

Piloting the Mockingbird Family™ in Australia: Experiences of foster carers and agency workers

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Abstract

Given that the number of children and young people needing care keeps rising and fewer people are becoming foster carers, efforts to support carers and workers in foster caring are essential. This paper considers the experiences of carers and foster care agency workers involved in Australia's piloting of the Mockingbird Family. With a view understanding experience, data were collected via focus groups with carers and agency workers ($n = 20$) involved in piloting, implementation and evaluation. Deductive analysis applied the theory of experience to generate understanding of experience, as both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions to capture strengths in the Mockingbird Family's foster caring networks. These dimensions of experience included collective passions of carers and workers; experiential change over time; collective experiences as a moving force; and experiences as transformational. Understanding of experience associated with the perceived strengths of the Mockingbird Family, including strategies to promote strong professional relationships between carers and workers, is an important element in strengthening environments of children and young people in care. Safe and stable environments are crucial for wellbeing.

KEYWORDS

Australia, carer attrition, foster care, Mockingbird Family, placement stability

1 | INTRODUCTION

The number of children and young people in Australia affected by statutory removal and placed in non-parental care continues to increase. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2022) reported that in the 2016–2017 financial year, 43 100 children (<18 years) were living in non-parental statutory care. The latest available Australian data showed that the number of children in non-

parental statutory care had increased to 46 000 in 2019–2020 (AIHW, 2022). Across these periods, most children (92%) were placed in foster or kinship care, approximately two thirds had been in care for two years or longer and less than 17% had achieved placement permanency (AIHW, 2022). More than half of foster and kinship care households in Australia have multiple children placed with them (AIHW, 2022), potentially due to the increased numbers of children in statutory care, fewer people becoming carers and high rates of carer attrition. Carer attrition impacts placement stability, care quality and prospects for reunification (Fernandez & Delfabbro, 2020; Miko et al., 2022; Miller & Grise-Owens, 2021). These issues draw attention

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to the need for innovative interventions to support carers, improve the carer experience and increase retention and, therefore, stability.

1.1 | The Mockingbird Family

The Mockingbird Family model engenders a unique approach that organizes foster and/or kinship carers into micro-communities, called constellations, in order to provide safe and sustainable care for vulnerable children and young people (Mockingbird Society, 2023; Patmisari et al., 2023). Each constellation of 6–10 foster and/or kinship family homes has a central Hub Home with an experienced carer at the help, which is linked to remaining satellite homes (Mockingbird Society, 2023). The Hub Home carer, employed by the agency, plays a crucial role in providing essential mentorship and respite, fostering community within the constellation (Figure 1). The Liaison Officer facilitates effective communication and resource coordination between the constellation and the child welfare agency. The case manager ensures children's well-being, collaborating with caregivers and professionals for tailored support and intervention. Formal linkages are maintained with relevant statutory services and with birth families where possible. Families in each constellation undertake relevant child-specific training together, often delivered by the Hub Home carer, provide respite care to each other, regular support group meetings and social events. By replicating extended family structures, the Mockingbird Family seeks to provide carers with the support they need to reduce stress and avoid carer attrition while also improving outcomes for the children and young people in their care. As of 2019, the Mockingbird Society had constellations in Washington State, New York City, California, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia (Mockingbird Society, 2019) and has since been adopted in Japan and the Netherlands. In Australia, the foster care agency Life Without Barriers has implemented the Mockingbird Family model, piloting two

constellations in New South Wales in 2019 and an additional two in South Australia in 2021 due to COVID-19 delays.

The first Mockingbird Family constellation was established in collaboration between the Mockingbird Society and the Northwest Institute for Children and Family in 2004 (NICF, 2004). Initially, the model focused on stabilizing African American families in foster care, aiming to alleviate adverse impacts on children's psychological, social and emotional well-being. It comprised five constellation families, each with an experienced Hub Home carer and skilled carers, targeting goals such as academic support, sibling connection, cultural identity and peer relationships (NICF, 2004). The model evolved, prioritizing hub home providers to facilitate support and collective problem-solving, resulting in positive outcomes like placement stability, reduced disruptions and stronger sibling connections that improved children's well-being (NICF, 2005, 2006, 2007).

The Mockingbird Family in the United Kingdom was evaluated by McDermid et al. (2016), who found that carers in each constellation had increased knowledge of the children, access to regular peer support and consistent respite carers. The Mockingbird evaluation revealed a remarkable achievement in fostering retention during Wave 1, with full retention of foster carers observed, in stark contrast to the national estimate of approximately 6% of carers leaving their roles in 2014/2015 (Sebba et al., 2017). The availability of planned and emergency respite care within the Mockingbird Family contributed to these positive outcomes. Of the 116 children placed in the Mockingbird Family, only six experienced placement disruptions, with a mere 4% being unplanned changes, compared to the national rate of 8% (Sebba et al., 2017). In a later UK evaluation, the model revealed positive outcomes in sibling relationships, stability, child wellbeing and foster carer support. While statistical analysis showed no significant impact on unplanned placements, qualitative evidence suggested positive effects. Children reported enhanced wellbeing, and carers displayed improved mental wellbeing and satisfaction. The model

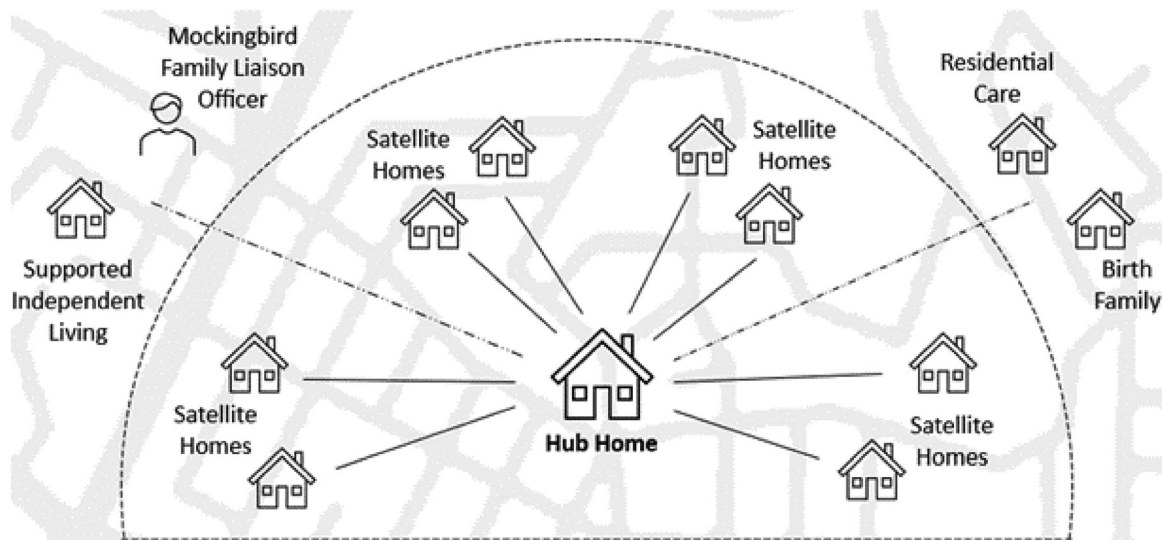


FIGURE 1 Model of Life Without Barriers' Mockingbird Family.

demonstrated a near break-even point in terms of return on investment, showcasing its potential value in the foster care context (Ott, Buehler, et al., 2020). These evaluations indicated that the Mockingbird Family offered a promising approach to addressing various challenges within the foster care system and contributing to improved outcomes that strengthened the protective environment of children and young people in care.

1.2 | Australian foster care system challenges

There is global agreement on the importance of providing children with a family environment for their holistic development. A consistent trend across English-speaking countries, especially in Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the United States, is the decreasing use of residential care in favour of family foster care, indicating a collective shift towards prioritizing family-based care models (del Valle & Bravo, 2013). Issues such as carer retention, the impact of trauma on children's behaviours, placement stability and access to support services are prevalent across different contexts. Australia's foster care system possesses unique characteristics shaped by historical, cultural and political contexts that contribute to the intricate landscape of foster care provision and impact on children's well-being (Musgrove & Michell, 2018). In their Australian study, Blythe et al. (2013) showed that foster and kinship carers commonly felt unsupported and frustrated with statutory child protection services, and these were the primary reasons for their attrition. In another study, they showed that carers felt marginalized and socially isolated due to negative stereotypes of foster carers, coupled with family conflict associated with pressures of caring (Blythe et al., 2012). McKeough et al. (2017) corroborated the profound stress stemming from children's challenging behaviours, creating a cascading effect that diminishes carers' self-efficacy and well-being. The stark realities depicted in Breman et al. (2018) brought to the forefront the distressing dynamics where carers face daily verbal and physical violence. Others have shown that poor understanding of children's ethnic and cultural diversity among statutory caseworkers, provision of limited information about the children they take on and the lack of sufficient carer respite services added to carer frustration and stress (Kiralý et al., 2020, 2015). Many carers also experience financial difficulties, challenges with children's behavioural problems and diminishing social supports upon becoming carers due the stressed statutory system (Harnett et al., 2014; McPherson et al., 2022). Randle et al. (2018) broadened the lens to encompass the systemic shortcomings, including inadequate agency support, training and financial assistance, exacerbating the cumulative stressors. These issues lead to negative carer identity, pressure, silence, disempowerment within the governing systems and, ultimately, carer attrition (Fergeus et al., 2019; McLaren, 2016; Octoman & McLean, 2014). Together, these studies present a sobering narrative of a foster care system where carers endure both physical and emotional turmoil, revealing the pressing need for comprehensive reform that prioritizes their well-being and fosters a supportive environment for both carers and the children they care for.

Amidst the persistent challenges evident across micro, meso and macro systems within the Australian foster care context, existing interventions predominantly revolve around enhancing carer competencies through training initiatives. For instance, the Circle programme aim to elevate the proficiency of specialized carers in therapeutic interventions for children facing intricate trauma-related issues (Frederico et al., 2014, 2017). Statutory requirements of carers require significant training to enable managing children and young people with significant histories of abuse and neglect, and multiple placements, causing mental health issues and behavioural problems (Engler et al., 2020). Research consistently shows that support, training and access to resources reduce frustration, stress and burnout among carers, leading to better outcomes for those who they care for (Begum et al., 2020; Dalgaard et al., 2022; Green et al., 2021; Harding et al., 2020; Harkness, 2019; Midgley et al., 2021; Vanderwill et al., 2021); however, research also indicates that training may not satisfy or meet the perceived needs of carers (Kaasbøll et al., 2019). When training is not seen as helping, carers feel unsupported or they perceive inequitable distribution of resources, this can exacerbate their frustration and stress (Fernandes et al., 2021; Zuchowski et al., 2019). With increasing numbers of children and young people in Australia in non-parental statutory care, the supply of training, support and other resources to carers has likely not kept up with demand. Establishing and maintaining informal relationships among carers has shown to safeguard the welfare of children and young people (Ball et al., 2021; Font & Gershoff, 2020), as it provides a buffer when formal supports, training and resources may be limited. Informal support from family and friends has been shown to enhance carer resilience and reduce carer attrition (Butler & McGinnis, 2021), but not all carers have informal supports due to the negative stereotypes and family conflict associated with being a foster carer (Blythe et al., 2012). Targeted support programmes for carers to enable building peer networks has the potential to improve the foster and kinship caring experience. The Mockingbird Family is one such programme that aims to mitigate carer stress, burnout and attrition, thereby strengthening the environment of the children and young people in their care.

While prior evaluations of the Mockingbird Family have predominantly centred on quantifiable outcomes and objective measurements, this study represents a departure from that approach by delving into the nuanced experiential dimensions of individuals directly engaged with the Mockingbird Family. The current study sought understanding of the experiences of foster carers and foster care agency workers involved in Australia's pilot of its first four Mockingbird Family constellations. To accomplish this, the study employed an approach of *experience* rooted in the domain of learning. Conventional learning theories emphasize the deliberate and logical facets of experience, assuming that individuals have control over their encounters (Wong, 2007). Dewey and Vygotsky's perspectives on experience challenge its common interpretation as mere participation in events (Dewey, 1963; Glassman, 2001). Dewey emphasizes the continuous nature of experience and its role in shaping practical activities and subjects' transformation within their environments. He views experience as an ongoing transaction between subjects and their

surroundings. In contrast, Vygotsky's theory of experience focuses on its role in learning and development, considering it as an irreducible unit integrating emotional, intellectual and practical aspects.

Informed by Dewey, Vygotsky and Bakhtin, Roth and Jornet (2014) propose a holistic perspective on experience, countering the conventional constructivist epistemology that emphasizes the self-sufficient constructing mind over a transactional process. This understanding goes beyond individual boundaries, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various dimensions within experience. In the context of exploring the experiences of carers and agency workers, the holistic perspective highlights experience as a continuous and complex interplay between individuals, their actions and the socio-material context in which they operate. As part of a larger evaluation study, this paper reports specifically on the dimensions of experience of Australian foster carers and agency employees involved in the Mockingbird Family pilot. Research ethics approval was granted by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee, Project ID 4781. Incorporating Roth and Jornet's theory into this study provides context to the understanding of how the Mockingbird Family model operates within the Australian foster care landscape. The study aims to address the following inquiries: How do foster carers and foster care agency workers perceive their engagement in the Mockingbird Family? Additionally, how do these experiential perspectives enhance a more comprehensive comprehension of the model's implementation and outcomes?

2 | METHODS

Our qualitative inquiry examined carers and foster care agency workers experiences. Our rationale is premised upon the fundamental notion that leveraging experience leads to larger, more refined and better structured systems than where they may have started. Experience, reflection and leveraging, in turn, have the potential to improve the governing bodies and agencies' ability to keep vulnerable children and young people safe. As Liamputtong (2020, p. 1) suggested, the underlying premise of qualitative inquiry is that people employ 'what they see, hear, and feel' to make sense of social experiences. The interpretive phenomenological approach, as described by Heidegger (Pham, 2022), enabled exploration of the range of prevailing and alternative worldviews related to the lived experience of Mockingbird Family carers and agency workers to be exposed.

2.1 | Data collection

The primary method for qualitative data collection was through focus groups with carers and agency workers ($n = 20$) involved in the Mockingbird Family. Recruitment materials were disseminated by the foster care agency to Mockingbird Family carers and relevant agency workers, inviting participation by self-nomination. The focus groups provided an opportunity to interview participants efficiently and simultaneously. The empirical significance of this method lies in the

interaction and synergy that emerges during discussions (Acocella, 2011). Focus group discussions were undertaken via Microsoft Teams meetings, in real time. This enabled a close replication of face-to-face interaction with participants living up to 1800 km apart, in the Australian states of New South Wales and South Australia. Due to the small sample size, reflective notes were taken following each focus group as a secondary method. This included documenting the researchers' observations of interactions and interpretations of the focus group participants' experiences. Participants were asked to share stories related to being in the Australian Mockingbird Family, local barriers, programme adaptations and learnings. These questions served as guiding prompts to facilitate our exploration of the participants' perspectives: (1) Was the experience of being part of the Mockingbird Family model's constellations perceived as useful? (2) What valuable insights were gained through this experience? (3) How did this experience contribute to personal and professional growth and development for the participants? (4) In what ways was this experience impactful for the participants' roles as carers and agency workers? During the focus groups, the researchers adopted a participant-centred and facilitative approach. The researchers fostered inclusive discussions, monitoring group dynamics and power dynamics while promoting equal participation among participants. The risk of confirmation bias is an important consideration in qualitative research. In this study, we took several precautions to minimize this risk. One crucial measure involved the composition of focus groups comprising both foster carers and agency workers, ensuring diverse perspectives and the cross-validation of experiences. Facilitating discussions among participants with varying roles and viewpoints, the research team aimed to counterbalance any undue influence that one group might exert over the other. Focus group discussions were electronically recorded and then transcribed using AI technology. Transcripts were checked for accuracy, cleaned and identifying information removed prior to recordings being deleted.

2.2 | Data analysis

Deductive analysis involved the application of Roth and Jornet's (2014) theory of experience, as a lens to enable breadth and depth of understanding of being in the Mockingbird Family. This theoretical lens, outlined by Roth and Jornet (2014), encapsulates dimensions that underscore the integral role of passion, integration across time and space, dynamic movement and transformative shifts within experiences. While initially applied by Roth and Jornet (2014) in the field of education, its applicability to the Mockingbird Family draws upon communities of practice as learning experiences. Analysis involved a process of iterative immersion, re-reading and reflective engagement with the data across three phases, that is, data familiarization, deductive identification, sorting exemplars into dimensions of experience, review and report production. Throughout the study, the researchers remained attentive to the potential for unforeseen discoveries during the data analysis process. Despite the familiarity with the approach and the model itself, the researchers maintained an open stance to

unexpected insights that could emerge. To minimize subjectivity and bias, a multi-coder approach during analysis (Church et al., 2019) was performed during the review phase by two of the researchers. Their individual interpretations were subsequently cross-compared, and any discrepancies were subject to thorough discussion and consensus building to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the data. Transparently discussing the steps taken to mitigate confirmation bias enhances the validity and reliability of the findings, ensuring that the research remains grounded in the participants' authentic experiences.

3 | RESULTS

Results of the analysis are presented as they corresponded to four encompassing intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of theory of experience. According to Roth and Jornet (2014), experience signifies processes involving people, material and social situations, and ongoing society-specific interactional relations. While encompassing of experience is expressed uniquely and reflected differently among individuals, the manifestation of intrinsic (emotional and thoughts) and extrinsic (material and social milieu) dimensions is integral to understanding experience more holistically (Roth & Jornet, 2014). Qualitative results are accompanied by excerpts from the transcripts are illustrative of the four key dimensions encompassed in experience.

3.1 | The Mockingbird Family manifests itself in/as passions

Focus group participants' responses were heartfelt, with a shared affection expressed passionately for the children and young people and their work. Many spoke about their roles as carers or agency workers, dedication in giving back to society through helping children and young people achieve a better life, and the meaning and sense of purpose they ascribed, for example:

It gave us a sense of purpose in our life. I guess at the time when we started out, we felt like we were actually contributing something of importance to society. (Carer)

However, care work is not easy. Many of the carers and agency workers had contemplated leaving. They affirmed with each other during focus groups that, had it not been for the Mockingbird Family, they may have resigned from working in foster care. The collective approach enabled sharing burdens, riding waves of emotions together and keeping passions for caring alive among them. The emotions and rewards that come with supporting each other were expressed by one member of a constellation when reflecting on a care-related crisis.

Our constellation had a lot of loss, a lot of tears, a lot of hugs and a lot of empathy and a lot of support for each other throughout this whole situation. (Carer)

Focus group members talked about trust being formed on a bedrock of passion, which benefited from having like-minded connections. Trust enabled speaking about children's needs and parenting responses, self-efficacy and then feelings of empowerment. Empowerment was associated with confidence and passion since being in the Mockingbird Family.

... carers start to feel a bit more empowered as well as supported. They can share experiences and I think that's a good thing, you know, to feel like they have a sense of self efficacy in the role and know it's a very important one. (Carer)

The Mockingbird Family model, in which the Hub Home carers attended meetings with statutory services and other carers were privy to the needs of children and young people in their constellations, also contributed to confidence. Confidence enabled the translation of passion into action.

We feel like we can be much better advocate for the children because we're empowered to know more information for them. (Carer)

Such as when one child in care ran away, and child protection, health and other agencies became involved:

I know that Mockingbird had a lot of representation and a lot of voice in the decisions that were being made. (Carer)

There were clear links between being able to advocate for children and young people's needs as a collective and, as individuals, being better able to manage the stress and frustration associated with caring in bureaucratic systems. The foster care agency workers likewise expressed passion for the Mockingbird Family upon seeing its impact on the children, young people and carers. Comments included 'I like the feeling when you go to a house', 'It has given me great, great confidence' and 'I wasn't a part of the original team ... I'm proud of the team that explored this model'. These were said with shaking heads and disbelief when talking about the extent of positive change among the Australian Mockingbird Family constellations seen.

3.2 | Experiences of the Mockingbird Family integrate over space and time

While the Mockingbird Family model recommends close proximity of homes within constellations, Australia hosts geographical differences. The four constellations were diverse in geographical dispersion, numbers of homes per constellation, carer experience and human dynamic.

My observation is that [one] is a smaller group and quiet. I think they are just more connected and, maybe for lack

of a better term, intimate group in their connection. [The other] still has it. It's a larger community ... spread out over greater geographical distance. (Agency worker)

Each constellation was constituted differently in terms of members with existing professional connections combined with foster carers new to caring. This helped overcome potential group formation lag, and it positioned newcomers directly into existing community.

They really wrap around each other, and they have some of them who have known each other before. We put the group together, but kind of in a different way ... a respect for that community feel. (Agency worker)

The first two constellations formed during the first year of COVID-19, which was instrumental for overcoming isolation associated with caring, compounded by social distancing and lockdowns. Despite variation in constellation formation, each constellation grew and changed over time. As well, the Australian industrial relations legislation required Hub Home carers to be paid a wage (in the United States and United Kingdom, they are volunteers and receive an allowance). This bestowed a level of financial decision-making within constellations, as opposed to the usual processes of seeking approvals and navigating bureaucratic red tape.

Coming together with others in the constellation offered the greatest amount of change. Children had a chance to play, learn from other children and young people and build relationships in a safe, inclusive community. We heard stories of children and young people who had never been invited to birthday parties, others had arranged birthday parties but no guests came. They simply yearned to belong, to be with others, without judgement.

Kids have made friends with each other within the constellation. Friends that they probably wouldn't have outside of the constellation. (Carer)

With tears of joy, carers and agency workers shared these stories of the children and young people having friends and how the Mockingbird Family had changed. For them, compassion satisfaction grew, stress and burnout diminished, because the children and young people in their care had social connections and some happy times, making their work worthwhile.

3.3 | Individual and collective experiences of the Mockingbird Family is a moving force

The indispensable influence that gives the Mockingbird Family its strength in Australia was the dynamic force of collective voice and connections across micro-, meso- and macro-levels. Micro-dynamic force was represented by a sense of camaraderie among members of

each focus group. They talked about the good times, the tough times and the importance of being connected.

It's the getting together and connecting with people that are going through similar situations to us ... being able to support each other through those challenging situations. (Carer)

They reflected on experiences in the Mockingbird Family, comparing former experiences of foster caring as usual. Some carers had no friends, as their networks had abandoned them on becoming carers. Mockingbird Family was responsible for re-establishing needed connection.

They would lose a lot of friends because they were not understanding of the needs of the children in their care ... social isolation of foster carers, so hearing feedback over time of not necessarily having people in their communities that they could go to for support. (Agency worker)

The micro-network connected the children and young people through constellation meetings, activities and respite. Since respite takes place within the constellation, it is with familiar people, parenting is more consistent, and carers are less stressed.

In the Mockingbird, probably we feel a lot more comfortable knowing that we can send our children to people that they already know. (Carer)

Support at the meso-level dynamically influenced the operation of the Mockingbird Family constellations and the experiences of carers and agency workers. The formation of professional and social ties, system support as needed and a process that was care-led were pivotal.

This model works because it is based on relationships, and [we] are getting the support that [we] need when [we] need it. (Carer)

We don't want to be system-led, and I think this model really talks to what I want ... to be care-led, child-led, family-led, and to really empower the voice of those the people that we work with to develop supports that suit them. (Agency worker)

A focus on the support needs of carers was central. As well, participants were confident that the statutory child protection department 'sees the value in the model' and 'that's half the battle'. There was a willingness to fund the Mockingbird Family, to trial new ways of developing child-centred environments. Collaboration between statutory services, foster care agency and carers were a 'key element' to

the success of the Mockingbird Family in Australia. When systems work together, the carers felt supported.

3.4 | Mockingbird Family experiences lead to transformation

The Mockingbird Family has transformative resilience. Constellations showed capacity to absorb horrendous disruption to carer when undergoing change. In doing so, this essentially preserves utility and structure. As one carer said, '[we] would have cracked under the pressure, completely, and fallen out of the system. We have been so close ourselves'. These experiences point to the collective capacity of the individuals in the Mockingbird Family. They prosper through collective resilience, and while each foster carer has different skills and experiences, they bolstered each other. There are regular meetings between satellite homes and Hub Home carers. In these meetings, friendships are nurtured as well as mutually beneficial and transformative power, for example:

[The difference is] having the ability to provide respite or respite across that constellation, having the attributes and skills to be able to facilitate that community. (Carer)

One worker, associated with the Mockingbird Family, said:

... seeing what the benefit is of bringing them together with like experience. You know, transferable skills and knowledge that can be harnessed in that community setting. (Foster care agency)

However, Mockingbird Family is a fundamentally different system of care. One carer expressed expectations of 'just a certain type' of person being attracted to the model, but instead, 'it's just been a range of different walks of life and experiences'. It was experienced as having transformative capacity across the micro-, meso- and macro-structures, most notably the impact of the model on paradigm shift in regard for the Mockingbird Family.

A lot of carers have really positive family contact and talk about it positively. I've seen a paradigm shift in that which was quite amazing for me because I knew how there was a great resistance historically. (Carer)

Although this was a pilot study with little data, The Mockingbird Family showed some success in mitigating carer attrition and placement breakdown, thereby promoting stability. The role of the Hub Home carers was perceived as instrumental for keeping carers engaged, committed and strong, and for allaying issues. Expressed by carers, this central role 'gave permission to reach out to another foster carer', and this helped 'with the stability over the long term because people aren't waiting 'till it's too late to get support'.

The availability of support enabled carers to manage personal emotions, improve wellbeing and reduced stress and better enjoy

fulfilling purpose in life through providing opportunities to children and young people to have a safe home and a loving family life.

4 | DISCUSSION

Given that the number of children and young people needing care keeps rising and fewer people are becoming foster carers, efforts to support carers and workers in foster caring are essential. This builds upon the back of understanding that collaborative approaches between foster and kinship carers, community, service levels and sectors in Australia historically been fragmented and siloed (McLaren, 2015; Scott, 2009). Joined-up approaches in child protection, such as with the Mockingbird Family model, offers hope for strengthening professional relationships between carers and workers. This is an important element in stabilizing environments for children and young people in care crucial for wellbeing.

Our study showed that people involved in the Australian pilot of the Mockingbird Family had preferential experiences for closely interwoven networks, where the carers felt supported. This support extended beyond carers to encompass the children in their care, highlighting the potential for this positive atmosphere to benefit the well-being of the children involved. We observed experiences that aligned with the four dimensions of Roth and Jorret's (2014) theory of experience. These offered insights into the strength of the Mockingbird Family model that were buttressed by the passion of carers and workers, power in having like-minded peer and worker support and empowerment among constellation members through the formation of social capital from within. Consistent with existing research on the value of social capital, individuals derive benefit from knowing others with whom they could form networks of interconnected individuals (Huggins et al., 2012; Shi et al., 2022). Findings showed that the Mockingbird Family assisted in establishing social capital, which was grounded in four accounts: passion; temporal and spatial dimensions; macro-meso-micro dynamic forces; and transformational avenues.

The first dimension of experiences indicated that 'passion', as a strong feeling of devotedness, enthusiasm and affection, was the fuel of action among the Australian Mockingbird Family constellations. The shared burdens, empathy and support within the Mockingbird Family community resonate with Roth and Jorret's (2014) concept of experience as an ongoing process involving both agency and reception. Experience involves enduring resistance and frustration, and the challenges faced by carers and workers are met with determination and a sense of collective purpose. Passion symbolizes individuals' positive feelings towards activities they consider important and rewarding (Baum & Locke, 2004). It is an indispensable, critical element for positive experience and purpose in life, personal growth, self-efficacy and well-being (al Issa, 2021). Increased passion reduces disengagement associated with occupation stress in the helping profession (Landay et al., 2022), and it leads to positive personal growth and improved organizational outcomes (Houliort et al., 2014). There were indicators in our pilot study of the passion among carers and workers

Mockingbird Family, based on participant experiences of benefit for the children and young people. Positive vibes among carers translated into stronger relationships within the Mockingbird Family. Recent studies have shown that passion is contagious, and it can influence and be influenced by the wider social environment (Ho et al., 2021; Ho & Astakhova, 2020). Investing in activities that foster passion allowed people to experience emotional benefits that, in models such as the Mockingbird Family, appeared to evolve and continue to improve over time.

The second dimension of experience showed insights from participants on the dimensions of space and time, which intertwined both change and consistency in the Mockingbird Family model of care. This highlights the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment, emphasizing that experiences are not isolated occurrences but rather integrated processes that unfold over time and across various contexts (Roth & Jornet, 2014).

The findings unveiled that the notion of close proximity and interconnectedness within constellations encounters challenges within the Australian context. The observations of agency workers reveal nuanced dynamics within constellations. One constellation is characterized by intimacy and a sense of deep connection, potentially facilitated by prior relationships among its members. On the other hand, a larger and more dispersed constellation exhibits a different dynamic that is influenced by its geographical spread. This divergence in geographical dispersion, the number of homes per constellation and the composition of carers and agency workers within each constellation introduce a layer of complexity that is not uniformly addressed by the model recommendations (Mockingbird Society, 2023). Extant literature affirmed that geographical distance is associated with group social cohesion, knowledge diffusion, collaborative learning, community engagement and participation (Kakuhikire et al., 2021; Morone et al., 2019). Torre and Gallaud (2022) identified that proximity served as a value for strengthening human relationships, trust, shared values and a sense of belonging, which reflects the philosophy of Mockingbird Family. As well, the impact of the progression of time was visible in our findings. The Mockingbird Family foster carers and agency workers were aware of the changes and different dynamics. In understanding individual change and social transformation over time, the Mockingbird Family strategy was invested in the value of relationships. This highlighted the potential for prioritizing the allocation of resources in foster care systems focussed on building relationships, consistent with research by Staniškis (2022) who showed that stronger relationships improves stability. Furthermore, this study uncovers the significance of the timing of constellation formation and its impact on overcoming challenges. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in shaping the formation of the constellations, which highlights the adaptability of the model and its potential to respond to external factors. The juxtaposition of the Mockingbird Family model core principles with the unique Australian context underscores the need for flexibility and adaptability in its application.

The third dimension reiterated the perceived driving forces that strengthen unity in the Mockingbird Family and enable the achievement of goals. At the meso-level, supportive agency capacity was

articulated as the key to successful implementation. The workers were mindful that the Mockingbird Family nurtured family democracy and that the model provided families space to exercise decision-making and authority. At the micro-level, the foster carers' experiences of empowerment, to vent, or otherwise troubleshoot with peers, made caring less frightening and isolating. The findings underscore that the success is not solely reliant on micro- and meso-level dynamics but is further bolstered by its alignment with overarching macro-level goals and values. This alignment is evident in the willingness of the statutory child protection department to endorse and fund the Mockingbird Family programme, acknowledging its value in creating child-centred environments.

Sociologist Turner (2016) micro-meso-macro dynamics of societal order theory gives an additional vantage point for explaining our findings on experience. He emphasized the interaction, rather than the action of individuals, along with reciprocal affects at different levels of societal systems. Six 'universal transactional needs' included identity verification with a social group, perceived benefits in exchange of resources with others, a sense of efficacy, group inclusion, trust and shared intersubjectivity (Turner, 2016, p. 140). The focus group members agreed that the Mockingbird Family fulfilled these needs for them. Whether they were carers or agency workers, they experienced passionate emotions expressed as pleasure, satisfaction and contentment. Turner and Stets (2006) proposed that positive emotions repressed negative emotions, diffused anger and anxiety. This implies that the motivational and emotional dimensions of being in the Mockingbird Family are likely driving features that intertwine in influencing positive emotions among carers and workers, and mitigation of stress and burnout.

The transformational capabilities of the Mockingbird Family were observed in this study. Resilience, adaptability and transformability fuelled members of the Mockingbird Family to thrive during situations involving adversity. The positive energy among carers, in which bad news stories were turned into accounts of triumph and success, were key features observed in the focus groups. Transformative resilience, in particular, has been well documented in the social sciences and humanities in reference to the capacity to bounce back after a shock to a steady state (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2017; Svitková, 2021). Based on our findings, being part of the Mockingbird Family gave people the capacity to overcome difficult or challenging adversities and get back on track, thereby stabilizing the protective environment of children and young people in their care.

This study enhances the insights gained from evaluations of the Mockingbird Family model conducted in other countries (Goodvin & Miller, 2017; McDermid et al., 2016; Mockingbird Society, 2019; NICF, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007; Ott, Buehler, et al., 2020). While earlier evaluations may have focused primarily on outcomes and quantitative measures, this study delves into the experiential dimensions of those directly engaged with the model. This study discovered that the collaborative approach fostered the sharing of responsibilities, navigating emotional challenges collectively and sustaining a sense of dedication to caregiving. This insight might shed light on the findings from the UK evaluation study (Ott, McGrath-Lone, et al., 2020), which

indicated that households engaged in the Mockingbird Family exhibited a lower likelihood of de-registering compared to non-participating households (6% vs. 23%). The theoretical framework used provides a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the Mockingbird Family implementation and outcomes that goes beyond surface-level observations and delves into the deeper layers of the Mockingbird Family impact on individuals' lives. The collected experiential perspectives shed light on the challenges, rewards and nuances of their involvement, offering a deeper understanding of the model's implementation. Additionally, these perspectives were analysed to uncover their contributions to a more comprehensive comprehension of the model outcomes. While the Mockingbird Family model offers a promising approach to fostering that emphasizes communal support and shared responsibilities, it is essential to acknowledge some inherent weaknesses. These critical thoughts are grounded in the participants' narratives and reflections, providing a well-rounded understanding of both the strengths and weaknesses of the Mockingbird Family. Our reflective notes allowed us to capture any unspoken concerns or hesitations that participants might have had during the focus group discussions, further informing our critical analysis of the limitations. One notable concern is that the model success may heavily rely on the effectiveness of the hub home carers, raising questions about the sustainability and scalability of the approach in cases where hub home carers are not as well-equipped or dedicated. This means that the strong emphasis on carers working closely together and forming tight-knit groups within the Mockingbird Family model could unintentionally result in isolated communities. There is a need to consider the potential for groupthink within the constellations, where critical voices might be suppressed due to the strong sense of unity and shared values. Acknowledging and addressing these potential limitations is vital for its continued success and widespread applicability.

5 | CONCLUSION

Understanding the experiences of people is critical for leveraging change. Elevating experiences of carers and of agency workers involved in the Australian Mockingbird Family pilot may likewise lead to larger, more refined and better structured systems than where things started off. Experience, reflection and leveraging, in turn, have the potential to improve the governing bodies and agencies' ability to strengthen protective environments necessary for keeping vulnerable children and young people's placements stable and safe. In seeking the experiences of carers and foster care agency workers, we showed several dynamic examples of aspects within each dimension of experience that motivated, empowered and served as stabilizing features.

Four dynamic dimensions explored among focus group members represented their Mockingbird Family experiences. The four dimensions should not be regarded as discrete and linear but rather as cluttered, mutually dependent phenomena that inform thoughtful system thinking involving rethinking, redefining and reinventing priorities and resources. In conjunction with relevant literature, we suggest that the Mockingbird Family has strong practical and emotional value nested

in mutually beneficial relationships between individuals. Several recommendations can be made to enhance its effectiveness and address potential challenges such as cross-network events to facilitate knowledge exchange, foster innovation and enrich the fostering experience. Acknowledging the central role of hub home carers, investing in their training, ongoing professional development and support is crucial. Continual monitoring and evaluation of the model implementation are vital. Peer learning circles, where carers and agency workers from different constellations come together, can facilitate collaborative problem-solving, promote collective wisdom and provide a platform for discussing effective coping mechanisms. Additionally, ensuring adequate resources, both in terms of funding and professional support, is essential for sustaining the model's positive impact.

We acknowledge limitations to this study due to the newness of the model in Australia and the small sample size of the pilot. We also acknowledge that the possibility of social desirability bias cannot be ruled out, as participants might have been inclined to present their experiences in a more positive light. The absence of children and young people perspectives, who are essential stakeholders in the Mockingbird Family model, is also a notable limitation. Future research could employ mixed-method approaches, integrating individual interviews to capture more nuanced insights. Including children and young people's voices would provide a more holistic understanding of the model's impact. Lastly, a longitudinal study could shed light on the long-term effects of the Mockingbird Family model on participants and the children in their care.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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