



“There’s no disenfranchisement when you’re sitting in that room”: Evaluating a South Australian loss and grief support group for foster and kinship carers

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ABSTRACT

For foster or kinship carers who provide long-term care to children who are unable to live with their birth parents, a strong bond is often formed. Yet despite the best intentions of all parties, in some cases placements may be terminated, often leaving foster or kinship carers dealing with considerable loss and grief. This paper reports on the evaluation of a South Australian support group tailored to the needs of foster and kinship carers experiencing loss and grief following an unplanned placement termination. The paper provides an overview of the group, and reports on a thematic analysis of eight interviews with group attendees. The findings in regard to factors leading to placement termination and the impact of placement termination on foster families echo previous research on the topic. The findings with regard to the benefits of group attendance emphasise the utility of its restorative practices approach, highlighting that the group created a space in which participants could acknowledge what had been achieved for the child, take perspective about their role as a foster parent, recognise the attachment they shared with the child, and the use of group activities gave presence to the grief and helped participants to honour their relationship to the child. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research and highlights the benefits of a restorative practice approach to addressing disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss among foster and kinship carers who have experienced an unplanned placement termination.

1. Introduction

In Australia in 2019, eight out of every 1000 Australian non-indigenous children were living in out-of-home care (with rates for Indigenous children being substantially higher), making for a total of over 44,900 children living in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW](https://www.aihw.gov.au), 2020). Of these children, 67% had been in care long-term (two years or more), with the majority of these children being on long-term orders, meaning that they are likely to remain in care until they become adults (AIHW). The majority of children in long-term care are placed with kinship carers (i.e., a family member of their birth parents), and a significant minority of children (39%) in long-term care are placed with foster carers (AIHW). While not replacing the importance of birth parents, long term foster or kinship care arrangements in Australia thus typically constitute a significant relationship between

carers and the children in their care.

Despite the fact that foster and kinship carers raising children on long-term orders make a significant commitment to raising children until they come of age, some placements may end unexpectedly. This may be because foster or kinship carers find a child’s behaviors too difficult to live with, it may be because of a lack of support to manage such behaviors, it may be because of allegations of abuse in care, or it may be because of shifting decisions by statutory bodies about the case direction (i.e., a decision may be made to reunify the child with their birth parents, or for foster parents a kinship placement option may become available). Rates of foster or kinship care placement breakdown for any of these reasons are not publicly available, however we do know that in 2018–2019 alone, while 1,500 households commenced providing placements, 1,700 households exited care provision ([AIHW](https://www.aihw.gov.au), 2020). While there are likely multiple reasons why foster or kinship carers exit

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the system (including children coming of age, and carers not wanting any more placements), research suggests that significant numbers of foster carers in particular leave the system each year due to dissatisfaction with placement outcomes (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; Orme & Buehler, 2001; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003).

In South Australia, where the research reported in this paper was undertaken, decisions about the termination of a long-term placement are made at the discretion of the statutory child protection body. Legislation in South Australia allows for the discretionary removal of children from a placement, and foster or kinship carers have little recourse to contest decisions made (Nyland, 2016). Notionally, in terms of a potential long-term placement move, foster or kinship carers should be consulted about the decision before it occurs, and where possible the aim is to achieve an outcome where the child can remain in the placement (Nyland). In cases of suspected abuse, however, or where a resolution cannot be achieved, a child may be removed into an alternate placement at the discretion of the statutory body. The primary focus of any decision about a placement termination must be the wellbeing of the children, including both distress caused by moving placements, and potential harm caused by remaining in a placement. The Child Protection Royal Commission Report (Nyland) recommended that an external panel be formed to assess potential placement terminations, and encouraged consideration of facilitating ongoing contact with foster or kinship carers, where possible, after a placement termination, so as to minimize loss and grief for both children and carers.

The present paper reports on an evaluation of a South Australian loss and grief support group for foster and kinship carers who have experienced an unplanned placement termination. An unplanned placement termination is here defined as the ending of a foster placement that was not intended or planned for at the onset of the placement (Riggs & Willsmore, 2012). Before outlining the method and results, a brief overview of the literature is provided. The paper concludes by exploring what the findings mean in terms of the utility of loss and grief support groups tailored to foster and kinship carers who have experienced a placement termination.

1.1. Previous literature

In Australia, limited research has been undertaken on the topic of foster parent loss and grief. One paper, focused on South Australia, adopted a case study approach, exploring the experiences of four foster parents who had experienced an unplanned placement termination (Riggs & Willsmore, 2012). For all of the participants, the approach outlined above to making decisions about potential placement termination was not adhered to, leaving the foster parents with considerable grief, having felt they had failed the child, feeling unsure about their future commitment to providing care, and having a deep distrust of the statutory body. Australian research more broadly has suggested that long-term foster parents, and specifically women, view themselves as mothers to the foster children there are raising (Blythe, Halcomb, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2013). The threat of a placement termination thus cuts to the heart of this mothering identity, and is counter to the normative expectation of most parents that they will raise their children until adulthood, and then maintain a relationship with their children (and then potentially grandchild) throughout their lives (Blythe, Jackson, Halcomb, & Wilkes, 2012). Internationally, research on foster parents and unplanned placement terminations has emphasized a considerable power imbalance between foster parents and case workers in terms of placement decisions. Rostill-Brookes, Larkin, Toms, and Churchman (2011), for example, compared views on placement breakdown among social workers, foster parents, and foster children living in the United Kingdom. While social workers were primarily focused on risk mitigation and the potential impact on children, foster parents reported feeling that social workers made recourse to claims about a focus on children in order to make placement decisions that were not necessarily in the best interests of either children or foster parents.

Other international research has emphasized that it is not only foster parents who are affected by an unplanned placement termination. Birth children of foster parents also report considerable distress resulting from a placement termination. Williams (2017), for example, found in interviews with adult birth children of foster parents living in Ireland that they often felt left out of decision making, and felt that information about placement decisions was actively withheld from them. Participants also reported distress at not being able to stay in contact with children who had previously lived with them, and believed that greater support and training should be available to birth children of foster parents. Research with foster parents has also emphasized the broader familial impact that a foster placement termination can have, noting that there are few avenues for birth children of foster parents to process their loss and grief (Newquist, Ladd, & Cooley, 2020). Further in terms of support, research conducted both in the United Kingdom (Lynes & Siteo, 2019) and the United States (Newquist et al., 2020) reports that foster parents believe that training would help prepare them for potential placement terminations, yet participants in these studies were rarely offered training on this topic. Participants in both studies especially noted that hearing from other foster parents who had experienced a placement termination would be most helpful, the perception being that those with lived experience would be most likely to have an intimate understanding of their experiences. Nonetheless, participants also noted that the work of providing support should not simply fall to other foster parents, given the likelihood for burnout. Rather, participants believed that agencies and statutory bodies have a responsibility to provide support following a placement termination.

In terms of processing loss and grief, previous research reports that many foster parents experience guilt following a placement termination, feeling that they could have done more to keep the child with them (Valentine, MacCallum, & Knibbs, 2019). Yet at the same time, some foster parents report feeling relief that they are no longer living with challenging behaviors (Valentine et al.). Regardless of whether foster parents feel guilty or relieved (or both), research consistently reports that foster parents experience significant grief, often likening a placement termination to a death (Williams, 2017). For some foster parents, loss and grief may be normalized as part of the fostering journey, however this does not mitigate the significance and extent of the grief experienced (Hebert, Kulkin, & McLean, 2013). The loss of a child may for some foster parents be compounded when they are prevented from maintaining a relationship with the child after the placement ends (Lynes & Siteo, 2019).

A consistent theme across previous research is the idea that working through loss and grief following a placement termination may be compounded when the feelings of foster parents are not validated by others. Foster parents report that often times their own family and friends do not recognize or validate the extent of the grief, instead viewing foster care as temporary and not bringing with it attachment (Lynes & Siteo, 2019). Other foster parents have reported the sense that statutory bodies did not adequately take into consideration the grief caused by a placement termination, leaving their feelings unacknowledged (Hebert et al., 2013). Some foster parents report feeling that they had to hide their emotions following a placement termination, out of fear that showing emotions would result in them being deemed unfit for future placements (Rostill-Brookes, Larkin, Toms, & Churchman, 2011). As we discuss in our overview of the support group below, this broad lack of recognition of the loss experienced by foster parents can lead to the disenfranchisement of grief. Disenfranchised grief refers to when a person is deprived of the right to grieve a loss because their grief is not treated as valid, or the relationship that is lost is not socially recognized (Doka, 1989). Further, the prevention of ongoing contact between foster parents and a child previously in their care can result in ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss occurs when, for example, a parent knows that their child is still alive, but cannot see them, resulting in difficulties in achieving closure with regard to the loss (Boss, 1999; Kor, Fernandez, & Spangaro, 2021). Ambiguous loss can further compound the grief

process, making it difficult for foster parents to let go of what might have been.

Finally, all of the research summarized above focuses on foster parents, given that very little research has focused on kinship carers and placement terminations. Backhouse and Graham (2013) explored loss and grief experienced by grandparents raising their grandchildren in Australia, finding that many experienced grief about having to mourn the life they thought they would have (i.e., retirement, no caring responsibilities), and instead having to make a commitment to raising their grandchildren. Lutman, Hunt, and Waterhouse (2009) examined placement outcomes for children in kinship care in the United Kingdom, finding that in many cases placements ended for reasons summarized above with regard to foster placements. Different for kinship carers, however, ongoing access typically occurred, because the child was part of the extended family.

Building on the literature summarized above, the present paper reports on an evaluation of a South Australian loss and grief support group for foster and kinship carers. As outlined in more detail below, the group provides support for foster and kinship carers who have experienced an unexpected placement termination while providing long-term care. A sample of eight attendees (all foster parents) were interviewed about their experiences with the group, and the following sections report on both the development of the group and a thematic analysis of the interviews, which sought to address the questions 1) what impact do unplanned placement terminations have on the lives of foster and kinship carers, and 2) how can a support group tailored to foster and kinship carers who have experienced an unplanned placement termination process their loss and grief.

2. Method

2.1. Group model

The foster and kinship carer loss and grief support group was first initiated in February 2020, based on the experiences of a staff member and a foster carer member of the peak organisation who provides support and advocacy to foster and kinship carers in South Australia. Both recognised that grief over unplanned placement endings was a common theme impacting many carers. From the onset, the group was thus developed in response to carer need. Initial meetings held with a small group of carers involved the presentation of some potential ideas for the group, which were workshopped with carers to develop the form the group would take. An important issue raised in these workshops was the need for the group not to become stuck on individual stories, but rather to provide a space where the sharing of stories could directly translate into opportunities for healing. As such, to a certain extent the purpose of the group is to manage the limitations of advocacy as a singular route to healing. Instead, the existence of the group recognises that healing comes best with peers who have had similar experiences.

Since its initiation the group has typically been attended by seven or eight foster or kinship carers at any one time, with a total of 20 carers having attended the group across its life. The group meets monthly for two hours, with meetings alternating between day and evening sessions. Considerable interest has been expressed in the group, though this has to a degree been restricted by its metro setting. The group continued virtually during COVID lockdowns, but did not permit new members during this (in South Australia, relatively brief) window of time given the high state of emotions often witnessed when carers first attend, the concern being that new carers could not be adequately supported virtually following first attendance. Information about the group is shared in a Facebook group run by the carer advocacy organisation and through the email list of the organisation and directly by agency staff who support foster carers.

The group adopts a non-clinical group work approach, with a focus on relationships and relationship building. The group is structured, with each session involving a check-in, a reflective activity, a focus topic for

discussion, and a check-out. The group is guided by two facilitators who adopt restorative practice principles (Wachtel, 2013), with a focus on disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989). Responding to narratives of trauma and distress through a restorative lens involves asking directive questions about the what and the why of individual experiences, offering opportunities to reframe narratives through a focus on positive relationships. The group is psychoeducational in terms of providing information about disenfranchised grief, which for most attendees is a new concept. In a sense, then, some of the work of the group is about permission giving – permission to see a placement termination as a loss that for many results in grief.

2.2. Participants

The facilitators of the support group informed attendees that an evaluation of the group was being undertaken by the lead author, and were invited to participate in an interview where they would be asked to reflect on their experiences. Group attendees were informed that participating in an interview was not a requirement of their group attendance. Participants were not remunerated for their time. Of the eight participants who consented to an interview, all were women, with ages ranging from 47 years to 61 years (average age 54 years), and all were foster parents. Participants had been providing care for between 1 year and 40 years (average length 15 years). Participants were providing a diversity of forms of care, in addition to long-term care. These included respite care, emergency care, and short-term care. Most participants were generalist foster carers providing long-term care to children placed with them on an ad hoc basis, however a small number of participants were provided specific-child only care (i.e., a child known to them was placed with them). The most common reason given for an unplanned placement termination was the behaviors of the child and the lack of support provided to manage the behaviors. Other reasons given were a care concern being raised, reunification with birth family (including a kinship placement), and a child moving prematurely into independent living. Most of the participants were caring for non-indigenous children, though a small number were caring for Indigenous children.

2.3. Procedure

Ethics approval for the evaluation was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (approval number 4142). Participants who consented to be involved in the evaluation were interviewed by the second or third author, either on the phone or in person (depending on the availability of the participant and any COVID restrictions in place), in March 2021. Interviews lasted on average for 31 min. Interview questions included 'Please describe your experience of placement breakdown', and 'Please describe your experience with the grief and transition support group'. All interviews were audio recorded and were transcribed by a professional transcription service. Pseudonyms were allocated to participants following transcription.

It should be noted that some of the authors, including the lead author, are themselves foster parents. The position of all of the authors is thus reflective of the account of insider/outsider research outlined by Dwyer and Buckle (2009), which emphasises the utility of understanding insider and outsider positions as co-occurring, rather than as binaries. As authors, we are privy to aspects of both the support group and foster parenting that other researchers may not have access to. This most certainly facilitated our understanding of this complex and emotional topic. Furthermore, as facilitators of the group, the second and third author have a personal investment in the success of the group, and the fourth author is the CEO of the peak organisation that provides broader advocacy, education and support to foster and kinship carers across South Australia. With that in mind, the evaluation was led by the lead author, who is neither a facilitator nor member of the group, and who has not experienced a placement termination. As a collective of authors,

then, our differing standpoints as both insiders and outsiders to the group, to placement terminations, and to foster care, ensured both that we had a close understanding of the topic and group work, but also that at key junctures we were able to ensure necessary distance for our own safety, and also to ensure that our own standpoints did not unduly influence the evaluation.

2.4. Analytic approach

In terms of analytic approach, the lead author read the entire data set multiple times, noting recurring topics or codes within the data set, following the six-step approach to reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Having developed codes, the lead author then developed these into themes via a process of constant comparison against the dataset, condensing broad codes into specific themes. The term 'develop' is used here to denote the active role of the researcher in reading and interpreting the data. In other words, the themes reported below are not passively derived from the data set. Rather, they are actively developed by the researcher. Finally, a set of representative extracts were chosen for closer analysis, focusing on the semantic meaning of the extracts. It is this analysis that is reported below.

As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019a), a reflexive thematic analysis offers one particular, situated account of a data set. As such, reporting the prevalence of participants within a given theme would be misleading, as it would imply that a given theme is an objective representation of the reality of all participants included. Similarly, Braun and Clarke (2019b) critique the concept of 'data saturation', suggesting that a fixed or definitive account of the number of participants required to authorise the development of a theme serves to treat themes as inherent to the data, rather than as actively developed by the researcher. The themes included below are certainly representative of the data set, however are unlikely to be representative of all possible readings of the data set. Finally, Braun and Clarke (2019a) argue against the use of inter-rater reliability, noting that such an approach again presumes an inherent meaning to, and singular reading of, the data. Nonetheless, all authors read through the themes developed and confirmed that the themes developed provided a clear overview of the data set.

3. Results

The thematic analysis of the interview data resulted in the development of three overarching themes. The first of these arose naturalistically, and was not the subject of a specific interview questions about statutory bodies. The second and third themes relate to interview questions focused on the experiences of placement breakdown, and experiences with the support group. Each of the overarching themes is presented through sub-themes that provide a breakdown of each of the overarching themes. The language of 'foster families' or 'foster parents' is solely used throughout the results, given that none of the participants were kinship carers.

3.1. Actions of statutory body leading to negative outcomes

This first theme focuses on participant perceptions that the actions of statutory agencies played a role in negative placement outcomes. Two sub-themes were developed within this theme: 1) Lack of support leading to placement breakdown, and 2) Preventing contact leads to broken promises.

3.1.1. Lack of support leading to placement breakdown

As noted above, a majority of participants reported that challenging behaviours and a lack of support to deal with them precipitated placement breakdown. Participants commonly noted asking statutory bodies for support in order to prevent a placement breakdown, only to be refused support, as the following participant notes:

Angela: We asked for help [from statutory body] when the kindergarten said that [child's] behaviour had just got quite extreme and [child had] really swung into wild animal mode. So we asked for support and [statutory body] just sort of said 'No, can't go jumping to get support whenever there's a difficult patch'.

Here Angela reports trying to be proactive, upon learning that other people outside the family home were also witnessing challenging behaviours. Yet despite this proactive approach to trying to respond to challenging behaviours, Angela was denied support, and instead perceived that she was positioned as 'jumping for support' at the slightest provocation. Another participant similarly reported reaching out for help in the face of challenging behaviours, only for this to result in a placement termination:

Sarah: I was ringing for help and everybody was not available so I was leaving voicemails. Messages saying what was happening, like that I was being chased around with a knife and I'm trying to avoid this knife right now, and I really need some help. So their form of help was coming and removing him that day. That was really devastating.

As Sarah noted more broadly in her interview, what she needed was support to manage the behaviours. She was clear that she had not intended to terminate the placement, yet in response to her call for support the statutory agency removed the child. For Sarah this was devastating as she had no warning that this would happen.

3.1.2. Preventing contact leads to broken promises

Once a child had been removed from their care, most of the participants sought to maintain ongoing contact with the child. As Jane noted, this desire for contact was because she had promised the child a 'forever home', and she was aware she had broken that promise. Maintaining contact was thus a way to at least keep a connection, however this was denied by the statutory body:

Jane: There was the guilt that we promised this child a forever home, and we broke that promise. And yeah, that eats at you, even now. I think the issue is that whilst we couldn't have [child] in the home, we didn't want to sever the connection. That child needed us to still be there, even if we weren't there daily. But [statutory body's] views on that were, 'No. No contact'.

For Jane, she felt strongly that the child needed her and her family in their life, even if they could no longer live together. Yet despite this reasonable request, Jane reported in her interview that she was told that they needed to 'break the attachment' with the child, so they could bond with their new carers. Other participants were told that access would be possible, but over time this was phased out:

Toni: I got to see [child] less and less until now I don't see them at all. When I have emailed [statutory body] saying I want to see [child], they either don't respond or they'll arrange that we'll have to work something out for the next school holidays and then I never hear anything even when I email back. They don't know how much I love [child]. They don't know the relationship.

As Toni states, her desire for ongoing contact with the child was driven by her love for them, and reflects the depth of the relationship that had developed with the child. Toni reported elsewhere in her interview that she had been told that the child's new carers had different views on how to raise the child, views that were perceived as being in conflict with Toni's approach. The outcome was not to try and find some middle ground, but instead to cease contact with Toni.

3.2. Impact of placement breakdown on foster family

In this second theme, participants spoke about the significant

emotional impact that placement breakdown had on both themselves, and on other family members. Three sub-themes were developed within this theme: 1) Impact on birth children of foster parents, 2) Depth of grief and lack of recognition, and 3) Impact of placement termination on core being.

3.2.1. *Impact on birth children of foster parents*

A number of participants spoke about the impact that placement terminations specifically, and challenging placements more broadly, had on their birth children. Trudy, for example, spoke about the threats that one of her birth children was subjected to by her foster child:

Trudy: Little things started coming up with [foster child in terms of] behavioural issues, things like what they had seen mum go through and what dad had done to mum. So then there were little clashes between [birth children] and [foster child]. [Foster child] would start saying things to our younger child, stuff like, I'm going to beat you up, smash your face in.

As Trudy mentioned elsewhere in her interview, while the behaviours themselves were challenging, it was the direct threats to her birth children that increased Trudy's concerns about the viability of the placement. Martha directly linked one of her birth children's reaction to challenging behaviours to how they coped following the placement termination:

Martha: I think the crunch time came when the children were all standing on the back step yelling at each other, and one of my [birth children] says, "I'm leaving home". And they were ready to pack their stuff. But in the end, they were the one who struggled with the placement ending the most, suffered the worst. I think [child] felt guilt, like it was their fault [foster child] had to go.

In many ways the experiences of Martha's child echoes the experiences of some participants themselves: that on the one hand they found foster child behaviours particularly challenging, but that when the placement ended they felt guilt about what more they could have done, rather than relief that they were free of the behaviours.

3.2.2. *Depth of grief and lack of recognition*

Participants consistently spoke about experiencing considerable grief following the termination of a placement, grief that for some lasted many years, and indeed for some was still not resolved. For some participants, like Beth, there was a sense of ambiguous loss, such that the child was gone, but Beth knew they were still alive elsewhere, and further that there were constant reminders of them in the home:

Beth: Some people have their children removed that are just little toddlers that you were with 24/7 and all of a sudden your house echoes because they're not there. You're constantly finding things around the house. The first year, there's anniversaries of everything. It's like a death. It is 100% like a death and the impact is phenomenal because quite often they are not removed with pre-warning and knowledge and systems put in place. It's a termination.

As Beth states, a placement termination is 'phenomenal', exacerbated in some cases by the lack of preparedness for its occurrence. As she noted elsewhere in her interview, Beth was denied ongoing contact with the child who left her care, which potentially further contributed to the sense of the placement termination being like a death. Other participants spoke at great length about how significant the grief was that they experienced:

Jane: I've grieved over this child like nothing I've ever grieved over. My mum died and I love my mum but I've cried more about this child than I did about my mum. I think about it every single day. It's absolutely devastating. And it's really tough to wear because a lot of people don't get it. We had friends say 'Oh you must be so relieved

it's over'. And family members will say, 'Oh you'll be better off now'. And 'Oh it must be a relief' and stuff.

Jane made a direct comparison to the death of her mother, noting that the loss of her foster child had been devastating, exacerbated by the fact that both friends and family did not understand. The idea that a placement termination was thought by others to be a 'relief' was expressed by a number of participants, who all similarly noted that this type of comment fundamentally failed to acknowledge the attachment that had formed, instead focusing only on reprieve from challenging behaviours, and ignoring the extent of grief.

3.2.3. *Impact of placement termination on core being*

Given the significant commitment that foster parents make to children notionally placed in their care long-term, it is perhaps not surprising that a placement termination would have significant implications for foster parent sense of self. Indeed, some participants spoke about a placement termination impacting on their 'core being', as was the case for Amy:

Amy: I got taken through the wringer. And the guy that – I got investigated, and I got all this crap that I had to go through. And then I was really emotionally absolutely stuffed. They took away my core being. They took away my whole ... me. They took away something in me that I've never been able to get back. It was just something went. It took me two to three years to pull myself out of that place.

Here Amy makes repeated reference to 'they', being the statutory body. Agency is attributed to the statutory body to make decisions that can have such significant impacts, with participants such as Amy being subjected to the will of others. This denial of agency made it very difficult for participants such as Amy to reclaim what they felt they had lost. For Angela, having made such a significant commitment to mothering children in foster care meant that she was left with an 'identity crisis':

Angela: I have defined myself as a foster mother for more than 30 years. So I have not yet recovered from defining myself 12 hours a day by mothering.. It takes a lot of hours of your day and then who are you if you've got all this time without children. It was a bit of an identity crisis. I am still working out what to keep in my house and what not to keep in my house given I am no longer an every-day mother.

While Angela had cared for many children in her long career as a foster parent, the abrupt ending of her last placement meant that she didn't have the opportunity to prepare for life after having children in her house. While she acknowledged that no longer having children in the house was on the horizon, given her age, the suddenness of the last placement ending left her unsure how to proceed.

3.3. *The role of the group in recovering from grief*

All of the participants spoke in glowing terms about the group, identifying core aspects of the group work itself that helped them to heal from grief following a placement termination. Four sub-themes were developed within this theme: 1) Group helped to celebrate what had been achieved for the child, 2) Group allows for perspective taking, 3) Group recognises the depth of the attachment to the child, and 4) Group activities give physical presence to loss and hope for the future.

3.3.1. *Group helped to celebrate what had been achieved for the child*

For some participants, the extent of the loss experienced meant that they were unable to see what they had done for the child who had been in their care. Attending the group helped them to reframe their guilt, and for some a sense of failure, through a focus on what the child might have gained from the placement, even if ultimately the placement ended:

Louise: The group has given me back ... I don't know, this sense that actually I'm okay, and that I did okay for [the child]. We did the best job we could have done. There's this huge guilt at the beginning, but that's definitely lessened because we couldn't actually carry on like that. The group has helped me to see in the end that we did give [child] something, that will hopefully benefit them into the future.

As Louise discussed elsewhere in her interview, she was very much committed to making the placement work. That it ultimately was terminated meant she was left with the feeling that she should have done more. Her attendance at the group helped her to acknowledge that she had made a positive contribution to the child's life. Toni too noted that the group helped her to reframe her sense of loss by focusing on what had been achieved for the child:

Toni: We had to find a phrase that we would say to ourselves if we were looking from the outside, a positive phrase, a way to acknowledge that without me [child] wouldn't have been able to accept or give love. It was going to that group that actually made me realise, that without me, while [child] might not be with me anymore, but because of me [child] can be in a family and before that [child] couldn't be in a family.

Here Toni emphasises what she feels the child got from her care, as a route to healing from the loss. While the child could no longer be with her family, it was being in her family, even if only for a short period of time, that has made it possible for them to be in a family more broadly.

3.3.2. Group allows for perspective taking

Beyond a specific focus on what children gained, other participants spoke about the group as a space that allowed them to take a broader perspective on both the positives and negatives of foster care. For Jane, this came from hearing other people's stories:

Jane: The group is about sharing situations with people who understand what you're going through without feeling judged or that you've done the wrong thing or that you could have done things differently. I think for me it was just about hearing other people's situations and putting mine into perspective going, okay, mine isn't as bad because at the end of our situation there was good.

Jane was able to step out of her own vantage point in a non-judgemental space that allowed her to take stock of her own situation through comparison with those of others, and to reframe what had at first appeared solely negative (i.e., the placement termination), and instead see it as also bringing good things. Sarah emphasised that attendance at the group allowed her to actually acknowledge her own feelings:

Sarah: The group is helpful because it validates. I think the biggest thing is acknowledging yourself, acknowledging your feelings and emotions and taking away blame. Celebrating everything you have done, and I guess that's another real key thing, is celebrating what you have done and although the journey may have come to an end, what it is that you have done, is forever.

For Sarah, being able to acknowledge her feelings allowed her to see both the challenging feelings alongside feelings that could be celebrated: to acknowledge that what had been achieved in the context of the placement would have lifelong effects.

3.3.3. Group recognises the depth of the attachment to the child

Participants also reported that attendance at the group helped them to recognise and have acknowledged the depth of their attachment to the child who had been in their care. Given, as noted earlier in this paper, for some participants their grief was disenfranchised (on the basis that their relationship with the child was not adequately acknowledged), being in a space where their attachment was acknowledged was

vital:

Beth: When I went to the psychologist they couldn't get it, they didn't understand the level of attachment because he wasn't biologically mine, but I loved him like he was. The group helped me see my loss had been disenfranchised. Which was important because my friendship circle got very small. People that I thought were friends dropped off pretty quick when things got tough.

For Beth, it was important to name how her grief was disenfranchised, as part of her journey to claim the attachment she felt with the child who had been in her care. Claiming this attachment had become difficult in her own circles, as friends had distanced themselves. For Beth, then, the group played an important role in providing acknowledgement of the attachment, acknowledgement that was not forthcoming elsewhere. Trudy too expressed gratitude to the group for seeing the relationship for what it was:

Trudy: These beautiful people who have opened their hearts and homes are made to feel like they're idiots, they don't know what they're talking about when they say they are grieving. Just 'snap out of it', you know. But people need to be able recognise how deep the relationship was, and how hard it is to let go. The group helped me with seeing how important the relationship was.

While Trudy speaks in the third person, we can see be the final sentence of the extract that she is also talking about herself: That she too has been told to 'snap out of it', and that she too needs self-care. The group thus provided a space where Trudy could acknowledge how important the relationship was, and thus why she was grieving.

3.3.4. Group activities give physical presence to loss and hope for the future

A final but important aspect of attendance at the group related to the use of focused activities within the group as a way to process loss and grief. Activities included creating collages or other pictorial tributes to children no longer living with participants, as well as life story books or life trees that helped to celebrate the relationship between foster parent and child. For some participants, activities gave them a way to focus their grief related to a child no longer in their care:

Angela: I've got a whole lot of little mementos that are kind of like a little tribute to [child], like a little shrine with some of the crafts they did and the date that [child] left on a little calendar. A little photo book, photos, so it's like a little shrine. And we did it with all pretty pens and stars and we could choose pretty decorations for it and it was really nice and a therapeutic thing to do for myself and it definitely helped.

As Angela notes, collating materials together into 'a little shrine' was therapeutic in the sense that it gave her a space where she had permission to focus on the child. Giving a physical space to the child and Angela's attachment to them potentially helped to address a sense of ambiguous loss, by giving form to the child in a house where the child was otherwise absent. For Amy, the creation of a life story tree allowed her to create links between the past and present, and between presence and absence, so that she could focus on the positive things in her life:

Amy: Last month for example, we did this tree. It's basically your life story tree I guess. And I just felt this amazing gratitude because by starting out at the bottom, you start with your values and how they developed. And then all these other things, you know what's in your life, and who's in your life, and who's not in your life. I just went away going 'Oh my God, I'm so fortunate'.

Focused activities like the life story tree helped to materialise the types of perspective taking mentioned in an earlier sub-theme. Seeing people as situated in a relational network – even for those no longer living with Amy, such as her foster child – meant that Amy could view her life and relationships holistically, rather than as compartmentalised.

4. Discussion

In terms of the first two overarching themes, the findings reported in this paper echo international findings to certain degree. Reports of a lack of support leading to placement breakdown are similar to the focus on power imbalances between statutory staff and foster parents reported previously (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011), and the loss of trust in statutory bodies reported in previous research following a placement breakdown (Riggs & Willmore, 2012). The idea that preventing contact leads to broken promises relates to the idea reported in previous research that being prevented from seeing a child after a placement termination can serve to compound grief (Lynes & Siteo, 2019). What our findings add is the drawing of a clear line between antecedents and consequences, namely that a lack of support is not simply frustrating for foster and kinship carers, but that when it remains unattended to by statutory agencies this can result in an unplanned placement termination. Indeed, it would seem that in some cases the statutory response to requests for support was to terminate the placement.

Similarly, the finding that a placement termination can impact on birth children of foster parents echoes previous research (Williams, 2017), and the framing of placement termination as like a death and the disenfranchisement of grief also echoes previous research (Lynes & Siteo; Williams). Finally, the idea that a placement termination can impact on the core being of foster parents is reminiscent of the work of Blythe et al. (2012, 2013), in the sense that a mothering identity is threatened when a placement breaks down. What our findings add, however, and different to previous research (e.g., Valentine et al., 2019), is the finding that for none of the participants in the present study was there a sense of relief following a placement termination. Instead, many were left feeling that more could have been done. This potentially speaks to the context of providing long-term care in Australia, where carers are expected to bond with children, leading many to adopt a parental identity for children in their care, thus understandably leading to loss and grief (and for some guilt) when a placement ends, rather than relief.

The third overarching theme, focused on the support group itself, makes a significant contribution to the existing literature. While previous literature, as noted above with regard to the first two themes, has extensively documented loss and grief in regard to an unplanned placement termination, lacking to a degree has been a focus on how to address such loss and grief in a systematic fashion. Central to the third theme is thus recognition: recognition of the significance of the relationship, recognition that something has been lost, and recognition of what the carer has given to the child. These forms of recognition were much needed for all of the participants, given for many both statutory bodies and friends and families failed to recognize the extent of loss and grief experienced with an unplanned placement termination. Importantly, the therapeutic aspects of the support group extended beyond talking, to also encompass practical activities. For all of the participants the creation of forms of memorialization were vital to recognizing and working through loss and grief. Memorialization provided an important counter to feelings of frustration with a lack of support offered elsewhere, and also allowed participants to address any guilt they felt about the placement termination by celebrating the relationship with the child, rather than feeling responsible for the fact the child was no longer physically with them.

These findings with regard to the support group echo previous research that has suggested mechanisms for supporting foster and kinship carers following a placement termination. Lynes and Siteo (2019), for example, highlight the importance of support from other carers, and the support group evaluated in the present paper provides evidence for the importance of formalizing such support. Newquist et al. (2020) too emphasise the importance of peer support for foster carers following a placement termination, and also suggest that recognition from statutory agencies is important for addressing loss and grief. By contrast, the findings reported in the present paper would suggest that while peer support is important, less important appeared to be

recognition from statutory agencies as a way to address loss and grief after the event (rather, for participants in the present study recognition by statutory agencies was needed before an unplanned placement termination was considered or occurred).

4.1. Limitations

In terms of limitations, it is important to note the relatively small sample size, though it must also be noted that this is an adequate sample size for qualitative research, that it is similar to sample sizes in other qualitative research on the topic, and that the sample size constituted almost half of all who had attended the group. Another limitation relates to the fact that all attendees of the group were women, and indeed a number of participants noted that their male partners were either not interested in, or were averse to, attending, due to perceptions about the significant emotion work attached to group attendance. This suggests the importance of considering the needs of foster or kinship carers who are not women in terms of processing loss and grief following a placement termination. Further, all of the participants were foster parents, and the limited research on kinship carers suggests their experiences of placement termination may differ. Further research is thus needed to focus specifically on kinship carers. An additional limitation is that the support group was only for foster and kinship carers, yet the findings reported in this paper suggest the importance of support groups for birth children of foster parents. Finally in terms of limitations, the follow up interviews undertaken for this study were a singular event approximately a year after the group commenced. It will be important to follow up participants at a further date in time to identify any additional benefits, and to ascertain if the benefits identified in this paper are sustained across time. The use of quantitative measures completed before and after group attendance may also help to further examine whether group attendance reduces, for example, grief and psychological distress, and increases psychological wellbeing.

4.2. Implications for practice

As noted in the introduction to this paper, lack of recognition of the loss experienced by foster or kinship carers can lead to the disenfranchisement of grief (Doka, 1989), and preventing ongoing contact can result in ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999). The findings reported in this paper suggest that support groups such as that evaluated in this study can play an important role in ameliorating both. As the findings suggest, the group helped participants to celebrate what they had achieved for the child, and allowed them to take perspective about their caring journey. Both of these are likely to address disenfranchised grief, by acknowledging the loss and also acknowledging positive outcomes. The purposive focus on disenfranchised grief within the group likely played an important role in producing these outcomes.

Further, as the findings suggest, the group helped participants to recognize the depth of their attachment to the child removed from their care, and to do so by engaging in activities that gave physical presence to the loss and hope for the future. Activities that materialized both the child and the loss of them potentially helped to address ambiguous loss, by giving permission to participants to continue to see the child as part of their life. The use of restorative practices, rather than the group simply being a space to share stories, would thus appear to be an important aspect of the group. A focus on restorative practices helped participants to recoup both a sense of self and a relationship to the child that had otherwise seemed unpermitted by statutory bodies, and indeed by some friends and family.

Finally in terms of practice implications, and echoing the work of Hebert and Kulkin (2016), the findings reported in this paper extend beyond the direct benefits to foster and kinship carers. It would seem important that statutory and other agency staff are provided with adequate training to recognize the loss and grief experienced by foster and kinship carers following a placement termination. Given that for

many of the participants the placement termination experienced was not in accordance with guidelines for placement decisions (Nyland, 2016), there is clearly scope for staff to be better apprised of how to approach a potential placement change, and that following the Child Protection Royal Commission Report (Nyland), facilitating ongoing contact would appear to be an important aspect of placement terminations other than those that involve potential abuse by foster and kinship carers.

4.3. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the evaluation reported in this paper focuses on one South Australian support group for foster and kinship carers, the similarity in findings to previous research about placement terminations and their impact on foster parents would suggest that the group approach outlined in this paper is likely applicable across a diversity of statutory and legislative contexts. Obviously each such context is unique, both within and across contexts, requiring that groups are tailored to each context, however the restorative practices focus with an explicit focus on disenfranchised grief is likely applicable to the experiences of many foster and kinship carers. Ideally foster and kinship carers would be better supported to maintain a placement or to play an active role in any placement decisions that might result in a placement termination, however it is also likely that even with both of these in place foster and kinship carers are likely to experience grief following the end of a placement. This would suggest the ongoing importance of support groups that seek to acknowledge and validate the grief experienced by foster and kinship carers, and their families more broadly.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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We begin by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kaurna people, the First Nations people upon whose land we live and work.

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