



Who? Am I

Making Records Meaningful

Research to support archiving and record-keeping
in Victorian Out of Home Care

Fragmentation or coherence? Issues in record keeping for children in out-of-home 'care'

Report of Workshop 1, 2009
Current Practice Strand

Introduction

This paper presents the findings from the first *Who Am I?* Current Practice Strand workshop for 2009, held at the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare on 24th April, 2009. It provides an overview of issues in record keeping for children in out-of-home 'care' as identified by participants representing the partners in the research consortium. *Who Am I? Making Records Meaningful*, is a Linkage Project funded by the Australian Research Council and by the partner organisations.

Goals for the action research workshop

This workshop was the first of several *Who Am I?* Current Practice Strand workshops to be held in 2009. It is intended that together they will form the basis for choosing areas for practice development to be refined through the action research process over the following two years. This first workshop broadly canvassed the issues currently encountered by practitioners in the field across the record keeping continuum (that is, *making*, *keeping or storing*, and *accessing* the record) with particular reference to the research questions for the *Who Am I?* Current Practice strand:

- A. What principles should underpin record-keeping and archival programs for children and young people currently in out of home care to support their on-going construction of identity?

B. What are the factors which enable or create barriers to effective practice in record keeping and archival programs for front line workers, managers and organisations providing out of home care?

The research method

A preliminary discussion paper was circulated prior to the workshop. The paper briefly reviewed lessons from the past with respect to 'care'-leavers who subsequently seek information in support of their identity from their 'care' records; it documented some of the sources of complexity and variability in current 'care' records, in relation to both children's pathways through 'care'¹, and the range of reporting formats required; it addressed (from an ecological perspective) the need for contextual information to situate and help interpret the child's case history; and it raised a number of questions for reflection. The paper was accompanied by a preparation sheet built around the proposed workshop questions and tasks, and participants were encouraged to submit these to the research team. Four agencies chose to do so.

The workshop began with an initial trigger question – 'What are we doing well?' – and it progressed through a series of issues for the attention of the participating agencies:

- Lessons from the past (This included a brief account of a literature review, and presentations from VANISH and CLAN, which will be made available to the consortium members through the password protected project website.)
- Principles for making and keeping the record
- Barriers and enablers for making and keeping principled, child-oriented records
- Mapping the complexity of the record
- Reviewing strengths and gaps in the record matrix
- Priorities and issues for further attention

At each stage of proceedings issues were discussed in Structured Action Learning Groups (5 tables of 5-7 participants, from a mix of Department of Human Services, Community Service Organisations and consumer organisations). The results of these discussions were collected in a 'data box' on each table. In addition, all participants were encouraged to note their responses and thoughts during the day, and to record these on paper or briefly on 'post-it' notes, and to add these to the box. This combination of preparation sheets, group discussion and individual comments allowed for consensus views to emerge, but also for private contributions in case members did not wish to expose practices in their agencies to the scrutiny of others. All comments from these various sources were entered into one document, and the content was then organised, condensed and analysed for common themes and for distinctive comments. The results of this process are presented below, without naming specific contributors or organisations, and in general following the format of the workshop itself.

¹ 'care': In view of the sensitive issues encountered in file searching, and in response to concerns raised by consumer groups, it has been suggested that this project will use the quotation marks around 'care'.

Findings

What are we doing well? (Initial trigger question and review of strengths across the record continuum)

Despite its positive phrasing, this question elicited a number of concerns about what was *not* working well, particularly related to the under-resourcing of the *Looking After Children* process, and its decline into a routinised (rather than individualised) recording tool with an emphasis on compliance rather than on practice, and to the problems of integration between various recording systems. It was noted that ‘care’ organisations tend to be very good at recording critical incidents, but this results in an unbalanced picture of the child’s or young person’s functioning and experience.

The overall message was that although there is good practice, it is patchy and unreliable. While there were many comments about the value of life story work in its various forms, it was noted that this work is most difficult to duplicate and store, and that from an archiving perspective it has low priority as a record for formal long-term retention. There is a risk that should children lose these personal records and collections, they might not have back up copies available.

Participants noted that good practice includes:

- The scrapbooking work done with young children by carers.
- The use of ‘treasure boxes’ in which older children can choose to store memorabilia and important information.
- Creative life story work by case support workers, using visual as well as narrative data, to go with the child when the child leaves ‘care’.
- Creative use of internet tools such as Myspace and Facebook for young people to store information.
- Efforts to improve daily recording in residential units, so that personal information about young people is not hidden in the daily operational log of the unit or mixed in with information about other young people.
- Improved systems for former residents to gain access to their care records, and more consideration being given to how to support them during the process of searching for and reading the files. Good advocacy by CLAN was seen as contribution to this good practice.

Lessons from the past

Presentations focused on issues confronted by adults who have been in ‘care’ when they search for and hopefully obtain their case records. While for some the process and the results are rewarding, for many others there is great frustration and distress involved. Many have high expectations that the files will yield both information and explanations about what happened in the past.

Participants’ responses to the presentations addressed several main themes in relation to the record continuum:

Making the record

- Many workers may be unaware of these lessons from the past, and need to be sensitized to how a record will be received by the child as an adult, through pre-service education and workplace training. Agencies could also benefit from being mentored by former 'care'-leavers.
- The presentations raised questions of purpose and ownership: 'Who is the record for?' The general consensus is that the record at present is created with a view to accountability to management and the Court, not primarily with a view to helping the child form a continuous and positive sense of identity.
- The quality and quantity of the language and value judgments, including cultural misunderstandings, on the files are still seen as problematic.
- Workers lack sufficient time to record and maintain files, and when working under pressure it is hard to bear the future needs in mind.

Storing the record

- It is not clear how the field can be recording and storing important contextual information (e.g. policy, organisational arrangements) so that this can be used to help interpret client files when they are later accessed.
- Agencies should be storing in accessible form information about staffing of 'care' settings, where children were sent to school, where they were sent for medical treatment.
- Information is fragmented and dispersed. E.g. financial information can be telling, but tends not to be on the child's file.
- With time, all past records become problematic to interpret, even using stable paper technology. Already electronic recording has disrupted the recording process, and storage and retrieval will become more complex. Theoretical and ideological changes are also unpredictable.

Accessing the record

Again the issues of purpose and ownership of information were raised.

- Adults who have been in 'care' are frequently seeking family information, but the privacy principle is invoked to ensure they receive *individual* information. This area needs much attention, as the family is very much part of the child's identity. As Frank Golding from CLAN made clear in his presentation: 'The search for self cannot be separated from the search for kith and kin: identity can't be reduced to an individualistic search for self. The self exists not in a personal vacuum, but in relation to significant others.' We need more creative ways about how information can be shared.
- The requirements of Freedom of Information (FOI) are variously interpreted and the policy has not been well developed for this sector. For example, simply giving the client file is inadequate; contextual information is also needed, including where to go for additional information. Specific legislation may be required.
- Agencies need to work better with each other and with people who are searching to identify their needs for information and how these might be met.

- There must be support processes for people seeking information, but this should be respectful and empowering, and should not be at the cost of them being 're-cliented'. Even so, it was also evident that the issue of releasing sibling information might be complex and need further discussion and practice guidelines. For example, under what circumstances can third party information be released, and what should be done if the searcher does not appear sufficiently balanced to handle the information.
- Young people currently in 'care' are often unaware that they can see files, and do not know how to access them. This information must be provided.
- Links should be made to other sources of information, such as education department or police records. As Frank Golding noted: "What are the files not telling you, and where can you go to find that out?"

Principles for making and keeping a record that supports the identity needs of the child or young person in 'care'

In large group discussion, following the presentations related to 'Lessons from the past', participants identified a number of principles to guide practice across the record continuum. From the discussion, there appeared to be a broad sense of agreement on these principles. Subsequently they have been grouped according to whether they relate chiefly to the process of recording or to the content of the record. They were:

Process

- Recognise that the record is a precious possession, and possibly the child's only link to the past.
- Make records within a culture of respect and inclusiveness.
- Conjoint construction of the record with the child.
- Capture multiple voices in the record: especially the child's, the parents' and the carers' voices.

Content

- Include information about strengths (particularly about the child, but also about the family).
- Assume that the child (and the magistrate) will read it: give reasons for decisions.
- Include reasons for placement and information about the child's family.
- Make a narrative that captures the story of daily life from the child's perspective.
- Visual images are evocative and powerful, and should be made and retained.

These principles generated from the workshop participants overlapped in part with some beginning propositions for sensitive child-oriented recording, identified in the preliminary paper and presented by the research team to the group after the group's own principles had been discussed. These were:

- Accuracy – factual correctness, fair depiction of life events
- Balance – multiple perspectives, strengths as well as problems
- Accessibility
- Readability

- Accountable (reasoned) in light of explicit policy of day: e.g. child's best interests, ecological perspective, developmentally appropriate, family sensitive, stability/permanency, culturally competent

Barriers and enablers to principled, child-focused records across the record continuum and improvements needed

Participants identified a range of barriers and enablers to good recording practices, along with improvements needed. Reflecting the diversity of the stakeholders present, and the depth of their experiences in the field, these contributions included practice issues, administrative and systems issues, and policy and funding issues.

Barriers

<i>Making the record</i>	<i>Storing the record</i>	<i>Accessing the record</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Crisis laden work: case managers can spend little time with children and young people on life story work and 'discretionary' recording. - Placement changes. - Volume of information. - Lack of legislative basis for file content and access. - Lack of clarity about purposes, ownership and content. - Poor integration and incompatibility of recording systems (affecting content and full timely coverage) – e.g. LAC/CRIS/CRISSP CRISSP/IRIS; case file/ financial records. - Disconnection between CSOs and child protection. Is it possible to generate a full placement history for a child from CRIS or CRISSP? - Inconsistent collection of a child's basic identity documents. - Holders of information (carers) are separate from recorders (case managers). - True cost of LAC implementation has not been covered. - Overall inadequate staffing in out of home care. - Informal poor recording via email. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of climate controlled premises. - Lack of clarity about retention: e.g. Keep only electronic and destroy paper? - Different parts of an organisation may hold records simultaneously – need to keep these connected. - The maintenance of historical records is unfunded. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Confusion over application of Freedom Of Information and Privacy principles and legislation and how these interact. This gives rise to risk averse practices, including extensive 'blacking out' of information about others on case files. - Lack of specific regulatory or enabling legislation, comparable to Adoption legislation. - Lack of sector wide standards, policies and practices. - Incomplete or poorly managed historical holdings. - In some agencies, significant retrospective gaps due to deliberate and accidental destruction. - Some records have been impoverished by what was interpreted as a ban on taking photographs of wards of state.

Enablers

<i>Making the record</i>	<i>Storing the record</i>	<i>Accessing the record</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Therapeutic care and care teams: carers are full participants. - Child-centred supervision and agency culture - Good induction and training in child-centred recording. - Unique identifier for every child? - Standards - Respect for people's belongings - Staff and management competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Archival expertise - Technology, space, and funding for scanning, cataloguing, maintenance of records - Appropriate hardware and software, space, funding - Management commitment - An electronic register of what is held where. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dedicated heritage and information staff, with good links to current practitioners. - Clear records about the organisation's holdings: what information is available, in what form and where. - A record of what information the agency does NOT hold. - Clear access procedures and an orientation to rights. - DHS is working on improving the ability to track all departmental records: scanning all ward index cards and storing these in a central database. - Increased availability of published institutional histories and autobiographies.

Improvements needed

<i>Making the record</i>	<i>Storing the record</i>	<i>Accessing the record</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More common understandings and policies across the board about what must be recorded and how, in order to facilitate the child's continuous development of a positive sense of identity. - Include writing, archiving and history in relevant pre-service education. It was suggested that all students be asked to write a report on themselves, with a view to it being accessed in 20 or 30 years time. - Make links between recording and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Office of the Child Safety Commissioner's Charter of Rights for Children in Care. - Compatibility of recording systems. - Need for hard resources: computers and relevant software scanners for photos etc, cameras. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More common understandings and policies across the board, including shared understanding of whose records are they (DHS, CSO, child), and who stores them, where and in what format. - Flyers from CREATE and CLAN to go in treasure boxes? - Lack of standardised policies and practices around collection and storage of photos and other records of daily life; keeping and storage of memorabilia could be improved. - Consider cyber-records. - Need funding to employ people to image and catalogue files. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A support network of people trained to help people access records. - Make right to access information about self and parents a compliance issue by legislating. - More common understandings and policies across the board, including Retention Disposal Authorities. - Need for policy and practice guidelines about how the adult child can question material in the file and add to it or correct it.

Complexity of ‘the record’- gaps and tensions across the recording continuum

In the light of mapping, both in the preliminary paper and in the workshop, some of the complexity of the system of records for children and young people ‘in care’, participants collaboratively and individually identified a number of commonly occurring gaps in the record, and areas of tension or confusion across the record keeping continuum. Often these echoed the points made in other sections of the workshop. This table highlights some of the specific gaps and tensions that arise in daily practice.

<i>Making the record</i>	<i>Storing the record</i>	<i>Accessing the record</i>
<p><i>Fragmentation</i> With multiple placements and case managers, and multiple locations of information, how can the field ensure a coherent record? These include: whole LAC system, daily notes by residential care workers and other carers, minutes by agency case manager or unit managers, incident reports and case notes.</p>	<p><i>Fragmentation</i> Dispersal of records: in the residence, with case manager, in other program areas of an agency; across agencies. Fragmentation creates the risk that information will not be available when sought.</p>	<p><i>Fragmentation</i> Variation between agencies with respect to who manages the release of information (level of hierarchy), including the offer of counselling and management of sensitive information</p>
<p><i>Format & scope</i> Commonly records are duplicated- both electronic and print. This involves time commitment to scanning and duplicating and associated costs. Agencies vary in their approach to what should be duplicated.</p>	<p><i>Format & scope</i> Variable agency practices about what is stored in paper form and what is stored electronically, or both. This affects what information might be readily retrievable.</p>	<p><i>Format & scope</i> Need for administrative history of the agency and its record keeping to help explain the records.</p> <p>Need for ability to search the records from various starting points: client’s first, last or assumed names; caseworker name; program area; date range.</p> <p>Need good central file register in agency and at DHS.</p>
<p><i>Purpose and ownership</i> Who is the record for? If for the child, who might search later, much of the ordinary detail of daily life might be missing, and this is significant when children will not have family members to turn to in order to fill gaps in memory.</p> <p>Who needs what information? Some participants believe carers need only such information as is necessary for a safe & nurturing placements, yet they are also asked to collect information. There is some ambiguity about what is in the domain of private family life and what is an official function for foster carers.</p> <p>Should files document who has accessed those files?</p>	<p><i>Purpose and ownership</i> Need for guidelines and practice notes about who keeps what information and how.</p> <p>Training in privacy and confidentiality for carers; what happens to the information that they hold and how is it protected?</p> <p>Should files document who has accessed those files?</p>	<p><i>Purpose and ownership</i> Young people currently in ‘care’ not aware of rights to access information and how to do it.</p> <p>How can FOI issues be addressed so that people who have been in ‘care’ can get important information about siblings and family members without harm to others parties? The family and its context over time is a part of the sense of self.</p> <p>Should files document who has accessed those files?</p>

<i>Making the record</i>	<i>Storing the record</i>	<i>Accessing the record</i>
<p><i>Child-focused content</i> General agreement that there is an inadequate record of life in 'care' from the child's or young person's perspective at the time (including positive experiences).</p> <p>Life books/boxes: Some agencies involve the child or young person in compiling and collecting information to be stored: school portfolio, cards, photos, favourite toys not in use, teeth, x-rays, personal correspondence including emails. Such practice cannot be assumed to be universal.</p> <p>Life books may be the responsibility of the carer, case manager or case support worker. This depends on training, skills and commitment of carer. Generally we need carers to be recording or keeping the kinds of information a parent would keep.</p> <p>LAC- has improved child-focused recording; but lacked follow up training. Many staff are not imbued with its primary goals, and see it as an accountability tool. There is insufficient time allowance in caseloads. Practice advice with LAC should be reviewed as it may be faulty (e.g. assumptions about age of toilet training.)</p> <p>Insufficient funding for case management when a young person enters 'care' in adolescence: may not get historical information.</p> <p>Specific identity tools, such as birth certificates, health care cards and Medicare numbers are not routinely gathered but may only be requested when a young person needs identification for employment or gaining a driver's licence.</p>	<p><i>Child-focused content</i> Life books or 'treasure boxes' tend to be kept with child on location. These tend to leave the placement with the child: what is the safeguard against loss (especially when adolescents abscond or are leaving for a vulnerable 'independence'); should here be a nominated community friend who holds key documents? Should agencies keep certified copies of key identification materials and scanned images of the contents of treasure boxes?</p> <p>Life stories have shortest retention period on current record keeping standards.</p> <p>Some materials (e.g. school reports) may go to the guardian rather than to carer or agency and may not get entered into LAC nor put in the child's repository.</p>	<p><i>Child-focused content</i> Some agencies give the child copies of court reports and court orders. Who has the right to release what kinds of information, such as these reports and specialist assessments?</p> <p>We should remember that there are some former care-leavers who have very scant personal information available to them, and whose lives will need to be illuminated by other contextual information. There are also some who were cared for in informal care who may approach agencies but who will have no records at all.</p>
<p><i>Family focused content</i> Need more careful, considered, not derogatory, descriptions of child and family, while not 'sugarcoating' painful realities. That is, we need to balance positive with hurtful information. Common gaps in information: family circumstances, reasons for lack of contact. There was little discussion of how well files incorporate parents' and relatives' own information about the child and family.</p>	<p><i>Family focused content</i> Should the agency keep copies of correspondence sent to parents - an important measure of contact.</p>	<p><i>Family focused content</i> Many people searching for history receive files with large sections of information pertaining to other family members blacked out. There is a need for clarity about privacy and freedom of information issues for this population: how are family details to be released?</p>

Discussion and suggestions for further attention

In this early phase of the Current Practice strand of the *Who Am I?* action research project, the research team has sought to build an overview of the recording issues impacting on the sustained development of a coherent and positive self-narrative for children and young people 'in care'. In doing so, we have considered the *record keeping continuum*, that is, the processes of *making*, *storing* and *accessing* the case records and other information. We have begun with the assumption that we can learn from the experiences of those adults who were placed 'in care' as children and who have subsequently sought their personal and family histories through access to files held in the statutory and community services. Their stories have taught us that there are many difficulties in locating information, and that when it is located, it may be scant, biased or unbalanced, derogatory, inconsistent, illegible or riddled with omissions. Even so, the process and the result can be vital to the searcher's understanding of his or her life, and rewarding in terms of information obtained and contacts renewed. Those who have followed this path have shown that there is a need for guides to the complex search process. Support during the process of reading and interpreting files can be very valuable, but it should be given in the spirit of an equal adult-to-adult relationship, and not recreate for the searcher a sense that he or she has returned to being a powerless 'client'. These are indeed cautionary lessons for current and future practice and, in the first workshop that is the subject of this report, participants expressed their conviction that all new and existing workers in the child protection and care sector should be well acquainted with these messages, and should incorporate the learning into their own recording practices.

On the basis of these discussions, the research participants identified a number of principles which should apply to the content of the record of the child or young person 'in care' and to the process of record making:

- The record is the child's precious possession, possibly the only link to the past.
- Make records within a culture of respect and inclusiveness.
- Conjoint construction of the record with the child.
- Capture multiple voices: especially those of the child, the parents and the carers.
- Include information about strengths of the child and the family.
- Assume that the child (and the magistrate) will read it: give reasons for decisions.
- Include reasons for placement and information about the child's family.
- Make a narrative that captures the story of daily life from the child's perspective.
- Visual images are evocative and powerful, and should be made and retained.

Yet it was also acknowledged that while we judge the past, it is difficult to know how the present will be judged by those in the future, given the dynamic nature of the field and the inevitability of change. It was clear from the discussion that there was general agreement with the propositions advanced in the preliminary discussion paper, namely, that the recording issues are even more complex than in the past, for many reasons:

- Increased formal requirements.
- More comprehensive assessment and copious information collection.
- The mix of electronic and paper formats.

- Increased recognition of the child's own need for information during and about the 'care' experience, expressed in the development of tools like 'Life books'.
- Frequent placement changes and reunifications with family, involving changing carers, CSOs and CSO workers, and departmental workers and regions.
- A reliance on more 'private' than institutional 'care' – foster, permanent and kinship care.
- Complex accountability processes between CSOs and government, through varied report systems, critical incident reporting and administrative data set requirements.
- Increased expectation of client access to files, accompanied by more active community and consumer voices in the policy environment.

Of all these changes, changes in technology loomed large as an issue for practice identified at the workshop, through the recognition of the complex relationships between paper records and multiple electronic recording systems, and recognition of the speed at which electronic systems are changing.

Against this background, it is not surprising that this overview of children's records yielded a picture of *tensions and questions* in the field, with workers and managers involved in a balancing act between competing demands and needs, particularly when asked to focus on the question of how recording practices across the record keeping continuum do or do not support children and young people in their on-going construction of identity. Much of workshop focused on *making the record*, but there were also strong concerns raised about *storing the records*. The discussion of *access to the record* has begun with a focus on the past and its implications for future access, and especially how searchers are best supported. There has to date been little discussion in this research group of restitution or healing activities following the file search. This raises the question of whether these issues are seen as outside the domain of this study.

At this early stage, the project cannot produce clear recommendations for the future, though participants *did* consistently argue that we must ensure that standards, procedures and tools *support* practice with and for the child, rather than *drive* practice to serve others' ends.

The emergent themes or tensions are summarised here in the following terms:

- *Improving the child's voice in and ownership of 'the record'*
- *Improving the coherence of the narrative*
- *Recognising the place of the family in its culture in the child's evolving life story*
- *Realigning legislation and standards with the best interests of the child*
- *Managing technologies for information durability*
- *Too much or too little information*

These tensions span practice, administration and policy domains, and most have implications for funding both practice and infrastructure. Each of these themes gives rise to many questions and areas for further attention, as demonstrated in the findings above,

potentially taking this research project in many directions. In this concluding section, we have suggested a few potential areas for further investigation for the consideration of the research consortium, chosen with a view to how the child's identity needs can help drive practice and procedure.

Improving the child's voice in and ownership of 'the record'

It was clear from the workshop that care sector practitioners juggle multiple and conflicting accountabilities in their recording practices, to the Court, to the Department of Human Services (both child protection and placement and support), to their own organisational hierarchies and of course to the child, the family and the carers. Under these conditions, it is difficult to treat the file as primarily *for and belonging to* the child, even though this might be what they would prefer. This raises a number of important questions for further attention:

- Is it possible to develop a hierarchy of accountabilities?
- How can files be made more transparent to the child while 'in care'?
- Should there be attention to which aspects of the record clearly belong to the child, not to 'the system'?
- How can we ensure that the child's perspective on 'care' experiences is more systematically included?

Some of these questions will be addressed in part in Workshop 2, and all need to be included in the ongoing deliberations of the research group.

Suggestions for further consideration by consortium (subject to the outcomes of Workshop 2):

- That the project supports a review of the practice and utility of the *Looking After Children* system, from the perspective of the child's construction of a coherent positive self-narrative, and drawing on the experiences of children and young people 'in care' and front line workers.
- That the project explores the feasibility of a more consistent approach to building, with the child, the child's own portable and durable personal record, using creative methods appropriate to the child or young person.

Improving the coherence of the narrative

From the perspective of the child's entitlement to a clear life story, the case records offer a very fragmented picture, with little narrative coherence. Elements of the story are dispersed across multiple sites and record formats. Sometimes the accounts exist in story or tangible form in Life Books or 'treasure boxes', but these are often built at a particular transition point, and may miss critical periods of the child's life. Because files are made up of entries and accounts from multiple stakeholders, there are multiple 'truths' recorded about the child's life. For a child who might live in many different homes and perhaps lose contact with family members, maintaining truthful, coherent and accessible case

records must be understood as a fiduciary responsibility: 'the system', and the many workers within it, *hold in trust information crucial to the child's evolving identity*. During and after 'care', the child must be able to gain access to a coherent life narrative.

Suggestion for further consideration by consortium:

- That this project consortium supports work by the Department of Human Services to establish one unique identifier for each child entering the protection and care system, checked against the child's birth record. The birth record is the first building block for a continuous identity, and without a unique identifier, it is difficult for the Community Service Organisations and the Department of Human Services to coordinate their efforts and ultimately to help information seekers.

Recognising the place of the family in its culture in the child's evolving life story

This workshop gave support to the view that the family is a central part of the self; information about the family is essential to the child's identity. In addition, the family in turn is located within its cultural context, and this too is part of the child's heritage and future. These are both enduring concerns in the field. This theme gives rise to many questions, including:

- how family members can be and are involved in *creating* the child's record (e.g. involvement through LAC in monitoring the child's development; or, as in an example given, seriously ill parents making video for and about the child and family);
- whether family members are and can be involved in *storing* important information for the child for the future (e.g. keeping copies of key documents, when this is appropriate and safe);
- *how* information is recorded about the family, its members, its lifestyle and its culture, and whether this is given due attention and respect in the record, and whether the child is helped to understand this information; and
- how information about family members is handled at the point of file *access*.

Suggestion for further consideration by consortium:

- That the place of the family be kept open as a topic on the running agenda of the project.
- That the family's role in LAC and Life Story work receive particular attention at Workshop 2, 2009.
- That the approach to documenting the child's cultural heritage with a view to assisting the development of a cultural identity be begun in Workshop 3, 2009 and kept on the project running agenda thereafter.

Realigning legislation and standards relating to access to information with the best interests of the child (including child-as-adult)

While there is serious concern about the heavy compliance demands upon workers, and how these curtail their time spent with and on behalf of their clients, there is also a view that unless the field has appropriate enabling legislation and agreed standards of practice, it is difficult to argue for change and for funds to achieve change. This is a particular concern in the file search and access phase for 'care'-leavers, but has implications earlier in the process. Some of the questions raised included:

- How can we assist 'care'-leavers to develop skills in searching and interpreting records?
- Does Adoption legislation provide an appropriate model for information access for 'care'-leavers, or must new approaches be taken for this population, especially with respect to freedom of information procedures and their interaction with privacy principles.

Suggestions for further consideration by consortium:

- That this project consortium advocates for and contributes to a review of the Freedom of Information legislation to better accommodate the needs of 'care'-leavers.
- That this project continues to examine and disseminate knowledge about best practice in file access for children and young people in 'care' and for 'care'-leavers.

Managing technologies for information durability

The research participants raised many issues relating to the difficulties of file storage, and the implications of this for future file access. There was concern about:

- the vulnerability of paper records;
- the need for and costs of electronic duplication of paper records (and paper duplication of electronic records);
- the rapid changes in electronic systems and their limitations and incompatibilities;
- the unexplored potential for the use of the internet for client-held records;
- the difficulty of ensuring sufficient contextual information for former 'care'-leavers to be able to interpret their records; and
- the low knowledge base in the field to keep up with an exponential growth in holdings and changing archival options and practices.

Suggestion for further consideration by consortium:

- That the current practice and archival strands of the *Who Am I* project work together to develop the research agenda and future workshops with respect to archival practices in the field, and explore and disseminate best practices in archiving for this field.

- That the project advocate for increased funding for developing the necessary skills, hardware (such as scanners, cameras) and technologies for maintaining durable, accessible and linked archives of both case information and contextual information across the sector.
- That the issue of training needs in relation to knowledge and skills for archiving in current practice be listed for future consideration in the project.

Too much or too little information

One tension running through the discussion was the ongoing practice challenge of determining whether too much or too little information is being collected and stored, and how to achieve some balance in what is recorded. The field needs to be vigilant so that young people do not acquire case records that contain copious descriptions of the problems and unacceptable behaviour of themselves and their families, unbalanced by accounts of positive qualities and achievements. This continual challenge does not lend itself to immediate recommendations, but it does need to be kept in mind, and given particular consideration in any further exploration of file content standards or training of workers.

Suggestion for further consideration by consortium:

- This issue of balance in recording be kept on the project's running agenda, and be given consideration at workshop 4, 2009 (focus on training.)

Conclusion

This paper has presented an overview of issues in relation to making, storing and accessing records relating to children and young people 'in care'. It has reported on the first *Who Am I?* Current Practice workshop for 2009, presenting the goals of the workshop, the method of study, and the findings from the workshop and associated submissions. These findings have been organised and analysed in relation to the core focus on the identity needs of children in out-of-home 'care'. In accordance with the action research methodology, the dominant themes have been distilled and the participants in the research have been offered some suggestions for further attention as the project proceeds.

Dr. Lynda Campbell
Research Fellow,
School of Social Work
University of Melbourne

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