Higher Learning Lab · Free research resource · CC BY-NC 4.0

Cross-Sector Child Documentation: Review of the Literature and Rationale

Bjorn, Genevive (Higher Learning Lab)

Published 2025-11-23 by Higher Learning Lab, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Dover, Delaware.

Canonical version: https://www.higherlearninglab.org/portfolio/cross-sector-child-documentation-review-of-the-literature-and-rationale/

Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0.

By Higher Learning Lab

Citation: Bjorn, G. (2025). *Cross-sector child documentation: Review of the literature and rationale*. Higher Learning Lab. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23541047

Across child welfare, health care, and education, documentation—case files, clinical notes, school records, and advocacy briefs—is a primary way children and families are seen and acted upon. These records drive decisions about services, legal interventions, and long-term care trajectories, and for care-experienced people, they often become a "paper self" that shapes identity, memory, and belonging (Hoyle et al., 2019; Lomas et al., 2023; Shepherd et al., 2021). Empirical work in child social care shows that records frequently omit or misrepresent children's voices and feelings and are experienced as shaming, fragmented, or retraumatizing when accessed later in life (Hoyle et al., 2019). Building on this, Lomas et al. (2023) explicitly describe social care records as a "paper self" that mediates care-experienced people's memory and identity, and the MIRRA Child Social Care Participatory Recordkeeping Framework similarly foregrounds this issue (Shepherd et al., 2020; Shepherd & Hoyle, 2022). The topic of this project is documentation as care: how frontline practitioners transform deep listening and emotionally intense encounters into ethically sound, evidentially useful, and protective written records across systems and over time.

Scope, Problem, and Importance

The scope is deliberately cross-sector. Child-focused documentation is now governed by a crowded landscape of standards in children's social care. Examples include the human-centred participatory recordkeeping and access rights for care-experienced people (Hoyle et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020; Golding et al., 2021), medico-legal responses to conflict-related sexual violence against children (Physicians for Human Rights, 2024), social-work documentation and case-recording manuals (Sidell, 2023), and pedagogical documentation practices in early-childhood education (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). Despite this proliferation, practitioners continue to report confusion about what to record, how to record it, and how to balance legal and organisational requirements with child-centred, trauma-informed practice (Hawkes et al., 2024; O'Keefe et al., 2025; Sidell, 2023). Research on case notes in child protection highlights persistent problems—variable quality, deficit-focused language, and systems that do not support child-centred recording—even in jurisdictions that have undertaken multiple reviews and practice

initiatives (Hawkes et al., 2024; O'Keefe et al., 2025). The stakes are high: documentation decisions affect individual children's safety and justice and also the evidentiary base for advocacy and system reform.

Several bodies of work address parts of this problem. The MIRRA project and related Rights in Records initiatives have developed a human-centred, participatory recordkeeping approach for child social-care records, grounded in the rights of care-experienced people to participate in, access, and understand their files (Golding et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2020, 2021). MIRRA's findings document critical failings in how records are created, managed, and accessed, with direct impacts on wellbeing (Hoyle et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020), and respond with principles for caring recordkeeping, participatory app design, and guidance on including memory objects and contextual information (Lomas et al., 2023; Shepherd & Hoyle, 2022). Although these frameworks and briefings begin to translate principles into practice guidance, they still operate primarily at the levels of organisational governance, archival practice, and high-level principles. They offer relatively little step-by-step guidance on the moment-to-moment micro-skills of interviewing, listening, and writing a single child-facing case note. They are mainly scoped to social care and archives rather than health care and educational records.

The Child-Centered Documentation Toolkit, developed by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR, 2024), is a major advance in medico-legal documentation for child survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. PHR describes significant gaps in standardized approaches and practices for documenting sexual violence in children and responds with a multi-module toolkit that emphasises trauma-informed, rights-based documentation, child-friendly spaces, consent and assent (and dissent) procedures, and evidence-grade recording for justice pathways (Physicians for Human Rights, 2024). In its intended context, the toolkit provides detailed guidance on engagement (e.g., child-friendly spaces), forensic documentation standards, forms and curricula, and minimising retraumatization and safeguarding identities. However, it is highly specialised: designed for conflict and post-conflict settings, sexual-violence cases, and medico-legal teams. Its scope, language, and technical depth make it challenging to adopt wholesale for routine child-welfare case notes, school records, child welfare advocacy work, or everyday paediatric encounters, and it is not presented as a general mental workflow that can travel across sectors.

Within children's social work, resources such as Sidell's *Social Work Documentation: A Guide to Strengthening Your Case Recording* and

recent case-record studies seek to improve how practitioners document their work. Sidell's text is a comprehensive "how-to guide" on case recording, formats, electronic documentation, trauma-informed writing, and bias-free, person-first language across social-work settings (Sidell, 2023). Empirical work like Hawkes et al.'s (2024) *Caring Records* study and O'Keefe et al.'s (2025) analysis of child-centred case recording shows that practitioners and students value child-centred, caring notes but face time pressures, confusing or risk-centric systems, and inconsistent training; many remain unclear about the purpose and audience of case notes and about how to write in ways that children can bear to read later (Hawkes et al., 2024; O'Keefe et al., 2025). These resources significantly advance behavioral clarity, basic assessment, and standard formats, and they gesture toward listening to children, honouring their perspectives, and trauma-informed and bias-free language. Yet, documentation is still primarily treated as a technical skill within social work rather than as a cross-system, emotionally sequenced method, and these resources do not provide a simple, shared process that can be used across health care, education, and social care.

Early-childhood pedagogical documentation offers yet another framework. Systematic reviews and empirical studies describe pedagogical documentation as an "integral working method" in early learning settings, in which educators observe children, collect traces of learning, reflect, and share documentation with colleagues, children, and families (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021; Carlsen & Clark, 2022). This work is strong in listening to children, honoring their perspectives, using multimodal evidence of learning, and collaboratively sense-making about children's meaning-making. It supports family-educator communication and child participation (Carlsen & Clark, 2022). At the same time, the literature notes challenges: documentation is effort-demanding and time-consuming; child participation in deciding what and how to document remains limited; and teachers often lack training in the process of documentation, not just in its products (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). Crucially for child-welfare advocacy, these practices are oriented to pedagogy rather than legal or evidentiary standards; the literature seldom foregrounds explicit truth-testing or corroboration and rarely addresses the long-term emotional impact of records on children who may later access them outside the classroom context (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021).

Gap in Resources

Taken together, this body of work shows that key elements of "documentation as care" already exist, but they are distributed across specific domains and frameworks. Rights-based recordkeeping projects (e.g., MIRRA) articulate caring, participatory principles and highlight the lifelong impacts of records, but operate mainly at the governance and archival levels (Golding et al., 2021; Lomas et al., 2023; Shepherd et al., 2020, 2021). The PHR toolkit offers a well-developed, trauma-informed, evidence-grade model for a narrow medico-legal pathway for conflict-related sexual violence (Physicians for Human Rights, 2024). Social-work documentation manuals and case-record research focus on formats, risk management, and improving individual case notes, but mainly within the silo of social work and without a shared, emotionally sequenced process that can be transferred to healthcare and educational contexts (Hawkes et al., 2024; O'Keefe et al., 2025; Sidell, 2023). Pedagogical documentation offers sophisticated practices of listening, observing, and interpreting in early-learning environments, yet it does not aim to produce records that function simultaneously as care, rights practice, and formal advocacy evidence (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021; Carlsen & Clark, 2022).

Within the child social-care, medico-legal, and early-childhood documentation literatures reviewed here, previous models and frameworks have not provided a single, cross-sector workflow for practioners that (a) starts from deliberate emotional attunement to children and caregivers, (b) separates neutral observation from contextual interpretation, (c) embeds explicit verification and doubt as a distinct step before conclusions are recorded, (d) requires practitioners to structure information into clear, interoperable containers, and (e) ends with a future-oriented protection check on how the record will affect people when read years later. To our knowledge, there is currently no widely adopted framework that offers a mental workflow as a portable, conscious, repeatable sequence that can be overlaid on or integrated across existing standards in child welfare, health care, and education without replacing them.

Project Rationale

This project will address that gap by investigating how a documentation-as-care method centering six core practitioner functions—attune, observe, interpret, verify, structure, and protect—can be defined, grounded in existing evidence, and applied across

child welfare, health-care, and teaching contexts as a cross-sector integration for producing records that are simultaneously caring, ethically robust, and usable as evidence for child-welfare advocacy.

References

Alaçam, N., & Olgan, R. (2021). Pedagogical documentation in early childhood education: A systematic review of the literature. Elementary Education Online, 20(1), 172–191. https://doi.org/10.17051/ilkonline.2021.01.021

Carlsen, K., & Clark, A. (2022). Potentialities of pedagogical documentation as an intertwined research process with children and teachers in slow pedagogies. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 30(2), 200–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2022.2046838

Golding, F., Lewis, A., McKemmish, S., Rolan, G., & Thorpe, K. (2021). Rights in records: A Charter of Lifelong Rights in Childhood Recordkeeping in Out-of-Home Care for Australian and Indigenous Australian children and care leavers. The International Journal of Human Rights, 25(9), 1625–1657. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1859484

Hawkes, M., Evans, J., & Reed, B. (2024). Caring records: Professional insights into child-centered case note recording. Archival Science, 24(2), 183–207. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-023-09430-w

Hoyle, V., Shepherd, E., Flinn, A., & Lomas, E. (2019). Child social-care recording and the information rights of care-experienced people: A recordkeeping perspective. British Journal of Social Work, 49(7), 1856–1874. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy115

Lomas, E., Shepherd, E., Hoyle, V., Sexton, A., & Flinn, A. (2023). A framework for person-centred recordkeeping drawn through the lens of out-of-home child-care contexts. Archivaria, 94, 64–93. https://doi.org/10.7202/1094876ar

O'Keefe, R., Geddes, E., Vincent, S., & Davies, P. (2025). Enabling child-centred case recording in children's social work: The voice of practitioners. Child & Family Social Work, 31(1), 389–399. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13288

Physicians for Human Rights. (2024). Child-centered documentation toolkit. Physicians for Human Rights. https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PHR-Child-Centered-Documentation-Toolkit-2024-ENG.pdf

Shepherd, E., & Hoyle, V. (2022). Good practice in recording and access to records (Strategic briefing). Research in Practice. https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/182464/

Shepherd, E., Hoyle, V., & Lomas, E. (2021). Project MIRRA: Memory–identity–rights in records–access. Comma, 2020(1–2), 97–110. https://doi.org/10.3828/comma.2020.6

Shepherd, E., Hoyle, V., Lomas, E., Flinn, A., & Sexton, A. (2020). Towards a human‐centred participatory approach to child social care recordkeeping. Archival Science, 20(4), 307–325. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-020-09338-9

Sidell, N. L. (2023). Social work documentation: A guide to strengthening your case recording (3rd ed.). NASW Press.