From passive subjects to active agents: Enabling child-centred recordkeeping in social care contexts

Author information

Sharon Vincent (*corresponding author*)
Leeds Beckett University
Corresponding author email: s.vincent@leedsbeckett.ac.uk
ORCID 0000-0003-1127-0172
Sharon Vincent is Professor of Social Work in the School of Health at Leeds Beckett University. She has been conducting research in child welfare and protection for over 20 years. Particular areas of research interest include child death review processes and prevention of child deaths from abuse and neglect, comparative child protection research and policy analysis and early intervention to prevent abuse and neglect. Her work has informed national and local child protection system reform in the UK and elsewhere.

Martine Hawkes
Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia
ORCID 0000-0002-9144-3020
Dr Martine Hawkes is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia. She has worked in the fields of child abuse and neglect, refugee protection, and post-genocide archives.

Justine Ogle
Northumbria University
ORCID 0000-0002-2423-3031
Dr Justine Ogle is a registered social worker and Head of Subject for Social Work at Northumbria University. Her doctoral study explored how the views, wishes and feelings of children were portrayed in reports that were submitted to and generated from child protection conferences in an English local authority Children's Services Department.

Joanne Evans
Department of Human Centred Computing, Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University
ORCID 0000-0002-0837-765X
Associate Professor Joanne Evans is an archival and recordkeeping researcher and educator in the Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University. Through an ARC Future Fellowship (2015-18), she has established the interdisciplinary Archives and the Rights of the Child Research Program to address the lifelong identity, memory and accountability needs of childhood out of home care. This involves the exploration of participatory design and research strategies to develop dynamic evidence and memory management frameworks, processes and systems supportive of multiple rights in records and recordkeeping.

Barbara Reed
Department of Human Centred Computing, Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University
Barbara Reed is currently a part time Research Fellow on Monash University's Rights in Records by Design project. She is also Director of Recordkeeping Innovation and is a consultant in the field of records, archives and information management with more than 25 years industry experience in Australia and the Asia Pacific region. Areas of special interest include digital recordkeeping strategies, recordkeeping metadata and standards development for whole of government initiatives.

Abstract

Keywords

Child-Centred Records, Participatory Practices, Child Protection, Child Welfare,

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Competing interest declaration

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Abstract

This paper describes the findings and implications of interdisciplinary exploratory research conducted by social work and recordkeeping informatics researchers in Australia and the UK. It sought to identify the practices, systems, education and technologies that can foster rights-based, child-centred recordkeeping practices in child protection contexts, exploring the transformation and advocacy work that could be achieved in child protection case note recording and recordkeeping practices and systems through interdisciplinary collaborations.

Drawing from qualitative interviews, focus groups and surveys with Social Work students, Social Work educators and practice educators, and with practitioners working in children's social care (in England) and the child protection services system (in Australia), we identify how practitioners are prepared for keeping records that reflect children's voices and experiences, and identify emerging best practices and persistent challenges.

Focusing on the intersection of child rights, archival ethics, and participatory approaches, this paper adds to the discourse on critical archival studies concerning children and calls for an interdisciplinary approach to reimagine future possibilities for participatory and child-centred practice in which children are not just passive subjects but active collaborators in the recordkeeping process.

Introduction

Overview of child-centred recordkeeping in child welfare systems

Child-centred, participatory recordkeeping plays an essential role in protecting children in child welfare systems. Keeping records of social work activities, judgements and decisions has been a routinized core area of practice throughout decades of changing discourses,

practice imperatives and organizational complexity in children and family social work. Case records include photographs, drawings, diagrams, worksheets and audio as well as records related to investigation and assessment. The day-to-day practices associated with creating and maintaining case records occupy considerable space in a social worker's day, opening an enduring debate over the impact of recording for organisational purposes on the capacity for time-intensive relational social work. Case records have come under scrutiny at points of crisis, usually triggered by the failings of a child protection system, correlating poor recording with poor practice. Although recognized as a core and essential part of social work practice and validated as such in professional standards, recordkeeping is a contested, problematized area of practice that brings to the fore the orientation, purpose, and characteristics of contemporary westernized child protection systems.

Recent initiatives, such as the MIRRA project in England and Wales, which developed a human-centred participatory approach to child social care recordkeeping, and the Australian Research Council-funded Discovery Project 'Rights in Records by Design' and Charter of Lifelong Rights in Childhood Recordkeeping in Out-of-Home Care, aimed to redesign recordkeeping systems through approaches rooted in information rights principles that support responsive, accountable child-centred care.[1] This work was informed and inspired by the tireless advocacy of older generations of Care-experienced people confronted with the deficiencies of their records in meeting their childhood identity, memory and accountability needs.

While there is an increasing awareness of the need for child-centred records among those working in and with child welfare systems, systems often fail to provide participatory avenues for children. The absence of system support for high-quality records creation, a lack of understanding of the impact of recordkeeping, and a need for a more nuanced, systematic integration of case recording skills within social work education are arguably what hold these

problems in place. This underscores the need for continuous improvement in recordkeeping practices to ensure they truly reflect and serve children's best interests.

Background/contextual overview

Child welfare systems in Australia

Over the past decade, numerous reviews, inquiries, and royal commissions have been conducted into Australian child protection systems. These investigations brought systemic failures into the public eye and have been instrumental in advocating for more child-centred approaches in protection and recordkeeping strategies.[2] While these investigations reflect an ongoing effort to address systemic issues and improve child protection practices, Australia's systems are frequently found to be understaffed, struggling with increasing demand, and displaying a reactive, incident-based model of risk aversion, prioritising procedural compliance and accountability over the child's needs, strengths, culture, complexities, and rights.[3] Such an environment impedes the adoption of child-centred practices that recognize and foster participation as a fundamental right and serve as a crucial protective factor.

Child welfare systems in England

In England children are recognized as separate in law from their parents, positioning the child as a rights holder.[4] The right to be heard is a paramount consideration outlined in the welfare principle of the Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 2004 legitimising child-centred practice principles in public and private law applications. The Munro Review of Child Protection and MacAlister's Independent Review of Children's Social Care called for a more child-centred system, with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a guiding framework. However, the dominance of a child protection as opposed to family support or children's rights child welfare orientation has influenced a dichotomy in

practice between the upholding of protection rights and participatory rights,[5] with the child protection system arguably upholding the former at the expense of the latter.

Challenges in child-centred recordkeeping

In contemporary social work practice, case recording is a high stakes activity delineating decisions made that may profoundly impact a child's life. Reviews and Royal Commissions in England and Australia have noted the absence of the child's voice in social work records.[6] The contested purpose of case recording in professional practice underlies criticisms levied over what constitutes 'good' and 'poor' case recording. While there remains a tendency to frame the documentation requirements of the work as 'tedious busywork necessary to meet agency and legal mandates,'[7] rather than as a key part of practice, there is a growing call for improvement in case recording to effectively address immediate child safety and lifelong identity, memory, and accountability needs, through child-centred, participatory approaches.[8]

Electronic case records are the hallmarks of contemporary information systems, characterized by their atomized structure[9] and designed to standardize and lineate texts into the core social work activities associated with assessment, planning, intervention, and review. Such activities are enacted in performance management culture concerned with achieving economy of scale, outcome-focused efficiency and effectiveness, creating child protection systems defined by the identification and management of risk and characterized by 'risk aversion, audit and responsibilisation'.[10]

 As an organisational resource, case records produce, legitimize, and regulate the everyday encounters and activities that define the relationship between social worker and service user. As a 'document in action,'[11] the case record is a socially constructed recognisable articulation of professional and organisational knowledge in text form, transforming subjective statements into objective facts. The case record provides an evidence trail for demonstrating

legal, organisational, and professional compliance. The mantra: 'If it's not written down, it didn't happen'[12] has become synonymous with organisational concern for compliance and accountability as hallmarks for safe and effective judgement in safeguarding practice at the expense of strength-based practices which seek to balance relational social work practice with the need for bureaucratic accountability. Within a risk-averse context, the creation and maintenance of case records is perceived by social workers as essential, yet also resource-intensive and time-consuming. This creates ethical tensions between the time needed to develop the quality of relationships required to engage and work alongside children and the organisational requirement to evidence that this has occurred. Within such contexts, professional autonomy to provide timely, responsive, child-centred interventions erodes, with potential negative safeguarding outcomes.[13] Yet, there is limited evidence to suggest the introduction of more rights-informed, strength-based practice frameworks and approaches has repositioned children as agentic partners in recordkeeping.[14]

Arguably, the conceptual dissonance between accountability and relational authenticity in case recording practices is reinforced by regulatory standards and the nature of social work education. Professional standards in England and Australia require qualified social workers to demonstrate accountability concerning the quality of their practice in terms of decision-making, and in England, this extends to demonstrating how case recording documents decision-making.[15] National guidance[16] outlines the requirement for practitioners working with children to record their actions, recommendations, decisions and outcomes but fails to describe effective child-centred case recording. Social work education and training standards set out the attributes required of graduates to practice safely and ethically as social workers[17] but in both nations, the core curriculum is generic, adopting a life course approach to be transferable to diverse practice contexts. Within a cluttered curriculum recordkeeping occupies a discretionary space defined by individual higher education institutions (HEIs).

Despite growing awareness of the detrimental impact of inadequate case recording on children, and recognition of the crucial role that quality recordkeeping plays in promoting safety and wellbeing, the challenges of effectively addressing this in pre-qualifying and ongoing training of child protection practitioners remain opaque.[18] This paper presents the findings of an interdisciplinary, exploratory study conducted by social work and recordkeeping informatics researchers in Australia and the UK that sought to address this gap by identifying the practices, systems, education, and technologies that can foster rights-based, child-centred recordkeeping practices in child protection contexts. The intention was to move beyond describing deficiencies in case records by exploring the potentials and opportunities for meaningful and innovative international and interdisciplinary collaboration between recordkeeping informatics, social work, and child protection practice in system transformations. Focusing on the intersection of child rights, archival ethics, and participatory approaches, we offer insights into how records can better include children and young people as active recordkeeping agents.

Methodology

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How is case recording and other recordkeeping practices represented in the current social work curriculum?

2. What is the experience of social work students in case recording as they transition into the child protection workforce?

3. What is the experience of social work professionals in child protection contexts in developing their case recording knowledge, skills, and practice?

4. What are the perceived enablers and barriers to child-centred and rights-based case recording practices?

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative data from in-depth interviews and focus groups with quantitative data from surveys. The research design enabled a comprehensive exploration of the opportunities for child-centred recordkeeping in child welfare contexts and provided a rich understanding of the perspectives and experiences of participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committees at Monash University and from Northumbria University.

One hundred and thirty-one participants were recruited from three groups (Table 1): (1) practitioners working in the child protection service system in Australia and children's social care in England; (2) Social Work students studying on an undergraduate or master's programme; (3) Social Work educators (SWEs) (academics engaged in curriculum development and/or delivery of social work education and practice educators (PEs) supporting social work students in placement).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Practitioners and SWE participants in Australia were identified through 'snowballing' with initial contacts of the research team recommending other potential participants. Recruiting social work students for interviews relied on recruitment notices circulated by course coordinators and administration staff, and the recruitment period coincided with the mid-year study break for most universities. Consequently, just one social work student was interviewed, and the decision was made to focus on surveys as the primary data collection instrument for students.

English participants were recruited through the North-East Social Work Alliance (NESWA), one of 23 Teaching Partnerships introduced in 2015 to enable effective ways of working

between HEIs and partners. NESWA comprises 12 local authorities (LAs) and six HEIs.[19] Three social work students were interviewed and 12 attended a focus group. All studied at the HEI where the English researchers worked as they were unable to recruit students from other universities. Fewer practitioners were recruited in England than Australia as gatekeepers may not have distributed the survey across the NESWA. Three of the nine SWEs interviewed in England were PEs who contributed a dual practice/SWE perspective which went some way towards addressing the gap in practitioner qualitative data. Two of the Australian SWE participants were PEs.

Forty-two per cent (n=14) of Australian practitioner survey participants worked in the delivery of child protection services; 58% (n=19) in child and family services. There was a crossover of roles among the Australian interview participants, with two of the SWEs, one social work student, and 12 additional practitioners bringing experience as current or former practitioners (n=15 practitioners). Nine of the 15 practitioners who were interviewed worked in child and family services, and six in child protection. In England, 77% (n=10) of practitioner survey participants worked in the delivery of child protection services; the other three worked in children's social care but did not deliver child protection services. One practitioner who was interviewed worked in the delivery of child protection services, the other in children's social care. English SWE and practitioner participants all held a Social Work qualification, as this is mandatory for staff working in statutory social work roles, whereas Australia's child protection and child and family services workforce comprises individuals with various backgrounds, as Social Work qualifications are not obligatory for all positions. The qualifying background of practitioners in Australia was not screened but data collection focused on social work students and educators to facilitate comparison across the two countries.

Three-quarters of the student survey participants were undergraduates (n=19 in Australia; n=9 in England); a quarter postgraduates (n=4 in Australia; n=5 in England). Similar proportions of English (15%) and Australian (17%) student participants indicated they would 'probably not' go on to work in child protection services. English participants were more likely to be 'intending' to do so (62% compared to 39%); Australian participants were more likely to be 'considering' doing so (43% compared to 31%). English student participants were more likely to have had experience of working in children's social care in a paid or voluntary capacity in addition to placement experience (46% compared to 13% of Australian participants).

Data collection and analysis

Data collection was undertaken in 2022. Interviews were held in person or via Zoom, Microsoft Teams or telephone, depending on participant preference. The student focus group was undertaken in person. Surveys were hosted by Qualtrics in Australia, Jisc Online Surveys in England. A semi-structured interview guide and topic guide for the student focus group were developed. Surveys used 'closed option,' multiple-choice and Likert scale items, and open text responses to capture information and examples linked to some closed option items. A survey was not opened for SWEs as there was a limited pool of potential participants, and interview invitations generated a good response rate. Slight variations in the interview guide and survey tool reflected different terminology used in the two countries but did not impede meaningful comparison across the two datasets. Interview participants received an explanatory statement and signed a consent form or provided recorded verbal consent. Survey participants received an explanatory statement at the beginning of the survey and a consent statement to electronically indicate consent.

Audio recordings of interviews and focus groups were transcribed. A cross-country case study approach, where researchers immerse themselves in each case allowing themes to

emerge, can generate rich data. Consequently, data from each country were initially analyzed separately to enable development of a 'country specific story'.[20] The research team then identified common themes and differences. NVivo assisted thematic analysis of the interviews and the qualitative data obtained from open-text survey responses. A coding frame was developed based on the broad research questions, and themes derived from common experiences.[21] Themes and sub-themes were remarkably consistent across the two countries and different sample groups. Quantitative survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics.

Findings

How social workers are prepared for keeping records that reflect children's voices and experiences

There were a small number of responses to the practitioner survey, particularly in England, and some practitioners had practiced for many years, which may have affected their ability to recall how they had learned about case recording. Nevertheless, the most common sources of learning were university, student placements and on the job (Table 2), which was reinforced by the interview data. Notable differences included Australian practitioners placing more emphasis on workplace training, placements and professional development opportunities and English practitioners more likely to cite observation of colleagues and feedback from managers. English students were more likely to say they learned through lectures (Table 3), but the small number of responses must be considered when exploring student preparation.

INSERT TABLES 2 AND 3 HERE

University

The inclusion of recordkeeping in the university curriculum is supported by accreditation standards and guidelines, but child-centred recordkeeping is not explicitly described. Some participants felt universities could do very little to prepare students for the case recording aspect of social work:

> It doesn't matter what they do; you won't experience the reason for that until you're in the job. Until you meet the people; they have a face. Until you are looking back at the recording and thinking: oh, that's not very good; I don't really understand what that says. I don't think you get that understanding until you come. (PE, England)

This may explain why universities offered minimal content on how to undertake child-centred recordkeeping. Another reason may be that social work programmes in both countries are usually generic with no discrete children's modules, so content that is offered is normally threaded through modules on law, ethics, or trauma. In both countries, students requested more prescription, but SWEs warned this risked curtailing critical thinking:

> Something that I find interesting was just how there was less critical thinking or less tolerance of critical thinking amongst some students (…). Some students wanted a formula to work to. In a way, seeing social work with children as a science rather than an art. (SWE, Australia)

Rather than teaching students how to record, one Australian SWE suggested universities should focus on

> … how do you make visible, you know, the child and or how do you make visible who's having an impact on the child? How do you write about that in an evidence-informed way, and how do you record your conversations with and engagement with the child? So we talk about visibility of the child or invisibility. And that can happen in case files as well.

Recordkeeping skills were rarely assessed; exceptions included students being asked to write a court report at an Australian University and an Australian and English University requiring students to write a record based on a simulated case study.

Placement

In both countries, SWEs expected students to acquire most of their recordkeeping learning on

placement. Students confirmed this was their preferred learning style but admitted feeling

unprepared:

> I remember sitting down to write my first set of case notes; we'd been on a joint visit
> and there was a lot gone on and I sat down and I just didn't… I couldn't… I just
> couldn't seem to do it. I felt like I had no structure (Student, England)

PEs confirmed students had very little knowledge of recordkeeping. They used observation

and examples of good and bad records to model effective practice:

> We have a trial week of 'can you record this for us and I'll review it;' we'll discuss it
> in supervision and we'll see what standard they're at … I would always meet them
> before they come into placement, spend a couple of hours letting them know what my
> expectations are in terms of recording, tell them about [LAs] ethos, what we want for
> the children if they come back and look at files in the future … they are given our
> one-minute guides to 'this is how we expect a statutory visit to look; this is what we
> expect from a review document…' For the first few weeks, they wouldn't have cases;
> I would ask them to go out and observe and record, so I can then see how they record
> and get my worker to record that as well, so I can see what the differences are, if
> there's anything missed … We have a good practice guide, so they would have access
> to that … I would provide them with really good case recording examples and say
> 'this is what I would like you to build up towards, this is what I expect'. (PE,
> England)

Reflecting on language was another way of helping students hone their recording skills:

> I asked her to do some reflection when she'd been to a panel and some of her personal
> opinion came through … the foster parents who were at the panel said that the LA
> social worker was a liar and the student had put 'Mr. and Mrs. [name] said the LA
> social worker was a liar, which wasn't the case' and I was like 'oh, right, you don't
> know that wasn't the case. They shouldn't have said what they'd said and you should
> have acknowledged that in your writing, but really, we don't know that that's truth …
> You're assuming that because they're a professional social worker and this is a foster
> parent that the foster parent's wrong and the professional is right and you know, that's
> not what it's about; it's about writing the facts of what's been said'. (PE, England)

Students initially found this kind of criticism upsetting but came to appreciate its value.

While some students learned how to write in caring, child-friendly language and attach

photos and drawings to their case recordings, others had less positive experiences, '… when I

first got there, we were kind of in between case workers, so I didn't get a lot of opportunity to

shadow anybody and see how that process goes. Erm, I kind of got told once how to write up

a case note and then that was sort of it' (Student, England). SWEs acknowledged the variability of supervisory support and stressed the need for more consistency.

'On the job'

Practitioners in both countries stressed that most learning was acquired 'on the job' through supervision, feedback, co-working, shadowing and observation. They felt this was superior to reading manuals or attending training and none mentioned national or local guidance.

> I think it's just from watching other workers and how they conduct themselves. Those interactive moments. You really need to watch them and you need to say, I don't like how that worker does that, I'll park that, but I did like that from that person. So you just start to pick these bits and these habits and start forming your own style I guess. (Practitioner, Australia)

Australian and English students gained essential knowledge of case recording from work outside of social work study and PEs confirmed students with practice experience had superior understanding even if this experience had been acquired outside social care settings.

Australian practitioners were more likely to have undertaken work-based training around recordkeeping. Some English students reported receiving training on placement but said this focused on the use of specific tools rather than on how to actually produce child-centred records.

Factors that challenge and enable child-centred recordkeeping

Relational-based practice

All participants understood and were able to articulate the importance of a child-centred approach to recordkeeping and participants in both countries identified relational-based practice as the most important enabler of this:

> … it comes back to what [name] was saying around being relational. And I think it's not just about one day your client, this client might read your record of them, but that you care about that person, you know, like you actually care about the circumstance as well … And so it's not just about 'that person might read my record,' but that that will affect the quality of the relationship. (Practitioner, Australia)

In both countries children have the right to access information held about them. Parents can also request access to their child's records but the primary consideration in providing access would be the welfare and safety of the child, and information that might put them at risk would be redacted. In England the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) ensures children's views are taken into account, so an application by a parent can be refused if it means disclosing information which was provided by the child in the expectation that it would not be disclosed, or if the child indicates it should not be disclosed.

Participants described relational-based practice as trauma-informed and strengths-based but did not, perhaps surprisingly, situate child-centred recordkeeping within a children's rights framework or refer to the UNCRC:

> We have to think about 'it's not the person it's the behaviour' and what kind of trauma has been experienced either by the parent and or the child? And then whilst you're not trying to justify or abdicate responsibility for what's gone on, it's about looking at it through strength and trauma lenses. And you've got to understand that when you write someone's story in black and white, it's incredibly confronting. (Practitioner, Australia)

Nevertheless, most participants cited the child as their primary audience:

> The case recording should be written for the child and from the child's perspective … A good child protection case recording must include observation and non-verbal signs/body language/presentation/home conditions as well as what people have said. The language should be child appropriate so they would know what you are saying. (Practitioner, England)

Child friendly language was deemed to be synonymous with relational-based practice and a child-centred approach:

> … we're not calling it a placement, we're calling where they live a 'home,' 'cos it is a home and they live with a foster family or a family, rather than referring to them as a placement, because it makes them sound like a product. And who wants to sound like a product? … So you know, if they're kicking the door, well actually, let's say they were feeling dysregulated and they were feeling really wobbly ... (PE, England)

An Australian participant questioned whether families would understand everything that was written about them, such as 'cumulative harm' or children being 'parentified' and presenting

as 'unkempt'. Some LAs in England had attempted to address this by writing directly to the child.

> We record to the child. So we write it to the child. We write it in a letter for them, so when they come back, we are writing it in a child-centred way that is focused on what they need to know rather than going through your case recording, 'missed phone call to mam; she didn't answer the door…' that sort of stuff is, 'today, we rang your mam to discuss this'. (PE, England)

Writing directly to the child and including their own voice supports child-centred case recording by focusing on the strengths and achievements of the child.[22] Some English students encountered this approach on placement and found it challenging: '… that's probably one of the hardest things, I find. To write in a way that an eight or nine-year-old would understand, so I'd be re-reading everything that I'd wrote, er, to make sure that it is understandable'. Practitioners similarly found it challenging, with one outlining the challenges of writing about sexual abuse to a child.

Co-creating case notes alongside children and families was cited as a potential way of facilitating greater authenticity, trust and transparency. Some participants had experienced this in adult social work contexts and saw no reason why it could not be applied in child protection:

> I think it would be empowering for the clients to be part of their own developing of case plans and even getting them to write it themselves ... But if we could just start with like at least getting our case noting ethical and working with families around case noting, maybe even like having iPads and sitting with the family and doing some quick notes while we're there and saying, 'Hey, are you okay with this?' And that could be even empowering and really transparent. (Practitioner, Australia)

Participants also recommended involving young people in social work education and training. An Australian participant suggested social workers should sit with young people exiting care and read their file with them; another thought young people should attend staff meetings to advise practitioners how they could improve their practice. An English PE had facilitated a training session where children asked foster carers uncomfortable questions, and she felt something similar could be done with social workers: '… like how many sexual partners have

you had? Have you ever had STDs and stuff like this, so it makes you mindful of how you're phrasing things and how you're asking things and how it must feel'.

SWEs in both countries told us they prepared students to work with all children, including those who are disabled, pre-verbal, require an interpreter or are asylum-seeking. However, they acknowledged this was challenging in the context of a crowded curriculum. This may explain why some English students reported receiving limited input on how to communicate with non-verbal children. One told us she came to understand that disabled children's rooms might be bare for safety reasons, whereas when she first started placement, she looked for toys and desks and, if these items were not visible, noted this as a concern. Some Australian participants highlighted cultural challenges in relation to child-centred recordkeeping when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children:

> So even gathering information in some cultural contexts is quite sensitive. And who you ask and us whities aren't very good at this, but, you know, the issue of, you know, trusting information coming from aunty as being authentic to the child, you know, us whities are taught 'mum and dad'. If you work cross-culturally, you've got to work out who in the family has authority to talk … so I think that's very interesting in terms of where you gather your information from and how you record that information and how you interpret child-centeredness in a culture that doesn't necessarily have a degree of comfort with that. Where children are differently defined in the relationship. (SWE, Australia)

Accountability

When asked about the purpose of case records and what constitutes good recordkeeping, participants in both countries discussed transparency, compliance, accountability, risk management and covering their backs. They said this had been drilled into them at university and reinforced in practice. They were conscious their records might constitute evidence in court or in an inquiry or review.

> I remember being told as a new worker that if something happens to your young person … you know, something tragic happens and they pass away, that literally they will come to the office, grab your file and take it. And if it's not in there, there is no

chance... there's no recourse. You can't go 'but I did make that phone call and I did ring that mum back'. And that in reflection probably was what put the fear of God into me making sure that I did record things well so that if something did ever happen, that you've got your, you know, you've got your records to say, 'no, I did'. (Practitioner, Australia)

Australian participants referred to royal commissions and inquiries that had recommended child protection service system workers be retrained in case recording, resulting in mandatory training sessions being implemented. One mentioned a particularly unhelpful inquiry report that outlined what practitioners had done wrong but failed to provide child-centred recordkeeping solutions. In both countries SWEs commented that an overemphasis on accountability resulted in risk-averse recordkeeping thwarting child-centred approaches:

So if as an organisation or a program or as a person, your primary intention is to mitigate risk, then case notes become very good at mitigating risk and they become very good at documenting response to risk and shifting or assigning responsibility … I think traditionally that's the space case notes have sat in, and I don't think that's just for us here, I think that's a general thing is like it sits in a sort of risk mitigation space. (SWE, Australia)

Disconnect between academic training and real-world practice

Another challenge identified was the disconnect between academic training and its focus on theory and critical thinking and real-world practice which is much more proceduralized. SWEs reported that they are often criticised because social work graduates are not work-ready. One Australian University tried to remedy this by ensuring staff had recent practice experience and incorporated realistic case studies from their practice into their teaching; another used 3D avatars to simulate real-world practice scenarios.

Students identified a disconnect between academic and practice writing. They said they were told to use complicated words at university whereas placement required simple terminology devoid of theory. For example, the word '*concern*' was used at university but not permitted in practice and '*family time'* replaced '*contact*'. PEs criticised students' poor writing skills. They stressed that at university, students had time to write and edit essays whereas the practice environment required them to write quickly and succinctly. Conversely, an English

SWE commented that students could not write academically when they returned from placement:

> … and they start to do these very descriptive pieces of work and you have to say to them: 'okay, that's what you've been doing in practice … Actually, that's not academic writing,' so there's some issues in how comfortable those two things are, case recording and academic writing, with each other. … Because of the academic elements of the course, the focus is on academic writing and so in the university environment, that is the focus.

Reflective practice

Participants in both countries stressed that social workers needed to continually reflect and be mindful of how their own values and personal experiences might be influencing their case recording:

> … like, you know, we cover stuff in assessments about abortion and erm, religion, so it's about being aware of your own ethics and … You know, are you letting that lead you? Are you letting that…? You know, kind of make a judgment, if you like? Erm, because you really do have to be aware of that. (PE, England)

However, reflection takes time and is a 'luxury' for busy social workers:

> I used to use very factual: 'Today I visited so and so. Wanted to discuss this. Was unable to discuss it because this this, this, this, this happened' ... And I found that I did that because I was actually really short of time. I couldn't do reflective recording. I couldn't do a lot of that detailed, perceptive recording that I learned at university where you can think about your feelings as you were discussing certain things and what the client was perhaps alluding to, I just couldn't. (Practitioner, Australia)

Some participants shared time-saving ideas. For example, an Australian practitioner told us their agency trialled a voice-to-text app that enabled case notes to record straight into the system, and some organisations in both countries gave staff 'stop the clock' or 'downtime' days which could be used for case recording.

Reflective supervision emerged strongly as an enabler of child-centred recordkeeping in both countries. Participants felt this needed to occur in a safe, supportive environment where they could be honest, open and transparent about the challenges of their work and air their

frustrations without being judged or blamed. An Australian practitioner outlined their

approach:

> I need you to paint me a picture of what transpired. Help us be in the room with this
> child … How does this client make you feel? You know, have you thought about what
> it's like for them every day when you ask them to be here for a 9:00 meeting? Where
> are they coming from? How are they getting here? Is that humanly possible or have
> we started their day off in a really shitty system? What's going on? How is family
> contact structured? Where do these people feel safe? Who are the safe people around
> them? Can we have them participate? Our office is not a great place for parents
> who've been in care to come back to. It's not a great place for asking Aboriginal
> people to come to. So it's thinking about that right down to the structure of what we
> do. So I'm constantly trying to get staff to reflect on another's experience of what's
> going on. And that way you'll see the notes are much more compassionate and
> planning is more set up for success.

Discussion

While there is a growing recognition of the importance of child-centred recordkeeping in

social work, our findings reveal considerable gaps in the current approach to training and

practice. They also illustrate contradictions between the status afforded to case recording as

an essential task in child protection practice and the absence of the humane relational aspect

of social work in case recording systems. Despite heightened awareness among students,

educators, and practitioners of the need for records that genuinely reflect children's voices

and experiences, the findings indicate existing frameworks inadequately support effective

record creation and fail to fully appreciate the profound impact of recordkeeping on child

welfare. The findings suggest a lack of comprehensive, systematic integration of child-

centred case recording skills within social work education contributes to ongoing challenges

in practice and professional development, with overreliance on 'on the job' training and

experience, that is dependent on highly experienced educators.

The findings confirm that social work students, practitioners and educators value the

significance of real-world, in-person learning opportunities. Field education, more informally

referred to as 'learning on the job' or practice-based learning, is a recognized pedagogical approach for professional development and readiness for qualifying practice, occupying a significant space in pre-qualifying social work education.[23] Real-world, in-person learning experiences are vital components of social work pre-qualifying education, providing students with invaluable opportunities for bridging the gap between classroom and practice learning environments and applying generic knowledge, skills and values to specific practice contexts and service user needs. Our findings suggest pedagogical approaches for embedding child agency in case recording will be partially mediated by the individualized and contextual nature of learning opportunities, including:

- The conceptual practice orientation adopted by each organisation;
- The extent to which agency roles, responsibilities and priorities influence case recording systems and practices; and
- Resource-related workload pressures and variations in PE experience and attributes.

Opportunities and capacity for students to develop their recording skills within real-life practice environments are incidental and mediated by systemic constraints, which influence the discretionary space required for high-quality in-person learning opportunities. The representation of a child and their family in records can be a matter of chance depending on the worker's experience and skill in reflecting child-centeredness in their recording practice.

This research supports findings from a series of studies concerning the general preparedness of social work students for practice, collectively highlighting a critical need to address the divide between academic preparation and the demands of professional practice in social work, particularly child protection practice.[24] Student and practitioner understanding of the high-stakes status of case recording and professional repercussions when practice fails to safeguard a child, provides further insight into the compliance culture of child protection.

Findings also suggest dissonance between academic and practice expectations regarding the development of knowledge and skills in case recording. The perception of limited guidance within curriculum content and variant preferences over recording styles is symptomatic of the lack of academic and professional body consistency over what should inform curriculum development and delivery within crowded curricula.[25] Findings also identified a level of disconnect between the use of formal writing styles within academic teaching and informal writing styles in professional practice, reflecting the diverse and complex nature of recording for different audiences and cultural sensitivities.

Recognition of the value of reflective practice and good quality reflective supervision for strength-based child-centred practice is reflected elsewhere.[26] Conceptual frameworks such as trauma-informed practice and relationship-based practice aim to place the child at the centre of social work assessment and intervention, repositioning them from passive subject of an adult-centric case record to an active co-constructor with a visible presence and voice. Keeping the child 'in the room' and 'over the shoulder' in case recording better integrates protection and participatory legal and moral responsibilities, eliciting and communicating to others the child's experiences as an owned and authentic textual reality of their life. However, this must come with investment in tackling the embedded inhibitors to better child-centred recordkeeping practices in education, organisational cultures and systems.

Conclusion

This interdisciplinary study contributes to deliberations over the nature and purpose of recordkeeping systems in professional practice in two child welfare systems. The emergence of shared perspectives from students, practitioners and curriculum developers illuminates the pedagogical status afforded to developing knowledge and skills in case recording in a saturated pre-qualifying curriculum. It advances our understanding of the interrelated

facilitators and inhibitors that mediate the advancement of participatory agentic case recording.

Child protection systems in England and Australia, though committed in theory to child-centred principles, often face challenges in practice due to their risk-averse nature. This is particularly evident in recordkeeping practices, where the focus can shift from the child's narrative to meeting organisational and procedural requirements. Munro's comment: 'Your job is not to write beautiful reports and lovely essays. It is to make life different for children,'[27] reminds us of the primary function of child protection social work practice and reflects an increasing awareness of the importance of child-centred practice in promoting rights-based positive outcomes for children. Participatory, inclusive recordkeeping practices support the advancement of rights-informed practice, challenging the traditional power dynamics between children/families and practitioners/child protection systems in the case recording process, thereby promoting equity and justice.

Both countries recognize the need for reform in recordkeeping practices to ensure they truly reflect children's needs, rights, and perspectives. The transformational shift required for positioning children as active agents in case recording is systemically complex, mediated by interactional elements that have short and long-term consequences for child outcomes. For change to be transformational and sustainable, it must occur within and across ideological, professional, organisational and informatic domains, creating a systemic shift in attitudes and practices within child protection systems, underpinned by adequate resources and a commitment to placing the child at the centre of recordkeeping practices. To better understand how this might be achieved requires a focus away from a top-down problem-solving, solution-seeking practice and workforce reform agenda and instead taking the starting point of understanding how practitioners might best be prepared and supported in child-centred, participatory case recording practices that support and fulfil the rights and

dignity of the child and their family and which place the child always 'at the shoulder' of practitioners.

Implications for future research

The absence of system support for high-quality records creation and an understanding of the impact of recordkeeping, together with a need for a more nuanced and systematic integration of case recording skills within social work education, underline the potential collaborative contribution of children, SWEs, recordkeeping informatics and case record system designers for developing participatory child-centred case recording practices. One of the most exciting aspects of this study was the finding that there is a community of committed social work professionals who care about case recording, and who want records to live up to their potential to make a difference to the experiences and outcomes for children and families.

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Table 1: Study participants

Type of participant	Number of participants (England)		Number of participants (Australia)		Total
Social Work Students	Survey	14	Survey	23	**53**
	Interviews	3	Interviews	1	
	Focus group	12			
	Total	29	Total	24	
Practitioners	Survey	13	Survey	33	**60**
	Interviews	2	Interviews	12	
	Total	15	Total	45	
SWEs	Interviews	9	Interviews	9	**18**
	Total	9	Total	9	
Total	**53**		**78**		**131**

Table 2: How practitioners had learned about case recording and recordkeeping practices (n=17 Australia; n=13 England)

Source of learning	Australia	England
Workplace training	13 (76.5%)	4 (30.8%)
During student placement	12 (70.6%)	5 (38.5%)
During university studies	9 (52.9%)	5 (38.5%)
Observation of colleagues	8 (47.1%)	8 (61.5%)
Professional development opportunities	7 (41.2%)	2 (15.4%)
Feedback from manager	7 (41.2%)	7 (53.8%)
Staff induction	6 (35.3%)	1 (7.7%)

Table 3: How social work students had learned about case recording and recordkeeping practice (n=19 Australia; n=14 England)

Source of learning	Australia	UK
Through student placement	11 (57.9%)	9 (64.3%)
Through discussions with social workers	5 (38.5%	6 (42.9%)
Through own research/reading	7 (36.8%)	5 (35.7%)
Through lectures	7 (36.8%)	10 (71.4%)
Through work outside of study	5 (26.3%)	5 (35.7%)
In a particular subject/module	6 (31.6%)	2 (14.3%)
Through discussions with peers	6 (31.6%)	4 (28.6%)
Through discussions with teaching staff	2 (10.5%)	4 (28.6%)
I have not learned about this	2 (10.5%)	1 (7.1%)

1 Shepherd et al., "Towards a Human-Centred;" Rolan et al., Recordkeeping and Relationships; Golding et al., Towards Transformative Practice.

2 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Final Report;" Golding, Problems with Records.

3 Davis, Family is Culture; Harnett and Featherstone, The Role of Decision Making; Octoman et al., Tailoring Service; Lonne, et al., The Front Door.

4 Parton and Lyon, Children's rights.

5 Lefevre, et al, Both/and not 'either/or.

6 Commonwealth of Australia, Report of the National Inquiry; Commonwealth of Australia, Lost innocents; Evans, et al, Participatory information governance; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Final Report;" Shepherd, et al, Towards a Human-Centred Participatory Approach.

7 Lyman and Unger, A Preliminary Evaluation.

8 Humphreys and Kertesz, Making records meaningful; Lillis, et al, If it's not written; Ogle, et al, Authenticity, power and the case record; Wilson and Golding, Latent scrutiny.

9 Hall, et al, Language practices.

10 Featherstone, et al, Let's stop feeding.

11 Prior, Using documents.

12 Lillis, et al, If it's not written.

13 Hoyle, et al. Child social-care recording; Munro, "The Munro Review."

14 White, et al, Signs of Safety.

15 Australian Association of Social Workers, Practice Standards; Social Work England, Professional Standards.

16 HM Government, Working Together.

17 Australian Association of Social Workers, Australian Social Work Education; Social Work England, Education and Training Standards.

18 Hawkes, et al, Caring Records.

19 Hamilton, et al, Teaching Partnership.

20 Stafford, et al, Child Protection Systems.

21 Boyatzis, Transforming qualitative information.

22 Watts, Relationships, Reviews and Recording.

23 Joubert, Social work students; Le Maistre and Paré, Learning in two communities; Lillis, et al, If it's not written down.

24 Agllias, Student to practitioner; Healy and Meagher, Social workers' preparation; Lonne, et al, Workforce development.

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26 Ravalier, et al, A rapid review.

27 Cited in: McNicoll, "Watch: Eileen Munro on bureaucracy."