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Foster care for unaccompanied refugee children

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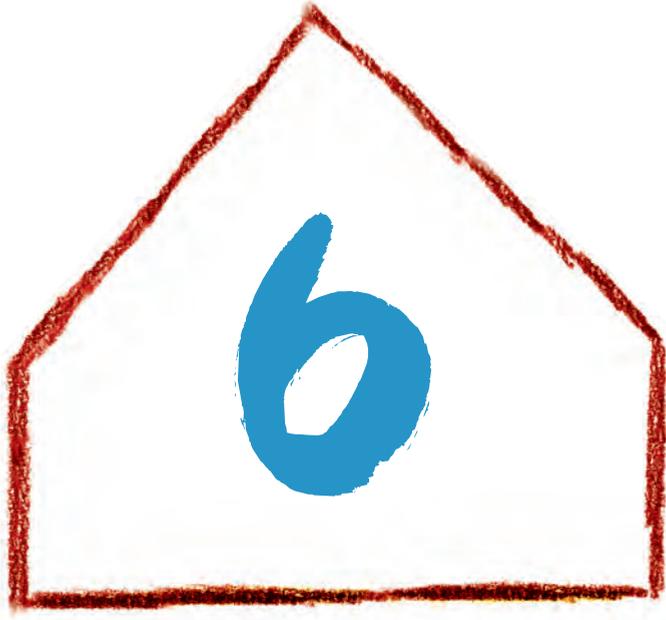
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GENERAL DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to assess and evaluate foster placements for unaccompanied refugee children based on the child's, the carers' and the guardians' perspectives. With this multi-informant evaluation, we gained insight into: (1) cultural matching and child and fostering factors, as well as placement success, (2) how the cultural matching and child and fostering factors may relate to placement success, (3) how the perspectives on the preceding factors could differ between those involved, and (4) how these factors may change over time.

Overall, we can conclude that children, their foster carers and guardians are positive about the success of their foster placements. Our results show that the factors contributing to placement success differed depending on the perspective addressed (i.e., child, carer, guardian). We can also conclude that children and carers or guardians disagree more on the success of the placement when they disagree on the quality of the caregiving environment, the child's conduct and emotional problems, and the quality of the child-carer and child-guardian relationship. From the perspectives of children, carers and guardians, most placements in which children stayed in the same foster family over the one-year timeframe of the study remained relatively stable in terms of child and fostering factors and placement success. According to the carers, however, the children's social-emotional problems significantly increased over time.

Below, we first present the main findings in relation to each of the four research sub-questions, followed by an integrated discussion of the findings. Subsequently, we discuss the strengths and limitations of the research and end with implications and recommendations.

6.1 Main findings

Experiences in foster care

In a pilot study, we examined the experiences that former unaccompanied refugee children and unaccompanied refugee children (who were currently in a placement), their foster carers and social workers (guardians and matchers)³⁵ had of the foster placement, with respect to factors contributing to foster placement success as identified in the literature.

35 As the matcher was predominantly informed by the guardian on the current status of the foster placement, the matcher was not asked to participate further in the longitudinal study.

The results of this study showed that, in general, participants were satisfied with the foster placement, with several children even saying that they could not be more satisfied. There were also children who reported some negative experiences related to the placement or who did not feel at home. Nevertheless, in contrast to what might be expected (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003), they still rated the placement as successful. In line with previous research (e.g., Brown et al., 2009a; Wade et al., 2019), the children and carers valued cultural similarity in foster placement. However, former unaccompanied refugee children considered cultural similarity to be less important. Overall, participants valued similarity of language the most. Somewhat contrary to expectations, namely that “a cross-cultural placement is a barrier to feel[ing] at home” (Barrie & Mendes, 2011, p. 493), this study found that not only in cross-cultural but also in cultural placements there were children who did not feel at home. Consistent with a study by Wade et al. (2012), in most foster families, the caregiving environment offered to children seemed adequate: most family relationships were normal to good and the children were supported in practical matters by their carers.

Factors associated with placement success

In the second part of the research, we explored which factors contributed to placement success in foster placements of unaccompanied refugee children. Here, we used the data from 39 placements at baseline (T0) of a longitudinal study in which we assessed the placement according to the perspectives of the children, their foster carers and guardians.

The results of this explorative study revealed that the quality of the relationship between the child and foster carers had an almost one-to-one relationship with placement success. Regression analyses showed that, for children, cultural similarity between them and their carers was of great importance for success. However, for foster carers and guardians, cultural similarity was less related to placement success. In addition, a higher score on pro-social behaviour by the child (SDQ self-report) was associated with more positive outcomes regarding placement success. For foster carers, children’s externalising behaviour (SDQ) was negatively correlated with the success of the placement. For guardians, a higher score on the quality of the caregiving environment (BIC-G) was associated with placement success.

Multi-informant discrepancies

The next step in our research was the examination of multi-informant discrepancies (between the child, carer and guardian perspectives) regarding placement success,

as well as possible factors associated with such discrepancies. We also examined whether these discrepancies in placement success at baseline (T0) were related to placement breakdown at the second measurement (T1). These analyses were based on data from 39 foster placements.

The results showed that when placements were rated with a high average placement success score (looking at child-carer and child-guardian dyads), the child and carer, as well as the child and guardian, generally agreed on the success of the foster placement, with a low level of discrepancy. In contrast, placements with a low average score on placement success showed large discrepancies between the perspectives, which may also lead to breakdown. The results of the multilevel analyses showed that discrepancies regarding placement success were mainly associated with differences in perspectives regarding fostering factors (i.e., quality of the caregiving environment, child-carer and child-guardian relationship) and child factors (i.e., conduct problems, emotional problems). The results indicated that children and their carers or guardians disagreed more on the success of the placement when they disagreed on the quality of the caregiving environment, the child's conduct and emotional problems, and the quality of the child-carer and child-guardian relationship.

Stability of foster placements

In the final part of the study, the stability (or instability) of 29 foster placements of unaccompanied refugee children over a one-year period was examined, including how stability was related to factors such as the cultural matching of children and carers according to the perspectives of the children, foster carers and guardians. Here, several dimensions of stability were assessed, such as placement stability (continuing versus disrupted placements at T1, the second measurement), stability in placement success, and stability in child and fostering factors (i.e., development of the placement between T0 and T1).

Our results revealed that, according to the perspectives of the children, carers and guardians, most placements in which children stayed in the same foster family over time remained relatively stable in terms of child and fostering factors *and* placement success. According to the carers, however, the children's social-emotional problems showed a significant increase over time. In addition, the children's and carers' appreciation of their cultural similarity tended to fluctuate over time. Notably, the children's appreciation of cultural similarity in terms of religion decreased significantly. Most of the children in disrupted placements showed stable or even improved results

for child factors at T1. Moreover, with reference to the findings measured at T0, we observed differences between children who were still living with the same foster families and those who were living elsewhere at T1. According to the perspectives of the foster carers and guardians, the former fared better than the latter.

6.2 Discussion of the main findings

Foster care is widely considered to provide the most suitable living environment for unaccompanied refugee children (e.g., Kalverboer et al., 2016; Van Holen, Trogh, Carlier, et al., 2019; Zijlstra et al., 2019). Nevertheless, our finding that foster placements of unaccompanied refugee children did not demonstrate significant improvements over time with respect to the child and fostering factors, as well as placement success, is in line with the results of previous studies conducted within the context of regular foster care (e.g., Goemans et al., 2015; Lipscombe et al., 2004; Vanderfaillie et al., 2013). However, these findings contrast with those of Leloux-Opmeer et al. (2018), who found that 67% of children exhibited favourable psychosocial development in regular foster care in the first year of placement.

Overall, from the perspectives of children, carers and guardians, placements remained relatively stable with regard to most child and fostering factors as well as in terms of placement success. One important exception to this result was that carers perceived a significant increase in the social-emotional problems of children over time (from T0 to T1), which is associated with an increased risk of a placement breakdown in foster care in general (Oosterman et al., 2007). Based on the perspective of the children in our study, the level of social-emotional problems at T0 was relatively high (especially compared to the perspective of carers) and remained relatively stable. This actually resulted in a convergence in the children's and carers' perspectives on this issue over time. These findings may indicate that children need time to develop trust and share their problems (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013; Van Os, 2018). Moreover, this finding suggests that in the absence of problem sharing, carers do not seem to clearly recognise the children's social-emotional problems during the initial period of the placement. Fortunately, carers' sensitivity to the mental health status of their foster child can be improved with specific interventions (Konijn, 2021; Van Andel et al., 2016; see further below).

In our quest to assess which factors were associated with placement success, we found that they differed depending on who we asked (i.e., child, carer or guardian).

Our results indicated that, in addition to 'cultural similarity between child and foster carers', which was included in all prediction models, some interesting differences between the perspectives of children, foster carers and guardians were found with regard to factors that predict the most successful placements – that is, the presence of 'pro-social behaviour', the absence of 'externalising behaviour' and the presence of a 'good caregiving environment', respectively.

In addition to cultural similarity, a higher score for children's *pro-social behaviour* (SDQ-self report) was associated with more positive outcomes regarding placement success (child model). Previous research (Stone & Stone, 1983, as cited in Doelling & Johnson, 1990) has also found a positive association between pro-social behaviour and placement outcomes, as "better socialised children were more likely to remain in their assigned placement" (pp. 585-586). For foster carers, children's *externalising behaviour* (SDQ) was negatively correlated with the success of the placement (foster carer model). In line with our results, Wade et al. (2012) also identified a relationship between emotional wellbeing and placement success (based on the Family Integration Measure), noting that this was likely to be a reciprocal relationship: children who were easy to care for were likely to be considered as doing well in their emotional, social and educational development (Wade et al., 2012, p. 185) and, logically, foster carers would rate the placement as more successful.

For guardians, a higher score on the *quality of the caregiving environment* (BIC-G) was associated with placement success (guardian model). This is to be expected, as one of the prime responsibilities of guardians is to "advocate for all decisions to be taken in the best interests of the child, aimed at the protection and development of the child" (i.e., core standard 1, cf. Goeman & Van Os, 2013, p. 18), and the assessment of the quality of the caregiving environment (using the BIC questionnaire; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006; Zijlstra, 2012) is one way of doing this. A high-quality caregiving environment within the foster placement is in the best interests of the child, and therefore our results point to the quality of the caregiving environment as an important predictor of placement success from the perspective of guardians.

In line with previous research (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Wade et al., 2012), the results showed the importance of the relationship between children and their carers, as there was an almost one-on-one relationship between the quality of this relationship and the perceived success of the placement (from the perspectives of both the child and the carer; Chapter 3). Basically, this suggests that one could simply ask children and carers about the quality of the relationship between them to determine placement success. Fortunately, the quality of the

relationship between child and carer remained relatively high (Chapter 5). The importance of good relationships for the success of a placement has not only been recognised in research into foster care for unaccompanied refugee children but also with regard to regular foster care (e.g., Hallas, 2002) and residential care (e.g., Harder et al., 2013; Ní Raghallaigh, 2013).

The findings of this study did not unambiguously endorse the Dutch practice of cultural matching for foster placements of unaccompanied refugee children. They contrast with a study by Waniganayake et al. (2019), who found that – according to carers and social workers – cultural matching of the foster child and carer contributed to long-term placement success. Although we found that cultural similarity was a predictor of placement success for children at baseline measurement (Chapter 3), with the passage of time, the significance of cultural similarity for the children's placement success decreased (Chapter 5). This finding may imply that cultural matching is beneficial primarily at the beginning of a placement, and that it becomes less important over time. In line with this finding, Fong (2004, p. 7) emphasised that in new environments refugees “may cling to their cultural values with a fresh intensity in reaction to the fear of losing old culture in the new environment”, while after some time, “they necessarily go through a process of sifting which cultural values to emphasise and which to deemphasise”. Thus, placements involving high levels of cultural similarity may become a kind of a burden once children have adapted to a new culture.

This raises the question of whether the placement of children in culturally similar foster families is always in their best interests if they are intended to be long-term placements, also because some children in our study indicated that they would have preferred to stay with a Dutch foster family but their wishes were not followed. The preference of some children for a cross-cultural placement, or their lack of interest in developing their cultural identity, has also been reported in other studies (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013; Wade et al., 2012; Yaya, 1996). Although continuity and stability of placement is still seen as the preferred option (UNCRC, 2013), one could possibly think of a growth trajectory, in which children are initially placed in a culturally similar foster family, followed by a placement in a Dutch foster family. However, this would contradict the need for stable and non-disrupted placements. The child's voice should lead in such a process (see also Bouma, 2019). Insofar as a positive outcome in a child's asylum procedure – and thus the chance of being reunited with their family – may affect whether a cultural foster placement provides continuity and stability (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013), it would seem to be in the child's best interests that

they be reassessed shortly after significant decisions have been made in the asylum procedure.

The above-mentioned complexity of matching – a process of choosing which available foster family is the best fit for a foster child according to certain criteria (Strijker & Zandberg, 2001) – has previously been reported by Zeijlmans (2019). As stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and General Comment No. 14 (GC 14; UNCRC, 2013), with regard to placement decisions, best interest assessments concern the individual child as well as children as a group or children in general. Important elements to consider include the child's identity and vulnerability (Kalverboer et al., 2008; UNCRC, 2013; Van Os et al., 2016; Zijlstra, 2012). For example, for LGBTQ+ children, placement in a culturally similar foster family might be contraindicated, depending on the child's cultural background (see also González-Álvarez et al., 2021). Therefore, an *individual* best interests of the child assessment remains necessary in all cases.

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Exenberger et al., 2019; Guion et al., 2009; Hou et al., 2018; Moens et al., 2018; Reidler & Swenson, 2012; Sawyer et al., 1992; Strijker et al., 2011), this study found discrepancies between the reports of different informants. In addition, depending on the topic or factor assessed, variation in the level of discrepancy was noted (Hwang & Lee, 2013). Thus, children, carers and guardians each provide a unique perspective on factors related to the foster placement. Consideration of all of these perspectives might thus be helpful for guardians in shaping their guidance practices, as differing perspectives can provide information on problematic family functioning (Moens et al., 2018).

Overall, most of the participants were generally satisfied with the foster placement (Chapters 2, 5), as shown by the high average placement success scores. Moreover, in more than half of the placements, there was low or no discrepancy (i.e., high agreement) between the child and the carer, as well as between the child and the guardian, regarding how they perceived placement success. Moreover, agreement between child and carer was predominantly high. As unsuccessful placements normally have a negative impact on the developmental outcomes of children (Van Rooij et al., 2015, p. 130), the results of this study seem promising for the current practice of fostering unaccompanied refugee children. However, our pilot study taught us that children can still rate the placement as successful, while also reporting negative experiences during the placement or that they felt somewhat uncomfortable. Therefore, looking solely at the placement success report scores might mask problems within the foster family, and consequently might lead to an

incorrect interpretation of the support needed. This underlines the importance of listening to the child on a regular base (UNCRC, 2013).

6.3 Strengths and limitations

Strengths

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in the specific field of foster care for unaccompanied refugee children that explores placement success and cultural matching, and child and fostering factors from the perspectives of children, their foster carers and guardians with regard to the same foster placements. Including the perspectives of all involved in each placement contributed to a comprehensive picture of the fostering situation for unaccompanied refugee children. With the inclusion of the child's perspective (GC 14), we have – in our opinion – improved on the previous definition of placement success³⁶ offered by Wilson and Sinclair (2003). Our definition³⁷ “takes the child's perspective” (i.e., gives children an opportunity to speak for themselves), rather than “having a child perspective” (thus, thinking for the child, rather than asking the child, as is the case in Sinclair and Wilson's definition) (Nilsson et al., 2015). Moreover, due to the explorative nature of this research, we included a broad spectrum of variables.

As part of the pilot study (Chapter 2), participants were asked to evaluate the instruments and procedure used, with the aim of developing a longitudinal study (Chapter 3-5). Positively evaluated practices, such as home visits and administering the questionnaires during interviews, were maintained, while other practices were improved. For example, reported scores replaced scaling questions and we added emoticons (Due et al., 2014) to the answer categories in most questionnaires to better indicate the intention of the answer. Questions that were perceived as unclear or redundant by children or carers were omitted from the longitudinal study. In addition, several matchers in the pilot study indicated that they had difficulty reflecting on the *current* situation in the foster placement because they did not have regular contact with the foster family. Therefore, they were not asked to participate in the longitudinal

36 Sinclair and Wilson (2003, p. 874) defined a foster placement as 'successful' when the foster carers and social workers involved in the foster placement (i.e., guardian and matcher) all report that the placement went 'very well from the child's point of view'.

37 The placement is regarded as successful when the child, foster carers and guardians (and matchers in Chapter 2) are satisfied with the placement.

study. These adjustments to the procedure and instruments of the longitudinal study may have led to an increase in ecological validity.

Another strength was the design of this study. By collecting data for three consecutive years (of which we were able to use the data of two consecutive years in this research), we gained insight into the development of foster placements for unaccompanied refugee children, including breakdowns, and the extent to which they were associated with discrepancies regarding perceived placement success. The use of identical instruments across different perspectives (i.e., child, carer, guardian) increased the validity of multi-informant assessments. Moreover, by providing participants with the option to use telephone interpreters, as well as to complete the questionnaires in Dutch, English, Arabic or Tigrinya, we overcame some of the most important language barriers (Wade et al., 2012).

Limitations

One of the main methodological limitations of this study is the small sample size, which has consequences for the power of the study (Maxwell et al., 2018). This means that it is likely that some existing associations were not detected in this study. Although we intended to include 100 unaccompanied refugee children, their foster carers and guardians in our longitudinal study, the recruitment process reflected a 'hard-to-reach' participant group (see reasons for exclusion, Chapter 3). Moreover, in this study, we also had deal with a selected group. As the guardians were requested to discuss participation with the foster family (i.e., both the child and carers), they might have acted as gatekeepers, because they had "practical or principal reasons not to approach children in their caseload that fulfilled the inclusion criteria" (Van Os, 2018, p. 186). Accordingly, the sample probably does not fully reflect the population of unaccompanied refugee children with regard to vulnerability.

In addition, the current study was carried out in the Netherlands, a country in which unaccompanied refugee children are looked after in a foster care system distinct from the regular system and are preferably placed in foster families with a similar cultural background. As the child protection systems and the characteristics and numbers of unaccompanied refugee children largely differ between EU Member States (De Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015, p. 9), the findings of our study might be specific to the Dutch context. Non-response and selection bias may be threats to the internal as well as external validity (Maxwell et al., 2018). As such, caution is required in generalising our findings.

Another limitation is that the cultural instruments (i.e., cultural similarity score; AHIMSA) used in this study focused on “surface-level constructs of culture” (Toro & Nieri, 2018, p. 8). Although quite similar to the measurement of cultural similarity in previous quantitative research (e.g., Anderson & Linares, 2012), the cultural similarity score is a little arbitrary and does not cover the “rich complex of meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms and values prevalent among people in society” that defines culture (Schwartz, 2004, p. 43). Surface-level constructs of culture such as native language and religion highlight the ambiguity and complexity of cultural matching. For example, with Arabic being the native language of about 315 million people, a cultural match with regard to native language might not guarantee a linguistic match across the diverse dialects (Waniganayake et al., 2019, p. 372). Similarly, all religions have sects and denominations (Waniganayake et al., 2019), and sometimes these different denominations may actually be the reason for a dispute (e.g., the Sunni – Shiite differences among the Muslim population in the Middle East). Nevertheless, as there is no research on this topic that includes a large number of participants, the current study does contribute to our knowledge of the impact of cultural matching factors on placement success and might shape future research that further disentangles the complex phenomenon of cultural similarity.

Ideally, we would have compared foster placements in native Dutch families with placements in culturally similar families. However, due to the practice of predominantly placing children in culturally similar placements, this was not possible. Moreover, the heterogeneity of our sample did not allow for sub-analyses with regard to country of origin, while Wade et al. (2012, p. 185) reported variation in the overall progress in care according to the unaccompanied children’s countries or regions of origin. That people from different countries of origin may have different needs is underlined by the recent availability of toolkits or manuals addressing the support of Eritreans in the Netherlands (see e.g., Ferrier et al., 2017; Pharos, 2020; Sleijpen et al., 2018).

Furthermore, in addition to the leading researcher (Western background), a group of trained research assistants helped with the data collection. While we attempted to recruit a culturally diverse group of research assistants, we only partly succeeded in this. Accordingly, “we may have asked questions and interpreted narratives from a Western perspective” (Sleijpen et al., 2017, p. 361).

A further limitation of this study is the use of a non-validated one-item instrument for measuring placement success (i.e., the dependent variable). Although other studies (e.g., Farmer et al., 2004; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003) measured the success of

foster placements somewhat similarly, this might be a threat to the construct validity (Maxwell et al., 2018).

It is also important to mention that the benchmarks selected to measure discrepancies (Chapter 4) and development (Chapter 5) were relatively arbitrary. Differences in scores that were above 10% of the theoretical range of the scale signified high discrepancy (Chapter 4) and improvement or deterioration (Chapter 5). This operationalisation of 'clinically relevant' discrepancies and development was nevertheless similar for all of the factors assessed, thus making it easier to interpret outcomes on overall discrepancy and stability.

Another limitation concerns the fact that, at baseline (T0), the duration of the foster placements differed for each case. According to the inclusion criteria, each child would have been living with the foster family for at least three months and up to two years. As developments in foster placements usually occur at the beginning or towards the end of the placement (Wade et al., 2012), we may have overlooked significant developments during the first two months of some placements, or at the end of others.

6.4 Implications and recommendations

6.4.1 Recommendations for further research

Unaccompanied refugee children in other countries (EU and beyond) might face different challenges, not only because of the different child protection systems, but possibly also due to the fact that "in spite of the nationality and religion-blind logic of international refugee law, public attitudes are less sympathetic toward people from certain nationalities and religions" (Blitz, 2017, pp. 393-394). In line with this, Beiser et al. (2015, p. 33) found that refugee children "from culturally distant backgrounds were more likely to receive discrimination than youth from culturally closer backgrounds". In future research, various countries could combine their forces in doing research regarding foster care for unaccompanied refugee children. Ideally, in such a study, the perspectives of children, carers and guardians would be studied longitudinally over an extended period of time to ensure that significant challenges or fluctuations in the foster placement would not be overlooked. A collaborative study – consisting of a large and heterogeneous sample of children and carers with regard to age, gender, country of origin, native language, religion, type of placement and host country – might help to better determine the conditions under which foster placements

(including cultural placements) are successful – and for whom – and whether this develops over time.

Additionally, as the accumulation of problems or risk factors could exacerbate outcomes (see e.g., Zevulun, 2017, p. 172), this should be studied with regard to placement success in future research. Moreover, in such a study, cultural similarity between children and carers could be assessed more broadly than in terms of similarities regarding country of origin, native language and religion (see ‘cultural foster care, not the only way forward’ in 6.4.2 below). A future study could address cultural matching in which cultural expressions and their appreciation are not predefined but inductively determined.

The findings of our study highlighted the importance of good relationships between children and carers for placement success. Future research might also focus on other family members in the foster placement, such as other foster children and the biological children of foster carers, as they may influence the experience in the foster family (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013; Sinclair et al., 2005; Wade, 2019). In addition, for unaccompanied children who are in contact with their biological parents, it would also be of relevance to assess the parents’ views on the foster placement, as well as the expectations they have of their child, as they could promote or hinder placement success. In this respect, conflicts of loyalty have been reported by unaccompanied children living in foster families (see e.g., Kohli & Mather, 2003; Wade et al., 2012) and, thus, including the perspective of the biological parents could provide better insight into the dynamics underlying these feelings of loyalty and consequently inform guidance practices.

Future research should continue to address the fostering situation from multiple perspectives, including those of children. Additionally, qualitative study of the support needs of unaccompanied children and their carers, as well as understanding how these perspectives may overlap or differ (see e.g., Steenbakkens, 2018), might further contribute to our knowledge of factors that may influence placement success. Moreover, in the Netherlands, at the age of 18, unaccompanied refugee children are no longer under the legal guardianship and guidance of Nidos, and consequently must leave their foster families and become independent. This transition period into adulthood comes with many difficulties and challenges for those turning 18 in the Netherlands, as addressed by a recent report (Oxfam & Greek Council for Refugees, 2021). Because adequate preparation for adulthood may be of relevance in judging the success of a foster placement, this transition period should also be further studied (Smit, 2019) in those who have previously been in foster care.

6.4.2 Implications and recommendations for policy and practice

Cultural foster care, not the only way forward

It is possible that when considering the cultural needs of children, the cultural receptivity or cultural competence³⁸ of foster carers is a better indicator of long-term placement success than *actual* cultural similarity between children and carers (see e.g., Coakley & Orme, 2006; Vonk, 2001), especially because cultural receptivity (or cultural competence) could develop over the course of the placement. For children who receive a residence permit and are likely to stay in the host country, cultural needs might change, as they may want to better blend into the host country's culture. Thus, foster agencies must not only ensure that there are sufficient culturally matched placements available, but also provide a sufficient number of cross-cultural foster placements, in which the cultural needs of children are addressed by culturally competent carers.

Apart from analysing how cultural similarity is related to placement success, participants were also asked to indicate their appreciation of cultural similarity on each aspect separately (i.e., country of origin, native language and religion). The results revealed the overall importance of similarity in language. While in both the pilot study (Chapter 2) and the baseline measurement of the longitudinal study (Chapter 3), unaccompanied children valued cultural similarity in religion the highest, with the passage of time, the child's appreciation of religion decreased (Chapter 5). In line with this, former unaccompanied children, for whom 'time had already passed', did not value similarity in religion (Chapter 2). Interestingly, over time, similarity in language was valued more by both children and carers (Chapter 5).

Thus, when selecting a long-term placement for a child, preference might be given to similarity in language between children and carers over similarity in country of origin or religion. However, participants in our pilot study interpreted similarity in language more broadly than having a shared *native* language (e.g., both might speak Arabic, while having different native languages). Accordingly, it is possible that the ability to communicate with each other, in particular, contributes to a positive experience of care. Because the linguistic competences of refugees do not

38 'Cultural receptivity measures foster parents' openness toward participating in activities that promote children's cultural development. Specifically, it involves one's openness to support foster children's relationships with adults and children who share their cultures, find resources where the children can go to get their cultural needs met, learn about parenting strategies of the children's cultures, and learn from others who have successfully parented children of different cultures' (Coakley & Orme, 2006, p. 520). Carers working towards *cultural competence* need to transform a particular set of attitudes, knowledge and skills into the ability to meet the children's needs (McPhatter, 1997, as cited in Vonk, 2001).

always fit the norms or expectations of the particular spaces which they inhabit and their identities are ascribed by others as “not belonging” (Valentine et al., 2008, p. 376), speaking a similar language at home might contribute to a child’s feelings of belonging.

Facilitating good relationships between children and their foster carers

This study emphasised that the quality of the relationship between children and carers could inform us about the success of a foster placement, and thus professional support or interventions provided by the foster care agency should focus on keeping intact or even improving the relationship between children and carers (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003). Konijn (2021, p. 114), who evaluated interventions for foster carers of children who have experienced trauma, concluded that foster placements in which carers received interventions targeting the quality of the relationship between children and carers, among other dimensions, experienced significantly fewer breakdowns than placements that only received regular support from social workers. As reciprocal relationships helped to create a strong feeling of security and belonging and reduce the feelings of dislocation in those who were forced to flee (Wade et al., 2012, p. 291), support programmes should be aimed at carers as well as children. The foundation for a positive relationship between a child and a foster carer lies in “the combination of a caring foster [carer] who patiently worked with the child to help him or her establish family membership, and a foster child who not only recognized caring behaviors, but also was willing to respond to them” (Hallas, 2002, pp. 117-118). Additionally, activities such as having friends to visit, preparing meals and eating together, talking to the children about their own family and homeland, and listening to their concerns and fears, can be expected to improve communication, create closeness and a sense of belonging, and thus improve the quality of family relationships (Wade et al., 2012, p. 293).

Supporting carers in dealing with difficult behaviour of children

The findings of our study indicate that, for foster carers, children’s externalising behaviour is negatively correlated with the success of the placement (Chapter 3), and the children’s social-emotional problems³⁹ reported by carers significantly increase over time (Chapter 5). Thus, the Dutch foster agency’s position that these children simply need safe and suitable reception and that children with severe problems should be referred to general foster care (De Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015) may reflect a

³⁹ This includes internalising and externalising behaviour.

lack of understanding of the needs of these children and their foster carers. Support programmes should focus on issues such as how to support children who are dealing with mental health problems (Fergeus et al., 2019), because if these problems are not adequately addressed, they could worsen and/or lead to placement breakdown (Hiller et al., 2020; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2018a, 2018b). Such programmes could also alleviate the strain on carers, thus reinforcing their parenting abilities (Lipscombe et al., 2004).

That support programmes for foster families are needed (De Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2018a, 2018b) is also reinforced by our finding that, on average, child and fostering factors, as well as placement success, remained relatively stable over time (Chapter 5), while one would expect (or at least hope for) improvement over time. Although there are a large number of pre-service and in-service foster care training services for regular foster care or treatment foster care (see, for an overview, Piescher et al., 2008), we are not aware of training services that specifically address foster care for unaccompanied refugee children. The potential benefits of such training and the impact that limited access to training or support programmes can have on carers of unaccompanied refugee children (Sidery, 2019, p. 6) underlines its necessity. In developing this particular support programme, one could combine the knowledge of support programmes in regular foster care with knowledge about particular support programmes for unaccompanied refugee children (which do not specifically address foster care as such) (see e.g., El-Awad et al., 2017).

Frequently monitoring outcomes from all perspectives

For children, carers and guardians, different factors were associated with placement success, as was clearly found in Chapter 3. Thus, omitting one of these perspectives when reflecting on the quality of the care will not provide a complete picture. Moreover, as stipulated under Article 12 of the CRC (UN, 1989), children should always be given the right to express their views; for example, regarding a placement decision or the particular care provided. As refugee children do not know who is responsible for what when they first arrive in the host country and may have difficulty trusting anyone (Schippers, 2017), it is important to consider who is present when children participate and share their views (Steenbakkers, 2018, p. 131). Frequent monitoring of outcomes using appropriate instruments could help to identify specific needs. However, this may never replace personal contact.

In addition to the individual reports of the children, their carers and guardians, discrepancies between these perspectives may in fact be an indication of further

problems (see e.g., De Los Reyes, 2011; Moens et al., 2018; Verhulst & Van der Ende, 1991). Therefore, monitoring the outcomes for each stakeholder in relation to child and fostering factors and placement success over time could provide input for the foster care agency regarding the particular support needed by each child and foster family. Before guardians make a decision regarding the particular support needed, they should assess the opinion of the child and be humble in sharing their own opinion regarding the support needed, as their opinion might differ from that of the child. Finally, the screening of mental health problems before and during placement could also help to identify those in need of referral to specialised services (Aarons et al., 2010).

