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# Who? Am I

## Making Records Meaningful

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

### **Supporting the journey: issues in co-creating a sensitive narrative of the child's identity and experience 'in care'.**

#### **Report of workshop 2**

June 26, 2009

MacKillop Family Services, South Melbourne

#### ***Introduction***

*LAC (Looking After Children) is very confronting as the subject. (CREATE young consultant)*

In Victoria, there has been for many years a standard expectation that children and young people who are clients of the child protection and 'care' services will be involved in meetings or procedures that concern them. Even so, with escalating demands upon workers and problems of staff turnover and the dissipation of the effects of training, practice finesse does not necessarily keep pace with such procedural expectations. At this *Who Am I?* current practice workshop, one young consultant recalled how, as an adolescent 'in care', she had been summoned to a meeting with a variety of professionals, including her physical education teacher, who all then listened as the key worker proceeded to ask the many personal questions that make up the LAC assessment and action form, including the question about her sexual preference. Objecting to this level of disclosure, she asked to discuss these matters in another room. Participants in the *Who Am I?* workshop expressed their dismay that LAC's good intentions for the participation of young people, and for collaboration between professionals involved in a young person's life, had come to so override the process of sensitive engagement with young people, and observance of common courtesies.

In pursuit of meaningful dialogue about the 'care' records created and kept by both professionals and young people, this *Who Am I?* workshop, entitled *Co-constructing Who Am I? Ensuring the voice of the child or young person is at*

*the heart of 'the record'*, involved both advisory group members from the participating organisations including CREATE, the consumer representative organisation for children and young people 'in care', and additional invited practitioners. The above exchange was itself a dramatic example of how the voice of the child or young person gives a distinct perspective on how 'taken for granted' procedures can be experienced by consumers.

## **Workshop aims and method**

The previous *Who Am I?* current practice workshop concluded that current records for children and young people 'in care' are fragmented, have an incoherent narrative of the child's life and identity, and often fail to adequately represent the voice and experience of the child or young person. This workshop sought to 'drill down' into those issues, and to examine the core research questions for the current practice strand of *Who Am I?* from the particular perspective of how children and young people are actively involved in the construction of their record while 'in care', and the process of collaboration between them and professionals. Those core research questions are:

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?

While the workshop was alert to the variety of routine case records, it paid particular attention to two practices which have significance for how children 'in care' are portrayed: the *Looking After Children* (LAC) assessment and case management system, and *life story work*, often expressed in the creation of biographical 'life books'. The aim of the workshop was to build on the findings of the previous workshop with respect to LAC and Life Story work, by exploring how workers might ensure that the child's or young person's voice is clear and present in the record.

Prior to the workshop, participants were provided with several papers:

- *Rights and co-construction of the record*: a summary of the key relevant articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and from the Charter for children in out-of-home care developed by Child Safety Commissioner. This paper invited participants to reflect upon the degree to which these articles were routinely complied with in their organisations. (Two response forms were returned for inclusion in the data set.)
- *Looking After Children – Issues for reflection and discussion*, a review of issues arising in the recent literature around the case management system *Looking After Children* (LAC), from the particular perspective of children's participation rights. This paper raised a number of questions for organisational representatives to consider.

- *A collaborative life story archive? Issues for reflection and discussion*, a literature review and discussion paper about life story work for children ‘in care’. This was accompanied by a preparation sheet. (One was returned for inclusion in the data set.)

The workshop took the form of a series of presentations to which participants made written and verbal responses individually and in action learning groups.

Presentations included:

- How one agency with a commitment to client participation in recording (St Lukes Anglicare, Bendigo) has sought to engage carers, children and parents in the co-construction of the child’s record while ‘in care’ (Di O’Neil).
- Summaries of the *Looking After Children* and *Life Story Work* preliminary papers (Lynda Campbell and Lauren Cowling respectively).
- A panel of speakers on the topic *Looking After Children: Can we, and how can we, make it work as a practice tool for co-constructing a sensitive record of the child’s life while ‘in care’?* (Sarah Wise, Anglicare; Meaghan Holden, Berry Street; Jim Oommen, Office of the Child Safety Commissioner; Michele Werner, Department of Human Services, Eastern Region).
- Presentation, active commentary, and an experiential exploration of the topic of records and identity by CREATE, Victoria, represented by two young consultants (Rachel and Isla) and the coordinator (Jo McMahon.)

Following the workshop, notes were collected from all learning groups and from research team members, and the comments from these, with the few preparation forms that were returned at the workshop, were entered into a data document ( 27 pages in all), which was then analysed for themes and directions. The results of that analysis are presented below.

## ***Findings: Themes from workshop sessions***

### **Routine recording**

Di O’Neil’s presentation made a number of distinct points about the philosophy St Lukes has endeavoured to enact. The stance is collaborative, both with children and with their parents, and the key assumptions are:

- Recording is an integrated part of our practice, not an ‘add on’.
- Recording gives us the capacity for reflective practice.
- Recording is done with the client; children should be involved collaboratively. The client and organisation each hold a set of records.
- Recording is a way of engaging other people – such as parents and relatives – in the child’s life while ‘in care’.

It was noted that caregivers differ in their systems of recording and ways of telling children’s stories, but there are examples of excellent practice, including:

- An older carer of an infant who (using the *Publisher* computer program) wrote an account of the child's entry to care then asked the mother and grandmother to check and amend this. She subsequently wrote a regular story of the child's life 'in care', using the first person voice as if the child were speaking. This account, with photographs, goes to the family on a fortnightly basis, and they add to the story. The 'first person' strategy appears to have had the effect of engaging the family, and reducing their potential resentment of the carer's role with the child.
- An adolescent is working on his life book at home on weekends. It is entirely his, neither a part nor product of the organisational record.

The storage and safekeeping of records created by carers and young people is of concern.

***Reflection on routine collaborative recording.***

Participants identified the following issues as central to the ongoing deliberations of the *Who Am I?* project:

- *Clarifying ownership:* Who owns the record and how can it be kept safely? Can ownership of different aspects be differentiated? E.g. Should LAC records belong to the child?
- *Sensitive collaboration:* Be child-centred and co-construct the record but be cautious and think about how to involve children without overwhelming them, and without putting too much responsibility on them for storage of the record.
- *Achieving balance:* Seek to strike a balance between too much and too little information, while ensuring critical identity information and photographs are gathered and kept.
- *Building relationships and connectedness:* Build relationships with members of the child's family to assist in creating identity-focussed records. Workers should record positive interactions between children and their parents or other family members, and not just failures to visit or problematic exchanges.
- *Continuity:* The creation of the archive is continuous, consistently reinforcing who the child is, and providing a reflection of the passage of childhood. Childhood is a resource one draws on for the rest of one's life.
- *Fairness:* Make provision for a 'right of reply' on the record by the child or young person, especially in the wake of a critical incident report which tends to be written in response to a crisis, when the young person might not be available for comment.
- *Education:* Children need to be taught to be 'collectors' of things that connect their lives to their ongoing identity and that will stimulate memories in the future.
- *Future-minded/trusteeship:* It is difficult to predict what the child might find useful on the record decades later, but workers need to be alert to this.

The main areas of concern or dissent raised were:

- Worker time and workloads.

- The need for flexibility in methods of collaborative practice.
- Identifying exceptions to the principle of ‘co-creation’: What can children NOT write? Some professional judgments must be made and records kept of these.
- Widespread problems of storage of and access to records.
- Difficulty of engaging some young people (e.g. adolescent males).
- The function of daily records and communication books: Are these part of the child’s record?
- Training issues: accuracy, clarifying facts and opinions.
- The need to include records of the child’s strengths.

***How well is the out-of-home care sector doing in terms of meeting children’s rights to information and participation?***

The responses to this question ranged across a spectrum from statements that children and young people are not really aware of LAC or their rights, to ‘*We include the child in all LAC procedures and records where appropriate*’. In addition, participants noted:

- Participatory practice is sporadic and affected by workload and compliance demands on workers, which override good practice intentions, and erode the support that workers can give to carers.
- Procedures and tools are not designed to facilitate good practice.
- Cultural planning is poorly implemented.

***What conditions enable best collaborative practice in relation to routine record-keeping with children and young people in care?***

- Time. (This was the most frequent response.)
- Flexibility with media and methods.
- Technology for off-site work (laptops, cameras).
- Awareness of future needs – heritage projects assist current practice.
- Child-centred culture promoted from the top down.
- Mutually beneficial recording systems.

***Which kinds of records are least likely to include a child’s perspective?***

Children’s views are least likely to be recorded in (from most frequently mentioned to least frequently mentioned):

- Critical incident reports
- Case notes
- Referrals
- Court reports
- LAC
- The child’s views on placement movements.

***Strategies for ensuring that the child’s voice can be recorded (without being completely shaped by adult constructions):***

There were a number of responses reiterating that practice is patchy and constrained by demands on workers. Strategies suggested included:

- Making the child aware of the right to participate and developing their own history keeping skills and resources (e.g. a camera).

- Reducing the number of formal recording tools.
- Avoiding acronyms and codes.
- Supporting good practice and staff development.

## Looking After Children (LAC )

*Panel presentation: Looking After Children: Can we, and how can we, make it work as a practice tool for co-constructing a sensitive record of the child's life while 'in care'?*

The following key issues were raised by the panel members.

The major problems associated with the LAC records identified by Berry Street in late 2008 were:

- Repetitive and busy forms, not user-friendly or child-friendly.
- Similarity to other mandated recording forms, resulting in duplication of effort.
- The high reporting workload for contracted cases.
- Child Protection staff members are not knowledgeable about nor engaged with LAC.
- There is inconsistent application because of the lack of continued training in the context of staff turnover.

These problems have led to calls for streamlining reporting requirements in order to reduce administrative demands and 'over-planning' for children 'in care'.

With respect to the re-development of the Assessment and Action records being undertaken at Anglicare Victoria:

- These records will be made more appropriate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, disabled children and young people, and those in kinship care.
- There is confusion about the purpose of the Assessment and Action record, which is not intended as a life story, but as a professional assessment and review tool to improve outcomes for children 'in care'.
- The quality of implementation is variable.
- Suggestions for revision include clarifying the purpose, reducing the overall structure and length of the tool, making the language more child-friendly, making a link to life story work, improving the identity section, and retaining some standardised items but allowing more scope for qualitative, narrative recording.

From a DHS perspective, LAC is seen as designed to ensure that children 'in care' are receiving parenting that will help them achieve sound developmental outcomes. It is expected that the assessment process will be undertaken sensitively with young people, carers, family and significant others over a period of up to six weeks, not that it will be a formulaic application of a check-

list. Nevertheless, the administrative burden and problems of interface with other recording systems are understood, and there is still work to be done on these matters. Illustrating the multiple uses of such a case management system, it was noted that LAC data was used in recent successful budget applications for improved funding for out-of-home care.

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner has been engaged in projects directly speaking with young people 'in care', and their feedback has implications for LAC and for other forms of records, including:

- that they are wanting to know more about where they fit in, why they came into care, and the development of their talents and interests;
- that they need life stories, and the 'extra mile' that is involved in helping them build those stories, and particularly the stories of their significant relationships – '*Did they love me, hold me, touch me, want me?*'

CREATE reported that in recent consultations it seems that young people are often unaware of LAC, and that when they are involved, they find the language not child-friendly and the meetings have too many people involved. As there appears to be considerable variation in implementation of LAC across the sector, a need for training is indicated. It would be useful to have an information booklet on LAC and children's rights. The young consultants also identified the need to keep the LAC process focussed on the child, and not allow it to be diverted to parents' wishes and goals. Care needs to be taken to ensure that LAC updates are not '*all negative, negative, negative*', but rather offer recognition of achievements and inducements for change. Help for young people in researching their cultural backgrounds would be appreciated. Above all: '*Really listen.*'

### ***Participants' reflective responses on LAC***

To a considerable extent these comments echoed those made earlier about recording in general, but with a greater focus on LAC and a stronger response to the input from the CREATE team. Participants voiced their concern that the CREATE young consultants had given evidence of what practitioners would regard as 'appalling professional practice'. Many of the comments that best encapsulate the tenor of these responses are included below verbatim.

### ***Purposes***

- (LAC) is a means, not an end!
- It is more than a life book.
- All records serve more than one purpose, and even if the purpose of LAC is not life story work, it *is* still a record of the child's time 'in care' and a source of identity information.
- LAC should be seen as tools to support practice, not check-box social work.

### *Conditions that facilitate good implementation*

- The needs of young people in care re identity, belonging etc must be acknowledged as fundamental human requirements that must be met by service providers. This acknowledgment may need to be driven from highest levels, integrated into legislation, policy, KPIs, training etc.
- A trained LAC mentor in the organisation.
- Sustainability: ongoing training of CSO and child protection workers.
- Supervisors who assist workers with good LAC practices.
- Engage child protection as a key partner in out of home care.
- Collaboration within care teams, but not necessarily through large formal meetings.

### *Child-centredness and participatory practice*

- Keep the child at the centre.
- Absolute importance of talking with the child or young person and helping them with the why questions and the what questions. It's not a matter of filling in forms but of discussion and information sharing.
- Consultation with the child needs to be child sensitive and age appropriate, to avoid giving them too great a sense of responsibility for their circumstances.
- Review developmental goals and achievements from a strengths perspective.

### *Future awareness*

- Be aware that the subject of the record may require access in the future, and also that this is an historical record of practice and experience.
- Some young people will leave care with a strong sense of identity, and some will not - it is important to remember that the worth of LAC, Lifebooks etc will not always come to fruition until adulthood.

In summary, in vigorous discussion participants suggested that it seems that LAC is being used in unintended ways, and risks de-skilling workers, who need to understand that there is no one way to *do* LAC, but that it should rather be used as a tool to inform sensitive conversations with the child and others. It needs to be embedded within a culture of good practice: *'If we start with a child-centred perspective, then everything else should fall into place'*.

That said, from the historical perspective of former care-leavers LAC does offer a consistent process for attending to the child's experience and needs through focussed conversation. The improvement on past practices is marked: *'What I could not forgive was that no-one sat down with me and told me what had happened and what would happen.'*

The multiple uses of LAC were recognised, and it was noted that in the redevelopment of the LAC Assessment and Action Records efforts would be made to think about the document from an historical perspective, and how to use it in a more strengths-based way to record achievements and progress.

## **CREATE presentation**

Early in the workshop the CREATE team engaged other participants in reflecting on their own resources that shaped and maintained their sense of identity as children and young people, noting that children 'in care' also need such resources. They continued to participate actively throughout the day. They drew attention to three phases of identity questioning for the child: *Who was I? Who am I? Who will I be?* In addition, they undertook an experiential exercise on the use of evidence to help build a record that would affirm the identity of a child in placement. Using fragments of evidence from a real child's life, teams of participants were required to answer a number of questions about the child's identity in order to complete a picture of the child.

From this very engaging and successful process several themes emerged:

- The fragmentary nature of evidence, and the need to scrutinise, check, verify and piece it together to complete a satisfying picture of the child.
- The need to search out and pool additional information from credible sources. Group members failed this task on two counts: they did not engage with the mother who was in the room, and ask her advice; they did not collaborate with other teams who had different sets of evidence that would have augmented their own sources.

## **Life Story Work**

### ***Display of life story work models***

A display of life story work materials had been prepared by Lauren Cowling (honours student) and by participating agencies. These included a CD-ROM offering an interactive life story program to be used by young people; folders and templates for collating and interpreting memorabilia; books on life story work; examples from a private family of aged-related life books; and a DVD and book published by a CSO recording a group adventure holiday for young people in care. Please see Appendix A for a discussion of the characteristics of the life story work models displayed.

Participants recorded several main responses to this display:

- There was significant interest in the interactive computer program as a tool for engaging young people in life story work, with questions about whether it can be used for multiple young people, how those stories are saved and made transportable, and what the product looks like when printed. The problems of available hardware and changing technologies were of concern: *'How might a CD made from this program be retrievable in the future?' 'It's a great INPUT method but the storing and management need consideration.'*
- The relative absence of the creative arts (song-writing, music, poetry, sculpture, play-writing and so on) as a form of expression was noted.

### ***Responses to the presentation and paper on life story work***

The preliminary paper and summary presentation discussed the origins and goals of life story work; the child's need to come to terms with traumatic experience as a significant element of the rationale for life story work; the need

for a more flexible approach than a ‘once off’ life book at the point of transition to permanent care; and options for different kinds of life storying practice. The major immediate response to this material was concern that if life story work is made mandatory, it may suffer the same fate as LAC, becoming a matter of routine rather than a creative and personalised approach to each child. Life story work should ensure that the child has a positive experience of identity development and achieves a sympathetic but not ‘sanitised’ understanding of the circumstances leading to placement. The need for training for carers and workers, and for attention to storage and retrieval of life stories was also emphasised. It was suggested that because of workload constraints, the implementation of LAC has forced workers to choose between LAC and life story work, leading to the loss of expertise in life story work, and hence the confusion reported earlier about whether LAC substitutes for life story work.

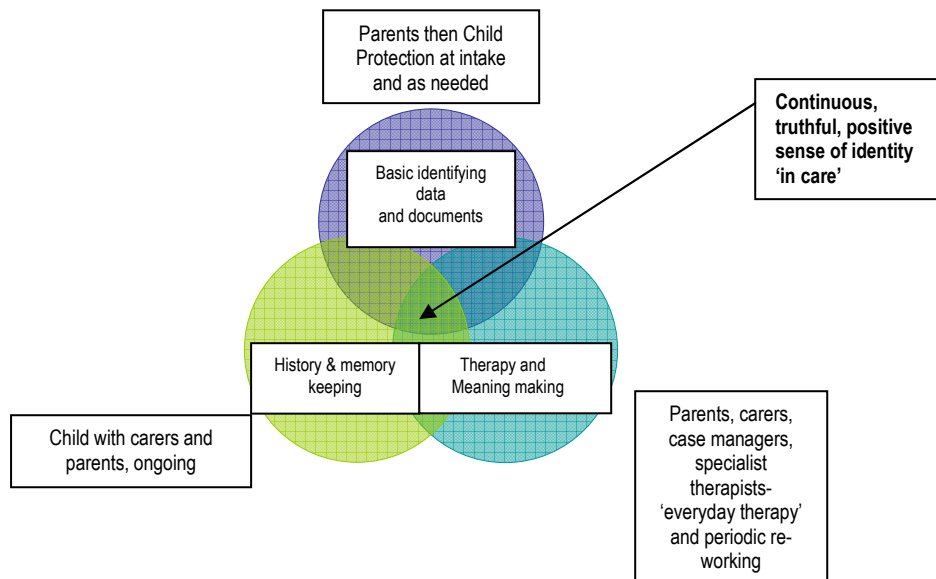
A conceptual device was proposed for considering the elements of life story work, an hierarchical pyramid (see below) comprising a foundation stone of basic identity documents and materials, an added layer of history and memory keeping, and a further refinement comprising therapeutic or ‘meaning making’ work.

***Figure 1: The Life Story pyramid: a conceptualisation***



Participants’ responses to this conceptualisation were sought. The pyramid stimulated considerable discussion, moving toward general consensus that all elements are necessary, and that a hierarchy might not be the best representation of their relationship with each other or their importance in practice. An alternative was suggested – a three way interaction, one possible depiction is given below.

**Figure 2: The interacting elements of life story work: an alternative conceptualisation**



Participants recognised the need for basic identity documents to be created, sought, retained and made available to the child throughout life, and suggested: *'If the state takes the child, it takes responsibility for basic identifying data'*. This was not, however, prioritised over memory-making and keeping nor was it given priority over the therapeutic interpretation of life events, personal experience and interpersonal relationships. The view was put that 'therapy' is not an 'added extra', but something that both occurs through everyday positive life experience while 'in care' and beyond, and is as function of careful explanatory and interpretive work by child protection and other key persons who hold the story of the child's entry to care and care experiences. This is not to diminish the possible need for specialist therapy at critical times. All such development of the life story should be attuned to the child's pace, and it was acknowledged that it is difficult to pursue life story work when a young person is always in crisis. The effect of trauma might be that a young person represses or loses memory of key events, and these may need revisiting at different times if a coherent and sustainable understanding of the protection and care intervention is to be reached.

The role of the parents and extended family members was mentioned several times. They hold key information and need to be collaborators with the child and workers in sourcing documents, constructing and reconstructing history and memory keeping, and making meaning of the evolving narrative. Sometimes their information is contained in case files but it is not made available to the child because of Freedom of Information (FOI) and privacy concerns. To address this problem, it might be necessary to routinely seek written parental consent to release family information in support of the young person's right to information for developing a coherent life story and sense of identity.

***Who should collect and document what, when, for which children and young people?***

Through the preparation sheets and in action learning groups, *Who Am I?* workshop participants recorded their views on the allocation of responsibility for the three levels or elements of life story work. The guiding principle behind these responses was that at different stages different people will have access to the most accurate information, and they should hold the main responsibility for making and keeping the record, though others might need to augment their contribution.

In general, participants suggested that these responsibilities begin with the parents, and elements of this responsibility are then assumed by the State when it intervenes to protect and provide alternate care for the child, particularly the responsibilities for basic identity documents and for information and therapeutic interpretation relating to critical protection and care decision-making. This statutory responsibility is seen as enduring, not fully devolved to Community Service Organisations (CSOs) as care providers, because critical elements of the story of statutory intervention decision-making about placement and the role of the family will always be held by the Child Protection (CP) service. Ongoing documentation of life experience while ‘in care’ was seen as largely the responsibility of the CSO care providers, usually delegated to carers, inclusive of the parents or kin, and increasingly involving the child as the child grows.

It was also noted, however, that the essence of good and successful care is an everyday lived experience, and it is this lived experience of a positive life story that is carried forward by the child without necessary being formally recorded. That is, it is carried forward in a positive and continuous sense of self, personal and social skills, a set of mutually beneficial relationships, and resources within a wider network.

Much of the discussion focussed on the creation of the record, with less attention during this phase of the workshop to storage of and later access to the life story archive, but some implications for these phases of the record continuum were noted. The following table summarises these views.

Life story elements	Who	What	When	For whom? access
Basic identity & records	Initially parents	Birth certificate Family genogram and accurate contact details Medicare card Health care card Important medical information including allergies, immunisations, chronic conditions in both child and family	From birth then ongoing	All children
	DHS (child protection)	Gather above information and retain copies or originals of key documents The story of removal. Initial and later court and CP planning and decision documents	At intake to CP and entry to care, then throughout orders. Ongoing collection may become responsibility of contracted CSO case manager?	All statutory clients

Life story elements	Who	What	When	For whom? access
Basic identity & records (continued)	The child and carers	Bank statements Learner's permit and other licences Medical records Educational records	Ongoing - as new records accrue  Ensure full and accurate identity documentation is available when child /young person leaves care.	All children in placement  Former care leavers <i>must have</i> access to copy of archive of this documentation, securely held by state and/or CSO.
History and memory keeping	Mostly carers in conjunction with child and parents/family members, but Child Protection and care case managers need to shape and support this process and contribute information.	Include: Pictures, keepsakes, photographs and commentary about birthdays, school records and health events, achievements, likes/dislikes, events, concerts, significant people, placement information (where, photos, pets, people who lived there, workers) where the family lives and the frequency and nature of contacts with them, letters Video/DVD/CD records are vital, as they give the chance to see and/or hear oneself, in speech, movement and interaction with others	Ongoing and as events happen. Should not be left till end of placement, but key transitions require additional focus: e.g. move to permanent care, going home, moving to independence-summaries needed at these points.	All children in placement  Ideally, former care leavers <i>should have</i> access to a copy of this archive (perhaps in digital form) securely held by trusted custodian in case of loss.
Therapeutic story	Shared between carer in 'everyday therapy', persons with a long term relationship with the child (possibly care case manager), parents, child protection worker, sometimes specialist therapist	Making sense of memories and events in the family of origin and 'in care'. E.g. Why I entered care, why decisions were made, who cared for me, what happened to me, ongoing family development and journey (new siblings etc)  Frame the narrative in a more easily understood way. E.g. What makes me happy? What have been my strengths, talents, vulnerabilities, values relationships? How have I overcome difficulty?	Required from a young age to provide explanation of why the child is in care. Provide basic information earlier and more sophisticated information and reflective interpretation as the child grows, with special attention at key transitions, e.g. e.g. move to permanent care, going home, moving to independence.	All children in placement

### *A consumer perspective*

The CREATE young consultants made three very distinct contributions to the issue of life story work.

*First, confusion.* They talked of how children and young people typically are confused about the reasons for their entry to care, even when they enter in adolescence and *appear* to be fully aware of why they have been placed. Frequently this lack of understanding is associated with self-blame, and their inability to understand the particular difficulties their parents are experiencing that lead to intervention.

*Second, the role of family members.* Because of this tenuous understanding, it is very important to involve parents and other family members in life story work, both during the 'care' process and afterwards. If workers can facilitate this shared work, there is more chance of a sympathetic but not sanitised understanding of the crises that have occurred.

*Third, protecting life story work during chaos.* Life story work faces particular difficulties in the residential care setting and during adolescent crises. The young person himself or herself can be feeling so upset that they resist life story work or destroy their own efforts and products. Other young people can deliberately or inadvertently destroy the child's life book or 'treasures'. Staff members are rostered and work under high pressure, and have to make heroic efforts to spend time (and sometimes their private time) with the young person on life story work. In addition, the ubiquity of crises and placement changes works against careful storage, retrieval and passing on the accumulated stories and memorabilia of young people when they move from house to house.

### ***Reflections on current life story practice***

Participants were asked to report on the current state of play with respect to life story work in the field, and as with other aspects of recording to support identity development, practice was seen as patchy. Their responses are summarised below.

#### *Which children and young people experience life story work at present?*

Those most likely to have life story work done are younger children, those in stable placements, and those with carers who are motivated to do it. Some care leavers who return to gain information from their files may also be helped to reconstruct the life story.

#### *Who misses out and why?*

Those least likely are older children (especially adolescents not in school), those in short-term placements (emergency placements, or multiple disrupted placements), and those with over-loaded workers or with carers who find it difficult to talk about trauma.

#### *What are the barriers and enablers to life story work?*

Barriers to life story work are believed to be chiefly lack of time (when placements are short-term or workers are overloaded); lack of knowledge and skill in both carers and case-managers; lack of access to full information about the past, both for young people currently in care and former care-leavers; and lack of suitable hardware (cameras, scanners.).

Participants suggested that life story work would be enabled if workers and carers had access to training in the purposes and methods of life story work, web-accessible tools to construct life books and other records, and guidelines and standards for practice.

*What is needed to improve the quality, reliability and equity of these practices across the population of children and young people 'in care'?* Echoing the above, participants called for training both for workers and for carers, sustainable and enduring electronic archives and repositories for memorabilia, smaller caseloads, a commitment by Child Protection to life story work, and involvement of parents and extended family members in children's life story work. The key dilemma is that someone has to 'own' the responsibility for life story work in order to ensure that it happens for all children, and is not left to carer initiative. Should this be the child protection worker who holds the main file? Although staff turnover means that the child is unlikely to have a long-term continuous relationship with a child protection worker, in a system in which multiple placements are common and protective and custodial decision-making is held by the statutory service, child protection provides the thread of continuity in archiving. In addition, because self-blame is common for children and young people 'in care', it is the child protection service that holds the most critical information from the child's perspective, that is: *What happened in my family? Why did I come into 'care'? Why and how were subsequent decisions made about my life?*

## **Priorities for the *Who Am I?* current practice strand**

*It all comes down to the purpose. Why are we doing this? Be child-centred.*

Discussing initial priorities for action research that might help improve the presence of the child's voice in the record of 'care', participants focussed on the following contextual issues.

- The need to restore a sense of purpose and child-centredness in recording: that the record, an integral part of practice, is about and for the child. A critical element of this is ensuring that the child understands and has repeated opportunities to explore reasons for his or her entry to care. The Child Protection worker must be an active partner in this process.
- The need to explore further the factors that promote good child-centred practice, and those that de-skill workers and inhibit good outcomes.
- The need to improve secure retention of the archive, including tangible memorabilia and day to day information about the child's life.
- The tension between standards and flexibility.
- The need for continued training in methods of involving children in records such as LAC and life stories.
- Ensuring that any learning from the *Who Am I?* project filters down to front-line workers and carers.

## ***Issues for future consideration***

On the basis of these workshop findings, we can identify several key issues for the *Who Am I* Advisory Group to consider, in order to help shape the future work of the current practice strand of the project.

Issue	Reflections and Questions to consider
<p><i>Identity and the record</i></p> <p>There are three elements to a coherent, positive evolving life narrative for children and young people 'in care', and these elements of the record interact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic identity documents</li> <li>• History and memory making</li> <li>• Therapeutic interpretation or 'meaning making'.</li> </ul>	<p>A record balancing these three elements requires a collaborative approach between (at a minimum) the child, parents/kin, carer, care caseworker/case manager and child protection worker.</p> <p>Given this interaction, should the <i>Who Am I?</i> current practice strand focus on any one of these three areas? ( Note that attention to basic identity records and therapeutic story work would both require added involvement of Child Protection, and history and memory making would require research work with carers. )</p>
<p><i>The child:</i></p> <p>Inconsistent engagement with children and young people; many do not have contact with workers who talk with them and listen to them.</p> <p>Efforts to include them can be clumsy and counterproductive (eg. daunting and intrusive 'LAC meetings'.)</p> <p>Understanding the reasons for entry to care, and resolving feelings of self-blame and being unloved and unlovable, is of central importance to children and young people.</p>	<p>The importance of recording practices for the young person's continuous sense of a positive and coherent identity and life story has been affirmed.</p> <p>How might the <i>Who Am I?</i> project's focus on case records and identity complement other initiatives to improve child-inclusive practice? Is further action research on implementing contemporary life story work an appropriate vehicle to improve child-inclusive practice? Should priority be given to helping the child or young person make sense of the entry to care decisions?</p>
<p><i>The child's family:</i></p> <p>Parents and other family members hold critical information and interpretations about the child's history, entry to care and future place in the family. Many are not engaged in helping construct the child's identity-supporting archive. Recording of parents' contact with their children (or lack of contact) often focuses on negative interactions.</p>	<p>It is clear that children need access to their parents' and relatives' information to build a coherent life narrative. Might life story work, done well, improve the chances of the child's successful return to the family?</p> <p>Should the <i>Who Am I?</i> current practice stream explore methods for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining parental consent for release of family information to the child</li> <li>• Involving parents and kin in helping the child reach an accurate and sympathetic understanding of the reasons for care</li> <li>• Improving the balance and accuracy in the record of the interaction between the child's journey and the family's journey after placement.</li> </ul>
<p><i>The carer:</i></p> <p>Carers can tell their perspective on the child's life in placement, but their levels of motivation and skill vary.</p> <p>Some are very creative in their documentation and in how they involve children and parents/kin.</p>	<p>Much responsibility for documenting the child's progress in care has been delegated to carers, but this requires strong worker support. To date, there is no direct carer representation on the <i>Who Am I?</i> project.</p> <p>Should/could <i>Who Am I?</i> attend to the training and support needs of carers in LAC and Life Story work, in order to have maximum impact on children's care narratives?</p>
<p><i>The care caseworker:</i></p> <p>High workloads, time poor.</p> <p>Staff turnover, the dissipation of knowledge and the need for continued training.</p> <p>Workers want to work well <i>with</i> children and young people.</p>	<p>Training has emerged as a theme in both Workshops 1 and 2. Training is both more needed and more problematic in a stressed and changing workforce. (Workshop 4 will focus further on training, and this issue should be revisited after Workshop 4.)</p> <p>Should the <i>Who Am I?</i> current practice strand explore the most cost effective training options for improving the child's care record, with a focus on co-constructing the record for and with the child?</p>

<p><i>The child protection service:</i> The child protection service in shapes the record and makes decisions that affect the child's identity journey, but many CP workers have little contact with children in placement. This is experienced by the CSO care providers and young people as problematic, because of the central importance of CP in the child's journey, particularly with respect to gathering core identity documents and explaining critical protection and care decisions and plans.</p>	<p>Although DHS is a partner in <i>Who Am I?</i> there has been no active involvement of Child Protection workers in the project to date.</p> <p>Should <i>Who Am I?</i> seek active representation from regional child protection in the project?</p> <p>If the project is to attempt to improve the gathering, storing and accessibility of core identity documents, can this be done without CP as an active research partner?</p> <p>If the project is to attempt to improve the therapeutic intent and outcomes of life story work, can this be done without CP as an active research partner?</p>
<p><i>The recording and accountability system:</i> The need for standards but the tendency for compliance demands to override purpose and outcomes for children. Practice tools become routinised and corrupted, children and young people are shown disrespect when this occurs.</p> <p>Confusion and debate about the purpose of LAC and its compatibility with and relationship to Life Story work. Can both be accommodated?</p>	<p>Should the <i>Who Am I?</i> project try to engage with the larger systemic issues or look for small achievable gains?</p> <p>Is it appropriate for this inter-organisational consortium to develop and test standards for identity-supporting case recording for and with children and young people 'in care'?</p> <p>Does the LAC A&amp;AR redevelopment mean <i>Who Am I?</i> should NOT focus on LAC, or does it provide an opportunity to further explore the relationship between the LAC framework and other aspects of recording to support the child's development of a continuous and positive sense of identity and life story?</p> <p>(In particular, how might LAC feed into and support life story work?)</p>

## Conclusion

*I'm the one taking the journey, not the workers. They're just there to support me.  
(CREATE young consultant)*

The *Who Am I?* current practice Workshop 2, *Co-constructing Who Am I? Ensuring the voice of the child or young person is at the heart of 'the record'*, considered issues in and methods for involving children and young people in routine case recording, the Looking After Children (LAC) case management records, and Life Story work. Working together, the research partners concluded that child-inclusive collaborative recording practices in the Victorian out-of-home care sector are variable in incidence and quality. Staff turnover and placement changes leave many children and young people ignorant or confused about their involvement in processes such as LAC, uncertain about the facts and possible interpretations of their own life stories, and having unreliable access to basic documentary evidence of their own identity. There is considerable room for improvement on these fronts, as was made clear by the very moving and constructive contribution of members of CREATE, as consumer representatives on the project. Professionals at the workshop reaffirmed their commitment to child-centred practice and record keeping, and echoed the words of the young person (above) that it is the role of workers to support the child in his or her journey through 'care'.

Much of the responsibility for addressing the identity needs of children and young people 'in care' appears to have been devolved to carers. While many carers use their own creativity to build good personal archives with young people and their families, this is to a large extent dependent upon the carer's own knowledge and skill, and on the level of information, training and support they receive from over-burdened child protection and care sector workers, who themselves may not have had access to training and resources to support this work. Their organisations may also lack the resources and systems necessary to ensure that the products of such good work are retained for the child's future reference.

These findings give rise to several questions about the priorities for the future work of the *Who Am I?* project. These questions focus on the themes of collaborative practice with children, young people and their families; more effective engagement of child protection workers with children in care and with identity-supporting record making; resolving tensions and confusions between the accountability and practice purposes of recording tools such as LAC, and between different ways of working with children (such as LAC and life story work); and the place of training in building and sustaining quality of identity-supporting practice and record keeping.

Lynda Campbell  
School of Social Work  
University of Melbourne  
July, 2009

## Appendix A

### Characteristics of the life story work models displayed

The models on display included a range of media:

- Photographic scrapbooks
- Lifebooks of varying formats
- Computer programs ('My Life Story' CD-ROM; 'In My Shoes')
- DVDs of the life of the residential unit, adventure-based holidays and events
- Published exhibition folio 'As eye see it'
- Art: LAC Action and Assessment Records were cut up, illustrated and annotated

Characteristics of some these models varied in *scope* and *format*.

#### **Scope:** *Individual; Group; Sector*

Life story work is usually focused around the individual child or young person and sometimes their siblings. Possibilities of recording group and collective experiences and stories were raised in the life story presentation.

- Examples of group work on display included: photographic book of the Debutante Ball; DVDs produced on the life of a residential unit, adventure based holidays and achievements; cutting, illustrating and annotating LAC records to interface with life story work.
- The sector initiative 'As eye see it' might also be considered part of a collective life story archive. This raises the question, *what other possibilities might there be for children and young people to collectively express themselves and learn from each other?*

#### **Format:** *Degree of structure*

The format of the written displays varied according to degree of structure. Some were based on unstructured journaling (through both the child's eyes and carers' eyes). A range of semi-structured proformas (to be completed digitally) have been developed and published life story books are also available.

This brief display showed that there are many ways of capturing the history of the young person as well as helping them develop their identity and life story. While this display was only brief, it still raises the question, *what sort of information resources might be needed to support the development of life story archives with children and young people 'in care'?*