. There are statements such as 'the care planning process must ensure that the views of children and their families are taken into account' (Ireland P2, 2014, 5.2). Some country variations are visible, but in general participation is often addressed in a vague and unspecific manner. The English policy on unaccompanied minor refugees emphasises most strongly the child's view, stating that the choice of foster home must be consistent with the young person's wishes and feelings (England P3, 2017, p. 24). Only two countries, Scotland and Ireland, point to the importance of the child's views on sibling placement (Scotland P1, 2011; Ireland P1, 2003). Norwegian policy emphasises that children should not be placed in a foster home that are opposed by *birth parents*, for example for religious or cultural reasons (Norway P2, 2014). Scottish and Norwegian policies state that birth parents' views on kinship and network placements require particular considerations (Norway P3, 2021, Recommendation 10; Scotland P1, 2011).

### 3.2.2. Measures to address 'cultural' differences

In most cases, the policies do not make many concrete recommendations on how cultural continuity can be promoted when the child is placed in transcultural foster care. Most countries seem to rely heavily on contact with birth parents and foster carers' abilities to support cultural continuity. Measures that address 'cultural' differences between the child and his/her foster carers may also take the form of mother tongue teaching (Denmark P2, 2019; Sweden P1, 2020), close contact with the child's network (Denmark P2, 2019), contact with local diaspora groups where the child's language, religion and culture are represented (Denmark P2, 2019; England P3, 2017; Ireland P2, 2014), and through mentors or support persons with the same 'cultural' background (England P3, 2017; Sweden P1, 2020). Swedish policy also stresses the social worker's role in addressing identity and origin in his/her contact with the child.

It appears like Swedish (Sweden P1, 2020), Danish (Denmark P2, 2019) and to a more limited extent English (England P3, 2017) and Irish policies (Ireland P2, 2014), provide more guidance on concrete measures than what we find in Norwegian and Scottish policies. Danish policy (Denmark P2, 2019) states that when foster parents lack the same religious or cultural background, such 'gaps' or deficiencies should be met with support and guidance from the child welfare services. Irish policy (Ireland P1, 2003) states that when children are placed with carers of a different cultural, ethnic or religious group, support should be provided to foster carers 'to enable the children to develop a positive understanding of their origins and background' (p. 15).

Policies also emphasise expectations of foster carers to have or acquire knowledge about the child's cultural and religious background, and to strive to facilitate cultural continuity in their homes, for instance through maintaining the child's and the family's holidays and traditions. The Danish policy suggests that maintaining culture and religion can be done 'by inviting the child's family and network to the foster family's home and carrying out religious rituals together' (Denmark P2, 2019, p. 105). Across countries, there is little reference to culturally and religiously appropriate food, apart from the Irish policies (Ireland P1, 2003;

<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, the separate chapter on matching in the English policy (England P2, 2011) does not address the child's ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic background at all.

Ireland P2, 2014) that note that ‘personal preferences, cultural, ethnic and religious considerations’ must be taken into account in the foster home (Ireland, P1, 2003, p. 21) and that children and parents should be asked about dietary customs and foods to avoid (Ireland, P2, 2014, p. 306). Training to increase the cultural knowledge of foster carers is noted by Swedish (Sweden P1, 2020) and Irish (Ireland P2, 2014) policies. The Irish checklist and guidance for social workers when placing children in care with carers from different cultural or religious backgrounds, specifically mentions the potential need to provide competence of skin and hair care to foster carers (cited in Ireland P2, 2014, p. 306).

Few policies address discrimination and racism. Some policies, like those of Sweden and Ireland, express cultural and religious continuity as being enable through the prohibition of discrimination. Interestingly, drawing on a UK set of guidelines (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010), the Irish policy emphasises, moreover, the need for professionals to ‘understand the effects of racial harassment, racial discrimination and institutional racism, as well as cultural misunderstanding or misinterpretation’ (Ireland P2, 2014, p. 310). In a section on Valuing Diversity, Irish policy states that children should be ‘supported and encouraged to develop skills to deal with all forms of discrimination’ (Ireland, P1, 2003, p. 15). However, none of the policies analysed in this study included guidance on how to prepare and equip children and foster carers to tackle encounters of discrimination and racism.

Norwegian policy appears to give special attention to religious aspects. The right of birth parents to choose the religion of their children must be respected by the foster parents, and ‘foster parents must, in the exercise of daily care, go to great lengths to accommodate and facilitate the wishes of parents with parental responsibility in relation to religious upbringing’ (Norway P1, 2004, 13.1). If the foster family belonging to a religious community that the birth parents do not want their child to be influenced by, foster parents should not bring the child to their religious community (Norway P1, 2004, 6.5). According to Scottish policy (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 25), the local authority has a responsibility to address the child’s moral and spiritual needs. The policy states that both child welfare workers and carers are responsible to discover whether the child previously has practised any aspect of his or her religion, and ‘provide opportunities and encouragement for this to continue’ (Scotland P1, 2011, p. 25).

Continuity of the child’s linguistic background appears to have a particular emphasis in Swedish and Danish policies. The Swedish policy states, for instance, that ‘the use of their own minority language must be particularly promoted’ (Sweden P2, 2020, p. 36) and stresses that children should receive support to learn and develop their language. Policies in both countries problematise the risk that the child ‘can no longer communicate with their parents after a couple of years in placement (Denmark P2, 2019, p. 104). Swedish policy also state that linguistic (and cultural) differences can create distance between people, which may make cooperation with the child’s birth parents more difficult (Sweden P2, 2020).

Apart from referring to the child’s linguistic background when reflecting the UNCR’s article 20, we find little specific attention to children’s right to maintain and develop their first language in the policies in Norway, Ireland, Scotland and England. Interestingly, while some reference is made to ‘linguistic background’ in Ireland’s alternative care handbook (P2), Ireland’s National Standards for Foster Care (P1) only references language in relation to access to the complaints procedure. Culture, religion and ethnicity are referenced in relation to ‘Valuing diversity’, but language is not explicitly mentioned.

#### 4. Discussion

Although, the policy documents agree that child welfare workers should arrange for the child to be able to maintain relationships and connection to culture, religion and language, the policies give divergent emphasis to various aspects. Moreover, our analysis reveals that specific guidance and examples of how to ensure relational and cultural

continuity are often limited, and there is little specific reference to circumstances of children with migrant backgrounds. Aspects like discrimination and racism are, for example, hardly recognised. Vague policies may cause practice to be variable and random when it comes to cultural considerations, as found in some research (Barn, 2007; Rugkåsa & Stang, 2023). At the same time, absence of specific guidance may be understood as an expression of the desirability of an individual approach to assessing continuity. Children and young people’s relationships and cultural identities and practices need to be understood as fluid and negotiated processes of becoming which are produced through historically and socially situated interactional episodes, rather than as essential or fixed characteristics and behaviours (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; see also Hall & du Gay, 1996; Jenkins, 2014). This indicates the importance of taking account of the needs and wishes of each individual child (Watters, 2008) while recognising that culture, ethnicity, religion and language intersect with other significant aspects of their lives. In the concluding discussion we will highlight some patterns in the data material and critically discuss their potential implications on assessment and decision-making.

The first pattern is a stronger articulation of the significance of relational continuity of children’s *adult* relationships compared to their peer relationships. This is visible both in relation to sibling and peer relationships. While contact with siblings is acknowledged across policies, most include little elaboration on how to ensure continuity of sibling relationships when they are not placed in the same foster home. Only the Scottish policy refer to the necessity of working towards reuniting siblings that have been split in emergency placements. As siblings are family members, children’s right to family life, as set forth by article 8 in the European Convention on Human Rights and article 16 in the UNCR (1989), requires the least disruptive intervention and consequently great efforts to protect and promote sibling (placements and) relationships. Lack of concrete guidance on these matters leaves the child welfare worker with a large amount of discretion concerning sibling placement and contact (McCormick, 2010; Falch-Eriksen, 2017).

Continuity of friendships after placement in foster care is barely mentioned in policies across the six countries. Research, on the other hand, has highlighted that peer relationships are crucial for identity formation and wellbeing of young people, not least for youth with migrant backgrounds (Behrendt et al., 2022; Eide et al., 2020). Migrant youth, particularly unaccompanied refugee minors, may have few relationships in the new country that they can trust, and therefore seek trustworthy peer relationships as a safety net for the future (Eide et al., 2020). However, the importance of friendships for children and youth in care are not always recognised and valued by child welfare workers and foster carers (Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021). We should bear in mind that rare socialisation with peers like friends and siblings may have particular implications for children with cultural minority background as these peer relationships may be some of few connections to their cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic background. For those with difficult relationships with their parents, or where parents are living in another country, peer relationships may be their only everyday connection to their linguistic and cultural background.

A second pattern is that there appears to be a strong emphasis on the significance of *parental* contact, while contact with family members like siblings, grandparents and other relatives in most cases receives less attention. Previous research has stressed that not only are sibling relationships likely to have the greatest longevity, thus, having the largest potential of providing future support, siblings also create an important link to the past through shared history and background (McCormick, 2010; McDowall, 2016). We may expect that the significance of having someone in their lives that share their history and background, is reinforced for children with migrant backgrounds in transnational foster care. Given the substantial body of research which underlines the benefits of maintaining sibling relationships and contact (McCormick, 2010; Lundström & Sallnäs, 2012; Moyers et al, 2006) and children’s wishes to see more of their siblings (Boyle, 2017; McDowall, 2015; 2016), the lack

of emphasis (in most policies) on promoting these relationships is surprising. For children with migrant backgrounds, placement with siblings may help in a particular way to facilitate continuity of ethnic and cultural identity, particularly if the placements are cross cultural. Research also emphasises the significance of relationships and contact with other relatives (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011; Lidén, 2020). The policies' inattention to contact arrangements with the child's extended family members, appears in stark contrast to their clear emphasis on the importance of kinship care in relation to promoting relational and cultural continuity (cf. Trenson et al., 2023). With the exception of Sweden, policies are also largely silent on the value of transnational family relationships. This is contrary to research which points to the importance transnational relatives may have for children's wellbeing by providing social and emotional support despite the physical distance (Oppedal & Idsøe, 2015; Lidén, 2020). To 'take refugee children seriously as competent interpreters of their own lives' (Watters, 2008, p. 187), implies to enter into dialogues with children and young people on who they define as friends, siblings and kin. Scottish policy may serve as an example of such an approach through its recommendation to explore children's own views of siblings, which can be rooted in more than biological connectedness (Scotland P1, 2011).

A third pattern that we observe from the analysis is a tendency to take for granted that we all share the same norms and values, presumably those of the Western and dominant culture. Eurocentric models, which are often strongly influenced by attachment theory (see e.g., Cameron et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2017), tend to centre on the individual child (and his/her caregivers), more or less disconnected from his or her community, and may not reflect the values of the children and families child welfare services are to serve. To consider what is the best interest of a particular child is always a value judgement, marked by the subjectivity of the child welfare worker responsible for the assessment (Falch-Eriksen, 2018). This inherent subjectivity heightens the risk of individual and cultural biases; 'by allowing decision makers, who are generally members of the dominant culture to impose family values that may be inconsistent with those of a minority group' (Walter et al., 1994, as cited in Ralph, 1998, p. 140). Various cultural interpretations of the best interest principle, such as cultural variations in child-rearing practices and expressions of attachment in the child-parent relationship, are not recognised when policies provide guidance to child welfare workers on contact arrangements, matching etc. (cf. Long & Sephton, 2011). This may indicate that the policies are based on an assumption of a universally agreed upon definition of what is best for children, although views and values most certainly vary among the children and families receiving assistance from child welfare services, for instance due to various religious beliefs and cultural and ethnic background. The principle of the child's best interest may, consequently, be used to establish a standard of care and child-rearing that reflects Eurocentric norms and values.

We know there are cultural variations also related to sibling relationships (Long & Sephton, 2011). Having an active role in caring for one's younger siblings, for instance, may be positively valued in one cultural context while interpreted as harmful or negative in another (Long & Sephton, 2011; Ursin et al., 2022). Inadequate recognition of cultural variations in European foster care policies, may cause a situation where the dominant view, in our case the Eurocentric view, prevails without questioning and critical reflection. Policies that emphasise more strongly cultural and religious variations and the need to base decisions on values and norms that hold meaning for the particular child and family, not only on what child welfare workers hold to be scientific knowledge (Skivenes & Pösö, 2017), may be important tools to avoid narrow and Eurocentric professional practice and decision-making.

A fourth pattern is what appears to be a dilemma or a difficult balance between ensuring that aspects of the child's immediate care and safety needs are addressed whilst simultaneously ensuring that cultural and relational continuity are promoted. Some policies, like the Irish, explicitly warn against a prioritisation of cultural continuity by pointing

to the danger of failing to address other fundamental rights of the child. Others, like the English, point to the risk of delays in placement decisions (and therefore also delays in providing the care and safety the child needs) if culture, religion and language are overriding considerations. Although these are sound arguments in the light of the low number of foster families with minority cultural backgrounds, this line of thinking may also be constructing a needs hierarchy where the child's cultural, religious and linguistic needs and rights are overshadowed by what policymakers observe to be more pressing care needs. The policies tend to focus on safeguarding the child's wellbeing in the short-term with less reference to cultural connectedness, wellbeing and identity in the long-term.

We argue that policymakers must think beyond childhood to fully incorporate the complexity of children's relationships and cultural connectedness. While referring to the children's right to preserve their identity and practice their religion and first-language, we find limited reflections and practical advice on how to compensate for the loss and feelings of 'fragmented' identity children in care may experience when disconnected to their cultural and ethnic milieu (cf. Degener, et al., 2021; Degener et al., 2022). While transcultural foster care placements may be both appropriate and necessary for some children, policies and practice must consider how to ensure children with migrant backgrounds have equal opportunities to explore and develop their identities.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The language of the policies, how they weigh various aspects, how clear and nuanced guidance they provide and what they are silent about, are likely to shape assessment and decision-making. Less nuanced guidance leaves the child welfare worker with a larger amount of discretion (cf. Dworkin, 1967), also related to relational and cultural continuity for children with migrant backgrounds. While the space to exercise discretion is necessary to ensure an individual approach, inadequate recognition of cultural variations in foster care policies may allow for cultural biases and may cause a less reflective and critical approach when child welfare workers perform their tasks and make their decisions. As a result, children with migrant backgrounds may be denied thorough considerations of their relational and cultural continuity, here included their right to preserve their identity, practice their language and to live in harmony with their culture and religion (UNCRC, 1989, Art. 8 & Art. 30).

With European countries becoming more and more cultural, religious and linguistic diverse, this diversity ought to be mirrored in national policies on foster care by incorporating the specific needs and circumstances of children with migration backgrounds into the policy framework. We call for clearer guidance on how to assess and meet children's 'cultural' needs and wishes, including a stronger focus on discrimination and racism. We also call for greater attention to how their relationships, peers as well as adults, national as well as transnational, can be maintained and further developed. The inherent fluidity of culture, religion and relationships (cf. Gjerde, 2004), pointing to variations across individuals, time and space, requires a culturally responsive and individual approach that take into account that needs and wishes may shift throughout the child's foster care experience.

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## Declaration of competing interest

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



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## Data availability

The data is national policy documents available to everyone

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