ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Digital Life Story Work: Linking Identity and Security for Young People in Out-of-Home Care

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Abstract

While every young person in Out-Of-Home Care (OOHC) has their own unique story, what they do have in common is the experience of a disrupted life. As they move through placements and assigned case workers change roles, young people frequently lack access to important records and memorabilia. A disjointed personal narrative can undermine a young person's sense of identity and, given this cohort is already at great risk of poor general outcomes when transitioning to adulthood, can put their physical and mental wellbeing at risk. This paper examines the role digital technology can play in supporting identity for young people in OOHC. It does so through consideration of a new Australian digital app called *CaringLife* and argues for the benefits of future Life Story Work (LSW) in a digital format in conjunction with more conventional formats. We argue that a digital format for life storying has strong potential to address the higher than usual critical issues this group face: unemployment, homelessness, and mental illness.

Keywords Life Story Work · Sense of self · Digital life story work · Apps · Mobile media · Identity

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Springer

Introduction

In Australia, there are over 46,000 children and young people in Out-Of-Home Care (OOHC) who are unable to live safely with their families (AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare), 2023). The key obstacles faced by these young people during and after placement are trauma, placement instability, separation from siblings, high caseworker turnover, and later, difficulties transitioning out of Care into independent life (Musgrove and Michell 2018). While the system aims to resolve family issues so individuals can return to their birth families, in practice, those problems can be difficult to overcome, resulting in many children and young people remaining in care for extended periods, often with multiple foster families (Kontomichalos-Eyre et al. 2023). Additionally, public inquiries such as Australia's Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection in NSW (Wood 2008) have shown that there are many challenges within the child protection system itself that affect outcomes for children and families. The accumulative consequences of these complexities see many young people going on to experience poor outcomes after exiting OOHC. Evidence both in Australia and internationally suggests that young people in Care are less likely to complete secondary education, less likely to be employed on an ongoing basis, more likely to be homeless, and more likely to experience incarceration (Everson-Hock et al. 2011). Looking to the bigger national picture, a 2019 report from the Early Intervention Foundation showed that late intervention on issues such as mental health, child protection, youth unemployment and homelessness costs Australian federal and state governments a purported 15.2 billion each year (Teager et al. 2019).

OOHC research studies and inquiries, such as those noted above, consistently demonstrate that disruptions relating to Care placements can negatively impact a child or young person's identity and sense of self. Additionally, chronic disruptions to Care placements, which are increasingly endemic in the OOHC experience, can result in young people not knowing their family story (Rose 2012). While official records exist for each individual, they tend to be fragmented or missing parts of a child's history. Notably, such records traditionally focus on problems surrounding Care, not who young people are as individuals: For example, they may include why the child was removed from their family of origin, but not include photos, certificates, birthday cards or other mementoes that show the uniqueness of the individual (Font and Gershoff 2020). Not having tangible evidence of a life lived, evidence that most people take for granted, can have devastating impacts on self-esteem, mental health and physical wellbeing (Rose 2012). A further consequence of disrupted or missing records can also be a lack of official identity documents such as birth certificates or medical records, which can significantly impede the transition out of Care as well as young people's autonomy and access to critical services. In their influential 2012 research project *Who Am I?*, Australian social work scholars Cathy Humphreys and Margaret Kertesz argued that "the significance of an accessible archival record [is] a vital element in supporting the construction of identity for young people in Out-of-home Care". They noted that while, like all youth, young people in Care need to know** who

they are, for those in OOHC, *proving* who they are can be a struggle due to difficulties accessing basic identity documentation (2012; 2015).

One method that has sought to respond to these challenges, and with some success, is Life Story Work (LSW)—a biographical approach that centres on the collection and documentation of young people's experiences, records and stories. LSW operates from the principle that personalised materials can support and foster youth-centred narratives that connect children and young people not just to what "happened" to them, but to memories, feelings and experiences (Font and Gershoff 2020). Practitioners maintain that what is often referred to as the "intimate archive"—for example, memory boxes, photographs, journals, letters, birthday cards, videos, or oral stories and anecdotes—can play a vital role in helping to animate "official records". Amongst other objectives, LSW typically guides and encourages personal archiving and curation and is usually undertaken by a case worker, foster carer, the young person or jointly by all. Record-keeping is core to the methodology and can include a family tree, school reports, awards and certificates, photos of and information about biological family as well as information relating to everyday life (Kontomichalos-Eyre et al. 2023). To date, it has primarily been oriented around paper-based, hard copy systems that are mainly reliant on carers to keep and maintain.

The sector, as a whole, widely acknowledges the importance of LSW (Rose 2012; Hammond et al. 2020). Yet despite commitments from organisations to integrate LSW into Care plans, efforts continue to be compromised by placement instability, the loss of personal belongings and a de-prioritisation of personal record-keeping during times of crisis (Rose 2012; Musgrove and Michell 2018; Deitz and Burns 2022). It is also well understood by both practitioners and scholars working in OOHC that while LSW remains an effective narrative tool, there is a persistent need to improve and innovate on current approaches, especially in light of the ever-growing body of research that demonstrates the impact of disruption. While Humphreys and Kertesz's research was presented over a decade ago, there is widespread evidence that, even with LSW implementation, the majority of young people living in OOHC continue to exit Care without precious belongings or essential identity documents (Kontomichalos-Eyre et al. 2023; Häggman-Laitila et al. 2018; Dutta 2017; Kruszka et al., 2012). This issue has also been recognised at a Federal level. In the *National Standards for Out-Of-Home Care 2009–2020*, the Australian Government acknowledged the need to "safely" support young people to develop a sense of identity and belonging and to deliver relevant and ongoing support to foster carers so they can provide quality care, including narrative continuity (AIHW 2021). And yet the issues described above persist.

In recognition of this, we argue that there is an urgent need for action to support consistent LSW practices that are meaningful to young people and those who support them. Taking our cue from scholars such as Humphreys and Kertesz, our research focuses on advocating for children and young people's access to youth-oriented tools and technologies that support life storying and the collection and archiving of personal mementoes. We are particularly interested in mobilising the as-yet under-utilised opportunity to embed a digital platform into the more traditional practices at a national level. This paper documents the foundational research we have

undertaken in order to stage a response to this challenge. Conducted between 2019 and 2021, the research comprises two scoping studies with multiple stakeholders: The first was undertaken by our research team when we sought to design and build a digital life-storying tool (an app) for national roll-out, and the second was undertaken once we discovered that a version of our projected app already existed. In what became something of an innovation in research practice, instead of seeking to compete with Nautilus Media, the team who created *CaringLife*, we elected instead to collaborate. While there were differences between our respective digital storytelling tools, our overall aims and objectives were aligned. A key issue in so many health and caring sectors is the failure to share resources and ideas at a time when collaboration is exactly what is needed. Rather than dilute the sector's focus and attention, our partnership has mobilised and recognised the value of bringing industries and knowledge sectors together to achieve a unified goal: to support a national campaign that ensures digital LSW tools are offered to every Australian child in Care.

Building on our collaboration, which we have now come to see as an ethical imperative, our paper argues firstly for the affirming potential of digital tools for memory keeping and life story work and secondly for further understanding within the sector of how such tools might be consistently implemented. Drawing on a long history of scholarship and the interviews from our own research, we have found that digital tools have the potential to not only supplement the current personal life-story system, but they can also increase and foster young people's autonomy and ownership over the way their stories are remembered and told. However, there is still work to be done to communicate their efficacy, impact and potential integration within existing frameworks.

Identity, Records and Well-Being

It is well understood across multiple domains of research that access to positive autobiographical memories can have an encouraging impact on mental health and depression in vulnerable young people (Rose 2012). According to a 2019 study from Cambridge University, recalling specific positive memories is associated with lower cortisol (the body's stress hormone) and fewer "negative self-cognitions during low mood" over the course of one year (Askelund 2019). Other studies have demonstrated that remembering positive memories results in reduced cortisol, helping the engagement of corticostriatal circuits needed for emotional regulation (Speer and Delgado 2017). Further, studies have shown that being able to recall individual memories, particularly positive memories—often difficult for young people who have suffered from trauma—rather than summarising categories of events, is critical for emotional regulation, mental health, and vulnerability to depression (Williams et al. 2007). This is significant considering that the prevalence of mental health issues experienced by young people in Care has historically been two to five times higher than that reported in the [Australian] *National Survey of Mental Health and Well-being* for children and adolescents in the general population (Sawyer et al. 2007; Humphreys and Kertesz 2015).

In the OOHC sector, it is also widely acknowledged in the sector that the ability to capture and store personal records and memorabilia such as photographs, journals and memory boxes is critical, especially for young people who have experienced disruption and trauma (Rose 2012). Such materials can represent anchors in a young person's "story of the self" and can be integral to ongoing life story work which aims to support positive identity, belonging and resilience by helping those in Care document their personal histories. As psychology scholar Christopher Chandler has noted in his research on changing perceptions of self-continuity for young people with a Care experience, a key element of identity formation is "acquiring a working sense of one's own personal persistence in time" in order to "claim confident ownership of your own past and feel a strong commitment to your own future" (Lalonde 2006, p.56). Similarly, psychologists Breen, Scott and McLean argue that objects can play a particularly potent role in anchoring and fostering identity, given their metaphorical potential as memory aides. They note that personal belongings "that are imbued with relational meaning provide a sense of connectiveness" and that such objects can be important for "one's ongoing construction of self and identity" (Breen et al. 2021, p306).

Life Story Work practices of the kind raised at the beginning of this paper seek to combine positive identity formation and autobiographical storytelling to help young people understand their personal histories and their time in Care. Embedded in governmental policy nationally and internationally (Kontomichalos-Eyre et al. 2023), LSW aims to foster and build belonging and resilience by helping young people in Care put the pieces of their lives together in a form that is accessible and personalised to their individual needs. It is important to recognise that when used in governmental care agencies, LSW differs from record keeping, the latter of which is largely an administrative function that has historically been performed by officials of government departments and Community Service Organisations (Rose 2012; Swain and Musgrove 2012). It also differs from Therapeutic Life Story Work (TLSW), a biographical model pioneered by social worker Richard Rose that adopts similar principles to LSW, but which utilises distinctly therapeutic techniques. What unites each life story approach, however, is the recognition that a disjointed personal narrative has the potential to undermine an already vulnerable young person's sense of identity, while gaps in self-awareness and self-knowing can be profoundly distressing and destructive. As Rose has written, for those who have already faced significant disruption in home life, family bonds and connection—and who may continue to face this on a regular basis—the impact of 'not knowing' can be devastating (2012). Rose's book, *Life Story Therapy with Traumatized Children: A Model for Practice*, argues that a young person's understanding of their family and cultural background, their life chronology and their own memories is fundamental to their sense of identity and place in the world (Rose 2012). When lives are further disrupted due to changes in care, this sense of identity can be thrown into turmoil. Given that this cohort is already at a greater risk of mental illness than other young people, this can further put their well-being at short and long-term risk (Humphreys and Kertesz 2015; Sawyer et al. 2007; Rose 2012).

We know ourselves, in part at least, from the stories we tell and remember. This understanding is central to the *Who Am I?* project's findings in 2012. The

team identified a consistent inability to locate birth certificates across the sector, leading to identity *and* bureaucratic issues for young people in early adult years, often when they are without support; medical records across multiple locations; and significant inconsistencies in the collection of personal information (Humphreys and Kertesz 2012; 2015). The project represents a seminal study in OOHC research with its emphasis on how record-keeping helps or impedes Care leavers' understanding of their identity. It is also an important stimulus for our research. Writing in a report submitted to the "Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry" (Humphreys et al. 2011), the *Who Am I?* academic team argued their work had "led to an understanding of the child's 'record' as much more than a single entity'—namely "the statutory 'case file" (Humphreys et al. 2011, p. 5). Rather, they maintained, it was also a "set of personal records" that could include "cultural plans, life story books, as well as photos, personal letters, cards, certificates, awards and precious items of memorabilia" and the "medical history[ies], educational reports and identity documents such as birth certificates". Together, they argued, these materials "are part of the whole record" (Humphreys et al. 2011, p. 6).

The *Who am I?* project was profound in the way it united social work, archives and record keeping researchers committed to addressing the identity and memory challenges for those with Care experiences. The project went on to inspire a wealth of research, including the Rights in Records by Design project and the development of the Charter of Lifelong Rights in Childhood Recordkeeping in Out-of-Home Care, a major outcome of the 2017 National Summit on Setting the Record Straight for the Rights of the Child (Golding et al. 2021). Building on the *Who Am I?* outcomes, scholars from Monash University and Federation University in Australia have also been working for approximately a decade on "addressing the asymmetries that foster social disadvantage and discrimination" in record-keeping. The 2012 Royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse finding that child safety requires national leadership and coordinated responses by all jurisdictions led to the development of a National Framework for Child Safety (Evans et al. 2019).

And yet, as we have already argued, despite considerable advances, the consistent implementation of LSW and support for personal record-keeping practices in OOHC remains as troubling as ever. As recently as 2023, Australian scholars Kontomichalos-Eyre, Lake and McGillivray published a synthesis of multiple qualitative studies that sought to address knowledge gaps in the sector, relevant to Life Story Work, which showed issues such as those outlined above remain current: "little is known about how LSW is implemented in OOHC or the experience of key stakeholders" (Kontomichalos-Eyre, Lake and McGillivra 2023). The authors write that while their findings suggest that LSW is valued by all stakeholders (young people, carers and case worker/practitioners), practitioners continue to report "lack of time as a key barrier to comprehensive implementation", while practitioners and foster carers both report that more training in LSW is needed (Kontomichalos-Eyre et al. 2023). Of particular significance to us is their acknowledgement that the ongoing precarity of personal records and archiving also remains unresolved (Kontomichalos-Eyre et al. 2023).

In their Inquiry report, the *Who Am I?* team maintained that their research had "highlighted the fact that a child's information may be stored in a number of locations" (Humphreys et al. 2011, p. 6) and went on to document the multiple failures, challenges, and cross-bureaucratic processes that stymy consistent record-keeping and identity practice. The final recommendation the *Who Am I?* team made to the Inquiry was an "urgent need" for a "place of digital recording" that could resolve archiving and record-keeping challenges with "dedicated budget" attached (Humphreys et al. 2011, p. 10).

The Case for Digital Intervention

In the next part of this paper, we present the foundational research we have undertaken that not only advances conversations about the critical importance of embedding digital tools within LSW practices, but why it is important to ensure that it is consistently implemented across Australia's diverse OOHC services and communities. Our research began with the hypothesis that digital technologies have a critical role to play in improving the way personal record keeping and storytelling work is carried out and in increasing and fostering young people's autonomy and ownership over the way their stories are remembered and told. Research by the Young & Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University, for instance, shows that the effects of digital media on well-being are broadly positive, including the potential to "foster identity formation, community-building and creativity" and support family relationships (Swist et al 2015, p. 5). The digital environment has also been shown to offer a place where young people can experiment with their identity and be given the "opportunity to build the identity of their choosing" (Third & Moody 2021, p. 56).

In 2019, we began working on a prototype of an app that could function as an identity resource. Cognisant of the extensive research showing the need for an accessible and life-long storying resource for young people with experience of OOHC, the intention was to build an app with the capacity to store official documents as well as life data, such as photos of positive moments in everyday life, to enhance a sense of self. When developing ideas for a prototype, we focused on how to support young people in Care to build a positive identity which included *proof* of identity—a vehicle that would transverse the stages of being in Care, moving into adulthood and continuing throughout their lives.

In our first research phase (2019–2020), we interviewed agency staff, caseworkers and carers on the issues that impede consistent life story practices and the perceived need, benefits and disadvantages concerning the potential application of digital tools, leading to the creation of our life story resource prototype. It was then, upon seeking funding for the build of the prototype, that we were alerted to the existence of *CaringLife*, which had been specifically designed for children, young people, carers and caseworkers in OOHC, and which was already in use in the Australian state of Victoria. Launched officially in 2020, but piloted first in 2018, *CaringLife* is a secure digital repository that enables select users to upload and share stories, documents and photographs. It offers a space to not only store important personal

information in mobile format, but to build and create individual self-made narratives. The basic "vision" of the *CaringLife* app suggests that it has the potential to facilitate an easier transition to adulthood and the ability to combat challenges that lead to housing problems, financial instability and access to healthcare. Upon meeting the creators, an entrepreneurial couple who are foster carers, as is one of our team, it was clear that our overall aims were similar. Following a process of consultation, we ultimately agreed that collaboration was in the best interests of the sector. We agreed to partner on an ongoing basis, and this proved a major turning point in the trajectory of the research. Before expanding on what would become the second phase of the project which involved *CaringLife*, it is necessary to consider the findings from the first phase—the scoping research into the WSU prototype, an initiative that represented our first significant engagement with digital LSW potentials.

Phase One

Throughout late 2019 and early 2020, we undertook a small number of interviews ($n = 10$) with Out-Of-Home Care stakeholders in the state of New South Wales, Australia, including agency staff from Barnardos, Anglicare, The NSW government Department of Communities and Justice and the Aboriginal Secretariat, along with three care leavers, with the view to building a prototype for a digital life storying app. Ethics approval was granted, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to locate tensions in current practices and to ascertain the potential of technological resources to combat challenges such as staff turnover and placement changes.

In the interviews, all stakeholders were asked about their experience with a well-known hard-copy resource called *My Life Story,* developed in 2004 by the Australian state of NSW Department of Family & Community Services (now the Department of Communities and Justice). Stakeholders reported that while they valued the intent of the *My Life Story* book, their experiences using it ranged from semi-regular to irregular use. One of the first issues identified with the print-based template was that young people's level of engagement with LSW depended on the quality of their relationship with their case workers. The book is usually compiled by caseworkers or carers; however, one interviewee reported that she and her older sister tried to put together their own *My Life Story* book while in Care:

> We didn't have much contact with our family, so we did our best with what we had. When I was 12, I remember we tried to fill it out, but it was difficult to piece things together. We did it on our own, my sisters and I sat down with each other. Our carer, never. She didn't care about us.

One organisational representative noted that young people are often not interested because the book is simply put in front of them. "They should have much more control, much more input, because this is their story, not our story". Another interviewee described life story work as "the nice stuff in a system that's often focused on safety and managing risk. It helps people to feel more secure". They said:

> There's collecting photos over time, keeping certificates, just kind of the everyday tracking of a child's life that they might have, you know, that they

would have if they were living in any family ... Then there's the therapeutic life story work side of things, which is more about the bigger conversation around identity and questions around why a child might be in Care or why they do or don't see their family.

All organisational representatives spoke of the importance of LSW being therapeutic alongside more pragmatic needs, pointing out that building a life narrative was often emotionally fraught for young people in care.

In addition to their experiences with the print version, our interviewees were asked to comment on the potential of a digital storying tool, what they could see working and how such a platform might look. The idea of a digital tool that was more interactive, customisable and, critically, co-designed by users was received with enthusiasm. All stakeholders were receptive to the idea that online and offline spaces were blurred, in theory, for many young people, and they were interested in learning how this might work in practice in relation to an app. One organisational representative pointed out that digital tools allow young people some level of autonomy and creativity. One of the Care leavers interviewed said that she could see the value in having a digital life story tool as it would be "more personal and interactive" than the print version. Another said that having a digital tool would make retrieving information "easy and accessible, that's the thing that everybody wants". She also expressed the benefits of an app that allowed young people to message their case worker, while also acting as a storage platform such as Google Drive or Dropbox, saying that she would love to have access to school reports, minutes from case meetings, goals, and photos of visits to birth parents. All care leavers liked the idea of an ongoing lifelong resource—a living archive.

Crucially, one organisational representative could see how a digital format might overcome the disjointed nature that is often encountered in life story work:

...a consistent platform, no matter which agency you were engaged with, that would make a huge difference.

This notion of "gaps" was expressed by another organisational representative who said:

The nature of being in this field is that it's never the same case worker between when the child is zero and when a child is eighteen...Something might have been done in 2011 and someone starts in 2019 and they have no idea what happened because it just goes in the child's file and you don't necessarily go through every year file when you start working [with a new child]. So there's no sort of central holding point for the life story information that happens for a particular child.

This same representative thought that a digital app would work well to overcome this problem of changing case workers, but also argued the need for case workers to be involved in the process of digital documentation:

I think an app is a great tool for making that information accessible, but we would still ideally want a lot of that to happen alongside a carer and case

worker because a lot of it is delicate. It's emotional work and a lot of those stories are complicated and need support.

In reviewing the data, our vision for what a digital platform could offer expanded. We started to recognise how digital platforms might also help young people relate to caseworkers and help sustain inter-family networks. That is, the support of collaborative life story work has the potential to encourage mutual partnerships and relations. This includes cultural and ancestral connections for Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)—identifying young people. The representative from the Aboriginal Secretariat pointed out that digital platforms have the potential to document culture and language and that more work also needs to be done to properly reflect diversity in the sector.

Overall, the interviews showed that while all stakeholders value life story work, traditional incarnations, such as the print book, are often difficult to maintain. If done properly, the book is valued, but items often get lost, and the hard copy book is infrequently updated and occasionally destroyed or lost. There is a sense that young people should have agency, but adults need to be involved—organisational representatives value the potential for case planning, while young people value the potential for memory-making and improved communication with a case worker.

Phase Two

Using information gathered from scoping interviews, we drafted our first prototype. However, as we have mentioned, while funding was sought for the build, we were made aware of the Nautilus Media app, *CaringLife*, which by 2019 was being used by a number of agencies in Victoria, Australia. *CaringLife* enables carers, case workers and children to each have their own private account, which is connected to the carer when the young person is residing with them. Once connected with a child, carers can upload content to their own account, which is also made visible on the child's account. Young people can add content to their accounts, and they can choose whether to make the content visible to their carer. Case managers, however, can view and monitor the material. Content can only be accessed by the child, the current carer, and the case manager. The app is not a public sharing, social media tool. The data is uploaded in a secure Dropbox-style system and remains the property of the young person when they leave Care, when the material can be moved to a digital archive of their own choice. All content is processed and stored in the child's country of residence on AWS cloud servers. The protocols for storage of content are aligned with international security and quality best practices standards.

After signing a Letter of Understanding with our institution, Western Sydney University, Nautilus Media agreed to share survey results from their pilot study. It is important to note that while both parties were and continue to be motivated to leverage digital technology to improve life experiences of young people in Care, at the time of their pilot project, Nautilus Media's main focus was on the functionality and delivery of the app rather than on collecting qualitative data. Their 6-month pilot involved distributing the app to three agencies in the state of Victoria (OzChild, Anglicare and Barwon Child Youth & Family) who initiated 192

CaringLife accounts for young people. At the end of six months, they surveyed families using the app via email about their experience. The survey, emailed to 62 families with a 100 per cent response rate, sought to obtain views about whether the carers found it useful for storing memories; whether the young people enjoyed using it; which features young people were drawn to; and whether any technical difficulties were encountered. Questions asked included: Do you find *CaringLife* helpful as a way of keeping your child's memories in one place? What other features would you like to see on *CaringLife*? Would you recommend CaringLife to other carers? What do the children in your life think of the app? Do the children in your life enjoy using the app with you?

The survey results revealed that during the 6-month period, over 6500 photos, videos and other content were uploaded, and photos and videos were mainly comprised of moments in daily life. Carers uploaded, on average, twice a week. Several carers said the app saved them time and was also useful as a back-up. A number of young people reported wishing that the app had existed when they were younger, so they had photos of their early years. While there were no major challenges reported, Nautilus Media conceded to researchers that any issues arising due to case workers or carers considering the app as yet another duty, or box to be ticked, may need to be addressed.

As well as acting as a repository for photographs and documents, the app has the potential to be a creative hub where young people can gain agency over their narrative and develop a greater sense of self. Vitally, young people can take the app and its digital contents with them when they leave Care or transition into adoption. It is worth noting, however, that in Nautilus Media's pilot project, only 9% of the entirety of materials uploaded were documents (59% were photos and 32% were video). This suggests that carers may not be aware of the importance of uploading documents for children, perhaps and understandably assuming that they are readily accessed elsewhere.

In sum, our analysis of the Phase Two data set demonstrated that the benefits of life story work can be extended to the digital sphere. Early responses to the app showed that digital applications are intrinsically viewed and intuitively recognised as a central holding point for young people to keep important documents, photos and memories. Users acknowledged that they have the potential to serve as communication tools for young people to sustain relationships with case workers and family while also having the potential to function as a storybook that young people can return to as a place of reflection. Further, our analysis suggested that a digital tool—in this case *CaringApp*—provides young people in OOHC with a sense of ownership and autonomy, with the digital format allowing for more control and decision-making by young people in both story-making and recording their lives. As we have detailed above, care-leavers, case workers and carers alike all commented that a digital app could be child inclusive and therefore empowering, thus giving young people a crucial sense of agency. Additionally, interviewees noted that digital platforms have the potential to serve as a time-saver for carers and case workers, whose roles include the collation of hard copy material for Life Story Work. They maintained that the app has potential for use alongside

projects such as the *My Life Story* print book. This is clearly advantageous when workers change roles or young people transition between families.

Advocating for Digital Lives

As well as managing money and being able to cook, digital media dexterity is now an equally fundamental life management skill. The social context in which stories, experiences and ideas are developed and shared online mediates how they "support the development of agency and identity for youth facing challenging transitions in their lives" (Davis and Weinshenker 2012). It could be argued that all transitions for young people are now challenging, as the temporal structure of lives has changed. There is no longer a standardised structure for the working week; young people's early careers are often characterised by part-time and flexible work; and general patterns of work, education and leisure are diverse (Furlong et al. 2011). The type of support offered by technology can help combat the isolation that can be endemic to experiences of OOHC (Gustavsson and MacEachron 2008), and there is a growing body of research showing how the effects of digital media on well-being can be positive, including the potential to "foster identity formation, community building and creativity" (Swist et al. 2015; Third and Moody 2021). The negative aspects, such as hate speech and exclusion, are of course significant. Yet it could be argued that the emphasis on risks is "exacerbated by limited intergenerational understanding of young people's ability to navigate online environments" (Swist et al 2015).

Changing social conditions—for example, institutions such as the family, employment and community becoming more fragmented—mean that the number of possible transitions for all young people have multiplied, and choices about their future are far more complex "in an arguably 'post subcultural' and individualised world". The phase of youth itself is now understood to be protracted; terms including "young adulthood" and "emerging adulthood" are increasingly used (Furlong et al. 2011). The challenges faced by young people generally are *compounded* for the marginalised group of children and youth in OOHC. As American social work scholars Melanie Sage and Sebrena Jackson have comprehensively argued, for young people in Care, the growing consensus is that mediated technologies are mostly positive, "counter to many narratives in popular child welfare discourse that focuses on harm associated with social media use". Sage and Jackson state that child welfare administrators and foster parents and group home staff focus on harms to mental health and risky contacts on social media. Youth focus on relationships and the ability to control their narratives and make decisions about their own lives. The view of foster youth is supported by a growing body of longitudinal studies suggesting little relationship between negative mental health outcomes and ICT use for adolescents (Sage and Jackson 2021). While there are no definitive Australian statistics relating directly to young people in Care and technology, four out of five children in Australia have at least one device for their own personal use and an average of three devices (Graham and Sahlberg 2021).

Social work scholar Jennifer Simpson's UK study, examining how children in Care use digital communication to maintain contact with family and friends, argues

for social work practitioners and child welfare agencies to not only recognise the strength of children and young people's relationships with birth family—whether they are in face-to-face contact or not—but to recognise that for children and young people in Care digital communication has changed "contact" to "ongoing connection and relationships". As young people have greater control, to a degree, of such "connection", it is pertinent that adults involved in the sector need to be more aware of how to manage this in a way beyond a risk-taking framework (Simpson 2020).

A digital application is seen as something that can provide a central repository, one place for everything. The research that we have undertaken reinforces the critical importance of life story tools that value and support young people's opportunities to not only have trusted memory keepers in place to record and document their lived experiences, but which also enable them to record and tell their own stories meaningfully using technologies native to them. Through our work, we have found that for many young people, digital life story platforms, such as *CaringLife*, are more accessible and flexible than traditional print formats, and subsequently they have the potential to create a vital sense of connection and empowerment by encouraging a greater interest in recording life story mementoes and materials. This has the potential to engender ownership, autonomy and self-efficacy in young people which can, in turn, help develop a stronger sense of belonging and identity and, we anticipate, also contribute to long-term mental health and social and cultural wellbeing.

Future Directions

Designed to aid young people to digitally record their life story, *CaringLife* is currently used by over 4000 young people in Care in all states of Australia. The app is also being used in parts of the United Kingdom and New Zealand and is being trialled in the USA. What is imperative now is ensuring further collaboration and research in order to mitigate the app becoming another "box to tick." While Nautilus Media Pty Ltd is a private company, the app remains cost neutral. We acknowledge that we cannot account for bias in the reporting of the *CaringLife* pilot project, as the company has a vested interest in sharing data that supports their work. However, as the only non-profit life storying app with the dual functionality of storing life memories and documents and with international reach, it would seem prescient to support this initiative by improving upon user experience rather than competing with other digital platforms. There are similar apps in various stages of development within government and non-government organisations in the sector, but these are only available to those young people already aligned to the organisation in question.

What is imperative to learn in the next stage of research into *CaringLife* is to stake out the app's expected use, that is the anticipation of how it will be used and how users are expected to benefit, to see how this aligns with how young people are engaging with the app. Applying the "walkthrough method." a technique to systematically step through the everyday use, or not, of an app, is useful to consider the current usage and future potential for *CaringLife* (Light et al. 2018). As Light et al. write, "[t]he walkthrough also serves as a foundation for further user-centred research that can identify how users resist these arrangements and appropriate app

technology for their own purposes" (2018). As previously mentioned, the basic "vision" of the app suggests the facilitation of an easier transition to adulthood and the ability to combat challenges that lead to housing problems, financial instability, and access to health care. Further user-centred research, in this instance, would be instrumental in ensuring users take advantage of the dual functionality of the app.

Looking ahead, it would also be useful to ascertain at what age the *CaringLife* account is driven more by the young person than the carer and how this comes about. As an app in its infancy, the pilot project suggested more carers than young people drove the currency of material uploaded. There is still relatively little empirical research outlining what could work with such an initiative, particularly in service delivery (Stiles-Shields et al. 2023). If the app is to reach its potential of becoming core practice in terms of ready-made access to positive memories *and* official identity documents, the continuation of usage by young people needs to be encouraged, along with explanations of the intended positive outcomes. The walkthrough method is a way to directly connect with the way young people are engaging, or not, with the app's interface to help understand how they are responding to "embedded cultural references" and "technological mechanisms." Most vitally, the authors of the walkthrough method argue that cultural studies, along with science and technology studies, can "supply the analytical power to identify connections between … contextual elements and the app's technical interface" (Light et al. 2018). They point out the need to go beyond using computational tools to address traditional social science questions and to develop new methods of studying technology such as apps as sociocultural artefacts: "analysing an app requires attention to its embed[ded] sociocultural representations as much as its technological features or data outputs, which also have social and cultural influences" (Light et al. 2018). Workshops in a number of Australian states will comprise the next phase of our research, using the walkthrough method to ascertain what young people in Care find most beneficial in digital life storying tools.

Conclusion

Our research contributes to a growing body of theoretical and experiential knowledge about the positive impact of life-story record-keeping on expression of identity for young people with Out-Of-Home Care experience and the pressing need to increase young people's capacity to steer and control the way their stories are remembered and told. The work we have done so far supports the existing foundational research that argues for the important role that personal stories, mementoes, and mnemonic aides can play in supporting identity development and a coherent sense of self. What is significant at the time of writing is the emerging theoretical movement which argues that technologically mediated communication is of particular importance to minority groups and marginalised groups as it offers the opportunity to connect and share information, knowledge, and practices with those experiencing similar life journeys (Gustavsson and MacEachron 2008, 2015; Denby et al. 2016; Simpson 2020). For young people, whose lives are intertwined with digital media, such digital spaces offer the potential to reinforce their sense-of-self. While

Sage and Jackson concede that more research is needed that is focused on Out-Of-Home Care and digital technology, they argue that it is noteworthy that other marginalised youth including homeless youth and LGBTQI youth are also found to benefit from identity-building opportunities from technologically mediated communication (Sage and Jackson 2021).

It is clear that ongoing research into digital solutions for life storying work in OOHC is vital. Opportunities to build and cement relationships for young people in Care have the potential to be revolutionised by digital technology, particularly when it comes to connecting to their inter-family networks, as well as friends and services. Our focus now is on further data collection and maximising the potential of partnerships. We aim to develop a strategy that advances that urgent national need to ensure that all children and young people in care have access to a life storying model that is best suited to their needs and environment.

Declarations

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