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## **Authenticity, power and the case record: A textual analysis of the participation of children and young people in their child protection conference.**

### **Abstract**

This paper adds to the limited evidence base around documentary representation of the wishes, feelings and views of children and young people involved in the child protection system. It presents the findings of a critical discourse analysis of 114 documents relating to 28 children and young people in the North of England who were the subject of a Child Protection Conference (CPC) due to having experienced significant harm or the high likelihood of significant harm occurring. Three dominant and interlayering discourses were identified: a discourse of childhood, a discourse of participation and a discourse of professional social work practice. While some children and young people came to life in the reports and were afforded a unique identity, others were invisible and their views were marginalised. The findings support a dominant discourse of the unseen and unheard child, with participation normally mediated by power relationships between adults and children within structural forces that serve to marginalise children from the reality of their lived experiences. The findings signify the need to establish assessment practices and case reporting systems in which children are heard themselves as well as reported on by others.

*Key words: participation, case records, Child Protection Conference, power, identity.*

### **Introduction**

#### **The child protection conference (CPC) as a participatory forum**

The 2011 Munro Review of Child Protection in England advocates a child centred approach to child protection in England (Munro, 2011). Recommendation 3 of Munro's influential report aims to ensure that a child or young person's perception of their lived experience is not only ascertained but also taken into account in decision-making and service provision. This presumption extends to the Child Protection Conference (CPC), a decision-making forum that fulfils the legal requirements for agencies to work together and with parents in

order to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are believed to have suffered significant harm, or are likely to suffer significant harm, without the provision of services (Children Act, 2004 s 11). A core group of professionals most frequently involved with the child and family is responsible for developing and reviewing the progress of the child protection or safety plan, which is subsequently subject to formal child protection conference review (Department for Education, 2018).

Whilst it is customary for parents or caregivers to attend conference and core group meetings alongside social workers and other agency representatives, the child or young person's attendance in person has been more contested (Alfandari, 2017; Cossar, Brandon, & Jordan, 2011; Muench, Diaz, & Wright, 2017; van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2014). Debate centres around whether protection rights as enshrined in Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child should be upheld in favour of participatory rights as enshrined in Article 12 (UN General Assembly, 1989), and whether it is ethically or conceptually advantageous for a child or young person to exercise participatory rights in a decision-making forum, when they as the subject have experienced or are likely to experience significant harm. Children and young people who do not attend a CPC in person rely upon others to represent their views, wishes and feelings. Their identities are constructed and mediated in the conference through text talk as opposed to a visible presence at the conference. However, the extent to which case conference records adequately portray children's lived experience and represent their views and opinions has been under-researched.

### **Case records as evidentiary documents of CPC participation**

Smith (2005) defines the case record as a record of an individual that is organised in text form, created and reconstituted through a sequence of organisational steps. The recording of activities through well-managed records management processes and systems is a key part of an organisation's management of information. Case records are an integral feature of an information system that epitomises the bureaucratic, technical and rational aspect of contemporary social work practice (Hall, Slembrouck, & Sarangi, 2006). The records created and held by professionals involved in the CPC, as well as containing evidence of legislative and professional compliance, are fundamental to informed, consistent and accountable

practice and decision-making in child protection (Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2018; Camilleri, Gursansky, & Kennedy, 2020; Hoyle, Shepherd, Flinn, & Lomas, 2019; Prince, 1996). Local authority information systems derive from the Integrated Children's System (ICS) introduced in England in 2005. ICS is characteristic of a standardised process for ordering texts in a linear sequence (Smith, 2005) that depicted core social work functions associated with assessment, planning, intervention and review activities. Record types generated or accessed by the CPC and discussed in this paper include agency assessment reports, core group minutes, the CPC report, and the child protection/safety plan.

Recent research, together with Reviews, Inquiries and Royal Commissions into child protection systems in countries such as the UK and Australia, have brought attention to the complexity of child protection recordkeeping systems within child welfare systems that are characterised by technical bureaucratic and procedural reductionism (Devlieghere & Roose, 2018), the implications of poor practice in case recording, and the necessity of child-centred and participatory practices (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, 2001, 2017; Eberhard, 2015; Evans, McKemmish, & Rolan, 2019; Munro, 2011; Nyland, 2016; Shepherd, Hoyle, Lomas, Flinn, & Sexton, 2020; Tropea, Evans, O'Neill, & Golding, 2020). Limitations in case records have been identified through this body of work, as well as through recent enquiries into the deaths of children (Laming, 2003; South Australian Courts, 2016). Criticisms include the inaccurate, minimal, or absent information, the absence of the voices and wishes of the children concerned, and the at-times subjective or pejorative tone and style of the records (Hall, Parton, Peckover, & White, 2010; Huuskonen & Vakkari, 2015; Ince & Griffiths, 2011; Munro, 2011; Parton, 2008). These limitations have implications for timely and effective responses to child abuse and neglect, the clear and objective interpretation of the records, and can cause further substantial distress and pain for the subjects of those records including children who have experienced abuse and neglect and care experienced children and young people.

### **Aims of the study**

Analysis of the documentary representation of the wishes, feelings and views of children and young people in the case records generated by the CPC is relatively under-researched, particularly in relation to children under the age of seven. This paper adds to the evidence

base by exploring the participation of children and young people in their CPC through an analysis of case record data obtained from a local authority in the north of England. It seeks to investigate how their views, wishes and feelings are represented at the CPC, whether or not they attend in person.

## **Methods**

Critical social work theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003; Fook, 2016; Healy & Mulholland, 1998; Hood, 2016) provided the methodological frameworks used by this paper to explore the social and political structural processes that underpin the CPC and which serve to shape and mediate the relationship between professionals and children and young people. CDA is associated with discourses of power and control and how these are manifested in day-to-day practices through an examination of the role of the speaker/author (Bloor & Bloor, 2013; Fairclough, 2003; Hall et al., 2006; Harding, 2018; van Dijk, 1995). When the child or young person is not present in person in the CPC, their subjective knowledge is produced by others, and through this act, a form of truth is created. CDA assisted in exploring these processes. Managing the minds of others through case records incorporates acts of showing and telling (Taylor, 2008). In a social worker's assessment report, the former is concerned with conveying activities and actions in a credible manner (for example, the undertaking of a home visit) and as factual representations. As such, the voice of the narrator is not particularly visible. In contrast, telling involves the narrator's voice, which serves to construct and categorise events, activities and identities.

One hundred and fourteen reports submitted to and generated in CPC's that took place over an eight-month period from 2014 to 2015 were analysed. These concerned 28 children and young people aged between two and a half and sixteen years and included both initial CPC's (ICPC's) and review CPC's. Child pseudonyms and age are outlined in Table 1. Out of the twenty-eight children, only one attended their review CPC. The majority were, therefore, reliant on professionals to represent their views, wishes and feelings, in particular social workers and school-based staff.

Table 1 Child pseudonyms and age

Barry age 2	Callum age 12
Colin age 3	Marcus age 12
Darren age 3	Emily age 13
Eleanor age 4	Esme age 13
Martha age 4	Corrine age 13
Daisy age 4	Elizabeth age 14
Belle age 5	Tommie age 14
Daniel age 5	Tony age 14
Louise age 5	Rhiannon age 15
Ryan age 6	Janneka age 15
Nadia age 8	Charlie age 16
Dyab age 10	Sean age 16
Kasey age 11	Sophie age 16
Dimitri age 12	Taylor age 16

A range of electronic documents are presented or developed at the CPC, including individual assessments by different agencies involved with the child and family; core group minutes; reports of direct work undertaken with the child; a record of the conference proceedings; and a record of the child protection or safety plan. Documents serve either an input or a strategic function. Any document designed for assessment and information purposes, including examples of direct work, serves an input function. Documents that serve a strategic function are those that illustrate decision making and planning processes, namely the record of the CPC and the child protection plan.

The first stage of analysis involved analysing the presence of the child's wishes and feelings in each of the 114 documents using Fairclough's analytical framework (2003) to identify the genre, assumptions, representation, style, identities and interdiscursivity apparent in the case records. The genre of each record is described in Table 2. There was no evidence of a standardised format being used for reports across agencies. All social worker reports included a separate section in the first section of the report structure for incorporating the views of the child or young person. Primary and secondary schools used a report structure

that sought evidence of consultation with the child or young person. However, this was usually left blank or answered in the negative. Reports provided by voluntary sector organisations were more standardised in that there was a section for reporting the child or young person’s views, and for establishing if the contents of the report had been shared with the child or young person, and this usually stated that the contents had been shared. In the second stage of analysis, themes and commonalities were identified across documents. Focusing on the authenticity, and the maintenance of the integrity and identity of the child in the case record, together with the power relationships observed in the records of the CPC.

Table 2. Genre of child protection records.

<b>Type of record</b>	<b>Number</b>
Social work report	20
Core group minutes	13
Direct work examples	10
Conference report	30
Child protection/safety plan	22
Other agency report	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>

Ethical approval for access to the electronic CPC records was granted from the University where the first and second author work and from the research governance unit in the local authority on the proviso that access to documentary data sources would be confined to the agency site. The question of ownership of the record is increasingly posed by recordkeeping as children become participatory actors in their case records (Evans, McKemmish, Daniels, & McCarthy, 2015; Evans et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020; Tropea et al., 2020). A case file is an agency record and produced within the legal parameters of information governance. However, the case record is also a narrative of a child’s life that contains elements of the lives of other family members. Arguably, informed consent should, therefore, be sought if the record is not to be redacted. However, Hayes and Devaney (2004) posit a utilitarian as

opposed to a deontological rationale for the use of case records in research. Although access to a case record without explicit consent can be considered a moral wrong, they suggest this may be counteracted by the moral benefits to research in general in accessing records without this consent.

## **Findings**

In analysing the 114 case records relating to 28 children and young people in the North of England who were the subject of a CPC, a window into practice with children and young people and how the CPC perceives the child emerged. Three dominant and interlaying discourses were identified: a discourse of childhood, of participation, and of professional social work practice. While some children and young people came to life in the reports and were afforded a unique identity, others were invisible, and their views were marginalised. The case review findings support a dominant discourse of the unseen and unheard child, with participation normally mediated by power relationships between adults and children within structural forces that serve to marginalise children from the reality of their lived experiences. These findings are presented through the four dominant actors who emerged in the case records. These are:

- The too-young child
- The ignored child
- The at-risk child
- The author of the case record.

### **The too-young child**

Across the age bands, assumptions were made over professional beliefs about childhood and the capacity of children to be involved in the assessment process. Children under the age of five were most likely not to have their views sought, and for this to be justified on the grounds of age. Instead, the child's views, wishes, and feelings were replaced with the social worker's assessment of the child's circumstances and needs. For example, the Social Worker for Eleanor, aged four, notes in Eleanor's case record: 'Due to her young age (4) her direct wishes and feelings have not been undertaken as part of this assessment'.



Where direct work activities were undertaken with children under five, a stronger picture of participation emerged. In a direct work activity undertaken with Eleanor, the child cited above, the social worker referred to 'the level of age-inappropriate information that Eleanor is aware of'. Here, the social worker conveyed to the conference a unique insight into Eleanor's understanding of her father's violent behaviour and details of his arrest. In making a judgement over what constituted 'inappropriate' information, the social worker also conveyed to the conference an assessment of Eleanor's agency, being influenced by and influencing (through the medium of the direct work activity) her social world at a relatively young age. Similarly, Belle's (aged five) social worker used the word 'adamant' to describe Belle's confirmation of information that effectively contradicted the social worker's own understanding of an important element of the safety plan. This served as an invitation for the CPC to give weight to Belle's account of events.

However, where direct work was not undertaken with children under five, the reason provided related to assumptions made about an individual child's age-related capabilities. The dominant assumption appeared to again be that children under the age of five could not communicate their wishes and feelings. For example, Barry, aged two and a half, was considered 'too young to provide his views formally'. It was unclear how Barry's social worker interpreted a formal articulation of views or whether any particular approaches, including child observation, were attempted. The social worker's report noted Barry was talking, making good progress and meeting his development milestones; characteristics which suggest that Barry was capable of expressing himself through verbal and non-verbal means. Darren's social worker variously noted: 'I did not complete direct work with Darren due to his age and understanding', 'Tried to carry out the Three Houses work but believe the children found this difficult to comprehend', and 'No work was undertaken with Darren'.

Assumptions over increased capacity as a child moved from infancy towards middle childhood were illustrated in the work undertaken with Nadia, aged eight. Greater use was made of closed and facilitative questioning styles, and her views were incorporated into the assessment reports. Although reported indirectly, Nadia described life at home within a context of family violence, and there appeared to be a degree of sensitivity on behalf of the family support worker as to why Nadia might find it difficult to talk about life at home. In Nadia's child protection plan, there was a clear commitment to her right to be informed and

provide her views: 'Nadia doesn't understand why her mother was upset as her father hurts her all the time. Nadia wants her father to come home but wants him to change his anger'.

Progression towards young adulthood correlated with greater weight afforded to the young person's views through explicit inclusion into the safety plan. Young people in this age group were also assumed more capable and of sufficient maturity to attend a CPC or a core group in person. A conception of childhood based on the adult being the more knowing, rational and capable person was, however, still often evident in respect of young adults, particularly where the stated views were contrary to the social worker's assessment. Perhaps the most striking example concerned Taylor, aged sixteen, who had not engaged in the interventions previously identified in the child protection plan for reasons unknown to the professionals. This is documented as: 'Taylor offered outreach: didn't engage', 'Taylor to engage with bereavement counselling: refused to engage', and 'Family Support Worker to undertake work with Taylor: Taylor lost his temper and hasn't engaged since'. It is somewhat surprising that in the face of evidence that suggested that the interventions had little meaning or value for Taylor, a prescriptive and directional approach was then adopted in his revised safety plan: 'Taylor will engage with education and training. Taylor to be spoken to re careers advice'.

A further aspect of the dominant discourse of childhood concerned normative assumptions over how children should behave. Children in the five and under age-band tended to be presented in terms of positive wellbeing. For example, Louise (aged five) was described as a 'happy and confident little girl, not worried or frightened about anything and Daisy (aged four) as 'a very happy child'. This contrasts with the focus in portrayals of children and young people over the age of thirteen that focus on negative rather than positive identities. For example, thirteen-year-old Emily's social worker alluded to more negative attributes, contrary to normative assumptions about what was considered acceptable behaviour for a child of her age. The social worker included indirect reports and statements of professional judgement concerning the validity of Emily's reported statements and concerning Emily's physical presentation and behaviour which contained significant evidence of value-based assessment:

‘Emily said she hangs around with boys of her own age. I am unsure if this is true and a real reflection of what is happening. However, Emily told me that she never has sex with boys, just likes to brag. Again, I am unsure if this is true’.

‘I asked Emily why she was so horrible to her little sister. She said she did not know and would try harder to be nicer to her. I am not convinced that this was said with any sincerity whatsoever from Emily’.

‘Emily told me her boyfriend doesn’t like her wearing makeup. Emily does look refreshingly prettier without makeup’.

The adverb ‘refreshingly’ emphasises the social worker’s value statement in the final quote.

An exception to the negative framing of older children was Tommie, aged fourteen, for whom the ‘child’s view’ section of the social worker’s report noted: ‘Tommie says he feels happy at home. He said he is never sad and life is always good... he says he feels looked after and cared for by his parents.’ Rhiannon, aged fifteen, was also presented in a more positive light, as a young woman with aspirations, as a young woman with the capacity to express a viewpoint and be heard but as a young woman with additional needs who aspired towards a career in journalism.

### **The ignored and the at-risk child**

All children and young people that are the subjects of a CPC have experienced significant harm or the high likelihood of significant harm occurring. However, there were few direct references to the child or young person’s perception of their circumstances. This was more likely to occur with young people aged thirteen onwards and with young women where there were stated concerns over sexual exploitation. For example, the most detailed narratives were found in the social work reports for Corrine and Emily, both aged thirteen, and both identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation. This is perhaps reflective of the high-risk profile accorded to sexual exploitation in general and acknowledging the practice challenges associated with working alongside young people, who may not consider themselves to be at risk. Therefore, attention to detail may be an example of accountability in managing the risks for both practitioner and agency.

In contrast, Janneka, aged fifteen, was completely invisible. There was no record of Janneka having been seen by the social worker, and the conference record noted: ‘child’s views

expressed by mother'. Out of five paragraphs in a previous local authority report, only one sentence referred specifically to Janneka: 'Janneka has experienced bullying'.

Identity was also lost through the child or young person's presentation as invisible. For example, there was no reference to Colin, aged three, by name in his child protection plan. Referring to the child using their first name was most evident in the 'Child's/ young person's views' section of the social workers' reports and conference report. However, in some conference minutes and core group meeting minutes, the child was either not mentioned by name, was subsumed within the collective sibling group, thus inviting more generalised statements, or the section where their views ought to be recorded was left blank. Loss of unique identity occurred for Barry (aged two and a half), who was subsumed into his sibling group as: 'The children are both happy and well cared for', as was Dyab, aged ten: 'The boys are reluctant to engage', and Sophie, aged sixteen: 'They speak highly of their mother'. Nadia, aged eight, was also subsumed under the umbrella term of 'children' in both ICPC and review conference reports and child protection plans and her brother was also referred to in documents where Nadia should have been the subject. It is unclear why Nadia's brother should have been referred to in these documents, as there is a clear expectation that each child in a sibling group should be referred to individually.

### **The author of the case record**

While the views of children or young people were recorded in some assessment reports, the author of the case records, usually a social worker, was also in evidence in the information provided, the language used, and the assessments provided.

In the first instance, the author of the case record is present in the formal noting of their attempts to ascertain the wishes and feelings of the young person. Examples of this are apparent in the following sections for Corrine, aged thirteen and Tony, aged fourteen:

'[Corrine] presented as a very guarded young person during the assessment period and has not engaged positively with one-to-one sessions that have been undertaken. Corrine's body language changed markedly when this area (worries) was explored and she was observed to turn away from me and stare at the wall'.

'Tony is not interested in speaking with me and was more interested in playing outside'.

However, the author of the case record was also apparent in the case records in the language chosen to record the wishes and feelings of the child. In the entries for Martha, aged four, there was some variation in the language used by the social worker. In the conference report, the social worker used both relatively child-orientated and more adult language when discussing the adults in Martha's life: 'Martha wants to live with her maternal grandmother and for mum to live there. Martha worries about mum'. In the core group minutes under the 'Child's views' section, the above was rephrased into the social worker's interpretation: 'Martha has nothing negative to say about living arrangements'.

The child/ young person's views section was also used to convey a professional opinion, provide a rationale for perceived non-engagement in the assessment process, or exercise a professional judgment on the validity of the child or young person's views. Professional opinion was included in the reported views of Dyab: 'I do not feel he (brother) or his sibling need a social worker to feel safe' and Elizabeth: 'Whilst I recognise Elizabeth's logic around this [a wish to move schools]...'.

The social worker's questioning of the accuracy or validity of the child's views was evident too in the 'views of the child/ young person' section for Elizabeth, aged fourteen: 'Elizabeth has described feelings of wanting to be away from her family but is unable to provide a clear or justifiable reasoning for this'.

The absence of the child or young person's expression of views, wishes and feelings in their own words in the reports submitted to and generated in the conference rendered it difficult to determine whose voice was being heard. It was not clear in any of the CPC records whether the child's own words had been directly transposed or whether they had been subject to professional filtering. For example, it is unlikely that a child aged five would be conversant with terminology such as 'Children's Social Care', but in the following sentence, the social worker does suggest that five-year-old Belle had some understanding of her circumstances: 'Belle is very aware in general and understands that Children's Social Care is involved in the family'.

It was also not always clear, even with older children, whether the statements made in social work reports were the child's own words directly transposed into the text format or were examples of social work filtering. For example: 'Brief conversation with Callum [aged

12] due to lack of privacy at school. Very open about concerns. Describes home environment as chaotic, unpredictable, overcrowded, an unhappy place to live.'

The following extract is an example of how the social worker used professional filtering to convey Esme's views and of the inter-relationship between the texts. The views expressed by Esme, aged thirteen, in the relevant section of the social worker report were combined with those included in core group meetings resulting in the following statement in the conference report:

'Esme repeatedly said she didn't like partner being in the family home and she doesn't get on with her mother. Feels she gets the blame for everything. Feels she has middle child syndrome. Home is not happy place for her'.

Of note, here is the insertion of the adjective 'not happy' in place of Esme's reported and more powerful description of her home presented in the child/young person's views section as a 'miserable and lonely place and feels she wants to spend as little time as possible at home'. Although it is not clear if these words were used by Esme herself, there is a distinct variation in meaning.

## **Discussion**

The participation of children in the child protection process is intrinsically linked with power relations that are mediated through political, socio-legal and cultural processes (Alanen, 2009; Fook, 2002). Participation, as analysed through a dichotomy of power and powerlessness, is a dominant theme in the literature, with limited evidence of the child as a social being within the child protection process (Bolin, 2016). In this study, this was manifested in the author of the case record being the dominant voice. Some children were completely invisible; others had their words subjected to professional filtering.

The extent to which children are seen, heard and authentically represented at the CPC is mediated by a complex and nuanced interplay of individual (child and professional), organisational and structural factors (Bastian, 2020; Collins, 2018; Ferguson, 2016; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020; Toros, 2021; Vis, Holtan, & Thomas, 2012) that are located within a child protection system that endeavours to act in the child's best interests and to promote participation within competing discourses of child protection. The production of an

organisation's frame of reality is founded on organisational discourses, which in turn serve to define and regulate the day-to-day local practices created through social relations. Local individual practice is therefore transformed into general practice in a recognizable and accountable form (Smith, 2005) and as a 'document in action' (Prior, 2003, p. 67). The organisational discourses and the regulatory frames that are produced create subject positions and subject roles in specific contexts. For example, the subject position of the social worker who produces and presents an assessment report for a CPC is delineated by discourses of professional practice articulated in legal and policy frameworks. As the findings of this study demonstrated, through the acts of creating and representing the assessment in a textual format, the social worker effectively frames the child or young person as a subject and effectively reframes their narrative.

Roets, Rutten, Roose, Vandekinderen, and Soetaert (2015) differentiate between the case record as a medium for truth-telling, in which the content of a record represents a professionally constructed structured objective reality and the case record as a medium for a more unstructured and reflexive storytelling narrative, which acknowledges the complexities inherent in social work relationships. The ICS and other contemporary evolved electronic recording systems have been designed to record social work activities within an 'atomised' structure (Hall et al., 2010, p. 394). This is coupled with what Evans et al. (2015) describe as a recordkeeping culture in which:

'Extant laws, standards and infrastructure designed for a different age, different values and a different technological paradigm puts the rights of the organisations, institutions and governments responsible for child protection and welfare ahead of those of children and their adult selves' (Evans et al., 2015, p. 184).

These factors, impacting the system design and the culture of social work recordkeeping, may go some way towards explaining why children and young people's narratives were so often absent in this study. Absent in this is an understanding of the 'lifelong identity, memory, accountability and cultural recordkeeping needs' (Evans et al., 2015, p. 189) of the children and young people who are the subjects of the CPC and the records that it generates.

The activities that culminate in documented records being presented to and generated by the CPC can be understood as a continuum of 'seeing' which encapsulates elements of a

child protection orientation or a child-centred rights-based orientation (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). Both orientations were evident in this study. The child protection orientation correlates with a child protection system that is risk dominated, and where the statutory duty to see a child and record this as a social work activity demonstrates accountability and compliance at individual and organisational levels. Within such an approach, it can be sufficient to record that the child was seen in the physical sense and appeared 'happy' or 'well', and there were numerous examples of this in this study, particularly when the child was deemed to be too young to communicate their wishes and feelings.

In contrast, within a child-focused orientation, seeing the child encompasses the principles of authentic participation, enacted through activities that are child-directed as opposed to adult-led, and subsequently documented as an authentic record using the child's own verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. Here the child is positioned as an agentic contributor to knowledge creation. Rather than conceptualising individual characteristics such as age as a barrier to participation, a child-focused orientation challenges child development led assumptions that children aged five and under are not capable of providing a unique insight into their own reality. While there were some examples of this in this study, sadly, they were few in number. Where the child's views were presented, they were frequently contradicted by professionals who perceived they were more knowing or diluted by professional value-based judgements that presented young people in a negative light. As Hall et al. (2006) and Noordegraaf, van Nijnatten, and Elbers (2009) note, a case record is closely related to the communicative exchanges upon which it is based. It is a transcript based upon the social worker's interpretation and analysis of spoken language and observation of the child's presentation in her/his environmental domains, including home and school. The case record is, thus a social construction, influenced by political, social and cultural factors which in turn influences professional identity and beliefs (Marston, 2013); a time capsule that preserved the children in this study as 'too young', 'ignored' or 'at risk'.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection framework (2019) recognises the dual function of the electronic case record as 'people changing' as well as 'people processing' (Gibson, Samuels, & Pryce, 2018, p. 43). Social work



case records have a moral purpose and should serve as a mechanism for empowerment upheld by principles of social justice and informed by relational based practice, evidencing the child's journey through the child protection system. Overall, however, the findings of this study suggest this is not currently happening.

### **Implications for policy, practice and research.**

Practice innovation, in the form of structural, cultural and practice reform, is intended to generate new solutions to enduring problems in contemporary child welfare systems that are characterised by a child protection orientation, such as those in the UK and Australia. In the last decade, local authorities in the UK and child protection systems in Australia have been required to respond to increasing numbers of children coming to the attention of child protection services. Practice frameworks that are more orientated towards family support and child focus aim to reverse this trend. To date, the extent to which these have repositioned the child's voice in the CPC are untested.

This study highlighted the unauthentic voice of children across age groups and the additionally marginalised voices of younger children in the CPC. Representation of the child's authentic voice, when they do not attend in person, requires a recognition of a child's capacity for voice, and a commitment to uphold legal and moral requirements in order to validate voice.

There is a dissonance between a legal and moral imperative and an ambiguous practice imperative which emphasises technical competence in truth-telling recordkeeping (Roets et al., 2015) at the point of social work qualification. Professional standards for social workers in England require the maintenance of "clear, accurate, legible and up to date records, documenting how I arrive at my decisions" (Social Work England, 2019, 3.11). The mechanisms by which social work students develop their knowledge, skills and values associated with recordkeeping should extend to a greater critical awareness of the impact of power relations that serve to define a child's identity in the now and in the future. In an era of practice innovation in westernised child welfare systems, there would be value in cross-county research to explore both the possible disconnect between education and practice and how the rights of children can be promoted within a child focused and child protection practice orientation:

‘If we seriously mean to improve the life conditions of children we must, as a minimum precondition, establish reporting systems in which they are heard themselves as well as reported on by others’ (Qvortrup,1990. p.94).

### **Limitations of the study**

There were a number of limitations to this study. It took place in one local authority, and the findings cannot be generalised beyond the scope of this single-site case study. However, as Simons (2009) notes, case studies contribute to applied knowledge generation for policy and practice development in similar contexts.

The documentary analysis was undertaken at a point when Signs of Safety was introduced as the agency’s practice model (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Signs of Safety is characteristic of a strength-based relational practice framework for assessing and responding to harm (Munro, Turnell, & Murphy, 2016) and repositioning family members as people ‘worth doing business with’ as opposed to ‘people we do business with’ (Turnell & Edwards, 1999, p. 32). At the point of data collection, there was no evidence (Bunn, 2013) around how children and young people had experienced using tools affiliated with Signs of Safety assessments such as the Three Houses, an assessment tool designed to support children to express their views on what is good in their life, their hopes, dreams and worries. A more contemporary analysis of case record data is, therefore, required in order to establish how participatory practice has evolved through post-Munro practice innovations.

### **Conclusion**

Critical Discourse Analysis provided a lens through which to examine and explore the meaning within and across a range of texts. This provided depth of clarity over the type and purpose of the range of documents presented to the CPC, and the illumination of the voices contained in these. The use of language served to privilege and not to privilege particular voices, to present the child in a particular way, and illustrated the range of assumptions that practitioners drew upon to validate their presentation and re-presentation of the child’s voice. Language served as a medium for constructing a child or young person’s identity in the reports submitted to the conference. On some occasions, knowledge of the child was

constructed through invisibility and silence, and this served to privilege dominant discourses of the child or young person being too young to participate in the assessment process, or in the case of some young people, as being disengaged from the process. For some children and young people, this resulted in an absorption of individual identity into sibling identity. The findings of this study signify a need to establish assessment practices and case reporting systems in which children are heard themselves as well as reported on by others.

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