Towards a 'care' record that supports identity construction: Issues for Learning and Development

Current Practice WORKSHOP 4:   23 October 2009

Preliminary Discussion Paper

As an Action research project, the *Who am I?* project has focussed in its first year on collecting and reporting on the knowledge, experience and wisdom already held within the sector. The following discussion aims to re-visit some of the learnings from the Current Practice workshops and to raise some issues for consideration and preparation for Workshop 4.

One of the themes emerging from the *Who am I?* Current Practice workshops this year has been the need for training in the field of identity and the out of home 'care' record. Workshop participants have noted the fragmentation of the child's record as it is created, the difficulties of locating information about 'care'-leavers in the archives, and the dilemmas faced by organisations as they receive requests for former residents to view their files.

Examples of good practice in all these areas have been noted, but the evidence suggests that practice is variable across the sector. While the lack of resources has been noted as a key issue here, this paper and the workshop will focus on learning and development possibilities. In addition to training, the issue of whether the creation of common standards (eg. for life story work) has been raised as a way of bringing the issues of identity and the record to the attention of practitioners, and of providing organisations with a path forward in this area.

1. What is the situation now?

Making the record
Many of the records currently being created for children and young people in out of home 'care' do not provide a coherent narrative of a child's life and identity. The focus of case notes and many of the required reports is on accountability to management and to the Children's Court, rather than on helping the child form a continuous and positive sense of identity. Records such as the Looking After Children reports and plans are often completed by workers who don't have the reflective space to think through how most appropriately to include the voices of the children or young people and the adults in their lives.

The records are fragmented in a number of different ways:
• Files kept both electronically and on paper
• Many different types of record – court reports, case notes, critical incident reports, medical and educational reports, plans, LAC documentation, life story records, etc.
• Information about one person can be found in different places in a file, in different files, and dispersed across a number of locations and organisations.[1]

Storing the record
Among the partner organisations of the *Who am I?* project (and these represent only a proportion of the out of home 'care' providers in Victoria), there is considerable variability in archiving practice, experience and expertise.

Accessing the record
There is a lack of consistency across the sector regarding the management of releasing files, the interpretation of Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation, and the degree of support provided to those people requesting access to their records.[2]

2. What are the characteristics of documentation which builds meaningful records of identity?

The first Current Practice workshop proposed five key attributes of meaningful record-making[3]. The record should be:
1. *Accurate* -   i.e., factually correct, with a fair depiction of life events
2. *Balanced* -   i.e., including multiple perspectives, and strengths as well as problems
3. *Accessible*
4. *Readable*
5. *Accountable* - i.e., decisions should be understandable in light of contemporary policies

Meaningful records also include[4]:

- multiple voices, particularly of the child, the parents and the carers;
- information about strengths, about the child and also about the family;
- reasons for placement, details of other decisions and information about the child's family;
- information about the child's cultural background (particularly for children who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or are from "CALD" backgrounds;
- narratives of daily life;
- visual images.

3. Examples of good practice in record-making

The following is a preliminary list of good record-making practice emerging from the *Who am I?* project[5].

- scrapbooking work done by carers
- provision of life story kits, including life story books and memory boxes.
- Inclusion of a photo CD in a young person's file
- Creative life story work by carers (in both residential 'care' and home-based 'care'), using visual and narrative information
- Creative use of internet tools (eg. Myspace, Facebook)
- The involvement of the child or young person's family in the creation of a life story
- Efforts to improve daily recording so that personal information is kept separate from that of other young people and not 'hidden' in operational details (residential setting)

> ***Do you know of other examples of good recording practice?***
> ***If so, please note them down at the workshop or email them to***
> ***mkertesz@unimelb.edu.au .***

4. Good practice in releasing records

Discussions about good practice in the workshops have been grounded and deepened by the contributions made by participants who have been in 'care' themselves. – 'care'-leavers, Forgotten Australians and members of the Stolen Generations. These insights have particular relevance for organisations and practitioners releasing records.

A number of key issues have been raised in the workshops and in other discussions. Like issues of creating the record, possible solutions lie in a

combination of structural change, better resourcing and learning and development strategies.

- Problems in gaining access to information regarding immediate family members.
- The frustrations (and emotional cost) of having to apply to multiple organisations for personal records because they are not kept in one place or by one organisation.
- Long waiting times between requesting and receiving files (up to 8 months).
- The need for emotional support and even outreach for people asking to view their files.

> **How can the sector and the Who am I? project best address these issues?   Please note any ideas down at the workshop or email them to mkertesz@unimelb.edu.au .**

5. How do we achieve better recording practice? - conceptualising the record[6]

A prominent theme emerging from Current Practice workshop discussions to date has been the unwieldiness of current recording requirements – the number of different documents to be completed, the repetition of information in different documents and tools, and the difficulty for practitioners of understanding how the different reports, plans, records and tools relate to each other. Many practitioners view recording requirements as a barrier to good direct practice with children and young people.

A revision of the current recording and reporting requirements has been called for and agreed to.[7]   In the meantime, there are a number of possible ways to think about recording tasks, as they relate to identity, which can contribute to clearer thinking about record-making.

1. *Ownership of the record.*
   Different records pertain to different parts of the 'care' system. Court reports belong to the Children's Court, case notes and other planning documents may be owned by the care organisation, life records such as LAC, life story work, cultural support plans and memory boxes could be seen as belonging to the child[8].

2. *Specific recording tasks and the structure of the file.*
   Where does a piece of information fit in the file as a whole? One piece of information may be relevant to a range of record types and can be cross-referenced in the file or used for accountability, planning, therapeutic or historical purposes.

3. *Values.*
   The task of recording may be integrated into an organisation's general practice framework, defined by that organisation's values.

4. *Purpose of the record.*
   Thinking about the purpose of each piece of recording may make it easier to link the recording task directly with practice, so that the two go hand in hand. Always the record has the double task of informing and supporting current practice, and creating the story and the context which can be stored for the benefit of 'care'-leavers in the future. "The archive is a live thing, living in retirement for a while."[9]

   Discussions at workshop 2 about conceptualising life story work produced the conceptualisation illustrated below. Life story work has three components: basic identifying data and documents, history and memory keeping, therapy and meaning making – each of these components was seen as equally important. This conceptualisation may have a broader application than life story work only. It has the potential to act as a framework for all recording about a child or young person's life.
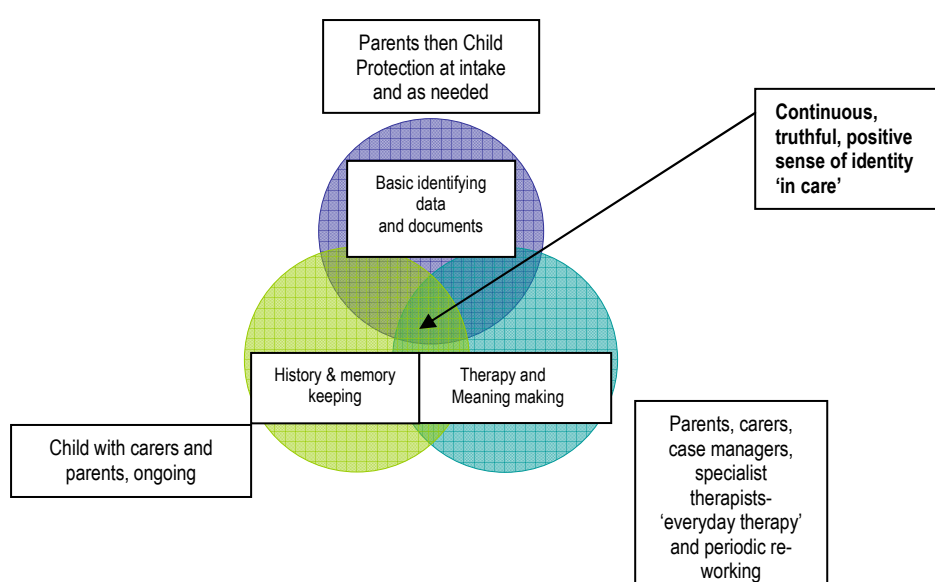
6. How do we achieve better recording practice?
   ## - learning and development

What does it take for the sector, or for individual organizations, to develop recording practices that contribute to the young person's continuous sense of a positive and coherent identity and life story? Given the variable nature of current practice, the need for workforce development is evident.

Formal training is an important and core strategy in growing understanding of the need for recording that takes into account a young people's safety and developmental needs, their current identity needs (including the therapeutic task of assisting them to understand why they are in 'care' and who they are), and their needs for information and understanding in ten or twenty or forty

years time. However, there is always the practical problem of how practitioners can integrate new understandings into their practice, particularly in the current climate of heavy workloads.

It may be useful to take a broader view of the learning and development spectrum, and consider a range of strategies which could operate at personal or team level, within organisations or at a sector level. These strategies are already in operation in various ways within partner organisations and across the sector and could be adapted to build and nurture good recording practices. They include:

- Formal training
- Sharing training experiences with colleagues
- Supervision
- Reflective practice
- Peer supervision / team meeting discussions
- Mentoring
- Organisational culture
- Organisational policies, procedures, practice guidelines
- Working parties / learning circles
- Sector wide standards (see below page 9)
- Sector-wide resources (eg. web-based information, funding for life story materials and other initiatives, life story groups for young people, conferences, sector exhibitions developed by young people, etc.)

7. Preliminary Training Audit

The *Who am I?* project aims to make the knowledge already existing within the sector its starting point. As a first step to understanding the learning and development needs of the sector with regard to personal records, an informal audit of learning and development opportunities known in the sector has been carried out over the last month.

The list below indicates preliminary results. It is a work in progress, designed to prompt additions and revisions.

Making the Record– training and development accessed by organisations in the sector

- *"Good Documentation: writing effective case notes and reports"* (Centre for Excellence)
- "*Write with care: writing and recording for workers in Residential Youth Services*" (2007) DVD and written support material, DEST Commonwealth of Australia
- "*Life story work*" (1999) DVD by NSW Department of Community Services
- Cultural competency training (VACCA)

- Lifebooks workshop (was offered by Mackillop in the past, and may be offered in the future if staff interested in running become available)
- LAC training provided in Barwon region in 2008 (information from Glastonbury)
- Caregiver training – Westcare offers 'train the trainer'.
- *Certificate IV in Community Services (Protective Care): Unit on Maintaining Organisations Information Systems* (Westcare is a training provider) – emphasis on accurate recording of a child's life, but focus more on accountability than on identity construction
- Diploma of Community Welfare (Westcare is a training provider)
- Residential Care Learning & Development Reference Group (possible forum for working on record-keeping practices)

Making the Record– training and development within organisations

- *All out of home 'care' providers* run standardised Caregiver training "Shared Stories Shared Lives". This includes a brief overview of how identity is formed, loss of identity in care, a DVD, and some ideas (eg. diary, photos). The degree of emphasis on life recording depends on the individual trainer.

Good Shepherd	- Good Shepherd internal training on identity & record keeping (OOHC, DV women) - Life story work (planned inhouse training)
Mackillop	- LAC (planned inhouse training)
St Lukes	- Induction training - ½ day on recording out of 3 days - Integration of recording into general practice framework (strengths-based) - Consideration of recording in planned Aboriginal cultural competence building activities. - Use of supervision and team meetings to build and reinforce practice - New discussions on strength recording and archiving to redirect OHC program away from "busyness" towards best practice
Anglicare	- "Foundations of Practice" training for practitioners touches on recording (now delivered through RMIT) - Policy framework – but no training on AV policies - Mentor model (supervision etc)
Berry St	- Online learning system being developed – one of the modules being developed this year will be on privacy &

recordkeeping (files, what is in the case record, structure of case files etc.)

Wesley	- Mentoring system to introduce new workers to case file procedures

	- Wesley has set up two working groups:
	    1. making & keeping the record
	    2. keeping and accessing the record

Glastonbury	- Therapeutic caregivers receive training regarding lifebooks
	- 1 workshop a year for Residential workers on recording
	- Supervision
Westcare	- 3 training modules – What is in a good life record?
VACCA	- Introduction to Case Work Practice (to be rolled out in 2010)
	- Incidental training through "Nikara's Journey"– Working with Aboriginal Children Training
	- Program Specific Training for Out of home 'care' and Family Services

Storing the Record

- On the job training from Archive consultant to coordinator & volunteers (Glastonbury)
- See *Statement of Knowledge for Recordkeeping Professionals* (Records Management Association of Australasia – www.rmaa.com.au)
- Westcare are planning to offer some training on storing the record – format not yet decided.

Accessing the record

- Westcare are planning to offer some training on accessing the record – format not yet decided.

Do you know of other examples of training, learning and development? If so, please note them down at the workshop or email them to mkertesz@unimelb.edu.au .

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8. Sector wide Standards – creating personal records

At the present time, Victorian legislation makes no mention of personal records. These are mentioned in a general way in the Victorian out of home 'care' accreditation standards and also in the Victorian Charter of Children's Rights, as outlined in the table below[10].

VICTORIAN LEGISLATION	VICTORIAN STANDARDS	WEB ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND CARERS
Children, Youth and Families Act, 2005; Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 No mention of the following keywords: 'Care records'; 'Life story work'; 'Personal records / information'; Children's rights	**Out-of-home care accreditation standards:** Evidence guide for Registered Community Service Organisations DHS, Draft July 2007 (Hard Copy) ☑ **'Personal records'** – "include details of a child or youth's placement, their experiences and achievements, photographs, of meaningful and significant events and the names of significant people involved in the child or youth's life that the child/youth can take with them" (**s.2.4**, '*Information Sharing*'; **s.2.5**, '*Information Accessibility*'; **s.5.2**, '*Promoting Development*').	**Charter of Children's Rights** ☑ Right to be provided with information, e.g. my life story, my history, my family's history, the choices I have and where I can go if I have a problem. http://www.cyf.vic.gov.au/__dat a/assets/pdf_file/0009/96066/ch arter_for_children_in_out-of-home_care.pdf

In the context of comments from many practitioners and organisations across the sector that the demands of the current compliance regime constitute a significant barrier to carrying out meaningful life story work, the proposal of more specific standards regarding life story work and 'personal records' has received a mixed response. While many project participants have opposed the addition of another layer of required record keeping to current workloads, others have argued that the specific addition of a standard about life story work is necessary to make this work more prominent in practitioners' priorities.

- Are enforceable standards the most effective means of ensuring the development of good practice in personal record making / storing / accessing?

- A comparison of state standards across Australia can be found in Lauren Cowling's paper (October 2009). Is the current Victorian accreditation standard (as set out in the table above) adequate? Can it be improved by reference to standards and legislation in other states?

- There are a number of life story resources and manuals in existence - drawing on these, would it be useful to develop a standardised approach to life story work and 'personal records' (as has been done for caregiver training)?

This paper has aimed to summarise some of the knowledge held in the sector on making records meaningful, and to stimulate further thinking about how practice can be improved.

The fourth current practice workshop's focus on training, learning and development, and on the possibility of developing standards, will hopefully generate ideas for strategies which will re-focus attention from accountability towards identity construction and meaning-making.

Margaret Kertesz   15 October 2009

Endnotes

[1] Lynda Campbell (April 2009) *Fragmentation or coherence? Issues in record-keeping for children in out-of-home 'care:* Report of Workshop 1., pp. 4,8

[2] *ibid.*, p. 8

[3] *ibid.*, pp. 5-6

[4] *ibid.*

[5] ibid., p. 3.
Lynda Campbell (June 2009) *Supporting the Journey: issues in co-creating a sensitive narrative of the child's identity and experience in 'care':* Report of Workshop 2. (with appendix by Lauren Cowling), p.4

[6] The following ideas have arisen either in the Current Practice Workshops or in discussion with staff from *Who am I?* partner organisations.

[7] Discussions with *Who am I?* partner organisations.

[8] For the articulation of this point, see Lauren Cowling (October 2009) *Australian policy context surrounding children, young people and care leavers' 'personal records'.*

[9] Di O'Neil, discussion, 31 August 2009

[10] Lauren Cowling (October 2009) *Australian policy context surrounding children, young people and care leavers' 'personal records':* Appendix 1

All papers quoted here can be found on the *Who am I?* website at:
http://research.cwav.asn.au/AFRP/OOHC/WAMI/default.aspx