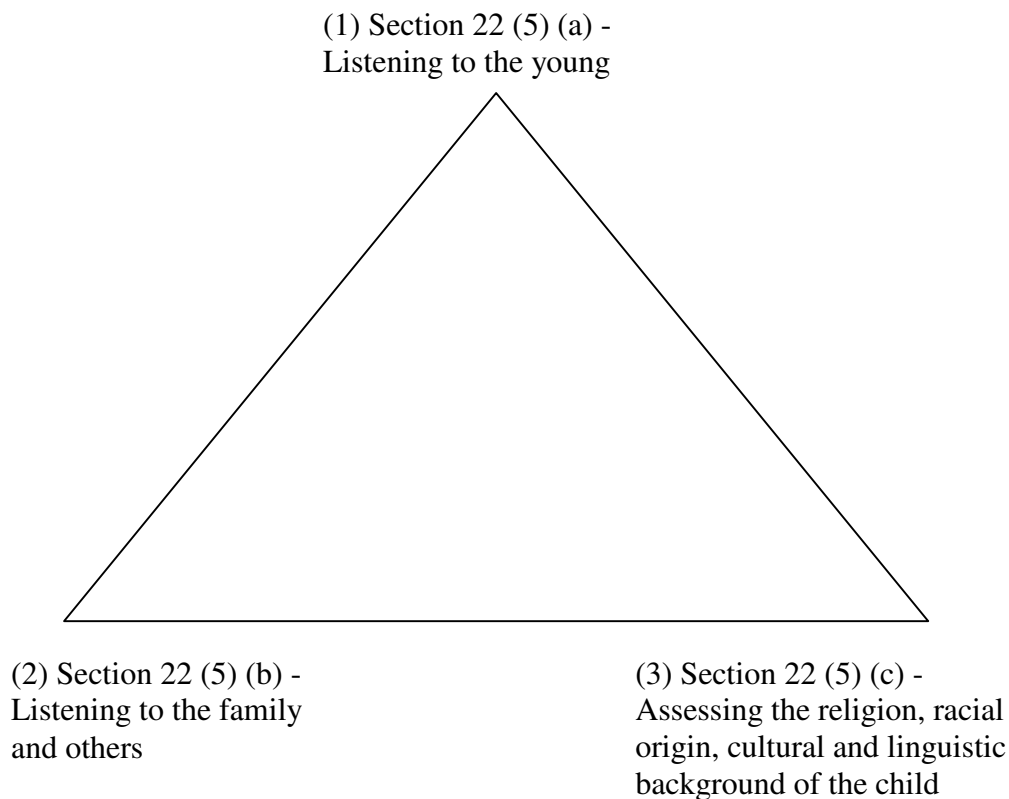


## Placement Matching

### **Placement policy: 'Does Section 22 (5) (c) of the Children Act 1989' act on the 'best interest' of the dual heritage young person or child?**

When considering placements for all children and young people, Section 22 (5) (c) of the Children Act 1989 stresses the importance of considering their religion, race, language and cultural background. A recent study which explored the care experiences of looked-after dual heritage young people (those with one white and one black parent of African Caribbean origin); found that in addition to these factors, practitioners also took into account the placement family's ability to support dual heritage young people in coping with racism. In most cases, this resulted in the young people being placed in black families. Thus, the implementation of Section 22 (5) (c) can result in the neglect of dual heritage young people's 'white heritage'.

Practitioners are expected to balance a complex range of considerations as presented in this triangle



Practice has overwhelmingly focused on 22 (5) (c) to determine placements. In my study, I counteracted the above by emphasising 22 (5) (a) and (b). The intention was not to deny the significance of social origin or, indeed, colour. Instead, I chose to compare and contrast the testimonies of young people with those of their carers and set this against a seemingly over-dogmatic approach to placement matching. There is insufficient data to make claims about the causes of such practice but future research could explore the complexity of the balancing act shown in the triangle. Future researchers may be interested in exploring the power of ‘mantra’ led practice coupled with dominant ideologies and how they can neglect the uniqueness of individual cases.

The requirement under Section 22 (5) (c) could cause some problems in practice. For instance, whose religion, ‘race’ and language are to be considered: the birth parents’ or the child’s? Which parent’s religion, ‘race’ and language should take precedence if different? Should the placement be based on the birth parents’ genetic inheritance? Service providers may be fortunate in finding a family who look like the child in appearance but what does that actually mean? It is not always the case that, because they look the same, these individuals will share the same religion and other cultural background as the child’s birth parents.

Despite the emphasis on placements that reflected the young people’s ethnicity, those placed with white families in primarily middle-class, white environments had positive care experiences. They were also comfortable with their racial and social identities. Once these foster/adoptive white parents took on their caring and parenting roles, they embarked on an ongoing journey of learning to help their dual heritage children succeed and cope with racism. This example challenges the preconceptions of practitioners who refuse to place this group with white families on the misapprehension that they will not help them to deal with racism.

Many of these white families saw themselves as ‘mixed race’ families as soon as they had adopted or fostered dual heritage children and learned about the cultural background of the new members of the family. For example, they bought art relating to the young people’s culture and chose holiday destinations that included the countries where the children’s minority ethnic parent was born. These carers saw this

as another way of encouraging these young people to remain connected with their black heritage even though most of them had never met their black parents.

In many cases, accounts from the young people interviewed mirror those from other looked-after groups. Nonetheless, other issues were specific to dual heritage young people, for example, some of them felt that 'same race' placement was not important. They also believed that meeting the needs of dual heritage people should be based on the outcome of an individual's assessment because sharing the same skin colour as their placement families did not necessarily mean they were caring and respectful. All of the young people felt that the key was to take into account individuals' requirements when assessing their needs rather than their skin colour. Many also agreed that, if children were old enough, they should be involved in decisions regarding placements and other aspects of their needs. The following illustrates these key points:

*The ethnicity of social workers is not important. How they treat you is what matters and not whether they match your ethnicity... It wouldn't have bothered me if my social workers were white, black or Asian...The most important thing is to be respected and to be listened to (Thomas).*

*It is important for people to adopt or foster because they really want to change a person's life and not because of money...take time to find the right carer and do not put too much emphasis on skin colour...My guess is most of them would prefer a loving family than someone who looks like them and then abuses or neglects them (Timothy).*

The young people and carers were asked how they would influence policy in relation to looked-after, dual heritage young people if they were in a position to do so. Some of their responses are reported below:

*I'd ask them to think about what children really need. What are the fundamental things that children need to thrive and to feel safe...(they should ) not to get bogged down in emotions and what the ideal picture would be...If a child's already in care and there are difficulties, there is no ideal picture... (Sam).*

*If there was one piece of advice I would give to the legislators over the adoption stuff, it would be to put the child first...All these notions of contact, this worrying about heritage and the biological background of the child and trying to sustain the culture of the birth family is just damaging that child. Social Services ought to intervene sooner when children are getting damaged, and...they ought to get those children into adoptive placements as fast as they possibly can. Keeping kids in care in the hope of being able to re-establish a relationship with an abusive birth family is not going to be in the interests of those kids (adoptive parent).*

*Workers should have more respect for us and to treat us as individuals with different needs and, if you are dual heritage, it does not mean you are black...That is crap and what we want is to have both sides of our heritage accepted and respected and not for teachers or social workers to say that we are confused or we have identity imbalance because we are not calling ourselves black. We have more than one heritage and, if we cannot describe ourselves as white, how can we describe ourselves as black anyway? (Musa)*

All of the young people interviewed had white mothers but the majority of them had been placed with non-white carers. The quality of care, and the young people's experiences, differed depending on the geographical context and their carers/practitioners. The study found that looked-after, dual heritage young people are a heterogeneous group with diverse needs and the ethnicity of their carers or social workers was irrelevant. All the young people reported experiences of rejection, discrimination from black and white people, institutional racism, as well as racism within the family. Perhaps, given the diverse groups of vulnerable children and young people in Britain today, the time has come to re-examine practitioners' interpretation of the 'best interest' of the dual heritage young person or child under Section 22 (5) (c) of the Children Act 1989.

(The young people involved in this study used diverse terms to describe themselves and they were all comfortable with their identities. For example, they used terms such as Mixed race; Mixed ethnic; dual heritage; brown; I am me; I am both white and black; British- Jamaican; one participant said that he saw his racial identity is multiple and changes.

Case one:

Sue: Mixed race.

Case two:

Safi: Mixed ethnic.

Case three:

Amina: Dual heritage.

Case four:

Roger...I am me.

Case five:

Mimi: If I was to describe how I identify myself...I'd talk about my family, I'd just say that I'm part of this family, that I have this job, these are my aspirations, this is what I love to do, this is who I am. I want to change the world, I want to do this and that...these are my plans in life, what I like doing. Like that's my identity, that's what makes me what I am. Um, so yeah, that's what I would talk about.

Case six:

Joachim: I am both white and black.

Case seven:

Timothy: British-Jamaican.

Case eight:

Adam: My racial identity is multiple and changes...

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