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# Exploring strategies for re-engaging children and young people in learning while living in out-of-home care in the Northern Territory, Australia

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## Abstract

The education of children living in out-of-home care (OOHC) has been a long-standing concern for children and their carers, policy-makers and researchers who have long highlighted the issue of low educational attainment and disengagement among children in care. This study investigates the strategies and practices used within a pilot programme based in the Northern Territory, Australia, that aims to re-engage children living in OOHC with education and training. Drawing on qualitative interviews with programme stakeholders, including educators, carers, child and family welfare workers, as well as an analysis of programme and client documentation, this study explores the programme's strategies to achieve re-engagement. The findings highlight the role of agile child-centred practice responding to the learning needs of participants, a focus on the 'educational futures' of students, as well as liaison and advocacy with schools and stakeholders on behalf of children in supporting re-engagement in education settings. Barriers to successful re-engagement include limited consideration of the cultural needs of children across education and OOHC systems, in particular the disruptive impact of OOHC placement changes, as well as programme discontinuity.

## KEYWORDS

child-centred practice, educational engagement, educational interventions, out-of-home care, residential care

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In scenarios where it is unsafe or not possible for a child or young person to remain in the family home, out-of-home care (OOHC) is utilized for children and young people, with the objective of reducing risks of future harm of abuse or neglect. In the Northern Territory (NT), OOHC is a core part of the child protection system, with 1032 children in OOHC in mid-2020 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

[AIHW], 2021) placed across foster care, kinship care, purchase home-based care, residential care and other care arrangements (Northern Territory Government [NTG], 2021), at a cost of \$121 million across the 2021/2022 financial year (NTG, 2021). First Nations<sup>1</sup> children are overwhelmingly overrepresented in child protection, with 90% of children in OOHC in the NT identifying as Aboriginal (SNAICC, 2021). Across Australia, First Nations children are also 12.2% more likely to be taken into OOHC compared with non-Indigenous children (SNAICC, 2021).

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International research across a range of countries highlights the issue of low educational attainment and participation among children in care (Dill et al., 2012). Children living in OOHC have poorer educational outcomes in comparison to children in the general population (Sebba, 2020), and the loss of educational opportunities can have a negative cumulative impact on children's development (AIHW, 2015). This is a significant issue with educational engagement being linked to overall health outcomes, development and wellbeing as well as providing important avenues to future employment and life opportunities.

### 1.1 | Challenges in educational engagement and attainment for children in OOHC

Challenges in educational attainment and engagement for children in OOHC generally co-occur as part of a range of additional challenges across a range of domains, many of which can impact children's education outcomes and wider engagement in education systems. On average in Australia, around a third of children in OOHC will have five or more case workers during their time in care (AIHW, 2019), be placed in different geographical areas than their birth families (Moore et al., 2016) and experience multiple school changes (McDowall, 2013), disrupting support networks and peer relationships. In the NT, children in OOHC have a higher average number of caseworkers at seven to eight per child (McDowall, 2018). These factors combined have particular implications for children from remote First Nations communities and their connection to culture and country and for whom English may be a second or third language. Placement instability and disruptions to care can also contribute to poor outcomes in adulthood across a range of measures including mental health and behavioural challenges (Cross et al., 2013). As such, education interventions and programmes that support children's educational attainment, participation and overall wellbeing can significantly influence life outcomes and mitigate the consequences of abuse, neglect and OOHC experiences (Sebba, 2020). This article investigates the practices of one such education intervention in the city of Darwin in the NT, Australia titled the 'Making Education Outcomes Reachable NT' (MeNTor) programme run by Anglicare NT and funded by the NTG.

### 1.2 | Cultural connections and engagement in learning

Experts detail that efforts to create meaningful cultural connections are inadequate in Australian OOHC systems (Krakouer et al., 2022; Liddle et al., 2021). Placement in OOHC can limit First Nations children's cultural connections and the positive identity and wellbeing that cultural connections support (Krakouer et al., 2018). When Aboriginal children are placed into non-Indigenous care, their exposure to Aboriginal family, community and culture is often reduced (Krakouer et al., 2022) and, with this, exposure to important learning

and education. This is especially the case in the NT, which out of all Australian jurisdictions has the lowest level of First Nations children in OOHC placements with kin or Aboriginal carers at 31.8% (Liddle et al., 2022). As such, efforts to maintain cultural connections via learning and education engagement are an important focus of education and learning interventions. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (UN, 2007) both specify that Indigenous children have the right to preserve their identity as well as learn about their cultures, including when growing up in care and are displaced from their families. Article 14, Section 3 of the UNDRIP states that: 'States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language'. (UN, 2007, p. 7).

### 1.3 | Educational interventions for children in OOHC

Previous research identifies a range of interventions and programmes, employing different approaches, that aim to improve educational outcomes for children in OOHC. Interventions may aim to directly increase educational attainment (i.e., improving grades), increase participation (e.g., attendance and classroom behaviours), encourage engagement or re-engagement in educational systems and pathways (e.g., vocational training, community participation) or a combination of these outcomes. Intervention models include individual-focused (e.g., direct tutoring and case management), whole-of-school approaches (e.g., improving engagement opportunities and increasing trauma-informed skills) or carer or family-level interventions (e.g., carer capacity building and provision of learning materials). Examples include the *Reading Together* programme in which learning materials were provided to children in care (see Connolly et al., 2021), the *TutorBright* programme that provided one on one in-home tutoring using manualised workbooks (see Flynn & Hickey, 2019), the *London Fostering Achievement Programme* that aimed to lift educational outcomes by building capacity in schools via needs analysis and training (see Sebba et al., 2016) and the TEACHaR programme where educators provide students living in OOHC with home-based and in-school support (Townsend et al., 2022).

Research highlights the importance of continuity in education for children in OOHC including the positive impact of selecting appropriate school placements and reducing exclusions from school to improve their educational outcomes (Cheung et al., 2012). Schools that have the capacity to support children, understand the behaviours of children with trauma histories and respond to and provide support appropriately lead to better education outcomes for children (Dube & McGiboney, 2018). Interventions that provide supports to children in OOHC and their schools to manage children's learning, behaviour and participation can also be effective (Weinberg et al., 2014; Zetlin et al., 2004). These types of interventions are able to support school

environments and systems to adapt to and be more responsive to children's learning needs. Interventions that similarly focus on educational stability, including limiting school changes and assisting with integration into new learning settings, are also effective in improving educational attainment and participation (Höjer et al., 2018; Townsend et al., 2022). Critical to the success of these interventions is their capacity to incorporate appropriate responses to the complex trauma histories of children (Fernandez, 2007; Howard, 2019). Additionally, there is some clear evidence for interventions that singularly focus on educational performance of children in OOHC via individual-focussed tutoring approaches (Flynn et al., 2012; Giles, 2018; Harper & Schmidt, 2016; Hickey & Flynn, 2019). These interventions demonstrate improvements across reading, spelling, comprehension and mathematics, outlining their efficacy in improving educational attainment among children in OOHC. However, Evans et al.'s (2017) systematic review highlights that this body of research is undermined by weak sample sizes, ineffective randomisation and designs that are unable to offer effective comparisons with control groups, which all impact the reliability of findings. The influence of cultural contexts on the interventions also raises questions about their wider applicability, particularly given there is limited focus on educational interventions with First Nations Australian children and their linguistic and cultural contexts and needs in relation to their learning and care.

## 1.4 | Children's agency and child-centred practice

Crucial to understanding the education needs of children and young people living in OOHC, as well as designing appropriate and successful education interventions, is to conceptualize children and young people as agentic, competent and active social actors (Corsaro, 2011) engaged in the social process and structures world around them (Bühler-Niederberger & Schwittek, 2014; Wall, 2019). As such, in the frequently constrained and bounded contexts of OOHC (Roche & Noble-Carr, 2017), children and young people should be provided maximum opportunities to participate and influence their environments and the services they receive. In practice contexts, children's agency accords with 'child-centred practice', a multi-dimensional concept developed in community services and educational settings. Although variations in terminology and definitions exist, it broadly focuses on identifying children's needs through appropriate communication, maximizing children's participation in discussion and decision-making in settings that affect them, emphasizing strengths and encouraging advocacy on the child's behalf (Barnes, 2018). Examples of these practices within OOHC education interventions include trauma-informed practice, advocacy for young people and flexibility in educational approaches (see Flynn & Hickey, 2019; Giles, 2018; Tideman et al., 2011). Relevant NTG policy strategies, such as *Transforming Out-of-Home Care in the Northern Territory* (Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities, n.d.) and the *Northern Territory Education Engagement Strategy 2022–2031* (Department of Education, 2021) both emphasize the importance of children's perspectives and needs being placed at the centre of decision making

and practice. The utilization of child-centred practice reflects broader rights-based developments regarding child safety and wellbeing including the United Nation's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990).

## 2 | RESEARCH DESIGN

### 2.1 | Overview

This research took a 'process' evaluation approach to focus on understanding the effectiveness of the MeNTor programme's implementation and functions, its appropriateness in meeting its objectives and the capacity of its activities and the extent its activities match its intentions and objectives (Limbani et al., 2019). This type of evaluation also allows for insights into the quality of a programme by providing information that can assist in improving its future design (Limbani et al., 2019) and fits within broader applied social research approaches to evaluation that look to investigate the efficacy of particular programmes (Neuman, 2014) and seek qualitative data to better understand the aims of practice-based programmes (Dodd & Jones, 2011).

The MeNTor programme aims to support educational achievement, strengthen school engagement and enhance home learning environments for young people living in OOHC and typically takes referrals from OOHC providers and schools (Angicare, 2021). The programme includes one-on-one teaching, informal and creative learning activities and mentoring and a focus on student wellbeing, positive school engagement and academic progression. Bearing in mind these programme aims, the research question overarching the evaluation approach was: 'What is the role of the MeNTor program in supporting its participants to re-engage in learning and education?' In response, this article presents the characteristics and contexts of the young people engaged in the MeNTor programme, analyses the key practices undertaken to re-engage young people living in OOHC in education and training and identifies the barriers to achieving re-engagement.

### 2.2 | Data collection

#### 2.2.1 | Document analysis

De-identified programme and participant documentation including client records, case notes, learning monitoring documents such as Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and other general records about programme involvement was analysed (listed in Table 1). Document analysis is a commonly used method in social science research, involving the treatment of relevant documents as data and examining and interpreting them to elicit meaning, gain understandings and develop knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Analysis of these documents assisted in developing an understanding of the programme's impact on re-engagement of participants in education and child-centred practice. This study also incorporated the MeNTor programme's 'operational

documentation' as data, including documents recording the progress, concerns and achievements of its work and general reporting of information pertaining to the programme's operation. Overall, the review included 160 de-identified client documents across 20 programme participants and an additional 27 operational documents.

## 2.2.2 | Stakeholder interviews

In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with MeNTor programme stakeholders. The aim of these interviews was to provide additional qualitative data to support the document analysis and the study's overall understanding of the MeNTor programme. The interviews sought to draw out key insights of the MeNTor programme and its impact through the participants' direct practice, programme management or view of the programme's outcomes on clients. In this study, interviews are utilized for their capacity to afford a rich understanding of social phenomena (Elliott, 2005), which focussed on the perspectives and experiences of MeNTor stakeholders (Rubin & Babbie, 2009).

Interviews averaged around 45 min and followed a protocol devised by the research team based on themes developed in a review of literature related to the research question. Interviewees were asked about their perceptions of the MeNTor programme's impact in relation to its key objectives. Discussions focused on the key strengths and weaknesses of the MeNTor programme, specific discussion of practices undertaken in the programme and the impact of the programme on educational re-engagement. Additionally, interviews included discussion of children's academic performance and participation in education, wellbeing, cultural safety and relevance and a focus on the overall implementation and objectives of the programme.

## 2.2.3 | Participants

Participants were identified and recruited by Anglicare NT from Darwin and the surrounding region. The criteria to participate in an interview were being identified by Anglicare NT as a programme 'stakeholder', defined as someone with current or prior involvement in the MeNTor programme. A total of eight stakeholders were interviewed. These included educators, carers, child and family welfare workers and programme and policy managers. One participant identified as Indigenous.

## 2.2.4 | Ethical arrangements

This study was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. It had a number of ethical risks to mitigate. All documents subjected to analysis were de-identified by Anglicare NT prior to providing them in a digital form to the researchers and were stored on password protected databases. The findings have been reported in a way to protect the identities of all stakeholders. All interview participants provided written consent prior to their participation. A 'Risk Mitigation Strategy' was utilized to address participant distress, preserve participant anonymity and minimize coercion to participate. Recruitment was undertaken by Anglicare NT who provided prospective participants with information about the study along with the researchers' contact details. Participant stakeholders made voluntary contact with the research team. The research team are independent researchers and had no pre-existing relationship with the programme. Participants' contributions have been deidentified and are referred to by codes in this paper (for example, P1 referring to stakeholders and YP1 referring to young person's documentation).

**TABLE 1** Documents under analysis.

Client documentation	<i>n</i> = 160	Operational documentation	<i>n</i> = 27
Strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ)	30	Bilingual resources	12
Referral form/MeNTor referral/top end school referral	24	MeNTor intake panel minutes	6
MeNTor case notes	22	MeNTor progress reports	5
Personal learning plans/goal setting	20	Steering committee case notes	1
Student details	17	Participant demographic overview	1
Narrative case study	10	Programme video	1
MeNTor case review	8		
Participant summary	6		
Educational activities	6		
Teacher feedback and reports	5		
Educational assessments	4		
Wellbeing activities	3		
Carer feedback	2		
Support letter	2		

Abbreviation: MeNTor, Making Education Outcomes Reachable NT.

## 2.3 | Data analysis

### 2.3.1 | Document analysis

A content analysis was conducted on client and programme documents using the data analysis software NVivo. A content analysis approach is used to systematically analyse and describe qualitative phenomena and documents for the purpose of developing knowledge and insights (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This involved identifying and describing key knowledge across the documents analysed relevant to the overarching research question to identify surface-level meanings and information within qualitative data (interviews and documents) (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The findings from the content analysis relate to descriptions of the programme, participant information and demographics. Next, a thematic analysis was undertaken on the documents in order to identify and analyse patterns within the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Themes were identified that related to the core research question and are presented in the findings of this article. Additionally, analysis was undertaken of MeNTor client information and operational documentation to explore participant demographics; OOHC, educational and health background; and participants' goals, presented in the findings below.

### 2.3.2 | Interview analysis

With participants' permission, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo. The interview transcripts were subject to thematic analysis by one researcher who coded the data and located themes, which were, in turn, checked for accuracy by another member of the research team. The analysis generated rich qualitative data that complimented the themes developed in the thematic analysis of documents. This approach allowed the research to centre the 'understanding of the social world from the perspective of the individuals being studied' (Elliott, 2005, p. 122). This analysis of the interview data supports the findings of the document analysis and research question of this research.

### 2.3.3 | Study limitations

There are some limitations to this research, including a lack of consistency in the programme information and documentation. Some client files contained more information compared with others, reducing the sample of key information in places, such as individuals' attendance records or teacher feedback. Nonetheless, the documentation provided an adequate corpus of data to analyse in order to answer the research question. Additionally, although some children and young people's perspectives are included via quotations throughout client files, the direct, qualitative views of children and young people are not included. Unlike quantitative studies such as randomized control trials where programme efficacy is related to confidence levels, qualitative evaluation research is limited in that it can provide a small

contribution in knowledge about a particular programme (Dodd & Jones, 2011).

Ideally, future research would engage children using child-centred, qualitative methods, to ascertain their perspectives of the role of such programmes in their learning. It is also important to note that none of the research team identify as First Nations Australians, whereas the majority of participants in the MeNTor programme to whom much of the documentation refers to identify as Aboriginal. In response, the research was attentive to guidance from Anglicare NT and the Charles Darwin University's Human Research Ethics Committee (CDUHREC) in culturally responsive research design, with the researchers working with a reflexive awareness of their social positioning and its potential influence on the findings of the research (Roche et al., 2022).

## 3 | FINDINGS

### 3.1 | Programme participant details and programme context

The participants of the MeNTor programme face a range of challenges that impact their capacity to participate and engage in learning in school or training settings, including interpersonal or relationship issues, significant experiences of grief and loss, mental health issues, neurodevelopmental disorders such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and general life disruption and discontinuity across care and education. Table 2 shows demographic details of MeNTor participants. Other figures provide information about OOHC placements (Figure 1), reasons for referral (Figure 2) and identified health needs of programme participants (Figure 3). These illustrate complex and overlapping engagement challenges for programme participants. Thirteen participants were reported as having interpersonal issues with their peers that impacted their willingness to attend school or engage in learning, including difficulties in making friends, fighting and bullying and aggressive behaviours. Five participants had been suspended from school for extended periods at least once during their engagement with the MeNTor programme. A number of documented mental health issues were identified across client documentation such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), grief and loss, anxiety, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and ADHD. Socio-emotional concerns, mental health issues and bereavement experiences were also found to intersect. For example, two children had lost a sibling, whereas another young person had lost both a parent and a grandparent. Experiences of grief and loss could have a direct impact upon children's interpersonal relationships and learning. In another instance, one young person struggled with dosage changes in their medication, which was interpreted as having a direct impact upon their behaviour. Four young people between the ages of 14 and 17 were involved in the juvenile justice system. The stakeholders interviewed attributed much of these challenges faced by children and young people to life histories of disruption and discontinuity across their lives. One stakeholder explained:

TABLE 2 Participant demographics.

Total young people (n = 20)	Age		Gender		Ethnicity	
	Age range	Average	Female	Male	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
	9-18	14	7	13	17	3

Total young people (n = 20)	Education level			School attendance			
	Primary (years prep-6)	Middle (years 7-9)	High (years 10-12)	Full attendance - barriers	Partial	Enrolled - disengaged	Not enrolled
	5	10	5	8	5	3	4

TABLE 2 (Continued)

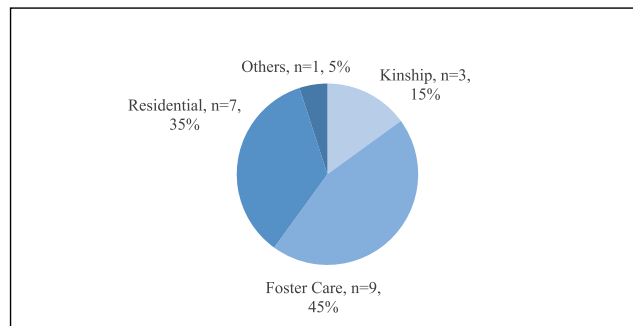


FIGURE 1 Placement type.

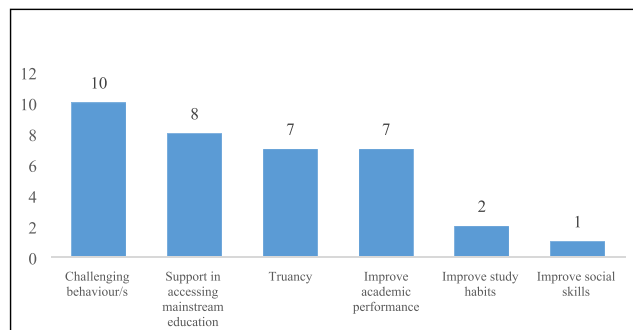


FIGURE 2 Reasons for referrals.

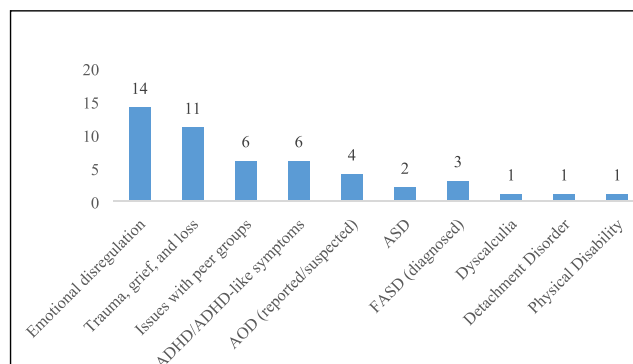


FIGURE 3 Identified participant health needs.

... our young people in care, particularly in long-term care, are young people who have had some really big life experiences where their education would have been interrupted at some point, and learning may be more difficult based on those big life experiences. And I think in society sometimes we forget to acknowledge that for those young people. And then what we know is the only way to break the cycle is by education (P4).

### 3.1.1 | A focus on educational futures

Analysis of MeNTor case note data and stakeholder interviews identified the theme of 'educational futures' as a distinct characteristic of

the engagement strategies, whereby children's successful re-engagement in education involved practices that incorporated experiences and feelings that enable young people to anticipate future employment options. Core to this was the facilitation of learning opportunities relevant to young people's future employment and achievement, as well as the conceptualization of training and learning beyond the current learning contexts of MeNTor participants. Exploring these educational futures with MeNTor participants was found to require interactional and relational teaching and practice skills in working with young people. The following case note data demonstrates how these skills were employed to focus interaction to elicit information about educational futures:

Young person said [they like] VET [Vocational Education and Training] and doing work experience ... Her interest is in textiles and is keen to follow up. She purchased a sewing machine with her Centrelink stimulus money and some fabric and is keen to learn some skills. ... YP was concerned that [their] dad would take more money from [them] than he is supposed to ... I redirected conversation back to a learning focus and working towards [their] independence (YP13 documentation).

### 3.1.2 | Support to engage in and navigate educational settings

Some of the key work that MeNTor teachers undertook with participants involved supporting them within education settings to engage and maintain participation. This could include meeting within classrooms, one-on-one tutoring within schools and guidance to manage school activities, routines and requirements. These practices allowed for MeNTor teachers to provide more intensive emotional support to children and young people if needed, particularly around navigating challenging school settings. 'Emotional check-ins' between MeNTor teachers and students were a continuous feature of MeNTor teacher practice across the programme. These were characterized by consistent, available and responsive approaches by MeNTor teachers. A MeNTor teacher remarked that:

I definitely think the MeNTor program gives the children time to talk about emotionally like what's going on if they feel safe and comfortable with you. Sometimes just having that consistent check in with someone that they know they can turn to ... (P3).

The development of more positive relationships and prosocial behaviours was also recorded in client documentation. This could include enhanced self-regulation, a calmer presentation in learning contexts and the extension of social groups.

### 3.1.3 | School and carer liaison to support children's engagement

A significant element of the MeNTor programme that was found to facilitate children and young people's engagement was the MeNTor teachers' capacity to advocate and liaise, on behalf of MeNTor participants, with schools, carers and other stakeholders involved in their lives, in order to improve learning outcomes. Liaising and advocacy could relate to practical arrangements and settings to support children's learning or by coordinating with key figures or service providers to collaborate. MeNTor teachers were able to support home learning with carers and connect them with school support. Programme documentation outlined what this could consist of:

Supplied and provided support with educational resources and programs out of school hours, including students modified timetable requirements such as additional educational sessions in the home or elsewhere. Assisted with understanding how to use the resources. Supported Out of Home Carers with understanding school processes and written communications that were sent home. Attended school/other meeting to provide follow up support for child/young person at home connecting information to educational outcomes (Program documentation, 2020).

Another example involved a 14-year-old programme participant who had their MeNTor teacher advocate with a carer for a personal room with a desk, as the participant had nowhere to study. A carer noted how helpful the MeNTor teacher was for the child, highlighting the connection between them and the school.

Yes, very engaging with the child and very informative to me as the carer. It's very, very supportive for me, that's what I'd say. The child is very comfortable with [the MeNTor teacher] ... the chats outside school hours, and the help around the school ... They even helped to kind of like mediate between me and the school. If there was something the school maybe did not quite understand in my situation, then [the MeNTor teacher] would be able to mediate with the school as well. It's easy for me as well, that's what I can say (P8).

### 3.1.4 | 'Joining-up' stakeholders to support educational engagement

Thematic analysis of MeNTor case note data and stakeholder interviews also identified that liaison between school staff, carers and the MeNTor teacher were central to supporting children's educational engagement. This involved a range of formal and informal



communication processes between key stakeholders to develop shared and supportive roles and to identify information and resources that supported children and young people's continued engagement. This most frequently involved developing a shared approach with school-teachers of MeNTor participants. An MeNTor teacher remarked that based on their previous experience in a different practice setting:

I thought it was highly effective ... I could see how different it was. And when we sat and discussed the behaviours and the issues and some of the barriers you sort of piece it all together. Like not used to being at a full-time capacity. Different support people around (P6).

### 3.1.5 | Responding to behavioural cues

Analysis of MeNTor case note data and stakeholder interviews identified that behavioural cues were important to the ongoing assessment of need relating to the young person. Behaviours such as non-school attendance or being disruptive in class were found to be opportunities for intervention and assessment.

Stakeholder interviews also offered insights into the capacity of MeNTor teachers to respond to the behavioural cues of children and young people. A stakeholder gave an example of how an MeNTor teacher was responsive to the behaviours of a young person that they were working with and was able to work with them to develop emotional regulation:

Whatever [YP] was working on with the MeNTor teachers, and was having outbursts and stuff in school, [they] would actually open up to the MeNTor teacher a lot more on what had led to it, from [their] point of view. So I think that's probably an example of where it goes beyond education, because I was very much more drifting into the how do you manage your emotions in school, how do you present, how do you kind of I suppose – how do you manage yourself, and even if you do not want to be there, just better decisions than throwing a chair through a window. [...] How do you let school know that you are leaving, instead of just kicking off and belting somebody on your way out the door? (P2).

## 3.2 | Child-centred teaching practices

A key finding was the presence of child-centred teaching practices in the MeNTor programme. This child-centred teaching approach elevated the perspectives, decision-making and needs of children, thus ensuring children and young people's learning was based on their interests and goals and relevant to them (Figure 4). This allowed for

children to have greater choice and control over their learning and interactions, which may not be possible in other education settings. An MeNTor teacher explained their approach to children's participation in their teaching practice:

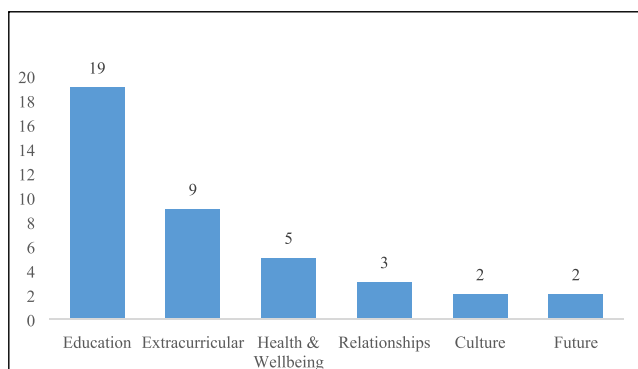
I always tell them who I am and what I'm there to do. And then I ask them if they want to. Because I make sure that they are involved in the decision making of being involved. And I did have two kids go, 'No. I'm not quite sure'. But then in the end, became involved. I think part of it is also listening to them about what they want. Because the school obviously has got expectation and outcomes they need to achieve. Home wants to see what they want to see. Sometimes, the student has got a different idea. [...] I think empowering them through letting them make some choice around what they think is good for their learning and who they are, is really important. And that's a really good way to relationship build too (P6).

Central to effective child-centred engagement practices was the capacity of MeNTor teachers to build rapport and maintain positive relationships with children and young people. This could involve creative learning and activities relevant to children's interests that allowed for the MeNTor participant to get to know and feel comfortable with the MeNTor teacher, at a pace and in context that suited them. An example and outcome of this is outlined in the excerpt from programme documentation provided below:

Each MeNTor session [YP] would participate in basketball skills and drills with incorporated math's games and conversations about happiness, wellbeing, and safety with a particular focus on friendships. The first few sessions [YP] participated with minimal conversation and was very reserved but after the 3rd and 4th session [they] initiated and made good conversation regarding the topics. By the end of term, [they were] joking and making fun banter (YP2 documentation).

Other flexible learning approaches were evident. For example, five MeNTor participants expressed a love for animals, and subsequently, the MeNTor worker was able to advocate for this to be incorporated into young people's learning in several ways. For other young people, sport or music created a connection point, and the building of rapport with the MeNTor worker was able to use these interests in their educational work with the young person. The importance for these types of flexible approaches was made clear by stakeholders interviewed:

The thing for young people in care with significant trauma backgrounds, multiple placements generally speaking, it needs to be flexible. I think if it's not, that's when young people disengage (P2).



**FIGURE 4** Participant identified goals.

### 3.3 | Barriers to achieving re-engagement

According to stakeholders, the cultural needs of programme participants were typically unmet by education and child protection systems. Stakeholders explained that this was most common in situations where young people are removed from remote communities to urban centre's for an OOHC placement, leaving them dislocated from their communities, family and culture and the learning practices, language and supports they were accustomed to. This could leave programme participants struggling to engage in unfamiliar school environments, in schools with less understanding and capacity to meet their learning needs. A stakeholder explained:

I mean I just think that the whole [OOHC] system that we have where we actually take a child from one community to another is just so jarring. The cultural differences are so huge. There's that ... culture shock initially because you have got culture shock in the home environment where you have been placed in your placement; and then the school environment is so different too. [...] The school, physical premises of the school is so different to the physical premises of a remote school. The kind of relationship that people have with their teachers is so different here than it is in a remote school. The sheer amount of people that you do not know when you attend a new school is so different. [...] Most of the kids who attend a remote school very limited English, and English is definitely their third or fourth language. It's not their first language ... that's another layer as well (P1).

In response to such challenges, for four young people, the MeNTor teacher utilized culture and language to connect with the young person as well as to teach numeracy and literacy. An example was demonstrated with [YP5] where the MeNTor worker contacted the school in their home community to access bilingual resources for the young person's first Aboriginal language and worked actively to source bilingual speakers in Darwin. The MeNTor teacher also worked

with family and kinship carers to increase literacy skills in this language. In two of these cases, advocacy around cultural connection allowed for successful integration back into school on a full-time basis. For another young person, the MeNTor worker was able to connect with the young person as she was familiar with the area and knew local people from their community, later successfully integrating back into school. In another case, a trip 'to country' was arranged that appeared to settle the participant's behaviours upon their return to Darwin. While this young person's academic work had not improved, there were marked positive behavioural changes documented. In a documented case study, it was stated that:

To date, [YP8]'s academic work has not improved but the school noticed a shift in behaviours and was happy for the MeNTor teacher to continue to work with [their] self-regulation and attitude. The school observed [YP8] was attending more classes and had re-signed with an extra-curricular ... program that offered more in-school support. The school's leadership was pleased with the decrease in on campus negative behaviours and communicated this (YP8 documentation).

Other barriers to re-engaging young people in education and training included discontinuity in the employment or availability of MeNTor teaching staff had a disruptive effect on the progress of young people in the programme who needed consistent and ongoing support. Additionally, instability in OOHC placements meant that young people were moved while participating in the programme, which led to some participants exiting the programme early, or to the young person's emotional stability and ability to engage in the programme. In other cases, referrals for the programme did not lead to successful engagement in the programme. In one example, it was felt that the MeNTor programme was perceived by the young person as 'just another person, another program' (P1). The same interview participant described the challenges in building engagement with this young person:

... [They were] engaged whilst in [remote community] and then once [they were] in Darwin [they were] not. And that shift from remote to mainstream was not managed well and by the time I got [their] case to - [they were] just really entrenched in the disengagement (P1).

Further barriers to engagement with the programme were noted in programme documentation. Internal MeNTor progress update documents reported barriers to engagement with multiple participants due to changes in OOHC placements and schools. It was also identified that changes to MeNTor teachers had slowed the programme and its responsiveness to need. It was also reported that short-term funding arrangements meant that the programme was unable to offer long term contracts to MeNTor teachers.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study identifies a range of re-engagement approaches and child-centred practices used to identify and respond to the needs of young people within the OOHC system in the NT, undertaken via a mix of direct tutoring, advocacy and case management, which had a positive impact on the MeNTor participants' educational re-engagement. These approaches and practices include tailoring engagement to young people's needs; focusing on young people's educational futures; supporting young people directly to engage in and navigate educational settings, school and carer liaison work to support engagement, the 'joining-up' of stakeholders; and responding to student behavioural cues.

The analysis of programme documentation and participant interviews undertaken in this article identified some important characteristics that underpinned the value of these approaches. The approaches were child-centred in that they elevated the perspectives of young people in decision-making and goal setting, amplified their ability to exercise choice and control, and in supporting this through liaison with stakeholders. Additionally, MeNTor teachers utilized child-centred practice to build rapport with young people by tailoring their engagement approaches and engaging in advocacy for young people. The approaches also undertook a dual focus in relation to educational attainment via tutoring, as well as broader engagement, liaison and advocacy efforts, and can cater for the differing and diverse learning needs of participants, by ingraining both an individual focus, as well as liaison and advocacy strategies to facilitate a responsive and supportive educational social context around them.

Additionally, the MeNTor programme was found to support culturally informed practice in some ways, through its flexibility in approaches to learning engagement, such as using culturally and linguistically relevant learning materials and assessing and identifying children's cultural needs as a part of a holistic assessment. Culturally responsive teaching has been shown to improve academic attainment of ethnically diverse students, allowing for learning through their own culturally based frames of reference (Gay, 2002), while efforts to embed Indigenous perspectives, language, knowledges and role models are highly valuable (Shay et al., 2021). Strengthening the cultural identity of First Nations children and young people also encourages self-confidence and community connectedness (Kickett-Tucker, 2021; Purdie et al., 2000). However, these practices fall short of the 'cultural connection' described by Krakouer et al. (2022) as necessary for First Nations children in OOHC. Community connectedness and strong cultural identity are an important source of resilience for First Nations children (Fejo-King, 2015) and is a chief need for children living in OOHC (Krakouer et al., 2018). Although education interventions such as the MeNTor programme may support some elements of cultural connection, it is unable to achieve the deep and meaningful connection to Aboriginal family, community and culture that children and young people require (Krakouer et al., 2018, 2022).

## 4.1 | Implications for policy and practice

The findings point to some important policy and practice implications for supporting children's engagement in education while living in OOHC. The findings of this study, and their alignment with the growing literature on the topic, indicate that child-centred practice and flexible approaches to educational engagement may be effective strategies for educational interventions for children in OOHC. Taking a holistic approach to the young person, working across individual, family, and school settings, and working directly in teaching, advocacy and liaison roles, allowed for responses that prioritized the changing needs and circumstances of the young person. Given the prevalence of internal and external barriers to engagement faced by this cohort, the findings suggest that a flexible and child-centred approach may be an effective strategy.

Cultural connection for First Nations children and young people in OOHC is an important objective that can improve children's well-being (Krakouer et al., 2022) and, in turn, their engagement in formal and informal learning and education opportunities. As such, First Nations children living in OOHC should be supported to engage in cultural connection, and education and learning engagement is a crucial way in which this can be supported. Also core to supporting children's engagement in education is reducing instability in their care and educational settings. Records of MeNTor participant's early exits from the programme were routinely explained by challenges engaging the participant due to changes or disruptions in care arrangements or unstable accommodation and the challenges for learning, routines and sleep patterns that occurred in OOHC settings. The importance of stability for children in OOHC, particularly in staffing and relationships (Bollinger et al., 2017), can have a positive impact on young people's educational engagement in residential OOHC placements.

## 4.2 | Limitations

There were several limitations to the research. In interpreting the findings presented in this study, it is important to note that the educational and academic achievement of children living in OOHC care is likely to be impacted by complex personal experiences and histories as well as multiple aspects of disadvantage (including poverty, maltreatment, family dysfunction and instability in care and schooling). The complexity and interrelated nature of these challenges means it is difficult to conclusively isolate key functions of the MeNTor programme. In some cases, the support needs of the participants were not met by the MeNTor programme, but there was evidence that the flexible and holistic approach of the programme was generally well oriented to respond to these the intersecting nature of these challenges. Future research should involve developing a more robust and evaluative evidence of educational attainment as a result of educational interventions for children in OOHC, such as pre- and post-intervention testing may provide useful evidence. It is also important that young people's perspectives of this and other interventions is

understood. Research that is able to include the voices of young people engaged in these interventions will provide rich evidence about the effectiveness of these interventions, while also reflecting the values that underpin child-centred approaches. Finally, any future research around similar programmes would greatly benefit from the participation and expertise of First Nations researchers or organizations in its design and analysis.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Engaging young people in education while living in OOHC involves a range of challenges, amplified by the presence of placement instability, cultural disruption and differences, trauma-histories and inflexible educational settings. This research identifies that in such circumstances, a child-centred, flexible and holistic approach to working with young people in OOHC, that is culturally informed, can improve educational re-engagement. These findings are significant as they add to the body of literature around educational interventions for young people in OOHC and are also the first findings about this type of intervention in the NT, Australia.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared to preserve the privacy of participants.

### ETHICS APPROVAL

Approval granted by Charles Darwin University Human Research Ethics Committee 13th September 2021: H21071.

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### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> 'First Nations' is used throughout this article to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whereas the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' also refer to First Nations peoples and culture from Australia.

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