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What Does It Take to Ensure Children's Cultural Care? Examining Organisational Drivers Across Five National Contexts

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Abstract

Children's cultural care is not an ancillary practice concern but a central element of governance, safeguarding, and ethical responsibility within out-of-home care systems. Across child protection systems internationally, out-of-home care services are mandated to safeguard children while upholding statutory and international care obligations. Leadership sets direction, organisational structures embed accountability, and learning cultures sustain responsiveness, forming an architecture that protects children's cultural identities as inseparable from their safety, wellbeing, and belonging. Cultural care thus signals organisational integrity and the translation of rights-based commitments into practice. Yet many out-of-home care organisations struggle to support children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to maintain connections with family, community, and culture. Responsibility is often delegated to individual caseworkers, limiting systemic impact. Whole-of-organisation approaches are needed to embed cultural connection as a core safeguarding priority, strengthen accountability, and develop practitioner capability. Interviews with representatives from service organisations across five countries examined the organisational drivers that enable effective cultural care and the factors shaping the implementation of practice tools. Findings highlight the interconnected roles of leadership, governance, workforce development, and practitioner teams in sustaining culturally responsive practice. This paper reinforces shared responsibility across organisational levels to act with intentionality and cultural curiosity in supporting children's rights to identity and belonging and concludes with an A–Z prompt tool offering reflective questions for leaders and practitioners to strengthen organisational approaches to cultural care.

Keywords: children; looked after; out-of-home care; cultural diversity; cultural care; implementation; leadership

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1. Introduction

Across national child protection systems, out-of-home care services are mandated to safeguard children and uphold their rights under both domestic legislation (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2022, 2025) and international conventions, including the United Nations General Assembly (UN) (1989). When children are removed from their families, organisations assume responsibility not only for their immediate protection, but also for promoting their broader wellbeing. These responsibilities extend beyond their

immediate protection to include acting in children's best interests, supporting their developmental, relational, and cultural needs, recognising that safety, wellbeing, identity, and continuity of family and community connections are foundational to healthy development.

Despite these obligations, cultural care is often positioned as secondary to immediate safety or placement considerations. In Australia, cultural care policy attention rightly prioritises First Nations children in recognition of the intergenerational harm caused by historical injustices and forced removals (Davis 2019; Grace et al. 2025; Krakouer et al. 2023). However, this necessary focus can unintentionally narrow system attention to the cultural needs of multicultural children; those whose parents or extended family come from two or more culturally distinct backgrounds, or whose culture differs from the dominant culture of the country in which they live. For these children, culture encompasses families' migration or refugee experiences, ethnicity, language, and faith, all of which shape the development of identity, belonging, and relational continuity. Understanding cultural care for multicultural children therefore requires attention to the complex, multi-layered nature of cultural identity and the organisational conditions that enable or constrain its recognition in everyday care.

Although cultural identity is widely recognised as central to children's wellbeing, organisational systems often provide limited guidance on how cultural care should be understood, documented, and enacted for multicultural children in out-of-home care. Poor or incomplete cultural information further constrains meaningful cultural connection, and responsibility for cultural care frequently falls to individual practitioners or carers rather than being embedded as an organisation-wide obligation (Degener et al. 2022; Sawrikar 2012; Waniganayake et al. 2019). These gaps contribute to inconsistent practice and missed opportunities to uphold children's cultural rights in everyday care.

Research to guide culturally responsive practice for multicultural children remains limited. In Australia, a national research audit more than a decade ago highlighted the absence of robust evidence relating to multicultural children and recommended prioritising this cohort for future investigation (McDonald et al. 2011). Although national policy, funding structures, demographic patterns, and community resources shape local practice, international research provides essential insights that can inform Australian and global approaches.

To date, only a small number of holistic, longitudinal studies have examined developmental trajectories, changes over time, and potential causal relationships among key variables for children in care (Ager et al. 2012; Barth et al. 2022; Cashmore and Wulczyn 2024). While these studies have advanced understanding of children's wellbeing, they offer limited insight into how cultural identity, belonging, and organisational conditions interact across the care journey. This leaves significant gaps in the evidence base for multicultural children.

Internationally, research from the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe highlights the consequences of poor-quality cultural data, inconsistent reporting of ethnicity, and limited conceptual clarity around cultural care (Allnatt et al. 2022; Javed et al. 2025). These limitations constrain the ability to understand how children's cultural identities evolve across different care settings and how organisational practices influence long-term outcomes. A Spanish systematic review further demonstrates the uneven global distribution of foster care research and the predominance of caregiver and professional perspectives, limiting insight into children's own cultural experiences (Vallejo-Slocker et al. 2024). Complementing this, recent European studies led by Norwegian scholars show that increasing migration has placed more children with migrant backgrounds in foster care, yet policy guidance on maintaining cultural and relational continuity remains limited (Herrero-Arias and Tonheim 2025; Hultman et al. 2025; Tonheim et al. 2025). As migration increases globally and more children with diverse cultural backgrounds enter care, the absence of cul-

turally attuned longitudinal evidence becomes increasingly consequential. Strengthening this evidence base is essential for informing policy, guiding organisational decision-making, and supporting practitioners to uphold children's cultural rights in everyday care.

Australian research reflects similar concerns. Studies consistently identify inconsistent cultural documentation, limited organisational accountability, and gaps in leadership oversight. A decade-long prospective longitudinal study of out-of-home care in the state of New South Wales, the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study, found that many children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds did not identify with their cultural heritage, indicating system-level governance failures rather than isolated practice issues (Paxman et al. 2021). A national study conducted between 2021 and 2025 reinforced these concerns, highlighting unclear stakeholder roles, limited partnership structures, and inadequate cultural data as barriers to culturally responsive practice, ultimately undermining service planning and children's cultural connections (Grace et al. 2025). Together, these studies show that cultural care is frequently treated as a practice-level task rather than a governance responsibility requiring clear expectations, oversight mechanisms, and leadership stewardship. These findings point to structural, not practitioner-level, shortcomings, underscoring the need for stronger organisational accountability and more reliable cultural information systems to support culturally responsive decision-making.

In the context of complex mental health, trauma, and socio-structural needs, governance structures must actively support decision-making and reflective practice so that cultural needs are not overshadowed (Harris et al. 2026; Wright et al. 2024). Yet reviews and inquiries across Australia consistently identify leadership and governance blind spots in recognising and assuring children's cultural needs (Audit Office of NSW 2024; NSW Ombudsman 2024; Stevens and Gahan 2024; Wise 2017). Strengthening cultural care therefore requires organisational stewardship, clear accountability, and sustained investment in culturally responsive and reflective practice across all levels of the system. Without this, cultural care remains aspirational rather than embedded, and children's cultural identities risk being overlooked or deprioritised in everyday decision-making.

This paper examines the organisational conditions, leadership responsibilities, and governance safeguards that support the monitoring and strengthening of cultural care for multicultural children in out-of-home care. It identifies opportunities for improvement to ensure children's rights to cultural identity and connection are upheld in everyday practice.

2. Methodology

This study employed a three-phase qualitative design to examine the organisational drivers shaping children's cultural care across national contexts. The research was guided by the overarching goal of investigating how organisational leadership, structural systems and governance safeguards influence the visibility, consistency, and accountability of cultural care for multicultural children in out-of-home care. To address this goal, the study asked: How do organisational leadership, structural systems, and learning processes shape the delivery, consistency, and governance of cultural care for children in out-of-home care?

A cooperative inquiry, participatory methodology privileged the perspectives of participants with direct leadership and operational responsibility (Heron and Reason 2007). This approach was selected because it aligns with the study's focus on organisational sensemaking, governance practice, and the relational dynamics through which cultural care is implemented. Data collection occurred over an 18-month period and involved agencies across the United States, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Norway, enabling cross-national comparison of organisational conditions and governance arrangements.

The study was undertaken by an Australian-based research team whose professional experience in cultural care and organisational systems informed both the sampling frame

and the interpretive process. The team's positionality shaped how international networks were accessed, how organisational practices were understood across jurisdictions, and how reflexive dialogue was used to interrogate assumptions during analysis. Ongoing supervisory discussion supported critical reflection on how the team's standpoint influenced meaning-making across the three phases.

Ethical Approval

Phases 1 and 2 were conducted under a single ethical approval framework, with participants giving informed consent prior to interviews and group discussions as part of the 2024 Churchill Fellowship study. Phase 3 forms part of a doctoral project approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 17031). All procedures complied with national and international ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

Phase 1: Leadership and Organisational Perspectives

Phase 1 involved 39 participants from 27 agencies across five countries, each holding organisational or system-level responsibility for cultural care in out-of-home care contexts. Participants were purposively selected for their organisational authority and practice expertise, including Chief Executive Officers/Directors (n = 17), operational leaders (n = 11), academics/researchers (n = 8), and participants in specialist training, carer, or out-of-home care partner roles (n = 5). Agencies were initially identified through established professional networks and academic referrals (n = 16) and subsequently expanded via snowball sampling to ensure diversity of organisational type and jurisdictional representation. This approach ensured participation from individuals with direct leadership influence, governance responsibility, and operational oversight.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with all 39 participants. Interviews explored organisational culture, leadership practices, governance safeguards, cultural identity documentation, and system-level enablers and barriers shaping children's cultural care. Ninety-six percent of interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the remaining 4% conducted via videoconference due to participant preference or geographic constraints.

The leadership and organisational perspectives presented in Phase 1 were analytic syntheses constructed from close interpretation of the interview data. These syntheses integrated participants' accounts of organisational structures, leadership roles, decision-making authority, and cultural care practices. They functioned as interpretive outputs that supported cross-agency comparison and informed the thematic analysis, rather than as descriptive profiles or document-based summaries. In doing so, Phase 1 provided the foundational insight into how leadership framing and organisational authority influence the governance and operationalisation of cultural care, directly informing the subsequent phases of analysis.

Phase 2: Collective Inquiry and Systems Dialogue

Phase 2 involved 11 facilitated group discussion sessions with 154 participants across five countries. Drawing on the organisational diversity represented in the study, including agencies engaged in out-of-home care service delivery, training, advocacy, research, and inter-agency collaboration, this phase created structured opportunities for cross-agency reflection and knowledge transfer. The purpose was not to extend the inquiry beyond participants' direct experience, but to enable them to examine cultural care practices within their own organisational settings while learning from the approaches, constraints, and system conditions encountered by others. This design supported inter-agency dialogue and comparative insight across different service functions and national contexts.

Sessions were convened and coordinated by Phase 1 participants, extending the cooperative inquiry design by enabling collective reflection within and across organisational

systems. Most sessions were conducted face-to-face (73%), with the remainder held online. Session formats included program-specific teams, intra-agency groups, inter-agency partnerships, and training cohorts, ensuring representation across organisational layers and system interfaces.

Each session incorporated a structured presentation of Australian-designed cultural inquiry tools, including the S.E.L.F. cultural framework (Settlement, Ethnicity, Language, Faith), which functioned as a reflective prompt to support critical dialogue and cross-context comparison (Karatasas et al. 2024). Participants examined how cultural care was conceptualised and operationalised within their national systems, identifying shared drivers, governance mechanisms, and workforce development strategies, as well as context-specific constraints such as regulatory environments and funding architectures.

Phase 2 therefore moved beyond individual organisational perspectives to examine system-level patterns and cross-agency dynamics, shaping cultural care. The collective dialogues validated and extended themes emerging from Phase 1 and provided the foundation for the targeted comparative inquiry undertaken in Phase 3.

Phase 3: Deepening Comparative Leadership

Phase 3 conducted 18 months after Phases 1 and 2, involved in-depth interviews with three senior participants from the Phase 1 cohort. These participants were purposively selected to represent diverse national contexts and organisational architectures, enabling the study to interrogate and refine emerging explanatory patterns regarding the organisational drivers shaping cultural care. All interviews were conducted online due to geographic distance, providing a focused opportunity to test the developing analysis and explore how cultural care is supported, constrained, and interpreted within different service systems.

The three participants included:

- A United States industry–research partner, leading a five-year, positively evaluated kinship and foster care training program incorporating culturally specific curriculum and adoption pathways.
- An England-based coordinating agency representative, with responsibility for out-of-home care service delivery, training, advocacy, and sector oversight.
- A Norwegian research leader, partnering with out-of-home care services to strengthen evidence-informed practice for children from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Interview questions examined legislative and policy requirements, governance safeguards, leadership roles, organisational processes for documenting cultural identity, practitioner capability development, and system-level enablers of sustained implementation. This phase generated comparative insight into how leadership authority, governance architecture, and organisational design shape cultural care practice across jurisdictions, clarifying areas of international convergence and divergence.

Thematic Analysis Across the Three Phases

This study views children's cultural care as an outcome of organisational structures, leadership priorities, and governance processes rather than individual practitioner capability alone. Drawing on systems theory (Senge 2006) and cooperative inquiry (Heron and Reason 2007), the analysis examined how policies, professional norms, and collaborative decision-making translate cultural care principles into practice across organisational and national contexts.

Data from all three phases were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019). Each phase was first analysed independently to identify phase-specific patterns, followed by cross-phase integration to develop system-level themes. The first author led the analysis, with iterative review and critical dialogue occurring with supervisory researchers to support reflexivity, challenge assumptions, and strengthen analytic depth.

Analysis proceeded through familiarisation, inductive coding, theme development, and theme refinement. Coding captured both semantic and latent features of the data, with attention to organisational drivers, leadership influence, and governance mechanisms. Reflexive memos, analytic journaling, and cross-phase comparison supported the development of themes and ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participant accounts.

To ensure analytic integrity, the study employed triangulation across phases, reflexive engagement, and supervisory peer debriefing. Themes were refined through repeated movement between individual phase datasets and the integrated dataset, enabling identification of both shared and context-specific organisational mechanisms. The three overarching mechanisms emerged inductively through cross-phase synthesis.

Phase 1 explored leadership framing and organisational drivers, revealing how culture is positioned as either foundational or discretionary. Phase 2 examined the operationalisation of cultural care within national governance systems, highlighting implementation challenges, interagency coordination, and workforce development. Phase Three focused on safeguarding architecture and executive accountability, consolidating insights on governance, training, documentation, and policy mechanisms.

Cross-phase integration identified three interrelated mechanisms that sustain cultural care: (1) leadership framing and responsibility, (2) safeguarding architecture, and (3) partnerships and shared accountability. Variations in practice were less about intent and more about organisational positioning, structural reinforcement, and learning capacity, demonstrating that cultural care is embedded through coordinated systems-level processes rather than individual discretion.

3. Findings

Across all phases, participants described cultural care as shaped less by individual practitioner capability than by leadership framing, external system pressures, and organisational learning processes. These system-level mechanisms influenced whether cultural care was positioned as a core organisational responsibility, how commitments were protected or deferred under political and fiscal pressure, and the extent to which cultural practices became embedded over time.

The findings are organised into three interrelated themes that highlight how cultural care is positioned, enacted, and sustained within organisational contexts. Theme 1 examines how leaders frame and institutionalise cultural care, shaping its visibility, legitimacy, and durability. Theme 2 explores how political, social, and budgetary pressures test organisational commitment, revealing when cultural care is prioritised or sidelined. Theme 3 considers how organisational learning processes, such as reflective dialogue, documentation systems, and shared accountability, support or constrain the embedding of cultural care over time.

Together, these themes show that cultural care becomes coherent and sustainable not through individual discretion but through coordinated, system-level processes that align leadership intent, governance structures, and organisational learning.

3.1. Theme 1: Leadership as the Architect of Cultural Care

Theme 1 examines how leadership shapes the positioning and durability of children's cultural care within organisational systems. Across jurisdictions, leaders were consistently identified as pivotal in determining whether culture was framed as foundational to children's identity, safety, and belonging, or treated as discretionary and vulnerable to competing priorities. Participants emphasised that cultural responsiveness does not embed through policy rhetoric alone; it is institutionalised through leadership decisions about

visibility, accountability, resourcing, and collective responsibility. These dynamics were evident in how leaders framed cultural care, navigated political and fiscal pressures, and stewarded organisational expectations.

3.1.1. Leadership in Embedding and Sustaining Cultural Care

Across sites, leaders were consistently identified as central to how cultural care was understood, prioritised, and enacted. Cultural responsiveness was operationalised through leadership decisions about documentation, review processes, measurement, and resourcing; decisions that reflected leadership intent rather than administrative neutrality. As one participant noted, "Cultural care quality feeds down from the top. Messages from organisational leaders that cultural care is part of child wellbeing has an impact" (Agency 13). Another emphasised that leaders influence "values, strategy decisions and resources", signalling what the organisation truly prioritises (Agency 12).

Participants repeatedly framed cultural connection as inseparable from identity, safety, and belonging. As one explained, "No matter what is happening in a child's life and whether child intervention is needed, being disconnected should never be the outcome" (Agency 9). This positioned cultural disconnection not as an unfortunate by-product of intervention but as a safeguarding failure.

Leadership messaging was described as critical in sustaining this positioning. Where culture was embedded within vision statements, strategic plans, and quality frameworks, it became coherent across practice contexts. Conversely, participants warned that silence diminishes significance: "Muting conversations about culture contributes to devaluing the importance of culture" (Agency 1). Leaders who facilitated reflective dialogue, including examination of bias and historical harm, were described as "brave and really important" (Agency 25).

Courage emerged as a defining leadership quality. As one participant stated, "You've got to believe in it. . . it takes courage to maintain focus and value on cultural connections" (Agency 5). Leaders described the need to sustain focus in environments characterised by crisis, competing demands, and reform pressures. Even in the absence of legislative mandate, some articulated clear expectations: "Even if it's not being legislatively mandated, it still matters. . . I want some accountability about children's cultural care connections because I'm interested. . . and I'm interested because it's important" (Agency 5).

Collectively, participants indicated that cultural care functions as a barometer of leadership integrity. What leaders consistently emphasise, resource, and measure becomes embedded as organisational norm. However, the extent to which such commitments endure is shaped by broader political and fiscal environments, explored in the next section.

3.1.2. Navigating Political, Social and Budgetary Tensions

While leaders influenced internal framing, their capacity to sustain cultural care was mediated by external system pressures. Participants described political shifts, funding reforms, and crisis-driven service environments as testing the durability of cultural commitments. In contexts of fiscal constraint, cultural initiatives were frequently recast as non-essential: "When there are cuts, the things that are not urgent or not perceived to be critical in crisis get shelved. Cultural conversations and experiences are often in that second group" (Agency 4). This "crisis logic" risks repositioning cultural care as supplementary rather than integral.

Political pressures were explicit in some jurisdictions. One participant described being asked to remove cultural humility modules from training packages following a change in government, with implied funding consequences. The organisation refused: "We believe in the importance of the module as central to challenging assumptions and understanding

history and impact on children's cultural care" (Agency 5). Such accounts illustrate that maintaining cultural priorities can require active resistance and advocacy.

Participants also expressed concern about the reframing of cultural care as discretionary: "We have found that agencies are talking about cultural care being discretionary rather than essential, and we are worried about the implications through inconsistent practices and deflecting organisational accountability" (Agency 26). This shift transfers responsibility from leadership commitment to minimal legislative compliance.

Conversely, leaders who sustained focus despite instability were described as strengthening organisational coherence. Remaining "steadfast in discussing culturally responsive practices" (Agency 4) and advocating collectively in response to counteractive reforms (Agency 9) reinforced culture as intrinsic rather than conditional. These findings suggest that the authenticity of leadership commitment becomes most visible during instability. When cultural care is protected despite political reprioritisation or fiscal contraction, it signals embedded value; when it is deferred, it reveals its contingent status.

3.1.3. Stewarding Collective Organisational Responsibility

Participants emphasised that cultural care must be normalised as part of organisational identity and collective responsibility. Agencies acknowledged both its importance and the inconsistency of its enactment, particularly in the context of increasing diversity among children entering care. As one participant reflected, "The profile of children coming into care is changing. . . and we are not as familiar with their faith and cultural practices. I think we are conscious of needing to have more attention to children's cultural care" (Agency 21).

Leaders were identified as critical in legitimising cultural dialogue and confronting avoidance. As one participant noted, "Leaders need to be brave to call out unspoken conversations about culture. . . our practices separate cultural communities" (Agency 22). Where culture was framed as central to identity, safety, and belonging, rather than compliance, it became embedded within quality indicators and performance expectations. One participant observed that when cultural care is regarded as a performance marker of organisational excellence, it becomes "a leadership asset not a liability" (Agency 13).

At the same time, leadership did not negate distributed responsibility. As one participant stated, "The success of our practice depends on every worker, supervisor, manager and administrative support person taking collective ownership. . . As leaders we need to be role models" (Agency 2). Participants also cautioned against crisis entrenchment: "You have to believe that keeping children connected to their parents, history and culture is important. As leaders we need to be careful not to get stuck in crisis" (Agency 6).

Across sites, cultural care was most coherent where it was embedded across governance structures, training, documentation systems, and outcome measurement. Where it remained peripheral, it fragmented across practice contexts and became dependent on individual commitment rather than systemic expectation.

3.2. Theme 2: Safeguarding Architects—Embedding Culture in Organisational Practice

Theme 2 demonstrates how leadership commitments to cultural care are translated into safeguarding practice through organisational systems and accountability mechanisms. Safeguarding was understood not only as immediate protection but as ensuring that children's cultural identities and connections are actively maintained as part of quality care. This was achieved through documentation systems, data practices, oversight mechanisms, and executive accountability. Culture was protected not merely as an ideal but through practices that track, scrutinise, and revisit children's cultural connections over time.

Participants consistently distinguished between compliance and safeguarding. When cultural care was framed as a compliance obligation, it risked becoming tokenistic, reduced

to procedural completion. In contrast, safeguarding was understood as accountability to children's safety, identity, and wellbeing. Leadership decisions therefore shaped whether culture functioned as a living protective practice or as an administrative add-on.

Three interconnected mechanisms illustrate how safeguarding architecture protects cultural care in practice: (1) cultural data, (2) governance and oversight, and (3) interagency partnerships.

3.2.1. Data as a Safeguard: Capturing Children's Cultural Identities

Participants highlighted significant limitations in how cultural data is collected and maintained. In many contexts, culture was reduced to dropdown fields capturing ethnicity, religion, nationality, or language; fields inconsistently completed and often dependent on practitioner initiative. As one participant reflected, "I find that as practitioners we are happy to ask people about sexuality and gender but not about their race or culture" (Session 1). This selective comfort in data collection shapes visibility.

Beyond inconsistencies in quantitative recording, qualitative cultural information was frequently absent. Lived experiences, relational context, and children's own perspectives were rarely collected systematically. As one participant explained, "The absence of accurate cultural and family data contributes to dismissing its importance" (Agency 8). Another added, "If we do not keep information on children's cultures, it forces people to make assumptions that lead to errors and inaccuracies. It is not child focused" (Agency 2). These comments represent a well-worn aphorism: You measure what you value.

Participants emphasised that data collection itself requires leadership commitment. One noted that gathering meaningful cultural information depends on organisations valuing it sufficiently to allocate resources (Agency 19). Data sharpened organisational focus, enabling leaders to identify disproportionality, patterns, and disparities, and strengthening advocacy regarding funding and commissioning arrangements. In politically constrained environments, incomplete data limited advocacy capacity.

3.2.2. Governance and Oversight: Ensuring Cultural Care Is Practised

Cultural care gained traction when embedded within governance and accountability structures rather than left to frontline discretion. Without structural supports, practice relied heavily on the confidence and lived experience of individual leaders, limiting sustainability.

Participants described internal accountability mechanisms designed to maintain visibility. One participant detailed a multilayered approach in which practitioners record activities and conversations, supervisors review case records, peer reviewers assess cases across offices, and findings are consolidated and shared with executive leadership (Agency 2). This process made cultural care auditable and collectively owned rather than individually interpreted.

Participants also described implementation gaps emerging where "high-level policy signals" failed to connect with operational requirements (Agency 26). Legislative change alone was insufficient; internal governance systems were necessary to ensure translation into practice. Structural oversight was therefore viewed not as bureaucratic burden but as protective architecture that prevents cultural invisibility.

3.2.3. Championing Cultural Care Through Interagency Partnerships

Interagency collaboration emerged as a significant protective mechanism in advancing cultural care. Participants spoke strongly about the value of unifying their voices to clarify data, strengthen collective advocacy, and respond to shared frustrations, resource constraints, and funding pressures. Beyond practice coordination, participants described the deeper significance of collective dialogue in sustaining a shared voice, particularly in contexts marked by discrimination, isolation, and vulnerability.

One participant reflected that collective forums enabled leaders to challenge systemic racism in ways that would be difficult individually (Agency 3). When agencies convened, patterns became more visible both within and across organisations. Cross-sector collaboration also enhanced data integrity, supported training development, and strengthened implementation safeguards.

Collective dialogue further fostered reflective learning. One participant described building confidence in "treading gently and respectfully" when navigating complex issues, particularly in relation to cultural communities shaped by historical trauma and strong rights-based perspectives (Agency 2). These forums provided space to consider the timing and strategy of advocacy efforts, enabling more culturally attuned and context-responsive approaches.

3.3. Theme 3: Advancing Practice Through Reflexive Dialogue and Cultural Partnerships

Theme 3 reveals how cultural care becomes embedded or diluted through organisational learning processes. Leadership intent alone is insufficient; without structured mechanisms for developing knowledge, reflexivity, and shared accountability, cultural care risks remaining aspirational rather than operationalised.

Participants consistently identified decisions regarding learning, supervision, and resource allocation as foundational to embedding culturally responsive practice. Investment in ongoing training and reflective supervision shaped practitioners' confidence and capacity to recognise, articulate, and respond to children's cultural identities within complex decision-making environments. Where leaders resourced structured learning systems, culture was more likely to be integrated into everyday assessment, planning, and review processes.

3.3.1. Engaging in Reflexive Dialogue

Across jurisdictions, participants articulated a shared view: organisations have a responsibility to resource and protect reflective conversations. Practitioners require time to question their own perspectives, examine bias, and consider how cultural identities intersect with trauma, placement instability, migration, and systemic inequities. As one participant noted, "Regardless of whether a caseworker is using an evidence-based practice, implicit bias is present. . . Reflective conversations are critical in exploring bias" (Agency 2).

Structured dialogue, through Communities of Practice, reflective supervision, or facilitated forums, enabled practitioners to surface "visible–invisible" and "voiced–unvoiced" dynamics (Agency 6), fostering humility and curiosity. Reflection was described as developmental rather than remedial, requiring historical, relational, and anticipatory awareness (Agency 13).

Reflection was considered most essential during crisis, precisely when it is most likely to be abandoned: "Reflection is often the first thing to go at times of crisis and often the most important time to be used" (Agency 22). This links Theme 3 back to Theme 2: systems under pressure risk narrowing to compliance and risk management, displacing identity-focused work. Leaders who actively protected reflective time signalled that cultural care remained non-negotiable even in crisis contexts.

3.3.2. Practising Cultural Humility in Leadership

Consistent with Theme 1, participants emphasised the importance of practising cultural humility in leadership. Senior leaders often described fear of "getting it wrong" or exposing gaps in cultural knowledge, which, if unaddressed, could result in avoidance or symbolic gestures rather than substantive engagement.

Conversely, leaders who participated in training and openly modelled curiosity reinforced cultural humility as an organisational norm. As one participant explained, "Sharing

the message of curiosity is amplified when leaders participate in training and role model being curious. . . Leaders do not need to know everything about every culture, but they do need to know how to be curious" (Agency 3).

Leadership presence in learning spaces strengthened psychological safety, enabling practitioners to examine bias without fear of criticism. Where leaders remained distant, cultural training risked being interpreted as peripheral; where leaders engaged visibly, learning became embedded within governance expectations.

3.3.3. Co-Producing with Cultural Knowledge Holders

Participants emphasised the necessity of incorporating external cultural knowledge. Hearing directly from children, families, community leaders, and practitioners with lived experience was described as transformative: "The opportunity to hear from knowledge holders including young people and practice experts in foster care can be powerful in embedding the importance of cultural connections" (Agency 18).

Co-production grounded cultural care in relational accountability rather than abstraction. Leaders who actively sought partnerships with knowledge holders strengthened organisational responsiveness. International examples, such as the Indian Child Welfare Act, were cited as legislative models foregrounding connections to family, community, and culture as protective obligations.

Participants also highlighted that for migrant communities, mistrust of child welfare systems can impede engagement. In such contexts, involving practitioners or leaders who share cultural elements was critical to rebuilding trust and supporting relational.

4. Discussion

This study positions children's cultural care as both a moral and governance imperative, demonstrating that safeguarding cultural identity is inseparable from organisational integrity and leadership practice. Across the three themes, a consistent pattern emerged: culturally responsive care is sustained when leadership conviction, structural embedding, and organisational learning operate in alignment. When any of these dimensions weaken, cultural priorities risk fragmentation and marginalisation, reinforcing that rights articulation alone is insufficient without operational and governance structures that make cultural care visible, accountable, and durable.

4.1. Leadership as a Driver of Cultural Care

Findings underscore that leadership framing fundamentally determines whether cultural care is positioned as core to children's safety and wellbeing or treated as peripheral. Consistent with international child welfare governance literature, leaders translate organisational values into operational realities, particularly within risk-oriented and compliance-driven environments (Healy 2022; Munro 2019). This aligns with broader organisational research demonstrating that leadership is the primary mechanism shaping organisational culture and climate, which in turn determines whether relational, culturally responsive practice can flourish (Glisson and Williams 2015; Li et al. 2020; Olaniyan et al. 2020).

In this study, leadership was constitutive rather than symbolic: decisions regarding resourcing, supervision, advocacy, and visibility shaped whether cultural care was embedded, coherent, and sustained. Leadership courage, the willingness to advocate for cultural care amid fiscal, political, or systemic pressures, emerged as a defining feature of mature governance. Conversely, silence or inaction contributed to cultural marginalisation, signalling organisational ambivalence. These dynamics reflect wider evidence that middle-layer leaders act as cultural carriers who buffer practitioners from system pressures,

sustain organisational memory, and translate values into everyday practice (Jeffrey 2016; Lwin et al. 2018).

These findings align with calls for anti-oppressive and culturally humble leadership that explicitly acknowledges historical harms and structural inequities, particularly for Indigenous, migrant, and minoritised children (Pecora et al. 2018; Nguyen et al. 2021). They also resonate with research showing that practitioner commitment and cultural responsiveness are shaped less by individual motivation and more by organisational climate, mission clarity, and emotionally supportive leadership (Howe et al. 2018; Lizano and Barak 2015). In welfare systems characterised by managerialism, fragmentation, and audit cultures, leaders play a critical role in protecting relational and culturally grounded work from being eroded by proceduralism (Bode 2024; Cabassa 2016; Proctor et al. 2023). Leadership, therefore, is not merely an enabler of cultural care but a determinant of whether cultural identity is safeguarded or sidelined.

4.2. Structural Embedding and Operationalisation

Leadership intent alone proved insufficient; cultural care requires structural embedding within organisational systems. Theme 2 demonstrated that safeguarding infrastructures, including data collection, documentation practices, performance indicators, and cross-sector collaboration, act as stabilisers that make cultural priorities visible and accountable. This aligns with wider evidence that structural conditions, rather than practitioner goodwill, determine whether cultural identity is consistently recognised and protected (Rees et al. 2021; Lwin et al. 2018; Olaniyan et al. 2020).

Data practices were particularly influential. Superficial demographic categorisation risks reducing culture to symbolic recognition, whereas relational, child-informed data strengthens advocacy and ensures cultural identities remain central to decision-making (Karatasas et al. 2024). This is consistent with research showing that when structural and cultural factors are omitted from assessment and recording systems, cultural harm becomes invisible and structural inequity is reframed as individual risk (Feely and Bosk 2021). Participants consistently described cultural connection as protective, integral to identity formation, belonging, and relational continuity. This reframed culture as core to safeguarding, not an administrative add-on, echoing national evidence that inconsistent cultural documentation undermines children's identity continuity and sense of belonging (McDowall 2018). It also aligns with broader implementation research showing that data quality and visibility are foundational to sustained practice, shaping whether identity-related information is acted upon or lost within organisational noise (Proctor et al. 2023; Wulczyn et al. 2015).

Cross-sector collaboration further strengthened organisational resilience, enabling agencies to collectively defend cultural priorities amid political and fiscal volatility. These structural mechanisms ensured that cultural care was not dependent on individual commitment but embedded within governance expectations. This reflects broader findings that children's rights to family, cultural identity, and relational continuity are realised only when supported by coherent organisational systems, clear responsibilities, and cross-agency coordination (Forrester and Byers 2024; Pecora et al. 2025). Implementation science similarly emphasises that sustained, equitable practice requires multi-level structures, leadership, supervision, data systems, and organisational routines, not isolated interventions (Cabassa 2016; Supplee et al. 2023). Structural embedding therefore functions as the organisational backbone of cultural care, ensuring that cultural identity remains visible, actionable, and safeguarded across the system.

4.3. Organisational Learning as a Sustaining Mechanism

Theme 3 highlighted the critical role of organisational learning systems in sustaining culturally responsive practice. Reflexive processes, authentic partnerships with cultural knowledge holders, and culturally grounded supervision supported the translation of leadership intent into consistent practice. These learning structures mirror international evidence that implementation success depends on systems that cultivate reflective inquiry, cultural humility, and shared meaning rather than technical compliance (Metz et al. 2021; Supplee et al. 2023).

Such systems enabled organisations to adapt to evolving contexts, embed cultural knowledge into everyday operations, and maintain cultural priorities even under crisis conditions. This aligns with research showing that culturally responsive safeguarding requires participatory, relational approaches that foreground critical consciousness and organisational self-awareness (Howard 2016; Howe et al. 2018). Learning systems also shape the organisational climate in which practitioners work: engaged, functional climates support relational and culturally grounded practice, whereas stressful, compliance-driven climates undermine it (Li et al. 2020; Lizano and Barak 2015; Williams and Glisson 2014).

These findings further resonate with evidence that middle-layer leaders play a pivotal role in sustaining organisational learning by carrying cultural knowledge, buffering practitioners from system pressures, and maintaining organisational memory across workforce transitions (Jeffrey 2016; Lwin et al. 2018). Implementation research similarly emphasises that learning systems, supervision, reflective routines, data feedback loops, and cross-team inquiry, are essential for sustaining equitable practice and preventing drift (Metz et al. 2021; Pecora et al. 2025; Proctor et al. 2023). Learning systems therefore functioned as the mechanism through which cultural care became durable, ensuring that cultural identity remained central to assessment, planning, and review processes.

4.4. Integrating Rights and Governance

Across all themes, findings highlight the persistent gap between normative rights frameworks and their operationalisation. International instruments, including the United Nations General Assembly (UN) (1989), affirm children's rights to culture, identity, and belonging. Yet these rights become meaningful only when embedded within governance structures that operationalise them through supervision, workforce development, data systems, and executive oversight. This aligns with contemporary child-centred evidence showing that children experience cultural connection as a fundamental right and cultural disconnection as harm (Howe et al. 2018; Venables et al. 2025).

Cultural care thus functions as a barometer of organisational integrity, signalling environments where leadership, structural embedding, and learning align to produce coherent, accountable, and ethically grounded practice. In such systems, cultural care is supported, consistent, and sustained, not reliant on individual effort alone, but enabled by organisational design.

This pattern reflects broader critiques that rights-based commitments are often symbolic unless supported by governance systems capable of sustaining them. Decolonial analyses demonstrate that cultural identity work is undermined when governance structures reproduce assimilationist logics rather than recognising cultural authority and community-led decision-making (Krakouer et al. 2023). Similarly, research on racial inequities in child welfare shows that rights violations are structurally produced through organisational decision-making cultures, not individual bias alone (Feely and Bosk 2021).

Indigenous and relational frameworks further reinforce that cultural identity, belonging, and connectedness are not discretionary practice domains but developmental and relational rights that must be structurally protected (Ullrich 2019). Implementation and

organisational research similarly emphasise that rights are realised only when supported by coherent systems, leadership expectations, reflective supervision, high-quality data, and organisational learning structures (Pecora et al. 2025; Wulczyn et al. 2015). Together, these insights underscore the need for governance models that integrate rights-based commitments with operational systems capable of sustaining them, systems that make cultural identity visible, actionable, and non-negotiable across organisational practice.

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

Interpreting these findings requires recognising that cultural care is not an enrichment activity but a determinant of children's safety, identity, and wellbeing. Participants repeatedly emphasised that "being disconnected should never be the outcome" of a care experience, highlighting that decisions about whether cultural identity is documented, reviewed, or left unattended reflect leadership intent rather than administrative neutrality. When cultural identity is poorly recorded or inconsistently prioritised, children experience identity discontinuity, relational instability, and diminished belonging; outcomes well established in developmental and trauma literature and reinforced by evidence that relational and cultural turning points buffer the effects of cumulative harm (Howe et al. 2018; Taussig et al. 2023). Conversely, when cultural care is structurally embedded, children benefit from coherent, culturally attuned care environments that support identity coherence and belonging (Ezekwem-Obi et al. 2025; Goldsmith 2023).

The findings also illuminate several psychological and organisational mechanisms. Identity formation is shaped not only by family and community but by organisational systems that either scaffold or disrupt cultural continuity. Attachment and relational permanence are strengthened when cultural connections are maintained and weakened when they are deprioritised. Organisational silence around culture can reproduce systemic trauma, reinforcing the principle that what systems fail to notice they implicitly permit. These dynamics align with evidence that children with complex maltreatment histories require relationally stable, culturally grounded systems to support socioemotional development (Hu et al. 2025; Olaniyan et al. 2020). The displacement of responsibility for cultural care onto individual practitioners without structural support contributes to moral distress, role conflict, and ethical strain, reflecting broader evidence that cumulative harm is intensified when systems lack coherence, continuity and organisational capability (Harris et al. 2026). These risks are compounded by findings that relational and cultural turning points buffer the effects of cumulative adversity (Taussig et al. 2023).

Despite these insights, several challenges remain unresolved. Persistent data gaps undermine cultural visibility, quality assurance, and system accountability. Many organisations lack measurable cultural care indicators, safeguarding processes, or governance oversight structures. Workforce capability remains inconsistent, with episodic training insufficient to sustain reflective, culturally responsive practice. Crisis-driven environments and regulatory pressures continue to deprioritise cultural care, while cross-national variations in mandates raise questions about minimal organisational safeguards and the translation of international learning. These challenges mirror broader implementation evidence showing that sustainability, fidelity, and equity are compromised when systems lack robust data infrastructures, leadership expectations, and organisational learning mechanisms (Proctor et al. 2023; Pecora et al. 2025; Wulczyn et al. 2015).

Across all themes, the findings highlight the gap between normative rights frameworks and operationalisation: children's rights to culture, identity, and belonging become meaningful only when embedded within governance structures that enact them through supervision, workforce development, data systems, and executive oversight. Cultural care thus functions as a window into organisational health: in settings where leadership,

structural supports, and learning cultures are mutually reinforcing, cultural care is reliable, principled, and well-anchoredTogether, these insights generate several implications for policy and practice across child welfare systems:

1. *Structural Embedding*: Cultural care should be formalised within performance indicators, documentation standards, and quality assurance frameworks to ensure sustainability.
2. *Leadership Advocacy*: Sustained attention to cultural priorities during periods of instability demonstrates authentic organisational commitment.
3. *Organisational Learning*: Reflexive systems and authentic partnerships with cultural knowledge holders are essential for maintaining culturally responsive practice over time.
4. *Relational Data Practices*: Data systems should move beyond demographic categorisation to capture children's lived experiences and cultural identities, enhancing visibility and accountability.
5. *Cultural Care as Governance Barometer*: Alignment between policy, practice, and organisational oversight reflects the integrity of rights-based commitments.

6. Limitations

Interpretation of these findings should be considered in light of several methodological limitations. First, as with all non-representative data collection methods, the study is subject to potential sources of bias. Participants were primarily leaders, operational managers, and organisational representatives, whose accounts may reflect aspirational or reputational positioning. Self-report data may understate organisational challenges or overstate cultural care commitments, particularly in contexts where cultural responsiveness is increasingly scrutinised. Group dialogue sessions in Phase 2 may have also been influenced by organisational hierarchies or dominant voices, shaping the dynamics of collective reflection.

Second, the study relies on narrative accounts rather than standardised measures. "Cultural care" is conceptualised differently across jurisdictions, and the absence of uniform definitions or consistent documentation systems introduces imprecision. Variability in how cultural identity is recorded, understood, and operationalised across agencies and countries limits the comparability of accounts and may obscure subtle differences in practice.

Third, the multi-phase design generated a substantial volume of data across interviews, group sessions, and comparative dialogues. While iterative analysis strengthened overall coherence, the breadth of material may have constrained depth in some areas, particularly where national policy environments or organisational structures differed significantly.

Fourth, the sample was purposively constructed and supplemented through professional networks and snowball sampling. This approach was appropriate for accessing senior leaders and organisational experts but may have favoured agencies with stronger interest or capability in cultural care. Some jurisdictions were represented by fewer organisations, and the perspectives of agencies with limited engagement in cultural care may be underrepresented. As such, the findings are not statistically generalisable, though they offer strong transferability through cross-national diversity and rich description.

Finally, the researcher's professional background in cultural care and organisational development may have influenced interpretation. Reflexive practice, triangulation across phases, and deliberate seeking of disconfirming perspectives were used to mitigate this influence, but it remains an inherent feature of interpretive inquiry. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but contextualise their scope and the interpretive boundaries.

Practice Resource: A–Z Reflective Prompts for Culturally Responsive Care

The following A–Z reflective prompts (Table 1) translate the study's three core themes: Leadership Framing (Theme 1); Governance & Structural Embedding (Theme 2), and

Organisational Learning (Theme 3) into a practical inquiry tool for leaders, supervisors, practitioners and teams. Grounded in the cross-national findings, the prompts are designed to support critical reflection on how children's cultural identities, relationships, and community connections are recognised, protected and embedded within everyday decision-making.

Table 1. A–Z Reflective Prompts for Culturally Responsive Care.

Letter		Reflective Prompt	Theme
A	Advocacy	How do I actively champion children's cultural identities and connections in policy, practice, and resource decisions, particularly during periods of pressure or reform?	Theme 1—Leadership Framing
B	Bias Awareness	What unconscious biases may influence my judgments, risk assessments, or decisions regarding children's cultural identities, heritage, or community connections?	Theme 3—Organisational Learning
C	Continuity of relationships	How am I protecting the "golden threads" of relational and cultural connection across placements, transitions, and time?	Theme 2—Governance & Structural Embedding
D	Documentation and Data	Do our documentation and data systems capture children's cultural identities, lived experiences, and relational context, or merely satisfy compliance requirements?	Theme 2—Governance & Structural Embedding
E	Ethical Attentiveness	How do I weigh the ethical implications of decisions that may strengthen or disrupt a child's cultural identity, belonging, and connection to their community?	Theme 1—Leadership Framing
F	Feedback Loops	How are children's and families' voices, including their cultural perspectives and experiences, systematically informing supervision, service design, and organisational learning?	Theme 3—Organisational Learning
G	Governance and Indicators	Do our governance structures, audits, and performance indicators make cultural care visible, measurable, and accountable?	Theme 2—Governance & Structural Embedding
H	Humility	How willing am I to acknowledge gaps in knowledge about different cultures and model curiosity when engaging with diverse children, families, and communities?	Theme 3—Organisational Learning
I	Implementation Integrity	Are we translating cultural commitments into sustainable practice systems, or relying on individual goodwill?	Theme 2—Governance & Structural Embedding
J	Justice	Do our decisions actively prevent cultural marginalisation and promote equitable access to identity, continuity, and community connection?	Theme 1—Leadership Framing
K	Knowledge Mobilisation	How do we convert insights from children, families, and cultural knowledge holders into everyday culturally responsive practice?	Theme 3—Organisational Learning
L	Leadership Modelling	How do leaders visibly model cultural humility, courage, and accountability in strategy, supervision, and workforce development?	Theme 1—Leadership Framing

Table 1. *Cont.*

	Letter	Reflective Prompt	Theme
M	Monitoring	What mechanisms track, review, and respond to children's cultural identities, connections, and wellbeing over time, and how do we act on what we find?	Theme 2—Governance & Structural Embedding
N	Navigating Uncertainty	How do we manage fear of "getting it wrong" without retreating from critical conversations about culture, identity, and belonging?	Theme 3—Organisational Learning
O	Organisational Narrative	Does our organisational story position cultural care as foundational to safeguarding, or as discretionary?	Theme 1—Leadership Framing
P	Practitioner Support	Are reflective supervision, training, and psychologically safe dialogue actively protected to support culturally responsive practice, particularly during crisis?	Theme 2—Governance & Structural Embedding
Q	Quality Assurance	How do we test whether cultural care is relational, protective, and culturally informed rather than procedural or symbolic?	Theme 2—Governance & Structural Embedding
R	Resource Allocation	Are resources intentionally directed toward sustaining children's cultural continuity, community connection, and identity, even when fiscal pressures intensify?	Theme 1—Leadership Framing
S	Systems Alignment	Do leadership messaging, data systems, and accountability processes consistently reinforce cultural priorities across the organisation	Theme 2—Governance & Structural Embedding
T	Training and Development	Is cultural learning ongoing, reflexive, and embedded within supervision and performance review, rather than episodic?	Theme 3—Organisational Learning
U	Understanding Children's Perspective	How are children's voices, particularly about their cultural identity and connections, meaningfully integrated into their care planning and organisational decision-making?	Theme 3—Organisational Learning
V	Visibility	Are children's cultural identities and community connections visible in data systems, case plans, and strategic reporting?	Theme 2—Governance & Structural Embedding
W	Workforce Capability	How do staff diversity, cultural competence, and stability influence the depth and consistency of culturally responsive practice?	Theme 1—Leadership Framing
X	eXamination of Practice	What evidence demonstrates that we critically review cultural practice consistency and responsiveness across teams and cases?	Theme 3—Organisational Learning
Y	Yielding to Lived Experience	How do we share power with cultural knowledge holders and respond to lived cultural experiences in shaping practice?	Theme 3—Organisational Learning
Z	Zero Tolerance for Cultural Disconnection	How do we demonstrate that protecting children's cultural identity, continuity, and belonging is a non-negotiable safeguarding responsibility?	Theme 1—Leadership Framing

Developed for use in supervision, executive review, training, and Communities of Practice, the prompts encourage reflective dialogue that strengthens culturally responsive practice across roles and organisational levels. Each prompt explicitly links to one of the three themes, highlighting the interplay between leadership commitment, organisational structures, and learning processes in sustaining cultural care. Collectively, the prompts reinforce that cultural care is not a discrete task or compliance requirement, but an organisational orientation requiring courage, structured systems, reflexivity, and active engagement with children, families, and cultural knowledge holders.

7. Conclusions

Children's cultural care is not an ancillary practice concern but a central element of governance, safeguarding, and ethical responsibility. Leadership framing initiates direction, structural embedding operationalises accountability and learning cultures sustain responsiveness. Together, these elements form the architecture through which children's cultural identities are protected as inseparable from their safety, wellbeing, and belonging. Cultural care, therefore, serves as both a practical and symbolic indicator of organisational integrity, reflecting the extent to which child welfare systems translate rights-based commitments into meaningful, sustained practice.

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