



# Caring records: professional insights into child-centered case note recording

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## Abstract

The consequences of poorly processed reports of child abuse and neglect, along with governance challenges in child protection systems, are well-documented. Recent research, inquiries and royal commissions emphasise the need for child-centered and participatory practices that support the rights and dignity of children and their families. However, the challenges of quality case recording in child protection systems and contexts remain unclear. This paper reports on the findings from a pilot study that interviewed ( $n=22$ ) and surveyed ( $n=56$ ) social work students and social work curriculum developers from Australian Universities and practitioners currently working in the Australian child protection service system. By capturing participants' professional insights, we aim to understand the embedded barriers to transforming child-centered systems by focusing on strengths and possibilities in current practices rather than reiterating deficiencies in recordkeeping. This paper reveals insights into how professionals working in the child protection system understand and are supported in child-centered case note recording and recordkeeping practices. It also identifies the possibilities for the crucial role that interdisciplinary collaboration and alignment between social work and recordkeeping informatics can play in transforming and supporting recordkeeping approaches and practices that prioritise and uphold the rights and dignity of the child.

**Keywords** Child protection · Child welfare · Case records · Case notes · Child-centered · Education

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## Introduction

Creating and keeping full and accurate records relevant to child safety and wellbeing, including child sexual abuse, is in the best interests of children and should be an integral part of institutional leadership, governance and culture (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017).

A host of reviews and inquiries in Australian and other jurisdictions, lived experience advocacy and research over the past few decades have shed light on the complexities and deficiencies in recordkeeping in systems set up to protect children from abuse and neglect. They have highlighted the serious implications of poor quality records and recordkeeping in response to reports of child abuse and neglect, challenges to the governance of children's data in fractured and fragmented systems, and the necessity of child-centered and participatory recording and recordkeeping frameworks, processes and systems to better meet identity, memory and accountability requirements (Commonwealth of Australia 1997, 2001; Evans et al. 2020; Evans et al. 2019; Humphreys and Kertesz 2015; Nyland 2016; Reed et al. 2018; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017; Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2004; Shepherd et al. 2020; UNICEF 2021). In Australia, in particular, this has led to the articulation of a strategic recordkeeping transformation agenda centered on the aspirational idea of a *National Framework for Recordkeeping for Childhood Out of Home Care* (Evans et al. 2020), with recent research leading to the development of a *Charter of Lifelong Rights in Childhood Recordkeeping* (Golding et al. 2021) and prototyping of information infrastructure to support recordkeeping rights (Rolan et al. 2020).

Child protection practices and services in Australia now (mostly) sit within legislative and policy frameworks based on the 'best interests of the child' principle of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and have undergone "a remarkable degree of reform and change ... in recent times" (Wise 2017). Despite these reforms, the sector faces significant and complex challenges in improving outcomes for children and families that come into contact with statutory protection systems and in addressing their continued disproportionate impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities (Liddle et al. 2022; Rice and Stubbs 2023). With increasing recognition and understanding of systemic issues and structural barriers, there are growing calls for transformational, not just incremental, change (Liddle et al. 2022, p. 43; Rice and Stubbs 2023; Wise 2017).

While the policy rhetoric promoting child-centered approaches to child protection is now widespread, as recordkeeping researchers in this area, we have also experienced a number of 'off the research record' conversations with social workers and other professionals about the frustrations they have in their implementation, along with hearing from those with more recent Care experiences of the perpetuation of the same records and recordkeeping shortcomings that previous

generations have experienced. This suggests to us that we need to move research from (re)describing the now well-known records and recordkeeping problems toward ways of exploring how to address them. Doing this requires an approach with both recordkeeping rights and human dignity at its core. While it is imperative that the rights and dignity of Care experienced children, young people and the adults they become is foremost, there is also a need to consider how in this research we can also better recognise, understand and support the knowledge, skills and dedication of frontline professionals dealing with crisis situations and complex decision making on a daily basis, while battling chronic underfunding, resource limitations and the enormous consequences to children and families of their decisions and actions.

Drawing from the current landscape of policy rhetoric and the real-world experiences shared by professionals and those in Care, there remains a pivotal area of exploration that has been underemphasised: the nuanced perspectives of frontline professionals and practice educators who navigate the maze of policy implementation on the ground. Our research offers a valuable insight into these experiences, stressing the role of educators and practitioners as a cornerstone for effecting genuine change in existing systems. Amidst the growing body of work in this field, our paper sheds light on the experiences of these professionals, presenting an indispensable viewpoint for holistic system enhancements.

In this article, we provide the background to our study of professional insight into child-centered case note recording practices in Australia, explain our aims and approach, report on the data collection and findings, and discuss their implications. By adopting an approach that emphasises the strengths and possibilities in current professional practices, rather than reiterating the now well-known deficiencies of case records and recordkeeping, our goal is to better understand some of the embedded inhibitors to child-centered system transformation. This approach is grounded in actively seeking solutions and innovations to address the challenges at hand, thereby creating opportunities for significant shifts and improvements in recordkeeping practices within child protection systems. As shall be explored, a key part of this is the potential for this shift through meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration and strengthening of alignments between social work and recordkeeping informatics. Focusing on case note recording practices in particular, we will argue that with child- and rights-centered approaches, records and recordkeeping can become a key part of a practice that supports and fulfills the rights and dignity of the child.

## **Background**

### **The necessity of child-centered and participatory practices in child protection recordkeeping**

Much social work practice centers on case note recording, yet it is also the target of much internal and external criticism (Lillis et al. 2017). Inquiries and research continue to highlight poor records and recordkeeping systems when it comes to

reporting, investigating, and appropriately acting on child safety and wellbeing concerns. Impacts of this include:

- hindering access to preventative, appropriate or culturally supportive services,
- preventing early responses to child abuse and neglect,
- contributing to and resulting in fatal or serious outcomes for children, and
- implications for lifelong access to records.

This continual criticism of records and recordkeeping is despite the emphasis in contemporary professional practice standards, like the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS), on information recording and sharing as a key graduate attribute, with expectations that graduates can “Formulate and document assessment conclusions; Keep accurate, comprehensive records ... in accordance with ethical principles and relevant legislation” (AASW 2021, p. 26). When it comes to ethical principles, the 2020 AASW Code of Ethics clearly places obligations on social work professionals to consider how both representation and participation in case recording are part of supporting the self-determination and autonomy of the people they work with (AASW 2020a). Both in Australia and internationally, there is a growing emphasis on case note recording in child welfare and protection contexts to be better able to address lifelong identity, memory and accountability needs through child-centered and participatory approaches (Domakin 2020; Everard 2020; Humphreys and Kertesz 2015; Golding et al. 2021; Lomas et al. 2022; Shepherd et al. 2020). There is also an increasing and urgently necessary research interest in how practitioners in Australian contexts might be better prepared for contemporary practice (Cleland and Masocha 2020; Gursansky 2015, 2016; Lonne et al. 2013; Russ et al. 2022). While receiving less emphasis, research into pre-service and ongoing training in child-centered and quality documentation and recordkeeping practices is also a subject of interest in Australia and internationally (Ames 1999, 2008; Cumming, et al. 2007; Dolejs and Grant 2000; Humphreys et al. 2018; Henry and Austin 2021; Leon and Pepe 2010; Rai and Lillis 2013; Savaya 2010).

Contemporary Australian child protection systems are described as having “a pre-occupation with the procedures of risk assessment [which] threatens to ignore issues of justice and the duty of practitioners in a moral community to value the humanity and dignity of all people, not just that of the child” (Lonne et al. 2015, p. 43). This approach can lead to distrust and disengagement from families and place unrealistic expectations and pressures on those working in the child protection service system in their decision-making, resulting in negative outcomes for all parties involved. It can also hamper the uptake of child-centered practices that embody, encourage and support participation as a right so that it can also act as an important protective factor.

Child welfare in Australia has historically been managed at a state and territory level, leading to a fragmented legislative approach rather than a unified system (Swain 2014). Currently, in each state and territory, child welfare responsibilities lie with state and territory governments, which focus on immediate child protection through legal and investigative measures when there’s potential abuse or harm. This

is distinct from broader child or family services that cover prevention, early intervention, and support, often delivered in partnership with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Both sectors attract professionals with qualifications in social work or related fields, though a social work qualification is not mandatory for all child protection workers (AASW 2020b; Russ et al. 2022; Lewig 2016).

For Aboriginal families, child protection practice emerges against a backdrop of colonial control, forced child removals, and the current over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system. In South Australia, for instance, during the 2020–2021 period, one in two Aboriginal children faced at least one child protection notification, compared to one in twelve for non-Aboriginal children. This disproportion stems from past policies which saw extensive removals of Aboriginal children from their families. Such actions have caused deep-seated intergenerational trauma and severed ties between families, communities, and culture. The enduring trauma and its repercussions on Aboriginal communities have yet to be fully acknowledged or addressed (Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People 2023; Kalinin et al. 2018).

While post-inquiry and Royal Commission reforms over recent years have both introduced clearer standards and guidelines for child welfare recordkeeping and cemented the need for high-quality and child-centered documentation, child protection and recordkeeping requirements are primarily governed at the state and territory level. As such, while there are common themes and objectives across jurisdictions and several national frameworks and initiatives, there isn't a singular 'national' standard or system that applies uniformly (Council of Australian Governments 2009; Golding et al. 2021). Each state and territory has its own legislation and associated guidelines that stipulate recordkeeping requirements for child protection.

Across jurisdictions, current recordkeeping frameworks, processes and systems are deeply implicated in the focus on risk assessment procedures overshadowing the importance of treating all individuals involved with respect and dignity. An enduring criticism is that child welfare and protection systems are "more concerned with 'dutifully record[ing]...incidents in...files' than with diligent action to fulfill children's rights to personal security and to protection of their family environments in strong communities" (Melton 2015, p. xiv).

Lonne et al. (2013) argue that a shift toward ethical and relationship-based practices is essential in addressing the issues and challenges in child protection systems, including the inadequacies in recordkeeping. Too often, the response to system failures, including poor recordkeeping practices, has been "to impose bureaucratic solutions, introducing 'new' systems, procedures and guidelines" (2013, p. 1632). Therefore, it is crucial to prioritise ethical, relationship-based, and child-centered recordkeeping practices to address the challenges and deficiencies in child protection systems.

While the outcomes for children and young people of poor practice in case recording are increasingly apparent, along with recognition of the integral role quality recordkeeping plays in child safety and wellbeing, the challenges of quality child-centered case recording among child protection practitioners remain opaque. To move away from bureaucratic solutions and practices that are risk-averse or purely functional, the question arises of how practitioners might best be prepared

and supported in child-centered and participatory case note recording practices that support and fulfil the rights and dignity of the child and their family. There is a need to explore 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-centered and rights-based case recording practices?

## Methodology

To address these questions, we designed and undertook an exploratory qualitative research project ('Caring Records') aimed at drawing on the experiences of child- and rights-centered recordkeeping of Social Work students and Social Work curriculum developers from Australian Universities and of child protection and family services practitioners from across the country. The child protection and child and family services workforce in Australia is drawn from a range of qualifying backgrounds, with Social Work qualifications are not mandatory for many roles, including for those carrying a caseload. Social Work remains a key qualification for the workforce comprising secondary child protection services (where there is a risk of abuse or neglect occurring) and tertiary services (where abuse or neglect has already occurred) (Russ et al. 2022, p. 41). Considering the higher retention rates and better preparedness observed in countries where social work qualifications are mandatory for statutory child protection practitioners (AASW 2020a, p. 16), this study sought to understand how future practitioners would be prepared for child-centered recordkeeping through a Social Work qualification in Australia. As such, while the study did not screen the qualifying background of practitioners participating in this study, it specifically targeted social work students and social work curriculum developers for data collection.

Our study design aimed to move from (re-)describing the well known deficiencies of case records and recordkeeping within child protection systems, and instead explore the impact of education, practices, systems, and technologies on promoting child-centered recordkeeping practices. Our intent is to establish the potential for meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration between recordkeeping informatics and Social Work and child protection practice in systems transformations. We developed a mixed-methods approach to gather and explore child-centered recordkeeping practices in child protection contexts, combining qualitative data from in-depth interviews with quantitative data from surveys. Through this research, we sought to identify and investigate the education, practices, systems, and technologies that can foster rights-based and child-centered recordkeeping in child protection contexts in Australia, as well as better understand systemic barriers. Though originally

conceived as an exploratory pilot study, in line with the funding available to undertake the research, the project exceeded data expectations, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the opportunities for child-centered recordkeeping in child protection contexts and providing a rich understanding of the perspectives and experiences of participants.

## Recruitment and sample

Participants were recruited from three groups: (1) practitioners working in the child protection service system either in state and territory child protection departments or in the delivery of child and family services through a non-government organisation, (2) Social Work students and (3) curriculum developers from Australian universities.

Child protection practitioners and curriculum development participants were initially identified through contacts of the research team established through previous studies, who were then asked to recommend other individuals who may be interested in participating. This method of 'snowball sampling' enabled the inclusion of individuals who may be difficult to reach through other sampling methods but who possessed deep knowledge and expertise on the topic. Overall, the snowball sampling method resulted in rich qualitative data by identifying participants likely to provide valuable insights into child-centered case note recording. We also note that, considering the pilot nature of this study and its methodological focus, the findings serve as a basis for generating hypotheses, much like any study with a similarly gathered sample.

Social Work students were more difficult to reach and recruit for participation in interviews as we were reliant on the circulation of recruitment notices by course coordinators and student administration staff. While all the Australian universities offering Social Work were contacted to circulate recruitment notices, only seven responded positively, with others indicating that students were often overwhelmed with research recruitment requests. In addition, the recruitment period, unfortunately, coincided with the mid-year study break for most universities. In light of this and given the positive responses from the other participant groups for interviews, the decision was made to just focus on the survey as the data collection instrument for students.

Data collection took place between May and August 2022. A total of 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 curriculum developers, 2 curriculum developers who were current or former practitioners, 12 practitioners only, and one Social Work student who was also a former practitioner. Of the 15 practitioners (current or former), 9 worked in child and family services and 6 in child protection departments. The curriculum developers had developed material for students studying at the tertiary level ( $n=7$ ), for students on placement in child protection departments ( $n=1$ ) and for new graduates entering child protection departments ( $n=1$ ). Participants were distributed around Australia. Interview participants are described in Table 1, along with the codename aliases used in this paper.

An online survey was provided to social work students from Australian universities, and another to practitioners. Surveys were received from 23 Social Work

**Table 1** Interview participant descriptions and codename aliases

Codename alias used in this paper	Curriculum developer	Precipitator (child and family services through a non-government organisation)	Precipitator (state and territory child protection departments)	Social work student
CurriDev1	✓			
CurriDev2	✓			
CurriDev3	✓			
CurriDev4	✓			
CurriDev5	✓			
CurriDev6	✓			
CurriDev7	✓			
PractGovCurricDev1	✓		✓	
PractGovCurricDev2	✓		✓	
PractitionerFamServ7		✓		
PractitionerFamServ8		✓		
PractitionerFamServ1		✓		
PractitionerFamServ2		✓		
PractitionerFamServ3		✓		
PractitionerFamServ4		✓		
PractitionerFamServ5		✓		
PractitionerFamServ6		✓		
PractitionerGov 1			✓	
PractitionerGov2			✓	
PractitionerGov3			✓	
PractitionerGov4			✓	
StudentPractitioner1		✓		✓



students and 33 practitioners from around Australia. Students participating in the survey were enrolled in either a Bachelor of Social Work ( $n=16$ ), a Bachelor of Social Work (Honors) ( $n=2$ ) or a Master of Social Work ( $n=5$ ) and were studying at universities around Australia. Only 4 student participants indicated that they would “probably not” go on to work in child protection services, with the remainder either considering ( $n=10$ ) or intending ( $n=9$ ) to work in this field. Of the 33 practitioners, 14 currently ( $n=10$ ) or previously ( $n=4$ ) worked in child protection departments, and 19 currently ( $n=17$ ) or previously ( $n=2$ ) worked in child and family services. We decided not to open a survey for curriculum developers given the limited pool of potential participants and that those involved in developing relevant curricula from the Australian universities offering professional Social Work degrees in May 2022 had already been contacted for interview.

## Method and analysis

All participants were provided with an explanatory statement and either signed a consent form or provided recorded verbal consent before participating in an interview. Survey participants were provided with an explanatory statement at the beginning of the survey, followed by a consent statement where they could provide an electronic indication of their consent to participate. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committees at Monash University and the University of South Australia.

Interviews were held in person, via Zoom or by telephone as per participants' preference, using a semi-structured interview guide. The survey used ‘closed option’, multiple-choice and Likert scale items, and open text responses to capture information and examples linked to some closed option items. Surveys were hosted by the Monash University Qualtrics platform.

Audio recordings of interviews were initially auto-transcribed using Sonix and then manually cleaned for analysis. Both interviews and open-text survey responses underwent thematic analysis, facilitated using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software and rooted in an inductive approach. However, as analysis progressed, themes organically emerged and were further refined based on common experiences expressed during interviews (Boyatzis 1998). This iterative process, combined with ongoing discussion among the research team, ensured a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the data. Additionally, the survey responses from Social Work students and practitioners were also analysed using descriptive statistics.

## Findings

Our findings are structured around three central themes, each illuminating different dimensions of our research focus:

*1. Understanding the importance of a child-centered approach* Our study revealed an awareness and appreciation among participants that the ways in which child-centered records support good practice in working with children and young people

are significant and represent an important area for further research and development. This theme encompasses participants' reflections on how these records accentuate good practice when engaging with children and young people, and emphasises the relationship between culturally safe, trauma-informed, and strengths-based practice approaches and the production of child-centered case notes. Briefly, and in relation to child-centered recordkeeping, these approaches emphasise the importance of keeping records that are respectful and sensitive to the child, their family and community. Specifically:

- In the Australian context, culturally safe approaches for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children ensure an environment that not only recognises and celebrates their cultural identities but also safeguards them.
- Trauma-informed approaches go beyond merely recognising trauma; they embed a deep understanding across the organisation, ensuring policies and stakeholder interactions are both supportive and prevent retraumatisation, always aiming for a reparative environment.
- Strengths-based approaches ensure that child and family strengths, skills and capacities are highlighted, rather than solely recording their challenges (Osborne et al. 2013; Pease et al. 2020; SNAICC 2021).

*2. What prepares and trains practitioners for child-centered recordkeeping?* Transitioning from the 'why' to the 'how', this theme delves into the educational and training approaches and activities that shape professionals' expertise in child-centered recordkeeping. Here, participants offered insights on the multifaceted educational approaches they encountered, their perceived efficacies, and the recurrent theme of the indispensable role of supervision.

*3. What challenges and enables child-centered recordkeeping practices?* The final theme encapsulates the realities of the field—the systemic hurdles and facilitators influencing child-centered recordkeeping. From technological constraints to organisational cultures, and from the multiple purposes performed by records, to the innovative workarounds professionals employ, this section provides a holistic perspective on the operational landscape of child-centered recordkeeping.

## Understanding the importance of a child-centered approach

This theme acts as the foundation of our study, setting the stage for subsequent discussions on training and challenges, as knowing 'why' something is important naturally leads to questions of 'how' it can be achieved and what might stand in the way. Participants described how high-quality records support good practice, provide evidence of decision-making, and meet the lifelong informational needs of children and young people. One participant, a curriculum developer with extensive experience in child welfare and investigating child abuse and neglect, described both the importance of holding the child at the center of records and the typical absence of this in records of child abuse and neglect:

Who is this little kid? I often look for the picture of who the child is. Can I tell who this little boy is I'm talking about? Is he a giggler? Is he a joke boy? Is he a little boy who hardly says a word? That picture of the child has to be alive and well in the record (...). But often, there's nothing that describes the child [in records of child abuse and neglect]. It describes the depth of the problem, but not this little child (CurricDev1).

Child-centered recordkeeping was described by participants as an essential part of an approach to practice that held the child at the center. One child and family services practitioner emphasised the ethical obligation and accountability to families that should be reflected in both case note recording and the practice of recordkeeping. The participant highlighted the complexities and challenges posed by the language used in these records:

I recall reading all the information [in the records] they've got on a family, just words, big words [and the family's reaction is], 'Hold on a second. No one's ever told me that before. No one's ever told me this...what is cumulative harm. Explain that?' (PractitionerFamServ2).

This underscores the importance of both clarity in case note terminology, of writing for the family and the child, and of ensuring that they understand what is in the record and what it means. The participant further elaborated on terms like children being 'parentified' or described as 'unkempt', questioning the accessibility and understanding of such jargon:

What is unkempt? You know. This language (...), if a family picked up the document, would they know what you're writing in their notes? (PractitionerFamServ2).

This participant also stressed the need for transparency and accountability in case noting, suggesting that the record should be straightforward enough for families to challenge if inaccuracies arise:

"It almost needs to be that accountability not only to the child protection system or the law (...). There needs to be ethical case noting [and] record-keeping that, if a family were to pick it up (...) they can come back and say, 'well, actually that didn't happen'. [Child protection department workers] are not going out saying to a family: 'whatever you say to me today, I will be documenting, and I'm going to put it on my system, and it will be in there forever'" (PractitionerFamServ2).

Participants emphasised that case notes were a record of a child's life and must be documented with kindness, respect and accountability, keeping the dignity of the child at the center.

A participant working with students on placement in a child protection department emphasised both the lasting nature of these records and the potential for the child to access them later in life. They stressed the importance of showing respect and kindness to the child who may read what has been written, urging a balance between truth and potential harm:

We're documenting a child's life as well, and that the children can access their files and read their case notes, so that we should be really careful about the language we're using when we're describing them, when we're describing their parents. You want it to be truthful, but you don't want it to be hurtful (...). I always get [students] to consider that audience that way, that, yes, we need to be able to utilise these in court, but that this is also a record of a child's life. So we want to try and document it with some kindness as well (PractGov-CurricDev2)

Similarly, a child and family services worker highlighted the importance of the records reflecting genuine care for the child, noting:

It's not just about one day your client, this client might read your record of them, but that you care about that person (...). For people who don't really care about (...) the client, then they don't really care how they took the record three years down the track when they don't have to deal with them (PractitionerFamServ1)

These sentiments underscore the balance practitioners must strike between the immediate needs of the job and the long-term implications of their records. The heart of their concern is the dignity, respect, and care that should permeate every aspect of child welfare work. Indeed, in describing practice, child-centered record-keeping was understood by interview participants as both supporting practice while also being reflective of particular practice approaches. Participants explained how child-centered records could support child-centered decision-making, as described by one participant working in child and family services:

[case notes] should also help us with our practice of not making decisions for young people... because you can't write down 'young person really wants to do this' if they said nothing (PractitionerFamServ8).

Participants emphasised relational, culturally safe, trauma-informed, and strengths-based perspectives as being key to child-centered practice, with risk or deficit-based approaches to practice as detrimental to this approach. For example, a child and family services practitioner participating in an interview spoke of understanding the child within the context of their family, relationships and community as being key to a child-centered approach to both case note recording and to practice with that child and their family. Another practitioner working in a child protection department also described how the practice approach could inform what was created:

When we write case plans, making sure that we are being child centered. Like, is the language child centered? Is the language trauma-informed? Are we supporting families? (PractitionerGov2)

Meanwhile, certain practice approaches were criticised by participants for their lack of support of child-centered recordkeeping, notably those employing deficit-based approaches to risk assessment. These methods often failed to consider a family's strengths and supports. One child and family services practitioner pointed out how child protection departments sometimes seemed to selectively document only

negative aspects about a parent, omitting vital details like the parent's trauma history or any positive actions. Such selective recording often felt like it was aimed to cast the parent in an unfavourable light, which could be misleading during court proceedings:

They were just gathering evidence from meetings that painted the mother in a poor light. So none of the other information that's presented, none about her trauma history, not about the positive things she did, none of that was in the minutes. And I was furious. (PractitionerFamServ5)

While certain practices have been critiqued, there is also a recognition of the potential for transformative changes in case notes influenced by practice approach, understanding and attitude. A child and family services practitioner, working with a child protection department, shed light on the positive shift in the recordkeeping after the introduction of family group conferencing. They described how the emphasis has gradually moved from collecting evidence *against* families to a more balanced view, incorporating strengths and positive aspects of the family. By engaging with the Department and adopting a strengths-based approach, the participant witnessed an evolution in documentation—one where family strengths and positive dynamics now get substantial emphasis instead of being relegated to a mere passing mention:

We get whoever is around that child, we get their views (...) and the Department... now we're seeing a bit of a difference in their writing(...). There never used to be a big chunk of strengths and what's going well for the family. And now we're seeing that (...), not just one little paragraph, they're really thinking about [and] being mindful that we all come with strengths. (PractitionerFam-Serv2)

### **What prepares and trains practitioners for child-centered recordkeeping?**

With the understanding of a child-centered approach to recordkeeping established, a next logical step is to understand how professionals are equipped to adopt this approach. It is widely recognised that practitioners who work in child welfare settings are prepared for their work through both professional education and practical training (Russ et al. 2022). This includes learning about the importance of recordkeeping, the legal and ethical frameworks that guide recordkeeping practices, and the best practices for collecting, storing, and sharing information. Professional education and training encompasses formal tertiary Social Work education, student placements, workplace training, and other on-the-job learning. Curriculum in Social Work education strives to reflect current social issues and policy direction, with a challenge to “balance core context and Social Work knowledge with the interests in specific fields of practice or contemporary social issues” (Gursansky 2015, p. 6). As an applied discipline, to meet professional accreditation standards, Social Work students in Australia are expected to complete 1000 h of field education learning experiences (AASW 2021, p. 10). Placements are often seen as just practice learning rather than being perceived as a formal course that builds specific knowledge and theoretical understanding applied in practice learning. The concern with this is

that without an educational framework, practice learning can lead to “the training of compliant practitioners concerned with service provision rather than social justice” (Gursansky and Le Sueur 2012, p. 917).

### Social work education

While, as previously described, information recording and sharing is a core practice and graduate attribute within the ASWEAS, interviews with participants involved in curriculum development highlighted that the representation of case recording and recordkeeping practices in Social Work curricula is dependent on a range of factors. These include the emphasis and framing of Social Work by the teaching faculty, the practice experience of teaching staff and their areas of research interest. Participants identified that case noting, while a core Social Work skill, is often taught within umbrella topics, such as ethics, law, and organisational theory, and as a component of other practice skills.

If you have a law subject in your course, you would tend to find those teaching law would talk about good recordkeeping because it's the way you then have evidence in a courtroom. You would talk about it early in a course, but I don't know. I mean, things have changed significantly, that it's very high-level content in a course. I'm not saying it's not taught, but I'm simply saying it wouldn't rank as the highest priority. When you think about all the things you're trying to teach around practice, you know, there's relationship, there's the use of self, choice of theoretical content relevant to the scenario that you're working with. Techniques, all of those things (CurricDev1).

While participants also emphasised that Social Work is a broad field that encompasses many areas of practice beyond child protection, child-centered practice was identified by curriculum developers as being taught as a fundamental practice approach across the curriculum.

Fifty-three percent of surveyed practitioners attributed their knowledge of case note recording, at least partially, to their university studies. However, many interviewees struggled to recall specifics from their academic years, possibly due to the time that has elapsed since their studies. One unique perspective came from an interview participant who, as both a current Social Work student and a former practitioner, was able to contrast their past and current approaches to child-centered recordkeeping:

I definitely didn't case note this way before I started the degree. (...) When I started working, I was so green; I had no experience. My case notes would have looked very different, I think. I still would have been conscious of what I was writing, but not so conscious of how that would impact on a family long term. (StudentPractitioner1).

Participants involved in training or working alongside either students on placement and/or recent graduates reflected on the quality of and understanding of case note recording. They indicated that it varied, with some students needing further

guidance on the level of detail and accountability required in practice settings. Participants presented a mixed picture of student and graduate understanding of case note recording, with some participants noting a struggle to understand the purpose of case notes and a sense that students had not been sufficiently prepared by their studies, with other participants indicating the presence of a foundational understanding of case note recording. This is captured by one participant, a practitioner in a child protection department:

Honestly, [student's understanding of case recording] varies the same way it varies across staff members in terms of the quality of it. Some Social Work students will just nail it. Others will really struggle to just maybe understand even the purpose. And maybe it hasn't really been clearly articulated to them around the purpose of it. And therefore, if you don't know the purpose, you're sort of not really that invested in it, I guess (PractitionerGov2).

### Student placements

Participants highlighted the significance of student placements during Social Work studies as an effective means of teaching and learning case note recording skills. These placements offer real-life practice settings where students can develop their abilities through hands-on experience and reflection. Moreover, participants discussed the key aspects students will likely learn during their placements. This includes gaining knowledge about case note recording through the supervised production of case notes and understanding the specific recording methods and requirements of the agency where they are placed. The participant working with students on placement in a child protection department also described the specific training placement students would receive. This included a training session that focuses on writing case notes, which was developed in response to recommendations from a recent inquest, access to a workbook with examples of both good and poor case noting, discussion and reflection on these examples, and an online learning program. These students would also receive feedback on their writing from their on-site supervisor.

While a small percentage (24%) of survey participants now working as practitioners indicated that what they had learned about case note recording was, at least in part, drawn from their student placement, participants in interviews who recalled their placements reported that they had learned about case note recording during their field education activities.

However, one participant raised the issue of how students move from a Social Work degree into the child protection environment and whether some bridging was missing:

So there is something that always intrigues me between the jump from a general degree into a specialist, highly complex environment like child protection; how that leap happens? I often think there is something missing in between (...). So we're a little bit hit and miss on who succeeds in here (...). There's a long path to get there, and who thrives. It's a bit hidden (CurricDev4).

## Workplace training

Practitioners responding to the survey were asked where they had learned about case note recording and supporting recordkeeping practices. The most common source of learning among respondents was workplace training, as indicated by 76 percent of respondents. However, participants in interviews tended to describe the availability of training rather than indicating that workplace training had particularly prepared them or supported their understanding of case note recording. In their descriptions of the availability or the mandatory nature of training (often as the result of an Inquiry), it is possible that the training programs offered, through child protection departments in particular, represent bureaucratic solutions rather than being aimed at embedding ethical, relationship-based, and child-centered recordkeeping practices.

## On-the-job learning

Most survey participants now working as practitioners indicated that on-the-job learning had been a key way they developed their knowledge and skills in case note recording. This included observation of colleagues (47%), feedback from managers (41%), other professional development opportunities (41%), and staff induction (35%). The emphasis on on-the-job learning may be for various reasons, including the possibility that workplace requirements, experiences and norms supplant university education once students enter practice.

Participants in interviews indicated that they had learned about case note recording, and child-centered case note recording specifically, through receiving supervision and feedback on their case notes from their supervisor:

I know when I first started, it was around my senior prac and supervisor. We'd go out and do a home visit together. They'd say, 'Let's both of us write the case note for it. And then, let's both bring those case notes into a supervision session and compare the two'. So I'd be able to see what did I document and what did my supervisor's case note look like? And we could discuss the differences or why I chose to omit a piece of information where they chose to include it. So I think it's those conversations that make the biggest difference (PractGovCurricDev2).

Participants also described that seeing the impacts and uses of the case notes kept by themselves and other practitioners during their work was where they learned about child-centered case note recording:

But you just need one child to teach you why the recording is important. People who don't go to trial really don't understand how valuable our records become in this space. But also people who haven't had to meet with a young person post-care or, you know, haven't had a tricky experience with a young person or a family member don't understand what it's like to read about your life in a judged way (PractitionerGov4).



## What challenges and enables child-centered recordkeeping practices?

This theme builds upon the previous two by offering practical insights and adding depth to the discussion. The challenges elucidate potential gaps in training, workplace supports and culture, while the enablers shed light on the possibilities for child-centered recordkeeping.

Participants described that their understanding of the importance of good case recording was not always shared or enabled within the culture of child protection systems. They noted that this emerged partly from a culture that does not encourage good case recording in practice, no matter the policies and procedures in place. This resulted in a workforce of practitioners being unable to keep good records, practitioners who had a limited understanding of good case recording practice, and practitioners who disregarded the importance of child-centered case recording. As one participant summarised:

I think recordkeeping isn't seen in the way that I think it is, which is as a tool to the good practice (CurricDev1).

The workplace context and culture that did not encourage a view of records as being tools that enable good practice was described by participants as including staff with limited experience or prior qualifications; a high demand, short staffed and high turnover environment; confusion or anxiety about what to record; lack of supervision; limited time quarantined for case recording; a tendency toward recording within a primary framework of organisational responsibility, producing purely functional or risk-averse records; and a practice framework that is not child-centered. A Social Work curriculum developer summarised the impact of these challenges, emphasising the urgent, crisis-driven nature of statutory child protection work:

... the environment of child protection, because it's so at the pointy end of crisis management (...) I don't have the time or space to think about these things critically (...). These bigger questions will always collapse when these demands are in front of you. So I think that's the tension of the workforce, and I don't think there are any easy fixes until maybe there is time and space, remuneration and stability in this workforce that creates the specialists that they need to be. (CurricDev6)

Participants also described technological barriers that presented challenges to them being able to write case notes and keep records as they ideally would. This included databases not designed for case note recording, resulting in a technological and system disconnect and unclear requirements about what was to be recorded. The following participant captures these challenges:

Our systems are also horrible. Take a long time to load, dropout, really fiddly, not intuitive, hard to find where you put things. We manage that with some things being in Excel (...), which is messy, and there's multiple points of contact to put things in. So it gets really hard to capture some of or much of that. (PractitionerFamServ6)

Another important aspect of the context in which practitioners work is that case records often have to address and respond to multiple in- and through-time purposes, that are both transactional and relational. Transactionally, they are crucial for the administration of services, the identification of risk, and for fulfilling compliance and statutory obligations. At the same time, they also have short and long-term relational purposes. The case record is important for family, identity and relationships. So, the same record that might guide and evidence service provision and case planning will also inform another practitioner of action taken while also fulfilling legal, organisational or contractual recording obligations. It may also go on to provide evidence to a court and meet a child's future identity and memory needs.

Despite the challenges to child-centered case recording, participants also described how particular practices could strengthen and support child-centered case recording. As described in the previous section, on-the-job learning, including supervision, was particularly identified as allowing for the review of case notes and fostering best practice. This was described by the supervisors that participated in interviews as often involving looking at case notes with a staff member to discuss what could be improved. As previously described, practitioners also described well-functioning supervision as key to developing their approach to and understanding of case note recording, particularly when it involved regular file audits and built-in checks of case notes.

Practitioners participating in interviews described having found other workarounds and ways of enabling child-centered case recording practice that, despite the various challenges to child-centered case recording, could have a larger impact on case recording practice. One practitioner who supervised staff working with young people in residential care described how they would encourage staff to take notes while staying connected with the young people and not hiding the action of recording. They said:

be connected while you're disconnected, be in the same physical space as them if they need it, or so they can come to you if they need it (PractitionerFamService6).

Another practitioner, also working in a child and family service, described her work with Aboriginal families. Families had expressed discomfort when child protection departmental workers documented their conversations and interactions without allowing them to see the notes taken. One family characterised the act of documenting conversations without involving them as disrespectful. They perceived the child protection worker's note-taking as an indication that the worker was not being present with the family, in their story. As the practitioner described it during their interview,

Recordkeeping and child protection – that's what it is. You know, always cruising around with that notepad and pen. Yeah, we don't do it (PractitionerFamServ2).

Instead, this practitioner described her sharing of information with families and co-constructing records with children and families. The practitioner emphasised the

importance of transparency and authenticity when working with families, believing that individuals are generally accepting of records being made if the process is open and the intent clear. They underscored the significance of directly sharing with families pertinent details, such as the number of notifications about the child or family received by child protection and the possible impacts of this, in a factual manner. The practitioner further highlighted the empowerment in co-constructing records, especially with children:

We actually ask children to develop the record of that session. So, [we would say]: ‘over this hour, we’ve spoken about a few things. What is it that you would like to let Mum and Dad know or what do you want to bring to this meeting?’. That becomes really powerful, actually, at the end of the day, that’s an example of a really clear and a really powerful document. (PractitionerFam-Serv2).

A curriculum developer further described the use of co-constructed records as part of child-centered practice:

It is, again, that respectful stuff, respectful to the child, first off, or respectful to that child’s family. You’re sharing information with a broad range of different organisations and disciplines. So the need to write in plain English and not into the Social Work jargon, but also that stuff... Ultimately, you’re writing for the child or the person, the client. (CurricDev7).

They further highlighted a previous practice experience where clients, adults, would review their own case notes before sessions, considering it an “excellent practice” that “kept you honest” and affirmed the client’s experience, suggesting its applicability for work with children as well.

## Discussion

Based on our findings, this paper advocates for the importance of child-centered, case-note recording to be better recognised and reflected in social work education and training programs. Our findings show that participants were aware of and valued the importance of child-centered records in promoting best practice when working in statutory child protection service systems, as well as how these records provide evidence of decision-making, and support the lifelong informational needs of children and young people. Participants reported the ways in which they had applied and shared child-centered recordkeeping practices in their work and teaching. While our study design attracted participants with an established knowledge of and interest in child-centered recordkeeping practices, it echoes the general understanding of what constitutes child-centered practice in the delivery of child protection services found in recent studies among practitioners in Australia (see, in particular, Bastian et al. 2022). However, this general workforce understanding may not extend to recordkeeping, with participants in our study also reporting that their awareness of the importance of good case recording was not always shared by others at the

individual, organisational and systemic levels. This suggests the need for more comprehensive surveying of attitudes to and awareness of case recording requirements.

This research sought to better comprehend and appreciate what influenced this understanding of the role of recordkeeping in child-centered practice and its application among participants. We found that the education and training of those who go on to work in child protection contexts can be effective in the frameworks and practical knowledge that enable workers to keep child-centered records, but that the positioning of information in the curriculum, the receptiveness of students to what is taught, and other structural barriers may ultimately determine whether this learning takes place and what can be put into practice. Other factors, including student placements, workplace training and on-the-job learning, were identified as being avenues through which practitioners were likely to learn about recordkeeping practice. However, there is a caution here that these avenues only induct practitioners into the recordkeeping approaches of an agency. If the agency is not engaging in child-centered practice, then a practitioner may struggle to practice in a way that is child-centered and relational, creating instead (and as already quoted) “compliant practitioners concerned with service provision rather than social justice” (Gursansky and Le Sueur 2012, p. 917).

Overall, the quality of the holistic education and training of child welfare workers needs to be generally responsive to the skills needed to engage in a practice that appreciates and is grounded on the rights and dignity of the child and those involved in that child’s life, with due recognition of the agency of the child and support for participating in decision-making. Without this, education cannot effectively prepare students for generating practice-supportive, child-centered and rights-based case notes in their professional practice. Recent literature indicates that the education and training that would achieve this is not yet in effect. For example, submissions to the 2022 Independent Inquiry into Foster and Kinship Care in SA reported that some child protection staff displayed a lack of empathic, trauma-responsive practice, and case workers lacked knowledge about their own policies and procedures, resulting in inconsistent practice (Arney et al. 2022).

Our findings highlight the crucial role of professional supervision, not just for ensuring the quality of case note recording, but for records to also facilitate reflective social work practice. However, there is a debate about what constitutes effective supervision, and limited recognition of the importance of training to become an effective supervisor or how to use supervision as a supervisee. Many practitioners move into supervisory roles without any training and with little attention to the varying needs in supervision at different stages of their careers (Gursansky 2015, pp. 16–17). The high-demand and high-turnover environment of child protection departments, in particular, creates a setting of limited practice experience and unreliable practice.

Once in the workplace, organisational culture, technological barriers, and the multipurpose nature of records were identified as barriers to capturing and keeping records in a way that realised participatory approaches to recordkeeping. In particular, there were reports of a lack of consistency in case recording practices, organisational and technological barriers, unclear requirements about what was to be recorded, and workforce issues. Participants also reported that a fearful culture or

risk-averse approaches to case recording were significant barriers to child-centered recording practice. The interviews revealed the daily tussle with the multiple purposes of records—in supporting workers in their decision making and delivery of services, in enabling organisational accountability, in meeting legal requirements and in reflecting children’s and families needs. They highlight the challenging contexts in which practitioners work and the difficulties of satisfying all these requirements and needs within the constraints of current systems.

Ultimately, for child-centered practice, and with this, child-centered recordkeeping, to truly come into effect, an approach of culturally safe, trauma-informed, and strengths-based approaches must supplant risk or deficit-based approaches to child protection practice. Our findings highlight both the promise of child-centered practice while offering suggestions for the organisational and cultural changes necessary to better support the implementation of child-centered recordkeeping practices. Despite the best efforts of those practitioners who demonstrated a deep understanding of child-centered recordkeeping, the systems that could or should be in place to support case recording have significant inefficiencies and present barriers to good practice. It points to the potential of further interdisciplinary collaboration between recordkeeping informatics and social work and child protection researchers and practitioners to address these challenges and progress the implementation of the rights-based and person-centered recordkeeping frameworks that have emerged in prior research (Golding et al. 2021; Lomas et al. 2022). With Tracey et al.’s recent study of how homeless services are sustained by recordkeeping, it also opens up the opportunity to explore together the design of information infrastructures that would allow recordkeeping practices to mirror the care work of practitioners by preserving and privileging the dignity and rights of children and families (Tracey et al. 2023). Instead of solely focusing on efficiency and shortcuts, these approaches would allow us to better understand the lifelong needs of those involved in and impacted on by child protection case recording and explore what information systems might support child-centered case recording practice. In particular, how to bring together our differing disciplinary and professional thinking, knowledge and expertise to develop systems to allow for and support records co-constructions.

## Conclusion

We would like to end this paper thanking the practitioners, curriculum developers and students that have shared with us their experiences and insights into child-centered case note recording. Their generous participation has enabled our pilot study to generate rich data on the ways in which case note recording practices are currently conceived, learned and developed through education, training, practice and experience. It has tapped into those who see this recordkeeping as a vital part of their professional practice and are keen that it reflects the rights and dignity of the children and families that they work with. It has also shown that despite the best efforts of those practitioners who demonstrated a deep understanding of child-centered recordkeeping, the systems that could or should be in place to support case note recording have significant inefficiencies and present barriers to better practices.

What is clear is that there is no simple solution to this complex issue. The absence of systemic support for high-quality records creation and a lack of appreciation for the seismic impacts of poor recordkeeping is arguably what perpetuates the inherent barriers. We need now to ask how we can bring our recordkeeping disciplinary and professional expertise to better configure systems, education and technology that would support child-centered case recording. This is a question of helping and aligning with curriculum and practitioners instead of creating further disconnected records bureaucracies that keep the problems in place.

It inspires us to seek creative collaborations with the multiple disciplinary, practice and lived experience communities in the child welfare and protection sector to continue to explore the re-imagining of recordkeeping systems to address structural barriers and better support child-centered practice. In particular, how true digital innovation—the essence of our recordkeeping informatics approach—might go beyond the automation of paperwork bureaucracies and better and more productively integrate child-centered recordkeeping into professional practice so that the systems set up to protect children from abuse and neglect do not do further harm. By incorporating principles of dignity into the design of recordkeeping processes and systems, we can ensure that these systems are more inclusive, equitable, and respectful of all the people they need to serve.

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