Family ties

Aspirations

Belief / unbelief

Being in care

Ethnicity

Gender

Expressions of self: Supporting minoritised children's identity

About this briefing

This briefing, and the tools contained within it, offer guidance on how social care practitioners can work with minoritised children and young people to explore their identities, meet their identity needs and promote positive identity development. It builds on **research** undertaken by Coventry University (funded by the Nuffield Foundation) regarding the identities of minoritised children and young people in care. The briefing provides tools to help social care practitioners think about and explore identity with children and young people, including:

> the different layers within their identities

> how they think, feel and relate to different aspects of their inherited identities

> how they think about their identities within different contexts, and with different people.

Although the briefing mainly focuses on the stories and experiences of minoritised young people in care (aged 14-21), many of the ideas and tools can be adapted and used with all children and young people in care.

A note on language

This briefing, and the report from which it's drawn, use the term 'minoritised' as a way of understanding that people are actively minoritised by others rather than naturally existing as a minority (Milner & Jumbe, 2020). The briefing focuses on young people minoritised by their ethnicity and religion, but the principles and framework discussed within it also enable transferable learning to help support other children and young people who may be minoritised in different ways.

The research

The researchers gathered 'stories' from 26 young people in care/care leavers aged 14-21 years from minoritised backgrounds, with a focus on their religion, ethnicity and identity.

The main focus of the research was on young people in care from Black (largely of Christian-heritage and, to a lesser extent, of Muslim-heritage), South Asian (largely of Muslim-heritage, but also of Hindu- and Sikh-heritage) and children from mixed ethnic backgrounds, who may have dual religious heritage but are less likely to have a distinct religious identity (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2010).

In relation to care experiences, the focus was on young people who are in, or have experienced, adoption, foster care or residential care. It did not include young people who are cared for under special guardianship or kinship-care arrangements as they will generally have some continuity accessing social networks, culture and customs (Ince, 2009).

The research used a variety of visual, verbal and written techniques to elicit young people's narratives and perspectives around ethnicity, religion and identity. It included a mix of qualitative methods, including:

> semi-structured interviews
> life narratives
> image elicitation
> arts-based methods.

It should be noted that the extracts and quotes used throughout this briefing are drawn from the research report and contain pseudonyms and modifications in order to anonymise the identity of participants, while retaining the crux of the narrative. For more information about the research, including the methods used, you can read the research **here**.

Briefing contents

Introduction to identity

What do we mean by identity?

Identity can be understood as an individual's or group's concepts of who they are, how they define themselves, how they relate to others, and how others see them (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Deng, 1996). A person's sense of self is made up of their experiences, values, characteristics and social roles (Bonsu & Smith, 2023) and the answers to questions such as:

> Who am I?

> What's important to me?

> What is my place in the world?

  (Jackson et al., 2020)

Rather than being static, identity is fluid and reflective of social and historical contexts, which fluctuate as circumstances, contexts and personal preferences change (Hall & Du Gay, 1996).

Central to an understanding of identity is the term 'intersectionality'. Similar to 'social graces', (Burnham, 2012, and see, also, *Social-GGRRAAACCEEESSS-and-the-LUUUTT-model*), it is a framework for understanding how different aspects of identity – for example, race, gender, sexuality – can lead to experiences of inequality, disadvantage or privilege (Crenshaw, 1989).

In addition to intersectionality, the briefing uses the concept of 'lived religion' in relation to religious identity. The term 'lived religion' allows for the inclusion of a variety of perspectives around faith and places the everyday actions that people consider as forms of worship at its forefront (for example, religious festivals can be more about decorations, presents and the people you meet rather than official doctrine) (Petrelli & Light, 2014). Using the framework of intersectionality, when combined with the idea of lived religion, allows for reflection around the specific contexts and identities of individuals.

Further reading

For more information on identity in children and young people see:
Understanding, exploring and supporting children's identity development: Practice Tool

Identity needs of children and young people in care

According to the Care Leavers' Charter, efforts should be made to 'respect and honour' a young person's identity (Department for Education, 2012). Identity is included as an element of a child's developmental needs in the assessment framework outlined in *Working together to safeguard children* (Department for Education, 2023) and local authorities must consider children's 'religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background' when making decisions about a child in care (*Children Act 1989*, section 22, p.3).

Children and young people in care are likely to have experienced disruption, harm and confusing experiences. Because of this, they need a home that offers them security, stability and a sense of belonging (Department for Education, 2023). It is important that this is a safe space for them to navigate the complexities of their circumstances and identities, and also a place where they are supported to make sense of their experiences and how these affect their identity (Bonsu & Smith, 2023; Michelson, 2022).

Supporting children and young people's identities can enhance their sense of wellbeing and confidence (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2022a). When children and young people are placed with alternative carers, they may encounter aspects of identity (for example, ethnicity, religion, culture) that are different from those of their parents (Waniganayake et al., 2019). Social care professionals play a key role in ensuring that they themselves, as well as carers, possess a good understanding of the identities of the children they care for, as well as the most appropriate ways to support them (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2022b).

Learning about identity from children and young people

The importance of listening to children and young people

A key aim of this briefing is to encourage social care practitioners to listen, and to avoid imposing their own perceptions of religion, culture or ethnicity onto children and young people. Instead, practitioners should seek to establish environments where children feel safe to explore and assert their identities.

The narratives of the young people who participated in the research showed that they see their identity as being defined by many experiences and beliefs, not just their ethnicity or religion:

> *I consider myself to be a thin black man. I enjoy making new friends, socialising, and learning new things. I'm also friendly. Additionally, I have a deep belief in religion. [...] I like playing football. So, they [the others] view me as maybe a good footballer, a good storyteller and a funny guy. We make stories around our migration background, football, and music.*
>
> African male, living in foster care, age 17

In response to the question about how he identified himself, this young person responded, slightly tongue-in-cheek, saying that he was a 'thin' black man – alluding to his physical appearance. However, the latter part of this quote shows that football was also key to his identity, as was music, his migration history and his ability to tell a good story. This young person encourages us to perceive him as much more than Black and religious. He wants us to understand the layers and depth of his identity.

The following sections provide further examples from children and young people whose 'stories' underpin the research. Their stories demonstrate the different ways in which their identities present in their lives in care and how their identities change over time.

In-flux identities framework

Based on the stories and experiences of young people, the researchers developed the idea of 'in-flux identity', as a way of recognising that identities are layered and continually changing. This is exemplified by Aleena, a young woman of Pakistani heritage who was living in foster care when she was interviewed.

Case study 1: Aleena's shifting identity positions

Aleena came into care aged 11. Prior to coming into care, Aleena lived with her deeply devout Muslim biological family. She said that when she lived with her biological family: "All I knew was prayer and Naths" (Urdu-language religious songs). When Aleena first came into care, she found strength in her Islamic faith. She was really happy when, after a few moves, she was placed with Muslim foster carers.

At the age of 11 or 12, with the help of her social worker, Aleena organised an Umrah trip (lesser pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Madina in Saudi Arabia). This Umrah pilgrimage was a deeply spiritual moment for her. She lived happily with these foster carers, but had to move again. Fast forward three years later, when interviewed, Aleena said that she was no longer religious. Islam still mattered to her, but only when she had contact with her biological parents. These days she defined her identity through her love of football and makeup. She travelled 45 minutes and took two buses to play with a female-only team. She loved her makeup, but her attitudes towards using it had changed. Whereas previously she had used makeup to hide her ethnicity, she now used it to emphasise her skin tone.

Questions for reflection

1. What are some of the different aspects of Aleena's identity?

2. What are some of the aspects of identity that she inherited from her biological family? Do you think she retains elements of her biological identity today?

3. What does Aleena's Umrah trip indicate about her agency when it comes to making decisions about her life?

4. How does Aleena's story demonstrate shifts and transitions in her identity? (Think about her faith as well as how her use of makeup has changed.)

5. As a practitioner, how might you help Aleena with her shifting identity?

Further reading

For more information on Muslim heritage children in care see:
www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/may/more-than-faith-muslim-heritage-children-in-care-strategic-briefing-2022

Understanding children and young people's identity as 'in-flux' can aid practitioners in the following ways:

Reflects lived experience
Identities, particularly for minoritised groups, are not simple or static. Children and young people in care are often in a continuous process of renegotiating their identity if they have to move placements, especially in terms of their heritage, which encompasses their ethnic and religious background. An evidence-based understanding of this complexity is closer to the lived experiences of many minoritised children and young people in care.

Suggested action: Introduce children to diverse stories, films, and books from various cultures and backgrounds. This will not only expand their horizons but will also allow them to see that identity can be multi-faceted.

Avoids oversimplification
Oversimplified notions can lead to stereotyping or misinterpretation of an individual's needs and experiences. Recognising the way identity is fluid and responding to context will help practitioners challenge their own biases and also reflect on how their identity is informed by their context, privileges and experiences.

Suggested action: Organise child/young person directed activities that allow them to explore different aspects of their identities (see section three on **page 19** for ideas for activities).

Encourages open dialogue
Rather than imposing an identity onto the child or young person, it allows them to define their identity, which can lead to more open and understanding conversations between the practitioner and the individual, while fostering trust and promoting positive identity development.

Suggested action: Encourage discussions that focus on varied facets of a child's life, such as their hobbies, dreams, values and experiences, rather than just their ethnic or religious background.

Helps prepares for challenges
Understanding the layered nature of identity helps practitioners anticipate potential challenges and conflicts that minoritised children and young people with a faith heritage may potentially face. It may also help them to prepare strategies to address these challenges.

Suggested action: Provide opportunities for children to reflect on their feelings, beliefs, and thoughts. This could be through journaling, conversations or mindfulness exercises.
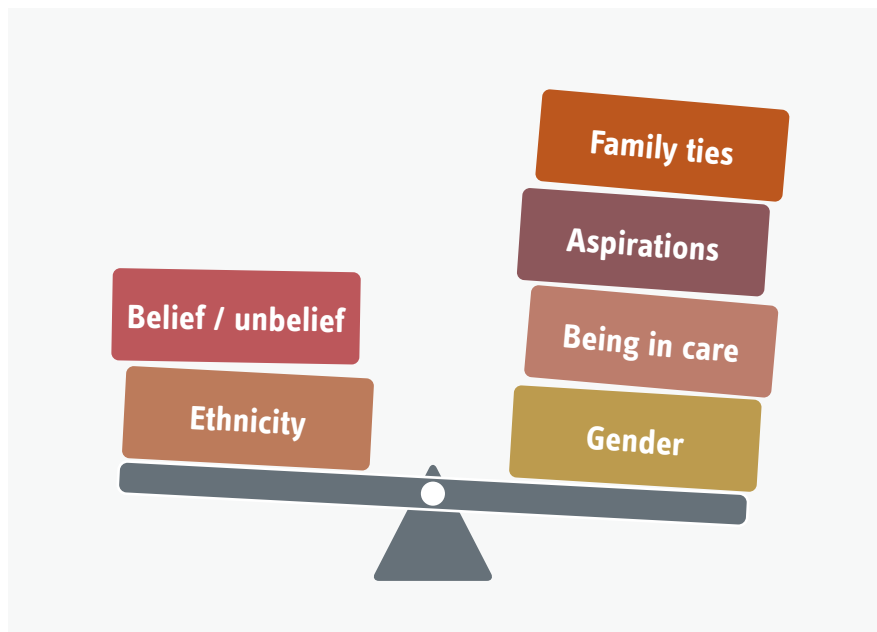
Enhances professional development
For practitioners, encountering and applying new frameworks can help them to expand and improve their practice. It can also equip them to work sensitively with a diverse range of children and young people.

Suggested action: Ensure that records are updated periodically, reflecting the child or young person's current sense of identity, rather than identity from a fixed point from the past.

The 'Identity see-saw'

Reflecting on Aleena's narrative, the researchers created the 'Identity see-saw' to illustrate how identities change and evolve.

**Figure 1:
Identity see-saw**

The see-saw symbolises changes in identities. It also represents the aspects of identity that are important at a given point in time. It shows one moment in time, whilst recognising that the significance of particular aspects of identity may change based on the child or young person's experiences, choices or particular contexts.

The see-saw's movement is largely governed by the child or young person on it, showing that individuals have agency in shaping their identity. At the same time, its movement happens within wider social contexts - including the beliefs, values and identities of the adults caring or making decisions for them. These external and internal elements can significantly shape identity and, as these elements change, so does the young person's identity.

For example, when Aleena first came into care, her religious identity was a significant marker of how she saw herself. Three years later, religion remained in her life, but its significance was much depleted, replaced instead by new interests and perceptions of self. Aleena's see-saw from three years ago would look very different from her see-saw now.

Using the identity see-saw to talk to a child or young person

An identity see-saw is a visually engaging and reflective way for children and young people to explore different parts of their identity. It supports practitioners and young people to think about identity in a nuanced way. It can also help consolidate a child or young person's sense of self, as well as support practitioners to understand their needs.

This exercise can be used as a recurring tool to check in on changing aspects of a child or young person's identity, linked wellbeing issues, and to help adjust coping strategies as needed – as children and young people grow and evolve, so will the items on their see-saw.

Steps to utilise the identity see-saw in practice:

Drawing the see-saw

> Give the child or young person a large sheet of paper, post-it notes and drawing tools.

> Ask them to draw a see-saw. Explain that this will be used to help understand the different parts of their identity that influence how they feel about themselves.

Identifying aspects of their identity

> Help the child or young person to write down or draw parts of their identity on post-it notes.

> Ask them to think about parts that really matter to them now – interests, values, habits that are meaningful. Ask them to stick these on the 'heavier' side of the see-saw.

> Now encourage them to think about parts that are less important – these fit on the other ('lighter') side of the see-saw.

> Take a picture of the see-saw. Date it and save it.

Revisiting the see-saw

> Come back to the see-saw in a few months and do it again.

> Encourage the child to think about the position of the post-it notes – some notes will move around and others may stay where they are.

> They might want to remove some notes, bring back some that were previously removed and/or add new ones.

Different aspects of in-flux identities

When developing this understanding of a child or young person's in-flux identity, there are three overlapping aspects that need to be considered:

> Layered and intersectional identities.

> 'Oscillating' (changing and evolving) identities.

> Identities that are determined and led by children and young people.

Each of these is explored below, supported by excerpts from young people. All aspects of identity can be explored through life story work.
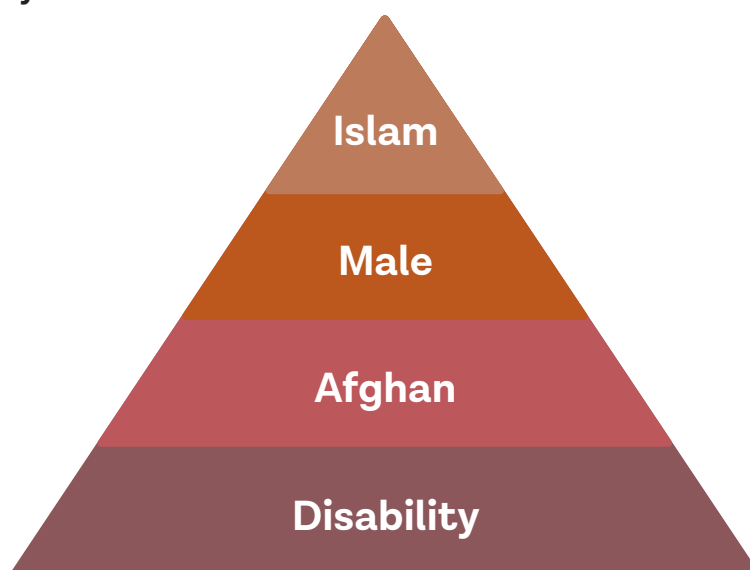
Further reading

A useful resource on this can be found here: *Life story work: Practice Tool*

Layered, intersectional identities

Children and young people in care often have complex and layered experiences of identity that determine their care needs (Ferguson, 2018). As previously discussed, intersectionality is a useful framework to help understanding around identities, with different facets dominating at different points. While certain aspects of these identities might be visible, some are hidden or invisible, depending on the context and the people around them.

To reflect on the implications of the layers of a child or young person's identity, we examine Amir's identity, which is illustrated in Figure 2 below. Amir is a young Afghan-heritage British man who came into care due to his family's inability to understand his disability.

Figure 2:
Amir's Identity Pyramid

When we asked Amir about his identity, he said he was first and foremost Muslim (represented at the top of the pyramid), then he was male, then he was Afghani (which he characterised largely by his language and by Afghani cuisine) and finally he spoke about his disability. However, from his interview it was also apparent that his disability was often at the forefront of his identity, especially as perceived by those who cared for him, and also in relation to his care needs – he came into care partly due to his disability. While in foster care, he required medical support to help manage his disability. This medical support also needed to take account of his religious needs; during his interview he reminisced about how his foster carer became an advocate for him, lobbying for his needs at school, with social workers and with medical practitioners. Whereas Amir put being Muslim at the forefront of his identity, the support needed to meet his disability meant that this aspect of his identity was also a critical feature in determining his experiences and needs.

Practitioners face the challenging task of striking a balance between helping young people navigate their evolving identities and ensuring that all their identity needs are met, when some may not yet be fully articulated or acknowledged by the individual. It is important for practitioners to work with the child or young person to address less visible and hidden identities that may not be readily apparent to others or receive explicit recognition in their daily interactions. However, care also needs to be taken to avoid exacerbating trauma when exploring hidden identities.

Implications for care provision

It's possible to make assumptions about identity based on what appears visible. However, these assumptions may be incorrect, simplistic, or different to how a young person sees their own identity. For example:

> A child's gender may be visible but not what they think about their own gender identity.

> A child may have a disability which is not immediately visible but which could be a significant aspect of their identity.

> A child's religion may be visible (for example, through the clothes they wear) but not how they live out their religion in day-to-day life, or what it means to them.
(Bonsu & Smith, 2023)

Questions for reflection

Which aspects of your identity are visible to everyone? Which are visible only to close friends and family? Which aspects of your identity do you keep invisible to most people?

> If a professional was making decisions about support and care for you, what information would be important for them to know about your identity? What might you not want to share about your identity?
(Adapted from Bonsu & Smith, 2023)

Oscillating identities

Children and young people's identities are in constant motion, adapting according to pivotal moments in their lives (see the example from Aleena in the previous section). The term 'oscillating' is used because it does not assume a single direction of travel. An oscillating identity suggests a dynamic ebb and flow between different aspects of someone's identity. Over time, or in different contexts, one part of the identity might become more dominant, only to recede later.

An oscillating identity can be viewed as an adaptive and dynamic response to changing experiences, circumstances or environments. For example, children and young people who enter care may have an 'inherited' sense of identity from their biological parents but, as time progresses, this can expand or contract as they encounter others' perceptions of religion, ethnicity and culture.
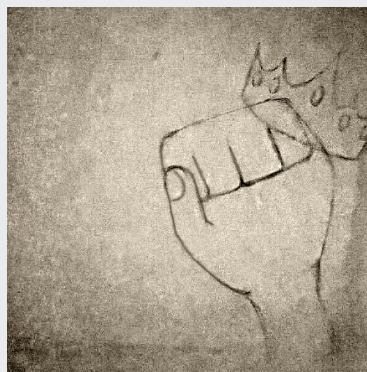
Family and community ties are a key determinant of children and young people's identities. This is explored in Anna's story below.

Case study 2: Anna - A strong Black queen

Anna is a Black Christian care leaver. While her biological family were of Christian heritage, they were not religious at all. She is now living independently. However, when Anna was younger she lived in many different foster homes. When she first came into foster care, she was placed with a Muslim family. She remained non-religious but came to respect the strength that these foster carers drew from their faith. A few years later, when she was placed in a Black Christian home, she decided to become a practising Christian. Now, as a young adult, she retains her Christian beliefs but does not attend church as regularly as she did when she was younger.

When we asked her about her ethnic identity Anna drew an image of the Black Lives Matter fist. Anna, like all the Black young people we have spoken to, had experienced some form of racism, including from some of the adults who were meant to care for her. She felt devalued whilst in care, without even access to basic skin or hair care support (Thomas, 2022). She said the Black Lives Matter movement gave her a deep sense of her own Blackness. More than ever before, Anna felt rooted in her ethnic identity. This is Anna's drawing below.

Image 1: Anna's identity – A strong Black queen

Anna included a crown in her drawing. She said that this was because she was not an 'angry Black girl', as she had been described many times whilst in care. Instead, she was a queen, who was part of a rich and diverse cultural heritage – she was a 'strong Black queen'.

Questions for reflection

1. The *Black Care Experience Report* (Denton, 2021) states that the voices of Black children and young people in care are not heard, and they are not understood in relation to their culture, identity and hair and skin care. How might the descriptions of Anna as an angry Black woman be connected to her experiences of racism and sense of being devalued whilst in care?

2. Anna alludes to becoming aware that she is part of a rich and diverse cultural heritage – how will this have helped her wellbeing?

3. How can children and young people in care be better supported to understand and challenge experiences of racism?

4. How can Black children and young people's identity needs be better met?

Useful resources

Here are three resources that may be used to help you support Black children in care:

1. Replenish Box – Support Black children and young people in care:
    www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/blogs/jasminer/creation-replenish-box-and-how-its-supporting-foster-carers-look-after-black

2. Promoting anti-racist practice for children and young people in care:
    www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/videos/promoting-anti-racism-in-childrens-social-care/anti-racist-practice-with-children-and-families

3. The importance of hair and skin for Black children's identity:
    https://theconversation.com/hair-and-skin-are-important-to-a-black-childs-identity-but-many-social-workers-dont-understand-this-143146

Implications for care provision: Recording

Children and young people spoke about the need to move away from 'set in stone' or firmed up categories of identity. When we asked Aleena about her identity she said: "I am still finding out who I am."

In the context of understanding identities as layered and oscillating, the way practitioners record children's identities in care settings becomes even more significant. When identities are treated as static, fixed constructs in case recordings, there is potential for children to be ascribed identities based on a particular moment in time. This can inadvertently lead to biases, misconceptions, or incomplete understandings, which might impact the quality of support they receive. In applying an understanding of an in-flux identity, social care practitioners could make the following adaptations within records:

> **Dynamic recordings**
> Using a dynamic, evolving method of recording that acknowledges the fluidity of identity. This might mean regular updates to a child or young person's file as they grow, change, and evolve.

> **Contextual annotations**
> Instead of broad labels, case recordings could provide contextual annotations. For example, instead of noting a child as religious, a record might state: 'Has been exploring their faith more deeply over the past year'.

> **Direct input**
> Whenever appropriate and feasible, children and young people should have a say in how their identity is recorded. Their own perceptions and self-identifications might provide invaluable insights that third-party observations could miss. The identity see-saw is useful here to help show how different aspects of a child's or young person's identity remain within their lives, but with different significance attached to these characteristics by the child or young person and by those who care for them.

> **Feedback mechanisms**
> As children grow and evolve, there should be a mechanism for them (and possibly their close caregivers) to provide feedback on recorded identities, challenging or updating them as necessary.

> **Transparency with future carers**
> When sharing information with potential future carers, it is essential to communicate the dynamic nature of the child's identity, emphasising that past records may not fully encompass the child's current self.

Listen

For further reflections on supporting good recording listen to this podcast:
Reflections on accessing care records

Child/young person-determined identities

Central to a child or young person's journey in care is their empowerment to actively shape their own identity. Social care practitioners, as well as carers, play a key role in empowering children and young people, and supporting them to have the confidence and agency to define themselves.

Children and young people determine their identities in a variety of ways. When we asked Laxmi, an adult South Asian heritage adoptee placed with white adopters, how she identified herself, she said: "My family is my identity."

In forming their identities, children and young people navigate the different cultures they encounter in care. This might include the culture of their biological family, as well as those of social workers and carers. This is exemplified in the quote below from another young woman of South Asian heritage:

> *Growing up as a British Asian girl, I always felt the difference between my heritage and the culture around me. [...] At times, I felt like I didn't belong to either culture, but as I grew up I realised that this difference was actually a strength. It allowed me to bring the best of both worlds and create a unique identity. Growing up in Britain was wonderful as it exposed me to various cultures and traditions. I have learned to embrace both my British and South Asian identities, and I am proud to be part of both communities.*
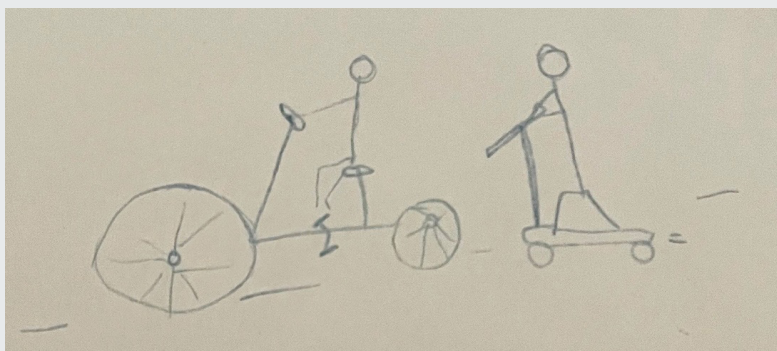>
> British South Asian female, adopted, age 16

Case study 3: Rose – Feeling free

Although many children and young people used religion, ethnicity, or both, to describe themselves, others described themselves in ways that completely bypassed these categories. For example, through their hobbies or skills. When we asked Rose, a young female Black care leaver, to draw her identity, she drew the image below, which she said represented freedom.

Rose shared vivid memories from her childhood when her biological father bought her a bike. She went cycling with him and spoke about feeling free from life's worries, which she's had even as a child. That bike, and the freedom it represented, was also a signifier of happy memories she held onto. She still cycles and feels free.

Image 2: Rose's freedom

Other children and young people emphasised their artistic or creative practice in defining their identity. A young man described himself as an artist, a young woman said she was a poet and a third young person said he was a writer.

Sometimes, the identity choices a child or young person makes may lead to conflict, misunderstanding, or even estrangement within families or communities. For a young South Asian heritage transgender person, such a space enabled them to navigate their sense of self:

> *School can be tough sometimes, especially when you don't fully fit in with your ethnic or religious community. But I've got some awesome parents and teachers who've helped me out along the way. They always encouraged me to embrace my unique identity and to be proud of who I am. They helped me learn more about my culture and heritage, which is super cool. And, as I've grown up, my ethnicity and religious background continue to shape my life in important ways.*
>
> British South Asian, transgender, adopted, age 15

Further reading

Further suggestions for supporting young people who identify as LGBTQ+ can be found here: *Inclusive practice with young people who identify as LGBTQ+*

Implications for care provision

Children often do not conform to the rigid and set ideas of ethnic or religious identity. Their religious or racial identities might have very different meanings to what an adult might be expecting. Furthermore, other aspects of their identity – such as their artistic prowess – may be more important to their sense of self and wellbeing. Supporting children and young people with developing positive feelings about their identity requires practitioners to understand this as a process of co-construction (Dalhberg et al., 2013). This needs to be done through building relationships with children and young people, and by checking the responsiveness of others towards them:

> Understanding a child or young person's identity is much more than thinking about characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, gender or sexuality that a child or young person, or indeed their social worker, might tick on a form.

> Different characteristics may have different meanings for individual children and young people. For example, a 17-year-old Black man who was adopted said that he loved his church and was a devout Christian. When he was asked the reason for this, rather than give a religious explanation, he said that this was the only non-racist place he knew.

> It's important to recognise all aspects of identity that a child or young person considers important to them. For example, it could be that they draw, paint or write, and that this could be nurtured to help them develop a positive sense of their identity, build their confidence and enhance their sense of wellbeing.

> Introducing young people to role models and mentors who share similar identities could be one way of them interacting with wider identity models to help support positive representation.

Implications and suggestions for practice

This final section draws on the research findings, as well as insights gained through knowledge exchange events with social workers, where the research and in-flux identity framework were presented and reflected upon.

In-flux identity encompasses three ways of thinking about identity - **Layered intersectional**, **Oscillating** and **Child-determined -** each of which have an impact on children and young people's sense of self in different ways. These different aspects of identity are not mutually exclusive and often occur in parallel (see summary below). As they seek to understand themselves and their place in the world, minoritised young people might use any or all of these three identity forms at any point in time in order to help make sense of themselves and others.

Aspects of in-flux identity	How does this present in children and young people's lives?	Why is it important to look out for this aspect of identity?	How can practitioners understand and support this aspect of identity?
Layered intersectional	Children and young people come with multi-faceted identities and, depending on how they feel or are perceived by themselves or others, these identities can be hidden, invisible or visible.	These identities are intersectional, with particular aspects of their identity coming to the fore at particular times. For example, health issues may have greater importance at some points in time than religion and race.	Facilitate opportunities for children and young people to delve into both their individual identities and collective societal roles by facilitating discussions about their personal experiences and family backgrounds. **Suggested activity 1:** Identity spectrum collage (see **page 20**).
Oscillating	Children and young people's identities change with their life trajectories. This includes entering care, recollections of biological family and ties with them, carers' identities, social contexts, and a desire to fit in or a sense of not belonging.	In articulating their identities, children and young people have to navigate many external situations and experiences whilst in care - including how to respond and interact to the identities of those who care for them.	Consistently integrate principles of acceptance and acknowledgment in interactions, ensuring that each child or young person feels their unique identity and cultural background are celebrated and recognised. **Suggested activity 2:** Discovery jar (see **page 22**).
Child or young person determined identity	In forming their identities, children and young people in care navigate the different cultures, norms and expectations that are part of their care journey.	When children and young people are listened to, and are given space to evolve, they have greater agency in defining their own identities.	Facilitate dialogues that highlight differences and the vast spectrum of human diversity. This can help children and young people to comprehend and embrace varied perspectives. Embrace each interaction with children and young people as a chance to reinforce their self-worth and a positive self-image. **Suggested activity 3:** Starting conversations with young people about identity (see **page 24**).

Example activities

Activity 1: Identity spectrum collage

Objective

To help children and young people visualise and understand that identities can be experienced in different ways. It can help them reflect on their own religious, ethnic and cultural heritage, and how they engage with different parts of their identity.

Materials

>   Large sheets of paper

>   Magazines, newspapers, printed images, or drawings

>   Glue, scissors, coloured pencils, and markers.

Introduction (10 minutes)

Begin by discussing the idea of a spectrum, using examples like a rainbow or a volume slider. Explain that, just as there are many shades in a rainbow, our connections to our religious, ethnic and cultural heritage can vary in intensity and manifestation.

Personal spectrum (15 minutes)

Ask the child or young person to think about their own religious, ethnic, and cultural heritage. How do they connect with it? Is it through food, festivals, stories, rituals, or something else? Prompt them to think about the different ways they engage with their heritage.

Collage creation (45 minutes)

Direct the child or young person to draw a long horizontal line across their paper, representing the spectrum. Using the magazines, newspapers, or printed images, ask them to cut out images, words, or symbols that resonate with their understanding and experience of their religious, ethnic, and cultural background. They should then glue these images/words/symbols along the spectrum. For example, if they feel a strong connection to a particular festival, that might be placed towards one end. Meanwhile, a dish they only eat occasionally might be more towards the middle or the other end.

Discussion (20 minutes)

Allow the child or young people to share their collage. This will provide insight into the diverse ways children and young people perceive and engage with their heritage. Encourage them to talk about what each image/word/symbol means to them.

Wrap up (10 minutes)

Reinforce the idea that everyone's relationship with their heritage is unique and valid. Emphasise that it's ok for these feelings and connections to evolve over time.

Follow-up for social workers, foster carers and adopters

After the activity, with the permission of the child or young person, provide caregivers with an overview of what the child or young person shared and created. This will offer them insights into the children and young people's sense of identity.

Discuss the importance of recognising and respecting the diverse ways in which they connect with their backgrounds. Emphasise that, for minoritised children and young people, socio-religious-cultural contexts prior to coming into care significantly shape their experiences of identity while in care. By understanding these spectrums, caregivers can offer more tailored and empathetic support.

Activity 2: Discovery jar

Objective

To enable children and young people to explore aspects of identity and express their views on what they value most. It helps them to recognise that their identities are constantly changing as a result of the people and contexts they encounter. It also acknowledges that they will still be forming a sense of who they are, and need space to explore and discover their identities.

Materials

> Three equal-sized, clean jars
> Stickers
> Felt-tipped pens
> Scissors
> A4 sheets of paper.

Introduction (5 minutes)

Begin by explaining that the goal is for the child or young person to express their thoughts on aspects of identity - such as personal interests, cultural background, or important values. Emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers. Continually remind the children of this during the activity.

Creating identity jars (10 minutes)

Invite the child or young person to decorate the jars with stickers, including labelling the first jar 'Very important,' second jar; 'Important,' and the third jar 'Not important.'

Identity exploration (15 minutes)

On the A4 paper, ask the child or young person to write down various aspects related to identity (for example, hobbies, traditions, languages spoken). Then cut them into strips.

Discussion

Discuss the listed aspects with the child/young person and ask in which jar they think they belong based on their perceived importance. This encourages dialogue and reflection around which aspects of identity they value most.

Follow-up

With the permission of the child or young person, share with their caregivers a summary of what they considered 'Very important,' 'Important,' and 'Not important'. Explain how the activity has shed light on the child's sense of identity. Discuss the significance of these insights in understanding the child's sense of self. This can help bridge the gap between the children's self-identified values and how they are nurtured in their current environment.

Activity adapted from *Involving children in decision-making*:
www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Guide-to-making-decisions-booklet.pdf

Activity 3: Having conversations with young people about identity

Objective

Each child's sense of their identity is unique, and those caring for them need to listen to the child in order to understand their own individual conceptions of what ethnicity, religion or gender personally mean to them.

Open-ended inquiries

Start with non-prescriptive questions like: "How would you describe yourself to someone who's never met you?" or "What do you feel defines you the most?"

Contextual conversations

Explore different settings by asking, "Do you feel differently about yourself at school compared to when you're at home with relatives?"

Reflective listening

Instead of leading the conversation, actively listen. Reflect back what you've heard, ensuring the child feels heard and understood.

Highlight fluidity

Make them aware that it's natural for identity to be fluid and context-dependent, reinforcing that it's perfectly ok to feel or identify differently in various settings.

Shared stories

Share anecdotes or stories of others (like the ones used in this briefing) who have navigated their identities in multi-faceted ways, reassuring them that they're not alone on this journey.

Acknowledge their feelings

Affirm the importance of their feelings, emphasising that their feelings are valued - whatever they feel or however they choose to identify.

Further reading

Further examples of activities that can be used to explore identity can be found here: *Understanding, exploring and supporting children's identity development: Practice Tool* This *Life story work: Practice Tool* also includes some helpful examples of activities that are useful for exploring identity.

Conclusion

This briefing emphasises a way of thinking about identity that is child or young person-led, and which goes beyond traditional understandings of identity categories. It focuses on capturing evolving and changing identities, and representing children and young people's voices. At its heart, this approach emphasises the importance of talking to children, listening to their views about their identity and then taking time to reflect on what this means for the child or young person, and the people around them.

Questions for reflection

> How do you build in time to listen to, and help piece together, children and young people's stories about themselves and their identities?

> The stories of the young people who took part in this research illustrate how different aspects of identity change over time. How might you review and check your understanding of a child or young person's identity in order to reflect its dynamic nature?

> How do you include young people's views about their identities in your written records? How do you review and update these?

> How might you use the tools shared in this briefing (for example, the identity see-saw, the discovery jar, the identity collage) in your role?

> Which area within this practice tool has been particularly interesting to you? How can you use this within your work with children? How could you share this with colleagues?

References

Abrams, D., & Hogg, M.A. (1988). Comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *18*(4), 317-334.

Arweck, E., & Nesbitt, E. (2010). Close encounters? The intersection of faith and ethnicity in mixed-faith families. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, *31*(1), 39-52.

Bonsu, N., & Smith, E. (2023). *Understanding, exploring and supporting children's identity development: Practice Tool*. Research in Practice. www.researchinpractice.org.uk/media/0tkdn3ht/understanding-exploring-and-supporting-children-s-identity-development_pt_web.pdf

Burnham, J. (2012). Developments in the Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS: Visible-invisible and voiced-unvoiced. In I. Krause, B. (Ed.) *Culture and reflexivity in systemic psychotherapy: Mutual perspectives*. Karnac Books.

Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Phiri, M., & Halford, A. (2022a). Identity, intersectionality and children in care: The case of Muslim-heritage 'looked-after' children in the UK. In Schmid, H. ,& Sheikhzadegan, A. (Eds.). *Exploring Islamic social work. Between community and the common good* (pp. 81-97). Springer International Publishing.

Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Halford, A., & Phiri, M. (2022b). The politics of matching: Ethnicity, religion and Muslim-heritage children in care in the UK. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *52*(8), 4571-4587.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and anti-racist politics. In *Feminist legal theories* (pp. 23-51). Routledge.

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2013). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. Falmer Press.

Deng, F.M. (1996). Identity in Africa's internal conflicts. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *40*(1), 46-65.

Denton, J. (2021). *The Black Care Experience Report*. The Black Care Experience. www.theblackcareexperience.co.uk/the-black-care-experience-report-2021

Department for Education. (1989). *Children Act (1989)*. C. 41, 22. Department for Education.

Department for Education. (2012). *Care leavers' charter*. Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a74c335ed915d4d83b5ec2c/Care_leavers__charter.pdf

Department for Education. (2023). *Working together to safeguard children*. Department for Education. www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2

Department for Education. (2023). *Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation Children's Social Care Reform 2023*. Department for Education. **https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_ data/file/1147317/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf**

Ferguson, L. (2018). "Could an increased focus on identity development in the provision of children's services help shape positive outcomes for care leavers?" A literature review. *Child Care in Practice, 24*(1), 76-91.

Hall, S., & Du Gay, P. (Eds.). (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. Sage.

Ince, L. (2009). *Kinship care: An Afrocentric perspective*. PhD thesis, University of Birmingham. **https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/492/1/ince09PhD.pdf**

Jackson, J., Noble, K., Anzai, D., Mitchell, P., & Cloney, D. (2020). *Assessment of children as having a strong sense of identity in early childhood education and care: Literature Review.* Victoria Curriculum and Assessment Authority. **www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EYLitReviewIdentity.pdf**

Milner A., & Jumbe, S. (2020). Using the right words to address racial disparities in COVID-19. *The Lancet Public Health*, *5*(8): e419-e420.

Michelson, S. (2022). Children's narratives about wellbeing in the face of difficult life experiences: Renegotiated self-understandings as turning points. *Qualitative Social Work*.

Petrelli, D., & Light, A. (2014). Family rituals and the potential for interaction design: A study of Christmas. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI), 21(3),* 1–29.

Thomas, Z. (2022). *Social work and black bodies: Why skin and hair matter for, and to, children and young people.* Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Huddersfield. **https://pure.hud.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/67217653/Final_Thesis.pdf**

Waniganayake, M., Hadley, F., Johnson, M., Mortimer, P., McMahon, T., & Karatasas, K. (2019). Maintaining culture and supporting cultural identity in foster care placements. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *44*(4), 365-377.

Authors: Sariya Cheruvallil-
Contractor, Alison Halford and
Kusha Anand
(Coventry University)